

The Motion: “Individual agents have no power or responsibility to change the economy to a more socially just and environmentally sound system.”

Arguing Against the Motion

Sarah Ware, Lisa Tamina Panhuber, Niko Korpar, Corinna Dengler

We believe that individual agents do have power and responsibility to change the economy to a more socially just and environmentally sound system, in other words we defend the agency side in a structure-agency debate. This is a very brief summary of our position.

With the initial statement, the opposing party clearly asserted that individual agents have no responsibility at all, to change the current status quo. Yet, we argue that if this were the case, there would be nobody who can take any responsibility for human action on Earth. The structure, mostly defined as the rules, norms and institutions, which shape the beliefs and actions of people, does not have willpower and the ability to deliberately perform an action. Agents are the only ones who can consciously choose among different actions and they do so every day. They may or may not seize opportunities they are given but in the end they have to take the responsibility for their (in)action.

Furthermore, we are convinced that agents are the only ones who can reflect on their behaviour and they are the ones who decide what is considered socially just and environmentally sound behaviour in society. We acknowledge that over time, beliefs and norms become institutionalised and may thus be attributed to structure. However, initially there have to be individual agents who make ethical judgments and normative decisions to form these norms and traditions.

Reflecting on the most pressing problems of our society today, we also realise that the question of time is a crucial factor of success. Especially, when we think about climate change, it is not only important that change is happening but when it is happening. Simply, relying on the deterministic notion that exogenous factors will eventually lead to a radical change of the ‘structure’, will most likely take too long. Agency - the ability to make autonomous decisions is defined not only by going against the predominant structure but also by the ability to freely choose when to do so. In order to stop environmental degradation and rising inequality in our society, we need individual agents who stand up for their ideals and start to act now.

Finally, the main critique of proponents of structure is usually that effective change has to happen on a global scale and that individuals are powerless at this level. Yet, we argue that power can be executed on different levels. Global change can begin on a small scale and grow into something larger much faster than we think. Global issues such as the consequences of the globalised agro-food industry also have a local dimension and can be challenged by an increasing number of individuals opting for regional, organic and home-grown food.

Of course, we do not deny that structure has immense power and that the increasing complexity and globalisation of our society has maybe disempowered agents even more over the last decades. However, we always have to remember, that it was individuals who created structures in the first place and thus it is also individuals who have the power and the responsibility to change them.