

THIS IS AN EXCITING BOOK: profoundly ambitious, well written, well composed. Does it hold its promises?

The central focus is on social ontology: what is the true nature of social objects and the exact nature of their relations? This leads to an interrogation on the causal power of social structures. Refuelling the ongoing debate on micro versus macro, methodological individualism versus holism, the author argues that social structures should not be thought of as being in opposition with individual social actors. Social reality is presented as a sort of Russian doll, where different levels of reality are incorporated within one another.

His focus on agency and structure is matched by his two major theoretical referents, namely Archer and Bourdieu. Dave Elder-Vass wants to reconcile these divergent viewpoints, a theory of the subject and a theory of the structure. He points to the fact that “habitus” is digested and reinvented by the subject (p. 113).

The author uses the emergence concept as an *Aufhebung* device, a way to escape the opposition between individualism and holism: “emergence” is in a way a new word for “synergy”, a concept pointing to the fact that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is also a little more than that: an entity can have properties or capabilities that are not possessed by its parts. This concept is not used here in its diachronic but in its synchronic sense, that is “a relationship between the properties of the whole and its parts at a certain moment in time”. Determined to prove that social structures hold certain explanatory power of their own, Dave Elder-Vass uses the concept of emergence as a hint that some effects can be interpreted as resulting from the causal power of a social system and are not the by-product of the sum of its components. He then concentrates on two social objects: normative institutions and organizations, defined as “structured social groups with emergent social powers”. He intends to show how both normative institutions and organizations have causation power. He admits that both normative institutions and organizations are intertwined and attempts to theorize this relation, including feedback effects: he

* About Dave ELDER-VASS, *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010).

mentions the “complex ways in which organizations are able to act back upon normative institutions”. He addresses two organization types: interaction groups and associations; however, he concedes that the dividing line between these two concepts might be somewhat fuzzy (p. 49). He mentions “queueing” as a normative institution connected with an interaction group (*à queue*). His relative neglect of “strong organizations”, in the usual “theory of organizations” sense of the term is somewhat surprising, as is his persistent silence concerning network theory. His assertion that “organizations are composed of people, not roles” means that he disregards the role of structure in organization. In such a perspective, it is difficult to understand the use of the organization concept. Let us put it blankly: the empirical part of the book, presenting examples, is the weakest.

I would suggest that one of the main virtues of this book is that the author is not afraid of going outside of sociology’s old trodden path. He makes extensive use of examples borrowed from the natural sciences. Thus in Chapter 2, devoted to the concept of emergence, he provides a variety of examples selected from the field of natural and life sciences. Moreover he presents a conception of causality that is clearly derived from what modern scientific disciplines have taught us: causality is not a single influence between a “cause” and its “effect”, but a network of complex forces that contribute to the making of an effect: here, “*multiple determination*” is the key word (chapter 8). More precisely, social structure can be viewed as produced by the causal power of specific social groups.

This book reveals an effort to analyse how social process take place at different levels of micro/macro reality.

Within social groups, individuals act and produce power and influence. Individual behaviour depends on their material, biological components. By asserting that emergent properties and therefore causation exist at different levels of reality, Dave Elder-Vass is able to provide a theory of the relation between the biological and the social without falling into the trap of socio-biology: “The properties and powers we have depend synchronically on the material parts we are composed of and the relations and interactions between them. *But this does not mean that human actions are purely determined by biological forces.* Like any other events they are determined by a variety of interacting causes from a variety of ontological levels” (p. 194).

Finally, this book is somewhat disappointing, more in its empirical parts than in its theoretical ones, and the reader is left with an impression of *déjà vu*: “normative circles”, presented here as an

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innovation remind us of the old concepts of social psychology. Are we simply re-inventing the concept of role?

However it is a great book, worth reading because some of these old friends are presented here with clarity and because of the effort to look at social reality with a wide angle.

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