

The Agent–Structure Problem and Institutional Racism

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My aim here is to demonstrate the relevance of meta-theoretical speculation to policy design and implementation through an examination of the agent–structure problem. I then apply this problem to the concept of institutional racism as developed in the Macpherson inquiry into the death and subsequent police (mis)investigation of black teenager Stephen Lawrence. When considered through the lens of the agent–structure problem, the account of institutional racism developed in the Macpherson inquiry still lacks a solid analysis of the structural causes that help explain the phenomenon. Policies developed on the basis of the account will necessarily fail to address some of the causes of institutional racism. Careful attention to the agent–structure problem can help illuminate potentially unexplored areas of the social field that might help in controlling or eradicating racism.

One of the most contentious elements of the Macpherson report into the death and subsequent police (mis)investigation of black teenager Stephen Lawrence was the notion of institutional racism.¹ It is contentious because the concept opens up the possibility that responsibility for racist acts may reside elsewhere in the social field than in the practices and intentions of individuals. Organisations, and perhaps even society itself, might be said to be racist, even if the individuals upon whose activity they depend were not. Underpinning the desire to understand how racist acts might be the result of non-racially motivated individuals is an abstract meta-theoretical problem that social theorists have been grappling with ever since reflection on the social and political world became a recognisable activity. Contemporary attempts to tackle this problem have labelled this ‘the agent–structure problem’ (Layder, 1994).²

The validity of theoretical debate on the agent–structure problem is generally accepted to reside in the fact that ‘every time we construct, however tentatively, a notion of social, political or economic causality we appeal, whether explicitly (or more likely) implicitly, to ideas about structure and agency’ (Hay, 1995, p. 189; see also Wendt, 1987). This means that most, if not all, empirical research already has an implicit solution to the agent–structure problem.

In this paper, I go further than this and argue that *all* social discourses, actions and practices are likewise predicated on such accounts. The agent–structure problem is not only a problem of concern to social and political theorists, but also constitutes part of the ontology of the social world. As such, positions on the agent–structure problem structure the social, economic and political arena. Once we understand the agent–structure problem as being a constitutive part of social life, we can see

how a more nuanced understanding of this problem can help highlight the limits and character of public discourse and policy implementation. Policies are formulated on the basis of beliefs about the characteristics of social entities, the relationships between them and notions of causality – issues that are integral to the agent–structure problem. In short, a more nuanced understanding of the agent–structure problem can help establish what must be the case in order for informed policy orientated towards emancipation (understood here as the eradication of racism) to be implemented. In order to make this argument, I will show how the agent–structure problem structured the account of institutional racism developed in the Macpherson report and how this social ontology limits the framing of policy recommendations.

The paper is structured in the following manner. In the first section, I provide a brief overview of what the agent–structure problem is and what it is not. Understanding how and why the agent–structure problem is constitutive of the social field requires an understanding of just what the scope of the problem is. In the second section, I show how particular understandings of the agent–structure problem structure public discourses that have political implications and policy-related consequences. I will do this through an examination of the account of institutional racism developed in the Macpherson report conducted through the lens of the agent–structure problem. Ultimately, I conclude that, despite the bold attempt to do otherwise, the account of institutional racism developed in the report reduces to a form of methodological individualism and hence fails to adequately locate the structural sources of institutional racism (Anthias, 1999; Solomos, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1999). In the third section, having established the nature of the agent–structure problem and the methodological individualism that pervades the social field, I return to the agent–structure problem to draw some conclusions in relation to policy formation and, in particular, to the conditions of possibility for emancipation.

The Agent–Structure Problem

Fundamentally, the agent–structure problem is concerned with the nature of agents, structures and their interrelationships – an ontological problem. Certainly, epistemological and methodological issues arise, depending upon how this problem is resolved, but these are derivative of the prior ontological problem. Put simply, the agent–structure problem is one of how to develop an adequate theoretical account of social interaction that conceptualises the constituent elements of the social world and specifies their interrelationships. Traditionally, there have been two answers to this ontological aspect.

One, generally known as ‘methodological individualism’, tends to see everything social as a result of individual actions, driven by nothing more than subjective beliefs, desires and wants. A classic expression of this viewpoint is Mrs Thatcher’s dictum: ‘there is no such thing as society’ (*Woman’s Own*, 1987). Society, it is argued, consists only through the actions of individuals – structures ‘do not take to the streets’. The alternative approach is that of structuralism. For structuralists, individuals are seen as mere pawns of society – they are ‘cultural dopes’ causally

coerced into actions over which they have no control. Oft-cited examples of structuralist and individualist approaches are Emile Durkheim (1964) and Max Weber (1968).

Much of the recent debate on the agent–structure problem has been a systematic attempt to think through this problem, drawing extensively on a body of literature in social theory and philosophy that has likewise attempted to go beyond the Weberian and Durkheimian poles (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1977; Bhaskar, 1979). The discussion has raised a series of fundamental questions relating to the nature of agents, the nature of structures and the relationship between them.

However, understanding just what the problem involves is not an easy task, since the contributors to the agent–structure debate use differing terms to describe similar ideas, common terminology to refer to different issues and display a diversity of opinions over which elements of the agent–structure problem should be classified as ontological, epistemological or methodological (Friedman and Starr, 1997). It is not always clear that they are talking about the same problem.

In a sense, they are not. In fact, the agent–structure debate has tended to conflate four interrelated, but distinct, problems: (i) the question of the nature of agents and structures and their interrelationship – the agent–structure problem proper; (ii) the question of which level of analysis is most appropriate in terms of explaining social outcomes; (iii) the issue of the relative proportions of agential versus structural factors determining social outcomes; and (iv) the question of differing modes of investigation required to study agents and structures, respectively.

The first confusion is that relating to the appropriate levels of analysis and the agent–structure problem. David Singer's discussion of the levels of political analysis provides a good example of this confusion (Singer, 1961). He argued that, although analysis could be conducted in terms of levels, the analysis of one level could not be combined with that of another to give a full account.

Whether or not Singer's claim *vis-à-vis* level combinations is sound, it is clear that the level-of-analysis problem relates to the level at which we wish to base our explanation – we can focus our attention on individuals, bureaucracies, or states. Yet the specification of levels-of-analysis requires a prior understanding of what an individual or level is. In this way, the agent–structure problem makes possible the identification (or its rejection) of a level to base an explanation upon, and hence must be analytically prior to the level-of-analysis problem.

The second problem that is often confused with the agent–structure problem is that of the relative causal weighting attributable to factors in the social field. Are social outcomes best explained in terms of individual or structural properties? This understanding of the problem seems to suggest the agent–structure problem is simply one of deciding what proportions of agents and structures to put in the explanatory blender. The issue of causal factors, however, is an empirical not a theoretical question. Furthermore, the question of whether particular social outcomes are the result of agential or structural forces cannot be raised unless we have first attempted to resolve the agent–structure problem and hence cannot be integral to it. Structural theorists agree that an adequate explanation must be more structure

based than agent orientated. Individualist theories, of course, would reverse this prioritisation, favouring agential explanations over structural ones. The agent–structure problem, then, is not at all about the relative proportions of agential versus structural factors determining social outcomes, but about constructing theoretical accounts able to guide empirical research that can do justice to the chosen theoretical elements.

The third confusion arises over the question of differing modes of investigation required to study agents and structures, respectively. According to Martin Hollis and Steve Smith ‘there are always two stories to tell, one explanatory and the other interpretative, and ... they cannot finally be combined’ (Hollis and Smith, 1994, p. 244). This distinction may seem to be one of competing epistemological positions relating to understandings of the scientific method. Yet even if we begin with an *a priori* epistemological position such as Explanation = x (positivism perhaps), it makes no sense to argue that x (positivism) is applicable to the study of y (the social world) unless we have an account of y such that it may or may not be susceptible to study by x – that is, an answer to the agent–structure problem. So even here we can see that the distinction between Explanation and Understanding is based firmly on ontological considerations about the nature of the entities in the social world. Hollis and Smith endorse this view, arguing ‘that ontology is what counts in the end’ and that the two stories ‘stem from conflicting ontologies’ (Hollis and Smith, 1991, p. 410). In this way, the ontological question of the nature of agents and structures and their interrelationship is prior to the question of the mode of investigation required to study them.

Defined in this ontological manner, the agent–structure problem, or some resolution of it, can be seen to be integral to all research. All research requires some notion of its constituent units and the relations between them. But more than this, I argue that a position on the agent–structure problem structures the social field beyond the confines of the academy. Public and private discussions on all manner of social issues invoke social ontologies and thus the agent–structure problem appears here too. The agent–structure problem is implicit in political practice.

The Macpherson Report and Institutional Racism

Concepts used within academic theories permeate the social field. A recent and highly controversial attempt to rethink a social ontology can be seen in the Macpherson report, which attempts to identify what went wrong with the Stephen Lawrence police inquiry (Macpherson, 1999). The report makes a set of policy recommendations in the hope of bringing about change in race relations in Britain – recommendations based on a particular understanding of the social world. The report, which took advice from a range of sources including academics, grapples with some difficult conceptual, policy and political issues surrounding racism in British society. It attempts to identify a social object beyond the activities of individuals that may be complicit in racist practices. The report defines this as institutional racism, which is regarded as ‘pervasive not only within the police force but

in other institutions such as the criminal justice and education systems' (Anthias, 1999, 1.3).

The willingness of Macpherson to accept the existence of institutional racism has to be placed in the context of the rejection of the idea in the 1981 Scarman report into the Brixton disturbances (Scarman, 1981; Bridges, 1999). Lord Scarman rejected the existence of institutional racism (Scarman, 1981, p. 135):

'Institutional racism' does not exist in Britain: but racial disadvantage and its nasty associate racial discrimination have not yet been eliminated. They poison minds and attitudes: they are, and so long as they remain, will continue to be, a potent factor of unrest.

Scarman's rejection of institutional racism was based on a very particular understanding of it: 'It was alleged to me ... that Britain is an institutionally racist society. If by that is meant that it is a society which knowingly as a matter of policy, discriminates against black people, I reject the allegation' (Scarman, 1981, p. 11).

Scarman's understanding of institutional racism is important, because it was the account that underpinned Sir Paul Condon's (the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police) rejection of it in his evidence to the Lawrence inquiry. In a classic statement of methodological individualism, Condon insisted that Scarman's position could be taken to imply that *all* his officers discriminated *deliberately* against black and other ethnic minority people (Macpherson, 1999, (Part 2, Day 3, pp. 290–1), 6.46):

... if this Inquiry labels my Service as institutionally racist the average police officer, the average member of the public will assume the normal meaning of those words. They will assume a finding of conscious, wilful or deliberate action or inaction to the detriment of ethnic minority Londoners. They will assume the majority of good men and women who come into policing ... go about their daily lives with racism in their minds and in their endeavour.

Although Condon was prepared to accept the danger of 'institutionalised racism', because of his underlying social ontology he did not accept that the Metropolitan Police were institutionally racist – a position that exasperated Macpherson and one that the report claimed was based on unfounded fears (Macpherson, 1999, 6.24). Of course, once the report was published with an account of institutional racism that differed substantially from that of Scarman, Condon was prepared to accept it, arguing that it set a new standard that could be applied to all institutions (*Guardian*, 1999).

David Mason addressed the issue of Scarman's rejection of institutional racism in a paper written soon after the Scarman report was published (Mason, 1982). He noted the implicit individualism and argued for 'the development of more adequate theoretical tools capable of comprehending the interplay of social structures and human action, material conditions and ideas, in human social life which we call "race relations"' (Mason, 1982, p. 44; see also Sivanandan, 1985). The explicit recognition of institutional racism within the Macpherson report might suggest a

move beyond the individualism identified by Mason. However, while the account of institutional racism developed in the Macpherson report is an improvement on Scarman's outright rejection of it, in the final analysis it is still a form of methodological individualism.

This is not in any way to belittle the report. To read Chapter Six of the report, where the notion of institutional racism is comprehensively discussed, is to observe Weber and Durkheim in open battle. The need to name and define a series of social facts beyond the activities of individual police officers seems inexorable in the wake of Stephen Lawrence's death. Nonetheless, the pull of Weber's logic undercuts the Durkheimian move at every turn.

The inquiry hoped to go beyond imprecise definitions, such as those utilised by Scarman and Condon, and, using evidence submitted to them, incorporated a definition of institutional racism in their final report. The report is clear that any such definition will not be the last word on the matter and that their concern is simply to arrive at a definition upon which clear policy recommendations can be made (Macpherson, 1999, 6.6). After considering various accounts and submissions, the inquiry defines institutional racism (Macpherson, 1999, 6.34):

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.

This can be contrasted with the definition of racism contained in the report (Macpherson, 1999, 6.4):

'racism' in general terms consists of conduct or words or practices which advantage or disadvantage people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. In its more subtle form it is as damaging as in its overt form.

And this generic racism has to be distinguished yet again from the notion of unwitting racism, which had previously been defined in the Scarman report (Scarman, 1981, pp. 182, 2.22, 11):

practices adopted by public bodies as well as private individuals which are unwittingly discriminatory against black people.

In the Macpherson report, the idea of unwitting racism is closely linked to ideas about unconscious and unintentional racism (Macpherson, 1999, 6.17):

Unwitting racism can arise because of lack of understanding, ignorance or mistaken beliefs. It can arise from well intentioned but patronising words or actions. It can arise from unfamiliarity with the behaviour or cultural traditions of people or families from minority ethnic communities. It can arise from racist stereotyping of black people as potential

criminals or troublemakers. Often this arises out of uncritical self-understanding born out of an inflexible police ethos of the 'traditional' way of doing things. Furthermore such attitudes can thrive in a tightly knit community, so that there can be a collective failure to detect and to outlaw this breed of racism. The police canteen can too easily be its breeding ground.

It is clear that the report was keen to go beyond Scarman. Institutional racism, the report claimed, not only existed but permeates society on both the individual and institutional level. Yet despite the recognition of a level of racism distinct from individual racism, it does not differentiate between institutional racism as *outcome* and institutional racism as *cause*. This failure means that the account of institutional racism is ultimately reduced to nothing other than the practices of individuals – whether overtly or unwittingly. Institutional racism emerges in the report as the unwitting racism of institutions and is 'a product of individual attitudes, exacerbated by a disinclination to critically self-examine actions' (Anthias, 1999, 2.5).

The problem is that the report tells us how to identify institutional racism but does not analyse what causes it. It deals solely with institutional racism as an outcome: 'institutional racism' is a 'collective failure'; it can be 'seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour'; it amounts to 'unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping'. But why does such behaviour occur? Despite the attempt to identify a structural component, the report ultimately refuses to locate the source of institutional racism in a genuine structural context, part of which would include the policies and procedures of the Metropolitan Police, the justice system and wider societal structures.

Indeed, the report is keen to point out that it is *not* the policies of the Metropolitan Police which are racist – '... the contrary is true. It is in the *implementation* of policies and in the *words and actions* of officers acting together that racism may become apparent' (Macpherson, 1999, 6.24, emphasis added). Once again, the pull of methodological individualism is simply too strong. This individualism becomes all too apparent in a reference to the Scarman report which makes it clear that, for Macpherson, institutional racism is nothing other than a combination of overt racism and unwitting racism – both of which are firmly based at the level of the individual:

Whilst we must never lose sight of the importance of explicit racism and direct discrimination, in policing terms if the phrase 'institutional racism' had been used [in the Scarman report] to describe not only *explicit* manifestations of racism at direction and policy level, but also *unwitting* discrimination at the organisational level, then the reality of indirect racism in its more subtle, hidden and potentially more pervasive nature would have been addressed. (Macpherson, 1999, 6.15, emphasis added)

If institutional racism is simply taken to be a combination of overt racism and unwitting discrimination, then the structural level is elided. Overt racism is that form of practice that intends racist outcomes; unwitting racism is that which

has racist outcomes where none were intended. In both cases, racism is linked to intentionality, and that is an agential characteristic not a structural one. To view institutional racism as a combination of the two does not tell us why either occurs, and this implicit individualism can be interpreted as exonerating the formal structures of the police force and indeed of wider society. This is to be regretted, since the report clearly sees the necessity of identifying the factors responsible for racist outcomes: 'There must be an unequivocal acceptance of the problem of institutional racism and its nature before it can be addressed' (Macpherson, 1999; 6.48). The report provides a strong case for the acceptance of institutional racism, but a weak account of its nature and sources – it acknowledges the existence of institutional racism, but sees it only located in the overt or unwitting practices of individuals.

In order to understand the sources of institutional racism, we need an exegesis of it that does not reduce it to the actions or neglect of individuals – one able to incorporate a genuinely structural dimension; an account that would see racism as, in part, stemming from the structural features of institutions and society; a set of structural features not reducible to the intentions or unwitting neglect of individuals. We need an understanding of racism as the outcomes of particular configurations of societal structures and social relations. We need an account able to explain why some people are overt racists and why others commit unwitting racism, and any such account would need to incorporate a genuine structural dimension. In short, racist practices are the products of a range of discursive and material factors and are embedded within a wider societal context (Yuval-Davis, 1999). Racism, and policy orientated towards its eradication, should be analysed (in part) as the product of specific structural configurations at the national, local and international level. Racism only manifests itself in the practices of individuals. This is the 'truth' of methodological individualism that the report has grasped. But its sources cannot be solely located in individuals, and the agent–structure problem can help us understand why this is the case.

Locating Structure in the Agent–Structure Problem

Despite almost two decades of theoretical exchange, it would seem that we are back with Mason (1982, p. 44) and still need to develop a set of more 'adequate theoretical tools capable of comprehending ... "race relations"'. One important aspect of this individualism is that, like racism, it is not enough to simply describe it as the practices of individuals, but to see it as a necessary ideological form within a society structured in a certain manner. This helps focus our attention on *why* particular ideological forms occur and not simply on statements that they do occur. Methodological individualism and racism are not things that just happen to occur. People are not born with a methodological individualist gene anymore than they are born with racist genes. Methodological individualism emerges in a structural context, and methodological individualism helps reproduce those same structures through its ideological role of keeping them hidden from view.

So if we are to emancipate ourselves from racism and other social ills, we need first to emancipate ourselves from methodological individualism. Methodological

individualism is precisely that which impedes the location of a structural dimension. We need models of the agent–structure relationship able to locate this structural context, but which do not reduce individual actions to nothing but this social context. As Foucault (1984, p. 242) put it, we need to see, that society is

a complex and independent reality that has its own laws and mechanisms of reaction, its regulations as well as its possibility of disturbance. This new reality is society ... It becomes necessary to reflect upon it, upon its specific characteristics, its constants and its variables.

Society can be seen to be both the ever-present condition (that is the material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency. All social practices have an action and a structural aspect that is integral to the practice. All social practices take place within a set of conditions that enable certain actions and constrain others. And it is the relations between the conditions for activity that constitute the structures of the social world (Bhaskar, 1979, pp. 34–6). ‘Our social being’, as Andrew Collier puts it, ‘is constituted by relations and our social acts presuppose them’ (Collier, 1994, p. 140).

At any particular moment in time, an individual may be implicated in all manner of relations, each exerting its own peculiar causal tendencies, and often individuals are unaware of the structure of relations within which they are embedded. This ‘lattice-work’ of relations can be said to constitute the structure of particular societies, and it is possible to envisage the study of these enduring relations despite changes in the individuals occupying them – that is, the relations (the structures) are ontologically distinct from the individuals who enter into them. There is ‘an ontological hiatus between society and people’ (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 46).

If there is an ‘ontological hiatus’ between society and people, we need to elaborate on the relationship between them. Here, Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* can be particularly helpful, since it helps locate the level at which the Macpherson report’s account of institutional racism is based (Bourdieu, 1977). In short, I suggest a three-level social ontology containing structure, habitus and agents. In relation to institutional racism, Scarman’s analysis is located at the level of agents, Macpherson at the level of the habitus, with the structural level as yet unexplored.

Bourdieu is primarily concerned with what individuals do in their daily lives. Like Bhaskar, he is keen to refute the idea that social activity can be understood solely in terms of individual decision-making or as determined by supra-individual structures. His notion of the habitus can be viewed as a bridge-building exercise across the explanatory gap between these two extremes. The habitus, however, can only be understood in relation to his notion of a ‘social field’. A social field is a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 14). A social field refers to a structured system of relationally defined social positions occupied by either individuals and/or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants and limits and/or facilitates certain practices. This involves recognition of the centrality of relations to social analysis (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 122, 125).

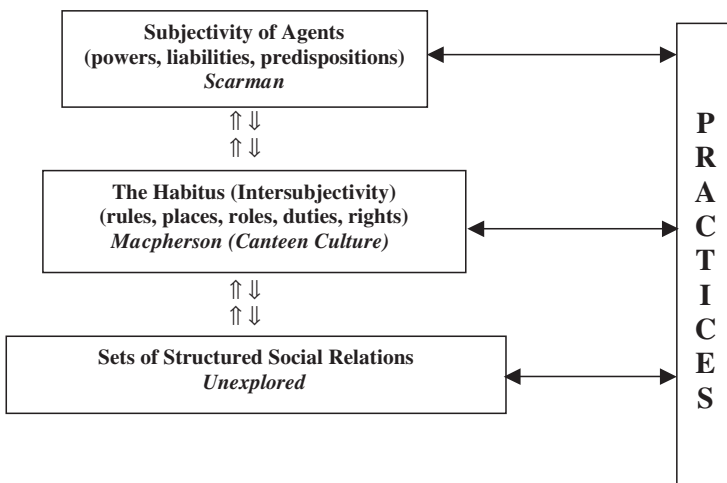
What then is a habitus or, in Bhaskar’s terminology, a ‘position practice’ system (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 51)? One way of viewing this notion is as a mediating link between individuals’ subjective worlds and the socio-cultural world into which they are born and which they share with others. The power of the habitus derives from the thoughtlessness of habit and habituation, rather than consciously learned rules (Bourdieu, 1997, pp. 12–14). A crucial distinction that Bourdieu draws here is that between learning and socialisation (Bourdieu, 1997, pp. 12–14). The habitus is imprinted and encoded in a socialising process that commences during early childhood. The habitus is inculcated more by experience than explicit teaching. Socially competent performances are produced as a matter of routine, without explicit reference to a body of codified knowledge, and without the actors necessarily knowing what they are doing (in the sense of being able to adequately explain what they are doing) (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79):

Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning ... It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know.

The habitus can be seen as the ‘site of the internalisation of reality and the externalisation of internality’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 205). When placed within my suggested ontology, the model we have is as in Figure 1.

All three levels are necessary to explain social practices, and these practices in turn reproduce and/or transform the various elements – hence the two-way arrows between practices and the levels. Social action occurs in large part due to the knowledge and beliefs about social situations that are shared by groups of people.

Figure 1: Sources of Social Practices

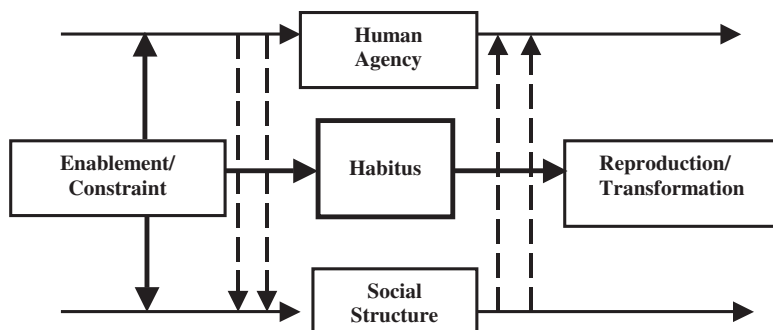


However, roles, rules and relations structure behaviour in ways that are sometimes opaque to consciousness, decisions or choices. And it is this opacity that gives social science a critical impulse, insofar as the agents, whose activities are necessary for the reproduction of these relations, may be unaware of the social relations in which they are embedded. It is through the capacity of social science to illuminate such relations that it may come to play a role in emancipatory practices such as the elimination of racism. Institutional racism, in this view, refers not only to the outcomes that such relations may produce, but also to the patterning of such relations that are causally implicated in producing such outcomes. Institutional racism is that which, covertly or overtly, resides in the policies, procedures, operations and culture of public or private institutions – producing certain kinds of practice and at the same time being dependent upon such practice.

One example of what I mean here can be seen in the relationship between the laws relating to ‘stop and search’, cannabis and certain cultural forms. If it is the case that, within certain cultures, cannabis smoking is seen as normal and, in some instances, required³ behaviour, then larger proportions of that population than other groups will be potentially in conflict with the law. Laws prohibiting cannabis consumption are not specifically targeted at the black population and hence are not racist in an overt sense. Nor are police officers simply unthinking in their practices. Nonetheless, given the relationship between black culture and these particular laws, racist outcomes may occur. The criminalisation of large numbers of certain cultural groups is, in part, the result of the relationships between the various factors. And, of course, a full understanding of this phenomenon would need to take in wider social factors such as levels of unemployment. Once identified, this structural level can help us locate the sources of institutional racism. Given the account of society above, we can develop the following models, taken from Bhaskar (1979).

Figure 2 can be considered a very simplistic model of the agent–structure–habitus relationship, and the arrows going from agent to structures and vice versa illus-

Figure 2: The Agent–Structure–Habitus Relationship



trate how each and every social act is a product of both dimensions and that all social practices occur within a habitus. In terms of understanding emancipation, the model demonstrates the naivety of any view that posits a realm of freedom devoid of social context.

Insofar as social contexts enable some outcomes and constrain others, there are always going to be limits to the forms that emancipation can take. In this model, emancipation can only be understood as the transition from an unwanted, unnecessary and oppressive situation to a wanted and/or needed situation (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 6). This is very much a processual view that highlights the necessity of knowledge of prevailing structures. Knowledge is intrinsic to emancipation. In order for emancipation to be possible, knowledge is necessary so that we might *know* the situation we are in, *know* that it is unwanted or unnecessary and *know* the potentials possibilities within the present social field. The social context in which we operate will not permit any and every practice.

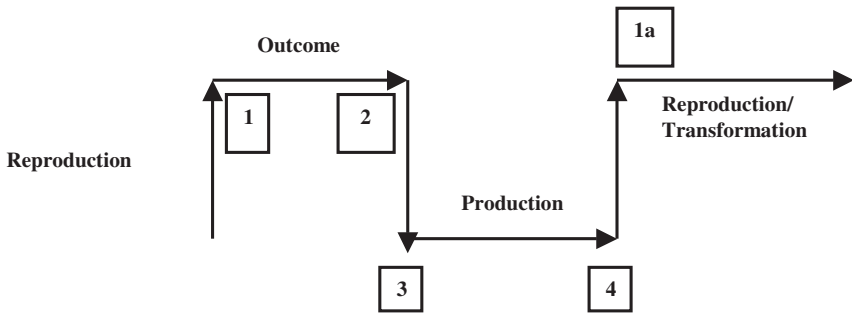
If knowledge is necessary for emancipation, however, it is not sufficient for it, and there may well be real impediments to the implementation of any policies we attempt to apply, and outcomes of policies might not be as expected. The social field is characterised by a radical indeterminacy and contingency – there may well be limits to what can be achieved within given social structures, and we cannot know that our attempts will succeed. The agent–structure problem, however, can help highlight those moments in the social process that might rupture attempts at emancipatory practice. These are highlighted in Figure 3.

This model signifies the social process over time with agents drawing on antecedent materials in the course of their practices. The possession of adequate knowledge can help at each of the indicated points if we are to understand the move from unwanted practices to more desirable ones. At points 1, 1a and 2, unintended consequences and unacknowledged conditions limit the actor's understanding of their social world, while unacknowledged motivation and tacit skills (3 and 4 in the diagram) limit their understanding of themselves. Knowledge has an emancipatory role to play at each of the points and at 1 and 4 in the form of more adequate praxis.

We can only build the future out of the present, and the future we can build is constrained and enabled by the possibilities embedded within existing structures. Institutional racism can only be adequately dealt with if we can locate its sources and if we know how prevailing structural formations might impede our good intentions. Knowledge of prevailing structural configurations is vital if we are to formulate adequate policies for dealing with institutional racism.

The account of racism developed in the Macpherson report is clearly an improvement on that of Scarman – if only because it identifies a deeper level, that of institutional racism. However, the analysis of the agent–structure problem detailed here suggests that there is a yet deeper level of structure that needs to be addressed. Because the account of institutional racism in the Macpherson report does not theorise this level, policies implemented on the basis of the social ontology contained in the report cannot address these deeper levels. Thinking about

Figure 3: The Social Process over Time



Note: 1, 1a = Intended/unintended consequences; 2 = Unacknowledged conditions; 3 = Unconscious motivation; 4 = Tacit skills.

institutional racism through the agent–structure problem highlights the fact that policies aimed at eradicating it must address a socio-cultural field wider than that of the Metropolitan Police. These would include all aspects of British society, including the justice system, the educational system, the welfare system and the employment system. The Metropolitan Police is simply one institution embedded within a wider socio-cultural system. If some of the sources of institutional racism are located in this wider system, we need to formulate policies aimed at changing the system and not just the behaviours of individual officers or the canteen culture.

The irony is that, although the report demands action in other public bodies, the specific policy recommendations are largely aimed at training, recruitment and the behaviour of individuals. The report details 70 key recommendations intended to produce a society with ‘zero tolerance’ towards racism. The recommendations emphasise the importance of training related to racial awareness – much is made of levels of recruitment, retention and progress of ethnic minorities so that police authorities should seek to ensure that the membership of police authorities reflects so far as possible the cultural and ethnic mix of the communities which those authorities serve. None of the recommendations, however, address the structural properties of the wider socio-cultural system that contributes to outcomes that are institutionally racist. And of course, given the definition of institutional racism contained in the report, such recommendations could only be lacking. The report recognised institutional racism as an outcome but failed to fully consider its causes.

Conclusion

Despite the attention given to institutional racism within the Macpherson report, it neither has a satisfactory definition of what it means by institutional racism in

relation to the police nor provides us with a framework of what kind of policy and political initiatives are necessary in order to eradicate racism in institutions or in society. Of course, if I am right about the former, then the latter was inevitable. The report is in many ways not concerned with defining the meaning of institutionalised racism in any depth, but instead with arguing that the failure of the police as an institution to respond professionally to the murder of Stephen Lawrence was largely the product of 'discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people' (Macpherson, 1999, 6.34). The report provides a wealth of evidence that the police response to the murder of Stephen Lawrence involved all these processes in one way or another – at the level of the empirical, it identified institutional racism. But it has little to say about the actual structural configurations that are complicit in the production of such outcomes. Where it did, these are reduced to the (in)activities of individuals.

The main problem with the report is that it collapses together systemic and subjective racisms and, in the final analysis, advances an account of institutional racism still rooted in methodological individualism. The model of a social ontology developed here helps highlight that this methodological individualism is a necessary ideological form, the dispelling of which is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for emancipation. Understanding this ideological form and how it came to be, and is sustained, will require an understanding of the discursive structures and material constraints that structure our thinking and ways of acting. Part of this structural context is obviously an implicit commitment to empiricism (we can only observe human agents acting, so talk of structures can only be meta-physical) allied to a Judaeo-Christian desire to maintain notions of individual responsibility.

The latter is perhaps acceptable, since nothing happens in the social world except in or through human agency, so there are always going to be responsible agents. The former, however, is simply untenable, since human agency requires, as a condition of possibility for action, materials that make action possible. Part of what makes social action possible is a structural context that we inhabit and inherit from the past, but which may only be observable in its effects. We live our present and build our future in a world not of our own making, but one which we remake and perhaps transform. Whether we can remake it in a more emancipatory manner will depend upon understanding it, and the first piece of necessary understanding is that the social world is much more than simply people and their activity.

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Notes

- 1 On 22 April 1993, an 18-year-old student called Stephen Lawrence was attacked and killed by a group of white youths in the south-east London suburb of Eltham. The subsequent police investigation was deemed lacklustre and the media, politicians, community leaders and Stephen's

- parents argued that a far-reaching investigation into the handling of the murder inquiry was necessary. In July 1997, the new Home Secretary, Jack Straw, announced the inquiry and appointed Sir William Macpherson to chair the hearing. The Lawrence public inquiry put the police and British justice as a whole on public trial. It raised allegations of systematic corruption and institutionalised racism.
- 2 Political theorists and political scientists have displayed an awareness of the problem (Dowding, 1991, 2001; Hay, 1995; Marsh, 1998; Marsh and Smith, 2000). International relations theorists have been engaged in a concerted effort to grapple with the various ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects of this problem (see, for example, Wendt, 1987, 1991, 1992; Hollis and Smith, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994; Dessler, 1989; Jabri and Chan, 1996; Doty, 1997; Wight, 1999, 2000; Carlsnaes, 1992, 1994; Ashley, 1984; Patomäki, 1996).
 - 3 Coptic Christians, Rastafarians, Shintos, Hinus, Buddhists, Sufis, Essenes, Zoroastrians, Bantus and many other sects have traditions that consider the plant to have religious value.

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