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Agency: The Internal Split of Structure

Yong Wang

In this article I first examine the ways in which the dual terms of structure and agency are used in sociological theories. Then, relying on Lacan’s notions of split-subject, the formula of sexuation, and forms of discourses, and Laclau’s theory of ideological hegemony, I argue that agency in most current sociological formulations is but a posited other of the structure that dissolves if examined closely; it is similar to the Lacanian fantasric object. To resolve the fundamental paradoxes in structure-agency theories, I reformulate structures as paradoxical, incomplete, and contingent symbolic formations that are always partial and unstable due to their inclusion and exclusion operations. Consequently, social transformational agency consists in the structural inconsistencies that open structural gaps available to social actors. As a result, agency can be recognized in two moments conceived as two symbolic gestures. From this perspective, agency as such is always a possibility qua potential and its efficacy is always retroactively recognized-actualized from within a new social structure or symbolic order.

KEY WORDS: actor; agency; structure; structure-agency theories.

INTRODUCTION

The abundant literature on structure-agency theories not only attests to its indisputable influence but also bears witness to the rising discontents about the existing formulation of the core concepts: structure and agency. As Meyer and Jepperson indicate, “there is more abstract metatheory about ‘actors’ and their ‘agency’ than substantive arguments about the topic” (2000:101). Archer’s discussion on the upward, downward, and central conflations may be the most systematic critique of the dominant theoretical strategies with regard to structure and agency (Archer, 2000, 2003). Worth quoting here are her comments on what she calls “amalgam
of practices,” which, according to Archer, “oscillates wildly between voluntarism and determinism, without being able to specify the conditions under which agents have greater degrees of freedom or, conversely, work under a considerable stringency of constraints” (Archer, 2000:6). Working within the paradigm of systems theory and apparently having no intention to salvage the concept of agency, Fuchs probably provides the strongest critique of Archer’s work. He argues that agency is “a residual, consisting of that proportion of variance unaccounted for by social structure. Agency is not the cause, but the effect, of failures at prediction” (Fuchs, 2001:34). Although I find Fuchs’s above quoted argument very illuminating and agree with him with little reservation,3 I nevertheless note that failures at prediction or explanation ought not to be the reason to dismiss the concept of agency. Therefore, in this article I examine the dual concepts of structure and agency following two intellectual traditions: Lacan’s formulation of the split-subject and Laclau’s theory on ideological hegemony, which, respectively, lend new conceptual tools to reformulate, on one hand, the possibility of agency as residing outside formations of structure; and on the other, structures as hegemonic constructions that always contain its beyond or exclusion, which renders agency possible.

Before approaching the specifics of structure and agency, a big picture is to be drawn: a picture that addresses the fundamental paradoxes of structure and agency. One effective way to draw this picture is to engage the limits of the conceptual and relational domains of structure and agency, the points that serve as gestures of the exclusion of a “beyond.” Along this line, Pickering’s (1993, 2000) conception of material agency, for example, points to the beyond of a human-centered conception of agency, one that is central to structuration theory and theories of social practice.

Although Pickering’s subjectivizing gesture in construing the unknown material world as a form of “resistance” is itself problematic (see, e.g., Breslau, 2000; Jones, 1996), it nonetheless raises an important question: Do we humans live in a world of our own will? If not, how do we account for the material world that is always already part of our reality? What is paradoxical in Pickering’s strategy is that, in a purely symbolic (human) gesture, he tries to erase the difference between human and nonhuman agency. If Pickering’s strategy is to directly attribute agency to the (unknown) material world, Breslau (one of Pickering’s strongest critics),

3 Having originated from two different intellectual traditions, Lacanian perspective and systems theory established by Niklas Luhmann share some fundamental features, which cannot be addressed in this article. It suffices to say here that the shared features may very well find their origin in their similar starting points: signifier as possibility of knowledge and distinctions as observation.
opts for structure qua actor-network to address the issue of nonhuman agency. According to Breslau, not only the actor-network is "thoroughly relational" (Breslau, 2000:300), the human and nonhuman agencies are both relationally constituted as well. The price to be paid for a thoroughly relational ontological status of the actor-network is the determination of the network as such. What act, then, determines the actor-network as such, namely, its symbolic (over)determination, its double? The formation of an existing actor-network entails a determination of the network as a gesture of exclusion through positing a beyond that is nonrelational. For instance, a network of CEOs and high-level managers of large corporations would only function if it excludes, for instance, low-level employees. Of course, this is not to deny that inside the network agency/power is relationally constituted. Hence, the paradox is that the determination of a relational network is not relational.

On the side of structure, similar paradoxes are not far away. Take for example the central thesis of structuration theory that structure both enables and constrains (the actor in her action) (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:1003; Giddens, 1984:169; Hays, 1994:61). Questions soon arise: How did Nazi concentration camps enable the Jews, or the Soviet gulags enable millions of dissidents and innocent citizens? It should be noted emphatically here that concentration camps and their variations are precisely power structures that are devised to deprive human beings of their agency. This seemingly extreme case points to a fundamental paradox in structure-agency theories: when the only function of structure is to erase the last trace of agency. Even if one resorts to "less extreme" cases, one would find similar problems. Take another example: the racist segregationist system of the U.S. South. The segregation system never simply constrained and enabled people; it enabled one group but constrained another. Therefore, structure is not a neutral force that constrains and enables an abstract actor or actors. The argument that structures constrain and enable obfuscates the fundamental paradox in the relation between structure and agency, the fundamental antagonism resulting from structural formations conditioned by exclusion.

**THE ENTANGLEMENT OF STRUCTURE AND AGENCY**

In this section I try to untangle the intricate knots of structure and agency with a focus on the presupposed constraints and enablements that are considered the fundamental functions of structure. In recent literature on theories of structure-agency, one can hardly find the postulate that structure is merely a set of constraints or limits. In fact, as early as in
1986, Swidler’s (1986) metaphor of the cultural “toolkit” had already unequivocally suggested the enabling capacity of culture qua structure. Of course, the problem with this image is the presupposed actor who is already able to select and apply cultural tools to varied situations. One naïve but nonetheless necessary question can be posed here: Is the ability to use the tools innate to the actor? If not, one is compelled to ask: Are such abilities already some structural effects?4

Unfortunately, ensuing efforts in theoretical and empirical works on structure-agency have not departed from this posited capability qua agency as a fundamental trait in the actor. For instance, despite his many trenchant insights on structure-agency, Sewell surprisingly makes the point that “a capacity for agency—for desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively—is inherent in all humans.... [T]hat humans are born with only a highly generalized capacity for agency, analogous to their capacity to use language.... But a capacity for agency is as much a given for humans as the capacity for respiration” (Sewell, 1992:20) In light of Žižek’s discussion on the Hegelian moments of possibility and actuality, which states that actuality is the conjunction of possibility qua potentiality and some externally (imposed) forces (Žižek, 1993:141–142), one can immediately recognize that in Sewell’s proposition half the set is missing. To further illustrate this point, I would like to use Žižek’s example on the correlation between proletariat revolution and the working class (Žižek, 1993:142) In a Marxist framework, the working class is potentially capable of revolution. The only problem is that revolution would not automatically happen when all the conditions, such as extreme exploitation and stark poverty, are mature. (There may be riots.) That is to say, the revolutionary potential of the proletariat cannot be actualized without an external act that recognizes this potential and forces the proletariat to act as a revolutionary subject. One necessary component imposed externally onto the working class qua revolutionary potential is the Party, which would transform the working class into a revolutionary subject, from in-itself to for-itself. Along the same line of argument, humans’ capability of using language qua actuality is a two-sided coin: on one side is some innate capacity for language use; and on the other the externally imposed social cultural institutions that socialize humans qua potentiality into actual language users. What is crucial with regard to this argument is the asymmetry between potentiality and actuality: potentiality can be recognized only in its actuality but not vice versa. We should even push this argument one step further: the assertion that we all have capacity for agency is nothing but a gesture to create an illusion of a primordially

4 A “yes” answer to the question registers nothing but the failure of explanation. In other words, if the ability to employ the cultural toolkit were to be understood as a certain innate capacity, what is effectively posited is an inaccessible and impenetrable Thing.
leveled ground that never materializes in its actuality; what really exists, namely, what is actualized, are our unequal capacities that result from social structures of unequal social, economic, political, and cultural means. Here, I would like to point out that Sewell’s assertion for the existence of such capacity has already departed from his arguably most important point in the article discussed here, namely: “Agency is implied by the existence of structure” (Sewell, 1992:20).

Another notable theorizing effort on structure-agency is Hays’s four ways of understanding the notion of agency. Rejecting the structural deterministic thesis that agents are “carriers or instruments of social structures” (Hays, 1994:62) and the voluntaristic conception of agency, Hays offers two alternatives.

Second, one can say that people make structures at the same times as structures make people: through everyday practices, the choices made by agents serve to create and recreate structures continuously. Third, one can argue that people are agents insofar as they make choices that have significant transformational consequences in terms of the nature of social structure themselves. (Hays, 1994:62)

The first alternative, the second form of agency above, which Hays calls structurally reproductive agency, creates more problems than solutions. First, if we accept Hays’s explication that structures are reproduced “only through the interactional activities of individuals” (1994:62), can we also say that structures have always already taken into account people’s interactional activities as their very mechanism for reproduction? The problem with this first alternative is its fundamental ambiguity: either interactions imply certain agency on the interactants’ side or interactions are always already structural processes and effects. The question is: Where does one locate agency? If we opt for the former, we claim an innate capacity in the interactant. If one locates agency on structure’s side, one already loses the human-centered notion of agency. If the notion is to be of any explanatory power, however, the one gesture to be absolutely avoided is precisely the obfuscating argument that agency has to be situated in structural contexts. Following Fuchs’s argument that the possibility of observing agency is often a matter of scale (Fuchs, 2001:25–26); namely, as one examines actions or interactions at the (alleged) micro level, one is able to attribute agency to the actor as a person with intentions, wants, beliefs, and so forth. However, if we take Fuchs’s observational strategy one step further to examine the forms of intention, wants, and beliefs, one would find agency dissolving again into the social structural: intentions, wants, beliefs, roles, and identities are already either components or effects of the social symbolic order. It is in this sense that socially reproductive agency always eludes our grasp: at the very
moment we think we have a good hold of it we realize that what is in our hands is nothing but some elements of social structures.

Second, Hays recognizes that with regard to this form of agency, choices made by agents are ones “among an available set of structurally provided alternatives” (1994:63). If this is true, does the empty gesture of making a choice regulated by structures suggest any agency in the choice maker? In a contemporary case, we have President Bush’s offer of choice regarding the War on Terror: you are either with us or against us. Either way, one remains in a social reality precisely structured by the two choices. Such “actions” of choosing are empty because the choices are forced, given only to sustain the appearance of choice. Perhaps the case of Willis’s (1977) lads, as discussed by Hays (1994:163), is more illuminating with regard to structurally reproductive agency, but in a much different sense. Willis’s lads are a group of working-class schoolboys who refuse to conform to disciplinary rules and academic norms in school. Their defiance against the bourgeois ideology of achievement, not surprisingly, lands them in the working class. Is this not a perfect example that structures have already taken into account their own deviation, which is already a structural choice? One is tempted to argue that the capitalist class structure needs some people, to use Merton’s (1957) words, who reject cultural goals so that an under or working class is reproduced. The defiant gestures of Willis’s lads’ to distance themselves from the ideology of achievement sustain the very system they seemingly reject. To the extent that Willis’s lads are not aware of the fact that their defiance is the very cause of their reproduction as members of the working class, this case shows perfectly one form of ideology characterized by Žižek (1991)—“They know not what they do.” A more complex form of ideology that functions to sustain social structure of post-totalitarian system, according to Žižek, is “They know, but nevertheless.....” (Žižek, 1991:241–245). An exemplary case of the second form is Pavel’s proverbial greengrocer in pre-1989 Prague, who, though indifferent to the totalitarian system, complains in private about the corruption and inefficiency of the bureaucracy, nonetheless faithfully performs his duty: hanging out signs saying “Long Live Socialism” on state holidays (Žižek, 2001:90). How are we to address the issue of agency in this form? The crucial point not to be missed here is that the power structure already takes into account such complaints, the cynical distance the subject carefully maintains to resist the overwhelming sense of guilt. As long as the subject performs his or her duty, the system has nothing to worry about.5 It is in this sense that I would argue that in

5 A perfect example is doubtlessly contemporary Chinese society where a totalitarian system is sustained because everyone carefully calculates what one says in public while at the same time tries to benefit from the many “choices” available in the economic domain.
cases of Willis's lads and the "greengrocer" in post-totalitarian societies, agency has to be (re)located in structure, not in the actor, because the reproduction of structures effectively relies on the actor's illusion of choices in forms of defiance and distancing.

Despite the above critique, one of Hays's important contributions to structure-agency theory is her distinction between socially reproductive and socially transformational agencies (Hays, 1994). Hays’s second alternative, namely, her third form of agency, or socially transformational agency, captures the thrust of the notion of agency as something at least not completely on the side of structure. That said, some crucial questions remain unanswered. First, how is the significance of transformational consequences recognized? Second, correlative to the first question, how is the "nature of social structures themselves" (Hays, 1994:62) determined? What I try to suggest here is that measuring the significance of transformational consequences always entails a social symbolic order within which the natures of the social structure to be transformed and the new social structure are defined. Furthermore, what about failed endeavors to change certain social order? Do those actors who participate in failed attempts have agency? I will return to these questions in a later section. It suffices to say here that to answer these questions, the notion of structure itself needs to be reformulated. One of the socially transformational agent’s main tasks is to (re)define or (re)frame the existing social structure and the new social structure the agent strives for. The theorist, as a second-order observer, to borrow a term from the systems theorist, has to examine the social symbolic order within which the subject of transformation is actualized and agency is recognized.

**AGENCY: THE INTERNAL SPLIT OF STRUCTURE**

If structural constraints and enablements inevitably point to the efficacy of structure at least in the case of socially reproductive agency, one is tempted to perform a pseudo-mathematical operation: subtraction. The question then is: When one takes away structural constraints and enablements, what is left of the actor or agent? The answer is not as obvious as it might appear. In fact, one can reasonably argue that this is the very moment from which social theorists move apart from one another. For instance, Giddens has to assert the duality of structure and to subsume both structure and agency under the notion of structuration to heal the cut that creates the dual terms. Archer, who obviously is against such "central conflation," nonetheless constructs a narrative trying to unify structure and agency in temporality, which would allow what she calls
analytical dualism. In Archer's scheme, agency only returns as the present "I" "as a source of creativity and innovation" (Archer, 2003:73). Emirbayer and Mische's direct treatment of "What is agency?" is in a sense not fundamentally different from Archer's.6 The real problem is not that after taking away structural constraints and enablements, nothing is left. There is indeed something left: the leftover. The real task is how to formulate this leftover. From the Lacanian perspective, this leftover is both an effect produced by the very notion of structure and the limits that formations of structures stumble upon and fail. In the Lacanian framework, this leftover is called objet petit a—the small object of a. The being of this object of a can be located in the Imaginary, which is the product of signification; or in the Real, indicating the failure of symbolic integration.

The Lacanian universe has three registers: the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. The Lacanian real, according to Žižek (1989:162), has two sides: "the brute and pre-symbolic reality which always returns to its place," and the (presupposed) cause of a series of structural effects. In other words, the Lacanian real is a paradox. Žižek most clearly renders the two paradoxical sides of the real: "[T]he real designates a substantial hard kernel that precedes and resists symbolization and, simultaneously, it designates the left-over, which is posited or 'produced' by symbolization itself" (Žižek, 1993:36). The paradox is, put somewhat simplistically, that the real is a remainder and a surplus at the same time. Figure 1, which is also Lacan’s formulation of the master’s discourse (Lacan, 2007:29–32), may further explicate the paradox.

In Fig. 1, the symbolic is presented as a chain of signifiers: S₁—S₂. S₁ stands for the master or master signifier that totalizes the field of knowledge, S₂ is a set of signifiers that only achieve stable meanings through S₁. A convenient exemplary case is Giddens's notion of structure as rules and resources. Here, the signifier “structure” functions precisely as the master signifier that integrates and regulates the infinite interplay of rules and resources. If one stays at the upper level of the figure, one only sees a purely symbolic field, what one would call the (social) reality. What is hidden underneath is the Lacanian subject that is the very split between master’s signifier, a dominant social identity forced on a person, for instance, and the leftover or surplus of her/his identification. This leftover surplus is what Lacan calls the objet petit a, or the small object of a. Such a peculiar name indicates that this object cannot be recognized in any positivity. Instead, it is an object sustained only through the split-subject’s

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6 Here, we witness two strategies to maintain discursive consistency: Giddens's atemporal duality of structure and agency that eventually leads to temporal process of structuration; and Archer's and, arguably, Emirbayer and Mische's narratives of a temporal space proposed to resolve the paradox in the atemporal presuppositions.
fantasy. To further illustrate the notions of the split-subject and the object of a, let us do one little exercise: making a list of all social identities, roles, statuses, and relations that one thinks may define oneself. Our feeling is that no matter how long this list stretches, there is always something left to be enumerated. In other words, I am always more than my symbolic identities, roles, and so forth, and there is some hard kernel in me that always resists symbolization. This hard kernel is the small object of a. The Lacanian subject is precisely the very split between one’s symbolic identification and the fantasmic object-remainder. Different from the notion of subject conceived as autonomous and the deconstructionist’s reduction of the subject to structural subjective positions, the Lacanian subject is a gap between the symbolic and a fantasmic object. Žižek further warns us that the object-remainder is not to be understood as a positive Thing; it is an effect of our being involved in a symbolic order. This is why it is often perceived as already lost. To further explicate this notion of split subject or, more accurately, the split as the subject, let us think of the notion of “closet.” From the viewpoint of the normative heterosexual social order, the signifier of closet signifies its very limit, a void that serves as the beyond of the social order. For those gay men and lesbians who remain in the closet and at the same time live “normal” lives regulated by the normative heterosexual order, this void is precisely the split, the gap one occupies, the place from which one could claim: I am more than what you (the normative social symbolic order) say I am. Only when such void or the beyond in relation to a certain social order is able to not only claim its presence but also signifying such presence as a kind of universal, can a new social order emerge.

Purely structural explanations, which exclude the notion of subject or include the notion of subject as a sense of self correlative to social identities, and roles, remain on the upper level of the Lacanian master’s discourse. They have to be compensated by bringing in a Thing that conceals the lack in formations of structures. This fantasmic Thing is called agency. This is how the Lacanian perspective leads to an argument similar to that of systems theorists such as Fuchs (2001). Different from the systems theorists, however, the Lacanians do not conceive agency as merely an

Fig. 1. Lacan’s master’s discourse.
indicator of the failure of a certain system’s observation. Instead, the split-subject renders it possible to conceive of agency in a different manner. Along the dimension of the Lacanian real, agency in most current theories of structuration and practice returns as an object (of a) to the structural holes precisely at the moment of the failure of structural explanations. This point has been, if not explicitly stated, strongly suggested in some sociologists’ works. For instance, Ryan’s pithy analysis of the Nicaraguan Revolution (Ryan, 2000) introduces the revolutionary agents precisely at the points where the purely structural explanations fail. He perspicaciously recognizes the gap between structural conditions and the actual social events. In other words (if we can elaborate Ryan’s points further at the risk of reading too much into his argument), the gap between structural conditions and actual social-revolutionary events is abysmal. There is no enumerative strategy that would bridge this gap. Put simply, in examining social transformations, the list of structural conditions concerning the prestate would never sufficiently fill in the gap between the pre- and the poststate formed by the researcher. Formations of social, cultural, economic, and political conditions always stumble on the Real that is the beyond of such social realities posited as structural conditions. It is strictly in this sense that agency as real always returns to such structural gaps.

How, then, should we understand the thesis that agency is at the same time a fantasmic (imagined) Thing? One way to approach this issue is to get closer to what is supposed to be agency to the point where it dissolves. One of the best places to perform such an operation is the domain of social psychology. Take, for example, Tsushima and Burke’s (1999) work on levels of the parent identity and how the women they studied exhibit different types of (lack of) agency because of such internally stratified identities: principle-oriented mothers exhibit more agency than their counterparts, the program-oriented mothers. Closely examined, one cannot help wondering: Are not the principles, values, and norms already parts in an ideological symbolic order, and their internalization already products of socioeconomic circumstances—their own upbringings, for instance, which Tsushima and Burke recognize in their conclusion? Again, with a similar operation of subtraction performed on such agency—taking away the identities, principles, and values as effects of socialization, what is left is a void, the name of actor without any substance. Agency thus dissolves immediately once we take away the notion of parent as an identity (and its derivatives such as values and principles, or lack thereof) from parenting. Identification with an identity and acting accordingly (in accordance with the values, principles, rules, abilities, resources, etc.) only bears witness to the efficacy of the structure signified through the master
signifier, for example, the identity of parent and its supporting ideological system.

In this sense, the formation of structure and agency is homologous to Lacan’s formula of sexuation (Lacan, 1998:78–89). In this two-sided formula, two paradoxical logics are proposed. On the masculine side, the universal function (the phallic function) to which all Xs are submitted implies an exception: there is at least one X that is not submitted to the function. Without elaborating on Lacan’s notions of the masculine and feminine, we can simply point out that what Lacan aims at with regard to the masculine logic is that any universal function such as the concept of structure in sociological theories implies a constitutive exception, namely, the positing act that establishes such universal functions. In other words, we implicitly accept our structural explanations as universal, as the totality of the social, while ignoring the very positing of such totalities. It is in this sense that structure is on the side of the masculine. Agency, which is heterogeneous to structure, is on the feminine side, whose logic states that there is no X that is not submitted to the universal function, but that not all Xs are submitted to it. This seemingly paradoxical “formula” points precisely to the ways the notion of agency is treated in sociological theory: every conceivable form of agency is intricately intertwined with the notion of structure, nonetheless one cannot conclude that all agency is structural. Put it in psychoanalytical terms, agency is the symptom of structure: agency cannot achieve its identity with itself, and for structure to achieve its identity, it has to invent agency to conceal its own gaps (see Žižek, 1990:253 for an analogous discussion on man and woman).

If agency only achieves its identity through structure, then a direct treatment of agency would inevitably fall back onto some structural formation or tautological rendition such as Emirbayer and Mische’s triadic agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Take, for instance, Emirbayer and Mische’s definition of agency: the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive responses to the problems posed by changing historical situations (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:970). One question needs to be asked before anyone applies such a definition to research: Are “structural environments” conceivable without actors? If the answer is yes, then the actors are dispensable or replaceable, and structures can effectively reproduce themselves. There is no reason why one should attribute agency to the actors instead of the structure. If the answer is no, then the actors are already part of the structural environments. The challenge is how to distinguish agency from its structural environment. Soon, one will find agency to be nothing but an
relational and temporal position with an attributed capacity, a purely structural effect.

As soon as one tries to conceive agency as independent from any structural or symbolic order (or pattern), one finds that agency becomes the very gap between itself and the structure, as if an unknown cause of itself has to be posited. Archer correctly points out the mistakes in the upward and downward conflations: to treat either structure or agency as epiphenomenon. But to avoid conflation of either type, that is, to find a third way out, often leads to pseudo-dialectical notions such as structuration or practice. Following Žižek’s discussion on dialectics (Žižek, 1993:122–124), we should argue that an authentic dialectical gesture here is not to synthesize the two notions as, for instance, two moments of certain process such as structuration or practice but, rather, to recognize the very gap between the two and to assert that the very gap is constitutive of structure. In other words, the very gap between the notion of structure and agency is the inner split of structure, and agency is from the beginning structure’s posited other and it embodies the possibility and impossibility of structure. That is to say, on one hand, agency is the horizon of structure, the limit that always escapes the grip of structure yet internally conceived in structure. On the other hand, the very impossibility to be captured by structure is what sustains the very notion of structure as its boundary. It is in this sense that we can return to Sewell’s argument that “[a]gency is implied by the existence of structure” (Sewell, 1992:20).

**STRUCTURE, HEGEMONY, AND SYMBOLIC ORDER**

The above argument, that agency is but an effect of the internal split of structure, ought to be understood neither as an ultimate totality of structure (structural determinism) nor as a need to synthesize the dual concepts (asserting duality or dualism). To reformulate the concepts of structure and agency, two theses need to be proposed here. The first is the Lacanian conception of subject as the very split between a (social) symbolic order and a fantasmic object that is the very void-exclusion-surplus of the symbolic order. What needs to be affirmed with regard to this point is that this object is a paradoxical one, which never appears in positivity. Furthermore, this split-subject is not yet agency but a condition of agency. In other words, it opens the possibility of agency. The second thesis concerns directly with reformulating the notion of structure: structural formations are never complete because they always entail operations of exclusion posited as a beyond. In this section, I try to explicate this argument and address the theoretical consequences of this thesis.
Wrong’s nearly half-century old critique of the oversocialized conception of man (Wrong, 1961) points in a direction that is still important today. In his frequently cited article, Wrong proposes a thesis originated with Freud: “man is a social animal without being entirely a socialized animal” (1961:192). In other words, the socialization process is never complete and there is always a leftover that resists socialization. Although one can immediately recognize that such a remainder is but a myth, the significance of Wrong’s proposal lies elsewhere. As a theoretical gesture, what Wrong effectively rejects is the conception of human beings as (social) automata. Our attention, however, should not turn to the supposed unsocialized remainder because it would be wrong to refer to any positive animalistic traits humans manifest as evidence of such leftovers of socialization. In so doing we will soon find those animalistic traits only too human. The real task for the social theorist is to distinguish humans from social automaton. This distinction lies precisely in the very gesture of asserting herself/himself as human in addition to all the roles, identities, and relations. Humans are social animals who not only refer to themselves, as the symbolic interactionist would argue (Blumer, 1968), but refer to their referring. It should be noted that what is suggested here is neither some negative position one is able to take in relation to certain social identities, roles, and relations nor a kind of humanist assertion of some inborn human essence; instead, the very act of recognizing one’s social identities and roles and at the same time asserting that one is more than the social is the very proof of one’s humanness. This is the Lacanian split subject (S) that, on one hand, is displaced/decentered onto the symbolic Other, and on the other, occupies the very gap/split as its “being.” What is needed with regard to structure is a similar reformulation, that is, to assert Lacan’s logic of sexuation on the feminine side: although every formulation of social phenomena is structural, all of the social field is not structural. This does not mean that there are things in the presymbolic social field that cannot be incorporated into structural formation; instead, it means that, on one hand, no structural formation is able to grasp the totality of the social, and on the other, the irreconcilable gaps among various structural formations bear witness to the Non-All of these formations, and the possibility of shifting from one formation to another points to a certain fundamental antagonism (the Lacanian real) that resists symbolic incorporation (Žižek, 2006:25–26, 253). This is also what Laclau means with the statement that society as such is impossible (Laclau, 1990).

Therefore, as a first step we should unequivocally reject the notion that structure is something that really exists independent of any signification. Such structures are already posited as the beyond or limits of a certain system of signification. Any such assertion merely indicates the
inability to signify them. Thus it should be emphatically stated that social (cultural, political, economic, etc.) structures are always signified structures, albeit mis-signified structures. It should be noted that the notion of mis-signification is not to be understood as false consciousness. The idea of false consciousness is not sustainable without some conception of real reality (Laclau, 1990). In his effort to reformulate the notion of the ideological, Laclau asserts that “[t]he ideological would not consist of the mis-recognition of a positive essence, but exactly opposite: it would consists of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture” (Laclau, 1990:92, emphasis added). What Laclau’s definition of the ideological entails is a sociopolitical field that competing social discourses endeavor to hegemonize. The ideological is thus the discursive gesture that claims not being ideological. This leads to the second point: structure is to be understood as discursive or symbolic formation of the social field that is defined by the symbolic formation through inclusion and exclusion. The self-referentiality—a symbolic formation defines its own object—captures precisely the fundamental paradox that is constitutive of the social field.

One of the most important Lacanian tenets concerning discourse qua instantiation of the symbolic order is that the infinite sliding of a discursive field is only (temporarily) stabilized or totalized through what is known as quilting points, point de capiton (Lacan, 2006:681). Consequently, in order to conceive a system in its totality, there needs to be at least one signifier that refers to the system itself. The self-referentiality of such a signifier immediately produces a paradox: on one hand, the signifier that refers to the totality of the system indicates precisely a beyond of it—the excluded that would subvert the system if included. On the other hand, the beyond (or limit) of the totality of a system signifies the failure of the signifying act, namely, the very impossibility of signifying the beyond. Thus the reference to a beyond is the only condition to conceive a system in its totality. Then, the fundamental paradox of a totalized system is that the failure of totalizing serves as the very condition of the possibility of a totality (Laclau, 1996:37–40). One of the best examples is functionalist theory, which in resolving the problem concerning dysfunctions, a typical solution is to conceive dysfunction as serving certain functions in society. Here, Laclau’s formulation on social totalization helps us

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7 I should admit here that this paragraph is a(n) (over)simplified representation of Laclau’s wonderful discussion on empty signifier and hegemonic formation. Within the limit of space here I cannot possibly provide a more elaborate summary. Moreover, Laclau’s formulation of paradox parallels that of Luhmann’s, suggesting a likely relation between semiotics and systems theory.
recognize how functionalist theory inscribes its own excluded beyond as an internal difference in a paradoxical manner.

Thus, the second important step in reformulating the notion of structure is to recognize that social structures, as social symbolic formations, are always contingent on acts of positing master signifiers and are always dislocated in the sense that their meaningfulness and efficacy depend on an excluded (and disavowed) beyond that serves as the ground. Put differently, a symbolic social formation entails a relation “by which a particular content becomes the signifier of the absent communitarian fullness” (Laclau, 1996:43). For instance, systemic function in functionalist theories stands for the absent fullness of Society. This relation between the particular and universal is what Laclau has termed as hegemony. Here, the signifier of the capitalized “Society” signifies the impossibility of conceiving the social in its totality, which Laclau calls an empty signifier (Laclau, 1996:36-40). Functionalist theories are endeavors to hegemonize the social field as universal through particular contents of system-functions. What needs to be clarified immediately at this point is that such hegemony is necessary and its encounter with its own paradox, for instance, the function of dysfunction, is inevitable. Another example is action theory itself in an imagined scenario I would call “when the action theorist meets Mertonian retreatist” (Merton, 1957:153). Our reluctance to recognize action in what the Mertonian homeless loiterer does—subsisting in whatever he can get licitly or illicitly, attests to the inherent paradox of action theory. Agamben’s Homo Sacer, people who are deprived of any identities and legal protection, points to yet another form of inaction (Agamben, 1998). Similarly, the notion of refugee, people who, as victims of certain ethnic or political cleansing, live indefinitely in humanitarian camps, already contains our expectation that they would not act on their own. Their fate is either in the hands of diplomatic negotiators or at the mercy of their persecutors. Here, action theory encounters its own exclusion, situations in which groups of people are reduced to nonactors.

What we can conclude from the above discussion is that, using one of Lacan’s sexuation formulas, all is socialized (thus structural) but the social is Non-All. Social structures are not just generative rules and resources that condition the infinite play of goals, identities, and relations. A social structural formation always contains an attempt to block the uncertainty and undecidability of its own field through inclusion and exclusion. From a theoretical viewpoint analogous to what the systems theorist calls second-order observer, conceiving structures as paradoxical, incomplete, and contingent symbolic formations opens up the possibility of addressing the issue of agency, socially transformational agency in
particular, as located in the gaps of structural formations and also as the struggle for hegemonizing the social.

MOMENTS OF AGENCY

If we adopt the Lacanian notion of the split subject and Laclau’s formulation of structures as paradoxical and contingent symbolic hegemonic formations, how do we proceed to examine agentic actions, more specifically, socially transformational actions? To address this question, I would like to start with an example: Stones’s examination of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (Stones, 2005:179–188), which, although providing a vigorous and sometimes insightful analysis, nonetheless fails at a crucial point. This analysis faithfully adheres to Giddens’s framework of structuration, which turns out to be its strength and its weakness. First of all, Stones’s analysis correctly identifies the external structural clusters such as economic relations (banking system in particular), legal institutions, and ideologies of family, love, patriarchy, and so forth, as the causal forces of the practices of the protagonists in their diegetic universe. Stones then moves to investigate how the position-practice (structure and structuration) and dispositional formulation and reformulation of the internal structures (actors) drive the narrative events to unfold. Toward the end of the analysis, addressing the most important event in the play, namely, Nora’s exit, Stones writes:

It is the reconfiguration and re-evaluation of her hierarchy of priorities that also allows leaving the “Doll’s House” to become a “feasible option” for Nora. ... With the subversive, wrenching, realignment of her world-view, many of the causal forces that once had this irresistible power to influence her actions now no longer have the causal efficacy. She now feels it possible not to live in fear of Torvald’s displeasure, of transgressing his patriarchal, constricting and pompous norms of propriety. (Stones, 2005:187)

There is no doubt that Nora’s world is reconfigured toward the end of the play, but to argue that Nora somehow conducts a reevaluation of “her hierarchy of priorities” and consequently finds leaving the doll’s house a feasible option misses the point completely. Nora’s act of leaving the doll’s house has to be understood as an act of the impossible in the sense that the decision cannot be grounded in any rational calculation or evaluation. Already at the beginning of the long dialogue between Nora and Torvald in the last act, Nora points out: “You and father have done me a great wrong. It is your fault that my life has come to nothing.” Is this not a way to say that I have come to the realization that I am nothing of importance in your world since you are (always) ready to sacrifice...
me when you have to save your honor? It can also be argued that this is the very moment that Nora, in choosing the two sides of the split-subject, which is fundamentally different from making choices within a structural context, chooses the side of the void that is the gap between symbolic identities and the position to choose, and her only option is to reject the symbolic definition of her being.

Therefore, far from a calculated act, Nora’s exit defies any causal chain embedded in the symbolic order of rationality. Ultimately, Nora is indifferent to the symbolic order, or the law. Her double transgression, forging her father’s signature and forging her father’s signature, already attests to her indifference. What collapses when her husband shows himself as an outraged but impotent coward is not the symbolic order but Torvald’s love for her that is sustained by her fantasy, the Thing (object of a) in her that deserves his love. This fantastic core of her being is what sustains her life in the doll’s house, which stands for dull and trivial bourgeois family life. It is clear that Nora’s readiness to sacrifice her own life (suicide) for this fantastic core (love) bears witness to her indifference to the symbolic order, a readiness for mutual cancellation to save the fantastic core. Her final choice of leaving the house rather than committing suicide points to the loss of the reason of self-sacrifice, the loss of her fantastic kernel. This argument also points to the mistake in Stones’s analysis when he states that Nora “now feels it possible not to live in fear of Torvald’s displeasure, of transgressing his patriarchal, constricting and pompous norms of propriety” (quoted above). It is in retrospect that Nora finds life in the doll’s house unbearable and Torvald’s norms of propriety constricting and pompous. Just a moment ago she was ready to sacrifice herself for this alleged unbearable life. The mistake of Stones’s analysis can be attributed at least partially to his overly faithful adherence to the framework of structuration. What his analysis fails to recognize is precisely the split-void as the subject that defies and questions the (normative) social symbolic order. That said, the gestures of defiance and questioning per se are only one moment of agency, its efficacy—its realization—needs to be registered in a (new) symbolic order.

In her analysis of Rosa Parks’s role in the civil rights movement, Lovell (2003) points out the possibility that Rosa Parks’s refusal to yield her seat and her subsequent arrest may have ended up in the long silent list of similar incidents that had occurred previously. Nonetheless, Rosa Parks’s heroic act did catalyze the ensuing social movement. Lovell perspicaciously recognizes the retroactive character of Parks’s authority. A closer look at the sequence of events shows that Parks’s act of refusal can be read as coinciding with Lacan’s discourse of the hysteric (Nora’s exit can also be understood as such a discursive gesture). In this discourse
Fig. 2. Lacan's discourse of the hysteric.

(see Fig. 2), the split-subject questions the interpolation of the symbolic order (Lacan’s notion of Master). The questioning can be formulated, following Lacan, as: “Why am I what you are saying that I am?” (Žižek, 1998:79), which effectively “pushes the master—incarnated in a partner, teacher, or whomever—to the point where he or she can find the master’s knowledge lacking” (Fink, 1995:134). Put differently, the hysteric returns her/his only internal split to the Master by exposing the Master’s lacking.

Precisely through insisting on the split-subject position, the actor’s refusal is to be read as a rejection of a certain identity (and social duties thus imposed) instead of claiming a positive identity. At this moment, however, Parks’s act presents itself as a possible candidate for socially transformational agencies that may or may not be recognized as such. In fact, Lovell draws our attention to the fact that cases similar to Parks were actually so numerous that it was expected (normative) that the driver in such situation “would stop and shout and then drive on” (Lovell, 2003:8; quoting Young, 2000). Thus, Parks’s act may well be “ignored” like the other cases without effecting the impacts as it did. Here, one should avoid any deterministic arguments that try to explain Parks’s impacts on the civil rights movement as inevitable. Such explanations precisely diminish the agentic function of her act.

How, then, should we understand the efficacy of Parks’s act? The answer lies in a second moment at which her agency is recognized by means of another form of agency, the agency of the signifier (or signifying act). This second moment requires establishing another symbolic order with a new master signifier, that is to say, a Laclauan hegemony, a competing discourse. In Parks’s case, the new master signifier was established by the ensuing civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is in a new symbolic order struggling or competing to hegemonize the social field, in this case, the civil rights movement’s demand for justice and equality, that Parks’s act was retroactively recognized as agentic, an actualized possibility. What should be further argued is that the actualized agency of Rosa Parks’s was contingent; whereas it is inevitable that one of the cases similar to Parks would have been integrated in a competing symbolic structural order. These are the two moments of agency: first, as
possibility manifesting itself in contingent acts and, second, the agentic potentiality is only actualized (as necessity) through a retroactively established discourse. Such a two-moment conception of agency rejects historicist reduction of a significant social and political event to its historical and situational circumstances and by doing so opens a space for social transformational agency.

In the above case, the first moment is one at which the (racist segregationist) symbolic structural order fails. In other words, it is breached by incidental personal acts. However, without a competing symbolic order to translate such breaches as failed struggles for justice and equality, the existing social order may simply handle such situations as minor disturbances, like how the many drivers managed similar situations. Parks’s act may have lost in history as a failed attempt to defend one’s right. The competing antisegregationist symbolic order started to take root precisely through translating Parks’s failure into not only a victorious demonstration of courage but also the symbol of a long series of failed struggles. The parallel between the couple Parks-King and Jesus-St. Paul is obvious. No wonder Žižek views St. Paul as the establisher of the master signifier in Christianity. What is crucial in the Pauline discursive gesture is to translate an unbearable failure (God’s own death) into triumph. As Žižek indicates repeatedly, the installation of a master (signifier) does not change anything in positive reality: it changes everything (Žižek, 2005:125).

CONCLUSION

Agency conceived as ability and knowledge (or knowledgeability) of rules, norms, values, and possession of, or accessibility to, resources can be decomposed into structural components. What is knowledge if not some structural effect of socialization institutions? What are resources if not some stratified structural positions? To argue that such agency resides in the individual actor is an empty assertion of an abstract actor of no positive existence. Such assertions, which often lead to what Fuchs calls “heavy rhetoric” (Fuchs, 2001:29), result from the disavowed act of positing agency as a fantasmic object to fill in the structural gaps. It is in this sense that one can say: agency is the internal split of structure. As one gets closer to such conceptions of agency, agency disappears. In fact, conceiving agency as the capacity to act in accordance with certain rules and to mobilize resources within structured situations always relies on certain notions of rationality. The above critique of Stones’s analysis of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House shows that acts are sometimes not grounded in any
rationality, which by no means entails unintelligibility. In fact, it can be argued that Nora’s act does not fit the definition of any form of (Weberian) rationality. It is a pure ethical act in the Kantian sense. The efficacy of authentic social transformational agency consists in rejecting precisely the rationalities imposed and regulated by existing social structural formations.

To avoid the dead-end of structural determinism and the various conflationist entanglements, two steps have been taken. First, the Lacanian split-subject is introduced to conceive the actor-agent as a two-sided subject that is the split between the inside and outside of a certain structural formation. This in turn requires a reformulation of the notion of structure. Thus, in a second step, Laclau’s theory on hegemony is brought in to reconceptualize structures as inherently paradoxical social symbolic formations that always need to posit their own beyond through exclusion. This conception depicts structures as always partial and unstable, open to new formations. As a result, agency can be recognized in two moments conceived as two symbolic gestures. In the first, the subject-agent occupies its own void in questioning the Master (the big Other as a signifier for certain dominant symbolic order) and hystericizes the Master by means of which it returns the subject’s lack-split back into the Master. In the second moment, a founding gesture establishes a new social symbolic order that transforms a current struggle as manifestation and representation of all previously failed struggles.

What is discernible in the arguments made above is their lineage with one of sociology’s most important paradigms, namely, conflict theories, which, to a great extent, have been displaced into a multidimensional or even multiculturalist framework of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and more to come. The close and intricate entanglement of structure-agency theories with the notion of social identity bears witness to efforts of translating conflicts into differences. The strength of the Lacanian/Zižekian and Laclauan perspectives, which is also what distinguishes these perspectives from traditional conflict framework, comes from their insistence on a certain fundamental antagonism, a hard kernel or the Lacanian real that only manifests as the gaps among social symbolic formations. Ultimately, it is this relocation of antagonism from positive differences into the negative that renders possible reformulations of structure and agency.

REFERENCES

Agency: The Internal Split of Structure


