

The Strategic Relational Approach to the State

<http://bobjessop.org/2014/12/02/the-strategic-relational-approach-an-interview-with-bob-jessop/>

Q. How would you describe or periodize the history of SRA?

A. First, it is important to note that I did not introduce the term 'SRA'. It was first used to describe my work by Rene Bugge Bertramsen, one of three Danish students of mine [the other two being Jens Peter Frøland Thomsen and Jacob Torfing] who wrote *State, Economy and Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1991). For me, that was a 'light-bulb moment' — I saw immediately that this was a very apt name for my approach. But, regardless of name, the SRA emerged from my reflections on how to resolve the tension between the capital- and class-theoretical analyses of the state. This is where a periodization must begin. So the strategic-relational approach *avant la lettre* emerged in my search for a means to overcome the paralyzing choice between, or simple perspectival switching between, capital- and class-theoretical approaches to the character of the capitalist state. As such it emerged in dialogue with Gramsci and Poulantzas, both of whom can be seen as implicitly strategic-relational in their approach. These figures were important because I was reading them at the same time and it was thinking with them, so to speak, that I arrived at the SRA.

Q. Because it sounds better than structural functionalism? [smile]

A. Yes, it's better to be a strategic-relational theorist than a functionalist – but this is more than a choice of words, it's also a matter of theoretical substance, as we shall see.

Q. Who do you consider most influential on the invention of SRA (except Poulantzas)? Or what's the influence of Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault, and Poulantzas on SRA (What's the genealogy of SRA)?

A. It's more a question of discovery than invention because it was already there. At most it was named the SRA and here Rene Bugge Bertramsen deserves the credit. Who has been the most influential in its discovery or rediscovery? Well, you can start with Karl Marx, or Antonio Gramsci, or Nicos Poulantzas. They have all influenced the approach but Poulantzas, particularly given the period when I was working on this, is the key figure. It was he who said several times between 1976 and 1978 that 'the state is a social relation'. This was already implicit in his 1976 book on *The Crisis of the Dictatorships* but can also be read back into *Fascism and Dictatorship* (1970). Althusser was unimportant in this regard but did introduce me to Marxism. My interest in Foucault came much later [...] When I study Foucault now, I can see that he can be read as a strategic-relational theorist; but this would not have been the case for me in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was easy to read Gramsci and Poulantzas in these terms. A broader history of the SRA would, of course, need to engage with many other debates on structure and agency. Thus the next step in the SRA was when I began to see that it could be used not merely for analysing capital vs. class theoretical issues but for the more general sociological question of structure and agency. And as sociologist by training, general questions flowed almost automatically from there. Cross-cutting these interests were others arising from my parallel engagement with critical realism. Previously I knew critical realism primarily through the work of Roy Bhaskar, namely, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds: Leeds Books 1975) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979). I was not convinced by his account of the social sciences (he considered only psychology and sociology at that stage) or by his proposed transformative model of social agency (which also seemed relatively underdeveloped in comparison with what was being proposed for a long time in sociological theorizing).

[...]

Q. What's the relationship between SRA and RA? Do you think RA is a variant of SRA, or SRA as such can be superior to RA in approaching political economy? Or are they at different levels of analysis?

A. I think the regulation approach at best is one possible application of SRA to the critique of political economy. This comes back to my previous remarks. The strategic-relational approach emerged for me from the class-theoretical versus capital-theoretical debate in state theory. I then turned to the regulation approach because I had been criticized harshly for politicism, not just by open Marxists, but by others who also felt I had overemphasized the state and neglected (political) economy. So I started to look in the mid-1980s for a Marxist political economy that was strategic-relational and was compatible with my approach to the state. I found it in very clearly in Gramsci's notes on Americanism and Fordism and *in nuce* in the early work of Michel Aglietta. Although Aglietta's study of accumulation in the USA was still heavily influenced by structural Marxism, it had been taken up already by other scholars, such as Mike Davis, in interesting ways. In any case, I conjectured that, if I wanted a more sophisticated and contemporary political economy than I had been using previously that was more middle-range and consistent with the SRA, the regulation approach would be an excellent starting point. [...]

Q. So do you think RA is a variant of SRA?

A. It is a variant on condition that variance is seen vertically rather than horizontally. In other words, whereas the SRA is a generic account of structure-agency relations, the RA is a more concrete-complex re-specification of the SRA in the context of the Marxist critique of political economy. In other words, the regulation approach is situated at a much lower level of abstraction and a much more complex degree of articulation among different institutional orders and fields of social relations. I'm very strongly critical realist in the sense that you move from the abstract and simple to the concrete and complex. Logically, the SRA must be presented before one moves to particular applications in political economy, state theory, and so on. So variance in this context can only mean specification of general principles to a more concrete and/or more complex object of analysis. Thus SRA and RA are situated at different levels of analysis and the power of the SRA is to suggest how different forms of analysis can be articulated. [...]

Q. So can SRA as such be superior to RA in approaching political economy? Or are they at different levels of analysis?

A. They are situated at different levels of analysis and the power of the SRA is to suggest how different forms of analysis can be articulated. Thus I am often asked nowadays to present a lecture or write an article that presents 'a regulation-theoretical and state-theoretical analysis of ...'. This is possible because the power of the SRA when combined with a Marxist framework enables me to establish connections that others miss.

Q. What's your view of civil society? How much do you agree with Marx's and Poulantzas's class-based critique of the juridico-ideological, illusory notion of civil society [bourgeois society] as an association of free and equal individuals?

A. I have thought about civil society intermittently from the time that I first encountered Gramsci, Althusser, and Poulantzas. I now think that it is important to recognise that civil society is an essentially contest concept and that it has multiple meanings that can be integrated in different ways into a critical realist, strategic-relational critique of political economy. Poulantzas is right to criticize the ideological

use of 'civil society' in the way that your question indicates but this does not mean that the idea cannot be appropriated and deployed in other ways. Thus I define 'civil society' analytically as an ensemble of social relations characterized by the primacy of identities, interests, and values that cross-cut the logic of capital accumulation and other system logics — thus it includes ethnic, gender, regional, generational, and many other identities. These provide a site for contestation in the struggle for national-popular hegemony (as Gramsci indicates), a source of resistance to attempts at the colonization of civil society (or, in Habermasian terms, the lifeworld) by the logic(s) of one or another system (capital accumulation, statization, juridification, etc.), and the space for sociability outside specific system logics or even what post-modernists might call the free play of identities. I recognize that I must do more work on this, especially given the growing interest theoretically and practically in 'global civil society', a notion that I regard with even greater suspicion. Thus, while I do refer to 'civil society' in several ways in my work, its use is more as a place-holding concept, i.e., a concept that serves to identify the site of a problem rather than to provide the solution.

III. A Defense

Q. What are the most common misunderstandings of SRA from your experience?

A. The most common misunderstanding, despite my best endeavours, is that the SRA is structuralist. It has never been accused of being agentialist. [...]. The reason probably has something to do with the fact that the SRA has a better developed set of concepts for dealing with structure than it does with agency. This is something that Rob Stones, another former research student who worked with the SRA (...), identified in the 1980s as a problem with the SRA. He introduced the idea of strategic-context analysis by agents to overcome this problem and I have been happy to use this concept in my own work. Indeed, it was Rob who identified the complementary weaknesses of Giddens's structuration theory and my strategic-relational approach - that Giddens was one-sidedly agentialist and the SRA one-sidedly structuralist, not so much intentionally as by virtue of the relative depth and range of concepts for dealing with agency and structure respectively. His critique was very telling and I have since tried to overcome it by paying more attention to subjectivity and agency. But it is still clearer what is at stake structurally in the application of the SRA than in terms of agency because I have undertaken more theoretical work on the structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity of forms, institutions, organizations, and other structures than on social forces, whether individual or collective. Social forces figure more in my empirical work, where they can be identified as agents and their identities, ideal and material interests, modes of calculation, and so on, can be brought into the picture. In part this reflects the strategic-relational rejection of assuming, *a priori*, that there are any privileged subjects and the associated conclusion that what matters is the relevance of particular social forces to the reproduction/transformation of social structures (and, indeed, identities) rather than some self-proclaimed and/or pre-given ascription of relevance. There is certainly no claim in the SRA that class, say, should be taken as primary or that class identities and interests will always be primary. This is a matter of theoretically-informed empirical investigation in specific conjunctures. My efforts to round out the agential dimensions of the SRA have been complicated by the influence of queer theory and its role in destabilizing the notions of gender fixity with obvious repercussions for the polymorphism and multiplicity of identities, interests, and so forth. So my recent work on the gender selectivity of the state can be seen as one example of how I aim to bring in more sophisticated notions of agency.

[...]

IV. Strategic Selectivity as a Key Concept

Q. What do you mean by the state as a social relation? Is it the state, state power, or both that is relational? How would you explain 'as a social relation' plainly to lay people?

A. The idea that the state is a social relation, first explicitly advanced by Poulantzas, is an elliptical claim. It can be interpreted in the same way as Marx's claim that capital is a social relation, which refers to a relation between people mediated through the instrumentality of things. So we can translate this idea into the claim that the state (or, better, state power) is a social relation between people or, better, political forces, mediated through the instrumentality of things. As to the nature of these 'things', we should mention the state apparatus, state capacities, state resources, specific modes of political calculation, and so on. To explain this to lay people it would be best to give some obvious examples — the effects of different systems of voting on the chances of minor parties winning seats in elections, the capacity of peripheral regions influencing government policy in decentralized as opposed to centralized states, the differences in opportunities for subaltern groups to influence decision-making in democratic states and exceptional regimes, and so on. In essence, the strategic-relational argument is that states are not neutral terrains on which political forces struggle with equal chances to pursue their interests and objectives and with equal chances of realizing their goals, whatever they might be. Instead the organization of state apparatuses, state capacities, and state resources (and, more specifically, the overall articulation of forms of representation, the internal architecture of the state, the forms of state intervention, the distinctive social bases of the state, specific state projects, and the prevailing view of the nature and purposes of government for the wider society) all mean that state favours some forces, some interests, some identities, some spatio-temporal horizons of action, some projects more than others. This in turn implies that there can be three levels of political struggle: struggle to transform the structurally-inscribed selectivities of the state, struggles over state policies within these limits, and struggles at a distance from the state to modify the balance of forces within the state and among those with privileged access to it with the result that more or less excluded interests enter into the political calculation of those with more direct access to state capacities and resources. All of this indicates that it is hard to separate, other than analytically, the state and state power. This said, it can be useful to separate them and thereby generate sets of complementary concepts appropriate to the more structural and more strategic dimensions of the state as a whole. You would develop more structural concepts to analyse the state apparatus but in a strategic-relational way; and more strategic concepts for analysing state power that would nonetheless refer to the differential capacity of actors to engage in strategic context analysis of changing structures and conjunctures. [...]

Q. Could you clarify what strategic selectivity is? First, is it *ex ante* probability of a system, *ex post* multiple/diverse effects and their overall balance/weight towards certain strategies (sub-optimal results), or a parallelogram created by more than two forces?

A. It can involve any and all of these. Thus actors could engage in an *ex ante* strategic context analysis and an *ex post* review of how well they had succeeded in their objectives and what this implies for the next round of *ex ante* calculation. This would be crucial for any strategically reflexive social forces. Equally, an observer rather than participant can also engage in both *ex ante* and *ex post* reflections on structurally inscribed strategic selectivities. I might make a calculation about the

chances of the major British parties winning the next election but this could only be probabilistic; after the election outcome is known, it would be essential to revisit these calculations and feed in new information. I am less happy with the idea of a parallelogram of forces, which seems to me too mechanistic. From a strategic-relational viewpoint, the complexities of spatio-temporal fixes and the multiplicity of horizons of action, opportunities make it hard to identify the parameters of any given parallelogram of forces. An important part of the unpredictability of politics is the fact that strategic actors can shift these parameters.

Q. How does strategic selectivity differ from structural selectivity? What's distinctive about it?

A. The notion of structural selectivity is not widely used. Claus Offe used it occasionally to refer to what I would call structural super-selectivity, in which there is no basis or scope for agency to make a difference. He introduced this as a third way between an instrumentalist account of state power in which whoever was in charge of the state could do with it what they wanted and a structuralist account in which state managers had no freedom of manoeuvre because of the external structural constraints on state power. Thus structural selectivity referred, for Offe, to the inherent logic of *state power* such that social forces seeking to control the state had to act in particular ways that served both to reproduce the state apparatus and to serve the symbiotic interests of capital. Specifically, this was mediated through the state's dependence for its resources (especially taxes and loans) and political legitimacy (delivering growth, managing crises) on continued economic expansion. In this sense it was neither voluntaristic actors nor external constraints that shaped state power but structural constraints inscribed in the political logic of the state itself. Poulantzas also writes about structural selectivity (a term that he takes over from Offe) but he uses it in the sense of strategic selectivity. The reason why I prefer strategic selectivity is that it has some scope for action. Offe's account, as presented in the relevant articles (elsewhere he advances different arguments), leaves little scope for agency — he simply internalized the external logic of capital inside the state. The strategic-relational approach recognises greater scope for agency and this is also how Poulantzas, especially when he integrated Foucauldian ideas on power and resistance, interpreted structural selectivity too.

Q. How do you compare the notion of strategic selectivity to that of relative autonomy? Does the former replace the latter?

A. I no longer use the notion of relative autonomy because it is contradictory. I have replaced it with the twin notions of operational autonomy and material interdependence. Operational autonomy gives you the scope of agency, Material interdependence gives you an ex post limit on operational autonomy through structural coupling and co-evolution rather than through sheer external constraints.

Q. Where is strategic selectivity of the state situated? Is it in the state system/ structure/materiality or is it in wider relations or conjunctural situation? Systems/structures (such as the state and institutional/material apparatuses as form-determined relations), or wider relations including systems/ structures?

A. Is the strategic selectivity of the state everywhere or nowhere? The complete answer is that it is an emergent result of all of these factors and of the actions of social forces. It would be a serious mistake to try to locate strategic selectivity purely within structures because this would be to reify these structures. Yet the SRA was introduced to escape this temptation by arguing that no structure exercises exactly the same constraints on all actors — each 'structure' (however delimited) is

associated with different constraints and opportunities for different types of actors. Indeed I argued in *The Capitalist State* (1982) that it was more fruitful to distinguish between the structural and conjunctural moments of any given structure, institutional ensemble, or organizational form. The structural moment comprises those aspects that cannot be changed by a given actor (or set of actors) acting with a particular repertoire of actions in a given spatio-temporal matrix in the attempt to achieve a specific set of objectives; and the conjunctural moment comprises those aspects that can be changed. Clearly, the mix of structural and conjunctural moments of a given structure will vary with the position of different actors. The key point is that structures are not equally constraining or enabling for all actors. Incidentally, this is another difference between the SRA and Giddens's structuration theory.

Let me give you an example. Tony Blair has recently reshuffled the cabinet. I, as an ordinary citizen, have to take for granted the structure of the cabinet, its composition, its rules, its decisions, etc. It's totally outside of my control in the foreseeable future and therefore it is pure structure. If I am Jack Straw being reshuffled because George Bush says he no longer wants him to serve as Foreign Secretary, Tony Blair has a right to dismiss me but I have some bargaining power because if I say "Okay, you can sack me, but if I then refuse to serve in your cabinet, I could be more dangerous to you outside the cabinet than inside it ". So the structure of the cabinet is less constraining on Jack Straw than it is on me. And, indeed, one of the reasons why people say Tony Blair's cabinet reshuffle went wrong is that he lost one or two people who refused to be reshuffled who regarded him as a lame duck and concluded that their strategic or tactical interests no longer required them to be inside the Cabinet because they expected Blair to fall. But Blair still had more power over the structure of the cabinet than Straw because he can change its composition, the distribution of portfolios, methods of operation, and much else besides. He has a lot of power in a particular moment. But after he has replaced Jack Straw with Margaret Beckett, he couldn't declare within, say, two weeks, that he had made a mistake and then dismiss the first female Foreign Secretary. The loss of two foreign secretaries within two weeks would indicate weakness. So at a particular moment in time, the structure of the Cabinet wasn't very structural for him, there was a whole set of possibilities. But once he had reshuffled, his hands were tied for perhaps four or five months, perhaps until the Party Conference. So even though Blair is more powerful in relation to Cabinet than any other actor, this is also subject to the logic of path-shaping and path-dependent lock-in produced by his own decisions.

So it is mistaken to ask where strategic selectivity is located because that would be a structuralist reading of strategic selectivity. You have to ask, who are the actors? What time horizon are we looking at? Who are the other actors? Who are their potential allies? What are their objectives? And so on. These are also the questions that self-reflexive actors ask about specific conjunctures. To continue my example, Blair's capacities to change the Cabinet have changed over the last nine years and it is this that requires analysis. Strategic selectivity must be analysed on a case-by-case basis and so you might conclude that it's in the "wider relations or conjunctural situations" rather than exclusively in the system or structure.

Q. What can constitute strategic selectivity?

A. Anything can constitute strategic selectivity if it is relevant to the pursuit of a particular strategic objective in a given context. In this sense the truth of strategic selectivity is the whole. But this is so hypercomplex that it cannot be a good basis for either strategic actors or impartial observers. In both cases complexity reduction is essential and this is the role of strategic context analysis informed by relevant

theories and imaginaries. A lot will depend on the scale of the structures under investigation and the spatio-temporal horizons of action. So we could talk about the strategic selectivity of an interpersonal interaction such as an interview or of the strategic selectivity of the world market as the ensemble of regimes, institutions, organizations, networks, and interactions shaping the course of accumulation on a global scale. You simply work on identifying. What would be worth considering in the former case would almost certainly be irrelevant in the latter — unless the interview had world-historical importance; and vice versa. Remember that the SRA focuses on the interaction of structural and conjunctural moments relative to specific actors and does not reify structures and strategies. If you are studying interpersonal interaction in an interview, you might begin with taken-for-granted structure of different types of interview as a genre. Does that put the interviewer in a more powerful position than interviewee? Not necessarily. If you are being interviewed by Jeremy Paxman on BBC2, he's in a more powerful position in certain aspects than you are. If you are a junior researcher and doing an interview with a key informant, the power is on the other side. But you can generally identify the structural asymmetries involved. Within this context there is scope for skilful interpretation and manipulation of the genre, For example, if you're a skilful interviewee, you will reflect on which questions you want to answer, which you're going to answer by not answering, which you're going to take exception to and so forth. Within the genre of interview, you get what you want out of it. And if you're a skilful interviewer, you'll have a strategy and tactics for, for example, the order of questions, the sequences of a succession of interviews, and so on. One can also imagine that the genre itself can be changed through, for example, new forms of communication or changes in power relations more generally. The same principles apply up to the level of world society from sociologically amorphous interactions through organizations, institutional ensembles, historical blocs, and so on to complex global systems. To take another example on a geo-political scale: relations between the United States and Turkey around the Iraq War and what an *ex ante* prediction of the relative situation might have involved. Unexpectedly for many observers, Turkey refused the US request to invade Iraq through its territory. So this might require an *ex post* analysis of how, against the expected probabilities, Turkey was able to resist (and what consequences it might have experienced later).

V. Methodological Clarifications

Q. Can strategic selectivity have an explanatory or predictive power, not merely descriptive power?

A. I believe that there is a *logical* symmetry between prediction and explanation but not necessarily symmetry in practice because of the contingencies involved in *ex ante* prediction as opposed to *ex post* explanation. The central problem here is what I term contingent necessity [...] I argue that the adequacy of an explanation depends on the concreteness-complexity of the explanandum. The same entity, event, process, or result can be defined in many ways from the viewpoint of its status as an explanandum — this is a reflection of the descriptive inexhaustibility of the real world — so that it would always be possible to make the explanandum more concrete and/or complex until, if ever, you exhausted its singularity. Depending on the initial specification, different explanatory starting points would be appropriate; and at each step further elements must be articulated to provide an adequate explanation. An explanation is adequate only in relation to the problem as it is defined in terms of specific level of abstraction, concretion, simplicity, complexity. And you can always destabilize an adequate explanation by adding another layer of concretion, or another axis of complexity. To explain something is to explain it as posed in a specific explanandum, i.e., its translation into

theoretically relevant terms. A description is not necessarily phrased in theoretically relevant terms but may remain at the level of the empirical rather than penetrate, in critical realist terms, to the actual or the real. A purely empirical description is unlikely to provide the basis for an adequate explanation because it lacks theoretical leverage. Faced with an inadequate explanation, then, the solution may not be to gather more empirical data but to ask a different theoretical question. Sometimes problems are not solved but dissolved in favour of another way of posing the problem. In addition, one should test explanations by moving to a more concrete-complex specification of the explanandum and see whether the previous explanation holds at the next stage. If it breaks down now, then it was not adequate before.

Q. Why do you refer to ‘selectivity’ (with an *ex ante* implication) rather than ‘selection’ (with an *ex post* implication)?

A. The answer is that I am a critical realist. Selectivity is a causal property at the level of the real, selection is a process at the level of the actual (after the operation of tendencies and counter-tendencies in a particular conjuncture), and the result of the selection can be described at the level of the empirical as well as be re-specified in terms of the actual and real. Selectivity exists as a set of potentials that may never be realized; selection is the realization of one of the potentials. In this sense, selectivity is *ex ante*; selection is *ex post*. But, of course, selectivity is equally real before and afterwards; selection is actual only after the event. This poses the issue of contingent necessity again, i.e., the idea that everything that happens has to happen (necessity) but that there is no single causal process that requires that this happens – it is the product of the contingent interaction of many processes (contingency). But I should also add, from a strategic-relational perspective, that selectivities get transformed through blind evolution (structural drift) and/or through deliberate action; and it is also possible to shape the outcome of selection. In short, the answer requires a return to the overall logic of the strategic-relational approach.

Q. Can there be something like strategic de-selectivity?

A. Selectivity is a differential privileging of opportunities to be selected in the evolutionary process of variation, selection, retention. So selectivity is also ‘de-selectivity’. By definition, selection means that some possibilities are not selected. But it might be simpler to say that selectivity implies differential chances of rejection as well as selection or, again, positive and negative biases. One might also see this as something that operates over time. Let us assume that the Keynesian welfare national state is gradually losing its capacities to manage the national economy through its usual set of policy routines; given the importance of economic performance to electoral success, one might argue that political parties committed to the maintenance of Keynesian welfare policies will be liable to de-selection through electoral competition. In other words, *ex ante*, their programmes are less likely to be persuasive. This can be handled perfectly adequately within the SRA.

Q. Does strategic selectivity block any possibility of the exercise of state power in conflict with the tendential biases in the state?

A. Not at all. The SRA was developed as a critique of structuralism as well as instrumentalism — it excludes both absolute structural constraint and pure voluntarism. Within these outer limits, it is always possible in principle to deploy a set of state capacities biased towards one set of policies in another direction. This is why politics has often been described as the art of the possible. One of my favourite examples is one of the first actions of the National Government in the United Kingdom in 1931, following the defeat of the Labour Party due to the Great

Depression and, especially, a major financial crisis. It took Sterling off the Gold Standard — and the recently defeated Labour politicians complained that ‘nobody ever told us that we could do that’! In part this reflects a cognitive selectivity on their part and within the British Establishment more generally – a form of path-dependent fetishism about the Gold Standard — and in part it reflects a shift in the balance of forces due to the intensity of the crisis. It was no longer possible to ‘go on’ in the old way. So among the complete set of potential actions which are never actualized are those that were never tried because they lay beyond the cognitive horizon of possibility of relevant actors. Thus a shift in cognitive selectivity (e.g., through policy learning or policy transfer) could open up new possibilities. The impact of Thatcherism is another example because it dared to challenge the prevailing view that one could not govern corporatist Britain against the wishes of the trade union movement.

Q. Can you explain the dialectic of structure and strategy through an example? Do structures enable and constrain strategies while strategies respond to structural conditions, thus strategies concretizing structures (internal relations) and thereby reproducing and modifying them?

A. Using the word ‘dialectic’ does not actually help you explain anything. It is just a methodological injunction not to be one-sided. What matters is how that injunction translates into a set of protocols for analysing the real world. For the SRA, the dialectic of structure and agency is actually a double dialectic. The first-order dialectic concerns: (1) the structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity of structures *plus* (2) the capacity of actors to engage in and act upon strategic-context analysis. This is the dialectic within Bourdieu at his best operates in terms of fields and habitus. The second-order dialectic concerns: (3) the selective retention of strategies that work within the limits of the prevailing set of differential structural constraints and opportunities associated with a given structural ensemble *versus* (4) the capacity of strategically reflexive actors to find ways to subvert or modify these constraints and opportunities through shifts in strategy, tactics, alliances, spatio-temporal horizons, scale-jumping, etc., and thereby modify the prevailing set of differential constraints and opportunities. Phrased crudely in terms of the mythical Hegelian dialectic (which he never actually advanced) of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, the second-order dialectic could be seen as the transformation through strategically reflexive action of inherited structures. Or, alternatively, it can be described as the transformation through selective reinforcement of strategic repertoires so that actors learn new forms of strategic conduct. The important point here is that this dialectic is processual — it evolves over time through the usual evolutionary mechanisms of variation, selection, and retention. Applied to the dialectic of structure and agency this requires us to look at structural coupling and co-evolution of structures, strategic reflexivity and strategic coordination, and the interaction between path-dependency (inherited structures and strategic capacities) and path-shaping (modification of structures and capacities). For an example, think again about the example of Blair and his Cabinet.

Q. How can you identify strategies in the real social world?

A. This is an interesting question. Sometimes actors do have real strategies and tactics; sometimes you can attribute strategies and tactics on an ‘*as if*’ basis, i.e., deduce preferred strategies and tactics from persistent patterns of conduct. In the latter case, we are talking about relatively unreflexive ways of going on in the world that work for most people most of the time based on a repertoire of actions that are selected in a practical way in terms of logics of appropriateness, i.e., what would be appropriate in a given situation. Once we move from the level of individual actors, however, a different set of questions emerges. To what extent can we ascribe

strategies and tactics to organizations and/or social movements? Sometimes there are public, semi-private, or private strategic discourses that can be found but, even when this is the case, it is important to check them against actual patterns of strategic action. Otherwise we are back to the issue of how to analyse revealed (or 'as if') strategies, whether in real time or with hindsight. The problems involved are the same whether or not one adopts the SRA because they are inherent in social action.

Q. How do you define strategy and tactics?

A. I define them in nested, relational terms because they depend on the horizons of action. One can distinguish strategy and tactics in a given context but what was strategy in a narrow set of horizons of action could be a tactic within a broader framework. The only exception to this general rule might be the distinction introduced by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1984). He says strategy is about the use of space over time (analogous to Gramsci's war of position) and tactics is about the use of time to create immediate opportunities in here and now without ever being able to transform these opportunities into a long-term power base. Thus, whereas my distinction between strategy and tactics is self-consistently strategic-relational, his is more ontological, depending on the use of space and time. It's always the tactics of the weak against strategies of the strong. But I think even if you said that was the case, then the tactics of the weak could be broken down into the strategies and tactics of how to use time to your immediate advantage. Developing the most effective strategies for tactical behaviour (for example, surviving as a hawker of pirated computer software) won't turn you into Bill Gates; but it might enable you to acquire a nodal position in a network of pirates. Conversely, if your overall strategic objective as a capitalist association is to break the power of trade unions, it is still necessary to have a series of intermediate tactical objectives. This was clearly how the Thatcher government proceeded in relation to the miners following earlier failed confrontations under the previous Conservative regime. So even if you accept the ontological distinction of de Certeau's kind, you can always push it that little bit further to recover the strategy-tactic distinction. One can read strategies and tactics together over the longer and longer time horizon with a continuing switching between what's the strategy and what's the tactic plus the 'as-if-ness'.

Q. What if I can't find clear strategies?

A. Then admit it and ask whether there is a problem with the mode of inquiry or there really is an absence of clear strategies. It could be that there is no strategic selectivity either, so that actors are unable to engage in strategic context analysis and elaborate appropriate strategies. Or it could be that you have found a set of strategically unreflexive, unskilled actors. Or, again, that this is a period of acute crisis marked by profound strategic disorientation. I would be very surprised if someone using the strategic-relational approach always found that every actor in every situation had clear strategies. This is not the way of the real world. But the SRA does not become irrelevant in such situations. It merely invites different types of question, including the differential distribution of capacities for developing strategic clarity. So there is no commitment on the part of the strategic-relational approach to the idea that actors always have clear strategies. Indeed, if I were an entrepreneur looking for opportunities to make, I would seek out people who were the least clued-up. An example of this is the transition period in the former Yugoslavia, where blind faith was placed in the market economy and capitalist banks and some unscrupulous persons set up fraudulent banks based on a Ponzi scheme. In other words, they attracted deposits by paying interest to customers from their own and subsequent rounds of capital investment until they closed down

the scam. There was clearly some sort of strategic asymmetry here and that, unfortunately, was part of the strategic game in this period. But this also has longer-term, path-dependent effects in terms of distrust of banks, calls for banking regulation, demands for a return to the communist past, and so on. This should indicate that you can explain nothing in terms of the general SRA heuristic - it must always be applied in specific cases using the appropriate substantive theories and concepts. What the SRA offers is a more sophisticated set of questions that have to be translated into a set of substantive arguments.

Q. But what are the implications of the SRA for non-strategic actions?

A. If I'm right that structures do not just exist out there in the real world with identical constraining effects on all actors, then non-strategic actors are those who cannot differentiate as many possibilities within a given conjuncture as more strategic actors do. This is a recipe for fatalism and, indeed, a recipe that can be realized by more sophisticated actors who seek to persuade others, for example, that globalization is inevitable and we can do nothing about it. Other actors will ask how they can reshape globalization or limit its development because they don't accept it as inevitable and regard themselves as players in regard to it. So turning your question on its head, we could say that non-strategic people are partly non-strategic because they fail to see the strategic possibilities and therefore regard structures far simpler and more constraining. At the limit this leads to pure fatalism but most actors will resist this conclusion — this, after all, is what de Certeau means with his emphasis on tactics. And, with tactics, comes the opportunity for tactical, if not strategic, learning.

Something that I have emphasized from the beginning with the SRA is that actors are capable of learning and reflecting to different degrees. They can learn reflexively by learning about learning, learn intentionally, or learn simply because certain things get rewarded and they adjust their conduct unconsciously. This is where some of Ji's doctoral research is very relevant.

Let me make one final set of comments before we conclude the interview. It could be that the SRA label is misleading if it implies that the strategic-relational approach cannot address non-strategic actions and practices. My own work has not required me to address this issue but it is clearly implicit in the SRA that structures will be more or less selective and that engaging in non-strategic action will have certain [strategic] consequences. From a strategic-relational viewpoint such structures and actions are less interesting theoretically (at least to me) but they can certainly be found and other approaches in the social sciences address them. The latter include ethnomethodology, the sociology of everyday life, and the sociology of the emotions and I think that the SRA could benefit from closer engagement with them. For example, emotions can be introduced into the SRA by exploring logics of appropriateness and the ways in which emotional behaviour feeds into strategic-relational context analysis and chains of action. But this does not mean that the SRA should be treated as an all-purpose theoretical framework and always be adopted, however appropriate or inappropriate it would be as an entry point into the analysis of a given problem. Strategic-relational reflection on entry points might say that for some sorts of theoretical questions, this is the most appropriate entry point than something else is. I developed the SRA to resolve certain problems in state theory, applied it next to political economy more generally, and am now busy integrating political economy and critical semiosis to produce a critical realist, strategic-relational 'cultural political economy'. For me, that's already a big enough agenda.