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Questioning structurism as a new standard for social scientific explanations

Abstract

As the literature on Critical Realism in the social sciences is growing, it is about time to analyse whether a new, acceptable standard for social scientific explanations is being introduced. In order to do so, I will discuss the work of Christopher Lloyd, who analysed contributions of social scientists that rely on (what he called) a structurist ontology and a structurist methodology, and advocated a third option in the methodological debate between individualism and holism. I will suggest modifications to three points of Lloyd's analysis, without abandoning Lloyd's intuitions completely. Firstly, the intuitions of the structurist ontology can be made explicit in a different way, without loosing the individual-society dualism. Secondly, opting for a structurist ontology does not necessarily imply opting for a structurist methodology. Ontology and methodology are related, but not as strongly as Lloyd supposes. Thirdly, the idea of a complete explanation, present in the structurist methodology, confuses causation and explanation while denying the pragmatics of explanation. A broader spectrum of explanatory forms can be defended. Criticizing Lloyd on these three points will lead me to the defence of an explanatory pluralism, which I relate to a minimal ontology. The intention of this reconceptualisation of structurism (and related Critical Realist applications) is to broaden possible perspectives on the explanatory praxis of the social scientist, and to question the reunification of the social sciences. It will also stipulate which form of interdisciplinarity is preferable for the social sciences.

Introduction: Critical realism in the social sciences

In recent years, the literature concerning Critical Realism in the social sciences has been growing fast For example, the work of Margaret Archer (1995) is very influential in social theory and sociology; in economics, we have Tony Lawson (1997), Steve Fleetwood (ed.)(1999) and others; in international relations theory, you can find David Dessler (1989), Walter Carlsnaes (1992), Heikki Patomäki (2002), etc.; and in history and historical sociology we have Christopher Lloyd (1993). Without claiming that we are dealing with a completely homogeneous movement, these different contributions do have a lot in common (as they often state explicitly themselves) and they suggest that a new model or standard for the social sciences is emerging. In order to start evaluating this new standard, I will scrutinize the work of one of the contributors, namely Christopher Lloyd. The ontological and methodological intuitions of Lloyd's structurism will be identified, and I will point to some of structurism's weaknesses and propose possible reconceptualisations. I have chosen to analyse Lloyd, as he pays a great deal of attention to actual social scientific practice in developing his analytical framework. Based on the discussion of Lloyd's contribution, I will end this article with evaluating the possibilities and problems of (current applications of) Critical Realism in relation to the idea of unifying social scientific explanation and its relation to the reunification of the social sciences and/or interdisciplinarity. My critiques, and the reconceptualisations I will propose for Lloyd's structurism, may also be taken into account in light of other current applications of Critical Realism in the social sciences.

1. Christopher Lloyd's structurism

Christopher Lloyd has developed an important contribution to the ongoing debate over the conceptualisation of the relation between structure and agency in social science (cf. Lloyd, 1986, 1989a, 1989b, 1991 and 1993). After an impressive analysis of the presuppositions on ontology and methodology made by some major social scientists,

mainly social historians and historical sociologists, Lloyd identifies a common intuition of the relation between actor and society in the works of such successful social scientists as Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Robert Brenner, Theda Skocpol, Reinhard Bendix, Norbert Elias, Alain Touraine, Philip Abrams, etc. In order to describe the common intuitions in the works of these social scientists, Lloyd introduces the term *structurism.* The ontological intuition of *structurism* is defined as follows:

> 'A **structurist ontology** directs attention to the structuring interactions between (on one hand) individual and collective human beliefs, intentions, choices, and actions and (on the other) the externally real enabling and constraining structural conditions of thought and action. In this model *social structures are the emergent ensemble of rules, roles, relations, and meanings* that people are born into and which organize and are reproduced and transformed by their thought and action. It is people who generate structures over time and initiate change, not the society itself, but their generative activity and initiative are socially constrained. This ontology denies the legitimacy of the action/society polarity that the others are based on and attempts to conceptualize action and society as being an interpenetrating duality in the sense advocated by Jean Piaget and Anthony Giddens. There is a duality of causal power in this model, with humans having structuring power and structures having enabling and constraining power.' (Lloyd, 1993:42-43, my bold)

Lloyd links this ontological structurism with a methodological structurism. (I will describe the methodological structurism later.) While I agree with the common ontological intuition Lloyd perceives in the work of the named social scientists, I want to point out that there are other ways to make this intuition explicit. Identifying alternative ontological conceptualisations will oblige us to question the way Lloyd connects a methodological structurism to his ontological structurism and to discuss his ideas on methodological structurism. In doing this, I will develop three modifications of Lloyd's conceptualisation of the intuition of structurism:

(1) In section two, I will analyse the debate between individualists and holists₁ in a more sophisticated way than what is generally offered in the literature, and I will show that *the*

intuition of a structurist ontology could be conceptualised differently.[2] In section three, the modified conceptualisation of the ontology will be presented.

(2) The seemingly '*natural*' *connection between ontological structurism and methodological structurism* will be discussed in section four. Here I will argue for a broadening of the possible connections between ontology and methodology, instead of the strict connection presented by Lloyd.

(3) Building on the results of section four, I will then show in section five how *the methodological structurism should be further developed or could be replaced* by a methodological or explanatory pluralism, and I will discuss the advantages it gives us. In section six, I will point to some consequences of my modifications for the role of structurism (and related Critical Realist applications) as a new standard for social scientific explanations, and the relation with the unity of the social sciences and interdisciplinarity.

2. Analysing the debate between individualists and holists$_1$

Dealing with the eternal debate between individualism and holism$_1$, Lloyd draws the following conclusion:

> 'The point here is that any sociological and historical discourse has to come to terms with the general relationship of individual action to social structure, something that radical individualists and holists fail to do. I shall be arguing that structurism is **the only viable** ontology and methodology.' (Lloyd, 1986: 18, my bold)

Lloyd's conviction that only *one* viable ontology and methodology represents an alternative to individualism and holism$_1$ is partially explained by the conflation of

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[2] I will distinguish holism$_1$ from holism$_2$. Holism$_1$ is *holism* as used by Lloyd as the opposite of individualism (I will use the term *collectivism* as a synonym of this holism$_1$). Holism$_2$ is used as the opposite of atomism, and will be defined in section two.

questions in the debate between holists$_1$ and individualists. This conflation paralysed the debate for many years, reducing it to a discussion between two camps. The introduction of *structurism* as a third alternativeis certainly a step forward in the debate. Notwithstanding, I think it would be fruitful to reconsider the debate on ontology by distinguishing at least two questions that were always conflated, and as such show that there is more than the one viable ontology and methodology that Lloyd calls structurism. The two questions that should be distinguished are:[3]

(1) Is individual agency determined or compromised by higher, aggregated structural factors? If the answer is yes, you choose collectivism, if not: individualism.

(2) Are mutual relations a condition *sine qua non* for actors in their constitution? If yes, you choose – what we will call – holism$_2$, if not: atomism.

Instead of an individualist versus holist$_1$ debate in ontology, we will now have a debate between atomistic individualists, holistic individualists and defenders of collectivism. In what follows, I will argue that the holistic individualism is a possible conceptualisation of the intuitions present in the work of the social historians and sociologists analysed by Lloyd, and that this holistic individualism can be an alternative to ontological structurism. My goal in doing this, is, however, not to 'prove' that holistic individualism is the only correct ontology, but rather to question the idea of starting with identifying an ontology, considered as the only viable and correct one, and then building up a methodology. I will develop this point in the following sections. For now, it is important to consider that I take holistic individualism to be just one possible ontology, among others. Questioning the whole idea of the metaphysical debate (an unending battle of intuitions) between individualists and collectivists and the decisive weight given to it, will be done in sections four to six (see also Van Bouwel, 2003).

Let us now deal with the two questions concerning individualism and collectivism I have distinguished above. Dealing with the first question, I will – just like Lloyd – reject radical collectivism (Lloyd's *holism*). Radical ontological collectivists ascribe a distinctive reality to institutional or aggregate features and hold that they act downwards, as it were, on individuals: they pre-empt or predetermine what individuals do. For them,

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[3] This distinction was developed by Philip Pettit (1993).

social structures relate to individual action and interaction as an emergent factor, having an autonomous status. My argument to reject this collectivism will be developed in section three. So my answer to question (1) will be negative: individual agency is not determined or compromised by higher, aggregated structural factors.

Dealing with question (2) brings us to the distinction between atomists and holists$_2$, the question of the relation between individuals themselves: Are people's social relationships with one another a condition *sine qua non* for their constitution as subjects and actors? Atomists, on the one hand, ascribe a minimal importance to the relation with others, stating that all the capacities characteristic of our kind could be developed in total isolation from others. Holists$_2$, on the other hand, consider social relationships as being constitutive for the development of distinctive capacities of the subject or actor. They take people's social relations to one another to be essential to their being rule-followers, and, therefore, to their being thinkers, speakers and agents (cf. Pettit, 1993: 111-112). In my view, this holism$_2$ expresses part of Lloyd's intuition of structurism as expressed in the definition quoted in section one. Holism$_2$ points to (part of) the '*ensemble of rules, roles, relations, and meanings* that people are born into and which organize and are reproduced and transformed by their thought and action' (Lloyd, 1993: 42-43). Contrary to Lloyd, however, I would not speak of this *ensemble* as *emergent* and being the social structure, as this suggests a merely vertical relation (structure-individual), where holism$_2$ focuses on horizontal relations (individual-individual). In section three, I will spell out which problems – concerning causation – appear by only focussing on the vertical relation and considering social structures as emergent.[4]

Notwithstanding the conflation of vertical and horizontal relations in the conceptualisation of ontological structurism, I take holistic individualism to be arguably close to Lloyd's intuitions. Firstly, it avoids presenting the individual as being dominated by a 'supra-individual system with powers of self-regulation' (Lloyd, 1991: 191) as collectivism (or holism$_1$) does. Secondly, unlike atomistic individualism, it accounts for the fact that the individual is constituted by interactions with other individuals, which is

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[4] Lloyd (1989a: 461) defends the existence of 'structural powers of both strictly physical and **emergent** kinds' (my bold).

the central condition for thought and meaningful action. Therefore, I take this holistic individualism as a possible alternative to ontological structurism, while respecting the intuitions present in the work of the historians and sociologists Lloyd is referring to.

3. Social ontology and causal fundamentalism

In this section, I will present an ontological framework, called *causal fundamentalism,* which supports our reconceptualisation of the idea of structurism, i.e. the holistic individualism. Causal fundamentalism states that the higher level causal regularities – chemical, biological, psychological, and social – supervene on the regularities and background conditions that obtain at the physical level. Therefore, all non-physical causal regularities supervene on the regularities and related conditions that actually obtain at the physical level (Pettit, 1993: ch. 3 and 5).

I will start with a short description of the terms supervenience and emergence (as I interpret them while noting that there are innumerable interpretations of these terms), and then show how some problems in the use of emergence, as used by Lloyd, can be avoided. *Supervenience* makes a claim about the relation between two levels of analysis. It states that if two states (or properties, events, or any relata of the supervenience relation) are identical with respect to their descriptions at the lower level, then they cannot differ at the higher level. Consequently, two things cannot be in the very same physical property P_x, at the lower level, without thereby being in the same state S at the higher level. Therefore, there is a one-many mapping between the supervenient state and the physical states. Supervenience puts emphasis on the dependency of the lower level, and denies the autonomy of higher-level aggregates.[5] *Emergence* must be understood as the following claim: When lower-level states interact, a certain level of complexity, or a higher-level state, could be achieved. This will allow for genuinely novel characteristics to appear and lead an autonomous (separate from the lower level) existence, having their

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[5] This does not automatically imply that supervenience entails reducibility, cf. Harold Kincaid (1997: 70-74).

own ontological autonomy, and exerting causal power upon other states. As a result, we are presented with a form of dualism: the higher level has another 'nature' than the lower level. This is a stronger claim than supervenience; it states that a higher-level entity or property can be realized by different lower-level combinations of entities or properties (this exemplifies multiple realizability, e.g. anger can be realized by different physical states or energy combinations of our brain), but the higher-level entity has no causal autonomy. As already mentioned, Lloyd relies on this idea of emergence to elaborate his structurism.[6]

Let us now compare my proposal of causal fundamentalism with Lloyd's structurism in which he refers to an emergent social structure. Endorsing the ontology of causal fundamentalism implies that there cannot be a conflict between non-physical regularities, such as the conflict between intentional and structural regularities. Ontological discussions in the social sciences, between ontological individualists and collectivists are precisely based on the assumed conflict between the intentional and the structural. However, seeing as the underlying physical regularities form a coherent set, and their fixation means that the intentional and structural regularities are both wholly in place, then those two sets of regularities cannot conflict with one another (Pettit, 1993: 152). Then we must reject ontological views that oppose individual and structural powers, views that claim that one level (be it the individual or the structural) overrides the other. If they were to go in different directions, then the physical powers would be acting against themselves.

That there cannot be a conflict between the intentional and the structural, should not be understood in a straightforward, common sense way. For example, it does not imply that a citizen of a state will never have a conflict with the state. It only claims that the state supervenes on all the citizens of that state and that there cannot be a (causal) conflict between the entire citizen body and the state at a certain point in time. A single citizen can always be constrained by a neighbour or a fellow citizen. A similar reasoning goes for structures that were created in the past. The realization of those structures in the present can be understood at the individual level (ultimately at the physical level), and as

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[6] Unfortunately, Lloyd does not define how he understands *emergence*.

such we do not have to accept downward causation (i.e. from the structural to the individual level).

The conclusion of adhering to causal fundamentalism is that, in the social sciences, ontological individualism is right after all. This is not because there are no structural regularities, and not because intentional regularities override social-structural regularities; it is because, as causal fundamentalism tells us, physical powers fix the pattern of powers and regularities that rule at all levels; therefore, there must be a harmony between levels. 'It cannot be the case that structural powers ever cause the intentional to be suspended or ever deprive individuals of the autarchy associated with the rule of the intentional.' (Pettit, 1993: 152) Hence, I reject ontological collectivism as it considers aggregate features as having an autonomous status, and holds that they act downwards, .

Comparing the ontology of causal fundamentalism with Lloyd's structurism, we must place emphasis on the vagueness of Lloyd's ontology, especially concerning his idea of *emergent* social structures. This emergence risks introducing a top-down causation – autonomous structures acting downwards, in conflict with individuals – or at least leaves us with a vague concept of causation.[7] Therefore, I prefer the ontology of causal fundamentalism to structurism in order to understand the social structure in a conceptually coherent way. Causal fundamentalism will turn out to be illuminating in at least three ways. First, it clearly distinguishes the individual level from the structural level, and introduces a concept of causation that is less vague than Lloyd's**.** Second, we can develop a more sophisticated framework of possible explanatory strategies, as we take many levels (from the physical to the biological, psychological and the social) into account in the ontological framework. Third, it offers us the possibility to analyse analogies between the structure-individual debate in the philosophy of history, and the mind-body debate in the philosophy of mind. Although I have a preference for one of the two ontological frameworks, I do want to repeat, however, that our main purpose is to illustrate that the intuition of structurism can be conceptualised into an alternative

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[7] On top-down versus bottom-up causation and its relation with supervenience, see: Jeroen Van Bouwel and Erik Weber (2002a).

ontological framework We do not want to claim that we can *a priori* decide what the best ontological framework is, as this is an empirical issue. The best we can do is to develop a minimal ontological framework that does not obstruct empirical research in a decisive way. The proceeding sections will deal with what follows from the proposed ontology of causal fundamentalism concerning methodological (or explanatory) strategies, and they will elaborate on the three advantages enumerated above.

4. Connecting ontology and methodology

To defend an *ontological* (holistic) individualism does not necessarily entail a preference for *methodological* individualism. Although Lloyd states that '[t]he three ontologies of individualism (or aggregationalism), holism, and structurism have given rise to three methodologies' (Lloyd, 1991: 189), I am convinced that the seemingly inevitable link between ontological and methodological individualism (and between ontological and methodological structurism, and ontological and methodological collectivism) is one of the causes of the ongoing debate between methodological individualists and their opponents. The link is not inevitable, nor 'natural': adherence to ontological individualism does not entail methodological individualism, as I will point out later. However, this does not imply that adherence to ontological (holistic) individualism and causal fundamentalism has no methodological impact whatsoever. Seeing as there can never be a conflict between intentional and structural regularities, the ontological view of causal fundamentalism clearly has a methodological impact. When it comes to formulating explanations of a structural kind, we must be able to see, 'in our intentional psychology of people, why the type of linkage involved is likely to be reliable. But the capacity to see this does not mean that for any structural (or historicist) explanation we offer, we will be in a position to tell a proximate intentional story, even an intentional story of a quantificational or statistical kind.' (Pettit, 1993: 263)

Although we cannot deny the impact of ontological conceptualisations, our views on explanatory options in the social sciences have been dictated too long by our views on

ontology and causality. Many contemporary contributions, especially those of the Critical Realists, focus mainly on how the relation between agency and structure has to be understood ontologically. Once that point has been understood, the whole methodological debate seems to be solved. But while causation and explanation are not clearly distinguished in ordinary or non-philosophical thought, it is important to be aware of the distinction in philosophy, and to explore the different explanatory options that follow from a conception of causality. Too much weight has been put on the ontological debate, which has led to the neglect of the debate on methodology and explanations. In the *philosophy of mind,* there are some people using a similar emphasis to avoid becoming paralysed in metaphysical or ontological debates, and they are choosing to pay greater attention to the explanatory praxis. For example, Tyler Burge states the following about the worries that exist in the *philosophy of mind* on mental causation:

'But what interests me more is the very existence of the worries. I think that they are symptomatic of a mistaken set of philosophical priorities. Materialist metaphysics has been given more weight than it deserves. Reflection on explanatory practice has been given too little.' (Burge, 1993: 97)

A similar idea is defended by Lynne Rudder Baker:

'Given standard metaphysical and methodological assumptions, not only has the problem of mental causation proved to be intractable but even worse: the same reasoning that leads to scepticism about mental causation also leads to scepticism about almost all supposed "upper-level" causation, and hence to skepticism about explanations that mention "upper-level" properties, including explanations offered by the special sciences and much of physics. Of course, pointing out such skeptical conclusions, even of this magnitude, is not a refutation of the metaphysical assumptions that generate them. But skeptical consequences may well be a motivation for taking a different philosophical tack. (…) My proposal is to perform a methodological about-face. Instead of beginning with a full-blown metaphysical picture, we should begin with a range of good explanations, scientific and commonsensical. (…) Although my proposal has a strong pragmatic cast, it is by no means an anti-realist

suggestion. I am not equating what is real with what is needed for explanations and predictions. The point is, rather, that we have no better access reality than what is required for cognitive success, construed broadly enough to include what is cognitively required for achieving goals in both science and everyday life.' (Rudder Baker, 1993: 94-95)

This change of focus will make us abandon the seemingly inevitable connection between ontology and methodology, and it will broaden possible connections between these two areas. The dominant methodological individualism relies on an ontological individualism and prescribes that explanations should refer to the intentional attitudes of individuals or other (non-intentional) facts about individuals as explanans. Although we do rely on ontological individualism as well, we will also allow explanations on a social or structural level. These structural explanations explain social facts by invoking other social facts, and they do not refer to individuals. In the next section, this explanatory pluralism will be developed and compared with Lloyd's methodological structurism.

5. Methodological structurism and explanatory pluralism

After having introduced holistic individualism and the ontology of causal fundamentalism, thus illustrating how the intuition of structurist ontology could be alternatively made explicit, and having shown that the connection between ontology and methodology has often been understood too narrowly, I will now develop the alternative conceptualisation of *methodological* structurism. Lloyd describes this methodological structurism as follows:

'Methodological structurism approaches explanation by developing concepts of the separate real existence yet mutual interdependence of individuals and institutional structures (...). Structures qua structures have structural properties such that those properties are not merely the aggregate of the powers and behaviour of the individual people who are supposed to constitute them. On the other hand, those structural properties are not independent of the structuring practices of people. Thus methodological structurism

is explicitly based on an ontology of the social that recognizes two nodes of causal power.'
(Lloyd, 1993: 46)

From this description we can derive that methodological structurism follows ontological structurism rather strictly.[8] Given ontological structurism, it is certainly possible to understand the idea of methodological structurism, although it is not defined very rigidly. According to Lloyd, 'structure and action, then, are not the poles of society but two moments in a dialectical duality.' (Ibid.) But how do we identify this 'dialectical duality' in our explanations? How should this 'dialectical duality' be expressed in the formulation of explanations?

It seems to me that this dialectical duality, or 'the interpenetrating duality' (Lloyd, 1991: 190), as a methodological guideline risks making an error similar to what Margaret Archer has called the Fallacy of Conflation:

'Thus when discussing "structure" or "culture" in relation to "agency" I am talking about a relationship between two aspects of social life. However intimately they are intertwined (...) these are none the less analytically distinct. Few would disagree with this characterization of social reality as Janus-faced: indeed too many have concluded too quickly that the task is therefore how to look at both faces of the same medallion at once. It is precisely this methodological notion of trying to peer at the two simultaneously which is resisted here. (...) [This] foregoes the possibility of examining the interplay between them over time. (...) Any form of conceptualization which prevents examination of this interplay should therefore be resisted.'[9]

Given this risk (and putting aside the discussion of whether Lloyd actually commits the Fallacy of Conflation or not), we have to examine the interplay by clearly disentangling

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[8] Lloyd (1991: 213): 'This means these writers have a realist and structurist ontology of society as consisting fundamentally of institutionalized social relations, a theory of persons as social agents who structure the social world through time, and, consequently (sic!), a methodological structurist approach to explanation.'

[9] Margaret Archer (1988: XII). The same defence of analytical dualism and against duality and conflation was already developed in (Archer, 1982: 455-483 and especially 458) as an argument against the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens. We follow Archer in her critique on the Fallacy of Conflation, but not in her conceptualisation of the relation between structure and agency (cf. Archer, 1995).

the threads of structure and agency. This will prevent us from conflating the 'two modes of causal power' (Lloyd, 1993:46), it will oblige us to be explicit and clear about the relation between the two, and it will clarify both the importance of agency and the analysis of structure. Depending on your interest or motivation you can either choose to focus on the individual level (the agency level) or on the social-structural level, or you can give an account of both levels; different sorts of interesting explanations are thus to be found at different, non-physical levels. These non-physical levels offer us causally relevant information that is not available from physical explanations, and these different non-physical sorts of explanation offer us different forms of information. On both the intentional and the structural level, explanations with causal relevance and explanatory interest can be found: Hence, the opposition between methodological individualism and collectivism is false, and should arguably be replaced by an explanatory pluralism.[10]

To be more concrete, imagine social scientists explaining a revolution. Their explanation can be formulated at different levels by referring to social structures, referring to the properties of individuals, or by referring to a neurophysiological basis or a genetic disposition. You have to choose the most adequate level of explanation for your purpose, for answering the questions asked (given the context). In order to compare revolutions, for instance, you can, following Theda Skocpol, choose a structural explanation, and it may seem to be the best approach if comparison is your goal, as it would not be economic (though not impossible) to provide an explanation by merely referring to the actions of individuals. Some individualist explanations are cumbersome; sometimes complexity might defeat the goal of explanation. If you want to explain the specific path of one revolution, it could be more illuminating to provide an individual explanation. If you are interested in knowing why a human being revolts in the first place, you could provide an evolutionary, genetic explanation. Different epistemic

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[10] We have developed this idea of explanatory pluralism extensively in Weber and Van Bouwel (2002), using the erotetic model of explanation and distinguishing different explanatory questions that can be asked about the same social phenomenon S, compare: Why does S have property P?; Why does S have property P, rather than property P'?; Why does S have property P, while object *b* has property P'?; Why does S have property P at time t, but property P' at time t'? You do not explain S, but answer an explanatory question about S, and those answers/explanations might be very different according to the questions asked. See also: Van Bouwel and Weber (2002b).

interests and motivations lead to different questions and answers/explanations of the same social phenomenon. The (one and only) explanation does not exist or (if it exists) is not the most economic one to provide. Hence, I avoid the reductionist claim that lower-level explanations are always better explanations.

Here we part from Lloyd's methodology, as the thrust of his argument is to try to unify explanation around a common basic approach where no difference exists between an individual and a structural approach, for all explanations should be structurist (a 'combination' of the structural and the individual understood in a structurist way) (Lloyd, 1989a: 456). Defending this kind of methodology, in which the dialectical relation between agency and structure is reflected in structurist explanations, leads to defending 'complete' explanations (Lloyd, 1989a: 482).[11] *Completeness*, in Lloyd's view, depends on an 'objective' world that could be truthfully and completely described. I claim that it is Lloyd's view on causation that imposes this (too demanding) view on explanations; causation should not be confused with explanation.

Completeness of explanations, in my view, depends on the epistemic needs of the researcher and the questions involved. Formulating explanations consists of combining the causally relevant components (ontological) with what is pragmatically relevant (the parts of the causal history that have to be mentioned), and as such it is always connected to knowledge-interests. An explanation will always be a selection of an ideal, complete causal account. Therefore, if structurists would reply to me that the explanations taken on their own (individual or structural) are incomplete or insufficient to provide a full picture of social phenomena, I can only answer that any explanation is incomplete given the standards of the structurists.

Replacing methodological structurism through explanatory pluralism does not respect Lloyd's intention to enhance the unification of the social sciences by unifying

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[11] This idea of a complete explanation existing of an agency-part and a structure-part, does appear in many applications of Critical Realism, e.g. David Dessler (1989: 453) states the following: 'In Aristotelian terms, structure is a material cause rather than an efficient cause of behavior. Structure alone explains only the possibilities (and impossibilities) of action. (…) A complete explanation must appeal not only to the material but also the efficient causes of action, which can be located only within a theory of the agents.' Another example is Alexander Wendt (1987: 362), in an article very much in the Critical Realist tradition: 'they [structural and agent-based analyses] are both necessary elements of a complete explanation of social action.'

explanation around a common basic approach. The connection of methodological structurism with successful social scientists, as done by Lloyd, suggested a norm; a standard of ultimate explanations was introduced. I have defended that we cannot restrict our methodology to that very demanding and complete explanation. However, this does not imply that unification will be replaced by an *anything goes* approach: firstly, attention should be paid to the questions asked and to the epistemic interests involved (this can form a basis for rational discussion); secondly, maintaining the minimal ontological framework of causal fundamentalism ensures non-contradiction between different levels of explanation. As such, the old debate between a one-sided methodological individualism and a one-sided methodological collectivism is replaced by a new debate. This new debate contrasts a monistic approach, structurism, which relies on Critical Realism and puts new limits on social inquiry, with a pluralistic approach which relies on a non-reductive physicalism and refers to the impossibility of an ideal complete explanation.

This shift from methodological structurism to explanatory pluralism implies the following differences for social scientific practice: (a) that several of the existing forms of explanation in the social sciences can be considered compatible (to the extent that they live up to our ontological framework), and that they should not necessarily be restyled to a new structurist form of explanation; (b) we avoid introducing a very demanding standard for explanations in the social sciences;[12] (c) more attention will be paid to the epistemic interests at stake and their implications for explanatory practice, where different explanatory requests concerning the same social phenomenon lead to different forms of explanation (as such, giving up the idea of providing a 'complete' or 'full' picture of a social phenomenon).

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[12] Avoiding creating expectations similar to the ones created by the introduction of the Hempelian (Covering Law) standard of explanation.

6. Current applications of critical realism, a new explanatory standard and the reunification of the social sciences

Previous research on the ontological and methodological points of view in current (often-quoted) applications of Critical Realism, in Archer (1995), Carlsnaes (1992), Dessler (1989) and Lawson (1997, 1999), has lead me to identify two common features of these viewpoints (cf. Van Bouwel, 2003 and Van Bouwel, 2004):

(a) The agent/structure debate, and debates between individualists and collectivists, can be solved by spelling out a priori their ontological relation. Debates between individualists and collectivists are dealt with in a very general way by many advocates of the Critical Realist approach in the social sciences; they commonly replace individualism and collectivism in their respective social scientific disciplines with a version of the Transformative Model of Social Activity. Secondly, the idea of emergent properties is assumed. It is striking that contributions made in the different social sciences are interchangeable, which shows that the actual practice and ontological presuppositions of the specific discipline are not seriously taken into account (Lloyd is an exception here). Rather than a priori defining how the social world functions, it could be more fruitful to start from empirical research. [13]

(b) *The methodological consequences of Critical Realism's ontology follow 'automatically', and hence do not have to be spelled out; the pragmatics of explanation are neglected completely.* A second common feature is the lack of attention paid to the form of explanations and to methodology in general. Margaret Archer, for instance, couples her ontological realism with a methodological realism, but does not develop the latter extensively. One of the very few times she mentions the *methodological* component is in the following quote:

'Just as Individualism and Holism represented social ontologies whose commitments to what constitutes the social world then issued in programmatic injunctions about how it

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[13] The actual state of the social sciences deserves more attention, cf. 'The proponents of CR oscillate between a descriptive and a pre scriptive philosophy of science, and whilst they recently purport to accomplish the latter, I argue that their strength lies in the former.' (Baert, 1996: 514).

should be studied and explained (that is Methodological Individualism and Methodological Holism as conflationary programmes working in opposite directions), so the realist social ontology also enjoins a Methodological Realism which embodies its commitments to depth, stratification and emergence as definitional of social reality. Thus the burden of this chapter has been to demonstrate that given these fundamental tenets of realism, they can only be respected and reflected by a Methodological Realism which approaches structure and agency through "analytical dualism" – in order to be able to explore the linkages between these separate strata with their own autonomous, irreducible, emergent properties and which consequently repudiates any form of conflation (be it upwards, downwards or central) in social theorizing.' (Archer, 1995: 159)

This quote shows how Archer adopts a familiar way of reasoning on the relation between ontology and methodology: first, we decide (*a priori*) on a social ontology, and secondly, we spell out (and sometimes that does not even seem to be necessary) the methodological implications. However, is prescribing a methodology (based on an *a priori* ontology) and its ideal form of explanation the way to deal with the plurality of successful forms of explanation in the social sciences? It is obvious that Archer's methodology does not do much more than repeat the *a priori* ontological stance; this methodology states nothing about pluralism of explanations or about pragmatic factors, and nothing about the actual state of disciplines in which explanations are competing.[14] In the discussion of Lloyd's ideas, I have shown how a different ontological conceptualisation could be presented for the intuition of structurism. We must emphasize that we cannot work under the current applications of Critical Realism in the social sciences. These applications first define an ontology (to avoid the *Epistemic Fallacy*), and then presume that a methodology follows automatically. There are different ontological conceptualisations possible (engaging in eternal metaphysical debates about the exact *a priori* conceptualisation often misdirects energy to the wrong issue), and relying on just one possible conceptualisation narrows our views on methodology, and a narrow approach does not satisfactorily take into

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[14] I do have to mention, however, that Tony Lawson (1999) does recognize that the context and explanatory questions at hand do affect the explanatory practice, but he considers it as a second-order issue and does not acknowledge the consequences these pragmatic factors might have on the form of explanation (cf. Van Bouwel, 2004).

account actual social-scientific practice and its plurality. Therefore, we must maximize the number of explanatory forms permitted, and then analyse their compatibility within a minimal ontological framework.

As the focus has been on ontological issues within applications of Critical Realism, the methodological consequences are underdeveloped, and the ideal form of (complete) explanation, as present in Critical Realists' contributions, is at odds with the plurality we find in the explanatory practice of social scientists. I hope future contributions will shine more light on these issues, particularly by accepting or refuting some of the reconceptualisations of Lloyd's structurism I have introduced above.

In the introduction, I have mentioned the growing body of literature on the benefits of adopting Critical Realism in the social sciences. After our analysis of Lloyd's structurism and the general remarks on Critical Realists' contributions I have just mentioned, we might raise some questions about the idea of reunifying the social sciences under the banner of this 'new' ontology and methodology. Lloyd, for instance, states, under the heading of *Towards the Reunification of the Social Studies*:

'If their practice were to be based on the realist-relational approach it would provide a framework for simultaneously explaining particular acts, events, patterns of behaviour, consciousness, and structural change. (…) It is because of the deeper relation of partly intentional behaviour to both the given structural conditions of behaviour and the production, reproduction, and transformation of structures, that action-oriented and structure-oriented history can be united on a more fundamental level. Such a unified science would ideally then incorporate all the existing empirical and theoretical social and historical studies.' (Lloyd: 1993:195)

Therefore, arguing in line with his idea of unifying explanation around a common basic approach, Lloyd defends his structurist approach as the way to overcome the intellectual division of labour in studying the social world. By developing a *via media* as a synthesis of individualism and collectivism, Lloyd wants to introduce unidisciplinarity, erasing the

borders between the different social scientific disciplines.[15] Following my critique of Lloyd's explanatory model, I claim that this unidisciplinarity is not the right approach, as it imposes a standard (closely linked to the idea of a complete explanation) that does not take into account the plurality of epistemic interests (and the difference these interests imply for the explanatory information that is required), nor does it account for the plurality of existing forms of research and explanation existing in the social sciences.

In line with my defence of explanatory pluralism, and going against current applications of Critical Realism, I want to defend a form of interdisciplinarity that is driven by the research question (and underlying epistemic interests) at hand. This question-driven interdisciplinarity will make maximal use of existing explanatory forms and theories in different disciplines (depending on the question at hand), rather than following an imposed *a priori* ontological framework which narrows the use of existing forms of explanations and replaces it with an unrealistic standard of explanation, neglecting the impact of epistemic interests and pragmatics. Although the existence of (historically constructed) disciplines might not be ideal, unidisciplinarity itself cannot be our goal *per se*; we might evolve in that direction driven by research questions and answers, but not by imposing metaphysical schemes.

Conclusion

In order to improve understandings of the explanatory praxis in the social sciences, and to evaluate the contributions of Critical Realism to these issues, I have reconsidered the concept of structurism as introduced by Christopher Lloyd. Introducing holistic individualism and the underlying ontology of causal fundamentalism, I have reconceptualised the intuition of the structurist ontology in a way that offers us the possibility to look for analogies in the *philosophy of mind* and in other sciences. Secondly, I have reconsidered the relation between ontology and methodology, and

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[15] Unidisciplinarity in the social sciences might as well be reached by imposing a unifying concept (e.g. Wallerstein's (1991) historical system), or by elaborating a monism based on unifying theory (cf. *economics imperialism* based on neo-classical economics).

defended the view that a methodology should be non-contradictory with the ontology, which does not imply that a methodology is completely defined by spelling out an ontology. Thirdly, I have emphasized the importance of disentangling structure and agency in the explanatory praxis, and introduced an explanatory pluralism as an alternative to Lloyd's methodological structurism. I do not want to defend a new division of labour, nor do I wish to deny the interconnectedness required to explain structure and agency (which is expressed in the supervenience relation). What I do want to emphasize with the explanatory pluralism is that explanatory progress depends on the questions asked; therefore, it depends on the chosen level on which your explanations can differ; both structural and individualist explanations are acceptable and indispensable.

In order to analysethe variety of explanations provided by social scientists, and in order to improve the practice of explaining, an *explanatory framework* has to be developed, within which the interests and related questions of a researcher steer him to the best explanation. This framework is a necessary support to the idea of a pluralism that counters the *anything goes* approach; it provides social scientists with an analytical instrument that makes their focus explicit in studying history and society in all their complexitywhile searching for the best explanation. It will, by relying on the reconceptualisation of ontological structurism, broaden possible perspectives of the explanatory praxis of the social scientist. In their present form, the applications of Critical Realism in the social sciences do not live up to these requirements, and ambitions to reunify the social sciences on a Critical Realist's basis should therefore be questioned.

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