

# Chapter 1

## Power and Structure

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This chapter is an attempt to address a fundamental and traditional problem central to the concerns of most philosophers, social scientists and historians, indeed to most of us at some time or other. It emerges at a number of levels. At the most general, metaphysical level, it takes the age-old form of the conflict between voluntarism and determinism. At the methodological level, it emerges as a dispute between theoretical frameworks, explanatory paradigms or problematics over whether the historical 'subject' has or has not an ineradicable and perhaps crucial explanatory role. This is an issue very much alive within contemporary Marxism, dividing so-called Hegelian 'historicists' and 'humanists' from their structuralist adversaries. It also underlies the division within contemporary sociology between, on the one hand, all those who are concerned to study social actors, their modes of symbolic interaction, their definitions of situations, their modes of constructing and negotiating social reality, and, on the other, those whose focus is upon systems and objective co-ordinates, on what Durkheim called 'social facts' and Marx 'definite relations that are indispensable and independent of [men's] will'.<sup>1</sup> And at the most common-sense and mundane level, the issue is simply this: to what extent and in what ways are social actors, whether individuals or collectivities, constrained to think and act in the ways they do? To what extent is an American President prevented from achieving desired outcomes by constraints, whether

external or internal?<sup>2</sup> What difference can a determined Cabinet Minister make in a time of economic crisis, faced with the inertia of the governmental system and obstructive civil servants?<sup>3</sup> Why did Bukharin consistently fail to stand up to Stalin?<sup>4</sup> To what extent can the elites of modernising societies conjoin possibility with will: to what degree in any given case are they constrained to follow a single path (*à la* Rostow) or a narrow range of possible paths (*à la* Barrington Moore) or are able to cut out new paths?<sup>5</sup> Why have the increasingly deradicalised Social Democratic parties of Western Europe made so little impact on the balance of class advantages?<sup>6</sup> What enables social movements, such as blacks in the United States, to transform objective possibilities into concrete results?<sup>7</sup> I shall formulate this issue as that of the relation between power and structure.

Let us look first at the concept of power. This concept, which looks so simple and innocent, and which we all use all the time, actually carries a considerable theoretical and ideological load. At its most general, it simply means the capacity to bring about consequences, with no restriction on what the consequences might be or on what brings them about (or on whether or not the bringing about is seen as a causal relation). However, when used in relation to human beings in social relations with one another, it is attributed to persons or sets of persons. Yet, clearly, talk of power in social and political life generally means something more specific than that human beings can affect the world. In applying this primitive notion to the understanding of social life, something further is required: namely, that the affecting is seen as non-trivial or significant.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, we all affect each other and the natural world in countless ways all the time: the concept of power – and related concepts, such as influence, authority, coercion, force, manipulation, and so on – pick out ranges of such affecting that are held to be significant in specific (and related) ways.

The question of how to define the concept of power is a notoriously unsettled one, with different theorists offering different definitions and ordinary language allowing for a wide variety of distinct, overlapping and inconsistent usages. Indeed, I maintain that power is one of those concepts identified by Gallie as ‘essentially contested’, which ‘inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users’.<sup>9</sup> Thus any given way of conceiving of power (that is, any given way of defining the concept of power) in relation to the understanding of social life presupposes a criterion of significance, that is, an answer to the question ‘what makes *A*’s affecting *B* significant?’.

Some writers take an extremely general view. 'Power', wrote Bertrand Russell, 'may be defined as the production of intended effects'.<sup>10</sup> On this view the forms of affecting that will be significant in such a way as to count as power will be those that realise one or more agents' intentions. Note that the object of power here (*B*) may be either human (persons or sets of persons) or non-human. But not all ways of conceiving power tie it to intentionality, while most uses of 'power' – especially those involving the locution 'exercising power *over*' – restrict its object to persons or sets of persons. Disagreements exist about whether or not *A* must aim at or (partly or wholly) succeed in realising his will, intentions or desires; about whether there need be conflict between *A* and *B* (and, if so, whether it must be between their wills, preferences, interests, needs, and so on); whether there need be the threat of sanctions or deprivations, what the balance of costs and rewards to *A* and *B* must be; and about whether *B*'s interests, options, preferences, policies or behaviour must be affected for a given relation to count as power. For Max Weber, power (*Macht*) signified 'the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the act'.<sup>11</sup> For Lasswell and Kaplan, power is 'the process of affecting policies of others with the help of (actual or threatened) severe deprivations for nonconformity with the policies intended'.<sup>12</sup> For Talcott Parsons, however, power excludes 'the threat of coercive measures, or of compulsion, without legitimation or justification' and applies definitionally to the 'generalised capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organisation when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions'.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, a contemporary Marxist definition is offered by Poulantzas, for whom power is 'the capacity of a social class to realise its specific objective interests'.<sup>14</sup> Again, power may be seen quite generally as being exercised when *A* affects *B* by limiting his liberty, that is by restricting his options; or it may be seen as being exercised when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*'s interests (this last being the concept of power predominant in contemporary political science).

Two points are to be noted here: not only is there an endemic variety of concepts of power, depending upon different criteria specifying what is to count as significant affecting, themselves arising out of different social theories and moral and political perspectives; but also, any given *conception* of power (to use the Rawlsian distinction between concept

and conception),<sup>15</sup> that is, any way of interpreting a given concept of power, is likely to involve further particular and contestable judgements – about, for example, what is going to count as ‘severe deprivations’ or ‘collective goals’, how relevant options are to be selected or how interests are to be identified.

One important point, however, seems clear in relation to all these concepts of power: that power is attributed to (individual or collective) human agents. Not all, as I have said, confine it to intentional agency; one may, for example, be held to exercise power through negligence, or routine action, or inaction, without considering those affected. They all, however, link the exercise of power to human agency. Human agents characteristically perform voluntary actions (of which intentional actions are a sub-class), these being actions done in the presence of open alternatives;<sup>16</sup> there is an openness between an agent’s performing or failing to perform a voluntary action, and indeed to describe his action as voluntary is precisely to deny that there is a causal link between his want and his action.<sup>17</sup> Human agents exercise their characteristic powers when they act voluntarily on the basis of wants and beliefs which provide them with reasons for so acting. Such an exercise of the power of human agency implies that the agent at the point of action has the power to act otherwise, that is, at the least the ability and the opportunity both to act and not act: it is in his power to do either; there is ‘an openness between performing or failing to perform the action’,<sup>18</sup> and there is no set of external circumstances such that in those circumstances the agent will necessarily so act.

If all the foregoing is correct, then any given view of (that is, way of identifying) power involves two central claims. First, where power is exercised, it is always the case that the exerciser or exercisers *could* have acted differently. Second, where power is (as usually) seen as affecting other persons, then it is always the case that those affected by its exercise *would* have acted (using that term to include thought, wanted, felt) differently, but for the exercise of power.

What is important for the present argument is that, on this account, power – and cognate notions such as influence, authority, coercion, and so on – presupposes human agency. To use the vocabulary of power (and its cognates) in application to social relationships is to speak of human agents, separately or together, in groups or organisations, through action or inaction, significantly affecting the thoughts or actions of others. In speaking thus, one assumes that, although the agents operate within structurally determined limits, they none the less

have a certain relative autonomy and could have acted differently. Compare the case of an employer who declares some of his workers redundant, in pursuance of a strategy to cut his costs, with that of an official government liquidator who declares an insolvent company bankrupt, thereby throwing its workers out of work. The first case is a simple case of power exercise on practically every definition; the second is not, just because we assume that the liquidator has no alternative (as liquidator – we may argue otherwise if we separate the man from his role). To talk of power implies that, if the future facing social actors is not entirely open, it is not entirely closed either (and indeed the degree of its openness is itself variable). To put it another way, in a world characterised by total structural determinism, imposing uniquely determining constraints upon action, there would be no place for power. Power, then, is exercised within structurally determined limits – which leads us to consider the notion of structure.

It follows fairly obviously from what I have so far said that structural factors, parameters or constraints in a given context will be those claimed to determine, that is, set limits to, the power of agents within some assumed time period. I agree, of course, with Raymond Boudon when he says that ‘the meaning of the concept of structure varies with the context in which it is employed’<sup>19</sup> and that a structural analysis of some object is simply the theory of that object viewed as a system (which will vary both with the nature of the theory and of the object). I further agree that ‘structure’ in its different uses variously connotes ‘essence’, ‘totality’, ‘system of relationships’, ‘dependence of parts in relation to a whole’, and so on, and contrasts with (for example) ‘observable characteristics’, ‘aggregate’, ‘superficial system’, ‘conjunction’, and so on. However, it seems to me plain that the opposition between structure and agency picks out a basic feature common to the major sociological and anthropological conceptions of structure, and is compatible with others.

Consider the Marxian notion of ‘the economic structure of society’ (relations of production which are ‘independent of [men’s] will’) and the ‘legal and political superstructure’ (note: *superstructure*), Weber’s economic and bureaucratic structures ‘prescribing’ the behaviour of individuals<sup>20</sup> and class structures determining life-chances, and Durkheim’s social facts (characterised as external to, constraining upon and independent of agents) ranging from the morphological (the most ‘crystallised’) through institutionalised norms to *représentations*

*collectives* and, at the extreme, free-floating currents of social life that have not yet taken a distinct form. Consider Radcliffe-Brown's concept of social structure as 'an arrangement of persons in institutionally controlled or defined relationships',<sup>21</sup> Nadel's as a 'role-system',<sup>22</sup> the Wilsons' definition of social structure as 'the systematic form of limitation by which eccentricities are checked and complementary diversities are preserved',<sup>23</sup> Lévi-Strauss's account in terms of underlying principles of organisation which are invisible and often unconscious – 'what is important is to find out when a given player can make a choice and when he cannot'.<sup>24</sup> Consider Merton's claim that the 'interdependence of the elements of a social structure limit the effective possibilities of change or functional alternatives. The concept of structural constraint corresponds, in the area of social structure, to Goldenweiser's "principle of limited possibilities" in a broader sphere',<sup>25</sup> Talcott Parsons's characteristic view that social structure 'focuses on the integration of the motivation of actors with the normative cultural standards which integrate the action system',<sup>26</sup> Blau's argument that social structure is defined by 'parameters' which specify the 'social positions that govern the social relations among their incumbents',<sup>27</sup> and Stinchcombe's claim that

the core process conceived as central to social structure is *the choice between socially structured alternatives*. This differs from the choice process of economic theory, in which the alternatives are conceived to have inherent utilities. It differs from the choice process of learning theory, in which the alternatives are conceived to emit reinforcing or extinguishing stimuli. It differs from both of these in that . . . the utility or reinforcement of a particular alternative choice is thought of as socially established, as part of the institutional order.<sup>28</sup>

This basic opposition between structure and agency is, then, pervasive, although views differ about what constitute structural factors, about what sort of limits they set upon agency and about whether the limits they set curtail freedom or provide the condition of its effective exercise ('liberty', as Durkheim once said, being 'the fruit of regulation').<sup>29</sup> It underlies views of structure that focus upon ecological or morphological factors, institutional factors, stable systems of generalised role expectations, or cultural factors. It is in this sense that we speak of class structures, kinship structures, occupational structures, opportunity structures, age structures, but also of linguistic structures, thought structures,<sup>30</sup> structures of myths, and so on. This

basic aspect of structure is also compatible with various further and familiar features of structure in its various applications – its persistence, its relative stability, its capacity to be hidden from agents and sometimes to be unconscious, and also the evident relativity of any attribution of structural determination to a theory of society, of the individual and of the relation between them presupposed by the attributor.

Now, just as I have argued that power is an essentially contested concept, and that any given empirical application of it carries a considerable theoretical load, so I claim exactly the same to be true of the concept of structure. Thus any given view of (that is, way of identifying) structural factors carries the following three implications. First, a (contestable) judgement about what is constraining upon agents, and the way in which it constrains them (more of this later). Second, a particular characterisation of those agents – that is, a way of identifying them counterfactually when asking the question ‘could “they” have done such and such?’ (Who are ‘they’? Do ‘they’ include or exclude ‘their’ wants, beliefs, personality characteristics, commitments, and so on, and if so, *which* of these? More of this, too, later.) And third, the specification of a time period within which what is claimed to be structural is held to be so.

I turn now to consider a number of corollaries of these brief accounts of power and structure, before turning to the problem of the relation between them.

The first corollary is (somewhat surprisingly) that, on this account, the notion of a power structure becomes a self-contradiction, since power operates within structures. However, the matter is not so simple, since the possession and exercise of power by some can be a structural fact of the situation of others – so that what is structural with respect to the recipient(s) may not be so with respect to the exerciser(s). Again, structures may be created, maintained and destroyed by acts of power. The point, however, is that to the extent to which the explanation of a given outcome is structural, the claim being made is that to that extent the agents involved in bringing it about are powerless to act otherwise. (Compare, for example, Merton’s theory of the structural sources of deviant behaviour, according to which there is a limited number of ‘alternative responses open to individuals living in an ill-balanced social structure’, when there is a ‘dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realising these

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aspirations'.)<sup>31</sup> In particular, if there is a conflict between the parties in a situation, *both* will tend to be seen as victims of the system, rather than one being held to exercise power over the other; it will not, for instance, be so much a question of, say, men choosing to exercise power over women, through voluntary actions on the basis of modifiable attitudes, as of a system of domination in which both men and women are caught up, albeit one serving the interests of the former at the expense of the latter.

2. The second corollary is that what is structural is relative – first, to a given time period (so that what is structural in the short term may not be so in the long term), and second, to specified or specifiable agents. Thus what is structural for one agent or set of agents (whether individual or collective) may not be so for another. What is structural for some Cabinet Ministers will not be so for others. What is structural for the Indian elite may not be so for the Chinese. Moreover, what is structural at the individual level may not be so at the level of groups of institutions. What is structural for a Cabinet Minister may not be so for the Cabinet as a whole. Indeed, groups or institutions will in certain respects *constitute* structures for their members.

3. The third corollary is that at certain periods of social transformation, what was structural ceases to be so and becomes subject to human agency, in the form of power, influence, authority, coercion, manipulation, and so on. This does not, however, apply only to periods of revolution. It could well be that the only distinctive feature of totalitarianism is the systematic elimination of certain structures, and, in particular, the State, by the power of a political elite, so that restrictions upon possibilities of action are destroyed.<sup>32</sup>

4. The fourth corollary is really a spelling out, in analytical fashion, of the nature of structural constraints. There are several distinctions that can be made here which, taken together, help to clarify the issues at stake. First, there is the distinction between external and internal constraints. *External* constraints typically will exclude options whatever the agents want, feel or believe. An example from the Crossman *Diaries*:

I know I have the Prime Minister behind me. I also know that my housing programme is at the mercy not of any cuts [other members of the Cabinet] may wish to make but of economic forces which are threatening and pressuring and bullying this poor government.<sup>33</sup>

It is in this sense that we characterise as structural the geographical,



technological or international political constraints facing the regime of a developing society. *Internal* constraints, by contrast, typically exclude options which are unacceptable to, beyond the capacity of or even inconceivable by the agents. Another example from the Crossman *Diaries*: he speaks of 'the pressures that are exerted on M.P.s in marginal constituencies . . . appeasing industrialists or right-wing groups, churches or chapels'.<sup>34</sup> This example assumes a rational model of the M.P. calculating that certain actions will work against his interests, and ultimately prejudice the retention of his seat. Alternatively, the agent may be incapacitated for action, like 'poor Frank Soskice with his arthritis and his twisted shoulder and his amiability and his self-centredness. He is a disaster as Home Secretary and he has to deal with the hottest potato in politics – the problem of immigration'.<sup>35</sup> And of course, structural constraints can work at a deeper internal level still, in the form of ideological limitations, internalised values and beliefs, setting pre-set limits to what is even conceivable by agents. In general we may say that an *ability* is the absence of an internal constraint (that is, the presence of an internal permissive condition) and an *opportunity* the absence of an external constraint (that is, the presence of an external permissive condition).

A second distinction is that between positive and negative constraints: a *positive* constraint is an actual obstacle or preventing condition; a *negative* constraint an absence, such as a lack of resources, strength, skill or knowledge, that, equally, prevents a potential option from being realised.

As Joel Feinberg has remarked, these two distinctions cross-cut one another, creating four categories:

There are *internal positive constraints* such as headaches, obsessive thoughts and compulsive desires; *internal negative constraints* such as ignorance, weakness, and deficiencies in talent or skill; *external positive constraints* such as barred windows, locked doors and pointed bayonets; and *external negative constraints* such as lack of money, lack of transportation, and lack of weapons.<sup>36</sup>

A third distinction is that between constraints upon ends and those upon means. The former limit the range of objectives that agents in a given context can seek: examples are Crossman's economic forces and constituency pressures. The latter set limits to the means of achieving a given objective: there is only a restricted number of ways to reduce a trade deficit, and of these some will be beyond the power of a

government to implement, others unacceptable to it, and others inconceivable by it. Either of these types of constraint may be external or internal, positive or negative.

These distinctions have a certain value: they are clarifying and they help us avoid muddles often made. But any given way of drawing them is eminently contestable and question-begging. Thus, as I have already suggested, what counts as external or internal will be relative to and dependent on a particular model of the agent; as Feinberg has observed:

How we make the distinction between 'internal' and 'external' constraints depends, of course, on how we draw the boundaries of the self. If we contract the self sufficiently so that it becomes a dimensionless non-empirical entity, then *all* causes are external. Other narrow conceptions of the self would attribute to its 'inner core' a set of ultimate principles or 'internalised values' or ultimate ends or desires, and relegate to the merely 'empirical self', or to a world altogether external to the self, all lower-ranked desires, whims and fancies.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, most real cases are self-evidently mixed; the structural constraints of the market only apply to rational economic men who play by its rules, and normative constraints such as the law only set external limits to choosable options for so long as agents continue internally to accept the law as setting such limits. Again, the distinction between positive and negative constraints is relative to the way they are characterised; the presence of pressure is the absence of leeway, and to lack strength, skill or knowledge is to manifest weakness, incompetence and ignorance. And what counts as an end is always relative to a particular way of drawing conceptual boundaries; reducing a trade deficit can also be seen as a means.

4.4 There is, however, a further distinction which cuts both across these distinctions and deeper into the problem we are trying to address. That is the distinction between rational and structural constraints – that is, between constraints which operate through the agent's reasons and those which do not.

^ *Rational* constraints determine, that is, set limits to, the options of agents simply by providing them with relevant and sufficient reasons not to act in certain ways. The paradigm case of these is that of economic constraints, which by putting a price tag on certain options thereby render them ineligible; but, in general, the same applies to all cases where the choice situation is patterned by weightings which, given

the agents' preference schedules, serve to determine or limit their choices. The key point here is that such constraints can be compatible with the agent's freedom to overcome them: the bayonets of the enemy, the threats of the dictator, the prospective verdict of the electorate no less than the antique dealer's price tag may simply provide me with good reasons for not acting in certain ways, which will be more or less compelling depending on the costs to me consequent upon so acting. Unless I am *unable* to do so, my acting as I do is both constrained and voluntary; on this view, I retain the freedom or power to act otherwise,<sup>38</sup> though, given that I have the wants and beliefs that I have, my actions have been determined. Rational constraints will not, therefore, be structural, that is limiting the power of agents; the agent is seen as retaining the power to overcome the constraint, however high the price.

By contrast, *structural constraints* do not operate through the agent's reasons, and they may indeed prevent certain reasons being reasons *for him*: that is, they may limit his capacity to have certain desires or to hold certain beliefs. Structural constraints limit the agent's freedom or power to act otherwise by precluding (rather than putting a price tag on) such a possibility. They may take the form either of a limit upon (internal) *ability* or upon (external) *opportunity*, they may be positive or negative and they may preclude the pursuit of ends or means (bearing in mind all the problems we have met with in considering these distinctions). Finally, they may be either *causal* (as, for example, when some psychological inability, like Frank Soskice's character, precludes a certain action, or the causal conditions for its performance, for example economic resources or technological conditions, do not exist), or else they may be what I can only call *conceptually necessary* (for instance, as a member of Kariera society, I cannot marry the daughter of my father's brother).<sup>39</sup>

One final remark in this connection: I have already suggested that judgements about what is constraining upon agents and the way in which they are so constrained has something to do with the way in which they are conceptualised. I shall later suggest that it has everything to do with this – that the two issues are deeply and intimately related.

The problem before us is this: how are we to think about the relation between power and structure? There are three clear-cut positions that can be adopted in relation to this issue.

The first is what we may call the voluntarist, anti-structural position.

On this view, the constraints facing choice-making agents are minimal – and, in particular, the only structural constraints are external to the choosing agent; internal constraints are always rational ones and can always be surmounted. The opportunity to succeed in one's projects may be lacking, but never the ability to think, choose and act otherwise.

One extreme exponent of this view is Sartre: for him the future facing the subject is always open (the subject for the early Sartre being the individual, for the later Sartre the 'group-in-fusion'), and all the acting subject needs is moral integrity, sincerity, invention, imaginativeness. There was for the early Sartre 'no human nature': man is 'what he conceives himself to be . . . what he wills. . . . Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.' He is 'not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality and the pressure of circumstances is such that he cannot fail to choose one.' Thus Zola was wrong to show the behaviour of base, weak, cowardly or evil characters as 'caused by their heredity, or by the influence of their environment, or of society, or because of psychological or organic determinism'; the existentialist, by contrast,

who portrays a coward, declares him to be responsible for his cowardice. . . . There is no such thing as a cowardly temperament . . . what produces cowardice is the act of giving up or giving way . . . the existentialist says that the coward makes himself cowardly, the hero makes himself heroic; and there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero.<sup>40</sup>

For another version of this position, stressing the permanent possibility of critical thought rather than of moral choice, consider Sir Karl Popper, for whom 'it is necessary to recognise as one of the principles of any unprejudiced view of politics that everything is possible in human affairs'.<sup>41</sup> Popper writes elsewhere, attacking Kuhn:

I do admit that at any moment we are prisoners caught in the framework of our theories; our expectations; our past experiences; our language. But we are prisoners in a Pickwickian sense: if we try, we can break out of our framework at any time. Admittedly, we shall find ourselves again in a framework, but it will be a better and roomier one; and we can at any moment break out of it again.<sup>42</sup>

Popper's 'central point' is 'that a critical discussion and a comparison of the various frameworks is always possible' – and, from the context, he

clearly means that as an empirical generalisation, not a statement of *logical* possibility (hence the telling phrase 'if we *try*'). The contrary view, the so-called '*Myth of the Framework*' (the thesis that the framework cannot be critically discussed) he dubs 'in our time, the central bulwark of irrationalism'.<sup>43</sup>

The only structural constraints, on this first, voluntarist view, are external and upon action as opposed to thought or desire. This view is hostile to the notion of internal structural constraints; there are no limits to the exercise of moral choice or the operation of critical rationality. This anti-structural position may of course take an individualist or a collectivist form. We have considered two individualist versions, but one may see it in its collectivist form both among those, such as the Jacobins and the Fascists, who believe that the social order can be shaped and controlled at will by powerful political elites, and among those, such as the Blanquistes or syndicalists,<sup>44</sup> such as Sorel, who equally believe that political will is sufficient to achieve its revolutionary transformation.

The second position in relation to the issue of power and structure is the *structuralist* position, most clearly exemplified, in recent Marxist discussions, by Althusser and his followers. Thus Althusser writes:

the structure of the relations of production determines the *places* and *functions* occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the 'supports' (*Träger*) of these functions. The true 'subjects' (in the sense of constitutive subjects of the process) are therefore not these occupants or functionaries, are not, despite all appearances, the 'obviousness' of the 'given' of naïve anthropology, 'concrete individuals', 'real men' – but the *definition and distribution of these places and functions. The true 'subjects' are these definers and distributors: the relations of production* (and political and ideological and social relations). But since these are 'relations', they cannot be thought within the category *subject*. And if by chance anyone proposes to reduce these relations of production to relations between men, i.e. '*human relations*', he is violating Marx's thought, for so long as we apply a truly critical reading to some of his rare ambiguous formulations, Marx shows in the greatest depth that the *relations* of production (and political and ideological social relations) are irreducible to any anthropological inter-subjectivity – since they only combine agents and objects in a specific structure of the distribution

of relations, places and functions, occupied and 'supported' by objects and agents of production.<sup>45</sup>

Or as Balibar puts it, even more decisively, 'individuals are merely the effects' of 'the structure of social practices'; they 'do not appear in the theory except in the form of supports for the connexions implied by the structure, and the forms of their individuality as determinate effects of the structure'.<sup>46</sup>

Poulantzas has taken the same view. Thus he writes that 'the agents of production, for example the wage-earning labourer and the capitalist, as "personifications" of Wage-Labour and Capital, are considered by Marx as the *supports* or *bearers* of an ensemble of structures', and he goes on to say that 'everything happens as if social classes were *the result of an ensemble of structures and of their relations*, firstly at the economic level, secondly at the political level and thirdly at the ideological level'.<sup>47</sup> He attacks Miliband for failing to comprehend

social classes and the State as *objective structures*, and their relations as an *objective system of regular connections*, a structure and a system whose agents, 'men', are in the words of Marx, 'bearers' of it — *Träger*. Miliband constantly gives the impression that for him social classes or 'groups' are in some way reducible to *interpersonal relations*, that the State is reducible to interpersonal relations of the members of the diverse 'groups' that constitute the State apparatus, and finally that the relation between social classes and the State is itself reducible to interpersonal relations of 'individuals' composing social groups and 'individuals' composing the State apparatus.<sup>48</sup>

It is true that Poulantzas writes of the class struggle, and indeed now claims that 'social classes, although objectively determined (structures) . . . only exist within and through the class struggle (practices)', which he describes as 'the production, reproduction and transformation of "forms"'.<sup>49</sup> But his epistemological standpoint stands opposed to 'the problematic of agents as subjects' and that of 'class based on agents',<sup>50</sup> and he consistently treats structural analysis as central and primary, and questions of agency as quite distinct and secondary.<sup>51</sup> This is most explicit in relation to individual agency. He ridicules the 'humanist and historicist' charge of granting insufficient importance 'to the role of concrete individuals and creative persons; to human freedom and action; to free will and to Man's capacity for choice; to the "project" against "necessity"', claiming that 'everything there is to say on this

subject has already been said', declining to answer the charge and seeing it as 'a reiteration in modern terms of the kind of objections that bourgeois idealism has always opposed to Marxism of whatever stripe'.<sup>52</sup> As for collective agency (and specifically that of classes), his main tendency is to dissolve it into structural determination.<sup>53</sup> Thus, in particular, he specifically *defines* power in terms of structural determination, as '*the capacity of a social class to realise its specific objective interests*',<sup>54</sup> arguing that this concept 'specifies the effects of the ensemble of [the levels of the structure] on the relations between social classes in struggle'.<sup>55</sup> Power, on this account, is 'an effect of the ensemble of the structures'.<sup>56</sup>

It is of course true that Althusser and Poulantzas have much to say about 'relative autonomy', but it is not agents, whether individual or collective, who are relatively autonomous but rather determining levels. As Ernesto Laclau has well put it, it is not a matter of 'autonomy conceived in terms of freedom': 'For Poulantzas . . . the "relative" character of an autonomy indicates that it belongs to a world of structural determinations, and it is only within this, as a particular moment of it, that the concept of autonomy must be elaborated.' Thus, with respect to the alleged relative autonomy of the State:

From the Poulantzas viewpoint this relative autonomy would be in turn a structural element, that is to say, the result of a particular articulation between the instances corresponding to the mode of production under consideration; in that sense, one more objective determination of the system as a whole.<sup>57</sup>

In brief, this second, structuralist position maintains (at its most extreme) that structural constraints – operating at different levels (economic, political and ideological) and both externally and internally – are uniquely determining and totally explanatory (hence the irrelevance of the problematic of agents as subjects).

The third position *vis-à-vis* the issue of structure and power is what I shall call the relativist position, which simply holds that there are just different points of view, or levels of analysis, or problematics, and there is no way to decide between them. One can either take a voluntarist position, stressing responsibility and seeing individuals or collectivities as always exercising reason, choice and will, engaging in strategies and making a difference to history; or one can see them as wholly determined, acting out roles, and indeed being not merely influenced but actually constituted by ever pre-given structures of a system that

operates upon them and through them. One can either adopt what Poulantzas calls ‘a problematic of *social actors*’<sup>58</sup> or one can adopt what Miliband calls ‘structural superdeterminism’, according to which ‘the structural constraints of the system are so absolutely compelling as to turn (for example) those who run the state into the merest functionaries and executants of policies imposed upon them by “the system”’.<sup>59</sup> This relativist position gets a considerable additional boost from the epistemological doctrine (common, incidentally, both to Bachelard, Althusser’s mentor, and to writers such as Feyerabend and Kuhn) that there are no theory-independent facts, so that there is no possibility of appealing to evidence to resolve the issue, for any piece of evidence will already be interpreted from within a particular problematic. Laclau states this position clearly: ‘modern epistemology asserts’, he roundly asserts, that ‘the concrete facts are produced by the theory or problematic itself – the problematic creates its own objects’.<sup>60</sup> From this, the third, relativist position, accounts in terms of power and agency and accounts in terms of structural determinism are simply incommensurable and there is no way of choosing between them or relating them to one another.

In my view none of these three positions is satisfactory: all three fail, in fact, to address the very problem at issue, namely, that of the relation between power and structure. Indeed, all three deny that there *is* a problem. The first position denies that there are structures (except minimally); the second denies that there are human agents; and the third refuses to relate them to one another.

One central claim implicit in the argument of this chapter is that the problem of where structural determinism ends and power begins is a real and important problem, about which disputes are endemic, but about which rational argument is possible and to which evidence can be brought to bear. Such disputes may occur between different observers (say, historians or social scientists), or between participant agents, or between observers and agents. Let us consider two examples.

Why, from the mid-1920s until his wretched end, did Bukharin, unlike Trotsky, systematically fail to resist Stalin, apart from occasional private and cryptic gestures of dissent and opposition? Why was it that ‘driven by outraged contempt for Stalin and his policies, he remained throughout a restrained, reluctant oppositionist’?<sup>61</sup> Obviously, many



complex and elaborate explanations may be devised, but we may here consider three broad possibilities.

The first is suggested by Lenin's characterisation of Bukharin:

We know how soft Bukharin is; it is one of the qualities for which we love him and cannot help loving him. We know that more than once he has been called 'just like soft wax'. It appears that any 'unprincipled' person, any 'demagogue', can make an impression on this 'soft wax'.<sup>62</sup>

Bukharin was like 'soft wax' in Stalin's hands, and, after acting as his zealous henchman during the latter's rise to power, he lacked the *ability* to escape his control. One might add that, as with Rubashov in Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, this inability was further compounded by his deep internalisation of loyalty to party unity and party discipline which had taken so deep a hold as to inhibit the option of resistance. Thus Solzhenitsyn has written of Bukharin:

above all he feared expulsion from the Party! Being deprived of the Party! Being left alive but outside the Party! . . . Bukharin (like all the rest of them) did not have his own *individual point of view*. They didn't have their own genuine ideology of opposition, on the strength of which they could step aside and on which they could take their stand.

Bukharin manifested 'sincerity and honesty . . . devotion to the Party . . . human weakness . . . lack of moral strength needed to fight back', because he lacked an '*individual position*'.<sup>63</sup> This line of analysis is, in part, also taken by Cohen: Bukharin's reluctance to appeal to popular sentiment

derived from the Bolshevik dogma that politics outside the party was illegitimate, potentially if not actually counter-revolutionary. . . . [He] was restrained by another consideration as well. In Marxist eyes, the social groups thought to be most receptive to his policies, notably peasants and technical specialists, were 'petty bourgeois' and thus unseemly constituencies for a Bolshevik. . . . Here again Bukharin was trapped by Bolshevik assumptions. . . . His reluctance to carry the fight against Stalin to the party-at-large derived from similar inhibitions. . . . By 1929 Bukharin had come to share most of Trotsky's criticisms of the party's internal regime. Unlike Trotsky, however, having sanctioned its development, he was its prisoner. . . .

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Bukharin's duty, as he saw it, was to his party, which meant 'party discipline', the pretence of unity and the gesture of repentance . . . he retained faith in the revolution and the party, and thus was wed, psychologically and politically, to the system. . . . Given his special status, his loyalty to the party and the revolution, Bukharin apparently saw little choice. A short time later, with obvious personal implication, he quoted Engels on the dilemma that Goethe had faced: 'to exist in an environment which he necessarily held in contempt, and yet to be chained to it as the only one in which he could function'.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, as another writer has put it, the Bukharinists were 'even sometimes involuntary accomplices of the Stalinism that eventually crushed them'. Bukharin himself 'could not escape . . . from the . . . slavishness of that time': 'Having always compromised with Stalinism, [Bukharinism] deprived itself of the power to mobilise, around a stated, coherent strategy, those Marxists who sought to change the course of the Russian Revolution.' Trotskyism by contrast 'has *fought* and has not made compromise a principle and capitulation a habit'.<sup>65</sup>

2. A second possibility is that Bukharin's failure to resist was due not so much (or only) to inability as to lack of *opportunity*. This was the explanation favoured by Trotsky, who compared Bukharin's later utterances to 'bubbles emitted by a drowning man'.<sup>66</sup> E. H. Carr endorses this view, arguing that Bukharin's cause was lost once the 'wager on the peasant' was defeated by 'the inherent impossibility in NEP conditions of inducing the peasant to part with his grain'. Thereafter, Bukharin was in Stalin's grip:

In the first months of 1928 Stalin, having routed Trotsky, knew that he had won, and no longer needed the support of Bukharin; and Bukharin became increasingly uneasy at the drastic and brutal course of Stalin's policies. Who first made the break? All that can be said with certainty is that it was Stalin who called the tune, and set the pace.<sup>67</sup>

3. The third possibility is to see Bukharin's later career as a series of misjudgements and of tactical and strategic mistakes, of 'sins of commission and omission'.<sup>68</sup> On this view, to some extent adopted by Cohen, Bukharin's failure to resist can be attributed less to structural than to rational constraints. One would speak of his 'unwillingness'

rather than his inability and inhibitions, or lack of moral strength and of choice. One would speak of his calculations of consequences deemed unacceptable to himself and his supporters, of his rejection of available options which he could have taken up but chose not to.<sup>69</sup>

Let us consider a second example. Why did the second British Labour Government of 1929–31 not act in a less orthodox, conservative and ineffective manner? Why did it not seek to combat the economic crisis with a radical unemployment policy, with extensive public investment financed by budget deficits, tax cuts or even the redistribution of income, together with an expansionist monetary policy?

One view is that of Robert Skidelsky, for whom the Labour Party was *unable* to rise to the demands of that time. Why, he asks, did it fail to use the dissent from orthodoxy which existed, for the ends of a radical unemployment policy?

I have sought the answer in terms of the Party's commitment to a Utopian socialism which incapacitated it from effectively working the parliamentary system and prevented it from coming to terms with economic reality. It suffered in those days from a split personality: on the one hand it was committed to constitutionalism; on the other it lacked a social democratic or gradualist programme without which tenure of power was bound to be rather barren of achievement. It thought in terms of a total solution to the problem of poverty, when what it was offered was the limited opportunity to cure unemployment. It was a parliamentary party with a Utopian ethic. It was not fit for the kind of power it was called upon to exercise.

For what was at issue between 1929 and 1931, with unemployment rising to nearly three million, was not Socialism versus Capitalism. It was interventionist Capitalism versus *laissez-faire* Capitalism. The Labour Party's commitment to a nebulous Socialism made it regard the work of the 'economic radicals' such as Keynes as mere 'tinkering', when in fact it was they who were providing the real choice. It was the failure of the Labour Party to recognise that this was the choice that doomed it to failure and sterility in this crucial period.<sup>70</sup>

Skidelsky's view is therefore of 1929 as 'the major missed opportunity of the inter-war period',<sup>71</sup> but a detailed counter-argument has recently been advanced by Ross McKibbin<sup>72</sup> which maintains precisely the opposite: that there was *no such opportunity*. McKibbin

contests Skidelsky's claim that international experience pointed to alternative reflationary policies, arguing that 'there were in fact, no such solutions abroad . . . deflation was almost universal. British policy, in relation to this, appears generous and almost unorthodox.'<sup>73</sup> As for the situation in Britain:

it is too easy to underestimate the barriers to fiscal or merely financial manipulation. The structural problems of the economy . . . required large-scale shifts in investment patterns, and the way in which the government could force such shifts was highly problematical . . . there were real obstacles to an apparently simple measure like devaluation. . . . It can be argued that a developed multiplier theory would have provided the necessary intellectual support for some kind of counter-cyclical capital expenditure. In fact, no such theory existed and it may not have been the right answer even if it had.

The absence of a mature reflationary economics was matched by the physical incapacity of the state. Budgets were too small and administrative traditions not flexible enough. . . . It must be concluded that the ability of the state before the Second World War to do more than marginally influence the economy was limited. Above all, the state had no way then, and scarcely has today, of determining investment rates.

Indeed, he argues, even if there had been a successful reflation, it would have required very wide state supervision of the economy and thus met decisive external structural constraints of a political kind:

It is scarcely conceivable that a Labour Government would have been permitted to introduce such policies while the existing structure of power remained intact. The bureaucracy, the Bank of England and the banks, the great financial institutions, most of industry, the dead weight of conventional wisdom, were thrown against innovation . . . spending policies would have made 'socialism' a central problem. Since the Labour Party probably would not, and certainly could not, reorganise economic life through state intervention, it did about as well as a 'progressive' party could do in a mature capitalist economy that was showing no signs of cyclical recovery.<sup>74</sup>

In short, the only 'practicable' alternatives to Labour were drift and deflation<sup>75</sup> – and the latter was successfully avoided until the crisis of July–August 1931. Reflation generated by capital expenditure and an

expansionary monetary policy were physically, psychologically and politically impossible.

Both these views contrast with a third, implicit in the title of an article written at the time by R. H. Tawney: 'The Choice Before the Labour Party'.<sup>76</sup> This view has recently been taken up again by Royden Harrison in an argument against the Skidelsky thesis: it was not the Labour Party's fixation with 'Utopian Socialism' that governed its actions but a *political choice* – politics being a matter of 'conflicts between distinct complexes of interests, purposes and ideas'.<sup>77</sup> For Tawney, the Labour Government was 'the author, the unintended and pitiable author, of its own misfortunes':

When the Cabinet took office, two alternatives were open to it. It could decide to live dangerously, or to play for safety. It could choose a short life, and – if the expression be not too harsh – an honest one; or it could proceed on the assumption that, once a Labour Government is in office, its primary duty is to find means of remaining there. . . . The Labour Government chose the second course. . . . Once convinced that discretion was their cue, ministers brought to the practice of the golden mean a conscientious assiduity almost painful to contemplate. They threw themselves into the role of The Obsequious Apprentice, or Prudence Rewarded, as though bent on proving that, so far from being different from other governments, His Majesty's Labour Government could rival the most respectable of them in cautious conventionality.<sup>78</sup>

Here, then, are two examples of disputes about the extent to which and the way in which the options open to an agent (in the one case individual, in the other collective) were constrained. Where did the limits on their power lie? Of course, to discuss even these two cases properly, a number of further, finer distinctions must be drawn: for example, there are different descriptions under which the relevant options may be brought; there is, for instance, the difference between Bukharin's power to oppose Stalin and his power successfully to resist him; and the Labour Party might have retained the power to act, as Tawney put it, 'on its principles', but never had the power to cope with the economic crisis (or vice versa). The point, however, is that disputes of real importance occur over whether (specifiable) options were within (specifiable) agents' power or beyond it, and, if the latter, whether this was because of factors 'external' or 'internal' to the agents.

Such disputes can, as I have suggested, equally occur between

agents, and between observers and agents. Powerful politicians characteristically appeal to structural constraints: they claim that what others count as possible courses of action are in fact precluded by external circumstances (for example economic constraints); while others allege that they are in fact *choosing* a particular package of actions together with their consequences, as opposed to others; and yet others will argue that the politicians have been so deeply imbued and socialised by the system that they cannot make the choice anyway. But the disagreement can work in the other direction too, as with the revolutionary left, say, in Allende's Chile, or Portugal in 1975, when the agent characteristically believes that there is available a wider range of choice than the observer, worldly-wise after the event, may, from a 'structural' analysis based on all the evidence, be prepared to allow.

Can disputes of this kind be resolved? Can one of the disputants be shown to have a better case than another?

All those, whether observers or agents, who deny structural explanations of outcomes, explaining them rather in terms of power, make counterfactual claims to the effect that some specified agent or agents could have acted<sup>79</sup> (that is, had the ability and the opportunity to act) in a certain way. My first move, therefore, is to say that empirical evidence can always be adduced (which must always, by nature of the case, be indirect and, especially from an empiricist point of view, lacking in certainty) to support (or to counter) any such counterfactual claims. One can, in particular, point to evidence of the same agent acting differently under relevantly similar circumstances, or of relevantly similar agents so acting. Of course, others will then object that either the circumstances or the agents, or both, are not relevantly similar, and a detailed argument can then ensue.

Such appeal to evidence and argument concerning counterfactuals is quite central to the explanatory enterprise. I have suggested that, by the nature of the case, it must always be indirect and ultimately inconclusive, but it can be more or less plausible. One can, as Cohen does, seek out what evidence there is of Bukharin's attempts to resist Stalin, or his perceptions of choices, or his deliberations about tactics. One can attempt to show that Bukharin did stand up to Stalin on those rare occasions when it was possible and showed some chances of success. The weight of such evidence can be disputed: for Carr, Cohen 'does his best for his hero, rather over-playing the gestures of dissent and resistance, always behind closed doors or in cryptic language

accessible only to the initiated, and passing over the futile and sometimes almost farcical attempts at appeasement and compromise'.<sup>80</sup> And one could make comparisons with the actions of others similarly placed who either actually resisted or failed to capitulate. Even at the time of the show trials, Solzhenitsyn argues:

there was a choice! The most farsighted and determined of those who were doomed did not allow themselves to be arrested. They committed suicide first (Skrypnik, Tomsy, Gamarnik). It was the ones who *wanted to live* who allowed themselves to be arrested. . . . But even among them some behaved differently during the interrogations, realised what was happening, turned stubborn, and died silently but at least not shamefully. For some reason, they did not, after all, put on public trial Radsutak, Postyshev, Yenukidze, Chubar, Kosior, and, for that matter, Krylenko himself, even though their names would have embellished the trials.<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand, one might argue, *for Bukharin* (Rubashov?) there was perhaps no choice: perhaps his life history and his character rendered him unable to do what they did.

Again, one could point to evidence of economically radical or interventionist elements in the Labour Party, of the courage or innovativeness of certain of its leaders, of its still-proclaimed ideology and its constitution. The weight of such evidence could certainly be disputed. Or again, one could point, as evidence of opportunities open to the Labour Party, to the alleged successes of Swedish socialism, which had 'clearly come to terms not only with economic reality but also with the parliamentary system',<sup>82</sup> and of the New Deal. But against that, one might argue, as does McKibbin, that "'active" policies of the later thirties, as in the United States, actually failed, or as in Sweden were hedged with ambiguity and doubt'.<sup>83</sup> And in any case, one might add, there were no such options open to the British Labour Party since it was differently placed and differently constituted.

However, a moment's reflection shows that all this adducing of evidence and deployment of argument about whether specified agents could or could not have acted otherwise than they did begs a crucial question: How are those agents to be characterised? The way in which we answer the question 'Could the agent have acted otherwise?' depends crucially on how the agent is conceptualised.

Let us take two extreme possibilities. If the agent is seen as including all his characteristics – his desires and beliefs, his attitudes, loyalties,

commitments, purposes and goals, and relations with others – then, as Leibniz thought, all propositions about him will be analytic and the answer to the question ‘Could he have acted otherwise?’ is always going to be ‘No’. (And a parallel analysis applies of course to collective agents.) If, however, taking the extreme opposite view, the agent is conceived as a sort of core, sovereign choosing self – always able to choose even what sort of an agent to be, without any kind of predetermining nature – then the answer is always going to be ‘Yes’. Or, more precisely, it is always going to be true that the agent can choose to act differently, although external structural constraints will prevent certain outcomes being achieved.

It is worth pausing to consider this second extreme possibility, since it is, in fact, a view of the self which in one form or another underlies and pervades the entire thought structure of our Western, liberal–capitalist societies. It has been suggestively described by Iris Murdoch as picturing man as ‘a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world’:<sup>84</sup> the will is seen as the essential centre of the self, as distinct from impersonal reason which, when properly exercised (as it always can be), yields knowledge. Morality, on this view,

is assimilated to a visit to a shop. I enter the shop in a condition of totally responsible freedom, I objectively estimate the features of the goods, and I choose. The greater my objectivity and discrimination the larger the number of products from which I can select. (A Marxist critique of this conception of bourgeois capitalist morals would be apt enough. Should we want many goods in the shop or just ‘the right goods’?) Both as act and reason, shopping is public. Will does not bear upon reason. . . . Reason deals in neutral descriptions and aims at being the frequently mentioned ideal observer.

This image is, Miss Murdoch rightly observes, behaviourist, existentialist and utilitarian:

It is behaviourist in its connexion of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts. It is also incidentally what may be called a democratic view, in that it suggests that morality is not an esoteric achievement but a natural function of any normal man.<sup>85</sup>

It is an image central to the liberal tradition, owing something to



Hume and to Kant, and to Hobbes and Bentham through John Stuart Mill. Miss Murdoch sees this picture of the individual as a free rational will as strikingly exemplified in the writings of Stuart Hampshire and Sartre. According to the former, she says, man is

rational and totally free except in so far as, in the most ordinary law-court and commonsensical sense, his degree of self-awareness may vary. He is morally speaking monarch of all he surveys and totally responsible for his actions. Nothing transcends him. His moral language is a practical pointer, the instrument of his choices, the indication of his preferences. His inner life is resolved into his acts and choices, and his beliefs, which are also acts, since a belief can only be identified through its expression. His moral arguments are references to empirical facts backed up by decisions. The only moral word which he requires is 'good' (or 'right'), the word which expresses decision. His rationality expresses itself in awareness of the facts, whether about the world or about himself. The virtue which is fundamental to him is sincerity.

And similarly in Sartre:

the individual is pictured as solitary and totally free. There is no transcendent reality, there are no degrees of freedom. On the one hand, there is the mass of psychological desires and social habits and prejudices, on the other hand there is the will. Certain dramas, more Hegelian in character, are of course enacted within the soul; but the isolation of the will remains. Hence *angoisse*. . . . Again the only real virtue is sincerity . . . this powerful picture has caught our imagination. The Marxist critics may plausibly claim that it represents the essence of the Liberal theory of personality.<sup>86</sup>

Between these two extreme views of the agent, there is of course a whole range of intermediate possibilities. We may characterise the agent in terms of a dispositional account of how a person or collectivity behaves under 'normal' circumstances; in which case we may take Lenin's view of Bukharin, or Ralph Miliband's view of the Labour Party, as by nature a non-socialist party ('Cart-horses should not be expected to win the Derby').<sup>87</sup> Or we may base our conception of the agent's nature on a dispositional account of his or its capacities for rising to unusual or historic occasions, when perhaps 'he' or 'it' could act otherwise. Or again we may see the agent as defined by what in his context he could reasonably be expected to do – as determined by the

generalised expectations of significant others, or as the consequence of a 'collaborative manufacture' involving social arrangements and supporting performances by people within them.<sup>88</sup> On this view, perhaps, Bukharin could not have acted otherwise – but what about Eichmann? Perhaps the self should be seen (at least by lawyers and moralists) as always including the capacity to do what an agent could be morally expected to do<sup>89</sup> (but then, if one is any kind of moral relativist, there will be as many versions of the self as there are moralities). Or perhaps the agent's self is seen as defined in terms of some rational-choice model; on this view, the agent can always do what, given the logic of the situation and the ends or interests he is pursuing, it is rational to do. And all the above applies, *pari passu* and with greater complexity, to collective agents. How are they to be conceived? Consider the apparently simple question 'Could a particular committee have decided differently?' What do we hold constant and what do we vary under the counterfactual conditions we need to imagine?

Now, one possible answer to the question of how the agent is to be conceptualised, currently favoured in philosophical circles, is that we simply identify the agent by referring to him, not by means of a set of characteristics, but rather by a name given to the entity which bears the appropriate causal relation with that which was named.<sup>90</sup> On this view, a person is simply a human being born of certain parents, of whom we may then ask: How might 'he' (thus defined) act in any given possible world we might imagine? We might then say that, for example, given such and such a desire, he would do *x*; given such and such a belief, he would do *y*; if he had such and such a life history or character, he would do *z*. But this approach leaves entirely unanswered the question: Could 'he' at any given moment have *had* that desire or belief? In the course of his life history an agent acquires a structured set of actual and possible desires and beliefs which precisely *constitutes* his character; and the nature of a collective agent is likewise given by its ideology and possible goals. But if we grant that, then we are accepting that a socialised person interacting with others has a 'substantial self', and that a party or a class has a determinate nature – and that to identify these *is*, in part, to identify a range of abilities and inabilities to desire, believe and act. Some inabilities will be essential to the agent's character or nature, others will vary with circumstances. We may express this view of the agent in either of two ways. We may either say that the agent, identified as such-and-such a causally continuous named entity, acquires a specific, structured character that renders that agent unable to choose

certain options; or we may prefer to say that the agent, identified as having that character, could not have made that choice (this claim being a logical one for essential inabilities and an empirical one for inessential ones).

The broad picture I am seeking to sketch here is of agents as *consisting in* a set of (expanding and contracting) abilities, faced with (expanding and contracting) opportunities. Together these constitute structured possibilities which specify the powers of agents, varying between agents and over time for any given agent. On this view, both behaviourism and empiricism will fail as recipes for explanation: the former because it focuses exclusively on the narrow thread of actualised possibility, rejecting the unactualised as of no explanatory significance;<sup>91</sup> the latter, at least in its narrower forms, because it systematically devalues the explanatory role of counterfactuals and the value of the evidence needed to support them.

I have argued that to investigate the structural constraints upon the power of agents is, at the same time, in part to inquire into the nature of those agents; such an investigation is of its nature an inquiry into counterfactuals, for which evidence must always be indirect and ultimately inconclusive. It would, however, be fallacious to conclude from the in-built difficulties of such research that there is in principle no correct answer to the question of what is within and what beyond the power of agents, or indeed that there are not practical ways of ascertaining whether some proposed answers are better than others.

On the view I have advanced, social life can only properly be understood as a dialectic of power and structure, a web of possibilities for agents, whose nature is both active and structured, to make choices and pursue strategies within given limits, which in consequence expand and contract over time. Any standpoint or methodology which reduces that dialectic to a one-sided consideration of agents without (internal and external) structural limits, or structures without agents, or which does not address the problem of their interrelations, will be unsatisfactory. No social theory merits serious attention that fails to retain an ever-present sense of the dialectic of power and structure.