

Sociology 915
Reading Interrogations #11. Structure & Agency
November 18

1. Matt Desmond

Emirbayer and Mische advance an attractive model for theorizing about agency termed the ‘chordal triad of agency’ that distinguishes three elements of agency corresponding to three distinct temporal orientations: the iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative elements. Immediately after introducing these terms, the authors remind us, “We should stress from the outset that these are analytical distinctions; all three of these constitutive dimensions of human agency are to be found, in varying degrees, within any concrete empirical instance of action” (p. 971). Although the authors point out that these three agentic dimensions are not always harmoniously realized, they do suggest that they are always simultaneously present in all forms of human action.

However, the article is not set up in such a way that agency is understood as multiply realized along past, present, and future orientations; rather, one specific temporal orientation results in one specific type of agency (in various sub-forms), which is then demonstrated by giving examples of empirical research. This suggests that agency should not be understood as possessing a triadic and synchronic existence but rather a context-specific phenomenon, which is very similar to Sewell Jr.’s (very clever I think) claim that agency comes from structure. My question, then, is follows: Though Emirbayer and Mische develop analytical categories of agency based on temporal distinctions, can we also not infer that these distinctions are empirical and practical as well? Is agency multiply-realized or does one of the agentic-orientations take precedence in certain social situations?

I believe the easy way to answer these questions is to concede with Emirbayer and Mische that all human action possesses all three elements. After all, even the most calculating actor relies on certain habits when she is doing the calculating. And sometimes the easiest answer is the right one, but then this leaves open two questions: (1) What kinds of social situations ‘require’ foregrounding a certain agentic element? I think Emirbayer and Mische do a good job answering this question. But they really don’t pay enough attention to the question of social situationing and makeup (not context, but class, identity, gender, race, etc.) affects agentic-orientations. In other words, (2) How do different positions within the social space result in different elements of the chordal triad becoming dominant? The authors hint at this question at the end of their paper, but do not offer grounded distinctions between, say, working class and upper class agencies, male and female agencies (these are oversimplifications of course), etc. Sociologists have widely noted that poor and working class individuals possess an iterational outlook while middle class families possess more of a projective outlook (take Bourdieu’s notion of the ‘taste of necessity’ in *Distinction* (1984) for example), and this would suggest that

the 'chordal triad of agency' is certainly not multiply realized with an equilibrium between elements.

Perhaps though, this is the work that Emirbayer and Mische leave us to do. And if this is the case, allow a generative question on the relationship between temporal orientation and social theory. Much social theory advocates for change on the foundations of consciousness-raising. For example, many liberal feminists suggest that 'becoming aware' is half the struggle. Likewise, although Habermas in *Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2*, begins with the premise against the 'philosophy of consciousness,' his theory which seeks 'responsible hearers' to launch validity claims against forms of speech and thus reveal types of symbolically distorted communication (again, another oversimplification for the purposes of illustration), he nonetheless requires hearers to embody a certain conscious orientation to language. These theories assume a temporal projective and practical-evaluative agentic existence, not so much an iterational one. Now, the question then arises: How can social theory lead to sustainable agentic change, that is, change not in the realm of policy or structures, but change in the form of an idea that moves people in a different way who then move policy or structures, which takes into account varying temporal ontologies? Does Habermas really expect a welfare mother who working a menial job who has no time on her hands and no time to think about time to make a validity claim when her political leaders tell her she is lazy? What can the 'chordal triad of agency' teach us about how to better our social theory for the sake of its applicability?

I realize that this last thought is pretty convoluted. It is an idea that has only recently been floating around in my head. I would suspect that certainly Marx, whose theories did change societies, can teach us a lesson here.

Ricky Leung

Emirbayer and Mische's article highlights incorporating the temporal dimension into the analysis of agency. I am particularly interested in empirical approaches about organizations (p. 983 and p.993). With an organization or institutional field, how a temporal perspective enables us to see taken-for-granted beliefs, scripted knowledge or rationalized myths?

A second point emphasized in this essay concerns the "double constitution of agency and structure: temporal-relational contexts support particular agentic orientations, which in turn constitute different structuring relationships of actors toward their environment" (p. 1004). However, the authors also emphasized that agency and structure are "never so deeply intertwined ... that these different analytical elements cannot be examined independently of on another" (p.1004). So, it is correct to say that the authors favor an analytical distinction between "structure and agency"? The authors also complained that

Sewell does not offer any "theorization of differences in agentic capacity that are not inseparably bound to structural qualities" (p. 1005). I am not sure what the authors mean here. Also, do they want to highlight the differences between actions, agency and agent, and emphasize that it is important to understand the constant interactive process between structures and agents?

I think Sewell's discussion on the "transposability of schemas" with regard to structural changes is very interesting. According to Sewell, the application of schemas by actors "cannot be decided in advance by social scientific analysts, but must be determined case by case by the actors" (p. 17). Thus, agency entails the "capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts, is inherent in the knowledge of cultural schemas that characterizes all minimally competent members of society." (p.18). In actual research, how do we distinguish whether an actor has creatively applied cultural schemas or invested new strategies in unfamiliar situations?

I really admire the creativity of these two papers. They are very good!

Sociology 915 - Philosophy of Social Science

Interrogation of the readings for week 12 (11/17/2004) - Fabian Pfeffer

Structure and Agency

Agency and Structure: how to make practical use of these concepts?

After a comprehensive (re)conceptualization of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) sketch the "*empirical* challenge [...] of locating, comparing, and predicting the relationship between different kinds of agentic processes and particular structuring contexts of action", i.e. the core of the structure-agency debate. Going one step back, we have to presuppose the empirical accessibility of their concept of agency - a point where I have some worries, or at least experience some confusion. Suppose we want to study a specific behavioral pattern of a specific group of individuals, say the time management of graduate students. The dimensions of agency in play might consist of the following temporal orientations: selective reactivation of time management methods applied in one's undergraduate studies (iteration), the project of receiving one's degree in a given time period (projectivity), or the judgment of present life balance (practical evaluation). The question "how differences in agentic orientation can be empirically measured" (footnote 23) remains unanswered by E&M. Keeping in mind that according to E&M agency shall be understood as present in but not synonymous to concrete action (p.1004), it is not clear to me how an adequate empirical application would look like. For the case described, is it just as easy as asking for individual motives (e.g. "Why do you/don't you study on weekends" - the question would even be open to structure effects). Or do we have to conceive agency as a non-observable heuristic which enters the stage only as an analytical assumption (e.g. graduates are input-minimizing rationalists)? In that case there can be no sociologist with the perfect pitch who is able to figure out the dominating tone

of the “chordal triad” of agency and it would be understandable why so far researchers have concentrated on just one and not all of the dimensions of agency.

The same unclarity regarding its empirical implementation applies to the concept of structure. In my understanding, Giddens’s (1984) notion of the “virtual” existence of structures (p. 17) (or at least the virtual character of rules - as opposed to the actual character of resources, see Sewell) also draws on the notion of generalizable heuristics for social action. How do we observe these? Can we observe these? Or do I misunderstand the function of the concepts of structure and agency when I regard these as analytical concepts as well as ideas about *empirical heuristics for social action*?

One final idea which touches on the central problem of the relationship between agency and structure: Sewell (1992) argues that agency is subordinated to and endowed by structure. I wonder if he arrives at this conclusion just because of the peculiar way he conceptualizes structure. When labeling rules as “schemas” and even more when relating these to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (“*mental* structures”!) he seems to heavily blur the analytical distinction between structure and agency.

Gokcen Coskuner

In “What is Agency?” Emirbayer and Mische reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, but also oriented toward the future and toward the present.

Some of the examples they give include social movements, revolutions, actors’ life projects, and career choices etc. where it is easier to realize a conscious and/or deliberate act on the side of the agent. In other situations which are unproblematic and in which actors are not making conscious choices –the authors has raised this issue in several places as well referring to habits- it is not very clear to me how the temporal dimensions are in play.

Emirbayer and Mische discuss that the agents continuously engage patterns and repertoires from the past, project hypothetical pathways forward in time, and adjust their actions to exigencies of emerging situations. Does the past that individual actors engage with involve the history of the nation that one belongs to or the history of one’s family? And if yes, do the traditions, values, norms that come with that past act as a structure when one is reflecting about the present and future?

Interrogation 11 – Structure and Agency

Sewell asserts that: “Structures, then, are sets of mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that

social action. But their reproduction is never automatic. Structures are at risk...in all of the social encounters they shape.” (Sewell, 19)

They way he puts it here seems to imply that structures are equally stable or equally at risk in any given social encounter. If this were true, **would we be able to even say that structures existed at all since they imply some sort of relative stability across social encounters?**

He goes on to add that, “Placing the relationship between resources and cultural schemas at the center of a concept of structure makes it possible to show how social change, no less than social stasis, can be generated by the enactment of structures in social life.” (Sewell, 19). He bases this on his conceptualization of the “multiplicity of structures,” “transposability of schemas,” “unpredictability of resource accumulation,” “polysemy of resources,” and intersection of structures.” I find his argument less than convincing here because I’m not sure that any or all of them actually “show how social change can be generated” outside of the accumulation of individual acts (which I think he argues for in his conception of the inherent structural risky-ness of all social encounters). **Doesn’t context and environment play a role in determining how “at risk” structures are across social encounters and therefore play a role in how we explain social change or relative social stasis?**

Also, he uses the terms “social milieu” and “social positions” to explain the access to and range of schemas and resources available to an individual agent. Does he consider these to be structures? [Editorial note: Sewell could also use a good dose of sociolinguistics. The fact that he thinks that the “power of linguistic structures is unusually slight” and that at its base levels of sound, structure, and meaning, linguistic structures are close to a “neutral medium of exchange” is at complete odds with current scholarship in the area (and maybe even scholarship at the time he wrote the piece) especially given the social and cultural nature of even the construction of linguistic structures.]

Emirbayer and Mische discuss agency as follows: “We might therefore speak of the *double constitution of agency and structure*: temporal-relational contexts support particular agentic orientations, which in turn constitute different structuring relationships of actors toward their environments. It is the constitution of such orientations within particular structural contexts that gives form to effort and allows actors to assume greater or lesser degrees of transformative leverage in relation to the structuring contexts of action.” (Emirbayer and Mische, p. 1004)

The depth of their discussion is impressive to say the least, but their piece, combined with the Sewell piece, leave me wondering. It seems like we are talking about three things when we are dealing with structure and agency (as stupid as that sounds...): structures, agents, and environments/context. **What is the relationship between the external environment/context with structure and agency?** I would assume that context/environment would have to be equated with structure (or an array of structures) on some level, but is that all it is? I feel like they are different, but the authors were a bit ambiguous in there references to the idea of context. It seems to me that the strength/presence of various structures in the lives of agents is relative to the context/environment (“situation) that they are in (i.e. – some contexts make us feel the structures of gender more than that of say race or class, etc.).

Eva Williams

What is Agency? Indeed. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998) set out to clear up some of the “strain and confusion in social thought” related to the concept of human agency which they define as the “temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational context of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (970). This, clearing up of strain and confusion is accomplished, according to these authors through separating agency into its three “constitutive elements”: the iterative, projective, and practical evaluative elements or dimensions – what Emirbayer and Mische term the *chordal triad of agency*. While reading this exposition of the *chordal triad of agency* I felt at times as though caught in an Escheresque labyrinth of concepts and constructs. My state of confusion rests, I believe, with the overlapping and/or nesting of definitions, as evidenced by such passages as: “Each of our dimensions of agency has itself a simultaneous internal orientation toward past, future, and present, for all forms of agency are temporally embedded in the flow of time” (972). Conversely, the structure of the article itself is fairly straightforward. I appreciated, for example, the authors’ inclusion for each of the three *agentic dimensions* 1) the history of the concept, 2) an analytic breakdown of its internal structure, followed by 3) a discussion of its role in empirical research. What would have further aided this exposition? Perhaps a diagram or two of the internal structures of each dimension of agency would aid those of us whose learning style is more visually oriented to gain a better handle on the nuances of these structures and their corresponding mechanisms. What would such a diagram look like? An interesting exercise for us to consider in class.

Relatedly, “Our own conception [of projectivity] builds critically upon the insights of the above-mentioned theorists but seeks to give a more concrete elaboration of how projectivity actually works in social processes” (988). Does this statement suggest a discussion of the *mechanisms*, or the *effects* of projectivity? The subsequent statement, “...we outline several important processes involved in the projection of future action...” (988) suggests mechanisms. They identify five; three dominant “tones”; *narrative construction, symbolic recomposition, hypothetical resolution*; and two minor “tones”; *anticipatory identification and experimental enactment*. The primary *tones* focus on the future while the secondary *tones* “orient actors toward the other two dimensions of time” (988). The use of the term *tone* resonates (sorry, can’t help myself) with the term *chordal*, but leaves me wondering why they chose this term. On page 979 they ask readers to recall “the imagery of the internal chordal structure” yet nowhere do they establish this imagery clearly for me to recall. Maybe readers with a music background find this use of concept/terms works quite well. For those readers, however, who lack

grounding in music concepts and theory, this use of “imagery” likely falls flat, confusing rather than clarifying what they seek to elucidate.

Question about the practical implications of such a theory: If, as Emirbayer and Mische posit, “actors are always simultaneously located in a variety of temporal-relational contexts at once...iterational in one frame, projective in another, and practical-evaluative in yet a third” (1008), how might researchers go about identifying or situating an actor’s *agentic orientation*? Additionally, how might they go about studying the “...historical changes in agentic orientations” (1011), an area of research that these authors identify as lacking in scholarly attention?

Dan Warshawsky

What could be more appropriate in our last session of class than to engage in the structure-agency discourse? I have two main questions to pose to our class this week. First, why do we, as academics, continue to bring up the same basic questions regarding structure and agency? Second, is there a future for more structure-agency debates in the social sciences?

I believe the latter part of Emirbayer and Mische’s article on agency has provided me with more provocative questions for Thursday’s class. In that portion of their article, they describe why the structure-agency debate continues to arise. Every few years, a few academics develop better rhetoric to approach the structure-agency debate. Some people engage these new insights, while others find them irrelevant or unhelpful in their scholarship. Intrinsic to Emirbayer and Mische’s article is the issue of relevance. What is the purpose of bringing the structure-agency debate up again every so often? Do new structure-agency commentaries provide useful and practical assistance in research, or are they just a meta-theoretical discussion which is just ‘theory for theory’s sake?’

My opinion is that it can be both; however, the primary role of the structure-agency debate should be to provide a clearer understanding of how change can occur to existing structures. For example, if one is concerned with income disparities across race; it is important to illustrate the interrelationships between structures and agents. This will provide scholars, activists, and others a framework to understand how they as individuals can (or cannot) affect change to current societal inequities. As Emirbayer and Mische note, “By subjecting their own agentic orientations to imaginative recomposition and critical judgment, actors can loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relationships to existing constraints” (1010). Thus, academics can help facilitate agents’ recognition of inequality and potentially stir up anger and eventually action. I am not saying that academics should be the leaders in affecting change; rather, I believe academics can provide useful tools for those wanting to eventually transform existing relationships between structures and agents. In all, scholars’ structure-agency work is one type of knowledge that can only be most beneficial if focus remains on the “affecting change” component of the discourse. This is highlighted by Emirbayer and

Mische's third question at the end of their article. They state that another area of future research should interrogate "How...actors reconstruct their agentic orientations and thereby alter their own structuring relationships to the contexts of action? (1009).

Do class participants believe that most academics that engage in the structure-agency debate worry about affecting change, or is academics' focus more on 'unpacking' the theoretical underpinnings of their research? From reading most of these articles and listening to general debates about structure and agency, it seems that most debate revolves around 'theory for theory's sake.' I do not think this is a bad thing. It is possible that 'theory for theory's sake' is always the start of big or innovative ways of thinking, and ideas then transform into more "practical" applications of affecting change once they become crystallized in the "theoretical realm." I guess this is more a discussion of flows of knowledge. Although this may seem irrelevant to the specifics of the structure-agency debate, I believe it is central if we want to know where we, as academics, want to place ourselves in the discourse. This relates back to one of the central questions entrenched in the structure-agency debate, especially in its critiques. Is the structure-agency heuristic a useful theoretical or practical activist tool, or has it lost its potency? I would answer that the heuristic is still relevant and important for the reasons highlighted in the previous paragraphs (primarily as an empirically focused discourse which can provide new 'knowledge' and facilitation for agent-centered change and secondarily as a theoretical discourse which could indirectly affect change).

Elizabeth Holzer
11/17/2004

Two issues:

1. The reproduction and transformation of structures—"agency" according to Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 970)—is very often beyond human-scale time and space. So why are theories of agency predominately theories of *human* agency (see also Giddens 1984, especially p. 3 and Sewell 1992)? They shouldn't be. The recognition that human agency is collective (Sewell 1992, p. 21) doesn't suffice—accounts of social change, at the very least, are hampered by this misleading reductionism. And tying the agency-structure debate to the philosophical debate over free will is a mistake, part of what's dragging the issue down to the level of the individual.

How can you explain the rise of the welfare state, a rather important transformation in structure, without arguing for the causal significance of institutions—be they political parties or state bureaucracies or movements? Institutions act, so they can't be reduced to structure, and they're more than the sum of their individual parts so they can't be reduced to human agents (see Powell and DiMaggio 1991 in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*).

2. If agency is defined as both the reproduction AND the transformation of structures than every single empirical observation of the relation between agents and structures would be evidence of “agency.” How could this kind of theory possibly help drive a research program? Say you the researcher are interested the capacity of individuals to effect the structure. You observe an individual acting. You know there are only two possible outcomes that you could observe, that (a) the structure changes or (b) the structure stays the same. You observe either (a) or (b), and you conclude that the individual has exhibited agency. But who cares now that “agency” has had the significance sucked out of it?

Mark Cooper

I believe I have a sufficient grasp on Sewell’s discussion of structure and the reproduction of structures in both Giddens and Sewell. One slight point is related to Archer’s critique of Giddens. I imagine the metaphor of the light as a particle/light as a wave debate being somewhat accurate. It seems somewhat insubstantial that Giddens compresses agency and structure, or the reproduction of structures into an recursive process (instead of a state) that blurs, if not eliminates possible dichotomization of the two. While I can certainly see the analytical value in separating the two, the point Giddens makes for their compression seems just as valid.

The more interesting subject for me is agency, and the different ways the three authors describe and use the concept. Sewell’s definition is relatively straightforward: the capacity or capability to extend schemas and reinterpret and mobilize resources. More generally he writes that, “to be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed.” What I find interesting about these descriptions is that all describe *potential*, rather than action itself. This is a seemingly significant contrast with Giddens, who concentrates on agency as action. I am unsure of how this difference affects the general course of their theorizing though. Sewell also does not seem to describe agency in any a way that excludes non-humans from possessing such. Though I am certain this was not his intention, the mere possession of “knowledge” and the pursuit of its extension through the manipulation of resources seems fundamental to all gene-based environmental interactions.

The discussion of agency from Giddens is, I believe, much more nuanced and serves as the most substantial investigation of any of this week’s readings. Giddens frequently uses the terms purposive, intentional, or rational alongside his description of the agent. These are not in themselves sufficient as a description though, some degree of power and the action to affect the structures in which agency is embedded is a necessary part of its definition. I find problematic the statement, “the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently.” (9) As all expressions of this would be counterfactual an unable to validate, the statement seems to have little value. For any hypothesized alternative action, one could reasonably hypothesize a cause which determined that alternative outcome, thus eliminating the existence of agency in said

action. Lastly, if am interested in the critique of Merton's functionalist explanation. (12-13) Though he takes issue with the functionalist explanation used, Giddens does not seem to express a position on whether or not "society's reasons" or "group needs" are legitimate descriptions of agency. A brief relation back to discussions of methodological individualism might be useful to reevaluate what constitutes a valid social actor. There are several other questions I have about the use of agency in the theory of structuration that relate to the Emirbayer and Mische article, (the value of dissecting agency's component parts in order to better understand the rational action paradox of how actions taken for the benefit of all agents in fact have negative consequences) but I am overwhelmed with the language and structure of the E&M article to an extent that makes my individual elaboration of such questions unsubstantial.

Interrogation, November 18, 2004.

Ana Cristina Collares.

The articles for this week apparently summarize much of the discussion we have had in previous classes. Three of them deal with the same issue, i.e. Giddens approach of structuralism or "structuration" (one of them being written by Giddens himself). This approach, as described in Archer's criticism, "melts" all the dualities between agency and structure in this idea of the 'duality of structure', i.e., the idea that action is both guided by structural constraints and transformative of structures, due to its relative level of autonomy.

My questions about this discussion will be very "baseline". First, I don't get (or maybe I don't agree) with the distinction made by Sewell between the structuration approach of Giddens and the idea of *habitus* in Bourdieu. Sewell claims that the idea of *habitus* can be added to Giddens's project to produce a better explanation of the role of "structure" on social theory, but I don't see what *habitus* can add to the last concept.

Bourdieu has already declared that *habitus* is an "structuring structure", i.e., that it shapes tastes, modes of action, preferences, etc., but it is also shaped by action – it is the result of struggles for power, or more exactly, for the imposition of meanings and symbols belonging to certain social groups as the dominant values. Therefore, this same social groups are also being transformed while they try to impose their symbols.

I think Michael Apple gives a good example of how this disputes take place in a "bourdiean" way by describing the struggles of the religious Right over the curricula of schools. In this example it is clear how social groups act based on structured values, but are also transformed by the struggle, aggregating new perspectives in order to increase power. This seems to me at the same time as a description of Giddens's concept.

In my opinion, Parsons, Giddens, and even Herbert Mead (with the distinction between the I and the Me), and Goffman have made attempts to show how human agency is partially influenced by the structure of social relations that preceded it, and partially able to decide among the various rules created within these previous relations in order to shape its meaning. The recombination of previously established interactional rules by the agents can create new rules, that may or may not be consolidated over time.

The only great differences between these authors are: 1) whether previous interactions really shape, even if partially, action, or they serve only as instruments for a successful interaction (e.g. Goffman's perspective); and 2) a difference of standpoint: "am I more interested in the macro or micro consequences of human interaction?"

Maybe I am reducing too much the discussion, and losing all its nuances, but that's exactly what I would like to understand, i.e., what are the main differences between theoretical perspectives that emphasize agency or structure and do these differences have very strong consequences for sociological analysis? (I know I am going back to the beginning here, but isn't it a good way to finish something?).

G.C.

Structure and agency seem to form an almost *a priori* conceptual dichotomy, which can take the shape of, and run along the same lines as, the purely philosophical question of the freedom of the will. This arises when the putative freedom of the will is held up against the backdrop of an external world which is governed by causal laws. Whether or not the will is subject to natural necessity perhaps is open to infinite dispute. What hangs in the balance, however, is the morality and merit of actions. Yet the mere thought of natural material necessity, or structure, does not in itself do away with the idea of agency; Hobbes, for instance, said that the notion of a "free" will, over and above will as a natural faculty with which we are all familiar, is redundant. Following Aristotle, if we are coerced to submit to an enemy at sword point, he says "there is nothing involuntary in it save the hardness of the choice." Hobbes was a materialist, who thought that all of our actions are determined by a chain of causes that traces back to God, who is *causa-sui*, or cause-of-himself. Yet this in itself does not make our actions involuntary; the notion of an involuntary volition is in itself absurd. This way of thinking seems quite abundant in contemporary sociology: actors' actions reproduce structures which in turn limit the range of forms those actions might take, in a continual process of flux and becoming. Giddens' analogy with *langue* and *parole* also is congruent with a Hobbesian account of the interaction between the material external world and the inner world of action. Thus it seems to me that structure and agency do not inherently oppose or contradict one another at this abstract conceptual level, but rather are like two sides of the same coin.

The problems, thus do not lie at this abstract level; rather, contradiction arises a) when one begins to impose the language of moral obligation or merit on actions and, what is more relevant for our purposes, b) when one tries to describe the precise way in which structure and agency are interrelated. Namely, I have in mind the 1859 *Preface*. For, even if we allow that ideology can only be overturned or altered by the material economic base, how can we conclude that the self-subsistent development of productive forces will eventuate in a social arrangement that is desirable? Is the hope that the material conditions of production will develop to a stage which occasions an ideological form that is not only well suited (as being determined by) the material base, but also congruent with philosophical ideals of justice which are in themselves ineffectual? If we put our faith in the providence of economics, why ought we not be instead Calvinists, Jansenists, and pessimists? To say that, even if the economic base drags the superstructure to new lows of iniquity and human suffering, this is just one step closer to

paradise seems to engender quietism. I know that I'm not that well-versed in Marxism and would benefit simply from basic explication, but is there something in historical materialism itself which is bound to appear contradictory (sorry for the pun)? For instance, Thomas Frank's book, *What's the Matter With Kansas*, or even the recent Onion headline: Nation's Poor Win Election for Nation's Rich, or Will's recent editorial, "the day the enlightenment went out": ideology can seem terribly stubborn and intractable from the standpoint of philosophy and science. I know it has been said that the third world is the new proletariat, and perhaps they will acquire objective class consciousness and burst the fetters of society, strictly as a result of their material circumstances; but perhaps not. By postulating the privilege of structure in those instances where understanding of how a specific sort of social change might occur, theory seems to nullify its own purpose.

Of course, this isn't exactly the tenor of the Theses on Feuerbach; how philosophically remove from the 1859 Preface are the Theses? It seems to me that the ideas of structure and agency, taken in the abstract, are commensurable; by embracing the principle that the task of philosophers (or sociologists, or whatever) is to change the world, does one thereby profess some agnosticism, indifference, or even denial about the precise way in which the structural level of society, as being impervious to conscious manipulation, will play itself out?

Brett Burkhardt

Soc 915

Structure/Agency

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) present an intricate portrait of the nuances of agency. They disentangle three major elements of agency: iteration (dealing primarily with the past), projection (dealing primarily with the future), and practical evaluation (dealing primarily with the present). The intended purpose of this distinction is to move beyond "one-sided" conceptions of agency that overemphasize habit and taken-for-grantedness (Bourdieu, Giddens, neo-institutionalists, ethnomethodologists), purposivity (rational choice theorists and phenomenologists), and deliberation (feminist and communications theorists). Essentially, Emirbayer and Mische want to avoid the poles of hyper-voluntarism and of behaviorist, mechanical (re)action.

In trying to avoid these poles, though, Emirbayer and Mische sometimes push their middle road in ways that don't seem justified. This, to me, was most visible in their discussion of iteration. They are at pains to show that agency can be non-conscious (non-intentional) but also non-mechanical. Examples: "While this [schematization] may take place at a low level of conscious reflection, it still requires attention and engagement on the part of actors...(975)"; "Even relatively unreflective action has its own moment of effort (976)"; or "[E]ven the semi-obscure zone of habitual taken-for-granted activity requires a selective focusing of attention...(979)." But there is little support provided for statements like these. Why do they insist on attributing effort to even the most habitual, non-conscious actions? Why is it essential that we retain a hint of voluntarism in all non-

intentional, non-conscious actions? It does not seem to be essential for a theory of agency that incorporates past, present, and future. Could not the theory admit that certain actions are in fact rather mechanical and effortless, while at the same time acknowledging the more intentional and conscious actions of actors, rather than stubbornly claiming that all actions, however habitual, require effort?

Matt Nichter

It's not clear to me that the authors are all trying to answer the same question when they address themselves to the 'structure-agency problem.' What common explanandum do they have in mind exactly? Without a clear specification of the problem, I'm not sure I'd even recognize a valid solution.

Emirbayer and Miche claim that their account of agency sheds new light on the "age-old problem of free will and determinism." I don't see how this is the case. The age-old problem, as I understand it, is to elucidate in what sense (if any) agents' actions can be considered non-trivially 'free' when those actions are simultaneously physical events governed by physical laws. This question arises for a Robinson Crusoe as much as for those living in highly-structured societies.

How do rational-choice theorists respond to the Deweyan argument that ends are endogenously generated through choice of means?

Matt Dimick

Philosophy of Science

Session 12: Structure and Agency

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What is added to our understanding of structure to insist on the distinction of schemas being virtual and resources being actual? Sewell spent some time arguing for the ontological status of schemas as "virtual," saying (and quoting from Giddens): "Structures do not exist concretely in time and space except as 'memory traces, the organic basis of knowledgeability' (i.e., only as ideas or schemas lodged in human brains) and as they are 'instantiated in action' (i.e., put into practice)" (p. 6). Sewell is likewise at pains to point out that nonhuman resources (factories, weapons, land, or Hudson Bay blankets ...) are material (p. 10). Moreover, Sewell goes to even further lengths and argues that human resources (for Sewell, "knowledge and emotional commitments") are "actual as opposed to virtual," that they are observable characteristics

of people who exist in time-space, and that “it is their actualization in people’s minds and bodies that make them resources” (p. 10).

Since “resources are anything that can serve as a source of power in social interactions” (p. 9), resources can only exist in their “actualizations,” since it is only in their actualizations that they can serve as sources of power. However, since schemas are “generalizable procedures applied in the enactments/reproduction of social life” (p. 8) it seems one can just as easily say that schemas can only exist in their “actualized” form since only as such can they work to enact/reproduce social life.

But Sewell also says, “This *generalizability* or *transposability* of schemas is the reason they must be understood as virtual” (p. 8). Because transposable, schemas can’t simply be reduced to their actualized forms. However, while certain kinds of nonhuman resources are obviously not “generalizable,” such as certain dedicated machinery, this seems less true of other nonhuman resources and even less so of human resources, such as skills or the king’s majesty. These seem just as capable of being described of having a “generalizable” existence that can be deployed in a variety of new and unanticipated situations. If the king’s caravan breaks down in the forest, I imagine his unanticipated and unprecedented appearance before the local peasants will be just as capable of inspiring reverence and fear. In addition, calling formally stated prescriptions *resources* (e.g., “statutes, proverbs, liturgies, constitutions, or contracts”) because they seem “actual” is wrong, since types of formal rules are often applied in a variety of concrete, “actual” situations and are just as generalizable and transposable as schemas (this is largely the history of the common law, for example).

Sewell seems to be concerned that Giddens’s “virtual” concept of structures would become self-contradictory if it included both virtual (schemas) and actual (resources) elements. But this seems largely a problem of Sewell’s own making, since if they were both virtual or both actual, the problem would not arise. Further, the notion of generalizability (admittedly very important) is not required to sustain the distinction between schemas and resources, so we need not be concerned about a threatened collapse of the crucial notion of duality. Each can be understood and defined without reference to the quality of generalizability (e.g., “procedures” versus “power”).

Finally, I note that Sewell’s definition of structure given in the conclusion (“Structures ... are constituted by mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action” (p. 27)) doesn’t even mention the word “virtual.” I also realize that this “virtual” idea of schemas may be a burden cast upon Sewell by the weight of Giddens’s approach to the concept of structure, so I do not mean to be unduly critical of Sewell.

Mara Eisch-Schweitzer

This week’s reading’s were especially interesting. My particular question relates to Emirbayer and Mische’s chordal triad. The chordal triad of iteration, projection and practical evaluation provide a means to identify the constitutive elements of human agency and yet preserve the fluid nature of human agency. It would seem that

reproduction or transformation of social structure is achieved predominantly within practical evaluation; where *problematization, decision and execution* of the present has the potential to either reproduce or transform social structures.

In other words, the chordal triad, being a fluid experience, would expect that the creative imagination of the future (projection) entertains alternative choices to the past (iteration) in the management of the present (practical evaluation). Emirbayer and Mische imply that the “dominant tones” (*problematization, decision and execution*) of practical evaluation are a conscious process. Any yet it seems that in situations of oppression, the oppressed are not consciously aware of their oppression, even while their choices in the present reinforce their oppression. How can this be reconciled within the chordal triad?

Martín Santos

My general question for this week is: under what conditions and circumstances, and in which span of time a *radical change* in *deeper structures* is possible? I will combine W. Sewell’s and M. Emirbayer’s main insights to suggest an “answer” to this issue.

Sewell and Emirbayer, in line with A. Giddens, contend that human agency and structure *presuppose* each other. Thus, a dialectical, internal relationship link these two elements. Sewell also proposes a dialectic relationship between schemas and resources, the two elements which structure consists of: “sets of schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute *structures* only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time” (p.13. Emphasis added).

Sewell criticizes Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* for its incapacity to account for *change arising from within the operation of structures* (we should keep in mind that by 1992, Bourdieu developed the notion of *fractured habitus* in *The Rules of Art*). Sewell contends that “structural change” is possible because of the multiplicity of structures, the transposability of schemas; the unpredictability of resource accumulation, the polysemy of resources and the intersection of structures. I think that by presenting these characteristics Sewell makes the case for the flexible, contingent and fractured character of *structures*, and also for the large space for human *agency and creativity*. But in principle, these properties of structures (understood as the dynamic interplay of resources and schemes), I contend, *do not necessarily imply “structural change”*. *For example, subordinated actors can deploy a very resourceful and creative agency to reproduce their domination*. Thus, what does “transformation of structures” really mean?

Sewell proposes a key distinction between *deep and surface structures*. Thus, “chronic instability or unpredictability of capitalism’s surface structures actually

reinforces its deeper structures” (p. 26). We can observe a chronic and endless change in surface State structures, patriarchal regimes, capitalism, etc, while their core, deeper structures remain intact. Why this is so? Why is so difficult to break the mutual reinforcement between schemas and resources? (“In some cases, structures can combine depth with great power and, consequently, can shape the experiences of entire societies over many generations (p.26)”.

At the beginning of his paper, Sewell suggest a notion that he never develops: the idea of *circumstances* (crucial, for example, in Marx’s thought): “[social historians have demonstrated how]...*in certain circumstances*, the agents can (or are forced to) improvise or innovate in structurally shaped ways that significantly reconfigure the very structures that constitute them” (p.5. Emphasis added). I consider that human beings only change when have no other choice. Gender theorists agree in that it was the confluence of different *processes* and circumstances that forced men to change their relationships with women. But, what about *social systems*? If chronic instability or unpredictability of capitalism’s surface structures actually reinforces its deeper structures, under what conditions and in what *circumstances* would societies be forced to substitute capitalism for another form of organization of production?

I claim that only if we are able to provide a *theory of the conditions and circumstances under which transformation of deeper structures is possible*, the idea by which “the same resourceful agency that sustains the reproduction of structures also makes possible their transformation –by means of transposition of schemas and remobilization of resources that make the new structures recognizable as transformations of the old” (p.27), remains a rhetorical device.

Matías D. Scaglione

Structure, agency and social production

I think that the dichotomy structure/agency, whatever the definition of its components, is artificial and marks a regression in the history of social thought. I think that the definitions according to which “structures” are

...constituted by mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constraint social action and tend to be reproduced by that action (Sewell, p. 27),

and “human agency” is

the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments –the temporal relational contexts of action– which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (Emirbayer and Mische, 970),

refer to the fact that the material, social, political and intellectual creations of man *are* (tautologically) creations of man, an undeniably rational, purposive and creative creature. I think that the *relevant question* is still whether one dimension rules over the other in the *production* of the society. In this sense, it seems to me that the common allegation that the Marxian answer is “structuralist” or leaves little space for “agency” is a false characterization based on an uncritical adherence to the dichotomy structure/agency.

The separation of an inert web of “cultural schemas and sets of resources” and the “actor” leads us to the negation of the rational, purposive and creative nature of the latter, insofar as *the former preexists analytically*. I think that this is the key to disclose the artificial nature of the dichotomy. Although Sewell and Emirbayer & Mische agree that “agency” *reproduces* “structure” –an obvious and irrefutable argument–, I think that they neglect the *production* of the “structure”. I believe that the only way of *separating* such things as “structure” and “agency” is to assume analytically that “structure” precedes “agency”, so “agency” can reproduce it. Once we realize that “structure” is *produced* by “human action” –an obvious and irrefutable argument–, the ontological separation is specious, insofar as the *social production* of the existence of men (Marx) *is human action* in a determinate material, social, political and intellectual context. In my opinion, what matters, again, is to discover what element(s) of this context, if any, has or have preeminence over the rest.
