

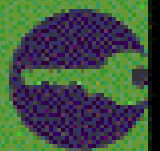


Social and Cultural Anthropology

The Key Concepts

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ROUTLEDGE



KEY GUIDES

AGENT AND AGENCY

The concepts of agent and agency, perhaps related most closely to that of power, are usually deployed in debates over the relationship between individuals and social structure. They also pertain, however, to the nature of individual consciousness, its ability to constitute and reconstitute itself, and, ultimately, the extent of its freedom from exterior determination.

Agency and structure

Agents act, and agency is the capability, the power, to be the source and originator of acts; agents are the subjects of action. Weber suggested that acts be distinguished from mere (animal) behaviour on the basis of acts being seen to entail a number of features of human rationality: consciousness, reflection, intention, purpose and meaning. He felt that social science should be an interpretive study of the meanings of human action and the choices behind them. G.H.Mead sought to clarify the Weberian notion of meaning, and its social-scientific understanding (*Verstehung*), by differentiating acts into: impulses, definitions of situations, and consummations.

On a Durkheimian view, however, what was crucial for an appreciation of human action were the conditions under which, and means by which, it took place; also the norms in terms of which choices between acts were guided. Over and against action, therefore, were certain structures which implied constraint, even coercion, and which existed and endured over and above the actions of particular individuals, lending to individuals' acts a certain social and cultural regularity. What social science should study, therefore, was how such formal structures were created and how precisely they determined individual behaviour. To the extent that 'agency' existed, in short, it was a quality which derived from, and resided in, certain collective representations: in the social fact of a *conscience collective*; only in their pre-socialized, animal nature (a pathological state within a socio-cultural milieu) were individuals able to initiate action which was not predetermined in this way.

Much of the literature on agency since the time of Weber and Durkheim has sought to resolve these differences, and explore the limits on individual capacities to act independently of structural constraints. Despite attempts at compromise, moreover, the division does not prove an easy one to overcome. Either, in more individualistic or liberal vein, one argues that structures are an abstraction which individuals create and which cannot be said to determine, willy-nilly, the action of their

makers. Or else, in more collectivist and communitarian vein, one argues that structures are in fact *sui generis* and determine the very nature of individual consciousness and character: so that individuals' 'acts' are merely the manifestation of an institutional reality, and a set of structural relations.

Numerous claims to compromise have been put forward, nonetheless, most famously by Parsons (the theory of social action and pattern variables, e.g. 1977), by Berger and Luckmann (the theory of the social construction of reality, 1966), by Giddens (structuration theory, 1984), and by Bourdieu (the theory of practice and the *habitus*, 1977). In each case, however, the theorist can be seen to end by privileging one or other of the above options; the compromise is hard to sustain. Hence, a division between social structure and individual agency is collapsed in favour of either a liberal or a communitarian world-view—and more usually (certainly regarding the above claimants) the latter (cf. Rapport 1990).

For example, for Bourdieu, to escape from vulgarly mechanistic models of socio-cultural determinism is not to deny the objectivity of prior conditions and means of action and so reduce acts' meaning and origin to the conscious intentions and deliberations of individuals. What is called for is a more subtle approach to consciousness where, in place of a simple binary distinction between the conscious and the unconscious, one recognizes a continuum. One also recognizes that the greater part of human experience lies between the two poles, and may be called 'the domain of habit': most consciousness is 'habitual'. It is here that socialization and early learning put down their deepest roots; it is here that culture becomes encoded on the individual body, and the body becomes a mnemonic device for the communication and expression of cultural codes (of dress and gender; of propriety and normalcy; of control and domination). Competency in social interaction is also to be found in the habitual domain between the two poles: individuals act properly by not thinking about it. In short, the wide provenance of habit in human behaviour is a conduit for the potency of processes of exterior determination and institutionalization. Objective social structures produce the '*habitus*': a system of durable, transposable dispositions which function as the generative basis of structured, objectively unified, social practices. Such dispositions and practices may together be glossed as 'culture', an acquired system of habitual behaviour which generates (determines) individuals' schemes of action. In short, social structures produce culture which, in turn, generates practices which, finally, reproduce social structures.