

Chapter 7.11

Concerns with “Mutual Constitution”: A Critical Realist Commentary

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ABSTRACT

The case for “analytical dualism” as a means of approaching sociotechnical action is presented as an alternative to accounts which tend to conflate agency, structure, and technology. This is based on the work of Margaret Archer, whose work is in turn located in the traditions of critical realism. Her commitment to analytical dualism, which stresses both the importance of time in analysis and the emergent properties of structure, is argued to give a firmer purchase on the notion of context than the alternatives based on, for example, the work of Giddens and Latour.

INTRODUCTION

I want to start from the premise that what concerns many researchers in this area is how best to conceptualise the nature of “context.” From the point of view of those researching information systems (broadly constituted), the concern is

to avoid what they perceive as being, at best, an over-emphasis on technical factors and, at worst, the charge of technological determinism. They are keen, therefore, to emphasise the importance of the organisational, social, and cultural context in situating the development and use of technological artefacts. In this they are joined by those studying information behaviour who are concerned with moving away from a simple model of an “environment” in which behaviours are selected “rationally” towards the ongoing interaction of context and action. In this endeavour, the notion of “mutual constitution” is seductive, and the seduction is reinforced by those whose concepts are turned to for support. For some, this is the actor-network theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour and others, where there is a strong emphasis on action embedded in networks. For those working in this tradition, the removal of the hyphen from “socio-technical” is a deliberate act designed to stress the ineradicable coupling of the social and the technical. “Sociotechnical” action, therefore, represents the solution of the problem of context by its conflation into networks of actants. Not all

analysts in this area, however, would wish to go so far, and so, as in other areas of the study of organisation, the theorist of choice is often Anthony Giddens and his notion of "structuration." What is taken from this is the mutual constitution of structure and agency, where structures form the ever-present conditions for the production and reproduction of agency. The strength of such notions is their emphasis on the irrevocable interconnections between action and context, but their weakness, it will be argued, is a tendency to privilege action over context. That is, when we explore these approaches in a little more detail, we find that they do not help as much as we might like in the specification of context. These criticisms will be addressed briefly but, as they have been considered elsewhere (Jones, 1999; Mutch, 2002), the main part of the argument will be devoted to the presentation of an alternative approach. The contention is that ideas drawn from the philosophical tradition of critical realism, and specifically from the application to social theory by the sociologist Margaret Archer, are of much more value both in specifying what we mean by context and in conceptualising the relationship between context and action. This is, therefore, an act of what Basil Bernstein (1996) calls "secondary recontextualisation." That is, the aim is to introduce some of the ideas and show how these can help existing approaches. Accordingly, after a brief introduction to some of the key tenets of critical realism, we look in a little more detail at what Archer has to say about the nature of structures (our "context") and the relationship of structure to agency (our "action"). The key argument is that, whilst there is no society (and hence no technology and no information) without people, the challenge is to examine the interaction between the structures which people create (including information and technology) and the subsequent action in which people engage. These more general ideas are then explored in the context of writings on organisations and technology. It is important to stress here that critical realism does

not purport to be a substantive theory of either of these two domains; rather, it offers some conceptual clarity on ontological and epistemological issues, which can further help the development of domain-specific theories.

For Latour, the "classic" question of the relationship between agency and structure is a case of asking the wrong question. His focus is on the enrolment of a variety of actors (sometimes "actants," to distinguish non-humans from humans) in networks of greater or lesser scale and scope (Latour, 1993). The consequence is an extremely helpful language for describing processes that, in the hands of the adept, can be illuminating, but can also lead simply to the production of more or less interesting stories. The particular value from ANT is the notion of "being specific about technology," but what we tend to get is an excellent language for describing process with the fading of context into the background (Montiero & Hanseth, 1995). It may be for these reasons that rather more attention is paid to the work of Giddens (Walsham, 1992; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). We need to be cautious here: it is not the purpose of this article to review the way in which Giddens has been employed, but we can take the comment of Hasselbladh and Kallinikos to stand in for many similar examples:

"It is not our task to defend structuration theory. However, we would like to observe that the analysis undertaken by Barley and Tolbert...does not have much in common with Giddens' basic ideas." (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000, p. 716; e.g., Phillips, 2003, p. 221)

What is it, however, that people seem to be drawing from Giddens? It would appear to be the notion that structure is important in forming the context which both enables and constrains action. A series of concepts are provided (structures of signification, legitimation, and domination) which provide a more finely grained conceptualisation of structure. However, whether what people take

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