


9-1-2004

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## Recommended Citation

Cooper, S. D. (2004). Connecting the dots: Implicit commonalities among cultural morphogenesis, structuration, and market economics. *The Kentucky Journal of Communication*, 23, 73-83

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## Connecting the Dots: Implicit Commonalities Among Cultural Morphogenesis, Structuration, and Market Economics

Stephen D. Cooper

*Perhaps the central foundational issue of our time is the relationship of human agency and social structure. If human actors are constrained by the rules and rhetoric of the social system, how is it that those actors can yet bring about radical change in that social system? A similar puzzle exists in economics: how is it that individual transactions both maintain and transform the marketplace? This paper begins to identify common ground implicit in the work of Margaret Archer, Anthony Giddens, and Friedrich Hayek. Emergence, change, reproduction, time, agency, power, and knowledge are themes which can be read in these scholars' theories of cultural morphogenesis, structuration, and market economics.*

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Perhaps the central foundational issue of our time is the relationship of human agency and social structure. If human actors are constrained by the rules and rhetoric of the social system, how is it that those actors can yet bring about radical change in that social system? A similar puzzle exists in economics: how is it that individual transactions both maintain and transform the marketplace? This paper begins to identify common ground in particular theories of social structure and market economics.

The works of Margaret Archer (1995, 1996), Anthony Giddens (1986, 1990), and Friedrich Hayek (1956) are not conventionally thought to be related, much less to be compatible. Archer aims a good deal of criticism at both collectivist and individualist conceptions of human agents. Giddens seems most concerned with critiques of functionalism and postmodernism. Hayek, one of the major figures in Austrian economics, seems to garner little scholarly attention in

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sociological or communication circles despite his evident concern for the relationship of social structures and human behaviors.

This paper begins to explore implicit commonalities in these scholars' theories of cultural morphogenesis, structuration, and market economics. Inherently, this is an exercise in "thinking out of the box" and is necessarily selective, rather than comprehensive, in considering those theories. Its reading of those theories will stray somewhat beyond their own terms. The hope is that despite what initially appears to be incommensurability among the theories, there may be conceptual synergy possible in even a rude form of synthesis. While this paper is not a rhetorical analysis in itself, rhetoric plays an important role in cultural and structural dynamics—both change and reproduction. For that reason, it may be useful to link cultural/structural dynamics to public decision making, with their connection to rhetoric taken as a given. This paper is a first step in that direction.

### The Three Theories, In Brief

It will be useful to first touch on particular concepts in the three theories by themselves, then proceed to identify common ideas implicit in them. Again, this treatment is selective, rather than comprehensive.

### Cultural Morphogenesis

Margaret Archer's work on cultural morphogenesis (1995, 1996) is the most recent of the theories considered here. Her dissatisfaction with earlier foundational theories of social life lies in what she terms the "conflation" of structure and agency (1995). In simplest terms, individualism reduced structure to a dependent variable of agency, while collectivism reduced agency to a dependent variable of structure. Both neglected culture as a variable. A central insight of Archer's work, then, is that social theory must recognize the interplay among structure, culture, and agency for that theory to have reasonable explanatory power.

Another insight is the role of time in structural dynamics. Structure, culture, and agency all exhibit their own morphogenetic cycles of conditioning (e.g., acculturation or reproduction), interaction (e.g., resistance, contestation), and elaboration (e.g., emergence).

These cycles are related but not synchronized; the cycles are also iterative, which is to say that the starting point of one cycle is the terminal state of another. Comprehensive social analysis, then, must also take into account the morphogenetic/morphostatic cycles of these three variables.

### Structuration

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1986) likewise avoids conceptualizing social institutions as independent variables. A key notion in Giddens is that those social institutions are not brought into existence by human actors, yet are inevitably recreated by the activities of human actors. This "duality" of structure is apparent in the way the production of social activity simultaneously reproduces the social contexts preserved as memory in human agents. Agents are "knowledgeable" in the sense that they know how to act in a practical, day-to-day sense, even if they do not possess the same knowledge at a level of discursive consciousness.

In Giddens' sense, structure consists of rules and resources involved in this ongoing production and reproduction. Rules include both normatives and codes of signification. Resources include the ability to coordinate the activities of humans, and control over material goods. What most distinguishes Giddens's theory from earlier functionalist approaches is the notion that structure (as collections of rules and resources) exists out of time and space, while the social system consists of the regularities of human activity, reproduced across time and space. This accounts for the duality of structure, and the recursive quality of day-to-day human activity.

### Free Market Economics

Perhaps the best-known work of Friedrich A. Hayek is The Road to Serfdom (1956). While this book has in recent years gained renewed attention for its critique of collectivist political ideology, of interest here is its connection between the properties of the social system and the agency of the human actors who operate within it.

A fundamental insight of Hayek's work is that a government which is expansive in its exercise of power tends, over time, to become tyrannical; this is the essence of Hayek's critique of socialist ideology. For our purposes here, it is useful to translate this relationship in the following way: a social system which tends to

extend its control over individuals' activities tends to diminish those individuals' agency. Thus, Hayek saw the power of the system and the power of the individual human agent to stand in fundamental opposition to each other, and in an inverse relationship to each other.

Another insight relevant to this paper is what Hayek and other Austrian economists referred to as the "knowledge problem." In brief, managed economies tend to operate in suboptimal states because it is impossible for the managers to obtain necessary information to make choices which maximize value throughout the system. By contrast, market economies are characterized by decentralized decision-making based on localized information about preferences and conditions. Here, too, we can see the structure/agency question in another guise: to the extent that the social system operates as an entity in itself, how can it maximize the value—not just economic, but aesthetic, emotional, or relational, as well—available to the human agents operating within it?

Signature Concepts: The core concepts which distinguish cultural morphogenesis, structuration, and market economics can be summarized briefly.

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Archer  | morphogenesis: separate, but interrelated, change cycles in structure, agency, and culture |
| Giddens | duality of structure: simultaneously a constraint and enabler of human agency              |
| Hayek   | threat to agency: attempts to manage social system tend to diminish individual freedom     |

### Implicit Commonalities

Their obvious dissimilarities notwithstanding, it is possible to tease out a number of common themes among these theories. For the most part, these are not the terms used by Archer, Giddens, or Hayek; rather, they are readings of those theories with an eye for commonalities implicit in their conceptions of agency and structure.

### Emergence

In all three theories, there is some sense that important features of the social system emerge through human interactions in the context of the social system. Archer uses the term explicitly, in categorizing her theory as “emergentist.” Giddens and Hayek do not invoke the term themselves, but it seems reasonable to read this theme in their theories. In structuration, it is the activity of humans which give rise to social systems. In Hayek, the transactions among humans create value and thereby shape the social system.

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Archer  | structure emergent through structural elaboration (1995, p. 193)                    |
| Giddens | social systems emergent through “situated activities of human agents” (1986, p. 25) |
| Hayek   | value emergent in a free market   |

### Change/Reproduction

Archer’s explanation of change and reproduction in structure is by far the most elaborate. Structure, culture, and agency are separate variables, each with a cycle consisting of conditioning, interaction, and elaboration. The interrelationships of these three variables create conditions of change or reproduction.

Curiously, structuration theory in itself seems to neglect this dimension, other than to note that intentional (i.e., rational) actions often have unintended (i.e., irrational) consequences (1986, p. 11-14). Giddens’s notion of radicalized modernity (1990, p. 53) provides more detail: change is supported by “disembedding mechanisms” (i.e., social relationships can span large distances of time and space) and a “reflexive appropriation of knowledge” (i.e., the reproduction of social relations is greatly affected by the awareness of the social relations).

In Hayek’s work, positive change is a casualty of managed social structures. Once a power to coordinate the activities of humans

has been instantiated (what Giddens refers to as an “authoritative resource”), that power tends to become unresponsive to the needs and preferences of those humans. We can read into Hayek’s discussion of tyranny a correlation between this kind of power and the reproduction of social structure.

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Archer  | interlocked cycles in structure, culture, and agency; combinations favoring change (morphogenesis) and reproduction (morphostasis) |
| Giddens | unintended consequences of intentional action; radicalized modernity   |
| Hayek   | managed social structure inhibits positive change  |

#### Driving Force Behind Change

For Archer and Giddens, change seems strongly related to limitations on human rationality. In cultural morphogenesis, contradictions in the cultural system figure heavily in change. In structuration, intentional action often has unintended consequences, and the action may be taken within conditions unacknowledged by the actors. In individualist conceptions of agency, such as Hayek’s, self-interested activity provides ongoing feedback into the social system.

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Archer  | contradictions in cultural system (or in social system)                |
| Giddens | unintended consequences of action; unacknowledged conditions of action |
| Hayek   | self-interest in situation of personal freedom                         |

## Time

Time is a key element in Archer's theory of morphogenesis. The conditioning, interaction, and elaboration stages of the morphogenetic cycle occur in time; conditioning and interaction overlap, as do interaction and elaboration. Another way time figures in Archer's work is the observation that neither transformation nor reproduction is equally possible at all historical times.

Time figures heavily in Giddens's work, also, but in a different sense. Time-space constrains human agency, but not structure—a condition which Giddens refers to a “time-space distantiation.” While day-to-day life is reversible (in the sense that as individuals we can often undo what we did), the lifetime of the body is irreversible. Social institutions exist in time, also, but usually a much longer time frame than the individual human.

For Hayek, the stability of social rules over time is an important condition for humans to be able to make intelligent choices for their actions. In this sense, time is related to knowledge as a factor in human agency. Moreover, a connection can be made here to Giddens's concept of the human as a knowledgeable agent with regard to practical (day-to-day) consciousness.

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Archer  | periodization of change/stasis;<br>possibility of transformation not equal at all times  |
| Giddens | time-space is constraint on agency;<br>reversible time of day-to-day life;<br>irreversible time of the body; long duration of institutions |
| Hayek   | rules must be knowable and consistent over time for individuals to plan their activities   |

## Power

The concept of power is central to all three theories, although the conception in each is distinct. In Archer, power plays a major role in a tension between morphogenesis and morphostasis. Giddens notes that power is an essential ingredient in any meaningful idea of human agency; put simply, there cannot be agency without an ability to



influence the course of day-to-day life. As an economist, Hayek's concern is that control over the economy is not contained simply to the economic transactions individual might choose to engage in, but constitutes a far-reaching power over much of social life.

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Archer  | two kinds of power:<br>transformational and reproductive  |
| Giddens | inherent in being an agent; not restricted to sectional interests, and not necessarily oppressive |
| Hayek   | control over economic activity confers broad power over human action                              |

### Constraint on Agency

Giddens's conception of structure as a duality is an explicit statement of a constraint on agency. He takes pains to note that, as a duality, structure simultaneously constrains and enables the actions individual humans might take; paradoxically, it does this by virtue of its time-space distanciation (see 1986, p. 170 ff.). Archer identifies structural and cultural conditioning as analytically distinct constraints on human agency (1995, p. 195 ff.); in short, humans at the present time are constrained by the outcomes of prior morphogenetic cycles. For Hayek, the greatest constraint on agency is collectivist thinking and action; in short, purposefully coordinated activity stands in a fundamental opposition to individual action (see 1956, p. 32 ff.). These positions may at first glance appear incommensurate, yet in each there is some hint that the individual human is in some important way constrained by the group.

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Archer  | cultural and structural conditioning                         |
| Giddens | structure (organized rules and resources, out of time/space) |
| Hayek   | collectivism, as an ideology                                 |

### Threat to Agency

For all three theories, the chief threat to agency would thus seem to be control: control over the cultural system, control over structure, or control over transactions.

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Archer  | control over culture (beliefs & practices)              |
| Giddens | control over structure (rules & resources)              |
| Hayek   | control over transactions (voluntary economic activity) |

### Knowledge

This, too, is a concept central to all three theories, yet it plays a markedly different role in each. In cultural morphogenesis, the cultural system is bounded by the total set of things which can be made sense of or given voice to at any given time. In structuration, agents know how to “get along in the world” far better than they know how to articulate the conditions in which they act. In Hayek’s theory, the “knowledge problem” is the fatal flaw of central planning: it is impossible for the planners to optimize the system because it is impossible for the knowledge to be centralized.

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Archer  | at any given time, the cultural system is bounded by the stock of knowledge              |
| Giddens | knowledgeability of agents is mainly in practical, rather than discursive, consciousness |
| Hayek   | managed structure suboptimal because necessary information cannot be centralized         |

## Dynamic Relationship of Individual and Society

All three theories recognize some level of impact of the individual human on society as a whole. In Archer's theory, this effect operates through the cultural system. In Giddens, action—which is both constrained and enabled by structure—both reproduces and transforms structure. In Hayek, the accumulation of individual, self-interested acts is, in some sense, social capital upon which future acts can draw.

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Archer  | individual acts shaped by cultural conditioning, and have potential to impact cultural elaboration |
| Giddens | individual simultaneously constrained and enabled by structure                                     |
| Hayek   | individual acts accumulate into social capital   |

### Implications for the Rhetoric of Policy

It may be useful to distill these commonalities into a few general statements with implications for policy discussions.

- Human agency and social objects are symbiotic.

Neither concept makes much analytical sense without the other—or much real world sense, either. As Giddens points out, social structure is the medium for human agency. As Archer points out, interaction is a crucial phase of the morphogenetic cycle—at least in part because it is through interaction that the “internal and necessary logical relations between components of the cultural system” (1995, pp. 168-169) can be maintained or restored.

- Social objects emerge through the exercise of human agency, but are manageable only to a limited extent.

As Giddens put it, “human history is created by intentional activities, but is not an intended project; it persistently eludes efforts to bring it under conscious direction” (1986, p. 27). The knowledge problem identified by Hayek pertains here, also. Efforts to manage social structure require a level of reduction in information about that structure that precludes the success of the effort. The morphogenetic

cycle Archer described is clearly a process of negotiation or accommodation more than conscious direction.

- Centralization of control over human activity is problematic. Hayek's warning about this danger is explicit: agency (as individual freedom) and institutional power are fundamentally opposed to each other. There is a sense of this in Giddens, too, when he describes nation-states as self-interested "actors" (1990, p. 72) in themselves.
- Social life may be analyzable, but it cannot be reduced to simple, deterministic relationships.

Archer's critique of earlier collectivist and individualist social theory drives home the essential point that social life is complex, dynamic, and multidimensional. Giddens seems to have been wrestling with the same issue when he formulated structure as a "duality" rather than a dualism. And implicit in Hayek is a warning against an intellectual smugness that anyone understands social life well enough to be able to direct it.