Review: Agency and Social Theory: A Review of Anthony Giddens

Reviewed Work(s):

*New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*
*Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*
*A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism. Vol. 1. Power, Property and the State*

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In an article recently published in Comparative Studies in Society and History (vol. 26, 1984:126–166), Sherry Ortner plots the course of “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties.” Hers is a remarkable synthesis. She shows that a convergence is occurring in such disparate orientations as marxist thought, the various species of cultural analysis, transactionalism, and structuralism.

The most important analytical element of this emergent orientation is the “key symbol” of practice. This in its turn is made up of structure in its various senses and its relationship to action. A fundamental concern is to examine how, in specific settings or social formations, structure is an emergent property of action at the same time that action presupposes structure as a necessary condition for its production. The complex and contingent relations between structure and action are nicely stated in Marshall Sahlins’ aphoristic reference to “the practice of the structure and the structure of the practice” (1981:79). I share Ortner’s enthusiasm for the new, new synthesis. It offers the possibility of a real convergence between social history and anthropology. This promises to establish a basis for examining what is coming to be the most critical issue in the study of social and cultural formations, how are they transformed (Sahlins 1981)?

There are inevitable difficulties with Ortner’s account but she has done a real service in defining the contours in terms of which discussion will take place. Still, a number of questions naturally remain open. Is there really an emergent synthesis that can encompass the idealist metaphysics of David Schneider and the dogmatic materialism of Maurice Bloch? Ortner also does not take up the fundamental question of what shape the ethnographies that emerge out of this synthesis will assume. The acute self-consciousness manifested in so many experimental ethnographies is the product of the shocks given by interpretive theory to the positivist assumptions of much thinking about ethnographic practice. This interpretive turn in ethnographic writing makes it impossible to continue to assume that the ethnographer is the passive recorder of naturally occurring “facts.” It raises fundamental questions about the social determination of agency and social theory
of the ethnographer’s practice which Ortner skirts in her map of the new world of theory. The result is that we increasingly recognize that ethnographies are genres as much as other literary forms, that the categories of ethnographic recording are also socially constructed. Hence, it remains an open question as to whether the old categories of ethnographic analysis inherited from classical political economy are adequate to the new theory.

As a relative conservative with respect to innovations in ethnographic format, I remain in fundamental sympathy with Ortner’s decision not to question too closely whether new theory will require such different forms of knowing and describing that ethnography will undergo radical change. It really is difficult to ignore, however, the thriving cottage industry in reflexive ethnography, based as it is on the postmodernist awareness that ethnography is as much a “literature of fact” as any other seemingly descriptive genre. Thus we become increasingly aware that how the experiences of cultural others are represented is the product of conventions of ethnography and decisions made by the ethnographer. The new self-consciousness raises the question of how ethnography is implicated in the politics of representation so characteristic of “Orientalist” disciplines. There are various solutions currently being posed. In their anxiety to deny the privileged stance of ethnographers as knowers of cultural others many of the experimental ethnographies resolve their epistemological angst by privileging the experience of the ethnographer over the experience of the subjects of ethnographic research. An important development in ethnographic writing such as the reflexive mood carries with it the danger of sliding into unreflexive solipsism.

Still we cannot escape from considerations of the consequences of the function of representation that animate the anthropological enterprise. If there is a politics of representation in anthropology, it is manifested in the style, rhetoric, and context, since, as Clifford (1983) and Marcus and Cushman (1980) have shown, our presentation of social reality is rhetorical in its appeal to authority. At the same time others have examined the complex nature of the social field in which fieldwork takes place (Karp and Kendall 1982).

This leads to an open question. Where are we to situate the epistemological break that so many assert anthropology is undergoing? Do the new theory and ethnography rupture the forms of the old in such a way as to constitute a new field of discourse? Will our future students regard The Nuer the way I think of Rivers’ The Todas, a work worth reading only as an antiquarian exercise? While I hope not, the possibility remains. Ortner’s choices as the avatars of the new anthropology are transitional figures who may teach as much through what they fail to do as through precept. Many of them, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins, are centrally concerned in their work with the relationship of agent to structure and how they may be incorpored into anthropological theory. It is this theme that makes the writing of Anthony Giddens so important to Ortner’s exposition and so central to much of the current theorizing in anthropology.

These issues and more are discussed in Giddens’ books. Because of his broad synthetic sweep, Giddens tends to see conceptual difficulties where more narrowly focused discussions may not. This has its own problems, of course. Giddens ventures into treacherous waters unguided by an anthropological map such as Ortner has provided us. When it comes to anthropology, he often runs aground. Still, he has much to offer anthropologists who see agency as a central term in their conceptual equations.

As a way of illustrating Giddens’ significance for anthropologists, I briefly examine notions of agency in the two anthropologists in whose work Ortner sees the emergent forms of “practice theory,” as she calls it. Pierre Bourdieu’s version of practice theory might seem to come close to Giddens’ writings about action. Giddens relies on Bourdieu in his most anthropologically relevant book, Central Problems. Bourdieu offers an attractive amalgam of structuralist, marxist, and transactionalist concerns. He provides an analytic frame which allows ethnographers to describe the complex relationships among the agents’ strategies, the symbolic forms they invoke in their actions, and the distribution of power in society. As Bourdieu himself recognizes,
his major conceptual achievement has been to expand the idea of strategy to include cultural symbolism and structure. For me the most attractive element in Outline of a Theory of Practice (1972) is the account of how symbolic classification is elaborated in practice out of basic habitual elements taught as bodily discipline. This accounts for the unsystematic, polythetic quality of the categories defined through symbolic forms. It is the making rather than the stating that gives the system such cohesiveness as it has. This is a major achievement. Bourdieu relates the tradition stemming from Mauss (who coined Bourdieu's term ‘habitus’) to the current interest in strategy, transaction, and networks in a very productive manner. Through their strategies the actors are able to achieve their aims even though they act under conditions of unequal power. They do this by acknowledging symbols of domination in exchange for access to scarce resources. The difficulty with Bourdieu's formulation is that he grants too little knowledge to actors at the same time as he fails to recognize that action itself may be articulated in terms of ontological principles other than those found in capitalist social formations. Bourdieu's actors are all small-scale entrepreneurs, struggling to acquire without either much ability or opportunity to reflect on the conditions of their existence or much understanding of their culture. Differences in personhood or ideas of being are missing from Bourdieu's outline. When it is a matter of goal-directed action, Bourdieu differs little from other transactionalists who take the position of the anthropologist in J. P. Marquand's The Late George Apley, "People are pretty much the same the world over." Bourdieu really has not solved the problem of how to take account of the agents' knowledge in the production of action.

Marshall Sahlins would seem to provide the corrective to Bourdieu. He has been fundamentally concerned with how the uncritical assumption that "practical reason" as a universal has affected our ability to understand how different systems of cultural assumptions are used to organize social worlds. Hence he has an acute sense of how culture may embody different ontologies and how these ontological principles may be used in the construction of self, society, and history (1976). He has systematically attempted to apply this perspective to questions of historical transformation, which in his hands become issues of changing cultural logics (1981). The agent has more knowledge in Sahlins' framework than in Bourdieu's and action is clearly seen as the product of the application of aspects of culture that can differ from one formation to another, or over time within the same formation. Unhappily what has been gained for culture is lost for action. Action tends to be collapsed into culture in Sahlins' writings and the actors all too easily perform cultural categories. If Bourdieu's actors struggle to achieve their aims, Sahlins' effortlessly enact their culture. Whereas Bourdieu's actors engage in conflictual strategizing, Sahlins' elegantly play rule-governed cultural games. What Sahlins lacks is the tragic sense of culture manifested in the work of Simmel and Weber. Unlike French structuralists, the German interactionists recognized that ideals are never realized in life, that compromises are continuously made among conflicting ideals and between ideals and the conditions of existence (Karp and Maynard 1983:499–500).

Both Bourdieu and Sahlins, in common with other anthropological theorists, deploy an unsatisfactory idea of agency in their work, in spite of their considerable merits. This is an important difficulty because the new synthesis can only command our attention on two bases. The first is the negative claim to correct errors in previous theoretical positions. The second is the positive claim to enable better accounts of the relationships among intentions and interests on the one hand and the grounds through which they emerge and on which they act on the other hand.

The new synthesis often defines itself by what it is not. This is part of the segmentary politics of anthropological theory, in which schools are often created after the fact in order to legitimize new positions. Most of the acrimonious accusations levelled at "structural-functionalism" strike me as exhibiting this tendency, particularly when the analyses show little difference from what is so strongly condemned.

The most important issue is the positive claim that practice theory will enable ethnographers
to account for what two authors rightly assess is the “central problem for any adequate theory of history,” how interests are transformed into practices (Levine and Wright 1980:58). This is the problem of agency, variously defined in different dictionaries as related to action and power, as well as to instrumentality or the means by which something is done. What is implicated here is how we work upon the world and constitute it as a social entity.

The concept of agency may be inadequately theorized in current anthropological writing but it is the “central problem” of the sociological hero of Ortner’s article, Anthony Giddens. Through considering Giddens’ concept of agency and the diverse range of topics he addresses, we can understand his significance for our discourse. Giddens has not made it easy. He is not at his strongest when discussing anthropology. He has no appreciation of the nature of fieldwork, and he uncritically takes over Lévi-Strauss’ notion that a distinction can be drawn between “hot” and “cold” societies. Giddens is simply uninterested in the characteristics of the noncapitalist formations and their subjectivity. Hence, it is the anthropological reader’s task to relate his theme to our projects. This review attempts to do so by examining the concept of agency in relation to structure, action, and power.

Giddens has elaborated his synthesis in a remarkable variety of books and articles that shows no sign of diminishing. Along with the recently published The Constitution of Society, the three books examined in this review provide an evolving argument that examines interpretive theory and its relationship to processes of social reproduction (in New Rules of Sociological Method), an agency-oriented framework for social analysis (in Central Problems in Social Theory) and the relationship of the above to questions of the state and long-term historical processes addressed in marxist theory (in a Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism). A thread that holds this disparate collection of subjects together is a rigorous refusal to accept the widely held distinction between distanced studies of large-scale aggregates and structures and the fine-grained microanalysis of social situations. Thus Giddens is developing a sociology that denies the organization of sociological specialisms and argues that the failure to consider action in the context of structure and structure in the context of action impoverishes both.

Giddens’ sociology extends into questions of subjectivity and experience as well as analyses of action limited to the observable and statistically confirmable. This is the first task he set himself, how to incorporate the perspectives of interpretive sociology into an action-oriented social theory. In New Rules he achieves this aim through a critical examination of convergences among phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology, post-Wittgensteinian analytical philosophy, and continental hermeneutics. Because Giddens takes the essentially Weberian position that action is intentional and goal directed, he relates intentionality to the production of structures and tries to examine how structure affects the production of action. Finally, he relates the action perspective to sociological explanation, recognizing that sociologists are as much agents as the members of the societies whose action they seek to interpret and explain.

These issues are the great themes of classical social theory. They encompass questions of free will and determinism, agency and structure, interpretation and explanation. Most of the issues examined at greater length in the other books are raised here. New Rules is my favorite because it provides the best discussion I know of the issues involved in incorporating interpretive and explanatory moments in social analysis. The two most important conclusions of New Rules are that social analysis entails what Giddens calls a “double hermeneutic” in which the observer attempts to make an account which incorporates the agents’ subjectivity and intentionality into an explanatory model that uses terms derived from the life world of the observer. This is, of course, the problem of translation raised once again. Of real value in Giddens’ work is his stress on the shared qualities of interpretive work performed by both agent and observer. The identification of acts, for example, is a critical problem for both the engaged native and the distanced observer. Thus the interpretive dilemmas of the subjects of our research become issues in the interpretive dilemmas of our explanatory accounts. In his concluding chapters Giddens relates this perspective to some of the literature on the philosophy of science. In one respect he
does not go far enough. He often stops just short of the more radically reflexive position that social analysis as criticism must turn on itself. Despite his valuable reading of critical theory, he never quite arrives at the position that emancipatory social science can only be achieved through analyses that contain an element of auto-critique, which attempt to examine how the conditions of research defined in the widest sense determine the research conclusion. This makes Giddens' double hermeneutic even more complicated. Like some baroque Olympic dive, it tends to become more and more elaborate. The hermeneutic is not double but triple (Karp and Kendall 1982:271).

The other major theme developed in New Rules is the theory of "structuration." Giddens' purpose here is to develop an action-oriented account of social organization that incorporates the element of subjectivity he explores in the first two chapters of New Rules with a processual model of structure. A number of important observations are made. Giddens takes seriously the observations that structure is "virtual" and "actual." By this he means that structure is a process, that structures do not exist at any point in time and space, that our "models of structure exhibit tendencies in action" (Karp and Kendall 1982). This virtual quality to structure makes the process one of "structuration," a becoming rather than a being. The importance of this observation is that structure then becomes situated in time and among spaces. This accounts for the capacity of structuration to "bind" times and spaces, a central theme of A Contemporary Critique. It also accounts for the role of agency in the production of structure. Giddens has his own formula, reminiscent of Sahlins; structure is both "the medium and outcome of action." Through this model of structure Giddens strives to show how structure is the unintended outcome of the agents' bringing about of effects at the same time as it is the medium through which those effects are achieved. "Unintended" does not equal "unknowing" in Giddens' hands. Throughout his essays and books he is concerned to emphasize that action is the product of knowledgeable actors, that the causes that are a grounds for action are incorporated in some form or other into the agents' reasons. Only by accepting a model of the agents as reflexively monitoring their actions, Giddens argues, will we be able to account for how the members of society produce their structures.

The production of structures is a dominant theme in Central Problems. This is the book most directly related to anthropological concerns and the one most cited by anthropologists. In it Giddens develops his theory of structuration further than the outline provided of structuration and relates it to contradictions in social formations as well as to power and domination. Giddens moves away from the phenomenological focus on subjectivity and toward relating institutions to action. Rather than limit himself to defining an agent's knowledgability solely in terms of his distinction between discursive and practical consciousness, the explicit and the tacit, Giddens probes the relationship between consciousness and ideology. This is a rich book, full of elaborate ideas that bear directly on the central problems of social and cultural anthropology. I am unable to do adequate service to it in this review. Because it covers so much ground, it has the appearance of being less well organized than the others. This is a false impression. The binding thread of agency remains at the core of the argument. Agency gets related to structure in two ways in Central Problems. The first is through Giddens' recasting of elements of structure into what he terms "rules" and "resources." This structure becomes an element in defining identity and situation on the one hand and a means through which action can be enabled on the other. This provides an elegant resolution to the countervailing images of society as producing the individual and the individual as producing society which anthropology turns to in sequence. This is neither Malinowski nor Radcliffe-Brown. Both can be accommodated in Giddens' model of structure. Because he moves toward a sophisticated account of rules as well, he incorporates the French structuralist concern with abstract principles as they are used by the agents to define identity and situation. Finally this leads Giddens to argue that structure is significant, above all because it provides a means for acknowledging that our experience transcends the particular moments when we enact society. Giddens dis-
cusses this insight in an account of the temporal extension of situated activities and their relation to other contexts. He argues that the phenomenology of time and space provide an experience of absence such that we exist in a world that extends beyond the confines of the immediate.

The second key element in Central Problems is Giddens' account of power. Giddens moves far beyond the Weberian obsession with power defined in terms of control to a more praxis-oriented approach. Power is defined as situated in "transformative capacity." Thus power and the social relations through which it manifests itself are directly related to the agents' capacity to produce form through work upon the world. Power, he tells us, is a "necessary implication of the logical connection between human action and transformative capacity" (Contemporary Critique, p. 28). This way of theorizing power helps to solve the realist dilemma in which we are put by interpretive theory. If the world is socially constructed, how do we recognize it? Giddens' answer is that we do so by approaching it in the process of construction. Since transformations occur through social relations, power can then be related to rules and resources. It not only enables the production of social forms, it enables the control of others. Thus power is tied to domination, to relations of autonomy and dependence. Giddens continually relates power to agency and through power, agency to interaction; he sees power relations as continually produced and reproduced in context, related to the invocation of rules and the mobilization of resources. How these are conceived by the agents is examined in Giddens' theory of ideology, which he conceives as not governed by specific content but relational. Ideology is not a false set of beliefs but any belief which becomes an instrument of action.

The third book, A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism, moves away from the examination of action and more toward institutional analysis and comparison. Giddens is concerned to refute the evolutionary element in marxist thought and to develop a framework for examining the development of class-based societies. Even here, however, agency is paramount. For Giddens the various analytical elements he examines in his books are both abstracted from action and brought together in action through the work of the agents. This is why structure is virtual and not actual; it is always in a process of coming into being and never fully formed. In A Contemporary Critique, Giddens looks at historically specific means through which the agents form systems larger than they can personally experience. This is why time and space relations are so critical to his account. Only through the "stretch" of time and the binding of time-space can larger institutional systems come into being. A Contemporary Critique contains an original account of the city in different types of systems, the difference between agrarian and industrial societies and an attempt to examine the implications of state formation. This and the subsequent volume to be written on Marx's conceptions of the transition from capitalism to socialism are the most historically specific of the group and represent a new phase in Giddens' work. They will have to be judged by specialists in a number of fields. One reservation that Giddens has not put to rest is his reliance on Braudel's concept of duration. Braudel's longue durée has problems for an anthropology configured around the concept of agency. History is made for the agents in la longue durée; they neither choose nor create.

I discover something new every time I go over Giddens' works. There is much to offer us. Giddens' account of agency overcomes a number of two-headed monsters with which anthropology has lived for too long. He provides ways of obliterating the distinctions between the ideal and the real, statics and dynamics, structure and action, and more. Perhaps the most important contribution of Giddens to anthropological thinking is that his own project is so firmly situated in the European tradition of social thought. Giddens' work is useful as a path between the ghetto to which anthropological thinkers too often relegate themselves and other traditions in social theory.
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1In the course of this review I will be distinguishing between "actor" and "agent." These are usually used as interchangeable, but I find it useful to think of them as terms derived from different emphases or discourses. The actor refers to a person engaged in action that is framed, as is all social action. An actor's action is rule governed or oriented. The agent refers to persons engaged in the exercise of power in its primary sense of the "bringing about of effects," that is, engaged in action that is constitutive. Agency implies the idea of "causal power" through which we realize the potential of the world.

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