THEORIES OF AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES: ANTHONY GIDDENS, ULRICH BECK AND BRUNO LATOUR

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Abstract: The article expands on contemporary theories in the related fields of identity and subjectivity, particularly on theories of agency, which see the individual in more pragmatic and action oriented terms than theories of structure, still prevalent in cultural and literary interpretation. The three theoreticians discussed at length here have been chosen from different backgrounds (British, German and French) to illustrate different (yet distinctly European) views of how the individual manages to make sense of himself and the world around him. The article discusses in relevant detail the main concepts and theories elaborated by Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour- theories that can be used in literary and cultural studies as more appropriate tools for the understanding of the contemporary self and the issues surrounding identity.

Keywords: structure/agency, narrative identity, individualization, actor-network theory

1. Introduction

There are two basic orientations in recent contemporary thinking about the related conceptual field of identity, selfhood and subjectivity: 'structure' designates those theories that see the self as an effect or a construct elaborated by transhistorical forces like language, ideology, power and discourse; 'agency' points to the critical rejoinders brought against theories of structure and which underscore the importance of a theory of subjectivity capable to leave room for agency, much needed in social and political action. If theories of structure are characterized by epistemological skepticism and make up what Paul Ricoeur called a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (32-6) aimed mainly at demystification, theories of agency interpret the subject in terms of a "hermeneutics of recovery" (28-32) or of appropriation, and are more pragmatic and action oriented. In the following pages I will try to give a brief outline of contemporary theories of agency, considering that the major representatives of the 'structure' theories of identity (Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault) are already too well known in academia.

That the subject is an agent is evident in everyday practice. Confronted with the law, professional or parental standards, or even social norms, we are regarded as separate entities capable to think and act on our own. Epistemologically, theories which emphasize the role of structures in the production of the subject may appear as closer to reality than theories of agency; yet in actual life agency is inescapable. That is one of the reasons why theories of agency are more action-oriented and tend to be generated within more pragmatic, more scientifically active disciplines like sociology, the law and political science. The cultural anthropology of Raymond Williams and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu bridge the gap between the subjectivist (agency) and the objectivist (structure) stances. When discussing theories of agency I think it will be useful to keep in mind that the objectivist pole is never entirely absent, as agency is generally conceived as a stronger or weaker response to the objective possibilities embedded in structure. Then the

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concept of agency goes hand in hand with personal autonomy. You regard people as agents when you grant them independence and the freedom to act on their own. Yet autonomy was exactly the point of departure for the critique launched at Enlightenment and modernity. Theories of agency will as a rule resume this dispute and argue that the Enlightenment project was not entirely flawed and that it could be improved. For instance, Jurgen Habermas claimed that the project of modernity was one with that of the Enlightenment and argued that it could not be completed because on an emphasis on instrumental rationality that led to reification. (*Modernity-an Incomplete Project*) Another common feature is the historical perspective they adopt when explaining the structure- agency feedback loop. Both Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck differentiate between pre-modern and modern societies in terms of the former's almost complete reliance on structure and the latter's more reflexive or individual focus, which accounts for the greater part agency plays in the functioning of modern society. Nevertheless, proponents of extreme agency like Bruno Latour (who consigns agency to human and non-human actors as well) take issue with what they perceive as an artificial distinction between pre-modern/modern/postmodern, nature/culture, individual/society and resume the critique of modernity from another angle. Although theories of agency are numerous, I will confine my analysis to just three names: Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration and reflexive modernity, Ulrich Beck's theory of individualization and the risk society, and ANT (Actor - Network Theory), whose initiator has been the French philosopher of science/anthropologist/sociologist Bruno Latour.

2. Anthony Giddens- Reflexivity and Narrative Identity

Anthony Giddens is among the best-known British sociologists and public intellectuals, a spokesman concerned with the most pressing problems of our day- globalization and the politics of climate change- and more recently an advocate of the Third Way, a compromise between social democracy and neo-liberalism. The central problem in his work is the relationship between the capacity of social actors to engage in action and social structure. Although in many ways his theory of structuration resembles Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, Giddens's preference for 'action' instead of 'practice' and his conception of the subject as capable to reflect on his action situates him on the side of agency in the agency-structure debate.

In *The Constitution of Society*, Giddens argues that human agency and social structure are not separate concepts, but can be used as two different ways of considering action. Structure is not something that completely determines the constitution of the human subject, like in poststructuralist theory. It is produced/ reproduced through individual acts which aggregate to form social structure, yet once formed it acts as a constraint on further action. It is a direct result of all past individual action, like Bourdieu's habitus. Nevertheless, traditions, institutions, mentalities and all forms of social structure can be changed if the individuals start to ignore or challenge them. This is possible because agents are endowed with rationality (the capacity to reflect on their acts), conscious intentions and knowledgeability about the world they inhabit:

> All human being are knowledgeable agents. That is to say, all social actors know a great deal about the conditions and consequences of what they do in their day-to –day lives. Such knowledge is not wholly propositional in character, nor is it incidental to their activities. Knowledgeability embedded in practical consciousness exhibits an extraordinary complexity- a complexity that often remains unexplored in orthodox sociological approaches, especially those associated with objectivism.(10)

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Here Giddens takes issue with what he sees as the main flaw of objectivist (structure theories): their ignorance of the fact that human beings are often more conscious about their acts than these theories reveal. Moreover, "actors are also ordinarily able discursively to describe what they do and their reason for doing it"(10) - meaning that they have the capacity to verbalize their intentions and narrate their behavior.

The human ability to narrate is identified as the basis for self-making in *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Giddens is concerned with exploring personal identity in modern or post- traditional societies. He calls the period we live in late modernity, disagreeing with the theorists of postmodernity. In traditional societies, Giddens argues, action follows the rules and prescription of custom, and we don't need to analyze it from the perspective of the individual social actor. Modern societies, on the other hand, do not place as much authority on what previous generations thought and did, and individuals tend to rely more on themselves when making choices. Individuals need to decide issues about how best to behave or act in certain circumstances all by themselves. Thus, society becomes more reflexive and decision making, rather than being entrusted to the old customary ways, becomes increasingly a personal task. Social agents are given more autonomy and responsibility - which can sometimes be quite a burden, as it generates anxiety and uncertainty: "What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in late modernity- and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day behavior."(70)The fact that identity issues are such a major concern of late modernity is both the consequence of changes at the macro level and a cause of these important shifts. Giddens makes a connection between the individual's enhanced sense of self and constant preoccupation with identity (the micro-level) and globalization, the international free market and the spread of multinationals (the macro-level), taking them to be inter-related phenomena. He gives the example of the recent change in marriage and sexual relationships. The rising percentage of divorce and unmarried couples, the increased openness about sexual relationships, all these are changes that were initiated at the micro-level, as it would be ridiculous to suppose that public institutions could uphold changes which often act as disruptions and challenges to their authority. But how could people all of a sudden decide to embrace free love and open marriages? There must have been a change at the macro-level - the declining power of the church to dictate sexual behavior associated with a rationality corroborated by capitalist practices. Thus, micro- and macro-levels converge to elucidate new social phenomena.

In post-traditional societies, Giddens argues, personal identity becomes a reflexive project, something we take on as a necessary task. We work continuously to determine who we are and we stop to reflect on our actions and our life path. The subject needs to create, to maintain and permanently revise the project of his/her own self - the narrative of his/her life. The idea of narrative is thus able to accommodate the two basic requirements for a stable self-identity: continuity and coherence. The stable self which remains a necessity for any theory of agency is predicated on the discursive and narrative ability of the subject:

> A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor- important though this is- in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self. (*Modernity* 54)

Significantly, the subject's identity is not produced by others (whatever these others may be in post-structuralism), but by a self- made story with some roots in reality. The story of one's

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life, Giddens insists, must be based on real, not fictive events, otherwise the subject's interaction with others and his/her integration in society is endangered.

The implications of such a theory of identity for literary studies can be immense. The idea of narrative as a meaning-giving structure is of course very old, at least as old as the hills, yet its association with personal identity is fairly recent. Narrative identity was also theorized by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur and a host of other sociologists, who in some respects addressed the issue more specifically than Giddens[1]. The reason I chose to discuss it through Giddens' focus is because he makes the explicit connection between late modernity and narrative identity. He searches for this narrative bias in self-construction in the ideal of romantic love and the beginnings of the novel. In other words, constructing personal identity through narrative is not an ancestral human imperative. It is a specifically modern imperative, as it is inextricably bound with the demise of older meaning-giving structures and institutions, and it reflects the modern individual's ontological and epistemological anxieties.

3. Ulrich Beck- Individualization and the Risk Society

German professor Ulrich Beck is among the most cited and controversial names in recent debates about globalization and cosmopolitanism. His book *Risigogesellshaft: Auf den Weg in eine andere Moderne* sparked a new understanding of the role of risk in modern societies and proved enormously influential in Anglo-Saxon sociology. Together with Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, he co-edited a volume entitled *Reflexive Modernization*, in which the notion of second modernity/ late modernity or reflexive modernity was defined in relation to the concepts of globalization and transnationalism, new risks (manufactured or man-made) and individualization.

Beck's concept of institutionalized individualization is inseparable both from an understanding of what reflexive modernization entails for society and from the concepts of risk and risk-taking which come to the fore in Western societies of the second modernity. In *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, he makes a distinction between three types of society: traditional, early modern/ first modern and late modern/ reflexive modern societies. Traditional societies functioned according to the logic of structures that embedded and defined the life of each individual. Among the most prominent institutions were the Church, which was responsible for providing a meaning, a telos for individual life, the village community which gave each subject a particular role or identity inside the group and the extended family, responsible for situating the "I" in a network of family relationships. The Enlightenment ideal of self-autonomy gradually eroded the structures and institutions of early modernity, leaving the individual a certain amount of freedom in organizing his/her life. At that time the concept of private (versus public) life appeared, as subjects started to derive meaning in their life from private associations such as clubs, unions, political parties, professional organizations, etc. The extended family was replaced by the nuclear family in industrial society as the subject was now more involved in social than familial networks. Finally, the sense of belonging to small communities was challenged by the development of the nation-state, responsible for ordering the lives of subjects in the larger industrial society, in which the notion and the identity of the citizen became prominent. With the advent of technology-information revolution and education for masses,

[1] Paul Ricoeur especially outlined a more comprehensive theory of narrative identity (in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*), which presupposes both continuity and consistency (idem identity) and change (ipse identity). He also added an ethical dimension by specifying that the actions belong to agents when they can be imputed to them as either worthy of praise of blame.

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another type of society evolved, one in which structures, any kind of structures are gradually displaced by networks and flows. Thus, in late modernity, the creation of meaning which had been the primary task of institutions like the church, the state or the family is relegated to the self as the agent responsible with the creation of meaning. For sociologists like Beck, the individual becomes the key institution of our age, replacing older structures of meaning like the state, the nation, church and family. Institutionalized individualism (Individualisierung in German) is according to Beck "a structural characteristic of highly differentiated societies" (xxi) Beck emphasizes the fact that individual agency has become the structure that organizes late modern societies. It no longer makes sense to speak of an antinomy agency-structure, as agency is now the structure that organizes social life.

For Beck, individualization is not necessarily a bad thing. It is different from individualism, from the Enlightenment ideal of the self-sufficient individual and from the neo-liberal concept of the free market individual. In his preface to Ulrich and Elizabeth Beck's book *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences*, Scott Lash stresses that while Enlightenment individualism was about "being individual", Beck's theory is more concerned with "becoming individual" (vii). The individual of the second modernity is aware of the incompleteness of his/her knowledge, of the unintended consequences of his actions and also of the fact that he has to live permanently with risks. The neo-liberal conception of the individual rests on the assumption that the subject is in complete control of its life and that is capable of taking rational decisions based on evidence and argumentation. This idea is often contradicted by sociological studies which show that the individual is always tied to others in a complex social network, and that very seldom the decisions it takes are wholly rational. If individualization for Beck is not tantamount either to Enlightenment or neo-liberal individualism, then what is it exactly? Here is what Ulrich and Elizabeth Beck write:

> individualization is a social condition which is not arrived at by a free decision of individuals. To adapt Jean Paul Sartre's phrase: people are condemned to individualization. Individualization is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage-manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it, and to do this amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life, while constantly adapting to the conditions of the labour market, the education system, the welfare state, etc.

One of the decisive features of individualization processes, then, is that they not only permit, but demand, an active contribution by individuals. As the range of options widens and the necessity of deciding between them grows, so too does the need for individually performed actions, for adjustment, co-ordination, integration. If they are not to fail, individuals must be able to plan for the long term and adapt to change; they must organize and improvise, set goals, recognize obstacles, accept defeats and attempt new starts. They need initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration.(27)

For Beck the individual of reflexive modernity is the one who needs to create not only a biography (a self-narrative in Giddens' terms) but the social networks and bonds of everyday life. He/she must be able work out his/her life project amid networks that are never fully constituted and must assume responsibility for failures and new starts. Failures arise naturally, as a consequence of rapid change and unintended consequences often difficult to calculate- so the individual must get used to them. That is why risk- taking is one of the most important features of life in reflexive modernity. The majority of risks we face nowadays are no longer external, but manufactured (a consequence of human action and politics).

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The individual has become the nodal point of social structure as a result of both the corrosion of public institutions and globalization. As economic and financial policy is now the responsibility of transnational markets, national governments have lost a great part of their power. The welfare state is more or less in a state of disintegration, and its institutions are no longer trusted by people. What new institutions do we need in order to regulate the life of individuals who do not rely on institutions anymore? This is a very difficult question. Beck argues that we must make a distinction between constitutive and regulative rules. Constitutive rules are those which allow us to play the games- they create the social field, in Bourdieu's formulation. Regulative rules are more prescriptive, and they normalize behavior according to historical norms. In reflexive modernity the individual must be encouraged to play the social game by the constitutive rules, while ignoring the regulative ones. Institutions do not disappear; they just lose some of their authority, which is now transferred onto the individual.

4. Bruno Latour and Actor-Network Theory

Bruno Latour cuts an exotic figure in contemporary philosophy. Like his actants in actor-network theory, it is impossible to reduce Latour to anything so definite as to make him fit a tight professional category. Though not a professional philosopher (his most famous books are anthropological/sociological studies of science, religion and law) in his Unseld Preis acceptance speech he describes his lifelong project of inquiring into truth-production as philosophy in disguise:

> Even though I have always held positions in sociology, and have sometimes been accepted as an honorary anthropologist, and feel much loyalty to the little field of science and technology studies, and have also dabbled in social theory, I have never left the quest for philosophy. To be sure, I have written on various topics which make my work hard to locate. In French bookstores, the rare buyers complain that my books are spread in too many different aisles: one book on the Conseil D'Etat in the Law Section, another one on the automated subway in the Engineering Section, while a book on the invisible city of Paris is put, wrongly, of course, in the Travel Section, whereas a little book on religion has disappeared in the Spirituality Section (almost as wrongly). And yet, I have not dispersed myself at all: it is just that, throughout my career, I have simply rather disingenuously hidden my real intentions. (2)

Latour's philosophical dream was that of 'irreduction', the idea that nothing can be simply reduced to anything else. And yet reduction is one of the cornerstones in every system of thought, be it religious, philosophical, sociological, anthropological or political. Every theory rests on some kind of reduction, as groups of things are explained in terms of substances, essences, identity or difference, oppositions like matter-spirit, nature-culture, structure-agency, traditional-modern, etc. Reduction is the key in abstract thinking, and as such it is inescapable. In *Irreductions*, a small appendix to a vast study entitled *The Pasteurization of France*, Latour describes the beginning of his philosophic project as a negative reaction to what he saw as an endless chain of reductionist thinking, with Catholics, mathematicians, Hegelians, Kantians, semioticians, scientists, engineers trying to explain away the complexities of reality by reducing them to a single principle. He developed his own philosophical mantra, which formed the basis of his subsequent theories of actants, collectives, mediation and translation: "I knew nothing, then, of what I am writing now but simply repeated to myself: 'Nothing can be reduced to anything else, nothing can be deduced from anything else, everything may be allied to everything else."(163) If the mark of modern philosophers like Kant and Hegel was an aspiration towards

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totalizing systems, Latour is not very far from this project either. However, his aim is not to come up with another universal that would explain everything, but rather to include the totality of objects and humans that make up reality into his explanations. The result is somewhat unexpected- a theory of agency that comprises human beings, rules and abstract things, but also door hinges, raindrops, various mechanisms and devices along with scientific instruments. In order to do that, he has to take a different view of society. He argues against the artificial distinction nature- culture, nature-society that has dominated social sciences so far. This distinction is artificially excluding hybrids, things that reside at the intersection of nature and society and have a powerful shaping force on what we call reality. Where sociologists see a difference between society (an association of humans and human relations) and nature (an aggregate of things), Latour sees only collectives, associations of humans and non-humans that make up closely knit networks in which humans cannot be separately conceived from objects, mechanisms and instruments, as these are specifically endowed with ethics and values. In *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Latour goes back to the etymology of the word 'social' and argues that in spite of the tendency to regard the social as a homogeneous thing, it would make more sense to "designate by the same word a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements"(5). Thus sociology can be conceived as a description of any type of aggregate "from chemical bonds to legal ties, from atomic forces to corporate bodies, from physiological to political assemblies" (5) Latour's meaning of the social is thus a name for any given group or association of humans and/or non-humans, involved in some kind of action. An actor is not what Giddens and Beck understand by the term (a human being endowed with intention and reflexive capacity), but anything that does something, or rather anything that is made to act by its ties in a certain network: "An 'actor' in the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but a moving target of a vast array of entities swarming towards it."(46)

He also writes of Dingpolitik (the Politics of Things, in German) and the Parliament of Things. Things and mechanisms are actors just as humans are, because they make a difference in the world. The important thing for Kantian philosophy was to find a way of explaining the distinction between subject and object, between humans and things. Latour does not argue that this difference does not exist, but only that nowadays it has become irrelevant. What is important is to study the way associations and assemblies of things and humans work. In an interview "Making the Res Public" Latour explains why rivers can be important political actors:

> Rivers make a difference, especially now; for instance in Spain, where the politics of water is very important. It makes sense to say that rivers are important political actors. On two conditions: one of them is that the river has to be made to speak through plenty of techniques of representation. The question is "What is the speech of this river?" And the second one is "What is the role played by the river speech where people in charge of water management talk about it?" (366)

If we regard rivers as political actors who are made to speak for certain environmental policies, it should be clear that the type of agency involved in this case is not equivalent to what either Beck or Giddens understand by the term. Agency is something that is distributed among the actors in a network without belonging to a certain specified source; it is a force that influences actors more or less, and that cannot be tied to anything in particular. Actors act, but without being able to locate agency in themselves. Latour, speaking about the uncertainty of agency, notes: "Like Jesus on the cross, it is of the actor that one should always say:' Forgive them Father, they know not what they do.'" (*Reassembling the Social* 46-7) The question that arises here is: if

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actors/agents do not know what they are doing, how can we call them actors/agents? We can, says Latour, because agency does not need figuration. Agency is an account of action, of something being done, of changes and transformations in things, people or a state of affairs. For a long time, philosophical accounts of agency have provided it with a specific figuration, with something or somebody that is imagined as providing a meaning and a shape to agency. But figuration, Latour argues, is not necessary in an account of agency (that is why it should remain anonymous), and it is not desirable either, as we can never be absolutely certain of causal chains. There is no way we can ever know the real source of an action, especially in complex entanglements and associations. The best term, Latour concludes, would be actant, not actor. (53-5) Actants can ally themselves with other actants, entering into networks that define them. They acquire action, intention and subjectivity only within particular associations that can be made and remade.

What ties together the heterogeneous assemblies of humans and non-humans is the work of mediation or translation. Actor- Network theory is also known as "the sociology of translation". Actants are related to one another in a certain network by their common role of mediators- they mediate between one another and make one another do certain things. For example, the networks that fishermen throw into the ocean lure scallops and make them prey; on the other hand, scallops make fishermen go out every day in search of new scallops. Thirdly, data collectors make the association of fishermen and scallops visible in their studies of oceanography. (107) A mediator is not a simple intermediary, but a medium, which translates forces from one level to another with a difference. They translate and transform reality by translation: they betray what they represent, and they resist being represented. Networks are organized systems of translations, with centers and peripheries and hegemonic relations. Identities of actants are established in the process of translation, which is simultaneously defined as dislocation (transport with deformation). In a rejoinder to Ulrich Beck "Whose Cosmos? Which Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck" Latour argues for a constructivist stance in the human sciences, characterized by the following principles:

- the realities to which humans are attached are dependent on a series of mediations;
- those realities and their mediations are composed of heterogeneous ingredients and have histories;
- the amount of heterogeneous ingredients and the number of mediations necessary to sustain realities are a credit to their reality (the more mediated, the more real);
- our realities are open to differing interpretations that have to be considered with caution;
- if a reality has an extension (in space and time), its complex life-support must have been extended also;
- realities can fail and thus require careful maintenance and constant repair; (458-59)

5. Conclusion

In an era of inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to cultural and literary practices/products the theories of agency that have been outlined in this article may have important implications. Literary self narratives, memoirs, autobiographies should be regarded as symptoms of a specifically modern condition and analyzed in their particular historical context and conditions of production, according to Giddens. They may be products of specific historical and geographical constellations, yet, according to the macro-micro interaction, the individual intention behind these works carries an important weight in the sketching of different types of subjects. Ulrich Beck's theory gives us a sharp insight into what constitutes the prime mover of

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our age: the individual capacity for survival in an increasingly complex, increasingly chaotic world, sketching the picture of the cosmopolitan individual of the second modernity, equipped with initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration. Latour insists that translation and mediation are basic cultural practices involved in the everyday construction of identity and reality. The central point of Latour's thought is to make us understand the importance of construction. First and foremost, our critical task is to analyze the work of translation and mediation practices in the constitution of social reality. And if literature is such a social practice, the whole network of writer-publisher-reader, the context of production and reception, the global and the local dimension become elements that are inseparable and must be understood together, without attempting to isolate any of them in a futile politics of ascribing positive or negative agency to just one entity. It is the way we construct these realities that can be good or bad, not the entities themselves or their associations.

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