

EXPLORING 'STRUCTURE AND
AGENCY': IMPLICATIONS FOR THE
SOCIOLOGY OF DEVELOPMENT

CLEMEN C. AQUINO

*Department of Sociology
University of the Philippines*

The dynamics of social relations and organization among workers cannot simply be reduced to structural and class relations. Following a broad perspective which allows a multi-dimensional view of reality and an interactive relationship between "structure" and "agency," the study shows that class activities cross-cut kinship ties, patron-client relations and ethnic identities.

One of the continuing problems in sociology focuses on the relationship between broad structural themes and detailed accounts of culture, everyday life, human agency and action. Not surprisingly, this difficulty is particularly evident in the sociology of development. In an article entitled "Knowing What They Mean: Or Why is There No Phenomenology in the Sociology of Development," Foster-Carter argues that despite the strengths of the sociology of development in the analysis of economic and political phenomena, it is much weaker in understanding culture, individual responses and initiatives. Reviewing everyday life and struggles in the Third World, he notes that while such works as Figueroa's *Anthology of African and Caribbean Writing in English* (1982) reflect art, culture and literature, they lack a theoretical perspective and a consideration of structural dynamics. On the other hand, such Marxist accounts as Johnson and Bernstein's *Third World Lives of Struggle* (1982) reveal a tendency towards 'politico-activist reductionism'. Everyday life and culture seem nothing more but struggle.

Foster-Carter suggests that the sociology of development might develop an additional agenda not to replace its present concerns but to complement and complete them (p.227). Two related modes of analyses were offered. First, although a lingering reaction to the tendency of modernization theory to over-culturalize everything may still prevail, the careful examination of such socio-cultural dimensions as nation, ethnicity, gender, religion and kinship is still essential. Such approaches do not necessarily preclude the analysis of structural themes. Secondly, in lamenting the lack of phenomenological perspectives in development studies, he notes that despite the consideration of socio-cultural phenomena, 'the result is almost bound to be either reductionist or incomplete, unless cognizance is taken of the meanings that nation, gender, family or ethnic affiliation have for people' (p. 225).

I have no doubt that there have been other attempts towards this direction, especially among Third World scholars who recognize the pervasive influence of structural forces in the context of particular socio-cultural realities. But

perhaps we could also share a consensus that more work needs to be done.

Implicit in Foster-Carter's analysis is the imperative to avoid reductionism. We can posit at least two anti-reductionist variants in his agenda. One focuses on an anti-economic-reductionist perspective which seeks to adopt a multi-dimensional view of structure. In addition, he advocates an interactive approach where individuals are not simply viewed as 'passive bearers of objective structures'. In this paper, I wish to explore these two anti-reductionist positions by sharing relevant sections of a recent study entitled 'Workers in the Philippines: Classes and Beyond' (Aquino 1990).

In this research, I examined workers' social organization in different class contexts. Exploring the theme of anti-reductionism, Giddens' views and Bhaskar's realism provided the theoretical orientation and sensitized the nature of empirical research. The works of Cohen (1979) and Lloyd (1982), among others, were utilized to explore structural and socio-cultural realities in the Third World.

Along the lines of Foster-Carter's views, two main strands of anti-reductionism were explored in the study. First, a multi-dimensional perspective which focuses on the links between class and such social relations as kinship and paternalism was adopted in the study. The relevance of ethnic factors was examined as well as the linkages between class and national interests. While a multi-dimensional perspective may prove useful for the analysis of Third World societies, it could also be argued that even in the industrialized West, such non-class elements as gender and nationalism may be dominant as well.

Secondly, both 'structure' and 'agency' (individual responses and initiatives) were considered crucial and an interactive relationship between them was posited. In this context,

ordinary workers' views were integral to the analysis.

The following sections will provide an overview of the theoretical orientation of the study and a summary of the empirical findings.

'Structure and Agency: Bhaskar's Realism and Giddens' Views

Sociology is conventionally viewed in terms of three major approaches: functionalism, interpretive sociology and conflict theory. Distinctions are also made according to the structural or macro orientation of functionalist and conflict theories and the individualist or micro perspective of interpretive sociology. Sociologists interested in exploring more eclectic approaches may find some theoretical comfort in Bhaskar's realism and Giddens' views. In fact, in a recent review of developments in contemporary sociology, Outhwaite argues that the dominant conceptions of theory have become liberalized (1989:168). To be judged as useful or explanatory, theories, especially those of the social sciences, are now seen less as precisely formulated sets of testable propositions than as general frameworks of 'sensitizing' concepts.

Realism is used in the study to refer to a perspective in the philosophy of science that has roots as far back as Aristotle but has become increasingly prominent in the last decade or so. Bhaskar's anti-positivist position represents one variant of the realist philosophy of science. Distinctive in viewing the natural and social sciences in parallel terms, explanations are not expressed according to a constant conjunction of events but in terms of structures and mechanisms which generate such events.

The central principle of realism is its conception of reality. Whereas empiricists have shifted attention from

reality to our knowledge of reality and analyzed that knowledge in terms of sense impressions, realists stress that what science is really interested in are the structures and mechanisms of reality. The combined tendencies of these structures and mechanisms may generate events that in turn *may* be observed, but the events take place whether or not there is anyone around to observe them... (Outhwaite 1983: 321-322).

In 'Toward a Realist Perspective', Outhwaite discusses the implications of the realist approach for the practice of social research.

The notion of real definition serves as a leitmotif to the practice of social research on a realist basis. The social scientist directs his or her attention to an object of inquiry that is already defined in certain ways in the world of everyday life and ordinary language... The realist social scientist will typically seek to redescribe this object so as to bring out its complexity, i.e., the way in which it is determined by its internal and external relations as an outcome of a multiplicity of interacting tendencies... What sort of object are we trying to describe and explain? To what extent is it a product of the interpretations of human beings, and to what extent is it structured by "deeper causes that are opaque to human consciousness" (Outhwaite 1983: 328-329).

This suggests that the realist approach does not necessarily adopt a particular methodological position. As a metatheory, it enlarges its domain of analysis and provides 'a framework in which alternative social ontologies (and

theories) can be rationally compared and examined (Outhwaite 1983:329). In fact, Bhaskar's realism posits a multi-dimensional view of reality:

Realists accept both the relativity of all knowledge and the *differentiated* nature of social processes. According to the latter position, 'reality' comprises a great many sub-domains of entities and properties. .. a stratified conception of reality demands a range of different, equally valid, levels of abstraction in scientific enquiry... In sum, though, realism amounts to an '*integrative, pluralist*' orientation with respect to the analysis of substantive relationships (McLennan 1989: 189; Bhaskar 1987: 156; second underscoring supplied).

The realist position does not only allow a multi-dimensional view of reality; it also posits an interactive relationship between structure and agency. For realism, '*society is both the ever-present condition (material cause) and the continually produced outcome of human agency* (Bhaskar 1979: 43-44):

Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification). But it is not [entirely] the product of it (the error of voluntarism)... *Society, then, provides necessary conditions for intentional human action, and intentional human action is a necessary condition for it.* Neither can, however, be identified with, reduced to, explained in terms of or reconstructed from the other. There is an ontological hiatus between society and people, as well as a mode of connection (viz. transformation) that the other models typically ignore (p. 46, underscoring supplied).

Similarly, Giddens seeks to move beyond the traditional orientations in functionalism and structuralism by rethinking the notions of, and the relationships between action and structure. Rather than seeing action and structure as the counteracting elements of a dualism, Giddens claims that they should be regarded as the complementary terms of a duality, the 'duality of structure'. By this, Giddens argues that

social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very *medium* of this constitution. Every act of production is at the same time an act of reproduction: the structures that render an action possible are, in the performance of that action, reproduced. Even action [which] disrupts the social order, breaking conventions or challenging established hierarchies, is mediated by structural features which are reconstituted by the action, albeit in a modified form. This intimate connection between production and reproduction is what Giddens calls the 'recursive character' of social life (Thompson 1984: 150-151).

In addition, Giddens also posits that structures which are conventionally conceptualized as placing constraints upon human agency are also enabling. 'Structures can always in principle be examined in terms of their *structuration* as a series of reproduced practices' (1976:161). While structures are constituted through action, the analysis of the structuration of practices reciprocally involves how action is constituted structurally (p.161).

Bhaskar and Giddens argue for an interactive, dialectical, and 'mutually causative' relation between structures and human agency. They emphasize the active and reflexive character of both structures and human conduct and reject the tendency of orthodox perspectives

which see behavior as the result of forces that actors neither control nor comprehend (cf Sayer 1984).

Workers, Classes and Beyond: A Summary of Findings

Exploring the preceding perspectives in an empirical context is a complex task and the relationship between theoretical concerns and empirical research is not always straightforward. Giddens' views and Bhaskar's realism provided a sensitizing function in carrying out the empirical research. Perspectives in the sociology of development were utilized to provide the necessary context for the examination of workers' social organization. In addition, relevant aspects of Philippine historical and contemporary realities, its labor movement in particular, were also considered. Key intermediate concepts like class, ethnicity and nationalism were used to provide the link between broad structural themes and the empirical material.

In the study, structural and class forces are considered vital, but so are kinship, paternalism, ethnicity and nationalism. The concept *class* is here defined according to a worker's position in production relations (cf Wright 1985). Ties within and beyond work places were considered and work and non-work relations among the workers and between workers and their employers were also described.

Non-class factors may blur, mitigate or reinforce class conflict, but they are not viewed as reducible to class relations. Neither are non-class factors considered hidden representations of classes. Following Nagata's views, among others, class and non-class factors are viewed as interrelated but analytically distinct categories (1976). Such ties are described as 'cross-cutting', thus suggesting an intersection and modification to workers' objective class position.

In further attempting an anti-reductionist approach, both 'structure' and 'agency' were considered crucial. Workers were not viewed as 'passive bearers of objective structures'. Hence, conventional as well as spontaneous or hidden forms of protest were also studied. Respondents' own views about their conditions and social organization were integral to the analysis.

Three case studies representing different class contexts were used for the research. These include hired workers in coconut farms, workers in an American multinational company, and Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) workers in a local beverage enterprise. The bulk of the empirical material was collected from January 1986 to September 1987 and updated in 1988. Informal discussions and observation constituted the primary means of gathering data.

The findings suggest that there is no necessary incompatibility between class activities and kinship relations. Kinship ties figured dominantly among coconut farm workers primarily because their work groups were organized along kinship lines. The labor process and work relations showed intensive cross-cutting ties with non-work relations among workers, and to some extent, even with their employers.

From the perspective of the coconut employer ('buyer'), kinship ties ensured the availability of labor, the training of new workers, the management of credit as well as discipline in the labor process. On the other hand, workers viewed such relations in terms of facilitating much-needed job opportunities for their families and children. Kinship ties support capitalist interests, but they are not reducible to class forces. In fact, these relations also provided the network for such incipient forms of resistance as the excessive picking of nuts, passivity, or theft.

Among the KMU workers in a beverage firm, the support of family members for the union was crucial. Indeed, to a great extent, the effective role of the union as a key socializing agency influenced the families as well. Workers' families took an active part in strikes and supported other union activities. Although there was no evidence of a 'we are all family' orientation found among coconut farm workers, family ties still play an active and essential role.

The case studies indicate a variety of paternalistic relations. Some are similar to the more traditional patron-client relations, whereas others, more ephemeral and flexible, occur mainly during election periods. Despite the ideological orientation of the militant KMU workers, it cannot be simply assumed that they are totally immune from the influence of patronage relations.

Workers in the American multinational and the local beverage firm whose owners are of Chinese descent make reference to ethnic distinctions suggesting the relevance of ethnic factors. Coconut factory workers took pride in the fact that their firm is American-owned and viewed their foreign managers and owners as benevolent superiors. On the other hand, although the beverage firm is technically a local enterprise, some workers stressed its 'Chinese' ownership. Varying attitudes were held between Chinese and Filipino managers. This suggests that while militant organizations grapple with structural forces and national interests, ethnicity remains a neglected dimension of analysis.

KMU workers in the beverage firm do not possess a monopoly of holding national interests and aspirations. Coconut farm workers who are not unionized and factory workers who belong to an independent union held strong views on such national issues as foreign debt and the political leadership. Coconut workers also recognize the economic vulnerability of their

own employers. At the time of the research, most respondents generally expressed favorable attitudes towards the New People's Army.

Although organized protest has a definite place in the study of labor relations, there have been attempts to analyze more spontaneous forms of struggle and resistance. Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance', Cohen's 'hidden forms of protest' and Giddens' 'strategic conduct' reflect the growing interest in this field of study. More importantly, this area of analysis provides a starting point for the analysis of an interactive relationship between 'structure and agency'. Through analysis of such behavior, one is able to portray workers as active agents and not simply passive bearers of dominant structures.

Farm workers themselves spoke of the prevalence of excessive picking of coconuts and theft in workplaces. Employers' inability to pay workers on time have also been met with refusal to work, silence and passivity.

Numerous problems beset the analysis of unorganized and spontaneous forms of protest. Difficulties arise in identifying the nature of such forms of behavior. The dividing line between 'coping mechanisms' and 'strategic conduct' is oftentimes blurred. Such acts as drinking in workplaces may simply be a reflection of everyday behavior. Are they class protests? Or are they expressions of kin conflict, ethnic affiliation or nationalist aspirations? Against whom are such activities directed? Clearly, the question of actor's intent is an essential one. These are issues which are not easy to grapple with in empirical terms.

Moreover, protest and resistance have crucial implications for political objectives. As Cohen notes, "how can 'hidden and spontaneous protest' be utilized for political purposes? Are they more important, or simply

more pervasive, than organized forms of resistance?" (1976: 117)

Conclusion

The preceding discussion sought to provide a pluralist, multi-dimensional view of reality, where an interactive relationship between 'structure and agency' was also posited. The study may be viewed as an exploratory attempt to relate broad structural themes about class to accounts of human agency and action. It could be argued that, conceptions which show a plurality of forces provide a more adequate account of social relations and experiences, allowing a useful framework for the analysis of the relationship between 'structure and agency'.

Exploring a pluralist position in his recent book *Marxism, Pluralism and Beyond* (1989), McLennan observes that realists tend to view competing perspectives on an issue as complementary (p.192). This suggests that such social forces as classes, women's movements, or ecological struggles may be seen to have 'entirely different causes, autonomous status and radically conflicting priorities' (p. 263).

Finally, positing an interactive approach between structure and agency, Foster-Carter recognizes that taking people's meanings into the sociology of development allows us to move on from such oppositions as 'modernization versus underdevelopment' and 'Marxism versus dependency'. Individual responses and cultural expressions have a place in the analysis of broad structural themes. People's ideas and experiences also form part of the reality in the sociology of development.

Bibliography

- Aquino, Clemen
1990 *Workers in the Philippines: Classes and Beyond*. PhD thesis, University of Sussex, England.
- Bhaskar, Roy
1987 *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*. London: Verso.
1979 *The Possibility of Naturalism*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Cohen, Robin, et. al. (eds.)
1979 *Peasants and Proletarians: Struggles of Third World Workers*. London: Hutchinson.
- Cohen, Robin
1980 Resistance and Hidden Forms of Consciousness Among African Workers. *Review of African Political Economy*. 19.
- Foster-Carter, Aidan
1987 Knowing What They Mean: Or Why is There No Phenomenology in the Sociology of Development. In *Beyond the New Economic Anthropology*. Clammer, J., ed. London: MacMillan.
- Giddens, Anthony
1976 *New Rules of Sociological Method*. London: Hutchinson.
- Lloyd, Peter
1982 *A Third World Proletariat?* London: George, Allen and Unwin.
- McLennan, Gregor
1989 *Marxism, Pluralism and Beyond*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Outhwaite, William
1989 Theory. In *Developments in Sociology*. Haralambos, M., (ed.) Causeway Press.
1983 Toward a Realist Perspective. In *Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Research*, Morgan, G. (ed.) Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Sayer, Andrew
1984 *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*. London: Hutchinson.
- Scott, James and B. Kerkvliet, B. (eds.)
1986 Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-East Asia. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 13 (2) London: Frank Cass.
- Thompson, John.
1984 'The Theory of Structuration: An Assessment of the Contribution of Anthony Giddens's *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Wright, Erik O.
1985 *Classes*. London: Verso.