

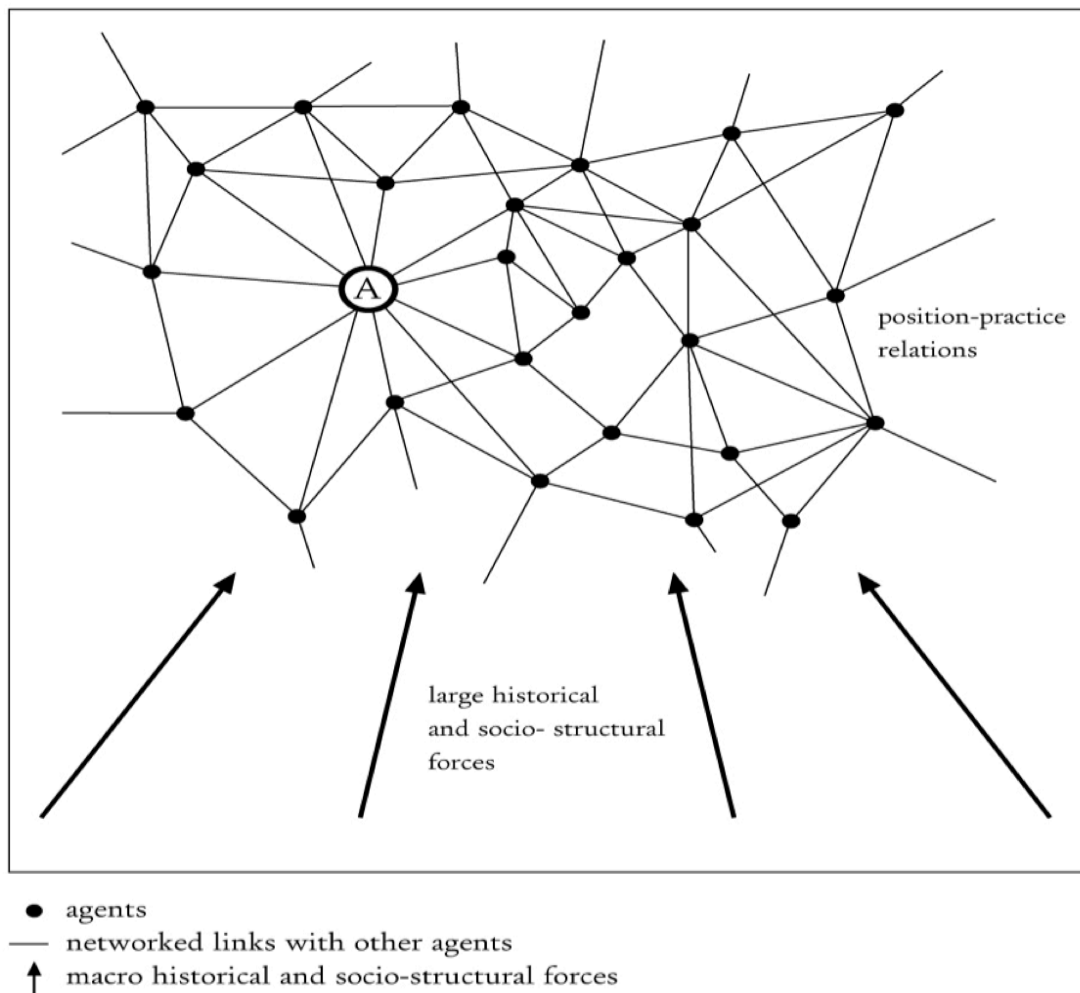
## Why Current Affairs Needs Social Theory: An Illustrative Case Study of Rights' Abuses in Burma

This paper is part of a wider project on social theory and current affairs, which is directed both at the academic researchers and at the wider audience for news and current affairs accounts. With respect to readers and viewers of news and current affairs the aims of the project are unashamedly pedagogical, intending to develop the capacity of audiences to engage more effectively with current affairs texts, from television news through documentaries to academic commentaries in periodicals such as the *New York Review of Books* or in book-length tomes. I will set out some of the key, generalizable, concepts of the approach in this paper, although some aspects of the argument will have to be alluded to rather than spelt out due to the limitations of space. The critical power of the concepts will be demonstrated through an illustrative analysis of a short Agence France-Presse (AFP) report from August 2009 on international reaction to rights' record of the Burmese junta.

I focus the analysis of current affairs texts around a fourfold set of textual operations identified by media and communications scholars concerned with how individual texts 'frame' a particular news story. These are i) the defining of problems; ii) the diagnosis of causes; iii) the making of moral judgments; and iv) the suggestion of remedies (Entman, 1993, 51-58. See also, Street, 2001, 37; and Kuypers, 2010, 301). The news report on Burma in the international community, which I will analyze below, concerns itself with the first three of these, and less with solutions or remedies. Using the *media frame* categories as a jumping off point, social theory can provide a further stage in the analysis. It can provide the tools to guide and inform an analysis of whether the media has framed reality in an *adequate* manner. Training a social-theoretical perspective on current affairs stories and their media framing, provides us with a way of assessing whether they over-simplify or misrepresent social relations.

Thinking about events as embedded within a *contextual field* is a key part of this social theory frame, providing a set of benchmarks against which to reflect upon the character and adequacy of the reality conveyed by news texts. When approaching a news and current affairs story about an unfamiliar topic, it is useful to begin by 'mapping' as many as possible of the key objective factors at a general, abstract level, to get an initial sense of what is involved in a contextual field, albeit in an impressionistic and rudimentary manner. Such a mapping is represented in graphic form in **Figure 1, below**. Subsequently, as we shall see in the illustrative case, one needs to complement a sense of objective factors with an emphasis on relevant subjective dimensions. This diagram is useful to keep in mind whilst thinking about contextual fields in general. For the sake of clarity I will home in on just one concept from the potential lexicon of objective elements, that of *interdependence*. The concept is closely linked to other generalizable aspects of contextual networks, such as the dependence of collective and individual actors on each other's power resources, the various hierarchies relating to the differential possession of such power resources, and so on.

The key to the importance of the objective interdependence, however, is how much value an actor places on it - this is the objective interweaving with the subjective. If a particular relationship of interdependence is *perceived as vital* for an actor, if it is *seen as* an indispensable precondition for achieving prized goals, satisfying keen wants, sustaining valued relationships, or realizing well-being of some kind, then it takes on a much greater force than it has when simply identified as an objective interdependence. For reasons of space, I can't elaborate further on the characteristics of the contextual field here, but suffice it to say that it is a way of thinking about surface events – the stuff of the drama and spectacle of news and current affairs – in a way that embeds them in networks of relevant relations. It provides a structural context, a sub-surface or hinterland of substantial significance, in which the surface reality can be more adequately understood.



**Figure 1:** Contextual Field (*adapted from Stones 2005: 128*)

## ***Identifying the Status of Knowledge in Current Affairs Stories***

**Figure 2, below**, is a way of illustrating in graphic form the *status* of the knowledge provided in current affairs items in general, including the report we'll look at in this paper. The figure is designed to distinguish between varying degrees of coverage, within current affairs accounts, of the relevant objective and subjective factors within the appropriate contextual field. It does this by paying attention to the density of the relevant networks of relations provided by an item, and also to the depth of relevant subjectivity conveyed by the text.

	Subjective Analysis	Combined Subjective and Objective Analysis	Objective Analysis
High Levels of Contextual Detail <b>CONTEXTUALIZING</b>	1a) Detailed subjectivity	2a) Detailed subjectivity situated within dense networks of relations	3a) Detailed, dense networks of relations
Low Levels of Contextual Detail <b>FLOATING</b>	1b) Thin, partial subjectivity	2b) Thin, partial subjectivity situated within thin, partial networks of relations	3b) Thin, partial networks of relations

**Figure 2:** Types and degrees of knowledge of contextual field conveyed by current affairs accounts. (source: variation of figure in Rob Stones, *Why Current Affairs Needs Social Theory*, London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming, 2015).

There are three key differentials to pay attention to, corresponding to the three headings along the top row. The first, which refers to boxes 3a) and 3b) involves whether a current affairs item situates the spectacle or events it focuses upon within a dense network of relevant relations, or only provides a thin or partial network of relations. I would argue that it is necessary for a news item to place the events it covers within an appropriate network of relevant relations if it is to genuinely enhance understanding. The implication here is that when a report includes only a thin and partial network of relations then this will substantially limit the understanding that can be acquired from that report. The kind of knowledge about networks that is indicated by boxes 2a) and 2b) parallels that in boxes 3a) and 3b), respectively, but now knowledge is also provided of relevant actors' subjective perceptions of, and orientation to, those networks. As

such, box 2a) represents an *ideal benchmark*, in which current affairs audiences are provided with detailed, dense, knowledge of the relevant networks of relations, but also with a full understanding of how these are interwoven with differently positioned actors' subjective orientation to these networks. This type of account allows the reader to grasp the internal worlds of actors in an intricate manner, as if able to step into their shoes as they engaged in the social practices we are interested in. One could refer to this sort of knowledge of interior worlds as 'experience-heavy' (see Clifford Geertz. Geertz 1987/1974). Such 'ideal' accounts foster empathy and a grasp of the actor's own internal experience and their deliberations, what I have elsewhere called *agents' conduct analysis* (Stones, 2005; also see Giddens, 1984), but they also allow both the actor and the reader to have a clear cognitive grasp of the external, objective, worlds that provide the contextual fields for the situated actor's perceptions and judgements (*agent's context analysis*). This is made possible because the heavy subjective experience of actors is placed firmly *in situ*, in a context that is also 'structurally-dense'. This can be contrasted with accounts that fall into categories 1a) and 1b), which refer to accounts of subjectivity that are uprooted from context, in which the point of view of actors, no matter whether detailed or 'light', is presented without any useful anchoring in a defined contextual field.

When the various features of a news article or bulletin all fall into the bottom half of the figure, they can be appropriately characterized as 'floating' accounts. The category of a *floating text* suggests an analysis made from a viewpoint metaphorically akin to that of traversing geographical space and historical time from the vantage point of a hot air balloon, taking a somewhat distant, bird's eye, view of what is going on below. Accounts provided from such a vantage point often have the strengths and advantages of breadth and scope, but can lack the ability to provide a more detailed fleshing out of, and contextualised embedding of, the relevant networks of relationships, events and processes in focus. It is not unusual at all to find that much of the content of short newspaper accounts, such as the article on Burma we shall look at below, is of this kind.

To this extent, they fall squarely into the category of news accounts that require greater embedding within networks of relationships in order to make sense (see Bourdieu, 1998). Floating accounts are also typically uneven, missing out important tranches of time and space and the relevant social processes going on within them, as if their hot air balloon has periodically sailed above the clouds, shrouding the events below from sight (cf. Stones 1996: 74–8 and *passim*). At other times, the position of the balloon in relation to the clouds means that, spatially, some networks can be seen but others are occluded from view, leaving a partial, incomplete appreciation of the sum of networks that are relevant to an understanding of the account. In the Burmese case, a number of the key relations and interdependencies relevant to the article's argument are entirely invisible to the reader. The distinction between *contextualizing* and *floating* accounts will always be a relative judgement made when comparing one account with another, or made against a benchmark of what a reasonably exhaustive account would look like.

## ***Rights Abuses and Burma's Powerful Neighbours: A Focus on the Concept of Interdependencies***

An Agence France-Presse (AFP) report, 'Burma "protected by its powerful neighbours"', appearing in the *Bangkok Post* on August 13, 2009, is a story of interdependence with plural causal mechanisms at work, but with one of these said to be more powerful than the others. The article appeared two days after the Burmese state had extended the house arrest of the Nobel laureate and 'democracy icon', Aung San Suu Kyi, by 18 months. Suu Kyi was the focal point for opposition against the Burmese Junta. A virtue of the report for our purposes was that it clearly stated both its *problem-at-hand*, or outcome to be explained and what it believed to be the key *causal* mechanisms producing this outcome. The problem-to-be explained was how Burma seemed to be able to ignore the widespread condemnation by the international community of this and many other instances of rights abuses.

One possible answer to this question would place all of its emphasis on individualistic, agency-based, or culture-based factors, putting all of the explanatory weight on a lack of moral principle or will power on the part of either key individuals or the international community as a whole. In the latter case, the international community would typically be thought of as a homogeneous, undifferentiated, whole, thus over-simplifying matters twofold. Such answers pay little attention to the positioning of key actors within networks of contextual fields, to the balance of power and interest relations within these networks, and therefore to the constraints and potential consequences facing variously positioned actors within the international community. A significant part of a more adequate answer can already be found within the news report in the *Bangkok Post*, which identifies Burma's positioning within a network of interdependencies with its powerful neighbours, China, India and Thailand. These interdependencies provide the causal basis for a more adequate, less free-floating, explanation. That is, the existing system of mutually beneficial interdependencies was such that those parts of the broader international community who would have been minded to place human rights and democracy at the apex of their dealings with Burma, had limited leverage over the ruling junta. This prevented any effective international response to Suu Kyi's arrest. Relations with China are said in the report – which here takes an interpretative, hermeneutic tone – to be the most essential within this contextual field, 'keeping Burma afloat through trade ties, arms sales, and by shielding it from UN sanctions over rights abuses as a veto-wielding, permanent member of the Security Council'. This was part of a reciprocal set of arrangements whereby:

In return, China is assured of a stable neighbour and gets access to Burma's natural resources – overall, trade between the two grew 26.4% to US\$2.6 billion last year, according to China's Ministry of Commerce. Yesterday it called for respect of Burma's judicial sovereignty in reaction to Mrs Suu Kyi's house arrest. India was once a staunch supporter of Mrs Suu Kyi but shifted its strategy in the mid 1990s as security, energy and strategic priorities emerged. It is also eyeing oil and gas imports from Burma, needs Rangoon's help in countering separatists operating along their common

border and is particularly concerned about not losing strategic ground to China in the military state.

However, it would be a mistake to feel too comfortable just reading off the perspective and the intentions of a government, or other key actor, directly from knowledge of some structural relations. Thus, in this case it is important to be aware of exactly what we know from the text of the article about the perspectives of the actors involved. The AFP report tells us directly that the Chinese government 'called for respect of Burma's judicial sovereignty', and, very precisely, that it did this yesterday. However, we should be clear that the link between China's statement of support and the prior information about its interests in having a stable neighbour, access to natural resources, and in mutual trading arrangements, is imputed rather than directly stated or evidenced. No matter how plausible it seems, it is important to note that the claim is about the intentions of the Chinese, but that there is no subjective analysis or evidence to accompany it. We would certainly have very little to go on if we were minded to try and reconstruct the relevant interior world – the relevant phenomenological perspective - of either the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, or whichever actor it was that made the call to respect the judicial sovereignty of the Burmese. A similar picture of inference and imputation is evident in the textual presentation of India's relations with Burma, as the mention of certain objective interdependencies is likewise used as license for the conclusion that these are causally responsible for India's withdrawal of vocal support for Aung San Suu Kyi, and for its support of Burma within the sphere of international diplomacy. We are told that this shift happened 'in the mid 1990s as security, energy and strategic priorities emerged'.

Taking the time to adopt the insights gained from the socio-theoretical perspective alerts us very quickly to the fact that we actually know very little about the nuanced details of the internal motivations, values and strategic calculations of the Chinese and of the Indian politicians and officials that have shown their support for the Burmese authorities. The text claims some knowledge through a coarse imputation from their actions, from the timing of shifts in their strategy, and from certain visible actions of the two states. In addition to this, however, it also makes direct references to the internal worlds of these actors. It does this through references that rely more on the rhetorical use of third person attribution than on any suggestion of evidence, as in the intimation of close familiarity conveyed in the reporting that the Indians are 'eyeing' oil and gas imports from Rangoon, and in the suggestion that they are 'particularly concerned' about not losing ground to China with the military state. We may, it is true, think this is quite enough for our purposes, especially if we have learned over time to place our trust in the sources and the interpretation of AFP as opposed to, say, less esteemed new media sources lacking equivalent status and lineage. However, we need to be clear that this is the evidence we are agreeing to base our conclusions upon, and that these are the grounds for whatever convictions we form.

In terms of the contextual field there is, it seems, a less than substantiated jump within the report from the identification of some objective relations of

interdependence between actors to assumptions about how this translates into a subjective sense of obligation or desire to support that actor. In this instance, as we've said, it seems a reasonably plausible jump, and one that is facilitated by thinking in terms of interdependencies within contextual fields, but, precisely because it is indeed a jump, with only the slightest of attempts to provide evidence, we need to be aware that we cannot be entirely sure of our ground. We have made a leap from knowledge claims befitting the perspective of an external, relatively distant, observer (box 3b) to claims that would need to be derived from a much more involved and intimate position. For there are claims here that presume knowledge of intricate inter and intra organisational webs at the meso and micro levels, and of how these webs are internalized within the subjective worlds of key actors (box 2a). There is a mismatch between the claims and the basis for the claims, which means that although we have learnt a good deal about interdependencies, there are still question marks over both the status and the adequacy of what the text purports to know.

Employing the contextual field as a conceptual benchmark allows us to make something of the fact that the report does not provide us with any information on the finely textured webs of interdependent relations *within* the relevant national policy spheres (hence, with reference to box 3b, the networks that are presented in the text are not only thin but also 'partial'). And, clearly, without such an account it would be impossible to go a step further and look for the ways in which objective and subjective factors are interlaced within national policy arenas. In terms of causation and likely future developments, we would need to know much more about these *meso-level* domains in order to judge with any degree of confidence that the Chinese, Indian and Thai support for Burma is likely to be robust and enduring rather than fragile and potentially short-lived. A stronger causal account, one able to provide greater confidence about the durability of the current state of affairs, would need to look not only at the macro-level objective interdependencies it outlines within the contextual field (**see figure 3, appendix**), but also at more middle level and micro policy spheres, and to show how the objective and the subjective interweave within these.

One can see the same kind of presentational orientation towards the objective at work in the article's subsequent observations about Thai-Burmese relations. An argument about causation is constructed by simply juxtaposing objective interdependencies. Thailand's maintenance of diplomatic relations with Burma in the face of the latter's human rights record is simply noted and then placed alongside the fact that Burma's 'biggest source of foreign exchange earnings is by far the revenue it receives from gas sales to Thailand – around \$3billion annually. Thailand, meanwhile, is largely dependent on Burma for its energy needs and also has investments in telecommunications there.' The imputation about causation is clear, and again is highly plausible. At the very least we should be fairly confident, unless we are to conceive of a highly dysfunctional national policy sphere, that such major objective factors would enter into the subjective calculations of Thai policy makers. However, a moment's reflection on general categories of policy making - including further elements of structural

interdependence we may have overlooked (but which could loom large in the internal worlds of key actors), issues of competing vested interests and their refraction through different ministries, divergent ideological motivations, and the balance of domestic forces at any one time - would alert us to the fact that the level of our detailed knowledge of many parts of the relevant contextual field is exceptionally low.

Once these important caveats to any simple and straightforward acceptance of the strongest claims of the AFP report have been made and incorporated, it remains the fact that the objective interdependencies providing the basis for the article's argument, relating to trade, energy resources, and finance, are significant enough to provide a major *initial*, provisional, orientation to the reader. They are key structural types that can be profitably incorporated into an audience's general 'stocks of knowledge'. Their generalizable quality means they are invaluable to audiences, ready to be transposed into new situations, suitably adapted to the specifics of those circumstances and contextual fields. However, audiences, and journalists, need to be aware that they shouldn't be made to take on too much of the burden of explanation by themselves.

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Figure 3:

### Burma's Macro-level Interdependencies as Context for Diplomatic Protection

**Legend:**

▭ Countries and social actors

○ Nature of dependence or interdependence

↔ Indication of interdependence

