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CRITICAL APPROACHES AND THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: REASSESSING THE LEGACY OF THE AGENT/STRUCTURE DEBATE IN IR

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Abstract

Conceptualizing the process of social change in IR has proved more elusive than initially thought. If the notion of agency that was proposed to capture this moment gained great saliency in the field, it has had surprisingly limited analytical effects on the discipline of IR. Hence, many can agree that social actors have agency, but very few have managed to set up an agenda that uses this notion in productive ways. Discussions about agency often remain meta-theoretical, and have had arguably little effect on the concrete studies in the field. This paper argues that debates over agency have failed to produce a satisfactory response to the question of how critical theories should approach social construction largely because they have missed what is ultimately at stake in thinking about social change and agency. Seeking in the latter an alternative form of causality that could be distinguished from structural reproduction, they created a dualism that was bound to be unproductive. Adopting a different perspective, this article revisits the structure agency debate with the aim of demonstrating that the notion of agency is fundamental to a critical perspective on social construction. It argues that introducing agency within our epistemological framework does not offer a solution for understanding social construction, but rather helps us frame the problematic of social construction itself in ways that pushes critical theory away from the reifying glance of positivism. More specifically, it uses agency as a means to problematise power as practice, arguing that, too often, critical theories take this aspect for granted. As a result they miss what exactly is being negotiated in struggles over power.

Introduction¹

Twenty five years ago, Robert Cox established his famous distinction between problem solving theory and critical theory by characterising the latter as being focused on social change. As he argued, 'critical theory, unlike problem solving theory, does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with the origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing'.² This concern with social change as a key for understanding how social dynamics are socially constructed came to be broadly shared by a wide variety of critical approaches. However, conceptualising the process of social change proved to be more elusive than initially thought. Although the notion of agency, proposed to capture this moment, gained great saliency in IR, it had surprisingly limited analytical effects on the discipline. Even as numerous scholars recognised the importance of agency, very few managed to set up an agenda that uses this notion in productive ways. Discussions about agency thus remained mostly meta-theoretical and had little impact on concrete studies in the field.

In this article, I argue, that proponents of the notion of agency have failed to produce a satisfactory response to the question of how critical theory should approach the issue of social construction. The problem stems from the fact that agency is often presented as a new form of causality which could account for social change, a means for *explaining* social change, rather than as a means to *specify the significance* of social change. This difference is subtle but fundamental to the project of critical theory, since it is one thing to stress that institutions and/or discourses are socially constructed but another to define what exactly is being constructed. Hence, coming to terms with the issue of social construction is not simply a matter of focusing on the social context to explain international dynamics. Rather, the challenge consists in grasping the historical significance of social institutions and discourses. It consists in problematising what is taken for granted, since critical theorists are themselves conditioned by their own social context.

Take money for example. While we can all agree that money is socially constructed, it would be wrong to seek an explanation for the creation of money, as we know it, since it was never created as such. Trying to explain the creation of money as if it was invented to

problems with the concept of agency, in fact, reflect a deeper problem with the way critical theorists think of structures, and more specifically of structural power. This has resulted, I contend, in an overemphasis on structural determination which only contributes in reifying social reality by suggesting that discourses and institutions have inherent tendencies which are imprinted on society regardless of how social actors relate to them. Finally, the fourth section advocates for a move away from structural notions of power in order to take more seriously power as practice. In order to highlight what is at stake in thinking about power as practice, I reformulate the notion of agency as the ability to relate to a social context, rather than an ability to transform it in ways that are not predetermined by structures. I argue here that the reason for highlighting this aspect is that critical theorists take this very ability for granted when they focus on structural notions of power. The difficulty of relating to a constantly changing social context is what drives the exercise of power. Hence, only by taking this pragmatic aspect into consideration can one start to problematise the process of social construction and grasp its significance.

1- Positivism and the Problem of Social Construction

My starting point is the critique of positivism. I use positivism here to designate approaches that reify social reality and present it as a 'normal' or 'natural' order, rather than as a socially constructed one. This specific definition of positivism follows on the general use of the term among critical theorists,⁴ even if my emphasis might differ somewhat from others. Instead of focusing on the separation of the subjective and objective world⁵ or the empiricist epistemology of positivism,⁶ I see the problems of positivism as being rooted in the way it seeks to generalise *laws* of social development. This quest for broad generalisations drives positivists to develop methodological tools which downplay the specificities of their object of research in order to infer more general and abstract laws. The problem with this predilection for transhistorical models built on causal laws which are applicable to a wide range of cases is that it creates the impression that these laws are 'universal' because, supposedly, they can be observed across a wide variety of societies. In that sense, these laws conceal what is socially constructed since they always seem to transcend the particular context in they are instantiated.

This positivist framework has two important consequences when thinking about social construction. First, positivism neglects social change by virtue of the method it promotes. Indeed, the more a theory is inclined to derive general laws of social development, the

⁴ Yosef Lapid, 'The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33 (1989), pp. 235-254.; Stephen Gill (ed.), *Gramsci, Historical Materialism*

more social change loses its importance. Change becomes a matter of historical curiosity, but it is no longer deemed scientific as an object of research. Positivism thus tends to split science and history as if they are different orders of explanation, one being theoretical the other descriptive. A second consequence, of particular importance for critical theories, is that this framework tends to present structures in apolitical ways, as if structures transcend power relations. For positivists, structures always seem to precede politics. They set out the fundamental laws that govern society. Because they operate at a general level, they appear impervious to the specific politics that are played out 'below' them.⁷ These structural laws are thus often seen as being generated independently from power dynamics and, while they set the terrain for social struggles, they are not directly linked to any specific interest or worldview. It is as if structural conditions apply equally to all actors.

Two examples can help better illustrate these features of positivism. In the field of IR, the Realist tradition presents the international system as being driven by the imperative of survival which emerges from the fragmentation of the system into various communities protected by their own state.⁸ Without an overarching authority, all states are said to be compelled to ensure their own security through the accumulation of power.⁹ Not only is this imperative considered almost timeless, but it is also seen as apolitical in that it results from the asociality of the international system. Indeed, the international system is here deemed akin to a state of nature. In that sense, structural determination precedes any exercise of power, and is not associated with the specific interests of any social force. An important corollary is that power is then considered mostly in behavioural terms, that is

as two distinctive moments of social construction. However, I argue in the rest of the paper that this proposition effectively formalised a tension already present in critical theory by separating the question of social construction into distinct moments that could never be properly reconciled. *Social change thus became a means to explain how social structures come about, but the significance of these structures was never conceived in relation to social change. It remained the purview of structural analysis. In other words, our conception of what these structures are about, of what they construct, mostly remained dependent on a structural and ahistorical framework of analysis.*

To demonstrate this point, I now examine these two modalities of social construction, agency and structure, and highlight more concretely how they hinder our ability to formulate a proper conception of social construction. Conceived as two different moments operating partly in abstraction from one another, they entertain a tension which has incited more and more critical scholars to move back towards a highly structuralist perspective that further reifies our understanding of the world. In other words, I will argue that the inability to properly resolve the structure/agent dilemma has pushed critical theory back towards a form of structural determinism which shares crucial features with positivism.

2- Agency and the Elusive Source of Social Change

In addressing the notion of agency, my interest is, as I mentioned, limited to an epistemological question: in what way does the concept of agency, conceptualised here as 'the capability of the individual "to make a difference" to a pre-existing state of affairs',¹⁷ enable us to grasp how things are socially constructed. This section points out that this concept, in its current guise, tells us little beyond the obvious point that there is social change that is triggered by the activity of social forces. Despite its fashionable ring, it cannot help us solve the problems that emerge from a structural conception of power. There are three reasons which account for why this is the case.

The main issue concerns a fundamental methodological ambiguity that is attached to the notion of agency. Initially, interventions in the debate about structure and agency were motivated by a desire to transcend the apparent dualism between reproduction and change. Alexander Wendt, in particular, explicitly attempted to articulate structural determination and social change. The publication of his 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory' served to sum up the state of the field in sociology, and set out the parameters for subsequent discussions about agency in IR.¹⁹ One of its main propositions was that the ability of people to transform their social environment is a crucial dimension of social reality which needs to be integrated more directly into the analysis along with social reproduction. He thus insisted on surmounting the dualism between both facets of social life. As Wendt and Duvall later stated, 'the goal of

¹⁹ Wendt, 'Agent-Structure Problem',

structurationist ontologies is to replace the 'dualism' of agency and social structure that pervades individualist and collectivist ontologies with a perspective that recognizes the 'codetermined irreducibility' of these two fundamental units of social analysis'.²⁰ Agency and structural reproduction, Wendt insisted, are inseparable aspects of social reality and must be both taken into account in the analysis of international dynamics.

While this intervention was certainly laudable, the end product remained flawed. Indeed, one could agree that there was no separation at the ontological level, but the dualism quickly reappeared as soon as one tried to derive the implications of this notion for the way we understand social reality. The difficulty here was to determine what difference the recognition of this role of agency would have for the way we do social analysis. As constructivists reflected on this question, the agents/structure dualism seemed to rapidly resurface, as theorists struggled to ascertain what aspects of social reality should be ascribed to agency and to structures.²¹ Hence, while both structural determination and agency could be said to be inherently tied to one another from an *ontological* standpoint, the dualism proved difficult to overcome *methodologically*. As one constructivist put it: 'as long as actions are explained with reference to structure, or vice versa, the independent variable in each case remains unavailable for problematization in its own right'.²² In the end, the study of social reproduction and social change could thus never be fully articulated to one another because it seemed to imply two different forms of causation. On the one hand, structures were said to shape the behaviour of agents, establishing the rules and norms that condition people. On the other hand, agency was presented as the ability to step out of social conditioning and, to some extent, freely transform structures. Hence, both types of causation appeared opposite to one another, and thus required a different perspective to be analysed, even when both aspects could be said to exist in a single moment. This is why the concept of bracketing out each moment seemed to resurface at various points of the debate,²³ as if one needed to abstract from one of the two modalities in order to perceive the other.

This very problem prompted various critics to suggest that structuration theory amounted to nothing else than a restatement of the problem.²⁴ In their influential *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, Hollis and Smith pointed out that ultimately one could not overcome the problem by superposing two different forms of causality (one structural and one related to agency).²⁵ As they stressed, it is one thing recognising that

²⁰ Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, 'Institutions and International Order', in Ernest Cziempiel and James Rosenau (eds.) *Global Changes and T1111s2 in T114T114T1w -19.983T114T114T1w -19.983Thanges and T1111s2 in T*

people maintain some margin of freedom even if they are conditioned by their context and another to articulate these two aspects into a coherent methodological framework. Hollis and Smith thus warned against the temptation to resort to a '*collage*' of two narratives that could never be fully articulated to one another. For them, it was 'all too plain that "structuration theory" is more of an ambition than an established body of theoretical achievements. It is more a description of social life than a basis for explanation'.

beyond the simple description of individual actions, they are necessarily driven to focus on structural determination. Hence, the introduction of the notion of agency has done little to solve the structural bias of the discipline. Scholars continue to rely on structural arguments for theorising social developments, even when they go to great lengths in order to bring agency back at a more epistemological level. If agency enters the picture, it is generally within the confines of a hypothetical reflection about what could have happened, with little explanatory value for understanding what did happen other than asserting that societies could be different. At best, referring to agency serves here to 'prove', in a circular fashion, that there was indeed agency, but this is as far as the notion can go.

A good example of this can be found in the arguments made by Susan Strange and Eric Helleiner who have shown, each in their own way, how key decisions made by state officials have allowed financial globalisation to proceed³³ While such an emphasis might be fruitful to attack deterministic conceptions of globalisation, they provide little in terms

insist that agency must play a role at one point in the analysis, that instance is rarely reached. Even, constructivism, which initially championed the notion of agency, fell back on the tendency to 'overemphasize the role of social structures and norms at the expense of the agents who help create and change them in the first place'.³⁶ Mostly treated as an exogenous variable, social change thus continues to be invoked to explain the advent of specific social configurations which are then assumed to last for a given time. This generally yields a conception of social change as being exceptional, short lived, and cataclysmic, as reflected in the idea of social revolution or epistemic changes.

distinctive challenge this poses for social theory.³⁷ If there is an infinity of possibilities that agents can exploit within a structural

the imperatives of capitalism because they no longer own their means of production and thus need to enter the wage relation to get their means of subsistence. However, this structural constraint on workers provides at the same time agency for capitalists who can use this power to exploit labour in various ways. In other words, when we focus on the restrictive nature of structures we limit ourselves to only one side of a social relation. What appears as the product of structural constraints, if we limit the analysis to the actor 'constrained', is always a product of agency when properly resituated within a social relation which takes into account the power of another actor exploiting these structural constraints. The structure/agency debate is thus ill defined because it examines the issue in terms of a dual relation between structure and agent, when in fact we are dealing with a social relation between agents *which is only mediated by a structure*.

This point is crucial because there are no structural constraints that will translate into an imperative for one agent if there is not another agent that threatens to act upon these constraints. This is, in a way, a banal statement. Most people would agree that law, for example, never applies homogeneously across society. Some people have more means to mobilise it and exploit it than others. Some can afford to ignore it. In this way, law has no determinate effect that could be derived in abstraction from the agents involved. Such a simple argument can be applied to any other social dynamic. In my own work, I have shown that the gold standard imposed certain constraints on states but only because it created distinct opportunities for financiers to arbitrage and speculate on the currencies.⁴² Hence, to think about the constraints on central banks without factoring the agency that financiers gained is to limit ourselves to one side of the equation. In the end, the gold standard was only a source of concern for central banks when financiers threatened to speculate against these banks.⁴³

The point, here, is not simply that structural determination is activated by dominant agents, but more fundamentally that these rules have little implication outside of the *way* people exploit them. Under the gold standard, central banks thus experienced differently the constraint of convertibility depending on who held banknotes, what kind of strategies these actors adopted, and the way they converted banknotes into gold. In the same way, workers experience differently the constraints that stem from the market depending on the way capitalists exploit their vulnerabilities. This is important because taking into account the people who exploit structures, rather than simply those who are constrained by them, one gets a richer picture of the social dynamics at work. Indeed, the focus is

⁴² Samuel Knafo, 'The Gold Standard and the Creation of a Modern International Monetary System', *Review of International Political Economy*, 13 (2006), pp. 78-102.

⁴³ Central banks could in fact stray far away from what would be considered prudent behaviour by today's standard because they were able to negotiate and make sure that key financiers and merchants would not exploit the commitment of convertibility in ways that were detrimental for central bankers Lars Jonung, 'Swedish experience under the Classical Gold Standard, 1873-1914', in Michael D. Bordo and Angie J. Schwartz (eds.) *A Retrospective on the Classical Gold Standard, 1821-1931* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 361-399.. This is again an indication that the existence of structures does not provide us with any reason to necessarily conclude that predetermined outcomes will result from them.

here set on *what is being done* through these structures, rather than simply on the product that results from these actions. In other words, we examine the process of social construction, rather than limiting ourselves to its outcome. When we conceal from view the role played by social actors, it becomes difficult to avoid the impression that structures generate themselves the result we observe. The outcome then appears as a necessary product of a structure, as if it had an inherent logic. In this way, we reify social reality.

Unfortunately, this important point is often neglected because there is still an assumption among critical theorists that differences in the way people exploit structures are largely secondary; that they simply constitute variations on a common theme. Hence, critical scholars are often adamant that there are limits to the possible which are established by these structures and which enable us to keep a structural viewpoint while still entertaining the possibility that, within these limits, concrete strategies can vary. Marxists might accept, for example, that capitalists pursue different strategies of accumulation, yet still emphasise that all capitalists must still face tight competitive pressures that limit what they can do. But these references to limits of the possible only represent convenient assertions that enable scholars to maintain a structural viewpoint while allowing for diversity, and/or agency. They lead us to misleadingly focus on structural similarities, to overemphasise the restrictive nature of structures, and to downplay their productive leverage. Social construction is then essentially conceptualised as a form of structural determination that manifests itself necessarily in restrictive terms as a limit to what people can do. This makes it impossible, in turn, to really grasp the process of social construction since we then interpret what structures do in static terms, that is in terms of how they reproduce something *already given*. *One can say that this perspective highlights how a state of affairs is maintained, but social reality is here, in a way, already constructed.*

More fundamentally, this emphasis on the restri

In my work on the gold standard, I have shown how the literature has systematically misread, in this way, the significance of this 19th century institution of monetary governance. Focusing on the constraints the gold standard imposed on states, this literature has come to see this institutions as a typical form of '*laissez-faire*' governance. Hence, most scholars present the gold standard as a means for limiting state intervention and consolidating self regulating markets.⁴⁵ For them, it imposed tight constraints on states, in the spirit of economic liberalism, most notably by obliging central banks to make banknotes fully convertible into gold at a fixed rate. As a result, states would have had to be careful with their policies not to provoke a capital outflow which could quickly deplete the gold reserves of their central bank.

However, as I argued, we generally exaggerate the restrictive nature of structures simply because we assess them in terms of the distance that separates these cases from our assumptions of what should be possible. In this way, the gold standard is generally seen as a restrictive system being compared, as it often is the case, to more recent monetary systems. Our judgement about its restrictive nature thus appears validated by the fact that the gold standard proved incompatible with modern large scale welfare policies, as developed under Keynesianism.⁴⁶ However, the assumption that the gold standard served to limit modern expansionary economic policies is ahistorical because such policies had never been implemented when the gold standard was first established. It is thus misleading to emphasise this constraint of the gold standard as a determining feature of monetary policy in the 19th century. When examining the gold standard from a historical standpoint, it appears instead as a flexible structure of governance in comparison to *previous* monetary systems.⁴⁷ It was, after all, a means to lend credibility to banknotes by ensuring that they would be convertible into gold. For that reason, it proved decisive in the shift to paper money and quickly became a powerful framework to inject massive amounts of money into the economy by the standards of the time. This helps account for the otherwise troubling fact that the countries which adopted the classic institutions of the gold standard generally saw a great surge in their supply of money despite the so-called limits these institutions imposed on states. The irony then is that the very restrictions imposed by the gold standard were only significant because of the very possibilities they opened up. While the gold standard limited the amount of banknotes that could be issued, it still enabled the issue of banknotes in the first place.

In emphasising the problems with readings that focus on the restrictions that structures imposed on agents, I do not wish to deny that there are limits to the possible. People,

clearly, cannot do whatever they wish. Yet this does not mean that these 'limits' actually determine in a significant way what actually people do. More importantly, it is always dangerous to assume that we can determine what are/were these limits because such judgements rely disproportionately on our own assumptions of what is possible. It leads us to highly formal interpretations which ar

defend and to reject state intervention. For this reason, one could make the case that

and presented as the predetermined outcome of an overarching logic. Social change is thus levelled out and too often reduced to an inconsequential development; one which, oddly enough, has a significance only to the extent that it is now repackaged as a functional requirement of social reproduction itself.

It is important to emphasise this point, because too often the debate over structure and agency degenerates into a discussion over whether agents have an autonomous freewill or not. Albeit a fascinating question, this is of secondary relevance to what is at stake here. The important problem relates to the way we make sense of the world. It is an epistemological issue because it concerns the nature of critical knowledge and a methodological one because it relates to the type of rigour that is required to overcome the pitfalls of positivism. Hence, I am not rejecting the notion that structures do, in a way, condition the behaviour of agents, but the more specific idea that critical theorists can derive from the structures they analyse why social dynamics take specific forms. Seeing determination as being inscribed in the very structures they analyse, critical theories then necessarily end up reproducing the problem they initially identified in positivist approaches because they reify structures in their own way. A drift towards essentialism is then inevitable and well exemplified in the broad generalisations that pervade the work of critical scholars. It is on this basis that some Marxists can posit that 500 years of market development in Western Europe are ultimately driven by a single logic of accumulation that was presented by Marx in *Capital*, or that some poststructuralists can hastily conclude that the West has been shaped by a similar discursive structure of modernity for the past 300 years.

4- Agency and the Practice of Power

Having criticised the concepts of agency and structure, we are now left with the difficult task of reassessing the problematic of social construction from a critical standpoint. As I argued, a fundamental tension remains in critical theory between the desire to read social dynamics in terms of power, that is to attribute the main significance of various social structures to the way they shape power, and a desire to examine how these social structures come about through social change. The reason for this conundrum, I pointed out, stems from the reliance of critical theories on a structural framework of analysis to address the question of power (i.e. the significance of social structures), even when they wish to see history (agency) as a means to explain how these structures are set up in the first place.⁵¹ Such formulations, I argued, oddly perpetuate a dualism as the significance of

appropriating a discourse to challenge certain of its assumptions. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought. Volume One: The Renaissance* (New York: Td[(ua Td(i)T1 1)uoa8c(9(rn/leocis)1 154.280)]TJ0.01

lead critical scholars to make three problematic assumptions: 1) that dominant forces fully understand the problems they face 2) that they know how to solve these problems, as if there was a predetermined and objective course to ensure reproduction, and 3) that they control the consequences of what they do, as if other social forces react passively to their actions. Such pragmatic considerations are more than 'complications'. They are the motive that shapes the practice of power. For this reason, one cannot emphasise enough how power, and the ability to shape society, is continuously exaggerated and misunderstood by social theorists who focus on structural power. In abstracting from the agents involved, and thus neglecting the practice of power, they miss the significance institutional and discursive developments. This cannot be defined without understanding how they are conceived to provide leverage for distinctive actors in order to relate to a constantly changing reality.

To illustrate the importance of this argument, let me come back to the example of the gold standard mentioned earlier. As I argued, a structural approach that derives the significance of structures in abstraction from practice is bound to misunderstand these social structures, and to overemphasise their restrictive nature. It is this very bias which led the literature on the gold standard to posit that the latter had limited the range of possibilities for monetary policy. But in doing so it missed how the gold standard had created a radically new form of agency by profoundly transforming *the way states relate to monetary phenomena*. It is the institutions of the gold standard which directly contributed to the rise of central banking, to a new structure of governance which would rapidly become central for state intervention in the 20th century. Hence, this literature only saw the restrictive impact of the gold standard (the limits imposed on central banking) because it took for granted the very thing the gold standard constructed (central banking). When inverting our reading in order to examine the leverage that the gold standard provided for states, it then appears as a crucial stepping stone towards the construction of monetary policy, rather than something fundamentally constraining it.⁵⁵ It was precisely this new agency that made the institutions of the gold standard, initially developed in Britain, so alluring in the late 19th century as other states raced to emulate its example.

This case helps specify how the significance of structures can only be grasped if one problematises how social actors relate to a specific social context through them. It is precisely because we take for granted this agency that we miss what these structures mean for social agents *in another social context than our own*, as if they would relate to their reality in the same terms as ours. Overcoming this bias requires a specific rigor in systematically problematising power as practice. To this end, I propose to reformulate the notion of agency as the ability to relate to a changing social reality in order to modify it, rather than the ability to change society in ways *that are not predetermined by structures*. Further, I argue that critical theory must take agency as its main focus of analysis since the development of agency is the motif behind social construction or, to be

⁵⁵ Knafo, 'The Gold Standard', p. 97.

more precise, behind the way the social is conceptualised and institutionalised. I thus take agency to be the central problematic of critical theory.⁵⁶

Seeing power as agency is the only way to reconcile the two aims of critical theory outlined above. This conception highlights, first, that the significance of structures is linked to power, but only insofar as it provides agency, that is leverage for social forces to influence their social context. Power is thus directly tied to social structures, but not embedded in them. If structures provide the necessary leverage to exert power, the practice of power is never reducible to the structures within which it is exerted. It is precisely because this methodological point was ignored that the literature on the gold standard never properly understood this institution. Starting from the paradigm of central banking, it always assumed that the constraints were aimed at the state. Yet, historically, it was the opposite. The gold standard was imposed by the British state on banks, such as the Bank of England, which were, at the time, private or semi-private. The aim was precisely to develop a new framework of governance to relate to a banking sector that escaped state control, a means to control, more specifically, the practice of banknote issuing which was growing rapidly in England. The significance of this was that it unwittingly created new tools of governance, notably by centralising banknote issuing under the aegis of the Bank of England and increasingly subjected the Bank to state control. In the process, central banking was progressively constructed as the state experimented with monetary governance in order to get a grip over developments that escaped its control.

As this example highlights, agency is not an inherent capacity of agent, as it is too often suggested, *it is a capacity that is itself socially constructed and which needs to be problematised as such*. Too often, agency appears in the work of critical theorists as a primordial ability that is progressively reined in by structural constraints. It is precisely this assumption that can lead scholars to see agency as something that escapes social

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It is on this basis that I offer a re-reading of Robert Cox's opposition between problem solving theory and critical theory which I rearticulate in relation to the structure agent debate. Here, the opposition between structural and agent based readings of social construction boils down to the contrast between positivism and critical theory. From this perspective, positivist approaches reify social reality by assuming that social dynamics are already determined, or constructed, by structures. This mode of theorisation cannot grasp the process of social construction because social reality is here only reproduced. In that sense, these approaches must always posit reality as a given. What I defined as critical theory, by contrast, puts into question what we take for granted by problematising the significance we attribute to these structures in order to highlight what is socially constructed. It does so by highlighting how these structures have a different significance depending on the agents who exploit them and the context where they do so.

The categories of structure and agency thus refer to two perspectives that I deem incompatible, not two ontological realities that we should reconcile. On the one hand, positivists build structural interpretations which consistently downplay the role of social actors in creating their social reality, and miss, for the reasons mentioned above, what is being constructed. Structural readings will thus always reinforce our own assumptions of the world and thus blunt the critical edge of theory. Critical theory, on the other hand, requires a focus on agency to problematise how people make their own history. This focus on agency, I argued, is necessary for the project of critical theory because without the methodological rigour of reading all social pr

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