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AGENCY, UNLIMITED

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Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

Beginning with the transactionalist approach in anthropology and the microsociology of symbolic interactionism, the last decade or so has seen a vigorous opposition to what has been a Durkheimian-Parsonian grip on the social sciences. A view of the world ordered by rules and norms, with "culture" and "social system" setting the limits and conditions for, and determining, the actions of individuals and groups, left a great many questions unanswered — questions which had their origins in the economically and politically tumultuous 1960s and 1970s.[1] Political activism and consciousness-raising required a concomitant theoretical orientation — having emerged in European political philosophy and social theory earlier (notably German and French) but developed later on the North American continent. Yet structural Marxism and political economy, in getting closer to the "intentional subject" and the "process" of history, still insisted that structure and/or system determined action as well as the motivations of individuals, and that process in history was simply the sum of all actions, *ad hoc* and moving foward with silent momentum (though not utterly directionless). The dualism of individual and society was thus maintained, as was the dualism of society-culture, institution-norm, base-superstructure, and so on.

The Radical question "How can we change the system" thus became the basis for more appropriate questions: Where do systems come from,

and how are they generated, produced and reproduced? When asked these ways, the dualisms of individual-society and all the rest begin to melt away, changed into dualities like agency and structure, action and intention, culture and meaning, ideology and value, and so on. Causal arrows, if there are to be any, now flow both ways, and then back again; static becomes dynamic while constraint, not denied, and unintended consequences, not ignored, are "produced" at the same time as they "mediate." The notion of change and history as processual, as something living and lived in time and space, is thus much easier grasped — literally, to be grasped.[2] The action or practice approach moreover yielded another insight, namely that a situated reality could be consciously manufactured, maintained and manipulated to keep other realities hidden from view — perhaps even preventing them from being imagined in the first place.

The two volumes by Giddens and Thompson complement one another in exceptional and important ways. Both volumes grew out of earlier works.[3] While one examines how structure is produced and reproduced by agency (Giddens), the other examines the manner in which agents inadvertently reproduce structure (Thompson). The chief difference between the two is that Giddens does not accord language as central a role as does Thompson, who, by adopting a critical conception of ideology, is able to conclude that it is through the medium of language that social relations, asymmetrical or otherwise, are sustained. The difference is not serious if we say that speech is itself action, but, while we know that an action is performed *by* an utterance, *in* uttering and *of* uttering (by someone), the depth-interpretative procedure that Thompson offers for analyzing ideology provides a better sense of just how all-pervasive "structure" as constraint really is. This is because discourse analysis reveals how powerful *meaning* is and what role it plays in the inadvertent reproduction and maintenance of relationships, structures and systems. One suspects then, in Giddens' own scheme (pp. 7, 289), but following Thompson's argument, that much reproduction actually takes place in the realm between what is referred to as "practical consciousness" and the "unconscious," instead of solely in the realm between practical and "discursive" consciousness. Indeed, meaning is generated precisely in the realm between the unconscious and practical consciousness. Curiously, Giddens acknowledges this (pp. 19-21), yet maintains there are repressive barriers between the unconscious and practical consciousness. There may well be, but Thompson's depth-interpretation implies that the zone between them is quite permeable; indeed, there is the temptation to portray the relationship between the three forms of consciousness as a circular one, rather than as a vertical-linear one as Giddens has done.

The point in arguing that more "agency" should be attributed to the unconscious is simply to preserve the integrity of the actor's ability to

reflexively monitor his or her own motivations and actions (including speech), and to grant the actor ability to bring the unconscious into direct relationship with first the practical, then discursive consciousness (to perform, in a sense, his or her own depth-hermeneutics, cf. the chapter on Ricoeur in Thompson). This same issue comes up in the context of motives, structural constraint and collective action to be discussed later. By making the three levels of consciousness more processual (extending Gidden's conception of consciousness) the central idea of "reflexivity" in structuration theory is thus joined, as it must be, with a critical conception of ideology, now from the perspective of the actor (extending Thompson's notion of depth-interpretation). That is, the duality of structure (where structure is constituted by agency while being at the same time the medium of the constitution) has to be linked with the duality of speech (where language as the locus of ideology and meaning reproduces ideology and meaning through its use). Use of language and reproduction of the rules of grammar that go along with it, of course, are possible precisely because of the dynamic relation between the unconscious and "practical" consciousness.

Thompson presents a systematic interpretative theory of ideology that combines both social and discursive analysis, and recognizes that the realization of speech is situationally specific. Discourse which expresses ideology must be viewed as a socially-historically situated practice, and taking Pierre Bourdieu's lead, he argues that Wittgenstein, Austin and even Chomsky were neglectful of the conditions under which particular discourses come to be constituted as legitimate, are imposed on speakers, and are successfully reproduced. A critical linguistics will offer a formal and explanatory method capable of analyzing ideology, whereby the concealment of relations of domination (and the concealment of the concealment) is understood to involve linguistic processes like transformation, which suppress and distort material contained in underlying linguistic structures. The work of Bourdieu, Ricoeur, Habermas, Castoriadis and Lefort, Pêcheux and others (including Giddens) that form the bases of discussions in Thompson, show how reflexivity could be potentially extended to involve all levels of consciousness to thus expand the notion of agency. Meaning (signification) serves to sustain relations of domination, and meaning itself emanates from that same locus from which emanate the rules of grammar and thus of language. Relations or structures of domination, it seems, have their genesis in the interplay between the unconscious and practical consciousness.

What of agency and its relation to structure? Giddens suggests the link between them is best understood by reference to a "stratification" model of the agent or acting self. Action is motivated, rationalized, and reflexively monitored. These are processes very much intertwined. Reflexive monitoring depends on rationalization, but Giddens makes

motivation a much more elusive process. He suggests actors are often unable to describe their motives, and so relegates motives to the realm of the unconscious. Thus, actors generate structural conditions that are largely unintended, which in turn become the unacknowledged conditions of further action. However, are most structural conditions unintended, where actors are tricked into believing they are not? In structuration theory, where does one draw the line between those intended structural conditions produced by rationalized reflexive monitoring, and those unintended ones produced by unconsciously motivated actions?

To attribute greater agency or reflexivity to actors and to be truer to the stratification model requires, again, a more open concept of the unconscious and an expanded notion of what a motive is. There are conscious as well as unconscious motives, and any act may have more than one motive as well as more than one kind of motive. Conscious and unconscious motives are themselves pluralistic, and they are hierarchically embedded with different levels of priority, intensity and specificity (constituting motives sets). Since motives are learned, they are variable and mutable with respect to time and space, and physical and cultural environment. Motivational sets or patterns are therefore not inalterably fixed in an actor, but are expressed in different ways at different times. These properties of motives suggest there may be a stronger link between motivation and reflexive monitoring of action than the stratification model admits. Because motives are learned, power (transformative capacity, and not merely the power to act), even at the level of the individual, has its genesis and basis for reproduction in the dynamic between motivation and rationalization-intentionality, and not merely (as Giddens implies) in the dynamic between rationalization and reflexivity (which would reproduce it only at the level of structure). Again, the stratification model, like the hierarchy of consciousness, must be imbued with greater dynamism than it presently is in the theory of structuration. Consciousness (all levels), motivation and reflexivity, while components of structuration, are *themselves* structured and structurally integrated. Thus, a more dynamic relation between motivation and reflexivity may be the "correcting" or controlling mechanism that works to limit unintended consequences by increasing the awareness of the conditions of action on the part of the actor.

Expanding the agency of actors carries with it other possibilities. Both Giddens and Thompson are interested in power and how aspects of it, like domination, are realized in the relation between action and structure. Social systems, institutions, and indeed organizations, are not structures in themselves, but "have" structures; they are the result of patterned interactions that have taken place over time. Actors draw from various resources to produce these patterns, which may include the interactions and the

resulting "structures" themselves. According to the theory of structuration, these resources constrain while they also enable. Power and domination are therefore immanent in social relations as well as transcendent to them; they are two resources, of many, inherent in structure and structural outcomes. However, resources — such as power — are only as enabling as actors are competent in recognizing, utilizing and exploiting them. In other words, the degree of competence also places "limits on the range of options open to an actor . . . in a given circumstance or type of circumstance" (Giddens, p. 177), not just the so-called "objective existence of structural properties that the individual agent is unable to change" (p. 176).[4] Constraint, however, is a perceived thing, a matter of degree, personal control and power. Giddens adds, though he may not have fully realized the implications, that structural constraint "always operates via agents' motives and reasons" (p. 310). The competence of actors is entailed by the social structure, insofar as options open to them are differentially distributed according to age, sex and no less in terms of different wants, needs and interests. Some individuals and indeed groups have greater scope for action and choice than do others; asymmetrical power relations occur precisely when agents or groups of agents are able (competent) to exclude others in pursuit of interests and goals, and to limit their options. Those excluded perceive a disjunction between wanting to fulfill wants and needs and being unable to pursue options, much less to recognize a range of them. Some may even come to recognize that wants, needs and perceived options are structurally circumscribed by the *act* of wanting and perceiving — even the language agents use, as Thompson points out, sustains the circumscriptions and the relations. They lack the means to change these however, because such would require changing the very bases of interaction and agency, including that of language.

Recognition of this disjunction, of course, is neither automatic nor explicit, but actors collectively have the potential to grasp it (intervention can help actors perceive the disjunction).[5] They have, precisely because it is with a more dynamic hierarchy of consciousness and a greater processual relationship between motivation and reflexivity that actors "sense" how their wants, interests and options are perpetuated, reinforced and limited by their very articulation. In collectively grasping this disjunction, actors gain the potential to *act* collectively. Social movements suppose a high degree of reflexive self-regulation,[6] whose participants struggle to regain control of the resources of interaction, including language, from those who have appropriated them for their own use. The origins of this struggle reside in awareness on the part of actors that the issue is who directs the orientation of action. Structuration theory must integrate the hierarchy of consciousness with a more processual stratification model of action if it is

eventually to include the study of social "movement." The latter is, after all, a collective phenomenon that is individually reproduced and mediated.

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Notes

1. S. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1984.
2. A. Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *The Self-Production of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).
3. A. Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); J.B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
4. The possibility of objective structural properties threatens to contradict the theory of structuration, however, since objective structural constraint negates agency and so turns the duality of agency and structure into a dualism. Thompson argues that agency and structure are not as complementary as Giddens thinks.
5. A. Touraine, 1981, *Ibid.*
6. A. Giddens, *infra*, p. 204. See also A. Touraine, "An Introduction to the Study of Social Movements," *Social Research*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 1985; A. Melucci, "The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements," *Social Research*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 1985.