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*Silence is so accurate*

Mark Rothko

## 1. Introduction

The structure-agency debate revolves around the dual nature of human societies, the dialectic between the supra-individual and structural processes vis-à-vis the individually autonomous and agential moments in explaining historical change. In what determines what, this article argues that while a thoroughly relativistic answer may be logically provided at a theoretical level (e.g. the Strategic-Relational-Approach), any attempt to explain historical change will necessarily be based, either implicitly or explicitly, on political and normative presuppositions; hence, the *politics* of establishing who has power to do what, when and where.

The so called 'first round' approaches to the structure-agency debate have been characterised for either providing ontological supremacy to either structure or agency. Structuralism emphasises that social structures determine individual conduct, reducing social action to a mere appendix of the former (e.g. Althusser 2005[1969]). Voluntarism or methodological-individualism underlines the ultimate autonomy of

social actors and the divisibility of social structures into its constitutive parts (e.g. neoclassical or institutional economics). In order to overcome a binary explanation to historical change, 'second round' theories provide a dialectical account to both structure and agency. Originally, Anthony Giddens bridged such an ontological gap by strictly superimposing structure over agency and vice-versa. Later, Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer improved Giddens's 'structuration theory' by bringing time into the analysis so that structural and agential moments could be distinguished appropriately (Archer 1998; Sayer 2010).

This article focuses on the so called 'third round' approaches that overcome prior limitations; fundamentally, on Bob Jessop's Strategic-Relational-Approach (SRA) as an idiosyncratic relational theory of power in the structure-agency debate. Jessop (1996; 2005) claims that SRA transcends 'second round' approaches by thoroughly dialectically integrating and relativizing structure and agency, mirroring and relating them to each other in a complex and multi-layered ontology, so that appropriate analyses of structurally differentiated actors within particular structure-conjunctures may be articulated.

There exist few critiques of SRA *from within* SRA. Hay (1994) criticised Jessop's silence on what, i.e. 'what theory' or 'what methods' the social scientist had to use, to make the SRA operational. Hay's solution pointed towards the development of an institutionalist framework against possible Marxist re-interpretations of SRA (2001; 2002). Conversely, those articles that have criticised Jessop's ontology from critical and Marxist perspectives have targeted only his more historically concrete levels of abstraction, namely: that of capitalist regulation and the production of space from both post-structuralist (Daly 2004) and Open Marxist perspectives (e.g. Charnock 2010); the material basis of the capitalist state (Kelly 1999); or, more recently, on the role of semiotics in the study of Cultural Political Economy (van Heur 2010; Staricco 2016). However, none have engaged with Jessop's SRA from a historical materialist perspective; that is, in providing a nuanced and explicitly politicised critique of SRA that brings the dialectics of the structure-agency down to a *class* perspective.<sup>1</sup> The arguments of the article can be summarised as follows:

First, in providing a thoroughly relativistic but logically accurate account of the structure-agency dialectic, SRA obviates that the researcher departs from a particular structure-conjuncture in history and, therefore, she inevitably experiences multiple

historically concrete relations of power. Social sciences are immanent to historical struggles from which they cannot detach and, hence, history cannot be thoroughly relativized as it exerts a *real* force upon the researcher. A *historical materialist theory of power* departs from *class* in the inquiry of a historically specific set of power relations.

Second, within a complex and heterogeneous reality, SRA suggests a 'method of articulation' that leaves open the theorisation of historical power relations. Different theories are useful for different purposes as structures have no meaning outside a context. However, Jessop remains silent on how and why particular inquiry methods provide us with the appropriate means to understand particular disruptive structure-agency dynamics, neither does he tell us why and how particular agencies may seek to transform social reality. In contraposition, Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis' helps us to understand the researcher as a potential 'organic intellectual' that may actively theorise and engage politically with historically specific power relations in order to reproduce or transcend them.

Third, according to Jessop, by thoroughly relativizing the interaction between the structure and agency, the category of 'power' loses its explanatory force and, in

opposition, becomes a redundant category that needs to be explained, i.e. in SRA, power becomes the *explanandum* instead of the *explanans*. A historical materialist critique of SRA warns us about the double-hermeneutics in the process of defining what power is. Put simply, in attributing power to social structures/actors, the researcher is strategically, either implicitly or explicitly, *exerting* his/her explanatory power as a potential 'organic intellectual' in the understanding of power relations and the possibilities of historical change. In and through a partisan critique to power, the researcher explicitly acknowledges that power is a politically contested category determining what can or cannot be done. A *historical materialist theory of power* may well frame *class* power as the interaction of economic, political and ideological relations of domination that result from overdetermined but necessarily contingent strategic class struggles. In seeking to transcend historically specific power relations, the researcher may well attempt to bridge the gap between theory and praxis.

Fourth, according to SRA, historical change that results from the changing 'balance of power' is contextualised a posteriori, after the recursive interaction of particular strategies within constraining structures. Jessop, however, stresses the concepts of overdetermination, contingent necessity and structural coherence in explaining

historical change, implicitly providing a structuralist account that downplays agency. This article argues that SRA does not sufficiently problematize the emergence, interaction and dismissal of structures as the result of contingent and radical action. In that sense, and in contrast to Gramscian theory, SRA misses the politics of understanding and explaining historical change as the dialectics of contingent necessity and necessary contingency. From a Marxist perspective, historical change may well be presented as the uneven and recursive interaction between *class* strategies and *class* struggles in the co-production of *class* power, formation of *class* fractions and/or their transcendence.

In and through engaging with the outlined four critiques, this article does not only provide a historical materialist perspective of SRA *from within*, but also provides the necessary steps to bring the structure-agency debate back to earth. While there are others that have already done so, either at a more philosophical and abstract level of analysis from a Marxist (Ollman 2003) and Critical Realist perspectives (Bhaskar 1998; Sayer 2010), or after engaging with Gramsci's writings (Poulantzas 2014; Morton 1999; 2007; Overbeek 2000; Bieler and Morton 2001, Thomas 2009), this article aims to

provide a similar perspective by focusing exhaustively on Jessop's potentially emancipatory theory.

## **2. The Strategic-Relational-Approach**

SRA departs from the 'second round' theories in the structure-agency debate. Jessop criticises Giddens, Bhaskar and Archer for providing a flat and linear ontology in the structure-agency dialectic (Jessop 2005: 45-48; Archer 1998: 373-378). Fundamentally, a flat ontology that periodizes historical change on a linear basis, i.e. past-present-future, does not account for the complexity of social structures that places actors in different strategic positions and structure-conjunctions. According to Jessop, this inhibits an account of the thoroughly complex and relative ontology that, due to the multiple interactions of the structure-agency dialectic, makes history an uneven process of social change (also Bieler and Morton 2001: 7-10).

For Jessop, the 'key to resolving the impasse was to emphasise not just that structure and agency were dialectically related but also that each moment in this dialectical relation contained elements from its other' (2008: 44). SRA set itself the problem of developing a theory and methodology in the analysis of power as a thoroughly

dialectical relation, i.e. the 'arts of the possible' in particular spatio-temporal matrixes (Jessop 2016: 91-93). SRA relies upon two crucial ontological presuppositions that make history 'multiply tendential'. First, the fact that social actors' behaviour cannot be predicted from the knowledge of the circumstances themselves: i.e. the possibility to act in a certain way shouldn't be identified with its realisation due to the contradictory nature of power relations that constantly place social actors in strategic dilemmas (2016: 91-92). Second, social structures are overdetermined by other contradictory structures due to their complex and incomplete nature, hence, social structures are partial and provisional (2001: 88-115; 2005: 52-53; 2008: 47; 2013: 6-11). From these two propositions, it follows that strategic interests must also be *relative* to a particular spatio-temporal framework rather than *absolute*, and analysed 'in terms of potential outcomes, in particular situations, for specific subjects who have internalised specific identities' (2016: 94-95). Agential possibilities are not amorphous but socially structured, and the transformative power of strategic action is not autonomous but structurally focused. Moreover, Jessop (1996: 123) argues that in order to develop a truly dialectical account of the structure-agency debate, one must not only acknowledge the contradictoriness of both categories, but also move on to consider how this affects their meaningfulness *separately* and *in unity*. Structure and agency can only exist through their relational interaction, as a complex system of



relations among relations; the (only?) methodological problem remaining is how to articulate them in a meaningful way (Jessop 1990: 10-11; 1996: 125-27; 2005: 53; 2016: 91-92).

According to SRA, power ultimately resides in the *capacity to reproduce, reform or transform* aspects of the historical context in which other *less powerful* groups and individuals are constrained and limited to advance their interests and strategies (Jessop 1996: 126-28; Hay 2002: 184-187). Yet, the dialectics between structure-agency have to be posited, a fortiori, in a definite spatiotemporal horizon that provides historical meaning to the strategic selectivity and the dimensions of strategic calculation and action. The relativity of the SRA comes to the fore because what is normally called social actors' structural power may become a complex and historically overdetermined process if contextualised differently, downplaying the strategic dimension of such particular actors (Jessop 2008: 38-44).

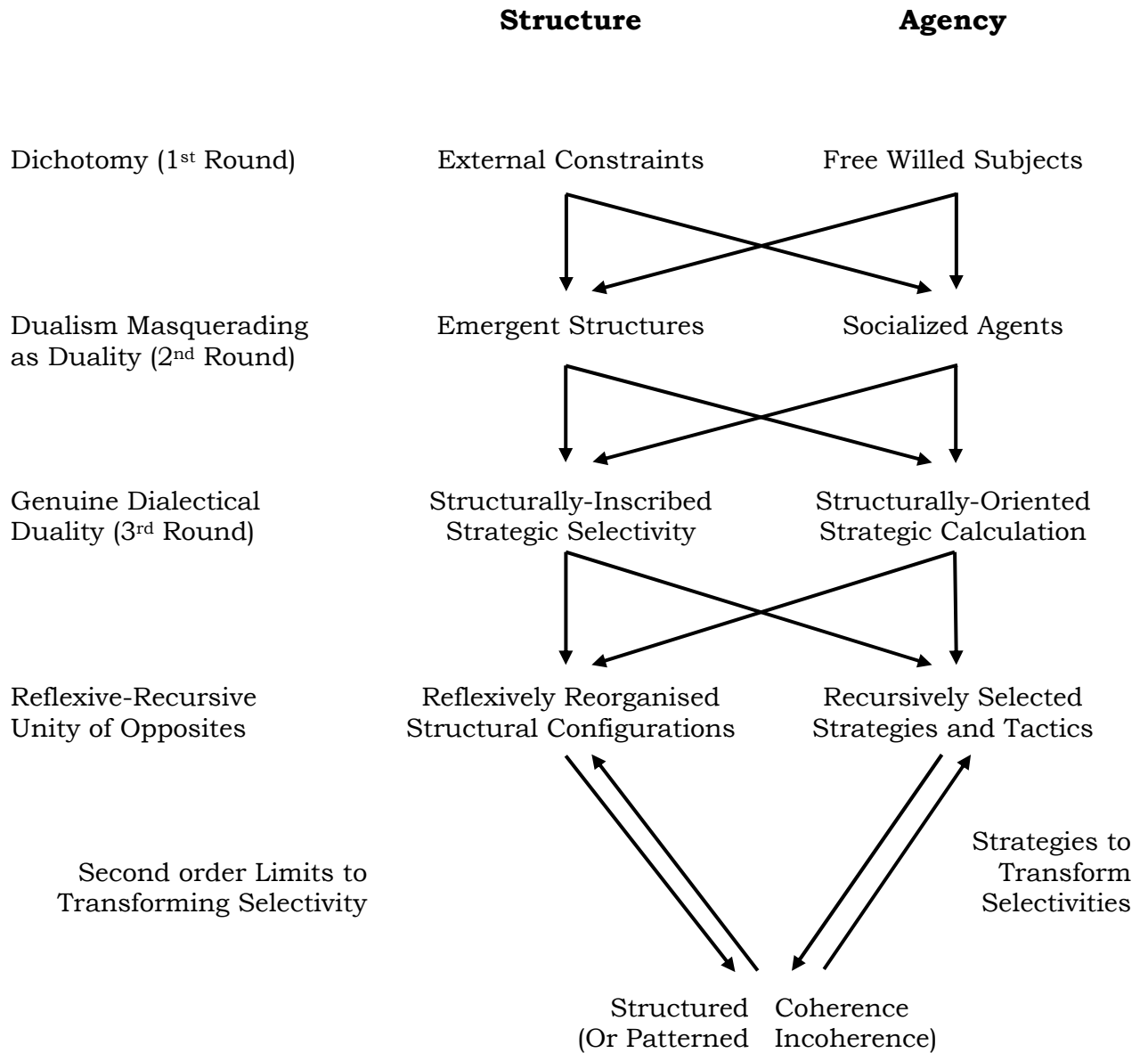


Figure 1. The Evolution Towards the Strategic-Relational-Approach in the Structure-Agency Debate.  
Jessop (2005:50).

Initially, SRA departed from a Gramscian historical materialist interpretation of the subjective and objective interests guiding strategic agency (Jessop 2008: 22; 31-33). Nevertheless, it distanced itself from a Marxist ontology to leave SRA open for its implementation in other strategic-relational paradigms due to the complexity of social life (2008: 53-54; 226; also 2002: 22-36). At a very abstract level, objective interests can only be *attributed to* a specific subjectivity holding a specific location in a given structure-conjuncture. A particular subject or collective, however, can always miscalculate any objective interests since the latter 'are defined in terms of the conditions actually necessary for its reproduction [and/or transformation] rather than the subject's own views on these conditions' (2008: 31-33). From here derives the importance of hermeneutics and the importance of how we contextualise the framework that determines which agent's interests are being (dis)advantaged, rather than providing an absolute judgment on any process (Jessop 2005: 52-53). However, and in spite the difficulties in articulating an accurate analysis of any particular structure-conjuncture, for Jessop, power ought not to be used as the explanatory mechanism driving historical change because any particular social relation is ontologically 'overdetermined' by other multiple relations due to the complex nature of society (cf. Althusser 2005[1969]: 99-100). More specifically:

Power is a complex, overdetermined phenomenon that is ill suited to explain social relations. [...] Insofar as power is not just a general term for the production of any and all effects within specific structural constraints, the specific effects of specific agents' exercise of power in specific circumstances constitutes an *explanandum* rather than an *explanans*. [...] The more detailed the specification of the context of a given action is, the less scope there is to attribute effects to the actions that occur in that context. Thus, when conjunctures are well specified, 'power' tends to become a residual category (Jessop 2016: 91).

In this way, the SRA basically argues that power has to be contextualised properly, rather than apprehended to explain the transformations of the context, so that we can better account for the *real causes* determining strategic action within a *given* structural framework. Jessop's trivialisation of the category of power, becoming the object of *explanandum* rather than of *explanans*, materialises in the implicit tendency to place greater emphasis on the notion of 'contingent necessity' in contraposition to that of 'necessary contingency'. For Jessop, the complex and multiply tendential nature of social structures that overdetermine strategic agency makes any particular

social action a contingent necessity. More precisely, this idea implies the ‘non-necessary interaction of different causal chains to produce a definite outcome whose own necessity originates only in and through the contingent coming together of these causal chains in a definite context’ (Jessop 1990: 11).<sup>2</sup> Hence, the transforming power of social action is simultaneously overdetermined by the *contingent* couple of various structures that make a specific action in a specific context *necessary*. More explicitly, Jessop assumes ‘that everything that happens in the real world must happen, that is, in some sense “necessary”. [...] It is the precise meaning of necessity, however, that is at stake in “contingent necessity”. For it need not, does not, and cannot mean that whatever happens in the real world is due to a *single* causal mechanism. Instead the concrete actualization of events results from the *interaction* of diverse causal tendencies and counter-tendencies’ (2008: 232; also 2016: 55; original emphasis). The task of the researcher is to find the contingent combination of *real* causes that makes a particular action necessary.

In this chicken or egg dilemma, Jessop’s particular articulation of the SRA implicitly places more ontological weight on the moment of agential necessity than on the moment of contingent structural reproduction or transformation, whilst others have

preferred to present the problem as insoluble (e.g. Bieler and Morton 2001:28). Further, Jessop's 'method of articulation' that insists on the epistemological relativism of social sciences leaves the methodological steps to approach concrete studies indeterminate (Jessop 1990: 10-11; 2008: 44-45) leaving the researcher free to use any amalgamation of theories for an 'appropriate' study of the historically concrete. The problematic of adopting one particular ontological entry-point in a complex reality is left unresolved, and it has only been problematized when Jessop, for example, brought semiotics into the study of capitalism (e.g. Sum and Jessop 2006a; 2006b; 2013); or in other words, when he had already adopted a particular (Gramscian) ontological standpoint in the analysis of the structure-agency dialectic. The political implications of such silence are discussed in the following section. Section 4 provides a *historical materialist theory of power* as a solution to the impasse.

### **3. A Historical Materialist Critique of the Strategic-Relational-Approach**

In spite of the alleged 'application' of SRA in the study of capitalist regulation, the state, political economic geography or Cultural Political Economy (Jessop 1990; 2002b; 2008; 2013; 2016; Sum and Jessop 2006a; 2013), the *accuracy* of such articulation has been questioned elsewhere (e.g. Hay 1994; Kelly 1999; also van Heur 2010 and

Staricco 2016; for recent critiques of the non-correspondence between SRA and the study of Cultural Political Economy); fundamentally, because Jessop does not define further intermediate steps to render the SRA operational for a historical analysis that moves from the abstract to the concrete and from the simple to the complex (Hay 1994: 331-332). This article argues that Jessop has not been able to provide a thoroughly strategic-relational study of particular structure-conjunctures because the SRA, as it has been presented in Section 2, is fundamentally unworkable. The problem resides fundamentally in two aspects that have direct repercussions on his particular understanding of power and historical change.

First, SRA tells us nothing about the structurally relative position that researchers have *within* the structure-agency dialectic. On the one hand, Jessop argues that the interests and agential power can be 'redefined' according to different structure-conjunctures (1996: 125-27; 2008:43). On the other hand, Jessop avoids problematizing why researchers may prefer to advance a specific structure-conjuncture in contrast to others despite the important consequences it may have in the attribution of *real* interests and power (*ibid.*). However, researchers cannot escape from ontologically given and historically concrete relations of power as they confront

the structure-agency dialectic from *within* and not from outside (Gramsci 1971: 347-351). The ontological unity between the structure and agency that SRA presupposes is not extended to the role of the researcher and the unavoidably structurally influenced nature of its research. In parallel, these actively produce knowledge within a historically given framework that provides meaning to historical structures and generates a critical ontology to enable their transcendence (Edgley 1998: 407). Underplaying the researcher's strategic role obscures the way in which SRA can be operationalized for any particular explanatory and, hence, normative purpose. A historicist method that stresses the importance of engaging with particular relations of power (Bieler and Morton 2001: 13-15; Morton 2007: 29-33; Rehmann 2013: 122-124) may well propose *class* as an ontologically meaningful category to understand relations of power *within* capitalism (e.g. Jessop 2001: 88-115; 2002: 30-36), thus the identity between subject and object is generated (see Section 4 below).

Second, since SRA presents itself as a 'general social ontology' for the structure-agency dialectic, it leaves the theorisation of power thoroughly underdetermined on an 'abstract-simple level [permitting its] resolution through *appropriately* detailed conjuncture analysis' (Jessop 2008: 44-47; 53; 1990: 11-13; emphasis added). In not



stating what the necessary steps are when moving from an abstract-simple to a concrete-complex ontology (Hay 1994: 352), SRA may provide a logically accurate ontology in which everything can be 'redefined', but at the price of remaining silent not only on *what* realities researchers may be confronted with but also on *how* they should approach such realities. According to Jessop, a Marxist entry-point may not be an adequate entry-point for historical analysis because: 'while it might be suitable for cases where the logic of capital accumulation is the dominant mode of societalization (*Vergesellschaftungsmodus*) and/or the theoretical object under investigation is heavily influenced by this logic, it may be less appropriate for cases where other modes of societalization are dominant and/ or have the strongest influence on the relevant theoretical object' (2008: 226; cf. also 2002: 22-36). Jessop concretises his argument on the complexity and the irredeemably historically specific form of social structures a bit further and states that 'not everything that is possible is compossible' (2008: 226-227), i.e. not all forms of societalisation are compatible. In so doing, Jessop finds himself in a contradictory position here because even though, according to SRA, power is thoroughly relative to the strategic field we are analysing, there are historical limitations that undermine a thorough relativisation of the structure-agency dialectic, forcing us to make particular theorisations of the historical concrete forms of power

due to, and precisely because of, their *material-real* basis (Poulantzas 2014: 35-38; 147-151).

Mark Rothko's 'silence is so accurate' helps us to understand that in order to achieve theoretical perfection, Jessop absolves himself from making any *practical* inaccuracy, even though it might be what we have been seeking from the very beginning. According to Andrew Sayer one of the main problems of contemplative views towards knowledge being:

[T]he assumption that the only function to knowledge and language is 'propositional' (to make propositions about the world) or 'referential'. What is overlooked in this view is that knowledge concerns not only 'what is the case' or 'knowing-that' but [also] 'know-how', that is knowing *how to do something* (2010: 9; original emphasis).

At a pure abstract-simple level of analysis, SRA cannot tell us either why particular transformative strategic agencies may exist, or why scholars may engage in infinite

discussions around the 'redefinition' of structure-conjunctures to understand and explain historical change. In that sense, SRA's dialectical relativity does not provide any rigour on how strategic research may be developed so that theory and praxis meet. Critical theory cannot exist without praxis, as critical theory strives to disentangle unexplored but existing forms of power, 'enlightening' the ground for their supersession (Gramsci 1971: 330-335; Edgley 1998: 403-407; Morton 1999: 4-5; Bieler and Morton 2001: 21; Sayer 2010: 28, 56). Interestingly, these two posited problems have more pervasive effects than just providing us with a theoretical framework that is practically inoperative; they have also permitted Jessop to implicitly advance structuralist accounts of the structure-agency dialectic that underplay the possibilities of transformative contingent action and, possibly, transformative strategic research.

	<b>Strategic Relational Approach</b>	<b>Historical Materialist Critique of the Strategic Relational Approach</b>	<b>Historical Materialist Theory of Power</b>
<b>Heterogeneous Reality</b>	Power is relative to specific structure-conjunctures	Researcher's position is not relative: located within a particular structure-conjuncture of relations of domination	Class as entry point although it acknowledges the existence of other historical relations of domination
<b>Method to approach reality</b>	Indeterminate. Structures have no meaning outside a context: thoroughly open 'method of articulation' that resorts to other theories for the study of particular structure-conjunctures	No method to understand and explain why the structure-agency dialectic may be a disruptive process. No explanation for why particular transformative strategic agencies exist	Philosophy of praxis: researcher as a potential organic intellectual that engages with different theories in particular structure-conjunctures to transcend class relations
<b>What power is</b>	Power as explanandum not explanans	Double-hermeneutic process in the definition of power renders any particular study potentially transformative. Power as a contested category	Class power as economic, political and ideological relations of domination that result from necessarily contingent strategic class struggles
<b>Historical Change</b>	Balance of power contextualised a posteriori, after recursive interaction within constraining structures: structural coherence, overdetermination & contingent necessity	Agency downplayed: implicit structuralist perspective that cannot problematize the emergence, interaction and dismissal of structures as a result of contingent and radical action. History as politics of contingent necessity and necessary contingency	Uneven and recursive interaction between class strategies and class struggles in the co-production of class power / class fractions and their transcendence

Table 1. From the Strategic-Relational-Approach to a Historical Materialist Theory of Power.

First, Jessop moves the category of power to a residual position in the equation, the *explanandum* rather than *explanans*. This implies that any contingent strategic action will always be thoroughly explained through an ‘appropriate’ theorisation of particular structures that render any action necessary (1996; 126; 2008: 43; see below). However, as it was pointed out above, this proposition obviates the double-hermeneutic role of the researcher in playing down social actors’ power which reciprocally undermines the potentiality of research to advance transformative strategies (Poulantzas 2014: 149). When researchers engage strategically in understanding and explaining historical change they will necessarily produce contingent discourses, a ‘noise’ that is necessary for living history, the ontological presupposition to strategic action that embodies the disruptive power in spite of constraining boundaries:

The oppressed, dominated, exploited, repressed, denied have an interest in knowledge [i.e. an explanatory critique] which their oppressors lack, in the straightforward sense that it facilitates the achievement of their wants and the satisfaction of their needs. And their oppressors, or more generally the oppressing agency, inasmuch as their (or its) interests are antagonistic to the

oppressed, possess an interest in the ignorance of the oppressed. [Human sciences] cannot be regarded as equally 'a potential instrument of domination' or of 'the expansion of the rational autonomy of action'. The human sciences are not neutral in their consequences in a non-neutral (unjust, asymmetrical) world. And it is just this which explains their liability to periodic or sustained attack by established and oppressive powers (Bhaskar 1998: 419).

To present power as a subordinate category in the analysis of historical change underplays the explanatory power of historical analysis and social actors' capacity to make their own history (Kelly 1999: 111-112). This inhibits the politics of attributing historical change to specific strategic actions. If we acknowledge the normative consequences of producing particular ontologies and discourses, we may well understand that power is a contested category. Something that Jessop does not openly when discussing the SRA.<sup>3</sup>

Second, SRA can be criticised for leveraging structures over agency when accounting for their recursive interaction, i.e. historical change, since the categories of 'structured coherence', 'overdetermination' and 'contingent necessity' have prevailed over those

of 'disruptive agency' or 'necessary contingency'. On the one hand, in and through providing more ontological importance to 'structured coherence' than to 'disruptive agency', Jessop (2005: 50-51; see Figure 1 above) prioritises the structural over the agential moment with an aprioristic two-tier stratification of social structures which confuse the dialectical relationship between structure and agency, undermining social actors' power to reproduce or transform their environment strategically. If we apply this to Jessop's own more concrete theorisations regarding capitalist regulation (Jessop 2002; 2013; Sum and Jessop 2006a; 2006b), the leadership role of hegemonic classes or class fractions in producing historic blocs becomes secondary, if not redundant, as their power to inscribe their class interests as strategic selectivities for the subordinate classes is overdetermined by and subordinated to, *sensu stricto*, the whole historical structural complex itself. Whether it is the agential or structural moment which contingently produce and reproduce any superstructure remains undetermined, thus jettisoning any meaningful theory of power that allows for strategic resistance. Within Jessop's SRA, *class* power and hegemony are instantiated *ex post*, never *in situ*.

On the other hand, if under Jessop's SRA labyrinthine formulation the use of any particular concept becomes more controversial is that of 'contingent necessity'. In

contrast to radical analyses that seek the *rupture within the structure* (e.g. Poulantzas 2014: 149), Jessop's conservatism materialises in his systematic trace of the 'regulatory' and overdetermining role of capitalist structures in framing agential power (Kelly 1999; Daly 2004; Charnock 2010; van Heur 2010). Whilst these critiques may not be completely justifiable (Hay 1994; Staricco 2016), it is true that for Jessop, and because the social actor cannot escape from its subordinate position in 'overdetermining' structures and from a partial and limited understanding of social reality, the reflexive action becomes the *necessary* outcome of the *contingent* articulation of given structures (1990: 10-11; 2008: 232-233). Thus, in the recursive interaction of the structure-agency dialectic, strategic action becomes secondary for the transformation of social structures. The SRA guides us confusingly to an ontological standpoint in which the *probable* (structural reproduction) becomes *contingent* to the complex interaction of contradictory structures (Jessop 2005: 50-53). Simultaneously, micro and macro power structures become immanent and undermine any *powerful* conceptualisation of emancipatory action because these are inherently overdetermined by multiple known and unknown structures. As for the category of power, the question of freedom becomes redundant since social action can always be thoroughly relativized in relation to the structures that overdetermine it, forgetting both the open nature of power relations that depend on the necessarily contingent



strategic response of social actors, and the emancipatory power of dialectical thinking which provides ample space for the critique of any particular structure and relation of power. It is precisely in concretely defining the *political* dimension of social relations that structures also become meaningful and contingent to social action, and not only a historical necessity, namely, seeking through the contingent *but* radical action to transform a necessarily conservative totality (Bellofiore 2014: 187-188). One wonders what historical relevance framing power has in and through a thoroughly relativist ontology that transcends its explanatory meaning. According to Gramsci, critical consciousness:

[P]rovides a basis for the subsequent development of an historical dialectical conception of the world, which understands movement and change, which appreciates the sum of effort and sacrifice which the present has cost the past and which the future is costing the present, and which conceives the contemporary world as a synthesis of the past, of all past generations, which projects itself into the future (Gramsci 1971: 34-35).

From this historical materialist critique of Jessop's implicit structuralist tendencies, historical change can then be finally reinterpreted within SRA as the politics of contingent necessity and necessary contingency, namely, that in defining the 'arts of the possible' within concrete structure-conjunctures, one will necessarily take a contingent side and that this will subsequently be subject to political critique.

#### **4. Towards a Historical Materialist Theory of Power**

In order to move forward, this section brings Jessop's contribution to the structure-agency debate back to its Marxist foundations so that SRA becomes operational for social emancipation and gets rid of its relativist and structuralist assumptions analysed in Section 3. Ironically, in producing a limited and partial ontology, we set the foundations for its own resolution since it theorises the necessity of articulating contingent strategies towards a historical dilemma in order to transcend it. But before doing so, we may first need to locate the self-critical positioning of the social actor/researcher within the structure-agency dialectic in Gramscian terms so that the categories of *class* power, *class* strategies, *class* struggles and *class* fractions do not appear *deus ex machina*. In this sense, the following theoretical framework may be located in the so called 'third round' approaches to the structure-agency debate.

The *politics* of adopting any 'method of articulation' points to the importance of ideological and discursive struggles that underpin the historical reflexive moment in which concrete (research) strategies are formulated. Locating ourselves critically within history, that is, by adopting a 'philosophy of praxis' that 'secularizes' thought to the absolute, suggests studying past history in the present in order to guide and formulate our actions and strategically construct a new history (Gramsci 1971: 427; 465). Thus, adopting a 'philosophy of praxis' that self-reflectively locates the researcher as a potential 'organic intellectual' allows us to understand:

How the present [structure-conjuncture] is a *criticism* of the past, besides [and because of] 'surpassing' it. But should the past be discarded for this reason? What should be discarded is that which the present 'intrinsically' criticised and that part of ourselves which corresponds to it. What does this mean? That we must have an exact consciousness of this real criticism and express it not only theoretically but *politically*. In other words, we must stick closer to the present, which we ourselves have helped create, while conscious of the past and its continuation (and revival) (Gramsci 1992 in Morton 1999:4; original emphasis).

A radical interpretation of SRA enables the researcher to potentially become an 'organic intellectual' with respect to (politically) determined complex structure-conjunctures. This encourages the researcher to understand and explain why past relations made any current social structure of domination a historical necessity, so that we can transcend it in and through a renewed strategy, i.e. when emancipatory ideas gain 'material force' and challenge the 'common sense' (Gramsci 1971: 9-11; Gill 1993: 21-26; Bieler and Morton 2001: 19; Morton 2007: 92; Bruff 2008: 55; Thomas 2009: 163).

Various historical materialist theories exist that, and by departing from Gramsci's 'philosophy of praxis', formulate class relations in a triadic way: as economic, political and ideological relations of *class* power (Shields et al. 2011). More specifically, a *historical materialist theory of power* that locates *class* at the centre of historical analysis seeks to study the failures and/or successes of historically contingent *class* strategies in their necessary co-production of *class* power and/or the transcendence of *class* relations. Put differently, *class* power can be dialectically theorised as the strategic field in and through which *class* strategies, which synthesise the past to

envision an alternative future, guide *class* struggles and, reciprocally, co-produce new forms of *class* power or transcend them. Hence, *class* power comprises a set of historical relations in and through which social actors are mutually constituted and become *class* (Ollman 2003: 25-26; 2015: 18-22), thus the identity between subject and object is theoretically formulated for practical purposes.

In a stylized way, and drawing upon 'Labour IPE' and Industrial Relations studies,<sup>4</sup> we can strategically locate workers' *class* struggles in contemporary capitalism around the following economic, political and ideological relations of power:

- I. Economic power, i.e. the position/function that workers hold within the capitalist relations of production which is determined by: (i) the *negotiation power within the labour market* (possession of abilities and capabilities, employment/unemployment rates within a particular geographical scale, capacity to reproduce their labour force without depending on wage labour, etc.); (ii) *negotiation power in the labour process or workplace* (autonomy or capabilities to control, organise, design or interrupt the labour process and the production of commodities); (iii)

- consumption power* (capacity to boycott or interrupt commodity sales and/or the realisation of the economic value produced in a given economy);
- II. Political power, i.e. the position/function and representation that workers have within the juridical-legal and executive system which exclusively belongs to the 'political society' or the 'capitalist state': (i) *power to legislate* or promote a series of laws around fiscal, monetary, labour market or collective bargaining processes (e.g. capacity to implement laws or fiscal policies that improve the economic and social conditions of the population; or reforming the legal structure of collective bargaining in order to promote more decentralised class relations in the labour market); (ii) *collective bargaining power* within bipartite or tripartite structures (e.g. capacity to negotiate effective and economically benefiting collective agreements);
- III. Ideological power, i.e. the position/function that workers hold in the production, articulation, organisation and projection of a set of class strategies/discourses that guide not only workers but multiple social actors in the civil society: (i) *power to produce a persuasive class identity-consciousness* that bestows them with a set of mental scheme/discourses that give sense to social reality and guides them in their individual/collective action; (ii) *power to associate and organise* with other

workers under an identity-consciousness that may be articulated in formal or informal institutions, e.g. a union or political party; (iii) *infrastructural power* that provides workers with the necessary material-financial resources to realise their interests; (iv) *cognitive power* as the capabilities of learning, reflecting and framing the social problems effectively, at the same time that they make use of their resources intelligently.

Relations Determining Workers' Class Power		
Economic	Political	Ideological
i. Labour Market ii. Labour Process iii. Consumption	i. Legislative & Executive ii. Collective Bargaining	i. Identity & Consciousness ii. Associative & Organisational iii. Infrastructure iv. Cognitive V. Coalitions

Table 2. Framing the structure-agency dialectic from workers' class perspective.

Capitalist history can be presented as the *uneven* interaction between *class* strategies and *class* struggles in the co-production of *class* power in capitalism or its

transcendence (see Figure 2 below). In emphasising the complexity of capitalist ontology, the theory opens the space for analysing the production of *class* power as fractional and uneven instead of homogeneous and linear. Hence, (working) *class* fractions emerge as historically concrete social groups who crystalize particular forms of (workers') *class* power, and which necessarily result from the contingent articulation of (workers') *class* strategies and *class* struggles against other classes (i.e. capitalists) and/or other *class* fractions (i.e. other workers). The explanatory power in studying the formation, transformation or transcendence of *class* fractions resides on the level of abstraction in which we determine the structure-agency dialectic. In other words, the study of *class* fractions is dependent on how we define specific structure-conjunctures that enable or disable particular strategies and struggles in the exercise and transformation of *class* power. In contrast to, for example, van der Pijl (1998: 49-57) who focuses on the economic foundations for the formation of capitalist class fractions, a complex theory on the formation of *class* fractions allows us to create a multi-layered ontology of *class* fractions around economic, political and ideological relations (also Jessop 1990: 203-205). Nevertheless, the 'relative autonomy' that *class* fractions hold when realising their *class* strategies can be confronted with their necessary co-constitution as *class* power within an ampler dynamic totality. What it might be understood as a *class* fraction exercising its power within a specific structure-



conjuncture, it may also be subsumed within an ampler historical *class* due to the overdetermination of uncontrolled/unforeseen structural processes. Hence, the recursive problem of the politics of ‘contingent necessity’ and ‘necessary contingency’ in explaining uneven capitalist change (see also below).

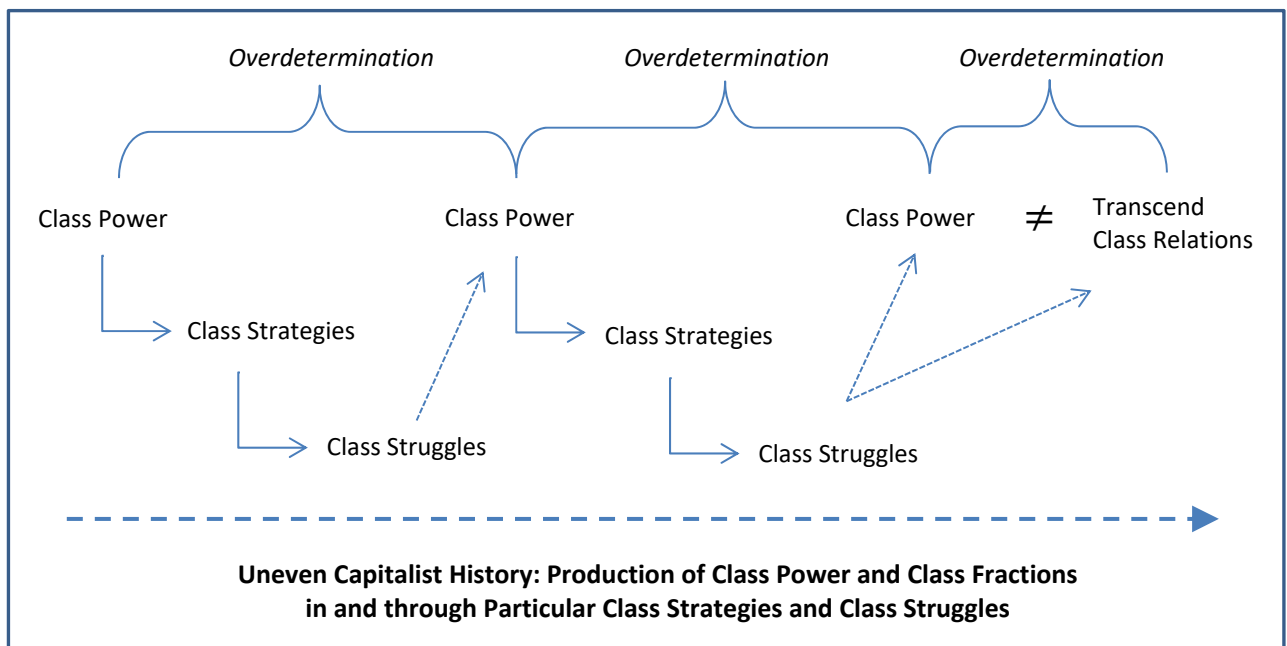


Figure 2. A Historical Materialist Theory of Social Change.

Jessop (1990; 2001; 2013; also Hall 1996; Overbeek 2000) reminds us that when studying capitalist regulation, any *class* strategy will be contradictory in itself, as it will

necessarily respond to some partial interests within a historical totality, hence, the importance of defining historically meaningful contexts when studying the formation of *class* fractions and their hegemonic or disruptive potentiality. Historically specific relations of *class* power, e.g. workplace capital-labour collective bargaining dynamics, are always overdetermined by more historically complex *class* relations, e.g. the constitution of Global Value Chains, national labour regulations or the fluctuations of financial capitalism, and it is due to concrete analyses to produce for more complete accounts on the underlying dynamics governing historical change. Further, a complex reality of *class* relations is also overdetermined by other social relations of domination, e.g. gender, race, culture, religion, ecology, etc.

These two propositions point us to the complex and overlapping ontology of the subaltern (Gramsci 1971: 52-53; Green 2002: 9-10), from which we can derive two other important theoretical consequences. First, the empowerment of some *class* fractions in contemporary capitalism does not eliminate their contradictory ontology, but only tells us about possible future transformations of their *class* power which may disempower and subordinate them with respect to other *class* fractions in global capitalism further. Within capitalism, what it may be perceived as a victory somewhere

it may be a defeat elsewhere; hence, the uneven displacement of contradictions in time and space when *class* struggles do not transcend capitalist relations (Jessop 2006). Second, the transcendence of *class* relations does not necessarily eliminate other ontologically relevant relations of power. More directly, the articulation of *class* interests under particular political or civic organisations, e.g. political parties or trade unions, may not tell us anything about how consensual or democratic these institutions are. Focusing on the transcendence of particular relations of power may produce far more oppressive structures, hence, the necessity to discern other interdependent relations of power when engaging with *class* struggle. What can be taken as positive from a concrete problematisation of the structure-agency dialectic in *class* terms is the thoroughly political nature of the debate: what relations of domination exist and how we can transcend them. The structure-agency dialectic can be posited as the debate where the realms of the possible and impossible are framed; the framework in and through which *real* relations of power are presented and contested. The process in which the historically contingent (social emancipation) becomes an absolute necessity (the struggle of the subaltern).

Finally, a *historical materialist theory of power* may dialectically oppose Jessop's emphasis on the 'contingent necessity' and suggests an understanding and explanation of historical change as the necessity of the improbable: social emancipation. This results from the 'multiply tendential' nature of *class* structures and the very transformative power of *class* strategies informing *class* struggles. The latter resorts more to the notion of 'necessary contingency' and not to contingent necessity, as it *actively* seeks not to trace the contingent overdetermination of structures that render some specific agency necessary, but to the contingent dismissal of historical structures of domination in and through concrete necessary action. Put simply, the notion of 'necessary contingency' stresses the contingent moment of struggle in structures that necessarily produce and reproduce domination, historical structures that are contradictory and incomplete in their constitution and which render the struggle for their transformation a historically contingent, albeit necessary, act. Hence, the dialectics between the contingent necessity and necessary contingency constitute the *political* process in which the structure-agency dialectic is historically framed and challenged; the political process that problematizes what can and/or must be transformed in a definite spatio-temporal framework without resorting to absolutist or teleological argumentations. Jessop's SRA becomes operational and meaningful, i.e. political, as it is inescapably entrenched into a critical analysis of the *real-material*

ontology of power. However, a class-based solution to Jessop's silence has required an active and partial engagement with reality *from below*. Whether one wants to accept such a challenge is another question.

Overall, the approach presented in this section can be located *within* Jessop's contribution to the 'third round' in the structure-agency dialectic because it posits strategic actors in a complex dialectical reality but, and crucially, it goes *beyond* the SRA in overcoming its relativistic and structuralist tendencies (Section 3). In so doing, Jessop's SRA becomes operational and emancipatory, explicitly politicising the relations in and through which power unfolds whilst the social actor acknowledges its structurally inscribed ontological position. Furthermore, it overcomes Jessop's distinction of power between the *explanandum* and the *explanans*, since *class* power (i.e. the structure) becomes meaningful in and through the strategic formulation of *class* struggles (i.e. agency). Hence, the explanatory and emancipatory powers of a theory inform strategic action (Sayer 2010: 56, 73). A *historical materialist theory of power* becomes a research project seeking to build common ground for the dispossessed so that a historical subordinate collective can challenge the economic,

political and ideological relations that undermine the realisation of politically attributed objective interests (McNally 2015: 140-141).

## 5. Conclusion

This article has provided a critical approach to the structure-agency dialectic from *within* SRA and *beyond*. After succinctly presenting SRA in Section 2, Section 3 has argued that while remaining silent on how a thoroughly relative ontology can be understood and explained, Jessop's SRA has implicitly advanced a structuralist and conservative ontology that inhibits its emancipatory power. Crucially, the political and normative consequences of theorising and studying particular structure-conjunctures have been underplayed. Arbitrarily, Jessop has reduced the category of power to the *explanandum* and provided more importance to 'contingent necessity' in historical change. A historical materialist standpoint problematizes the structurally informed role that social researchers play in defining what is possible or not in a historical framework, presenting them as potential 'organic intellectuals' rather than just mere passive observers. This brings to the fore what has been presented as the 'politics of power': the ideological struggle between different analyses that give more importance to the processes of either 'necessary contingency' or 'contingent necessity' when

explaining historical change. Bearing those limitations in mind, the article has advanced a *historical materialist theory of power* that puts workers' structural position in capitalism, i.e. *class*, at the centre of contemporary historical analysis. A systemic framework that disentangles the different forms in which workers' *class* power unfolds has been presented. This, allows us to provide an uneven dialectical account on the co-production of *class* power and formation of *class* fractions in and through particular *class* strategies and *class* struggles in specific structure-conjunctures. It has also been argued that adopting a politically determined ontology may downplay other contemporary forms of social domination. Being aware of the limitations of theory becomes paramount. The 'politics of power', however, helps us to understand that it is indispensable to accept that we are necessarily 'noisy' when advancing contingent forms of progressive thinking and living.

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## Notes

1. Differently, neo-Gramscians have departed from Robert Cox's (1987) and Jeffrey Harrod's (1987) materialist ontology to develop a nuanced top-down analysis of world order (e.g. Bieler and Morton 2001; Oberveek 2000) or the unprotected workforce (Davies and Ryner 2006).
2. See Jessop (2005: 42-43) and Sayer (2010: 73-74) for a more detailed definition of both concepts.
3. It is only tangentially that Jessop addresses the necessarily contingent nature of strategic choice, without problematizing the political repercussions of framing (choosing) the structure-agency debate in a specific form. For example, in Sum and Jessop (2013: 41) 'institutions [i.e. social structures] need to be interpreted and can be renegotiated, institutions do not fully determine action but nor are they consistent with any and all actions whatsoever—they are sites of the necessarily contingent and the contingently necessary'. The structure-agency debate is framed in relativistic and abstract terms and does not address the political nature of the structure-agency debate (also Jessop 2005: 53; 2008: 233).
4. See Kelly (2011) and Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman (2013) for a review of the literature on trade union power. Such an ontological entry-point, however, reifies trade unions as the historically relevant object of analysis in capitalism instead of departing from *class*. For Marxist and Gramscian perspectives this posits an important problem since it downplays the contradictory nature of unions within capitalism (cf. Hyman 1975; 1989). Differently, Harrod (1997; 2002) and Harrod and O'Brien (2002) are pioneering in bridging IPE and Industrial Relations literatures, hinting towards an 'IPE of labour' in analysing contemporary capitalist societies. However, they depart from *work* and/or *organised workers* which diffuses the historical relevance of *class* in the determination of capitalist relations.

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