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RECENT SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY BETWEEN AGENCY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE ¹

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In the last decade or so, there has been a significant movement within Western sociological theory to bridge the gap between macro and micro work. While some movement has occurred from the micro to the macro direction, the most conspicuous developments have occurred in macrosociology, which has given renewed emphasis to the concept of "agency" vis-a-vis "social structure". This movement in post-Parsonian sociology was stimulated positively by the radical voluntarism of microsociologists like Homans, Goffman, and Garfinkel and negatively by the anti-voluntaristic overextension of macro thinking in conflict theory, structuralist Marxism and state-centered neo-Weberian thought.

This effort to "bring men back in", to recall Homans' classic phallo-centered phrase, is a fundamentally important theoretical development. Indeed, one cannot think of any major contemporary theorist who is not preoccupied with the micro/macro problem. From Collins and Giddens, on the one side, to Habermas and Touraine, and Coleman, Elster and Boudon, on the other, with Bourdieu and some neo-functionalists in between, this concern defines what can fairly be called "the new theoretical movement" in sociology.

The widespread agreement among current theorists about this new direction, however, should not disguise the fact that fundamental disagreements remain. The object of analysis has shifted, and even some basic concepts and models are new, but presuppositional issues continue to structure theorizing about the micro-macro link.

In this brief contribution, I would like to express strong misgivings about certain aspects of this new emphasis on agency. As I see it, three major problems can be discerned.

First, there has been a confusion of "agency" and "actors". Second, there has been a tendency to conceptualize "culture" as separate from "actors".

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Third, the concept of agency has been associated with a naïvely positive ideological tone.

1. Problem One : Actors and Agency

If one examines the articles and books that have articulated this new movement over the last decade, one recognizes a strong tendency to identify actors (persons who act) with agency (human freedom, free will) and agents (those who exercise free will). This identification provided the unquestioned starting point for the brilliant generation of anti-Parsonian microsociologists, and it has been taken over, to one degree or another, by most subsequent efforts to create a micro-macro link. From neo-Marxism to rational action theory, from reconstructed conflict models to social movement and praxis theories, the dangerous legacy of this fertile but fundamentally misguided conflation of actor and agency can be found.

My objection to this identification of actor and agency is that it is guilty of misplaced concreteness. Rather than replacing or reinterpreting the familiar dichotomy between actors and structures, the identification of actor with agency actually reproduces it in another form. Rather than forming a hierarchy, actors and structures are placed horizontally – side-by-side but not interpenetrating and creating new forms. What results is a mixture rather than a solution, a compromise rather than a reformulation. The incantation that “structure controls actors who simultaneously reconstitute structure in turn” is simply that – an incantation. Because action and structure are conceived to be concrete, or empirically distinct, the dichotomization is inscribed in such a way that no amount of juggling – keeping both balls in the air at the same time – can create a fundamentally different conception of the micro-macro link.

A more complex position is needed. Actors are not simply agents – those who possess free will – nor are structures necessarily contradictory to the conditions under which actors exercise self-control and autonomy. If we define action as the movement of a person through time and space, we can say that there is a dimension of free will, or agency, in every action; we can even go further and suggest that agency – what Parsons called effort – is what allows actors to move through time and space. But actors per se are much more than, and much less than, “agents”.

There are many ways to express this distinction. In my own work, I have done so by suggesting that agency is the moment of freedom, or effort, which occurs within three structured environments, and that two of these – culture

and personality – exist ontologically only within the actor, conceived as a spatially and temporally located person. According to this model, actors certainly have knowledge, but it is an error to say, for example as Garfinkel and his microsociological followers have done, that actors are “knowledgeable agents”. It is an error because the knowledge that actors have does not rest with their agency but results from the cultural environments which surround it (and transform it into identity). That this internal culture is a result of earlier interactions with others does not mean, moreover, that it can be viewed as the result of an agent’s practical experience. While some of this knowledge is, indeed, distinctive to a uniquely individual learning process, or trajectory, it is misleading to identify most of this knowledge as the actor’s own. It is “society’s” knowledge. Even if it is not widely shared, rather than being generalized from a series of particular experiences, it has been learned from gestalts which such sequential encounters are seen to represent.

If action is the exercise of agency by persons, then it can occur only in relation to two highly structured internal environments. Action is coded and motivated, by cultural systems and by personalities. Still, personalities and cultural codes do not exhaust the contents of a person’s activities. There remains a dimension of agency which I have conceived as articulated through the processes of invention, typification, and strategization. By calling these agentic processes, I mean that they embody, in the sense of giving shape to, the exercise of free will. These agentic processes engage the structured, internal environments of action and move these environments through time and space. It is not only agency – as articulated by these three primordial processes – but the agentic articulations of these internally structured environments that comprise the “actor”.

What this position tells us about “social structures” rather than agents is not something I am able to discuss here. Suffice it to say that if actors are not only agents in the traditional sense, then structures are not only – not primarily, not essentially – constraining forces which confront actors from without. Culture and personality are social structures that confront agency from within and which, therefore, become part of action in a “voluntary” way. Structures can be described as existing outside of actors only if we focus on a third environment for agency : the social system. I refer here to the economic, political, solidaristic, and ecological relations and networks formed by persons in the course of their interactions in time and space. Yet, because they are formed from interaction, presenting themselves as aggregates of past interactions, it is impossible to conceive even of these components of the social system as things which exist independently of the patterned internal environments of the human beings who activate them. The internal and external environments of action must be thought

of analytically, not concretely. There is a vast and complex interpenetration of action with its environment.

2. Problem Two : Culture and Agency

The confusing conflation of actors and agents has produced certain difficulties for cultural analysis, an area that has recently received increasing attention in the field. Some of the most interesting work in the field of culture – from the Birmingham school to the efforts by Archer and Swidler – has taken action as something which is often or even typically opposed to institutionalized cultural codes. This has occurred because these theorists equate action with creative, reflexive, or rebellious agency, and culture with patterns that exist outside of this actor her/himself.

If there are internal environments of action, however, action must be a constant process of exercising agency through, not against, culture. This means that typification, or reproduction, is a continuous referent of every action, not instead of, but alongside of, invention.

Agency must be conceptualized as a process that is inherently related to culture, not as a process that defines itself by opposition to it. Because agency is “free”, action is never simply mimetic, never simply reproducing internalized symbolic environments. Action involves a process of externalization, or representation. Indeed, agency is inherently connected to representational and symbolic capacity, just as it is connected to the capacities that underlay its other internal and external environments. Because actors have agency, they can exercise their representational capacities, re-presenting their internal environments through what is called externalization. According to this perspective, every actor is a match for Levi-Strauss’ famed bricoleur, possessing what Durkheim called the “religious imagination” of the savage mind.

3. Problem Three : Ideology and Agency

In the preceding I have addressed some fundamental presuppositional problems of recent efforts to create a micro/macro link. I have sought to illustrate types of problems, not to identify particular efforts that exemplify them or even to highlight work which avoids them. There is no single theorist whose work completely exemplifies the problems I have presented. At the same time, the analytical distinctions, and lack of distinctions, which I have outlined can be

used to identify persistent inadequacies in virtually every major strand of contemporary work.

In this concluding section, I want to address a related, yet more evaluative or ideological, problem. I wish to suggest that there is a distinctive evaluative “tone” to these conflationary discussions of agency. They are celebratory and often heroic. According to one tradition, actors are rational, autonomous, self-sufficient, wily and clever. According to another, they are knowledgeable, reflexive, self-monitoring, and routinely competent. In the rhetoric of a third approach, actors are endlessly creative, expressive, and meaning-making.

Insofar as these evaluations refer to the analytic properties of agency, the adjectives are not objectionable in themselves. They should be subject to criticism, however, if we are to understand them as descriptions of actions or the properties of actors. In most instances, of course, this is exactly what is implied.

If we do not conflate actors with agents, we are forced to recognize that actors are not nearly as heroic as these accounts imply. They are often befuddled, passive, self-deceptive, thoughtless, and vicious. How can this be so, if “agency” itself can be described in a positive way? The answer is that agency expresses itself only through its cultural and psychological environments, and these latter forces structure agency in open-ended and sometimes extraordinarily harmful ways.

In ignoring and underplaying the negative elements of action, strong theories of agency sometimes seem less like dispassionate efforts to describe action than efforts to mobilize moral evaluations of it. They are, in fact, reformulations of natural rights theory. Rather than analytical generalizations about reflexivity, they are unreflexive, if hopeful, elaborations of the normative discourse that underpins democracy itself.

Rather than reproducing this cultural discourse, we must become more conscious of it. This means that we must recognize it as a discourse, deconstructing it as an ideology of action rather than rationalizing it as an explanation. Goodness cannot be inherently associated with action; it can only be attributed to action because of the social, psychological, and cultural environments with which agency is expressed.

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