Some Reflections on Structure and Agency in Migration Theory

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This paper explores the complex relationship between structure and agency and the way it has been incorporated into migration theory. It argues that attempts to develop a coherent and robust body of migration theory have been thwarted by a structure–agency impasse: some approaches lean too close to functionalism while others veer into structuralism. Those who search for middle ground have tended to draw on Giddens' notion of structuration as a way of articulating the balance between structure and agency in migration processes. The article shows that, while structuration is beguiling, it has failed to offer any significant advances for migration theory. This is a result of theoretical weaknesses in structuration theory rather than a failure of its application; this argument is based on a critical realist critique of the dualism inherent in structuration. It is suggested that critical realism offers a fruitful avenue for a more sophisticated analysis of structure and agency in migration processes. The article ends with a brief outline of a critical realist approach to migration theory and argues that this may offer a way around the structure–agency impasse.

Keywords: Structure; Agency; Migration; Critical Realism; Structuration; Methodology

Introduction

Understanding the relationship between structure and agency remains one of the most deep-seated problems in social sciences, which has persisted over decades. While some might argue that the debate is stale and increasingly irrelevant in the (post-)modern world, it keeps recurring in various guises—whether it is a concern about the relationship between micro and macro levels of analysis, voluntarism and determinism or individuals and society (Archer 1995: 7). It is particularly important for the study of migration because the agency of migrants (and non-migrants) continues to play a

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central role both in the development of social scientific theory on migration and in shaping the policy responses to people's movement (Faist 2000: 23–4).

With respect to the former, many theories of migration rest on the assumption that migrants or potential migrants have a significant level of choice over their decisions to move. Even though they may be working within the confines of the family or broader social institutions, studies will generally make a distinction between forced and voluntary migration. Hence, for example, if people are recognised as refugees they are often considered beyond the scope of migration theory: 'Forced migration is of course a topic of considerable interest and significance, but not with respect to individual decision making' (De Jong and Fawcett 1981: 45). We may try to explore the political, economic or social factors which forced them to move, but we do not need to explain their arrival in terms of their exercising agency. Indeed to go too far towards explanation and ascribing any agency to such people may undermine their case for refugee status.

In policy terms, there are fundamental differences between the legal status and the treatment of forced migrants who cross international borders. Those who gain refugee status gain rights under international law that, while they may only be upheld patchily in many countries, are stronger than those offered to 'voluntary' migrants. Among those who cross borders illegally, people under the control of human traffickers may also attract a certain measure of protection or at least public sympathy. In contrast, migrants who are thought to have used illegal routes out of choice are easily criminalised and portrayed as a threat to societies. Therefore, the extent to which agency or structure prevails remains a question of crucial importance in the analysis of migration processes.

This article argues that theories of migration have tended to skirt around the problem of structure and agency, despite its importance. Some approaches lean towards a more determinist position and play scant regard to the decisions and behaviour of individual actors. Many go in the other direction and focus on the agency of individuals; they tend to struggle to take account of the role of broader social structures in shaping migration patterns, except in as far as they are mediated through an individual's decision-making. Others head for the middle ground, recognising the importance of finding the balance between structure and agency.

Of this last group, many have drawn on Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration. However, as will be shown below, the approach has often been adopted somewhat naively and insufficient note has been taken of the fundamental critiques of structuration from social theorists. In particular, structuration theory, while it may suggest an approach to research, offers very little in the way of guidance to show how the balance between structure and agency is achieved in any particular context. As a result, some have even called into question the extent to which it should be considered to be a theory at all (Thrift 1985: 616). Instead, this article suggests that more fruitful theoretical insights on migration and social change may be achieved by exploring the work of critical realists in addressing the problem of structure and agency as the basis for theorising on migration.

In keeping with the theme of this special issue of *JEMS*, this article attempts to map out a new, or at least a little-explored, direction for theories of migration and social change. Castles (2007) argues that the study of migration is somewhat marginalised from the mainstream of theory in sociology and other disciplines. He lays down the challenge 'to develop a sociology of migration which is both critical and engaged with social reality, both empirical and grounded in theory' (Castles 2007: 364). He also warns of the dangers of engaging in overly abstract theoretical debates which are only of interest to other academics. Castles uses this conclusion as a rationale to abandon the idea of a single theory of migration, which is very unlikely to be useful given the complexity of migratory behaviour; this a message reiterated in this issue (see Castles 2010 and Portes 2010, this issue). Both these authors suggest that our ambition should be limited to the level of middle-range theories of migration relating to particular contexts.

However, recognising that migration is a universal human experience, and that it appears to occur according to observable (but shifting) patterns across space, time and societies, it seems reasonable to look for a level of general theory which can make sense of these patterns and explain the processes by which they take shape. This is already making the assumption that the concept of migration does have a universal application—that the act of moving residence is one which has significance at some level (economic, social, cultural, political, environmental, and so forth) in all societies. Hence, it does not seem over-ambitious to demand a fundamental agreement at the level of basic theory.

While Castles (2010, this issue) is seeking to embed the study of migration in the analysis of broader processes of social transformation, in this article the focus is on a much more limited component of the theoretical framework: the workings of the relationship between structure and agency. My ambition here is to highlight the importance of the problem of finding the balance between structure and agency in the analysis of migration, and to suggest a way forward. The paper aims to stir a theoretical debate and potentially stimulate new approaches to migration research. It is important to note that it is focused on theory and does attempt to present new research findings.

The argument is developed in four main sections. The first draws attention to the fractured nature of migration theory and argues that there is a structure–agency impasse that prevents the development of coherent migration theory. The subsequent section looks at the theoretical approaches to structure and agency, focusing on structuration and critical realist theory. The third section reviews some of the attempts to bridge the structure–agency divide in migration research. It shows how they have drawn on structuration but have not offered any way out of the impasse. The fourth section puts forward an alternative approach based on a critical realist perspective and argues that this may offer a more fruitful avenue of exploration for migration scholars.

The Structure–Agency Impasse in Migration Theory

The social sciences have generated numerous theories to explain various aspects of migration, drawing on different disciplinary perspectives and underlying models. In

this section, I argue that the problem of structure and agency is a major stumbling block for the development of an integrated and coherent theory of migration.

Others have undertaken much more detailed surveys of the range of migration theories than it is possible to include here (for example, see Faist 2000: 30–59; Goss and Lindquist 1995; Kritz et al. 1981; Massey et al. 1993, 1998; Richmond 1988; also the papers by Portes 2010, Castles 2010 and de Haas 2010 in this issue). Such reviews tend to refer to 'stylised levels of analysis' (Faist 2000: 30) to categorise the different approaches and bring some order to the theoretical space. For example, Pryor (1981) uses the underlying development model as the means of classification of migration theories, thereby distinguishing classical—associated with functionalism, conflict—associated with Marxism, and systems—associated with general systems theory. In a similar way, Goss and Lindquist (1995) distinguish functionalist, structuralist and integrative approaches; this last group includes the new economics of labour migration (NELM), systems, networks and cumulative causation theories. The most comprehensive survey is provided by Massey et al. (1998) who observe an important divide between theories that attempt to explain: i) the initiation of migration—neoclassical, new economics, dual labour market and world systems theory; and ii) the perpetuation of migration once started—network, institutional, cumulative causation and migration systems theory.

In their detailed review of the empirical support for different theories, Massey et al. (1998) conclude that no one theory is adequate to explain migration; the appropriate theoretical approach needs to be chosen according to the particular context in which it is applied. For example, one might analyse the initiation of migration through the new economics of labour migration and then explain the dynamics of the migration process by drawing on network theory.

However, their claim that there are no inherent contradictions in the different theories is hard to sustain when one considers both the conclusions and the foundations of the theories. Their discussion of each group of theories concludes by outlining a set of resultant hypotheses. For example, for neoclassical approaches, the wage differential between origin and destination areas is a necessary and sufficient condition for migration to occur; for NELM, it is not a necessary condition; and for dual labour market theory, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition (Massey et al. 1993). The incompatibility seems even starker when one considers very different ontological and epistemological foundations of migration theories. For example, the rational choice theory and methodological individualism that underpin neoclassical and NELM approaches have little place in world systems theory.

This is unsatisfactory. It pushes us to choose the theory that fits the context, but we can only know what fits once we have done the empirical research. What such theory does not offer is any basis for developing robust concepts and hypotheses concerning the interaction of these concepts. Should we put forward any propositions and they break down, it can be blamed on the wider context. The theory remains untarnished by failure and we develop another theory to cope with the next dataset. Arango suggests that this is a fundamental weakness with the field.

Rather than fulfilling the function of guiding empirical research and providing testable hypotheses that can be contrasted with the facts, existing migration theories are mainly useful for providing explanations *ex-post*. The starting point is usually one or more common-sense, empirical observations, which are then dressed in more or less formal and abstract terms with the fitting explanations, drawn at times from the general reservoir of the social sciences. In so doing, theories of conceptual frameworks play the function of upgrading the formal status of empirical observations (Arango 2000: 294).

There have been attempts to develop more integrated migration theory. A particular concern for many of these has been the divide between micro and macro levels of analysis. For example, De Jong and Gardner's (1981) volume on micro-level migration decisions sets out to 'join the micro and macro realms' but the closest it gets to macro-level analysis is the consideration of the influence of macro-level factors on individuals' decisions to move (Gardner 1981). Faist (2000) makes a much more convincing attempt but his main focus is on the 'meso link' which can bridge micro- and macro-level theories. It does not really consider the extent to which they are compatible in terms of their fundamental building blocks—in particular their conception of the relationship between structure and agency.

Goss and Lindquist argue that shifting the focus away from individuals to intermediate units of analysis, such as households or migrant networks, is not going to help the integration of migration theory, as it leaves us mired in theoretically and empirically problematic categories. NELM tends to use the utility maximising household in the place of the utility maximising individual: 'the household as an individual by another name' (Folbre 1986 cited in Goss and Lindquist 1995: 327). This leans towards a conception of a household as a unified actor masking the variation between households and conflict within them (Murray 1981: 167). It also excludes consideration of the wider social relationships in which individual household members may be embedded (Faist 2000: 41; Goss and Lindquist 1995: 327). Networks have proved equally difficult to pin down; 'they are treated as a causal category by virtue merely of their empirical existence without an adequate theorization of the logical and structural characteristics' (Goss and Lindquist 1995: 330–1). Again they conclude that the problem lies not in the integration of levels but in the failure of such theories to articulate the links between structure and agency.

Massey *et al.* (1998), while not developing their own synthesis of the theories that they review, do suggest that for any theoretical account of international migration (and I would argue internal—see King and Skeldon 2010, this issue) to be satisfactory it must include four basic elements: first, a treatment of the structural forces promoting emigration in areas of origin; second, the structural factors enabling immigration in destinations; third, consideration of the motivations, goals and aspirations of the people who migrate; and, finally, an analysis of the social and economic structures that are formed to connect areas of outward and inward migration. They express scepticism both of 'atomistic theories that deny the importance of structural constraints on individual decisions, and of structural

theories that deny agency to individuals and families' (Massey *et al*. 1993: 455). This appears to place consideration of structure and agency at the core of this problem of theory. We therefore turn to look at this troublesome relationship in more detail.

Structure and Agency in Social Theory

If structure and agency do indeed lie at the core of our problem with developing coherent migration theory, it is important to clarify what we mean by the terms and rehearse some of the debates about their relationship to each other. In this section, I delve into some of the arguments about the nature of structure and agency, drawing particular attention to the dominance of Giddens' notion of structuration over the more sophisticated theories elaborated by critical realists, in particular Archer's morphogenetic approach. I realise that this is dipping into deep theoretical waters and it is important to make the limits of my ambition clear—to go snorkelling and get a glimpse of the depths, not to go deep-sea diving.

The meaning of the terms agency and structure lie at the heart of the problem since the definitions adopted inevitably reflect a particular position. They are fundamental metaphors of the social sciences and widely used across the literature often without any attempt at definition, especially when applied to the analysis of migration. Given the focus of this article, it is important to lay these theoretical cards on the table and explain my use of terms as best I can.

It easiest to start with agency, as in some form it is accepted as an attribute of all members of society (Sewell 1992: 20). Here agency is taken to refer to the capacity for social actors to reflect on their position, devise strategies and take action to achieve their desires. For some, this emphasis on action is sufficient; agency need be no more than the simple individualism of autonomous actors exercising their power over the world beyond (Scott and Marshall 2009: 'agency'). However, rather than such an atomistic view, for our purposes agency is understood as a relational property.

> To be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degrees of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree (Sewell 1992: 20).

Our concern is with *social* actors who exercise agency to 'process *social* experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion' (Long 2001: 16, emphasis added). When we come to look at the foundations of the social milieu in which people exercise agency, we move towards a discussion of social structure and things become more contentious.

I reject an individualist view that society can be understood primarily as the aggregate of the individuals within it; its only advantage is that it obviates the need for the concept of structure. As people come together in complicated arrangements of social relations they do create organisations and develop patterns of behaviour that at least appear to take on a significance which is greater than the sum of the parts. The notion of social structure is concerned with 'any recurring pattern of social

behaviour; or, more specifically, to the ordered interrelationships between the different elements of a social system or society' (Scott and Marshall 2009: 'structure'). Such a definition is inadequate but Sewell argues that the term cannot be pinned down by formal definition:

> Structure operates in social scientific discourse as a powerful metonymic device, identifying some part of a complex social reality as explaining the whole. It is a word to conjure with in the social sciences. In fact, structure is less a precise concept than a kind of founding epistemic metaphor of social scientific—and scientific—discourse (Sewell 1992: 2).

He highlights some of the basic problems which frequently arise with the unexamined use of this metaphor of structure, two of which are raised here. First, there is a tendency to reification in which social structures—such as states or cultural norms—come to be seen as rigid and beyond the reach of human agency. At the same time as having this existence apart from social actors, they are seen as shaping their interactions. Second, the metaphor of structure usually carries with it connotations of stability. Structure describes patterns of human interaction but often has little to say about how those patterns change over time. Social change remains outside the system (Sewell 1992: 2–3).

The challenge taken up by many social theorists is how to acknowledge the importance of social structures in understanding social action—so rejecting methodological individualism (Archer 1996; King 2007)—while leaving room for agency and providing an adequate account of social change. This has stimulated an intricate and vigorous debate about the nature and properties of structure and its relationship to agency: a debate that I can only summarise very briefly here.

Giddens' theory of structuration proposes an elegant compromise which has an intuitive appeal to many social scientists and has reached far beyond the confines of the theoretical literature, not least to those studying migration. He argues that structure has a dual nature as both the 'medium and the outcome of the social practices they recursively organize' (Giddens 1984: 25). Structure not only shapes social practice but is in turn reproduced and possibly transformed by this practice. Hence, social structures are seen not just as constraints on individual actors but also enabling their actions. Social actors are self-aware in the sense of continual monitoring of the effects, both intended and unintended, of action and the modification of their behaviour accordingly. While their action may be constrained, people's agency ensures that they always have some degrees of freedom— some room to manoeuvre.

The duality of structure ensures that structure is not slavishly replicated but is *re*-produced; it only has existence insofar as it is 'instantiated' in social practice. Apart from practice, it only has a 'virtual existence': the potential to shape practice at the time of action.

> To say that structure is a 'virtual order' of transformative relations means that social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not have 'structures' but rather exhibit 'structural properties' and that structure exists, as time–space presence, only in its

> instantiations in such practice and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents (Giddens 1984: 17).

Thus, the process of structuration always leaves room for social transformation, as structures are the result of the messy interaction of social actors struggling, negotiating and at times guessing in order to further their interests.

The theoretical basis of structuration has been trenchantly challenged from a critical realist perspective. Drawing on the work of Bhaskar (1979, 1989), the critical realists view society as having an existence which can in some respects can be studied in the same way as the natural physical world:

> [T]here is a 'reality'—the important caveat being that our ways of knowing and understanding 'reality' are subject to modification and revision (Pratt 1995: 65).

Hence social structures 'exist and have effects independently of our knowledge of them' (Carter and New 2004). This is not to suggest that social structures have an existence independent of human activity—'no people: no society' (Archer 1995: 141)—although some would charge critical realists with the reification of structure (King 1999).

Over many years, Archer (1982, 1995) has led the charge in attacking Giddens' notion of the 'duality of structure' (see also Vandenberghe 2005). She argues that this 'duality' effectively conflates structure and agency. Instead, critical realists argue that social structures have *emergent* properties—they are the 'outcomes of agency which "emerge" or pass a developmental threshold, beyond which they exercise their own causal powers, independently of the agency which produced them' (Parker 2000: 73). Social structure can exist at any time regardless of the agency of any social actor. The concept of structuration suggests that structure is always contingent on the activity of social actors, but it fails to take account of the temporal disjuncture, when the activity of a social actor today contributes towards the future form of social structures, which will shape the context for social actors in the future. Archer argues that social structure pre-exists the individual, whereas Giddens assumes 'this society because of these people here present' (Archer 1995: 145).

This results in two major problems (Archer 1982: 459). First, structuration suggests that agency is 'hyperactive'. It always has the option to be transformative and at certain points actors can elect to act in a different way, whether to bring about change or maintain the status quo. Second, if agency and structure cannot be separated in any way, it makes it impossible to explore the relationship between structure and agency; therefore it has little to offer empirical research (Gregson 1989). Archer concludes that the theory of structuration is 'fundamentally non-propositional'.

Rather than the duality of structure, Archer argues that we must acknowledge an analytical dualism between structure and agency, which recognises that they operate over different time periods. In order to analyse the temporal interplay between structure and agency, she presents a process of *morphogenesis* that operates in a three-stage cycle to bring about social change. In the morphogenetic cycle, the consequences

of past actions contribute to *structural conditions* that have a causal influence over subsequent *social interaction*. While action may be structurally conditioned, it is not structurally determined, as actors come with their own agency. This social interaction sets in train *structural elaboration* which modifies the previous structural properties and may introduce new ones. She stresses that structural elaboration is largely an unintended outcome resulting from conflict and negotiation between social groups and may have perverse consequences that nobody wanted (Archer 1995: 89–92).

The morphogenetic approach has by no means solved the problem of structure and agency and has stimulated a further body of literature. Some strongly object to the whole notion of the emergent properties of structure, notably King (1999, 2007). Another strand of the debate looks at the extent to which morphogenesis and structuration can be integrated (Archer 1996; Stones 2001; Varela 2007). What does seem to be agreed is that Archer's morphogenetic approach offers a much richer theoretical account of the inner working of the relationship between structure and agency than Giddens; the question remains how far are they compatible. Another related set of debates revolves around the nature of the proposed dualism between structure and agency. Here one can distinguish between those arguing for ontological, analytical and methodological dualism as follows:

- Ontological dualism—structure has an objective existence beyond human agency. Few accept a strong ontological dualism that would reify structure. Some of the critical realists seem to suggest a weaker form (Elder-Vass 2007), while others argue that in essence all social structures arises from human agency so they cannot be seen to have an independent reality (Porpora 2007).
- Analytical dualism—although structure may not have an objective reality apart from agency, it can be observed and analysed as if it did. We may accept that states are nothing apart from the humans who populate them and exercise the powers of the state, but we can still acknowledge that the nature and action of states can be observed and analysed as if they were. This is the analytical dualism on which Archer insists (Archer 1982), although others suggest it lacks any substance (Dépelteau 2008).
- Methodological dualism—which is suggested within structuration theory by Giddens' appeal to bracket the analysis of the strategic conduct of individuals and the analysis of the structuring orders that determine the operation of rules and distribution of resources (Giddens 1984: 288–9; Goss and Lindquist 1995).

This very brief overview of a small part of the vast literature on the structure–agency debate serves to show that there are rich seams of fundamental social theory to be tapped. Here I have drawn particular attention to the critical realist perspective because, as I will argue below, it may provide a useful basis for the development of more integrated approaches to migration. Hence, rather than getting dragged too far into the murky depths of foundational social theory, we now consider how this structure–agency debate has been addressed by migration researchers.

Bridging the Structure–Agency Divide in Migration Research

While migration scholars often acknowledge the problem of finding the balance between structure and agency, far fewer offer any substantive guidance as to how to achieve this. In this section, I discuss some of the approaches offered in the literature. This may not be a comprehensive view, but it does illustrate migration researchers' partiality towards structuration.

Some authors have steered away from the central theoretical problem by focusing on the methodological challenges of simultaneously taking account of structure and agency. For example, Findlay and Li (1999) draw attention to the need to draw on mixed methods if we are to make any progress in teasing out the relationship between structure and agency in migration research. They suggest that there has been a tendency for migration researchers to rest on a limited set of methodological approaches, 'reading off' the methodology appropriate for the chosen epistemology as the way 'to do' research. This has resulted in too sharp a separation between quantitative and qualitative methods. Where mixed methods are used, 'primacy of understanding remains with one particular methodological stance' (1999: 52).

In their study of migration and identity in Hong Kong, Findlay and Li employed two sets of large-scale questionnaire surveys to examine the channels by which migrants come to the territory and to gather information about firms and labour markets. A further dimension of the study was to gather qualitative data concerning the relationship between ethnic identity and a person's access to opportunities, including migration. These approaches enabled the authors to analyse international migration as a process that is shaped both by international migration legislation (macro-structure) and by potential migrants making decisions relating to their interpretations of their identities at 'home' or in the 'other' place. However, this analysis focused too closely on individual migrants' views 'which falsely promote the explanation of migration as a rational response to *contemporary* sets of social and cultural events or triggers' and tend to neglect 'changing social and cultural influences *during the life course* as significant in moulding the deeply held values that underpin the decision to migrate' (Findlay and Li 1999: 56, emphasis added). This weakness was addressed by using the biographical approach, as advocated by Halfacree and Boyle (1993). They argue that this mix of methods is essential to reach a breadth of understanding that uncovers the multiple meanings of migration.

However, Findlay and Li (1999: 56) claim this can only be possible by drawing from more than 'one paradigm and associated methodology'. This suggests that they are themselves implicitly 'reading off' methods as if they are embedded into an epistemological approach—in their study, employing a mix of methods necessarily entails mixing epistemologies (unless they mean something else by paradigm). They discuss a range of theoretical approaches, including critical realism, but do not seem to clearly pin their colours to any mast. Rather than developing coherent theoretical foundations, their concern is to ensure that geographical research can engage with modern social theory. While I fully endorse their call for mixed methods, their

argument is unsatisfactory if it leaves us resting on an incoherent, mixed, theoretical foundation. Instead, our use of multi-methods should arise from our epistemology.

Others have drawn inspiration from structuration theory as a way of reconciling structure and agency. It is worth reflecting on some of these studies. The first, and probably the larger, group are those whose appeal to structuration is simply to acknowledge the importance of taking into account both structure and agency. For example, in a recent article Conway simply refers to structuration as representing 'contemporary capitalism's structure–agency power relationships' (Conway 2007: 422) but it seems to play a limited role in his subsequent rich analysis of the 'moorings' of Caribbean transnational migrants. Indeed he describes social structure as 'forces' which appear to have an existence beyond the 'instantiation of structure' envisaged by Giddens.

> 'Home' community social and cultural structures, social identities, obligations and networks, and the social changes therein, are as influential a set of forces as the global, metropolitan structural forces for determining and circumscribing the life-spaces within which transnational people move, make their life decisions, adapt to and/or resist (Conway 2007: 424).

Wright (1995) uses the concept of structuration to analyse the migrant labour system in southern Africa, examining the role of households in (re-)producing the social structures in which they operate. She argues that household responses to market opportunities were an important factor in the shaping of the African colonial migrant labour system. The discretionary migrant labour system, where households had other options open to them, evolved before the colonial powers moved to limit other cash sources for black households and make it essential for them to supply migrant labour. The system was 'never the conspiratorially planned solution of mining capital to the problem of labour costs' (Marks and Rathbone cited in Wright 1995: 778) but the result of different actors taking advantage of opportunities as they arose.

Richmond (1988, 1993) applies a similar approach with particular reference to refugee movements. He rejects the dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary migration, suggesting that it should be viewed as a continuum between 'proactive' and 'reactive' migration. This recognises that households retain some degrees of freedom (agency) and can be seen as following some strategy even under the severe duress of immediate threats to their security. He proposes a multivariate model of migration that highlights the interaction between structural factors and households. The structural factors both constrain the action of the household and enable it.

Drawing on such examples, I was also drawn to the structuration approach as a useful way to consider the migration process in a study on the voluntary repatriation of Angolan refugees in North-West Zambia (Bakewell 2000, 2008). This placed the agency of refugees and other villagers at the centre of the picture and assumes they are social actors along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the government and other organisations, all engaging in an arena of

struggle to bring about an outcome favourable to them. Adopting what Long describes as an actor-oriented approach (2001), I attempted to place the agency of the refugees at the centre of the study, despite their very limited room for manoeuvre. In retrospect, this was more of a reflection of my dissatisfaction with the other theoretical outlooks on offer than constituting a distinctive theoretical approach. This limited experience of adopting structuration as a theoretical framework echoed the problems resulting from its conflation of agency and structure that have been highlighted by the critical realists, as noted above. First, it proved to be non-propositional, giving no clues as to how the balance between structure and agency might play out in any particular context. Second, while I was concerned not to assume away the agency of refugees, I am open to the charge of overplaying their room for manoeuvre and suggesting they had more autonomy than they really had: the 'hyperactivity of agency'.

In contrast to these somewhat superficial engagements with structuration, Goss and Lindquist (1995) and Morawska (2001) stand out as migration scholars who have provided a much more detailed and sophisticated account of structuration as a means to bridge the divide between structure and agency. However, in both cases, the application of structuration in practice forces them to adopt methodological dualism, which seems to become indistinguishable from the analytical dualism of critical realism.

One of the major critiques of structuration is the lack of any clear way to apply it to empirical research (Gregson 1989). Goss and Lindquist follow Giddens' own recommendation to conduct research at two levels: first, analysing the strategic conduct of individuals; and, second, conducting an institutional analysis examining the operation of rules and distribution of resources. This leads them to examine migrant institutions, which they define as:

> a relatively permanent feature of social life that results from the regularization of social interaction for the purposes of overseas employment and which in turn regulates interaction and structures access to overseas employment through the operation of institutional rules and resources (Goss and Lindquist 1995: 336).

This encompasses not only social networks, some of which may become migrant networks, but also formal and informal organisations, interactions and routine practices.

The theory of structuration demands that these two levels of analysis—individual and institutional—must be bracketed together: this is simply methodological dualism and does not entail any agency or capacity for causal power on the part of institutions. The example from the Philippines elaborated by Goss and Lindquist focuses on recruitment agencies and brokers, government policy and the wider labour market. Although they show how encounters between individuals shape the outcomes of workers' attempts to find opportunities as migrant labourers, it is hard to see how far the emerging migrant institutions are not only methodologically but also *analytically* distinct from the social actors whose agency they condition. While they

proclaim structuration, it seems that they stray perilously close to the dualism of the critical realists.

Likewise, Morawska's study of Polish migration to Western Europe conceptualises migration as a structuration process, emphasising the agency of social actors to innovate and reinterpret the rules of the game: 'migrants' activities are neither simply the products of the *power to* and *power over* as these actors define and pursue their purposes, playing with or against different structures' (Morawska 2001: 54—emphasis in original). This appears to lean towards the hyperactivity of agency, but this is tempered by the acknowledgement that the extent of their 'agentic power' depends on the influence of other micro- and macro-structural conditions, such as labour markets, government policies and the host culture.

The challenge addressed in this study is to explain how the macro-structural conditions that facilitated migration—the growth of economic differentials, easy transport and a flow of information about life in the West and so forth—were 'translated' into decisions to move. She highlights three factors that enabled potential migrants to take advantage of these new opportunities: the micro-level structures of social relationships embodied in the extensive and long-standing Polish diaspora; the practical knowledge about wages, immigration regulations, job opportunities and so forth, afforded by these networks; and the experience of strategies developed under the communist regime to subvert regulation and official structures. The study elaborates a sequence of structure–agency engagements to explain the rise of Polish emigration in the 1990s and the evolution of a 'cultural structure of migration' (Morawska 2001: 67).

Morawska adopts structuration to build on Massey *et al.*'s (1998) work in order to provide what they do not: a theoretically coherent account of migration as a dynamic process that integrates structure and agency in a framework that takes account of the role of migrants' activities and structural conditions in origin and destination countries in both initiating and sustaining migration (Morawska 2001: 49–50). It also serves to bring the analysis of international migration in from the margins towards the mainstream agenda of sociology (Morawska 2001: 73). However, she concludes that:

> the conceptualization of international migration and, more broadly social phenomena as ongoing mutual constitutions . . . leaves the scenarios of future developments and the role of transnational migrants in Poland's double transformation [into both a capitalist and a democratic society] contingent on changing historical circumstances (Morawska 2001: 72).

While this formulation certainly offers an advance, again it is not clear that the theoretical core of structuration, the duality of structure (Sewell 1992: 12–13), is really upheld in the analysis. Like Goss and Lindquist's analysis of migrant institutions, the social structures described by Morawska seem to have more than a virtual existence, and even some causal power. This applies not only to the macro-level structures of states and political economy, but also at the micro-level of family

tradition, where migration was seen as being 'in our blood' (Lech Walesa cited in Morawska 2001: 59).

In his analysis of the relationship between labour migration in the US and patriarchy, Halfacree (1995) draws on structuration but acknowledges the critical realist critiques of Giddens' 'virtual' ontology of structure, which tends to overstate the voluntarism of social actors. From the perspective of women struggling against patriarchal exploitation, the patriarchal nature of society is very 'real', with an existence beyond its instantiation in social practice.

> [I]n order to break the patriarchal hold on labour migration it is not enough just to undermine patriarchy in the domestic sphere, since much of the rest of one's daily environment has been shaped by patriarchy. Thus, *inter alia*, changes in sex roles in the family can only go so far (Halfacree 1995: 173).

Despite the popularity of structuration among migration scholars who are concerned with the structure–agency debate, it inevitably seems to result in inconsistencies and contradictions, particularly as scholars wrestle with its dualism. Those who have gone down the structuration route have tended to run into the problems predicted by Archer's powerful critique. It has inspired thinking about the relationship between structure and agency, but has not resulted in any theoretical breakthrough or any propositions which might help us understand the evolution of migration institutions and systems.

An Outline of a Critical Realist Approach to Migration

It is clear that the debate about how to link structure and agency in a coherent way, which is essential to a fundamental and coherent approach to the analysis of migration, is far from being resolved. As the examples cited above show, those who adopt structuration struggle to follow through its premises to their logical conclusion. If Archer is to be believed, that is because its logical end is a black box of structure–agency dialectics which are impossible to research. As a result researchers are always being forced into the acceptance of at least a methodological—and I have argued an implicit analytical—dualism of structure and agency, which leaves the empirical findings somewhat divorced from the theory that denies this dualism.

Having shown that structuration is likely to lead to such an intellectual dead-end, in this section I argue that a critical realist approach may offer a more fruitful theoretical avenue to overcome the structure–agency impasse in migration research. This begs the question of how adopting a critical realist approach to migration research might change research practice. Here I suggest that achieving greater theoretical coherence may demand some radical departures from current methodologies. For example, it is hard to see how it can be reconciled with the methodological individualism inherent in the rational choice theory and utility maximisation which underlie many theories of migration. Hence, going down a critical realist path may

make it even more challenging to build bridges between economics and other disciplines in the study of migration (see Boswell and Mueser 2008: 527).

The aim here is to provide an outline of a theoretical foundation which can allow the development of a coherent body of theory to address questions such as: Who moves from A to B and why? Why these people and not others? Why do they move to B rather than C? Why now or then? Rather than developing 'grand theory', the task is to refine a theoretical 'brick', which will play a fundamental role in any subsequent elaboration of a broader theoretical framework and needs to be sufficiently robust to support the larger theoretical structure.

A starting-point is to return to Massey *et al.*'s conditions for a 'satisfactory' theory of migration: it must take account of the structural forces promoting emigration in areas of origin and enabling immigration in destinations, the motivations, goals and aspirations of the people who migrate, and the social and economic structures that connect areas of inward and outward migration. These can be mapped onto Archer's morphogenetic cycle of structural condition (structural forces shaping emigration and immigration), social interaction (of those who migrate), and structural elaboration (evolution of networks and migration systems). The puzzle for research is to unpack that cycle to understand both its elements and the causal mechanisms that drive it.

At first sight this may lead us to the exploration of social structures which seem quite familiar, such as labour markets, migrant networks, diasporas, migrant organisations and so forth. This may be deceptive. From a critical realist perspective, such concepts only become interesting when they have been shown to possess emergent properties, which move them beyond being the mere aggregates of the observation of individuals' behaviour. The 'litmus test' for emergence is that an entity has the 'generative capacity' to modify the power of its constituents in fundamental ways and to exercise causal influences *sui generis* (Archer 1995: 174). For example, while we may postulate the existence of migrant networks, these can only be said to be 'real' social structures (with emergent properties) when they are conceptualised in a way that entails their modifying the powers of people to change them, perhaps by establishing sufficiently dense connections to facilitate further migration even against the wishes of individual network members. Then it becomes a 'social structure' which can exert causal power on migration processes and serve to thwart not only the policies of states but potentially the interests of existing migrants. This is not to slip into determinism; but a current migrant may have to exert greater power in the face of such a network in order to deter more relatives from joining him or her as new migrants. The research challenge is then to identify the conditions under which such networks arise and the mechanisms by which they shape migration. This does not pose new questions (Boyd 1989: 655) but the challenge is as yet unanswered (see de Haas 2010, this issue).

Where does this lead us in terms of methodology? There is considerably more literature on a critical realist approach to empirical research than on the application of structuration theory (see Held and Thompson 1989); nonetheless, the critical

realist project is still in development and progress is slow. During the 1980s and 1990s there were a number of books and articles reflecting on critical realist methodology (Pratt 1995; Sayer 1992, 2000; Yeung 1997), but these have faded somewhat since the turn of the century. Over ten years ago, Yeung claimed that 'method in critical realism is underdeveloped and misunderstood, resulting in a methodologically handicapped philosophy' (Yeung 1997: 56). To some extent little has changed. While a realist school of geography emerged in the 1980s, its application to migration research has been very limited; in preparing this article, it proved impossible to track down one study which has explicitly drawn on a critical realist perspective to understanding the causal mechanisms that initiate and sustain migration practices (or systems).[1] In this field, structuration, the much less rigorous but perhaps more polished rival, has gained much ground, at least with respect to the critical question of the relationship between structure and agency. Attempting to outline a detailed critical realist theoretical methodology for migration research is far beyond the scope of this article. However, drawing on the critical realist literature, it is possible to sketch out some tentative directions.

The starting-point for critical realist research is the conceptualisation of the 'objects' to be studied.

> A common aspect of all critical realist research is the priority given to conceptualisation and abstraction, for how we 'carve up' and define our objects of study tends to set the fate of any subsequent research (Sayer 2000: 27).

If we are interested to study migrant networks, for instance, we may start with a definition of the concept that has been proposed by earlier research. A positivist approach is likely to explore relationships between this concept of the migrant network and various variables, to identify correlations and patterns. The concept may be refined but the unit of analysis is characteristically determined from the outset. In contrast, critical realists will set out from this starting-point to understand whether such a concept actually refers to a social structure (the migrant network) that 'exists' to the extent that it may have emergent properties as described above. Moreover, they will attempt to abstract 'generative mechanisms' which can explain the way networks affect migration (Yeung 1997: 58–60). This requires us to be ready repeatedly to reconceptualise the migrant network in the light of our findings and possibly abandon the notion in favour of a new concept, which can be associated with more robust generative mechanisms.

This inevitably means that the research process is one of iteration, producing both concepts and generative mechanisms. This iteration always entails using mixed methods (Yeung 1997). Qualitative methods such as interviews and ethnographic methods are required to tease out the abstract causal mechanisms which will be invisible to quantitative research. Quantitative methods are useful for highlighting regularities and relations between social objects such as poverty and out-migration. However, such relationships between variables must not be confused with causal mechanisms, which

cannot be captured by the 'acausal and astructural' language of mathematics (Sayer 1992: 179).

Critical realist research has drawn extensively on a modified form of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1968) as a way of supporting its iterative process of abstraction (Pratt 1995; Yeung 1997). One significant departure from the standard formulation of grounded theory is the critical realists' insistence that concrete data produced by the research subjects' narratives is not a sufficient basis *in itself* for theory. If research categories or coding are established solely by respondents, the analysis tends to revert to individualism, as any structural factors are understood only in relation to individuals rather than exposing emergent properties. Moreover, the development of theory must involve abstraction from the data to postulate causal mechanisms. Naively using the categories arising from respondents bypasses this abstraction, which is likely to leave underlying structural factors unidentified (Pratt 1995: 70; Yeung 1997: 63).

In practice, critical realist research may not entail dramatically different methods—ethnography, interviews, quantitative surveys may all play their part—but it does require greater attention to methodology. The balance of methods and the interpretations placed on results will be different from a positivist approach. That said, elements of the critical realist approach are likely to resonate with the calls from many migration scholars to engage in more interdisciplinary and multi-methods research (Boswell 2008; Findlay and Li 1999; Halfacree and Boyle 1993).

Conclusion

No doubt the arguments about structure and agency will continue unabated for many years to come. As I have argued in this article, the migration literature to date has largely failed to engage with this debate despite its fundamental importance, especially given the widely made distinctions between forced and voluntary migration. If we are to make progress in understanding the relationship between migration and social change, it is essential to find a way round the structure–agency impasse that blocks our way. I have shown that Giddens' notion of structuration, while initially appealing, does not provide a satisfactory account of the relationship between structure and agency. Attempts to employ it to analyse migration have not yielded any significant theoretical advances. A critical realist analysis of the relationship between structure and agency—especially Archer's theory of morphogenesis, which accepts an analytical dualism between structure and agency—can provide a much more sophisticated theoretical basis for understanding processes of migration and social change. I have offered a brief outline of how a critical realist approach might be applied to the study of migration.

I make no pretence that this sketch can do justice to this complex and dense body of theoretical work. It can only hope to stimulate debate and raise interest in an area of social science theory that has been much neglected by migration scholars. Adopting a critical realist approach as the foundation for building theory will be

contentious and probably objectionable to some. It needs more profound examination and to be tested through empirical enquiry. If the synthesis of morphogenesis and migration systems theories helps us to get beyond the current impasse on structure and agency in migration research it may be worth the effort. At the least, I hope that, by stimulating some reflection and debate, it may help to ease migration theory back from the margins to reconnect with the mainstream of social theory (see Castles 2007). It may also open up the prospect of theoretical approaches that can encompass both forced and voluntary migration in a more comprehensive way.

Acknowledgements

Note

[1]   Searching the ISI 'Web of Science' for articles on 'critical realism and migration' yielded no hits for relevant articles, compared to a dozen for 'structuration and migration'. For the record, searching on 'morphogenesis and migration' resulted in over 2,000 hits, but none of these were in the social sciences. Searches performed 30 January 2010.

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