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The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis

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The starting point of this article is the argument that scholars of foreign policy—in contrast to international relations theorists—have not sufficiently faced up to the explanatory implications of the agency-structure issue in the philosophy of social science. This claim is discussed with reference to four fundamental perspectives in foreign policy analysis, defined in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding the nature of social *order* and individual *action*. Taking its cue primarily from recent philosophical discussions within sociology and social theory, it proposes a metatheoretical framework based on a dynamic conception of the interplay over time between interpretative, purposive agents and a structural domain defined in terms of both constraining and enabling properties. On the basis of this suggested solution to the agency-structure problem, the article subsequently elaborates an explanatory framework premised on a morphogenetic conception of the contextually bound nature of the foreign policy behavior of states, arguing that this reconceptualization can incorporate not only (1) certain rationality assumptions of action, (2) psychological-cognitive explanatory approaches, and (3) the role, broadly speaking, of situational-structural factors, but also (4) an institutional perspective combined with (5) comparative case study analysis.

Introduction

The agency-structure problem has had many names in the annals of social theory. It has also been the root cause of a number of deeply entrenched disputes, stretching from the late medieval differentiation between the individual and the state to contemporary metatheoretical controversies within science, epistemology, and political philosophy. Indeed, this historical development of seemingly intractable dichotomies between “individual and society,” “action and structure,” “actor and system,” “part and whole,” “individualism and holism,” “micro and macro,” “voluntarism and determinism,” “subjectivism and objectivism,” and so forth has at present evolved into what is often claimed to constitute *the* central problem in social and political theory. At the heart of this problem lies an increasingly widespread recognition that, instead of being antagonistic partners in a zero-sum rela-

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tionship, human agents and social structures are in a fundamental sense inter-related entities, and hence that we cannot account fully for the one without invoking the other. The "problem" is that although such views of reciprocal implication suggest that the properties of both agents and social structures are relevant to a proper understanding of social behavior, we nevertheless "lack a self-evident way to conceptualize these entities and their relationship" (Wendt, 1987:338). In short, the creature facing us seems to remain inveterately Janus-faced, presenting an "action" side to some and a "structure" side to others.

Although this issue has received considerable attention among social theorists on both sides of the Atlantic during the past decade, it has done so in terms of essentially two different sets of issues, terminologies, and intellectual traditions (Ritzer, 1992). In the American debate the problem is most often discussed in the form of the "micro"–"macro" linkage, whereas in Europe the focus has largely centered on the relationship between "agency" (or "actors") and "structure." The former implicates the more general distinction—which can be either empirical or analytical—between small-scale and large-scale social phenomena *per se*, whereas the European tradition is concerned more specifically with the relationship between actors or agents (either individual or collective, but most often the former) and social structures (such as bureaucracies, institutions, or the state). An essential difference between the two approaches is thus that, whereas the first can be subsumed under the broader issue of levels of analysis, the latter is primarily concerned with the link between *purposive behavior*—the defining characteristic of agents or actors—and *social structures* on *any* level of social analysis. Although there is clearly a substantial overlap between these two debates within current social theory, it is the agency-structure issue in this latter and more circumscribed sense that will be my point of departure here.¹

The recognition of this issue as problematic has been nurtured by at least two different roots, the one entailing classical questions of political philosophy, the other disputes within the philosophy of social science. The first refers to the contention that whether we like it or not, it is impossible to do social science without at some point coming to grips with the rival claims subsumed under the rubric of this problem. As indicated above, these refer to some of the most retrenched antinomies in human history, particularly those of voluntarism versus determinism and subjectivism versus objectivism. The implication here is that, to the extent that our everyday lives are existentially governed by intimations of both freedom and enchainment, or by the belief that we are capable of shaping the future but only under numerous and often impervious constraints not of our own provision, we are willy-nilly confronted with the agency-structure issue. Furthermore, as noted by Margaret Archer, these "issues are problematic for any social scientist who cannot come down with conviction on one side or the other; and that means a great many of us, each of whom is then of necessity in the job of reconciliation" (Archer, 1988:x). The second type of consensus within this debate flows from the claim that since neither structures nor actors remain constant over time, a social theory worth its salt must be able to account not only for particular changes but also for social change itself as an inherently dynamic phenomenon, in respect of which neither factor "determines" the other but are both, in the final analysis, independent variables in an inextricably intertwined temporal process (Cerny, 1990:4). Without

¹ The suggested geographical division of this debate is by no means watertight. Thus, e.g., although British to the core, the two authors of what is arguably the most accomplished recent inquiry into the philosophical foundations of international relations theory (Hollis and Smith, 1990) have nevertheless chosen to discuss the agency-structure issue primarily in terms of the level-of-analysis problem *à la américain*. For an American response to this way of tackling the subject matter, see Alexander Wendt's recent review of their book (Wendt, 1991), and for the ensuing trans-Atlantic debate, Hollis and Smith (1991, 1992) and Wendt (1992).

in any way wanting to downgrade the issues of political philosophy raised above, it is this latter insight—the need for a dynamic synthesis of structural and agential factors in the explanation of change—which will be placed at the center of the present discussion.

The reason here for pursuing these metatheoretical issues is to pinpoint some of the implications for present-day foreign policy analysis of the problem raised here, particularly since—in contrast to an incipient awakening among international relations theorists—scholars of this persuasion seem, on the whole, to have shielded themselves remarkably well from the more disquieting effects of this question.² It is in any event not a high-priority issue on their research agendas or conference programmes; nor, in my experience, do they seem to lose much sleep over it. I will argue that this is a fundamental mistake, insofar as the agency-structure problem goes to the heart of some of the key assumptions underlying this subdiscipline in its present state, and hence that its resolution has implications—both of theory and substance—that need to be considered more seriously than has hitherto been the case.³

Although the problem considered here is metatheoretical to the core, my interest in it has had a decidedly empirical genesis, *viz.*, some of the recent and profound foreign policy changes that have been occurring in Europe. Here I have in mind not so much the convolutions shaking Central and Eastern Europe as well as the former Soviet Union, which are clearly a consequence of the collapse of entire political systems, but the sudden *volte-face* on the issue of membership in the European Community (EC) of the nonmember West European neutrals. Although these reorientations are obviously far less dramatic than those that have occurred in the previous Warsaw Pact states (or between the superpowers, for that matter), they are nevertheless fundamental, at least from the point of view of these neutrals themselves, who had previously ruled out the possibility of such membership precisely because of their neutral status. What is intriguing about these changes from the point of view of foreign policy analysis is that whereas the former Warsaw Pact states have changed their foreign policies as part of a radical turnabout in their general political ideologies, nothing of the kind has occurred in the neutral states. They are still the same societies, and apparently insist on remaining neutral even if granted membership in the EC. In terms of common-sense logic this would seem to represent an obvious instance of policy incompatibility; and yet it is not perceived in this way by either the neutrals themselves or, it would seem, by most other members of the larger European confraternity of states.

Is this a case of wanting and, more important, being allowed to have one's cake and eat it too, or are we facing a novel development affecting both state actions and international structures, in the sense that what is regarded as acceptable "neutral" behavior is being *redefined* in terms of a new international regime governing and empowering such behavior? And if the latter, how are we to explain these developments occurring at this particular point in time? Equally important, is a Europe increasingly dominated by the European Community undergoing a reconstitution of the very notion of sovereignty itself and hence of the foreign policy structures that have characterized its foreign policy behavior in the past?

² With respect to the former see, in particular, Wendt (1987), Dessler (1989), and the debate referred to in footnote 1. Nicholas Greenwood Onuf (1989) has also addressed the problem considered here, but in terms of his larger project of reconstructing—indeed, reconstituting—the discipline of international relations itself.

³ I should perhaps add that this argument applies only to what Richard Ashley has called "logocentric" (or "modern," as opposed to "post-modern") political theory and not to the type of poststructuralist discourse favored by him. Insofar as adherents of the latter regard the problem addressed here as an "undecidable opposition"—a true paradox—that cannot be resolved by "theory" (this is Ashley's position), they necessarily fall outside the purview of the present discussion. See Ashley, 1989:272–278.

In my view, these are the types of queries that necessitate a reconsideration of foreign policy theory in terms of the agency-structure issue. This is also the reason why, whenever appropriate, I will refer to this particular empirical subject matter in the discussion below, even though it has implications far beyond this particular issue area. This choice is also premised on the claim that if there are presently occurring any intriguing developments in foreign policy crying out for both extensive theoretical and substantive analysis, they are in the first instance to be found in the current vicissitudes of the "new" Europe rather than elsewhere.

Approaches to the Problem: A Critique

The Problem in General

As conceived here, the agency-structure problem consists of two interrelated aspects, the one strictly ontological, the other epistemological in a broader sense. Being the more fundamental of the two, the former focuses not only on the basic properties of agents and structures *qua* units of analysis, but also on the relationship between them. Invoking it here also marks a crucial watershed in recent philosophy of science, insofar as a stress on the prime importance of ontology in social theory is clearly in contravention of long-standing neopositivist injunctions against metaphysical postulates in the explanation of social actions. However, as Ira J. Cohen is happy to note, the "revocation of these injunctions is one of the liberating consequences of the post-positivist or post-empiricist revolution in the philosophy of science" (Cohen, 1987:276). In the latter, this break with received wisdom has proceeded most successfully in terms of arguments in favor of scientific realism, a doctrine claiming—to put it very succinctly—that "theories explain how phenomena are products or aspects of an underlying ontology" (Dessler, 1989:445), and hence that "whether a thing exists is a question about the world independent of questions about how we could know it or what statements concerning the thing mean" (Hollis and Smith, 1990:10). Although this standpoint is by no means uncontroversial within the narrower confines of the philosophy of social science, it is along these lines, and without any further ado, that the ontological issue in the agency-structure problem will be treated here.⁴

In a discussion of this problem in social theory, Jeffrey C. Alexander has conceptualized the ontological factor in terms of the concept of order, referring to the ultimate empirical source of social structures:

How is action arranged to form the patterns and institutions of everyday life? There have been two prototypical answers to this problem of order, the individualistic and the collectivist. Society may be viewed as the product of negotiation freely entered into, as the result of individual decisions, feelings, and wants. On the other hand, we can view society as constituting, in Emile Durkheim's famous phrase, a reality *sui generis*, a reality "in itself." (Alexander, 1988:14)

This choice between regarding either agents or structures as ontologically primitive has been a constant and factious characteristic of the history of modern social

⁴ Wendt has noted that whereas scientific realism is "arguably the 'new orthodoxy' in the philosophy of natural science, [it is] as yet largely unacknowledged by political scientists" (Wendt, 1987:336). Recent explications of scientific realism include Aronson (1984), Harré (1986), Manicas (1987:266–293), and Trigg (1989). The main present rival to scientific realism in international relations theory is arguably "constructivism," which has received an intriguing application in Onuf (1989). For recent discussions of the theoretical flux characterizing international relations theory in general, see *inter alia* Ferguson and Mansbach (1991), Lapid (1989), Bierstecker (1989), and the "dissident" essays in Der Derian and Shapiro (1989).

science, profoundly influencing its agenda from Marx, Durkheim, and Weber to the present-day pluralism in most of our social science departments and faculties.

This structural polarity between individualism and collectivism should be clearly distinguished from the epistemological issue of whether agency is to be conceived "objectively" or "subjectively," i.e., in terms of either "rational" or "interpretative" actors.⁵ This distinction, pertaining essentially to the role of rationality in social theory, has also generated much discussion and controversy in recent years, but will in the present context concern us only by virtue of its implications when combined with the two ontological choices presented above.⁶ In the present context these are claimed to be the following.

The individualistic answer to the ontological question reduces the epistemological issue to a choice between either treating actors wholly as objective maximizers of utility, most successfully formalized in rational choice theory, or viewing them as subjective, interpretative agents pursuing individual goals, an approach deeply rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and Wittgenstein's later philosophy, as well as contemporary analytical and psychological theories of action. In either case, the individual is viewed as the primary source of social order, and hence all conceptions of the link between agents and social structure are ultimately reduced to explanations in terms of individual action. In Karl Popper's classic formulation, "all social phenomena, and especially the functioning of all social institutions, should always be understood as resulting from the decisions, actions, attitudes, etc. of human individuals . . . we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called 'collectives'" (Popper, 1966:98).⁷ This is, in a nutshell, the tradition of methodological individualism in social theory.

Explanations proceeding from a collectivist approach to social order treat action either in terms of the objective pursuit of interests (this is, essentially, the mature Marx's answer to our problem), or with reference to processes of socialization, a view with deep roots both in Durkheimian sociology and modern social psychology. In both cases the relationship between agency and structure is tendered in terms of some form of structural determination in which individual action is conceived as a function of social order. This form of reduction in social theory usually goes by the name of methodological holism.⁸

The problem with each of these four options is, as Archer has forcefully argued, that they propel us toward either "upward conflation" or "downward conflation," i.e., the procedure of reducing the one component of the actor-structure linkage to explanation in terms of the other, thus by fiat excluding a *reciprocal interplay* between the two. "Consequently," she writes, "the dependent element is robbed of the capacity to exploit or to influence the determining element, for it lacked the autonomy or independence to do so" (Archer, 1988:97f.).⁹ Furthermore, insofar as

⁵ See also the discussion of these distinctions in Onuf, 1989:56–65.

⁶ The most suggestive, sustained, and indeed soul-searching discussion of all the various ramifications of rationality in social inquiry during the past decade has undoubtedly been provided by Jon Elster in a series of seminal books on this topic. See, in particular, Elster, 1979, 1983, 1989a, and 1989b.

⁷ It should be noted, however, that the methodological individualism of rational choice theory is usually of a stricter kind than the one espoused by Popper. The thrust of the former is defined by Elster as "the doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and change) are explicable *only* in terms of individuals—their properties, goals, and beliefs" (Elster, 1982:453; my emphasis), whereas Popper has conceded that our actions cannot be explained without reference to "our social environment, to social institutions and to their manner of functioning" (Popper, 1966:90).

⁸ On the individualism-holism debate in general, see *inter alia* the classic discussions collected in O'Neill (1973), as well as Lukes (1973).

⁹ In deconstructionist terms, this procedure typifies the logocentric approach previously mentioned, i.e., the operation "which at once differentiates one term from another, prefers one to the other, and arranges them hierarchically, displacing the subordinate term beyond the boundary of what is significant and desirable" (Gregory, 1989:xvi).

the above conceptions of social order lead to explanations referring to the essential properties of their respective primitive units, the latter are simply posited and hence remain immune to theoretical penetration *qua* social phenomena. In other words, 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. We simply have to accept it without recourse to theoretical justification.

This, in its most skeletal form, is the background to the problem invoked by the agency-structure issue in social theory: given the four major types of approaches in the social sciences adumbrated above, either agency is privileged over structure, or structure over agency—irrespective of our ontological and epistemological commitments. The current debate within social theory has revolved around the question of how to resolve this impasse, given the increasingly recognized need to view the relationship between actors and social structures in terms of mutual linkage rather than causal reduction.

The Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis

It is time that I illustrate the implications for foreign policy analysis of this brief foray into what is essentially an alien terrain to most foreign policy analysts. Is the problem highlighted here in any significant sense relevant to our more immediate concerns, or are foreign policy scholars fully justified in not letting their nocturnal slumbers be unduly disturbed by what is, after all, a contentious issue primarily among philosophically inclined theorists?

In this section I shall elaborate on the claim that this issue indeed ramifies foreign policy analysis to its core, encasing its focus and scope in various distinctive and characteristic patterns of analysis. By means of a quick cut into the foreign policy literature, an attempt will be made to illustrate the extent to which central approaches or “schools” within our subdiscipline can indeed be characterized in terms of the alternative frameworks sketched above, and hence also how each—for different reasons and to different degrees—can be criticized from the point of view of the issue raised by the agency-structure debate. The general logic of my argument at this juncture is that (1) as long as a given foreign policy approach characteristically fits into one of the four cells of the matrix suggested above, it is *ipso facto* problematic with respect to this issue; but (2) some approaches are more problematic than others in this regard, and hence we need to specify the critique in each instance, insofar as (3) certain approaches are more amenable to the kind of synthesis which, it will be argued in a subsequent section, is a prerequisite to adequately resolving the problem raised here. Because such a synthesis relates to how to make analytically operational the core assumption that both agents and social structures interact reciprocally in determining the foreign policy behavior of sovereign states, the question I pursue here is the following: how do major approaches within contemporary foreign policy analysis fare in this regard?

1. The application of rational choice theory to foreign policy analysis is the best current example of an *individualist* focus in terms of agents “objectively” maximizing their utility. Much of formal strategic analysis in international relations theory belongs to this category, primarily in the form of variants of game theory. The question here is not if game theory—or the rational choice approach in general—is fruitful or not in generating knowledge *per se*, but how it treats the agent-structure problem. In short, does it as a self-conscious research programme allow for the interplay of agential and structural factors in the dynamic sense conceived above?

As argued by Robert Grafstein, this query pertains to the role that rational choice theory gives *institutions* in its analysis of policy behavior (Grafstein, 1988).

On the assumption that institutions are both human products and social forces in their own right—"common wisdom among political scientists," one is happy to note from his article—the question is how to reconcile these "creation" and "constraint" aspects of the assumption (Grafstein, 1988:578). More specifically, with reference to rational choice theory, the problematic aspect here refers to the nature of institutional constraint, insofar as (quoting Peter C. Ordeshook) "viewing institutions as explicit or implicit products of individual choice seems only logical" (Grafstein, 1988:579). In short, the problem here is not the causal link from actors to institutions but the reverse relationship.

Grafstein's conclusion, after a lengthy analysis of recent discussions of this topic, is that rational choice theory essentially defines institutional constraint in terms of individual psychology: how actors make choices in specific situations. Thus it does not provide an account for the *active* constraints imposed by institutions but merely for how the rational actor will use all available information to preempt or evade the imposition of exogenous institutional processes. This, in his analysis, is simply to define away institutional constraint, leaving in its stead the wholly self-contained, agentistic notion of preferences, beliefs, and anticipated reactions *endogenously* generated by and *internally* constraining the actor. And insofar as rational choice theory also takes choices and preferences for granted, i.e., leaving them unexplained, it cannot account for "how individuals under given conditions produce new conditions," as Adam Przeworski has acknowledged (1985:401). This seems to be an inevitable consequence of the assumption that rational choice theory must perforce posit the desires of agents as primitive units in the analysis of the behavior of social beings. It may be true, as Jon Elster has noted in defense of rational choice theory, that "to explain behaviour in terms of the desires of agents is an important task even if the desires themselves are left unexplained" (Elster, 1986:38). But insofar as this is a *necessary* limitation, the rational choice approach seems constitutively both unable and unwilling to provide a solution to the agent-structure problem.¹⁰

To the extent that the critique referred to above is valid generally, it also undermines the utility of rational choice models in solving this problem within foreign policy analysis. Fortunately, these models are most often used in foreign policy studies not so much to explain *actual* behavior as to provide a logical—and sometimes fruitful—diagnostic tool for analyzing the strategic choices "in theory" available to individual actors in specific deterrence situations.¹¹ As noted by Alexander George and Richard Smoke, such approaches are "at best, an aid to devising deterrence strategies" (George and Smoke, 1989:180). Even in this latter respect, however, they have come in for serious criticism in the recent past.¹² As argued by two critical contributors to a *World Politics* symposium on this topic, "preferences often change through the process of interaction and may do so in ways that are unanticipated by or contradictory to theories of deterrence . . . what is critically relevant to theory and strategy is outside the model" (Lebow and Stein, 1989:215–217). This is precisely why, given the agency-structure issue, rational choice theory in foreign policy analysis is fundamentally so problematic. As it stands, it simply defines away the issue—as indeed it must do. Were rational choice

¹⁰ A recent and similar argument but along Marxist lines—directed in the first instance at such "analytical Marxists" as Elster and John Roemer—is presented by Callinicos (1988:64–76). Also see, however, the discussion in Taylor (1989).

¹¹ Neorealism also employs a similar choice-theoretic understanding of international order and cooperation, based on an individualistic ontology of the international system (Wendt and Duvall, 1989). However, since we are here discussing unit-level rather than systems-level issues, it is not an appropriate example in the present context, even though the same criticisms, in principle, apply to both levels.

¹² See, in particular, *World Politics*, Vol. XLI, No. 2 (January 1989), pp. 170–237, as well as the exchange on this topic in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (September 1989), pp. 418–514, in particular, Jervis (1989):511–515.

theorists to admit the relevance also of the structural aspect in explaining agents' choices, this would fatally undermine the elegant and parsimonious logic underlying the approach as a whole. It is also to a large extent on this score that its predictive power as an empirical theory of strategic behavior has been criticized. Thus, whatever the merits of rational choice theory in foreign policy analysis, a solution to the problem considered here is arguably not one of them.

2. Actors "objectively" pursuing their interests can also be defined in *collectivist* rather than individualist terms. Although this is admittedly the least populated cell in our matrix, I would argue that we have a foreign policy instance of this type of analysis in world-systems theory, a neo-Marxist approach most often associated with Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein, 1987). Clearly, this is a collectivist approach to state-to-state relations, and an explanation of actor behavior—the behavior of the sovereign states constituted by the world system—proffered in terms of a rationalistic, functional logic based on the pursuit of systemic interests.¹³ Equally clearly, as Alexander E. Wendt has argued, adherents of this approach "reify social structures when they assert, or imply in their concrete research, not only that certain social relations are irreducible and constitute the state and class agents which are their elements, but that these relations are analytically independent of, and ontologically prior to, those agents" (Wendt, 1987:347). Indeed, since this version of the collectivist approach is so clearly deterministic in its passive conception of state (and class) agency, there is no need to drive home the point further that adherents of this essentially functionalist mode of structural analysis not only cannot provide a solution to the agent-structure problem, but indeed—as do rational choice theorists, but for the opposite reason—seem to resist even the suggestion of such a need. In Anthony Giddens's acerbic epithet, actors in this type of conception seem little more than structural "dopes" of the larger system (Giddens, 1979:52). This is structuralism *ne plus ultra* in foreign policy analysis, something that should not surprise us, given its subterranean roots in the arid soil of Althusserian Marxism.

3. In turning to the *collectivist* approach in terms of "interpretative" (rather than "rational") actors, we come considerably closer to the interface between agency and structure. Hence, there is reason here to look at this type of analysis in somewhat more detail. The landmark study in this connection is arguably Graham T. Allison's explication and application of bureaucratic and organizational models in *Essence of Decision* (1971). In analyzing how people's behavior is molded by the offices they hold, the former approach has an essentially dynamic import, whereas the latter is viewed in terms of an inherently inertial process sustaining—wittingly or not—the status quo. Although "paradigmatic" (in Robert Merton's rather than Thomas Kuhn's sense), both types have been claimed to have empirical reference to most institutional settings, albeit in combinations showing great variation both over time and across different settings.

With respect to the agent-structure issue, the problem with both these types of approaches is that they too tend to reify the institutional factor, inasmuch as the explanation of foreign policy behavior is essentially reduced to an explanation in terms of structural-institutional variables.¹⁴ Or rather, while ostensibly recognizing that sentient individuals are involved in the processes described above, these models nevertheless assume that the contents of their perceptions lie beyond the contingency of individual action. In this tradition, Alexander writes, "micro processes may well become central points of empirical interest, . . . [but] only because

¹³ For reasons that remain unclear, Onuf has claimed (1989:56) that international relations theory "simply has no name for, or experience with," this combination of an objectivist and collectivist focus in social theory.

¹⁴ In this connection see the illuminating discussion in Hollis and Smith (1990:146–170).

phenomena such as personalities and interaction are conceived as central 'conveyor belts' for collective facts" (Alexander, 1988:270). This reflects its beholdenness to a quintessentially Durkheimian conceptualization of the agent-structure linkage, in terms of which human subjectivity is conceived as the reproduction of social structure, i.e., social structure is translated into the actor realm only via the agency of *socialized* individuals (Barry, 1978:47ff.).¹⁵ Indeed, no other type of individual seems conceivable in a social theory of this kind, in which all individual action is "nested" wholly within the crucible of social constraint. Insofar as both the bureaucratic and organizational models are to a significant degree latter-day applications of this sociological approach to the actor-structure linkage, they are thus equally indictable in terms of Archer's charge of "downward conflation."

4. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that an increasingly vocal reaction against this way of conceiving the role of the individual in explanations of foreign policy has made itself heard during the past two decades or so. The core issue in this reaction has been the attempt to reconstruct the parameters of action in favor of the notion of contingency, i.e., granting decision-makers more autonomy than the above—essentially deterministic—conception of socialized agents allows for. What we have here is, in short, a move toward our fourth type of approach, a metatheoretical choice that retains the notion of "interpretative" individuals but takes the ontological step from collectivism to *individualism*. This is conceivably also the current mainstream approach within foreign policy analysis.

Harold and Margaret Sprout were pioneers in this respect, particularly in their insistence that environmental factors—both nonhuman and social—can affect human activities in only two ways: they "can be perceived, reacted to, and taken into account by the human individual or individuals under consideration, . . . or be conceived as a sort of matrix . . . which limits the execution of undertakings" (Sprout and Sprout, 1965:11).¹⁶ Michael Brecher has extended this perspective into his conception of the centrality of both the "operational" and the "psychological" environment, in which the latter—especially in the form of the notions of decision-makers' image structures and attitudinal prisms—provides an interpretative link with the former (Brecher, 1972). However, the biggest impact within this approach has probably been the adoption of various cognitive and psychological theories for explaining foreign policy behavior. Central names here include those of Robert Jervis, Alexander George, Ole K. Holsti, Margaret Hermann, Richard Ned Lebow, Deborah Welch Larson, Jaacov Y. Vertzberger and others (Holsti, 1976:18–54; Jervis, 1976; George, 1979a:95–124; Hermann, 1980:7–46; Lebow, 1981; Larson, 1985; Vertzberger, 1990). It is undoubtedly the combined impact of these reactions and new perspectives that explains the resuscitation of decision-making approaches in foreign policy analysis, as well as the active role at present of foreign policy analysts in professional organizations—in particular the *International Society of Political Psychology*—primarily oriented toward cognitive and psychological foci in the explanation of political behavior.

Although we have a host of examples of this fourth type of approach, I shall here be bold enough to refer to my own previous attempt to contribute to this popular genre. This may at first appear to be a presumptuous choice; but perhaps less so

¹⁵ Certain forms of the "new institutionalism" also seem to follow this sociological path. See, e.g., Stephen Krasner (1988:73), who suggests that two interrelated characteristics are central to an institutional perspective: "the *derivative* character of individuals and the persistence of something . . . over time" (my emphasis). Although I am strongly in favor of an institutional approach to foreign policy analysis (indeed, as I shall indicate in my conclusion, this article is indirectly an argument in favor of it), one of my main concerns here is to argue *against* this derivative conception of the nature of foreign policy actors.

¹⁶ See also the discussion and elaboration of these Sproutian ideas—synthesized in the concept of the "ecological triad"—in Most and Starr (1989:29–35).

once it becomes clear that I shall argue that, in its present form, it too fails to resolve the actor-structure problem. More important, this choice is also dictated by discursive parsimony, since I will subsequently retain this explanatory framework as the baseline in an attempt to move us one step closer toward a resolution of our problem.

In a book published a few years ago, I set out an argument in favor of a comparative framework for analyzing foreign policy along the following lines (Carlsnaes, 1987:71–116). After having conceptualized the pertinent explanandum as “foreign policy actions”—a stipulation with fundamental metatheoretical implications flowing from the philosophy of action which I shall leave aside here—I there proposed that the explanation of such actions is most fruitfully pursued in terms of a logically *tripartite* approach consisting of an *intentional*, a *dispositional*, and a *structural* dimension of explanation (see Figure 1).

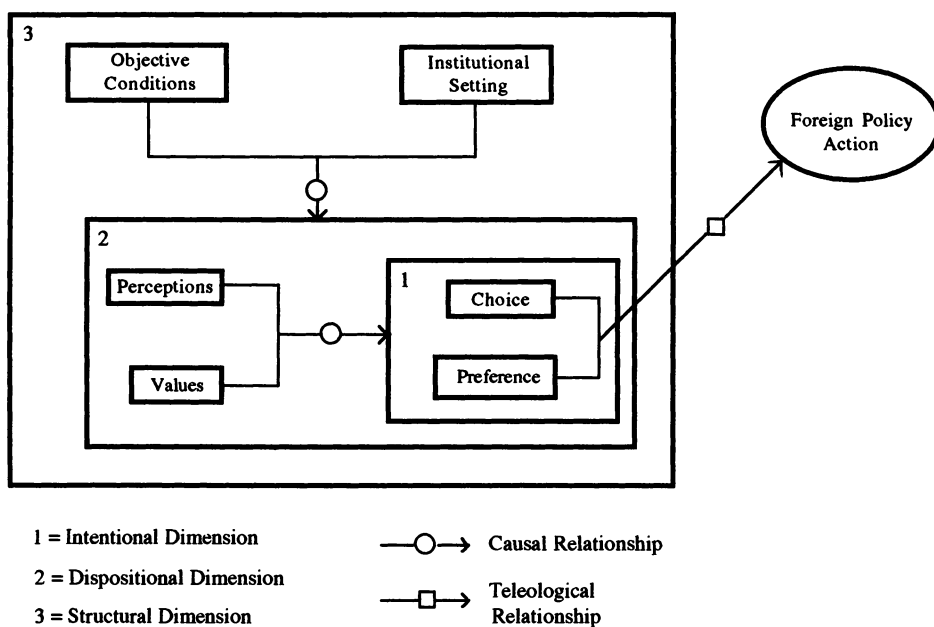


FIG. 1. Explaining a foreign policy action.

Although analytically autonomous, these three dimensions are nevertheless conceived as closely linked in the sense that they can be conjoined in a logical, step-by-step manner to render increasingly exhaustive explanations of policy actions. This means, first of all, that an explanation in terms solely of the intentional dimension is fully feasible (and indeed very common): for example, this dimension essentially indicates the explanatory parameters for all types of “rationalistic” analyses of actions. It also means, however, that one can choose to “deepen” the analysis by providing a causal determination—as opposed to an explanation wholly in terms of given goals and preferences—in which the factors characterizing the intentional dimension are themselves explained in terms of a question that the intentional dimension itself is unable to accommodate, *viz.*, *why* the given choices and preferences are implicated in the first place.¹⁷ The distinction between these two

¹⁷ In the 1987 version of this framework I used “motivation” instead of “preference.”

levels can also be described in terms of an “in order to” and a “because of”—or a teleological as opposed to a causal—dimension, the former referring to the intentional sphere, the latter constituting the link between this intention and *the having of it*: how a particular intention has come to be a particular actor’s intention. As indicated in Figure 1, two broad categories are deemed essential to a causal analysis of this kind, namely, *values* (including the *norms* they underwrite) and *perceptions*.

So far, a two-dimensional framework has been suggested that is wholly commensurable with an individualistic definition of order based on a conception of agents as “interpretative” actors. However, and here we come to the crucial issue, this framework also reflects the ambition of incorporating structural factors as explanatory variables. Indeed, one of the explicit purposes has been to respond to Giddens’s charge that “the analytical philosophy of action lacks a theorisation of institutions” (Giddens, 1979:54). This has been done in the form of the third explanatory level in Figure 1, referred to as the structural dimension.¹⁸ The link between it and the two other dimensions is to a significant degree conceptualized in terms of the notion of cognitive constraint as conceived by the Sprouts. This implies that structural factors—such as institutions, but all other exogenous factors as well—are *cognitively mediated* by the actors in question, and are hence not causal variables in the sense commonly understood within analytical philosophy of action. They do not “cause” actors to behave in a certain way; but they certainly provide the *constraining conditions* under which contingent actors—the only causal entities in the type of philosophical approach exemplified here—necessarily have to operate.¹⁹

Although I still believe that this approach is a creditable advance on explanatory frameworks defined solely in terms of intentionalist-rationalistic approaches, psychological-cognitive theories of action, or bureaucratic-organizational models (or any two in combination), it nevertheless fails to solve the particular conundrum considered here. What is problematic about it is that whereas the notion that individualistic explanations cannot contain structural factors is explicitly rejected, it nevertheless does not succeed in incorporating the *dynamic interplay* between agents and structures. Nor is it difficult to perceive why this is the case, since the traditions in decision-making analysis synthesized in the above framework focus quite explicitly on the “subjectivity of individualistic orders” (Alexander, 1988:271). Insofar as this—essentially Weberian—approach means that “interpretative individuals create society through contingent acts of freedom” (Alexander, 1988:270), it follows that structural factors such as institutions can be conceptualized solely in terms of their constraining effects on these contingent acts of freedom, not in terms of dynamic patterns of intervention across the agency-structure divide in terms of which both factors—at least in principle—carry equal causal weight in the explanation of purposive behavior. Ironical as it may seem, such a view harks back to Marx’s celebrated dictum, in the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that “men make history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx and Engels, 1975:103–104). Despite his Marxist predilections, Alex Callinicos has argued that this formula

¹⁸ In the original version, this was called the “situational” rather than “structural” dimension.

¹⁹ For reasons of parsimony, in Figure 1 I have preempted the discussion by placing a causal link between the latter two dimensions as well. In the original version this link was characterized in terms of neither teleology nor causality, but as one of constraint. However, this rejection of causality with respect to the linkage between the situational and dispositional dimensions is not tenable once scientific realism is adopted. The relationship between the explanandum and the intentional dimension is teleological, since actions and intentions are conceptually rather than empirically linked.

"suffers from a fundamental flaw, namely that it conceives the role of structure as essentially negative, as simply a constraint on action" (Callinicos, 1988:9). The same indictment applies to the particular framework discussed here. In so doing, it also fails to provide for the analytic wherewithal for explaining foreign policy changes over time, as distinguished from explanations of specific policies, be they adaptive or static.

In other words, if we are to take seriously the central desideratum of reciprocal and dynamic linkage stressed above, while at the same time remaining committed to the epistemological notion of interpretative, purposive actors, it is imperative that we transcend the unresolved tension that exists between individualism and collectivism. It is in this sense that one can argue that although the framework discussed above is arguably based on an acceptable understanding of the epistemological nature of individual *action*, it has not sufficiently penetrated the ontological nature of social *order*. In other words, while positing foreign policy actions as a proper and legitimate focus of analysis, it fails to account for the need to incorporate into our understanding of how they are pursued the fundamental proposition that it is individuals who create social structures, and that these structures both constrain *and* enable the subsequent choices of the same individuals or those of future generations. As it stands, it thus remains open to the essential thrust of Giddens's criticism referred to above—that action-oriented approaches of this kind tend to occlude the intimate connection between agents and structures, i.e., that they are constitutively unable to give institutions (and other social structures) their proper theoretical due in social and political analysis. But is this an irredeemable condition of this type of analytic approach?

Before responding to this query by way of a discussion of two current attempts within social theory to provide a synthesis of the agency-structure dichotomy, the argument hitherto presented can be recapitulated in terms of the following two points. First, the crucial issue for foreign policy analysis raised here is the question of how to conceptualize interstate behavior in terms of both human choice and social determination without falling prey to the kinds of *reductionism*—of either downward or upward conflation—illustrated above. As argued there, none of the four prototypical approaches discussed gives an adequate solution to this problem, although one, based on "interpretative individualism," was deemed to have come closer than the others. Second, although the above is essentially a metatheoretical conclusion, this failure has fundamental implications for the conduct of substantive research itself, since as long as the agency-structure issue remains unresolved, the foreign policy analyst is unable to address a crucial aspect of empirical reality itself: that the policies of states are a consequence of, and can hence only be fully explained with reference to, a dynamic process in which both agents *and* structures causally condition each other over time. In short, as long as the metatheoretical issue discussed here resists a solution, the problematic nature of *explaining the dynamics of foreign policy change itself* remains unresolved.

New Approaches to the Problem

Two Recent Synthetic Attempts in Social Theory

In a series of seminal contributions to this issue over the past decade, Anthony Giddens has proposed a synthesis which has been both highly acclaimed and vigorously contested. It is also a contribution to the discussion that is notoriously difficult to penetrate, and therefore I shall make no claims to full adequacy on this score. Fundamental to this synthesis, which goes by the name of structuration theory, lies an apperception of the centrality of continual transformation in social

life. Or as Giddens writes, quoting the great Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "*Unser Leben geht hin mit Verwandlung...*: Our life passes in transformation" (Giddens, 1979:3). To penetrate this phenomenon, he posits the core ontological notion of the *duality of structure*, which he has described as follows in an oft-quoted but opaque passage:

By the duality of structure, I mean the essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and "exists" in the generating moments of this constitution. (Giddens, 1979:5)

To the question of the link between action and structure—the Janus-faced issue claimed to signify the problem discussed here—Giddens thus gives the answer that they *presuppose each other* in a dialectical relationship: but it is a dialectic not of a series of sequential acts but of time and space defined as a process in which it "is the past *in* the present and the future *in* the present which matter" (Archer, 1985:75). Since this conflation of social, spatial, and temporal structures involves an image of society as a continuous flow of conduct—this is the process of structuration itself—it "proscribes any discontinuous conceptualization of structure and action—the intimacy of their mutual constitution defies it," as Archer writes in explanation (1985:75). Ontologically it is, in other words, an irreducibly single medallion consisting of an agency side and a structure side. As interpreted by Michael Taylor in a discussion of our problem, this means that "social relations are internal relations, the relata not being even definable independently of their relations" (Taylor, 1989:149). As such it constitutes an explicit attempt to transcend the dualism between voluntarism and determinism, and to mediate the dichotomy between subject and object, by making the actor a self-consciously knowledgeable *social being* producing and reproducing society on the basis of practical reason (Giddens, 1979:4f.).

There is also a *discursive* aspect to structuration theory, referring to the notion that social structures "are inseparable from the reasons and self-understandings that agents bring to their actions" (Wendt, 1987:359). Although it is not entirely clear if this means that social structures are essentially reducible to human consciousness (as some critics have claimed), it does imply both that social structures are dependent on human self-understandings and, more important, that they acquire their societal efficacy—i.e., their power—only through the medium of practical reason and action (Wendt, 1987:359).²⁰ "Power," Giddens says, "is instantiated in action" (Giddens, 1979:91), but at the same time agents' powers cannot be understood or explained without an analysis of social structure.

Quite clearly, we here have a resolute strategy for overcoming the central core of the agency-structure problem. It constitutes a bold attempt to amalgamate the divide between action and order by substituting an overarching conception of *duality* for the various *dualisms* that have previously defined this division. It has also for this reason been appropriated in a notable attempt to solve the agent-structure problem for international relations theory. In his innovative article outlining this solution, Wendt thus writes as follows:

A key implication of the argument . . . about the agent-structure relationship was that theories of international relations must have foundations in theories of both their principal units of analysis (state agents and system structures). Such theories

²⁰ Or as Ashley has written: "In the face of the contingencies of history that threaten to render institutionalized structures problematic, structurationism holds, the continuity of these structures depends upon the conduct of knowing agents who interpret contingencies of history, make choices, and orient their practices in the light of their understandings" (Ashley, 1989:276).

are more than simply convenient or desirable: they are necessary to explain state action. This requirement follows directly both from the scientific realist's conception of explanation as identifying causal mechanisms, and from the ontological claims of structuration theory about the relationship of agents and structures. If the properties of states and systems structures are both thought to be causally relevant to events in the international system, and if those properties are somehow interrelated, then theoretical understandings of both those units are necessary to explain state action. (Wendt, 1987:365)

He then goes on to suggest a research agenda the core of which consists of the "use of structural analysis to theorize the conditions of existence of state agents, and the use of historical analysis to explain the genesis and reproduction of social structures" (Wendt, 1987:365). Although there may conceivably be various other contestable aspects to this commendable proposal, I will here point only to one, since it is crucial to the eventual success of this approach as a whole. The problem I have in mind refers to the very possibility of conducting the kind of dynamic, historical analysis proposed above. Surely no one in today's post-behavioralist world would have reason to cavil unduly about the desirability of this type of research focus; but is Giddens's structuration theory in a position to help it along?

The problem here is the following. When Wendt argues that "an historical analysis of social structuring must begin with the intended and unintended consequences of state action (and the action of other agents)," he is proposing a starting point that at least Giddens's conceptualization of structuration theory arguably cannot accommodate, given the latter's view on the mutual constitution of action and structure.²¹ Giddens's conception of *duality* is crucial here. As Archer has forcefully argued, his use of this notion leads him to preclude the possibility of analyzing the empirical *interplay* between action and structure, since the notions of action and structure ontologically *presuppose* each other. She refers to this extreme form of mutual constitution in terms of "central conflation," contrasting it with more everyday applications allowing for considerable relative autonomy between constitutive elements:

Thus mutually constitutive concepts like "cycling," "singing," "haystack" or "officer" are all cases where it is possible to examine the constituent components separately. Bicycles, songs, bales and armies can be inspected in their own right, independent of human agency, and regardless of their dispositional capacity for being ridden, sung, stacked or manned. (Archer, 1988:76f.)

The problem with collapsing action into structure and structure into action à la Giddens—of giving neither explanatory autonomy—is that it precludes a realistic possibility of conducting *historical* analyses along the lines proposed by Wendt. More specifically, the absence of *temporal relations* between actions and structure must surely entail the conclusion that Giddens cannot incorporate the notion—quintessentially historical—that structure and action work on different time intervals. Or as Archer puts it: "What he stresses is that theorizing must have a temporal dimension: what he misses is time as an actual variable in theory. In consequence Giddens asserts that 'social systems only exist through their continuous structuration in the course of time,' but is unable to provide any theoretical purchase on their *structuring over time*" (Archer, 1985:72). This critique is iterated by Taylor in his argument that to "conflate structure and action is to rule out from the

²¹ In fairness to Wendt it must be added that in this article he does not exclusively—or even primarily—base his explication of structuration theory (or structurationism, as he prefers to call it) on Giddens's version of it. My argument thus pertains in the first instance to the latter's specific theory rather than to the former's more general application of the notion of structuration (based in the first instance on the writings of Roy Bhaskar and Nigel Drift). See Wendt, 1987:336fn.

start the possibility of explaining change in terms of their interaction *over time*" (Taylor, 1989:149). This is clearly a grave shortcoming if the intention is to provide an historical analysis of the link between actions on the one hand and their structural consequences—intended or not—on the other. Insofar as this is a constitutive component of the agenda of central conflation, we must therefore conclude that as it stands it is less than fully adequate for invigorating a dynamic approach to foreign policy analysis along the lines attempted here.²²

Margaret Archer's own response to the agent-structure problem is to contrast the concept of *morphogenesis* with structuration in the analysis of agent-structure interaction. Referring to David Lockwood's famous distinction between the relations pertaining between a group of *actors* ("social integration") and those prevailing between parts of the *social structure* ("system integration"), which he posited in order to theorize about the *interplay* between these two modalities of social life, she has appropriated this concept to analyze the capacity of social systems to undergo restructuring (Archer, 1988:xiv).²³ In critique of Giddens's use of the notion of duality, she describes this core meaning of morphogenesis as follows:

The emergent properties which characterize socio-cultural systems imply discontinuity between initial interactions and their product, the complex system. In turn this invites *analytical dualism* when dealing with structure and action. Action of course is ceaseless and essential both to the continuation and further elaboration of the system, but subsequent interaction will be different from earlier action because conditioned by the structural consequences of that prior action. Hence the morphogenetic perspective is not only dualistic but sequential, dealing in endless cycles of structural conditioning/social interaction/structural elaboration—thus unravelling the dialectical interplay between structure and action. "Structuration," by contrast, treats the ligatures binding structure, practice and system as indissoluble hence the necessity of *duality* and the need to gain a more indirect purchase on the elements involved. (Archer, 1985:61)

This strategy of uncovering morphogenetic cycles that can be analytically broken up into intervals in order to penetrate the relations between structure and action constitutes the core of her epistemological solution to the problem discussed here. It is based on two simple ontological assumptions about reality: "that structure logically pre-dates the action(s) which transform it; and that structural elaboration logically post-dates those actions. . . . This represents the bedrock of an understanding of systemic properties, of *structuring* over time, which enables explanations of specific forms of structural elaboration to be advanced" (Archer, 1985:72). It stands in marked contrast to Giddens's conception of the duality of structure and of structuration itself as "ever a process and never a product" (Archer, 1985:60).²⁴

This response to the agency-structure problem can be illustrated in the form of a simple figure (Figure 2), contained in Archer's critique, and here suitably adapted for purposes of the subsequent discussion.²⁵ In other words, the rationale

²² See also the kind of critique briefly discussed and referred to in Ashley (1989:316), revolving around the widespread controversy over the question of voluntarism versus structural determinism in structuration theory.

²³ This conceptualization is similar to Hedley Bull's distinction between a "society" and a "system" of states (Bull, 1977:8–16), as well as to Tönnies's classical sociological differentiation between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. For its applicability to international relations see *inter alia* the discussion in Wendt and Duvall (1989:52–54).

²⁴ It is in this sense that Giddens's notion of the duality of structure seems to possess little ontological reality of its own outside the crucible of agency itself. See, e.g., the discussion in Clegg (1989:145) and Callinicos's claim that the overall effect of Giddens's conceptualization "is a position much closer to methodological individualism than Giddens's general account of structure would suggest" (Callinicos, 1988:85).

²⁵ Figure 2 is based on Archer's discussion of morphogenetic cycles (1985:72); but whereas she is interested in explaining structural change, my explanandum—given the focus here on foreign policy—is policy action(s).

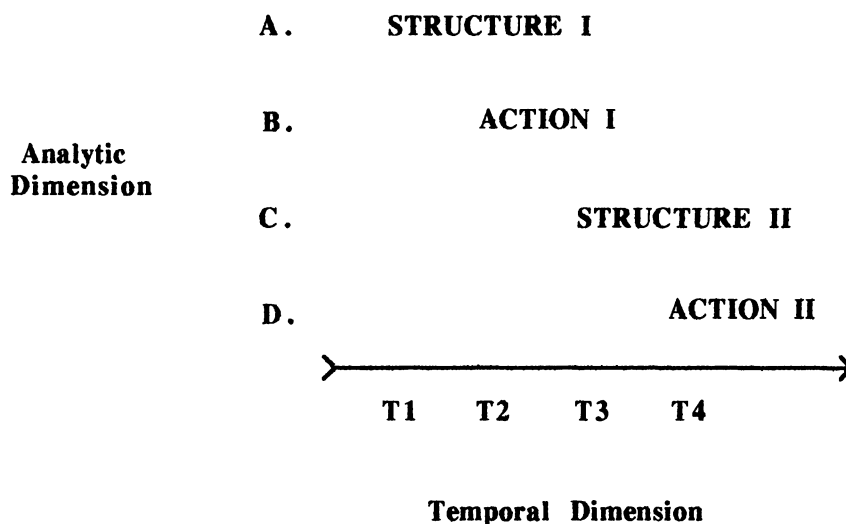


FIG. 2. A model of morphogenetic cycles.

underlying this analytic approach is that structural factors—such as institutions or rules—logically both predate and postdate any action affecting them; and that an action—such as a policy—logically both predates and postdates the structural factors conditioning it. It thus encapsulates the ontological notion of a continuous cycle of action-structure interactions, a dialectical process which not only serves to provide both continuity and change to social systems, but also can be penetrated analytically as a consequence of its essentially sequential thrust in societal transformation. Using a once revolutionary but now characteristic analogue of twentieth-century sensibility, this approach can thus be said to lay bare the Janus-faced nature of the agent-structure configuration not as two sides of an irreducible coin but in the form of a cubistic conception in which both sides of this interface can be conceptualized in terms of one complex and dynamic image. It is also, I shall argue below, a conceptualization that is eminently suitable for advancing a specific foreign policy resolution of the agency-structure problem.

Implications for Foreign Policy Analysis

After this brief reconnaissance we can, once again, return to the proper focus of this discussion: how to resolve the agency-structure issue within foreign policy analysis. The preliminary conclusion reached earlier was that although it is possible to conceive of an explanatory framework embracing both agential and structural factors as explanans, the one suggested for consideration nevertheless failed to incorporate the notion of agency and structure as causally reciprocal entities. To the question raised earlier, whether this is an irredeemable condition of approaches of this kind, I will now attempt to spell out arguments in support of a negative answer. This will be done in the form of zigzag but steplike emendations to the explanatory framework presented in Figure 1.

First of all, our discussion has made it clear that what is referred to in this framework as the structural dimension can no longer be conceived of as a parametric given in the form of constraints on action. Whatever specific solution is proposed for the agency-structure problem, it must at a minimum include the notion that agents produce and reproduce, while *pari passu* being determined by, international and domestic social structures. This constitutes, broadly speaking, the “codetermination” aspect of the issue.

Second, such a dynamic notion complicates matters, since it certainly requires the additional notion of "outcome" as distinguished from "foreign policy action" *qua* explanandum. Thus, the moment we incorporate the notion of outcomes into the framework, we must also include the crucial distinction between intended and unintended outcomes—both of which are constantly implicated in all dialectical interactions between actors and social structures. Foreign policy actions become intertwined with their multifarious structural consequences, and together they conjoin in constituting the future dispositions of actors and hence also their intentions and subsequent actions. Thus, although this implies the notion of a feedback loop, the conventional one found in input-output conceptions of foreign policy processes will not do, since the latter are usually based on static models in which the structures so modeled are themselves not conceived as dynamic, only the processes themselves.

Third, the core discursive concepts of foreign policy, signified by the relationship between dispositional and intentional factors in the framework, need to be addressed more seriously in terms of the agency-structure *problematique* than has hitherto been the case. This is not merely an issue emphasizing the semantic importance of historical roots in conceptual explication, but one that informs the discursive space of the actors themselves.²⁶ As pointed out by Robert Keohane, "the way in which leaders of states conceptualize their situations is strongly affected by the institutions of international relations: states not only form the international system; they are also shaped by its conventions, particularly by its practices" (Keohane, 1989:6). These latter clearly change over time and across different agential-structural contexts; hence the necessity, in William E. Connolly's words, of "detaching historical particulars from porous universals" when dealing with the various discourses of social analysis (Connolly, 1989:340). This rule applies as much to foreign policy analysis as to the broader spheres of social life implicated by most discussants of the agent-structure issue. A recognition of this discursive form of mutual constitution is thus both historically and analytically of crucial importance to the systematic study of foreign policy. Its primary concepts cannot be treated as given, static, or equally applicable to all foreign policy actors. Instead, their meanings have to be solidly anchored to the pertinent conceptual and mutually constitutive frameworks—the various domestic institutions or international regimes—which at all times underlie and underwrite state praxis within the international system.

Although used in a dispute within international relations theory rather than foreign policy analysis proper, a prominent example from the debate on neo-realism can be used to illustrate this point. In this debate, John Gerard Ruggie has forcefully argued that the shift from the medieval to the modern international system, implicating a fundamental change from a "heteronomous" institutional framework to an international system defined in terms of "sovereignty," constituted nothing less than a fundamental *redefinition* of the nature and power of the actors in this system (Ruggie, 1986:141–146).²⁷ Insofar as the implication of this is that the concept of "state" as we know it today—what it *means* to act and to have empowerment as a sovereign international actor—gained its present currency only as a consequence of this institutional revolution of the international system, it is a recognition *par excellence* of both the historically contingent and mutually constitutive nature of the agent-structure issue in state-to-state interactions.

The same mutually constitutive dimension can also be found in more recent and less momentous developments within international relations. Thus, e.g., the contemporary concept of a neutral state can be properly understood only with reference to the rules of meaning and membership which define neutrality as an

²⁶ See Carlsnaes, 1987:117–137.

²⁷ See also the discussion in Kratochwil, 1986.

institutionalized international structure (or regime), and with respect to which a given state has gained—or failed to gain, or perhaps lost—empowerment *qua* neutral state.²⁸ Thus, just like the concept of a “state,” the concept of a “neutral state” has no real meaning prior to the existence of the international institutions—coming to maturity in Europe in the early nineteenth century—in terms of which it is presently constituted (Hakovirta, 1988:10–11). In this sense it would be as anachronistic, e.g., to speak of “neutrality” during the Peloponnesian War (Karsh, 1988:13) as it would be to refer to war between “states” during the same period—or, for that matter, during Machiavelli’s lifetime, despite his archrealist status in the classical “tradition” of international relations theory.²⁹ In short, whatever these concepts can be said to mean in such claims and contexts, they do not stand for the properties or conditions that define their current—and open-ended—meaning in the modern international system.³⁰

Fourth, while mutual constitution in the above sense refers to the exclusively discursive aspects of the agency-structure issue, it also addresses the *causal* issue of codetermination and its implications for foreign policy analysis. In short, we here also need to reconsider the *empirical* ramifications of the agent-structure issue for foreign policy analysis—the fact that the discursive categories that inform foreign policy actors also help to shape international institutions and other structures, in the sense of either reproducing or changing these over time, and that the latter in turn have effects on the former. Defining this as an issue of “policy constitution through discourse,” two scholars of the sociology of social science have recently expressed this point well in their claim that “any serious study of the evolution and transformation of policies involves an effort to account for the interaction between a political-institutional setting—conceived as a series of practices—and the discursive framework which outlines the realm of effective political and societal intervention” (Wittrock and Wagner, 1990:114). Thus, for example, if the EC is indeed at present undergoing a fundamental structural change, potentially implicating a redefinition of the units of collective action and the principles of authoritative allocation in advanced industrial societies (as surmised by Philippe Schmitter), such a process must of necessity involve a dynamic evolution in the concept of sovereignty itself as understood by the pertinent actors, and hence also a restructuring of the international system in terms of which sovereignty is defined, legitimized, and acted upon.³¹

If this is indeed occurring, we have an example of codetermination as a process of *change* over time, involving the capacity for strategic and tactical action on the part of significant actors cognizant of the potentiality of structures not only to constrain policy but also to provide opportunities for evolutionary action. Insofar as change within the EC is driven by such strategically well placed and innovative actors (the architects of the “Europe of 1992”), they will thus succeed or fail

²⁸ For a recent discussion of regimes along these lines, see Young, 1989.

²⁹ As noted by R. B. J. Walker in his critique of Machiavelli’s imputed role *qua* archrealist in this tradition, it was in fact subsequent to his lifetime “that the principles of state sovereignty came to be framed within the context of the Euclidean-Galilean principle of absolute space rather than the complex overlapping jurisdictions of the medieval era” (Walker, 1989:42).

³⁰ Taking this example one step further, it can even be argued that “European neutrality” means and hence constitutes *different* things to the different European neutrals. Harto Hakovirta thus distinguishes between (1) occasional neutrality; (2) permanent neutrality; and (3) continuous, conventional neutrality. The former two are based on legal international institutions, while the third—of which Sweden is an example—is not. See Hakovirta, 1988:8–14. “Neutrality” or “non-alignment,” in turn, is a post-World War II phenomenon existing largely outside the European context, having primarily an ideological rather than institutional character *vis-à-vis* the East-West conflict. See, however, Salmon’s (1989) discussion of the “European model” of neutrality.

³¹ See Schmitter (1991). In neorealist terms, such a development would indicate the emergence of actors in the international system which, while still organized in terms of the principle of anarchy, would constitute functionally *differentiated* units.

depending on the different possibilities of various agents to influence discursively the balance between stasis and change in the wider structure, as well as on the different types of structural autonomy characterizing the individual states of contemporary Western Europe.³² (Conceivably, a reformulation of the logic of neofunctional integration along these lines would add to its theoretical clout.) As noted by Philip G. Cerny, these “structured fields of action” bound choices in various ways, particularly in terms of perceptions of the potential courses of action available to the actors themselves, ranging from conscious, goal-directed behavior to reactive responses to the actions of others (Cerny, 1990:91–92). The outcomes of these courses of action are in turn a function not only of conscious intention, unanticipated consequences, or perceived opportunity costs, but also of how other actors understand and play the same game of institutional reconstitution.³³

Fifth, insofar as a resolution to the agent-structure impasse is seen to proceed along the historically contingent lines delineated here, its implications are, sooth to say, essentially subversive of the research programme underlying much of mainstream comparative foreign policy analysis (CFP, to which the above framework has been a conscious contribution). This is, at least, the case if the goal of this programme is to adduce and to cumulate explanations and predictions in terms of empirically inferred *regularities* between a multitude of *discrete* and ostensibly “comparable” policy input and output attributes of sovereign states across time and space. Insofar as the ambition in the present discussion is to put forward a framework for analyzing foreign policy actions in terms of a dynamic account of the ways in which such actions are continually being constrained *and* enabled by contextually defined structures, and how these in turn are affected by human agency, it follows that one must perforce jettison the practice of viewing foreign policy in terms of separate and distinct actors possessing discrete, divisible, and “comparable” properties, whose behavior can be encapsulated inductively in terms of discontinuous events-behaviors proceeding serially in temporal increments.

In such a view, focusing on determining cross-national variations in order to explain variations in outcome, history is at best conceived as a concatenation of events—as *l’histoire événementielle*, to use Braudel’s phrase—typically interpreted in terms of the “objective” and “operationalized” indicators of straightforward empirical research. Instead of this type of epistemology we need an approach that posits *agency* as an analytical category in its own right, linking and mediating concrete actions and the structural properties—the institutional *rules* rather than behavioral *regularities*—of the larger sociopolitical domain.³⁴ As Ruggie has written, “the relevant facts for analysis here are institutional facts, and institutional facts inherently are intersubjective facts, not ‘brute’ or palpable facts,” requiring “that we probe beyond the palpable here-and-now until we come to see the historicity—the historically contingent subjectivities—of the pertinent social groupings as they see it themselves” (Ruggie, 1989:29).³⁵ In such a context history becomes the history of *la longue durée*, implying not only the notion of extensive periodicity but

³² On the general characteristics of these types of processes, see Cerny 1990:85–96.

³³ See also the discussion in Most and Starr (1989:47–67), and particularly their argument (1989:21) “that while many analysts have focused on linear and additive combinations of factors internal to states—national attributes—as possible sufficient conditions for their research, the general existence of such relationships appears to be logically precluded if the phenomenon under investigation can be conceptualized as *interdependent outcomes* or *resultants* of the actions of at least two states (such as war).”

³⁴ For two recent discussions of the role of “rules” in international relations, see Kratochwil, 1989, and Onuf, 1989.

³⁵ It is in terms of this perspective that the social structure of the state system “is the set of internal relations of spatial and political individuation that constitute state actors as empowered and interested subjects of international life,” as Wendt and Duvall write (1989:59).

also its inherently *systemic* character: the quality that gives structures their constitutive nature, defining the essentially institutional character of agential understanding and empowerment (Ashley, 1986).³⁶

This brings us back, finally, to the morphogenetic approach advocated by Archer and appropriately adapted in Figure 2. By embracing this analytic conception my intention is by no means to supplant the framework for explaining foreign policy actions previously outlined. Rather, it should be seen as *underlying* it, and as such indicating the reciprocal *interplay over time*—in terms of developmental patterns or cycles—that exists between structure and action in a given foreign policy system. Foreign policy actions *qua* specific policies still constitute the explanandum in such an analysis (Action II in Figure 2), and thus remain explicable in terms of the intentional and dispositional dimensions suggested in that framework as it stands. But as against the essentially static nature of this framework, implicating a conception of structural factors acting solely as *constraints* on actors, we here have an analytic conception that incorporates an understanding of the larger systemic properties of foreign policy *actions*, including the explanatory autonomy, i.e., causal nature, of such structures. In this perspective, actions are not only causally affected by structures ($A \rightarrow B$), but in turn—in terms of both intended and unintended outcomes—subsequently affect them ($B \rightarrow C$), and so forth ($C \rightarrow D$), indicating both the dynamic interaction between the two and hence the inherently constraining *and* enabling aspect of the structural domain. In other words, to explain an action at point T_4 , this dynamic model indicates the necessity of considering not only its underlying structures, but also previous actions and both the structural effects *and* structural antecedents of the latter.

This modification of the original framework can be illustrated in the form of a skeletal Figure 3, intended to incorporate the dynamics of the agent-structure issue into this explanatory model. As a framework intended specifically to analyze change, this conceptualization first of all stresses the need to compare policy within a specific issue area (the three ovals in Figure 3) over time, to determine if any change in policy has indeed taken place. This is essentially a *descriptive* enterprise, the specifics of which I need not go into here. Second, given the third oval as our explanandum (e.g., the policy of Swedish neutrality at present, which is clearly different from the official policy of only a year or two ago, not to mention this policy in the 1950s and 1960s), this framework is based on the assumption that accounting for the causes underlying policy change will involve an examination of how this policy has evolved from the past to the present. Two fundamentally different but intertwined processes are posited as essential for such an *explanatory* endeavor.

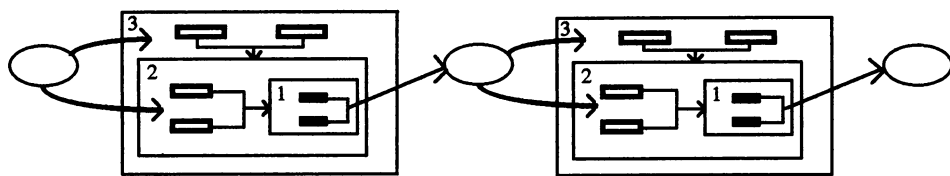


FIG. 3. A dynamic model for analyzing foreign policy change.

The first is to determine changes that have taken place within the three dimensions posited in the framework in terms of their respective conceptual subcate-

³⁶ Systems are here conceived in terms of regularly interacting agents and their practices in relation to one another (Wendt and Duvall, 1989:59).

gories. The second is to examine whether these changes are a consequence of factors independent of the foreign policy decision-making process itself, or if they are the outcome—intended or not—of previous policies (the thicker arrows in Figure 3). Clearly, many if not most of these causal factors will indeed be of the former kind—factors over which foreign policy-makers have had little or no control. For example, changes in Swedish neutrality since World War II have largely been in response to such factors—as is, perhaps, its current if still somewhat inchoate but increasingly radical reorientation. My argument here is, however, that we should by no means assume this to be the whole story. Sweden could have reacted to such external pressures in various ways over the years, and in order to explain why she chose a *particular* reorientation at a given time (and why, e.g., the other West European neutrals did not), we also have to consider the outcomes of her own previous policies as well, and the effects of the latter on her subsequent policy choices. Some of these were clearly a consequence of negative feedback; but others can be shown to involve “feedforward” processes and hence innovative rather than adaptive policies.³⁷ For example, one such anticipation was, arguably, the projected need for, and subsequent international empowerment of, neutral states *qua* “bridge builders” whose good offices would be found to be beneficial by both blocs in the ongoing Cold War. In this sense it can be argued that Swedish policy was aimed at *changing* international structures—both to her own long-term benefit as well as to alleviate international tensions—and hence not merely at accommodating herself to the existing (and largely tattered) neutrality regime of the late 1940s. The argument here is, in other words, that insofar as this regime in its present-day form is no longer discredited by the superpowers, this is *inter alia* a consequence of strategic actions on the part of the neutrals themselves. Being able to focus also on the nature of policy in this structurally enabling rather than constraining sense is essentially the thrust of the agent-structure issue discussed above.

The recent Swedish application for EC membership can be used to illustrate the rationale for combining this dynamic perspective with the modified explanatory framework previously discussed. In order to explain this specific policy action, this framework in its original, static form would proceed in terms of first giving a description of the current reasons for this application, i.e., the choices and preferences explicitly underlying this decision. These in turn could then (if more than an “intentional” account is desired) be explained causally in terms of the relevant values and perceptions informing the decision-makers’ intentional behavior in this particular instance, such as a powerful desire to participate more fully in the economic reconstitution and dynamism of Western Europe, or a perception that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States would actively block such a move despite Sweden’s long-standing status as a self-proclaimed neutral state. Third, these “dispositional” factors could then in turn be elaborated in terms of “structural” factors constraining Swedish foreign policy, such as, e.g., her economic dependency on trade with members of the EC, the fluidity of rules and practices characterizing the post-Cold War neutrality regime, a realignment of strategic domestic groupings, and so forth.

This tripartite explanatory procedure could be made more or less elaborate, and the Swedish case could subsequently be compared with her earlier decision—in 1971, after considerable vacillation—not to apply for membership, or, e.g., with the Irish policy of joining the EC in 1973 despite her neutral status, a condition that, in Sweden’s view, had stood in the way of her own interests to do so. In the same way, it could also be compared with the reasons why the other European neutrals have currently opted or not opted for a similar course. Such a combined study would

³⁷ On the notion of “feedforward” processes, see Schrodt (1991).

constitute a *bona fide* comparative case study in foreign policy; but it would nevertheless remain a study in static attributes, treating the various policy decisions in question as ultimately constrained by a number of given situational-structural factors (both domestic and international), some presumably similar in all the cases analyzed, others specific to each country. It exemplifies a view of the decision-making process based on the notion that "any single piece of human behaviour may be seen as the end product of two successive filtering devices. The first is defined by the set of structural constraints which cuts down upon the set of abstractly possible courses of action and reduces it to the (much smaller) subset of feasible actions. The second filter is the mechanism that singles out which member of the feasible set shall be realized" (Elster, 1979:213). In short, this type of approach would treat the agency-structure issue in the essentially nondynamic terms described and criticized above.³⁸

However, the same explanatory procedure can also be utilized in a diachronic analysis of the Swedish case (or of the other neutrals), based on the dynamic model illustrated in Figure 3. Such an analytic approach, premised on the notion of morphogenetic cycles elaborated by Archer, would address the issue in terms of an extended empirical process involving a series of prior actions and structural elaborations culminating in the present decision to apply for membership. For although Archer focuses on how structural elaboration becomes possible, her cyclic model is equally applicable to explaining how an action—such as the Swedish application for EC membership in June 1991—perceived unfeasible in 1971 due to her neutral status is now seen as a fully realistic option within an essentially unreconstituted foreign policy framework. In this view, the decision in question was the empirical end result of a series of complex, reciprocal agent-structure interactions, involving changes in both domestic conditions and the discursive rules governing the neutrality regime, as a consequence of which the "structured fields of action" available to Swedish (or Austrian, Swiss, and Finnish) decision-makers in this matter were perceived to have changed their character from one of more or less intractable constraint to one of relative opportunity.

Analyzing dynamic cycles such as these clearly implicates a more elaborate and painstaking research effort than the first approach illustrated above, since the same three-step explanatory procedure must be applied not to a single action *qua* explanandum but to a series of actions whose outcomes—both intended and unintended—have fed back into the mutually determinative process underlying the foreign policy decision-making system of a state. On the other hand, this procedure will undoubtedly give a "truer" and more "realistic" picture of the complex, dynamic, and determinative empirical mechanisms and processes preceding and underlying a given foreign policy decision. These consequences indicate, in a nutshell, both the costs and benefits of incorporating the agency-structure issue into foreign policy analysis.

Concluding Remarks

Instead of ending with a summation of the preceding discussion, I would like to conclude by pointing to two methodological implications which, in my view, need to be made more explicit. Although they do not necessarily flow from the suggested resolution of the agency-structure issue itself, they are nevertheless of

³⁸ See also Most and Starr's similar approach (1989:23–46), formulated in terms of the concepts of "opportunity" and "willingness," conceptualizing the link between environmental constraint and the decision-making process. However, this link is not mutually interactive in the sense conceived above, since they take the environmental factor as essentially given in their explicit reductionist explanatory proposal in favor of the decision-making level (1989:97–123).

substantive importance to the reorientation of foreign policy analysis which has been an implicit thrust of the argumentation presented above.

First, although I have alluded to this implication intermittently and will not elaborate on it here, it should nevertheless be emphasized that the arguments tendered above are fully supportive of a shift toward a thoroughly *institutional perspective* in the study of foreign policy, but one that does not thereby implicate a rejection of an interpretative epistemology.³⁹ The reasoning presented here can thus be viewed as an attempt to not only resolve the agency-structure issue itself in foreign policy analysis but also provide a metatheoretical foundation for such a methodological reorientation of the field.⁴⁰ Both domestic and international institutions are, if anything, structures constraining and enabling foreign policy actions; and they are certainly the outcome of human agency.

Second, it must be underlined that the explanatory ramifications of the foregoing analysis are not negative to—or even skeptical of—the comparative perspective *per se* which has attended this field for a number of years. In view of the recognition that the agency-structure linkage implicates a shift toward a contextual and historically contingent view of our object of analysis, it does, however, suggest the need for redefining the empirical scope and epistemological rationale of this ambition as far as the comparative analysis of foreign policy is concerned. (Hence the critique of CFP above.) The conclusion that this suggests is that comparative analysis must perforce be circumscribed by the *a priori* recognition that although state actors may possess many *analogous* characteristics, they are nevertheless *always* constituted by *different* real-world structures.⁴¹ As noted by Cerny, speaking more generally of the nature of sovereign states:

The core of these differences, taken together—the way they fuse configurations which permit broad generalizations about differences between countries—lies in the way that characteristic patterns of constraint and opportunities develop and are structured. Different states have different structures of autonomy—i.e., the elements of state structure shape, dominate, or intertwine with the actions of agents (and other structures) in ways which differ in both degree and kind. (Cerny, 1990:85)

As a consequence, the *raison d'être* of comparing the foreign policy actions of states now becomes to lay bare and to explain similarities and differences in terms of *contingent empirical generalizations*—contingent because they have application only under certain and specified conditions, and empirical because they are based on variable historical case studies.⁴²

Because the theoretical logic of the comparative case study approach of “structured-focused comparison” long advocated by Alexander George clearly meshes very well with this goal (George, 1979b; George and Smoke, 1989), I need not elaborate on this conclusion, except to make the following brief point. Insofar

³⁹ I therefore do not buy the concluding step of the central argument so eloquently defended in Hollis and Smith's book (1990), to wit, that there are always two stories to tell, one from the inside (“understanding”) and one from the outside (“explanation”), and that the twain can never meet. As Wendt has recently argued (1991:391) in his critique of Hollis and Smith's analysis on this point, “at least in a scientific realist conception of science (which Smith endorses), thinking about world politics from the perspective of actors—from the ‘inside’—need not imply the abandonment of scientific or ‘explanatory’ inquiry and its methodological entailments.” Uskali Mäki (1990:336), in a recent and highly relevant article reinterpreting Austrian economics in scientific realist terms, has explicated this viewpoint in terms of a combination of ontic subjectivism and ontological objectivism or realism.

⁴⁰ For arguments for such a focus in international relations research see Keohane (1989), Krasner (1988), Wendt and Duvall (1989) and, more generally, March and Olsen (1989).

⁴¹ In this connection, see also the discussion by Ferguson and Mansbach (1988:161–185).

⁴² This definition—and the subsequent characterization above—is found in Achen and Snidal's (1989:147) critique of case studies in rational deterrence analysis.

as the underlying rationale of his approach is to analyze different cases in terms of common concepts while at the same time placing their diversity in a theoretical perspective, leading to "segmented" theory (or domain-specific "nice" laws) seeking to identify distinct causal patterns and the conditions under which they occur, it is able to incorporate the contextually bound and diachronic phenomena pinpointed by the agency-structure issue without in any sense implicating a return to the type of historically idiographic studies once so fiercely—and rightly—castigated by the proponents of a "scientific" foreign policy analysis.⁴³ Indeed, rather than being inimical to such a project, this enquiry is instead intended to contribute to the bedrock assumptions which of necessity must underlie all foreign policy research worthy of that name and ambition.

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⁴³ The notion of domain specific "nice" laws is discussed in Most and Starr (1989:97–132), who also note the following: "If it is plausible to argue that states may pursue different goals for different reasons and with different degrees of effectiveness, then it may be useful to reconsider the efforts to search for a true, general, or universally applicable explanation of what states do. It might instead be more sensible to search for models or theories that are valid only under certain explicitly prescribed conditions" (1989:21). See also the discussion in their concluding chapter (1989:173–190).

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