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Structure and Agency in State Theory

Introduction

The instrumentalist theory of the state is strongly associated with explanation in terms of the role of agency,¹ and agency is sometimes counter-posed to structure.² However we have seen that the role of agency in the instrumental view of the state, far from being counter-posed, is linked in a number of ways to the structural context of behaviour. In setting out an instrumental view of the state agential factors cannot provide plausible explanations on their own. This reflects a more general point that, far from seeing ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ in terms of a dichotomy, it is necessary to elucidate the interrelationship between them. In this chapter we will make explicit the structural dimension of the instrumentalist view, and show how structural explanation can contribute to a fuller explanation of the state within a Marxist perspective.

Agency and structure aren’t all there is

The structure-agency question or debate is clearly of fundamental importance within social science, going as it does to the heart of what it means to provide an adequate explanation of social phenomena (Hay, 2002, pp. 93–4). On the face of it, ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ seem to exhaust the possible ways in which explanation can be offered.

Essentially, what we are concerned with here is the relationship between ... political actors ... and the environment in which they find themselves; in short, with the extent to which political conduct shapes and is shaped by political context (Hay, 2002, p. 89).
Thus it seems that explanation can make appeal only to ‘political actors’ or to ‘the environment’ (or some combination of these) and to nothing else. It has become a commonplace view within social science that adequate explanation must somehow combine structure and agency, that purely ‘structuralist’ or ‘intentionalist’ explanations are not tenable.³ As Hay suggests, political conduct (agency) in some sense is ‘shaped by’ but also ‘shapes’ political context (structure). In fact, there are three ways of conceiving the agency-structure relationship: reduction, opposition, and a dialectical approach. In a reductionist approach the distinction between structure and agency is denied so that everything is, according to taste, either structure or agency. For example, methodological individualism claims that

all social phenomena – their structure and their change – are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals – their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions (Elster, 1985, p. 122).

Thus what may appear as social structures are in principle always reducible to (i.e. really comprised of) individual agents.⁴ Against this, methodological collectivism makes the reverse claim, that what may appear as the properties of individuals are in principle always reducible to (i.e. really comprised of) the effects of social structures.⁵ However this is a false dichotomy. Methodological individualism may be rejected without dispensing with agency – for it can be denied that only individuals are involved. We might say instead that individuals are necessary but not sufficient. The insufficiency of methodological individualist (or intentionalist) explanation is precisely the neglect of context. If individuals are necessary then it follows by the same token that methodological collectivist explanation, as defined by Elster, must also be rejected. If this is accepted then structure and agency must somehow be combined.⁶

In the second way of conceiving the agency-structure relationship, structure and agency are essentially separate and, in some sense, operate independently or autonomously.⁷ Although this opposition, or dualism, may be compatible with purely agential or purely structural explanation, it is most likely to yield mixed explanations in which agential and structural factors are combined. Thus social phenomena are explained as the combined effect of structural and agential factors treated separately. This, then, involves an external relationship between structure and agency.