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WORLD SOCIOLOGY: AGENCY AND THE NEW THEORETICAL MOVEMENT

Is there a "new theoretical movement" in sociology and what are its effects? This question was discussed by Jeffrey Alexander (University of California, Los Angeles) in a previous issue of this journal.[1] Alain Touraine (E.H.E.S.S, Paris) was first to react.[2] Other reactions came from Helga Nowotny (University of Vienna),[3] Richard Münch (University of Düsseldorf)[4] and Raymond Boudon (University of Paris-Sorbonne).[5] In this issue of our journal Jeffrey Alexander pursues this theoretical discussion with "More Notes on the Problem of Agency" which are a reply to all these replies.

1 Jeffrey Alexander, Recent Sociology between Agency and Social Structure, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol./Rev. suisse sociol.*, Vol. 18 (1), 1992, 7–11.

2 Alain Touraine, La théorie sociologique entre l'acteur et les structures, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol./Rev. suisse sociol.*, Vol. 18 (3), 1992, 533–535.

3 Helga Nowotny, Sociology as Discourse System: the Impact of Social Movements upon Sociological Theorizing, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol./Rev. suisse sociol.*, Vol. 19 (1), 1993, 3–7.

4 Richard Münch, Kreativität und Gesellschaft: Über die pragmatistische Erneuerung der Handlungstheorie in gesellschaftstheoretischer Absicht, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol./Rev. suisse sociol.*, Vol. 19 (2), 1993, 289–306.

5 Raymond Boudon, Between Agency and Social Structure: An Epistemological Point, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol./Rev. suisse sociol.*, Vol. 19 (2), 1993, 307–308.

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MORE NOTES ON THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY: A REPLY

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Bruised and battered by the war of the schools that marked sociology in the 1960s and 1970s, in the 1980s there emerged a new theoretical movement in the discipline to (re)create a "macro-micro link". Initiated from within each of the warring traditions, this movement had the effect of obscuring the old lines of battle. Who now speaks of "conflict" versus "order" sociology? Of exchange theory versus symbolic interactionism, of functionalism versus ethnomethodology? Such discourse has been displaced by efforts at synthetic theorizing. Indeed, even new imperializing efforts, like the journal *Rationality and Society*, have been forced to produce similar effects. Thus, its "enlightened" self-conscious eclecticism has allowed not only elasticity but imprecision, with the result that contributions obfuscate rather that clarify such basic analytic distinctions as rational/individualist versus non-rational/collective approaches to social theory and social life.

In fact, in my originating contribution[1] to what has proved an unsually vivid and stimulating, if not completely transparent round of theoretical discussion, my aim was to argue that this welcome movement to overcome divisions has not, in fact, succeeded either in abolishing or in fundamentally rethinking the presuppositional distinctions that motivated general theoretical debate in its earlier, less ecumenical form.

As Touraine suggests in what is to me the most intriguing and broadly based reply to my earlier statement[2], behind certain versions of these new synthetic theories there still lurks the image of society (the macro-order) as a self-reproducing, "user unfriendly" system, an order that partakes neither of actors nor agency. This is exactly what is implied, for example, when Giddens asserts that "actors draw upon structural elements"[3]. To be sure, the latter are identified, in good macro-micro language, as "rules" and not only as resources – that is, as

1 Jeffrey C. Alexander, Recent Sociology between Agency and Social Structure, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol. /Rev. suisse sociol.*, vol. 18 (1), 1992, 7–11.

2 Alain Touraine, La théorie sociologique entre l'acteur et les structures, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol. / Rev. suisse sociol.*, vol. 18 (3), 1992, 533–535.

3 Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems*, London, Macmillan, 1979, p. 80. I draw here on some formulations by Paul Treherne presented in an unpublished undergraduate essay at UCLA.

structures that presumably have not only a collective but a subjective status – but rules are themselves objectified and depersonalized when Giddens insists on presenting them merely as "techniques or generalizeable procedures"[4]. No wonder Giddens equates agency with "strategic conduct"[5], that is, with the exercise of free will unconstrained by psychological identity or meaningful pattern.

This most representative figure of the new theoretical movement, in other words, has not fundamentally rethought the basic categories of actor, agency, environment, self, rationality, or meaning; he has simply placed them next to each other.

What about that other prominent resolver of antinomies, Pierre Bourdieu, to whom Giddens' work is so closely yet unobtrusively linked? Certainly he would seem to avoid such depersonalization, for example with his insistance that actors must always have a "feel" for the game. But Bourdieu argues that fields are systems of objective constraints, and that the creative, non-determined dimension of action manifests itself via the omniscient and omnipresent economizing impulse which he, too, calls strategization. What would better demonstrate that Bourdieu's synthetic approach similarly betrays an objectifying slant?

Most of the other influential social theorists of our time betray the goal of theoretical synthesis in similar ways. Collins equates the "macro", or extra-individual, with material, impersonal resources like property, power, and physical space. Luhmann's "autopoetic systems" are either mixed metaphors, tropes that obscure meaningful action and culturally ordered collectivities, or they are extraordinary reifications that deny them altogether. Assuming the latter to be the case, Habermas equates political and economic activities with systems-rational organizations that impinge upon lifewordly activities.

In their efforts to inscribe links where only divisions once existed, then, these synthetic efforts end up reproducing the structuralism they avowedly reject. None approaches the Parsonian or Selznickian understandings of organizations as sites for value institutionalization, or the understanding of the later Durkheim and Touraine of institutions as depositories of praxis, the solid, congealed form of the liquid of social movements.

This reification of the ontologically external environment of action produces, and is produced by, the conflation of actor, agency, and action I analyzed in my

4 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, London, Polity, 1984, p. 21.

5 Anthony Giddens, op. cit., 1979, p. 80.

earlier statement. Whether described as reflexive, knowledgeable, wily, strategic, interactive, or ethnomethodological, the actors which populate contemporary synthetic theorizing are presented as engaging in internally unconstrained acts, in free actions that are patterned only by social structures outside of themselves. The internal environments of action are distorted accordingly, culture being described as external to agency as well. "Accordingly", as Touraine writes, theories describing "systèmes sans acteurs" are merely the other side of those that "nous montrent des acteurs sans systèmes"[6].

Only if a strong cultural approach is accepted, one that views identity and action as resting within social meaning rather than outside it, can a more satisfactory understanding of the internal environments of action be achieved. But an unabashed antagonism to strong cultural theories is precisely what each of these new synthetic theorists shares. Giddens and Bourdieu falsely portray symbolic structuralism as merely another form of objectivism. Neither Habermas nor Collins even comment on Saussurean language theory, let alone incorporate its insights into their work.

Such failures of general theorists are not, perhaps, entirely of their own making, for the cultural sociology upon which they might be expected to draw is misshapen in similar ways. Liberal theorists like Archer and Swidler describe culture as providing a tool kit, authentic only if it is seen as something employed, or not employed, by rational, sensible agents. For radicals of the Birmingham School, cultural studies provide a framework for depicting rebellion against ideologies that are symbolic reifications of organized oppression. For interactionists like Gary Allen Fine, cultures are constructed bit-by-bit for special occasions. For action and social movement theorists, Touraine included, culture tends also to be seen either as hindrance to free action or as its result. In the provocative recent work of Hans Joas[7] – which Münch rightly brings into this theoretical conversation[8] – creativity is defined precisely as acting against established normative structures, a pragmatist understanding that severes the internal environment of culture from a positive relation to agency.

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6 Alain Touraine, ibid.

7 Hans Joas, *Die Kreativität des Handelns*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M., 1992. See also in French: Hans Joas, La théorie de l'action chez Durkheim et chez Weber: le problème de la créativité, in Monique Hirschhorn and Jacques Coenen-Huther, Eds., *Durkheim et Weber, vers la fin des malentendus?*, Paris, L'Harmattan (in press).

8 Richard Münch, Kreativität und Gesellschaft. Über die pragmatistische Erneuerung der Handlungstheorie in gesellschaftstheoretischer Absicht, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol. /Rev. suisse sociol.*, vol. 19 (2), 1993, 289–306.

But it is not only the external environment of action or its internal cultural environment that are distorted by recent efforts at general theorizing. There is also a marked inability to appreciate the other internal environment of action, the socialized yet independent "self". Among more macro-oriented theorists, like Giddens, Bourdieu, Collins, and even Habermas, the humanism of the self concept – in contrast to the strategic, deracinated quality of the strategic agent – seems almost entirely lacking. But even among more micro-oriented theorists, there seems to have been a degeneration from the sophisticated understanding of the self achieved by Mead, who insisted against Watson's behaviorism that the I (agency), the me (self) and the generalized other (culture) all resided within the actor (agent).

If Blumer is the original culprit here, one cannot exculpate those who followed in his path, like the early Goffman, or those, like Homans, who revived individualistic and rationalistic behaviorism in its neoclassical form. Despite his diplomatic willingness to allow different theories for different problems – an attitude that marks him as part of the synthetical turn – Boudon's comments[9] reveal how he, too, contributes to this deracination of the acting self. Acting in what seems to ourselves or others to be a "reasonable" manner does not, after all, justify the theoretical observation that action is rational in the culturally-unmediated sense so dear to neoclassical theory and the contemporary paradigm of rational choice. As Weber emphasized, we cannot assume that our own common sense is what motivates the actions of others. This insight motivated Weber's comparative study of the economic ethics of the world religions, which represents cultural theory in its strong form.

Has there been a similar degeneration from the founding insights of the phenomenological tradition? Certainly Husserl and Heidegger were more sensitive than many contemporaries to the connection between indexical, typifying action and the "ideal-types" presented to actors by their lifeworlds. It was such a connection that Schütz sought to portray in his more abstract theoretical work. The early Garfinkel, too, was much more inclined to accept the guiding significance of Parsons' "normative order" than the ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts who followed upon his later work and who treat norms as little more than pragmatically-inspired means for achieving interactional ends.

Correctives to this kind of mind-numbing nominalism may well come from developments in psychoanalytic theory, which reveal a conception of the internal

9 Raymond Boudon, Between Agency and Social Structure: An Epistemological Point, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol. /Rev. suisse sociol.*, vol. 19 (2), 1993, 307–308.

psychological environment of action unmatched in its richness and complexity. Despite the fact that, in a typical Anglo-Saxon conflation of actor with agency, Freud's "*Ich*" was mistranslated as "ego", the identity theories of so-called ego psychologists like Erikson have yet to be mined for general theoretical work, let alone some of the more recent developments in psychoanalytic work such as Kohut's "self theory". As always with psychoanalytic thought, the challenge in making links to culture and society is to correct the reduction of culture to self; yet, the emergence of what might be called the Freud-Dilthey dialogue, initiated by thinkers like Ricoeur and Taylor, promises at least the philosophical basis for synthesis.

In conclusion to this "Reply", I submit once again that social theorists must guard against the tone of ideological uplift that underpins the conflation of actor, agency, and action which I have described. Nowotny puts the issue well when she writes[10] that the microsociological revival in sociological theory "would have remained precisely that – an intellectual reaction to a previously dominant theoretical mode ... had it not been for the strong theoretical and practical interaction with (the) societal discourse ... initiated and represented by social movements". Yet, while she understands that "the empowerment of the individual in society [has been] reflected theoretically [in] the empowerment of 'actors' and agency", she seems to evaluate its effects for contemporary theorizing in a positive rather than negative way, suggesting, in contrast to my own position, that "how much this empathy" between social movements and sociology "impedes sociological reflexivity is another question". Despite some avowed misgivings about this empathic link, Nowotny announces that "there has indeed been a decisive shift in social and political life as well as in theorizing", and writes approvingly about how movements towards democracy, popular empowerment, and institutional decentralization underpin the new emphasis on the micro-macro link.

But is this not precisely the problem? Perhaps it is this obvious social and historical connection that is responsible for the distortions I have described. If it has been social empowerment that has produced, and presumably can be best understood by, theories emphasizing agency, does this mean that dis-empowerment – the loss of civil rights, the undermining of feminism, the increase of authoritarianism – will produce, and best be understood by, theories that ignore agency and deny a micro-macro link? Did effective contemporaneous explanations of Nazism and Communism focus only on supra-individual,

10 Helga Nowotny, Sociology as a Discourse System: The Impact of Social Movements upon Sociological Theorizing, *Schweiz. Z. Soziol. /Rev. suisse sociol.*, vol. 19 (1), 1993, 3–7.

objective factors? Now that nationalism has returned as a social danger, is the effort to recognize the role of subjectivity and agency to be abandoned?

Of course, that such proposals are fatuous is demonstrated merely by their asking. Yet they follow from the overt logic of Nowotny's position, and from the more submerged logic of others, even if they are not what either she or they have in mind. In the developmental and natural rights traditions within which virtually all contemporary social theorists still write, individuating action is identified with progress, and is favored as a result. Morally heinous social facts, like sexism, as Bloch points out[11], are attributed to supra-individual forces, not to the empowering acts of individuals or social movements, much less to culturally-informed subjectivities. Ideological progressives favor individually-oriented modes of explanation; strong culture theories, like that of Lévi-Strauss, are resisted as totalitarian and ideologically regressive.

If we are ever going to succeed in resolving the fundamental antinomies of social thought – and in going beyond the classical, modern, and contemporary efforts at rethinking them which certainly must be judged as progressive contributions in this vein –, we must eschew this ideological preference for individualising explanations. We can overcome an overemphasis on agency by recognising how cultural codes inform subjectivities and how structures of power, whether coercive or liberating, institutionalize meanings rather than merely manipulate force. In doing so, however, we must never lose sight of that fragile flower of our cultural legacy, the socialized and possibly humane self.

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11 Ruth H. Bloch, "A Culturalist Critique of Trends in Feminist Theory", Contention: 2(3), 79–106, Spring 1993