


Human action and social structures. A Reformed theological critique of conflict theory and micro-interactionist theory



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Dates:
Received: 02 May 2022
Accepted: 07 July 2022
Published: 19 Sept. 2022

How to cite this article:
Vorster, N., 2022, 'Human action and social structures. A Reformed theological critique of conflict theory and micro-interactionist theory', *In die Skriflig* 56(1), a2862. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2862>

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People's understanding of the origins of social structures and their relatedness, or lack thereof, to human actions and divine providence has a bearing on the moral significance they attach to the rules of structures. Within sociology, both structural-conflict theory and micro-interactionist theory has provided theories on the interplay between human actions and structures. Although both strands attempt to ground their ideas in empirical evidence, philosophical-anthropological views on human nature, the human will and human freedom play a major role in constructing the theories. In this article it is argued that the two theories are based on philosophical premises that create moral difficulties. Conflict theory, emphasising structures as the cause of human behaviour, risks cultivating a revolutionary moral attitude towards social structures that may end up in endless cycles of nihilist conduct. In contrast, micro-interactionism's social constructivist explanation of the relationship between human action and structures could lead to moral relativism and apathy. This article reflects on an alternative approach. At the core of both voluntarist and revolutionary moral attitudes towards structures lies the notion that morality has no grounding in a deeper reality – they are merely social constructions. The article argues that a Reformed-Christian theory that grounds moral responsibility in what Michael Welker calls an 'anthropology of the spirit' may provide an alternative that avoids the moral ambiguities created by structural-conflict theory and micro-interactionist theory. This approach resists voluntarism by grounding morality in God who is the origin of being and understanding moral conduct in terms of the encounter between the divine and human spirit. It counters anarchy by promoting a spirit of moral realism and constant social renewal that takes seriously the consistent threat of the desire for power.

Contribution: The specific contribution of this article consists in it bringing Reformed theology and sociology into dialogue. It identifies blind spots in conflict and micro-interactionist theories on the relationship between human agency and social structures, especially when it comes to morality. It also indicates how both theories are guided mainly by presuppositions about human nature and the human will. In response, it is attempted to provide an alternative theological outlook on the question of the relationship between human agency and social structures, which grounds morality in an anthropology of the Spirit. Until now, no such attempt has been made.

Keywords: structural-conflict theory; micro-interactionist theory; Reformed theology; human will; voluntarism; determinism.

Introduction

Sociology attempts to explain the social world. Ever expanding in scope, it investigates almost every sphere of social interaction ranging from the political, religious, cultural, urban, rural and industrial to the medical and military realms of life. Despite the rich diversity of focus areas, a single fundamental topic keeps cropping up in most sociological inquiries. It concerns the twofold question of the interplay between human actions and social structures.¹ How do human actions influence social structures and how do social structures affect human actions? This question has elicited very different responses from the two most dominant schools of thought in contemporary sociology. Structural-conflict theorists argue that structures precede human action. People are born into settings driven by supra-individual social arrangements, power plays and opposing

1. For the sake of conceptual clarity, it is important to distinguish between social systems and social structures. Social systems refer to a domain or sphere of interaction such as politics, law, media, sport, religion and the market. Social structures points to institutions or organised groups working together and coordinating their actions within a larger social system.

social interests. These structural determinants and institutional forces tend to develop lives of their own and often discriminate against people on basis of class, race and gender. If not resisted and upended, they may coerce and dominate the lives of generations of people. On the other hand, micro-interactionist theorists claim that conflict theorists overemphasise the impact of structures and class conflict on human behaviour. According to them, structures are too easily portrayed by conflict theorists as the *cause* of human behaviour as if humans possess no free will. This leads into a determinist view of reality where human conduct is explained in terms of fixed structural determinants. Micro-interactionist sociology opts to view social life as a fluid and permeable human construct. Humans create society through action and by fitting different actions together (Blumer 1985 [1969]:286). But whilst micro-interactionist theory enjoys considerable support in sociological circles, it has been criticised for falling into the trap of individualism, voluntarism and relativism by portraying reality as 'mental constructs' that have no basis or reference points in objective reality. Having originated in a Western context, micro-interactionist theorists are often accused of taking too lightly the impact of structures on human agency, and of underestimating the difficulty oppressed peoples' experience in transforming discriminatory structures and realising their potential.

Two features of the debate between conflict theorists and micro-interactionist theorists are quite striking: First, even though sociologists generally attempt to substantiate sociological theories in empirical data, the answers presented by the two most dominant sociological traditions on the relation between human action and social structures have clear philosophical and anthropological underpinnings. In fact, the two traditions diverge exactly at this point. They subscribe to different views of human nature, specifically when it comes to issues related to the human will and human freedom. Second, the two theories have clear moral implications. People's understanding of the origins of social structures and their relatedness, or lack thereof, to human actions and divine providence, shape their moral attitudes towards structures. It determines whether they will conform with the rules and standards set by social structures. For instance, people who consider legal social structures as divine instruments of social justice, would probably place a high emphasis on obeying the rules of social structures. Alternatively, people who consider social structures as social utilities created by those in power to serve expedient interests, would be inclined to either show apathy towards the rules of social structures or to support efforts to upend the social order through revolutionary acts.

This contribution argues that structural-conflict and micro-interactionist theories cultivate problematic moral dispositions towards social structures. The materialist and historical-determinist approach of structural-conflict theory fosters a revolutionary spirit towards social structures which may lead into nihilistic struggles and endless cycles of

violence. On the other hand, the voluntarist underpinnings of the micro-interactionist theory generate an unhealthy moral relativism that may entice people to disregard 'rules' because they view social structures as mere 'mental constructions'. What is needed is a theory grounded in a deeper moral reality that guards against cultivating reckless revolutionary or apathetic attitudes towards structures, but also bequeaths a critical discernment of the spirit of the times.

The first two sections of this article elaborate on the precise nature and nuances of the structural-conflict and micro-interactionist explanations of the relationship between human agency and social structures. The last section proceeds to present a Reformed theological perspective which attempts to break through deterministic and voluntarist explanations of the relation between human action and social structures.

Structural-conflict theory

Conflict theory² approaches the question on the relationship between human action and social structures from a macro-sociological perspective. It holds that human behaviour is conditioned by social arrangements and interests. Power structures guide and channel human actions in a particular direction through the distribution of resources. When social resources are distributed unequally according to class, race or gender interests, social conflicts erupt.

Karl Marx, who is generally regarded as the founding father of conflict theory, focussed his attention squarely on the phenomenon of class struggle. Marx shared Hegel's theoretical premise that history develops according to a dialectic pattern, but he maintained over and against Hegel that the progress of history is driven by forces of production and not human ideas. For Marx, the story of human history is one of class conflict caused by skewed ownership patterns and distorted production mode relations. History progresses from one class conflict to the next – each new conflict negating the previous one. Ultimately, history will find its resolution in a society free of class conflict (see Marx & Engels 1985 [1846]:7).

Marx's social theory is closely tied to his view of human nature. He defined human beings as a creative species whose self-understanding are closely tied to what they produce. Individuals express themselves through what they produce and how they go about in producing them. Who humans are, are consequently determined by the material conditions that govern their productions (Marx & Engels 1985 [1848]:4).

Concomitant with his view of the human as producer, Marx (1970:189) defined the human as '*zoon politicon*', meaning that the human is inevitably individualised within the context of society. For Marx, society is not simply a group of individuals who come together to enter a social compact as liberalism suggested, but it functions concurrently with the human

2. A distinction must be made between conflict sociology which refers to a sociological sub-discipline concerned with social conflict, and social conflict theory which refers to a specific theoretical approach to sociology (see Joas & Knöbl 2009:175).

individual (Fetscher 1973:448). Only within society can the individual acquire his skills as producer, be helped to achieve self-consciousness, to develop speech, to learn crafts and to entertain a sense of selfhood (Fetscher 1973:448). In fact, Marx (1970:189) described the idea that humans can function apart from society as ‘totally preposterous’.

Marx’s assumptions about human nature led him into his definition of the basic dilemma that humanity faces. According to him, the two most basic features of human existence – production and sociality – are suppressed by material forces and distorted ownership patterns. Humans experience self-alienation because they cannot exert control over the things they produce, and they are subjected to social structures that do not act as proper socialisation tools. Looking back into history, Marx found that ancient, feudalist, industrial and capitalist societies had one feature in common. They were all structured according to class and divided between masters and slaves (ancient), landowners and serfs (feudal), bourgeoisie and proletariat (industrialism), owners and non-owners (capitalism). In all of them, a small minority of elite controlled the means of production, whilst the vast majority produced things for the elite without having any control over the exchange of products and without accruing full benefits from their creations (Jones, Bradbury & Le Boutillier 2011:33). According to Marx, capitalism represents the ultimate system of social alienation and isolation. It creates a competitive environment by attaching monetary value to products, it forces labourers to specialise, and it replaces workers with technology to cheapen production costs (cf. Cropsey 1987:819).

In the end, human alienation is caused by the problematic way in which society are structured. Marx distinguished between the material base structures and ideological superstructures of society. The ‘material bases’ of society consist of economic infrastructure, production and trading activities, whilst the ‘ideological superstructures’ of society involve the state and legal institutions which exist on the material conditions of society (Cropsey 1987:806; Marx & Engels 1985 [1848]:4). The dominant class that controls production modes, inevitably control the distribution and communication of ideas. In doing so, they sustain the superstructures of society which, in turn, preserve the material interests of the dominant class.

Having analysed societal transitions throughout Western history, Marx contended that the make-up of social structures changes as material conditions change. When new material conditions arise, new superstructures supported by new ideologies are created. However, class divisions remain the common denominator (Collins & Makowski 1993:35). His theory of history eventually became known as historical materialism.

Marx’s understanding of the interplay between human the will and social structures exhibits materialist and determinist features. Human actions are, according to him (Marx 1852), driven by material forces and coercive superstructures rather

than free and voluntary decisions, whilst the human will is bound to and restrained by historical processes:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (p. 10)

For Marx, the only way to regain control over agency is to abolish existing capitalist ownership patterns through revolutionary means and to establish a classless society where human beings can exist as a universal brotherhood (Cropsey 1987:813, 822). Thus, despite being severely constricted, Marx acknowledged the possibility that the human will can break free from the external limitations it experiences.

Marx’s perspective on the human will contains a curious presupposition. He locates the axis of the human dilemma in social structures and not in human nature itself. The human person is a victim of oppressive supra-individual material and historical forces rather than the instigator of what is wrong in society. If social conditions change and skewed ownership patterns are abolished, and humans are allowed to create without coercion and enjoy the benefits of their product, they will be able to live in a classless universal brotherhood free of moral codes and religion. Living in such a utopian society would, however, require benevolent unselfish beings who do not exhibit a desire for power and greed. This begs the following question: Does Marx factor in the evil propensities of human nature itself? On the evidence to our disposal, it seems that he believes that the human person is essentially good. All such a person requires is to be liberated from oppressive social arrangements.

Marxist theory is often criticised for being fixated on class conflict and tracing back almost every conflict to class struggles (Joas & Knöbl 2009:178). From the 1960’s onwards, this lacuna was addressed by feminist structural-conflict theorists who drew attention to the interplay between class, gender and race as the three main social roots of oppression.

Feminist structural-conflict theorists, most notably exponents from Marxist, as well as socialist, radical, black and intersectional feminism, assert that gender oppression is related to social power abuse and that it is embedded in and aided by male-dominated social structures. Marxist and socialist feminists view capitalism as the structural cause of gender discrimination. According to them, the advent of private property has caused wealth to be concentrated in the hands of a few men, whilst capitalism aggravated the situation by organising the economy according to the physical and gendered features of individuals. In capitalist systems, women have traditionally provided the domestic services needed to sustain the male worker and have produced offspring who resupply the chain of labourers (see Joas & Knöbl 2009:435; Nicholson 2015:5). Those women who entered the labour market were entrusted with low-paying

or part-time jobs and received lower wages than men, because their husbands were considered as the designated breadwinners for the nucleus family (Jones et al. 2011:214).

Since capitalism are built on the structure of the nucleus family, Marxist and socialist feminists hold that the two must be confronted in unison. On the one hand, the destruction of capitalist social arrangements is required, but conversely prevailing ideas of parenthood, sexuality and family must be transformed by liberating women from the belief that only one kind of family and parenthood exists (cf. Jones et al. 2011:214). Marxist and socialist feminists consider the socialist state as the only means by which true equality can be produced. This would involve restructuring the family, ending 'domestic slavery' and finding collective means to carry out childrearing and household management (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:654).

Radical feminists consider patriarchy as the real institutional force behind gender discrimination. Women are subjugated, because men control ideas, the media, market and political power. Radical feminists specifically examine the role that male violence and female objectification play in subordinating women. According to them, violent male conduct such as rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment are so frequent and patterned that they can hardly be viewed as isolated pathological occurrences. Instead, they must be seen as the outcomes of a 'culture' intrinsically part of the social fabric of society. Female objectification, in a similar vein, occurs because distorted male conceptions of feminine beauty and sexuality are continuously disseminated through the media and advertising business, turning women into sexual objects (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:654). According to radical feminism, the only means to address women oppression consists in overthrowing the patriarchal order and radically restructuring society by, for instance, creating *women alone* spaces (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:654; MacKay 2015:334).

Black feminism questions the generalised way in which Western feminists speak of gender oppression as if the experiences of middle-class white persons in industrialised societies are the same as those of women in third world countries. Dissatisfied by the 'generic' nature of Western feminist discourse, black feminists focus on the interplay between gender oppression and racism without which the experiences of black women cannot be truly understood (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:655). Considerable emphasis is placed on the historical legacies of slavery, segregation and racism as well as the systemic impact of historical patterns of discrimination on the lives of contemporary black women (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:655). Flowing from black feminism was an intersectional approach which calls for a more complex analysis of subordination. It holds that oppression has its roots in multiple overlapping social locations that create multi-faceted experiences of discrimination (UN Women 2020). For example, a poor black female lesbian person who lives in a patriarchal tribal society is more

susceptible to gender oppression than an affluent white heterosexual female living in a free and open democratic society. In the former, various social locations are at play, whilst only gender is at stake in the latter. Thus, to understand the scope and range of vulnerability, one must consider the multi-layered nature of identities and should examine the interplay between gender, class and ethnicity or race as the three main sources of oppression (cf. Denis 2008:681).

As is the case in Marxist conflict theory, feminist conflict theory holds that structures function prior to or independent of micro-level individual interactions (Jones et al. 2011:17). Structural forces, whether they be capitalism, patriarchy or racist ideology, produce boundaries and opposing interests between men and women, and then carry them into society through cultural norms and values (cf. Jones et al. 2011:213).

Again, the issue at hand has implications for our understanding of the human will and morality. According to feminist conflict theorists, structural forces govern the human will. Social change cannot be brought about through a mere change of attitudes on the micro-level of human existence. Oppressive structures must be upended to set the human will free. But what is the use of a re-organisation or upending of patriarchal structures if it does not coincide with changed attitudes on the micro-level of human existence? Conflict theory responds by saying that new and fairer structures inevitably change attitudes, since they, and not the individual will, act as the real bearers of cultural values. However, if structures determine human action, does it not lead us into structural determinism? (cf. Jones et al. 2011:219).

What is more, the unequivocal distinctions feminist conflict theory makes between different groups of society, create questions about essentialism. Jones et al. (2011) stated it eloquently:

Whether we are discussing social class or gender, an individual is consigned to one category or the other and this allows no room for the complexity of real experience in which one is not just a woman, or a member of a particular social class or a member of a particular ethnic group. (p. 220)

The essentialist undertones of conflict theory are inescapably linked to its determinist features. If one argues that history unfolds dialectically through macro-sociological conflicts between groups, one has no option but to draw the battle lines between the groups involved and the interests at stake. However, in real life, group memberships tend to be multi-layered and fluid, while the group interests at stake are not always easy to pin down.

Although structural-conflict theory contains valuable insights and strengths, especially when it comes to identifying oppressive impulses in society, its position on structures as the cause of human actions creates moral difficulties. If history progresses through conflicts, and if human actions are controlled by structures, is society not doomed to endless and nihilist power struggles? In fact, Marxist revolutions in

Eastern Europe, Latin-America and Africa have been characterised by unending cycles of revolution. Second, we must ask the following question: Why does social change depend on the 'upending' of social structures rather than its renewal or reformation? Are conflict theorists not setting themselves up for processes of endless 'natality' where the old must be broken down for the sake of rebirth? To be sure, 'rebirth' guarantees change, but does it guarantee better change? And how does one 'upend' structures without using violence or utilising civil disobedience or creating binary distinctions between us and them? From a moral point of view, it increasingly seems as if the suspicious and revolutionary spirit kindled by conflict theory is self-destructive. It compromises the freedom impulse in whose very name it speaks by consistently wanting to effect 'rebirths' through revolutionary means of change, only to open up new cycles of 'us against them'.

Micro-interactionist theory

Micro-interactionist theories emphasise the responsive, creative, intentional and voluntary features of human agency. In contrast to conflict theory, which approaches the social world from a macro-level sociological perspective, micro-interaction theorists are concerned with micro-level interactions between people. In their view, social structures are products – not causes – of human action. Whereas conflict theorists regard structures as fixed entities governed by powerful historical forces, micro-interaction theorists consider structures as malleable and open-ended human constructions brought into life by human imagination, decision making and choosing. For them, structures are not 'things', but symbolic realities comprising creative and responsive human activities that have been fitted together (cf. Blumer 1985 [1969]:286; Jones et al. 2011:17). Human action is best understood by analysing how humans communicate and how they fit their actions together. Symbols, gestures and language provide the most important entry points for understanding the collective social consciousness.

Although micro-interaction theorists share basic premises on the relation between structures and human action, specific approaches have crystallised within the tradition, namely rational choice theory, symbolic interactionism, the dramaturgical approach, ethnomethodology and structuration theory. Rational choice theorists consider society as a product of the logical choices people make. Max Weber (1864–1920) described human beings as rational actors who interpret social settings, evaluate options available, take decisions and implement actions to reach desired outcomes. The sum of actions taken, leads to social structures (cf. Jones et al. 2011:84). To understand human actions and social structures, sociologists must analyse (*Verstehen*) the mental states and motives behind human choices (Weber 2019:95). Weber (2019:102–103) contended that some societies are characterised by typical forms of action that accord with generally shared mental attitudes. In this regard, he

distinguished between conservative attitudes that seek the familiar; affective values governed by spontaneity; value-oriented actions based on a sense of duty; and goal-oriented action directed by pragmatic considerations.

Weber's assumption that people and societies act according to rational dictates and that the sum of these rational actions leads to social structures seems quite problematic and naïve. In practice, human desires often trump rationality, whilst many social structures emanate from power struggles rather than cohesive rational actions. For example, in autocratic societies, governments are usually not constituted on the foundation of rational choice or the general will of the people, but they are assembled by those who hold military power.

Symbolic-interactionism studies the ways in which individuals frame their personal identities and the manners in which social groups emanate from multiple interactions between people. According to this strand of thought, human personhood is a social construction produced by social interaction rather than inherent biological features (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:85). The founding father of symbolic interactionism, George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), posited that self-awareness is intricately tied to reciprocity (Mead 1985 [1934]:269). According to him (Mead 1985 [1934]:280), we develop a sense of self by interacting with other people and processing the feedback. The instruments of symbols, language and gestures are vital in this process. During the interaction process, people near to us project their perception of us back onto us, whilst also espousing the roles they want us to assume. We process the feedback and develop an individual self-definition in light thereof. The identities we assume, usually reflect both the image society project onto us, and the mental attitudes of the groups we belong to (Mead 1985 [1934]:280).

Following Mead's basic insights, later symbolic interactionists, such as Herbert Blumer, analysed the role that language, symbols and gestures play in fitting human actions together. According to Blumer (1985 [1969]:284), our sense of 'meaning' act as an instrument whereby we fit our actions together. Meaning does not refer to the inherent 'make-up of things', but it arises from social interaction and inner self-conversations. It is an interpreted 'social product' continuously formed, revisited and adapted to fit changing relations and social conditions (cf. Blumer 1985 [1969]:287). What is true on the individual level is also true on the macro-sociological level. Groups, institutions and societies develop shared meanings, values, understandings and methodologies which enable them to fit actions together (cf. Blumer 1985 [1969]:295–296). Although joint actions are more than the aggregate of individual actions, they are like individual actions: exposed to challenges and changing social settings and therefore subject to continuous revision and adaptation. Hence, social structures must not be regarded as fixed entities driven by structural determinants, but rather as manifestations of ongoing human action and interaction (cf. Blumer 1985 [1969]:295–296).

Erving Goffman (1922–1982) focussed explicitly on the performative nature of human action. Goffman compared social life to a theatrical stage. According to him, humans assume identities to manage the impressions others have of them. Our identities are basically roles we play: By dressing, talking and acting in a certain way, we invite the response we desire from others (Jones et al. 2011:107). Goffman distinguished between the front and back stages of life. On the front stage, we present a choreographed image of ourselves that radiates competency and fits in the social setting, role expectations and performative rituals of the occasion. Backstage we let off steam, rethink the roles we play and regroup for the next frontstage performance (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:313). To organise our actions, and to develop appropriate strategies, we require ‘framing’. Goffman described ‘framing’ as socially constructed understandings of the norms that govern specific situations. These norms protect our symbolic realities by prescribing rituals and desired attitudes and by setting boundaries for actions in specific social settings (Goffman (1985 [1974]:330).

Symbolic interactionism gives due regard to society as a complex, multi-faceted and ever-evolving web of human interactions that seek creative ways to order society. By elucidating the complexities involved in micro-human interactions, it reveals the shortcomings in rationalist and normative approaches to sociology which seek to explain human actions and structural phenomena through all-embracing causative patterns of reasoning. In contrast to structural-conflict theory, it gives due attention to the creative and responsive dimensions of human agency, as well as the ability of society to act as an inspiration that unlocks the potential of individuals and expands the self (cf. Joas 1990:187). However, symbolic-interactionist approaches also create problems of their own. Depending heavily on the Western traditions of pragmatism and phenomenology, they tend to approach the relationship between human action and social structures unilaterally from an individualist actor-oriented perspective. The actor is depicted as an autonomous being with a free will, able to shape his or her social environment according to his or her needs. In turn, groups of people are capable of creating shared understandings, to reshape society and to develop collective means whereby social problems can be resolved. But does this voluntarist view of human personhood accord with reality? Western people living in democracies and vibrant economies might associate with this view of human personhood, but vast numbers of global citizens do not enjoy political and economic freedom. Those who have been born in impoverished and unequal societies, and who live under autocratic regimes, have little room to choose, decide and act. In these environments, human actions tend to be limited to *responses* on structural givens rather than acting as *causes* of social structures. In fact, postcolonial studies have indicated how many inhabitants from the global South experience social structures as overwhelming, oppressive powers which resist any effort to be reshaped.

Closely related to the issue of voluntarism is symbolic interactionism’s general neglect of the disruptive role that conflict plays in micro-interactions. Human interactions do not always lead to shared understandings and collective problem solving, but are often characterised by polarisation and the proliferation of conflict. This indicates that the human will is not as free as many micro-interactionist theorists seem to think. Most conflicts erupt exactly because people are frustrated by their wills being constrained by external realities.

Ethnomethodology represents one of the most radical strands within micro-action theory. The two main exponents of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011) and Aaron Cicourel (1928–), characterised social reality as a subjective and unstable phenomenon marked by continuous fluctuations. People tend to give an objective appearance to reality by developing shared understandings that make social reality appear orderly and stable. However, as these constructions are symbolic and have no reference in objective reality, they can be easily disrupted through counterclaims and challenges (cf. Collins & Makowski 1993:246; Jones et al. 2011:118). Garfinkel illustrated the point by studying people’s reactions to questions that upend shared linguistic conventions. He noticed how people became confused, irate and aggressive when asked to explain the precise meaning of ordinary expressions or questions such as ‘How are you?’ This signals, according to ethnomethodology, both the ease with which their symbolic universes can be upended and the inconvenient truth that shared understandings have no precise meaning or objective reference in reality.

Ethnomethodology’s understanding of the social world as a mental construct that has no reference in objective realities creates various questions. Does it not risk falling into a kind of solipsism that reduces social reality to a mind game? Can we extricate the social world from natural environments as if social reality functions independent of natural environments?

Anthony Giddens (1938–) attempted to combine the micro-level approach of action theorists with a macro-sociological perspective. His theory became known as structuration theory, a compound term, which signifies the intricate link between human action and social structures. Agreeing that social structures are virtual realities, he nevertheless contended that social reality has its roots in social practices. Actors share memories and experiences; they develop rules to mitigate risks; and they utilise combined forms of knowledge to resolve problems on a macro-level. When these practices bring forth benefits, they are repeated and eventually become entrenched in rituals and procedures (cf. Cohen 1998:284). The end result is social structures. Whilst actors form structures through continuous interaction and reconstruction, structures also influence the way people behave. They contain ‘socially structured knowledge’ that ‘pre-exists’ the individual and guides the individual in difficult situations (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:90). Although Giddens refrains from ascribing the same power to social

structures as conflict theorists do, he contends that the relationship between human actions and structures are marked by a two-way communication in which actors shape institutions and institutions shape actors (cf. Giddens & Sutton 2013:1072). To his credit, Giddens' approach goes a long way in building a bridge between micro-sociological and macro-sociological outlooks and transcending the subject-object divide. He has, however, been rightly criticised for 'excessive voluntarism' by not giving adequate attention to situations where actors lack the power to change their circumstances (Jones et al. 2011:166). Stated simply, in some social settings, the relationship between actors and structures are not characterised by a 'two-way communication'.

The micro-interactionist theories we have discussed, display two problematic features. On the one hand, its free-will approach does not take the self-conflicted nature of human beings and the external constraints to which humans are exposed adequately into account. Secondly, it risks descending into a solipsistic world of moral relativism. If moral codes have no reference in a deeper reality, if they are simply social constructions that flow from consensual agreements, what staying power would they have? Why would people obey and internalise rules that are nothing but mental constructs? Is the phenomenon of moral apathy not to a large degree a symptom of a relativistic worldview that view social reality as an open-ended and ever-shifting symbolic reality? Rules come and go, so why would we obey them?

A Reformed theory on human action and social structures

Having examined structural-conflict and micro-interactionist theories on the relationship between human action and social structures, I concluded that both theories create moral difficulties. Structural-conflict theory tends to engage in a revolutionary discourse that subverts moral codes, whilst micro-interactionist theories risk cultivating moral relativism and moral apathy. Both extremes are ironically connected to a common philosophical presupposition shared by the two theories: Morality has no grounding in a deeper reality; they are social constructions. Can Reformed theology provide an alternative?

In what follows, I will outline a Reformed perspective that rests on four basic tenets.

First, it holds that God and his Spirit of truth, justice, love and peace is the ultimate source and origin of creative human action. Hence, the relation between human agency and social structures cannot be adequately understood without understanding the encounter between divine spirit and human spirit in social reality.

Second, the human spirit denotes human self-awareness and the multimodal sensuous structure of the human being encompassing cognitive, affective, aesthetic and moral

sensibilities. Human agency is influenced by spiritual dispositions, personal factors, moral schemas and situational variables, whilst social consciousness is an emergent, multimodal and multi-polar manifestation of collective human spirit.

Thirdly, humans are self-conflicted and sinful beings who experience discrepancies between rational dictates, affective states and desires. The intra-psychic conflicts that humans experience, manifest also on a social-structural level. Social structures are vulnerable to the ever-present threat of the *libido dominandi* which flows from the sinful nature of human beings.

Fourthly, the broken nature of social reality, requires that social structures must continuously be reformed and renewed. To renew social reality, the guidance of the creative power of God's Spirit must be sought.

God as the Origin and Sustainer of being

God is the Origin of being, the Maintainer of being and the Consummator of being who counteracts non-being and draws all things to himself through his creative and re-creative actions. The father of Reformed theology, John Calvin (1509–1564), adamantly maintained that life, human existence and being, would not be possible without God's animating spirit. God 'breathes life and energy into all creatures' but especially into 'human beings who are conjoined with reason and intelligence' (*Inst.* 4.17.8). This idea finds classical expression in Genesis 2:7 which describes how God's creative power imparts spirit to the human being in rich imagery. Koos Vorster (2021:22–31) discussed the various movements depicted in Genesis 2:7 at length. First, God 'forms' the human like an artisan who makes a sculpture from clay, and then God blows the breath of life *niš-mat* into the human. The *niš-mat* transforms the human into a *nepes-ħayya*, a living being, a someone rather than a something (see Vorster 2021:27). Vorster (2021:23) described the *niš-mat* as 'nothing natural in the sense of being derived from nature, it cannot be taken for granted, it is a gift of God'. We could say that the animating breath of God in Genesis 2:7 is something more than biotic life itself; it denotes the imparting of 'spirit' to the human being.

However, what does the 'human spirit' exactly entail? According to Welker (2020:20), it is abundantly clear from studies on early-childhood mental development that the human mind contains more than intellectual and rational faculties. Aesthetic and moral sensibilities also fulfil important roles in coordinating the actions of the human body within natural and social environments. Welker (2020:32–33) described the 'human spirit' as the all-encompassing multi-modal power that the human person radiates when he or she acts. With multi-modal, Welker means that humans do not only act via one medium such as reason, but through a variety of mediums ranging from cognitive, affective and aesthetic capacities to moral sensibilities. In short, human existence is guided by a

'multimodal sensuous network' that radiates itself within natural and social surroundings (Welker 2020:35). The multimodal sensuous network of the human spirit is designed to convey, receive and process information. Decision-making and human agency is influenced by personal traits, variable situational factors and general environmental influences. These influences stand in a causative and reciprocal relationship with each other and inform human decision-making and action (see Bandura 1999:23).

Staying within the trajectory of Welker's thoughts, we might say that the human spirit, a multimodal sensuous system of self-awareness that processes situational factors and environmental forces, is able to connect and relate to other human sensuous systems through language, gestures and symbols. Through continuous social interaction, which consists in conveying thoughts to others and evaluating responses, new horizons of understanding originate, and collective forms of social consciousness emerge that surpass personal consciousness. Using Welker's terminology, we might say that collective human consciousness is emergent, multimodal and multi-polar in nature. It emerges in the sense that it is created by a confluence of situational factors, free decisions and actions that are not reducible to one single intervention (see Welker 2020:26). It is multimodal in so far as the collective social consciousness expresses itself in a variety of ways through different mechanisms such as linguistic and cultural conventions, art, sport, media, politics and social platforms. It is multi-polar to the extent that it is characterised by manifold power centres that do not always operate in unison. Whilst the multi-polar nature of the collective consciousness brings equilibrium, it also generates inter-group conflicts.

Humans as self-conflicted beings

Reformed doctrines of sin lean heavily on Augustine's initial framing of the topic. Augustine considered humans as self-conflicted beings who experience intra-psychological conflict because of a lack of coherency between their desires, will, thoughts and deeds (cf. McFadyen 2000:173). Contrary to Pelagius, who regarded the human will as a neutral mechanism which is capable of consistently returning to a default position, Augustine maintained that the human will does not function as an autonomous faculty external to the intentional structure of the human being. It is part and parcel of a larger, complex set of forces in the human psyche (cf. McFadyen 2000:179). Moreover, Augustine contended that the human will is depraved and sinful. He described sin as a distortion of human nature, a defection of the human will away from God to lower 'fleshly' desires and 'changeable goods' (Augustine 2010:70–71). This ongoing defection is propelled by habit's persistent power (*consetuedo*) (Augustine 2010:108). Although desires and affections are not negative impulses as such, Augustine maintained that humans have a natural inclination to follow misdirected desires (*concupiscentia*) (cf. McGrath 2007:363). He found a clear example of the hegemony of concupiscence over rationality

in the phenomenon of sexual desire. Lust and physical desire possess the power to shut down the individual's rational capacities. Nevertheless, Augustine did not limit concupiscence to sexual desire. He considered pride, greed and the *libido dominandi* as particularly destructive powers in human existence (cf. Augustine 2010:7, 19).

Various Augustinian philosophers and theologians elaborated on Augustine's understanding of human nature as self-conflicted. Calvin (1509–1564) essentially adopted Augustine's doctrine of sin, but added some insights on the epistemological effects of sin, and moderated Augustine's rather extravagant speculations on the transmission of sin. Calvin highlighted the epistemic and noetic shortcomings of human beings. According to him, human minds are limited and constrained by sin. This results in spiritual and moral confusion and distorted decision-making processes (*Inst.* 2.5.19). Although the theologies of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) deviated in various aspects from orthodox Reformed theology, their neo-Augustinian views on sin exerted considerable influence in Reformed theology. Both connected self-conflict to existential anxiety. Kierkegaard and Niebuhr described the human person as a synthesis of nature and spirit, corporeality and self-consciousness, necessity and freedom (Kierkegaard 1980 [1849]:5; Niebuhr 1945). Being free, human beings have the capacity to actualise and realise themselves, but freedom also has a downside. It requires that humans must make choices between different possibilities which means that the human person is consistently confronted with weighing competing self-interests and reconciling personal interests with the interests of others (Kierkegaard 2014 [1844]:23). Being finite, humans must deal with existential threats and find ways to secure themselves. The collective sum of these tensions creates existential anxiety which often leads to desperate and distorted attempts at self-preservation (Niebuhr 1945:40, 205).

Reformed anthropology deviates fundamentally from the anthropologies undergirding micro-interactionist theory and structural conflict theory. It rejects the micro-interactionist tradition's stance on free-will. For Reformed theologians, human decision-making is never an exercise in pure freedom, but it is constrained by inner psychological tensions and distorted desires, the power dynamics of social settings and the ongoing need to balance self-interests with competing social interests. Misdirected desires and affections orient the human will to a significant degree, whilst social group formation around shared interests often compound the effect and reach of misdirected desires. In Reformed thinking, sin encompasses more than individual decisions and private transgressions against God. It is systemic in nature. Humans are born into situations where their capacity to choose are significantly constrained by the systemic consequences of intergenerational sins (cf. Mathewes 2001:115–116).

At the same time, Reformed theology rejects structural-conflict theory's view that the nexus and source of social

conflict is to be found in oppressive social structures. The Reformed tradition locates the ultimate source of social conflict in the human psyche. For Reformed theologians, social problems cannot be resolved simply by replacing bad structures with better structures. Good structures might mitigate the inner tensions and conflicts that humans experience, but it will never put an end to intra-human and interpersonal conflicts. In my view, the starting point for social change lies in addressing the inner conflicts and existential anxieties of people, and guiding them in finding ways to balance their own interests with those of others.

Social structures, the *libido dominandi* and the need for reformation

In the Reformed social imagination, social structures are neither 'virtual realities' nor 'fixed entities' that surpass the human will. Like the individual human spirit, the social human spirit must respond to the creative, re-creative and consummative actions of God's Spirit. The theme of the kingdom of God which came to earth through the incarnation of Jesus Christ and which radiates God's liberating power in all spheres of life is central to Reformed social thought. According to this perspective, Christ's ethical example, death and resurrection, as well as the subsequent outpouring of the Spirit made possible a new mode of existence governed by the principles of God's kingdom, namely peace, justice, love and truth (cf. Rm 14:17; Jn 1:17). Interestingly, the principles of God's kingdom, as described in the gospels and epistles, correlate closely with descriptions of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit guides us in truth (Jn 16:13), he brings comfort (Jn 14:16), he is the Spirit of grace (Heb 10:29), he serves justice (Jn 16:8), he pours out the love of God in the hearts of believers (Rm 5:5). It follows then that these principles that characterises Christ's reign and the workings of the Spirit ought to act as guides for Christian social action. Nevertheless, a certain amount of realism is required. The kingdom of God is characterised by a tension between the already and 'not yet'. On the one hand, God's reign on earth is already present. It manifests itself wherever human action promotes the principles of God's kingdom. Conversely, the kingdom is not yet consummated on earth. This means that Christian social action must take into account the realities of a sinful and broken social order.

The self-conflicted and sinful nature of human beings requires that law and order be maintained for the sake of self-preservation. Without the government who maintains law and order, without social systems that embrace values particular to the nature of their functioning, and without social structures that operate according to rules and procedures, society would descend into chaos. Being created in the image of God, and being animated by God's Spirit of truth, justice, love and peace, humans are aware that they have callings to exercise virtues that run contrary to the predatory instincts of nature. In Reformed terms, we may call this awareness the *sensus divinitatis* and the human conscience. God's Spirit has inscribed his moral law on the conscience of every person, that is, every human being has a sense of moral

and civil duty (Van Drunen 2010:1). Although the values of justice, truth, love and peace are not self-imposing like gravitational laws, they are imperative for sustaining social worlds.

Social structures represent the human spirit's concrete responses to the impulses of God's divine Spirit. Once constructed, social structures act as guides for human actions. They offer knowledge systems, moral schemas, rules and procedures that give shape to human realities. Ideally, such structures must mitigate the effects of sin and guide individuals in striving after justice, truth, love and peace. Hence, Marxism is not wrong in asserting that structures serve an important moral function. But sin has a direct impact on the coherency of the human will, and a direct bearing on its views of the long-term sustainability of social structures. Because desires, pride and the *libido dominandi* often trump virtue, we cannot conceive of structures as perfect responses to the impulses of the divine Spirit. Humans do not act in predictable or consistent ways, whilst power plays always feature in human interactions. The temptations of pride and the *libido dominandi* loom large in social interactions with the result that structures are often as depraved and self-conflicted as humans. In fact, Augustine considered the civil realm (*terrena civitas*) as plagued by self-love (*amor sui*), hubris (*superbia*), wrongful desire (*concupiscentia*) and a thirst for power (*libido dominandi*) (Van Wyk 2018:85).

The corruptibility of social structures requires that structures be continuously reshaped. Far from being a nihilist, Augustine stressed the importance of citizens taking moral responsibility for the virtuous exercise of power through the exercise of love (*caritas*) and practical wisdom (Gregory 2012:136). The Reformers emphasised the need for ongoing personal, ecclesiastical and social reform, and maintained that not only the individual will, but also the general social will must consistently and on an ongoing basis be redirected towards God. The main exponents of Reformed thinking did not advocate for structural reforms through violence. Whereas Marxism considered violence as a legitimate means in upending oppressive social structures, the Reformed tradition rejected revolutionary violence and advocated alternative measures of reform such as instilling virtues in society (Augustine and Calvin) limiting the power of rulers through social compacts (John Althusius) and balancing the exercise of power (Niebuhr). Whilst urging social reform, the Reformed tradition maintains that permanent resolutions to human propensities of pride, greed and the urge for power are not feasible and ultimately lies beyond the capacity of social structures (see Niebuhr 2013 [1932]:1–23).

The Reformed understanding of social reform is guided by a discernment of the spirit of the times and an assessment of the will of God in a specific situation. Although reformation can in some instances lead to the upending of structures, the Reformed tradition does not subscribe to anarchic attitudes, but encourages conduct guided by God's Spirit of truth, justice, love and peace (see Welker 2020:129–131). According to Scripture, the work of the Spirit involves more than

imparting the 'gift of life' and 'spirit' to the human being; it also involves regeneration, sanctification, vivification, reformation and renewal (see Jn 3, Rm 8, 1 Pt 1). In fact, Joel 3:1–5 and Acts 2:1–13 provide descriptions of events where the divine Spirit connected in a special way with the human spirit to effect changes in the course of human history. However, spiritual and moral renewals do not have to be understood as events in which 'a numinous transcendent power descends upon creatures from the beyond like wind and rain' Welker (2020:21). Renewals of the human spirit can also occur in much more concrete ways. Welker (2020:25) refers to an event in Warsaw 1979 when Pope John Paul II invoked and summoned the Spirit of God to free Poland. This summoning galvanised a freedom impulse amongst the people of Warsaw, and contributed to the eventual overthrow of Communism in Poland. Although Pope John Paul II certainly believed that the Spirit of God is behind the extraordinary events, the response elicited, did not 'come about in some ghostlike indeterminate fashion'; rather people were emotionally moved and felt inspired to 'act anew and indeed in new ways' (Welker 2020:26). Following Durkheim (cf. Bellah 1973:xlii), one could describe events of spiritual and moral renewal as periods of 'collective effervescence' when a new spirit, outlook on life and *Zeitgeist* of respect for justice, truth, love and peace envelop masses of people. Such events of collective effervescence happen spontaneously; they cannot be traced back to simple 'cause and effect chains'; they are, in fact, multimodal and 'emergent' in nature.

Returning to the research question

This article probed the age-old sociological question about the relationship between human actions and social structures. It argued that structural-conflict theory tends to nurture harmful revolutionary moral attitudes and that the tenets of micro-interactionist theory are prone to moral relativism and moral apathy.

We now return to the question stated at the onset: How does a Reformed understanding of the relation between human actions and social structures address the moral difficulties created by the structural-conflict and micro-interactionist approaches? I conclude by answering the question in three short statements.

Firstly, the moral codes of social structures must not be reduced to relative mental constructs rooted in voluntarist or expedient human actions. They find their moral foundations in God who is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, who imparts spirit to human beings, and who give human beings a clear sense of truth, justice, love and peace through his Word, the person of Jesus Christ, the *sensus divinitatis* and the human conscience. Although moral responses to the impulses of the divine Spirit are never perfect and always in process, they remain important, because they are responses to God's will. Moral apathy and moral relativism set in when morality is disconnected from the Spirit of God who is the Sustainer of all things.

Secondly, the Reformed approach holds social structures in high esteem. They serve as useful tools in restraining the impact of the *libido dominandi* and in mitigating the self-conflicted nature of the human being. Revolutionary and anarchic attitudes that seek to upend and subvert social structures in the name of freedom, are resisting the orderly impulses provided by the divine Spirit. God is after all a God of order and peace (1 Cor 14:33)

Thirdly, the Reformed approach advocates moral realism and continuous social renewal. Like the human spirit, social structures are prone to inconsistency, internal conflicts, and power abuse. Always vulnerable to the ever-present danger of pride and the *libido dominandi*, structures have the propensity to degenerate into oppressive powers that subject and coerce the human will. If not continuously reformed and reconstructed, they may evolve into oppressive powers. Being created in the image of God and being animated by God's Spirit, human beings must attempt to reform, reconstruct and reshape structures through virtuous actions.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

N.V. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

The National Research Foundation of South Africa contributed to the funding of this research. The grant number is 132307.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency or the author.

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