

On Practice Theory

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Is practice theory merely a strain of postmodernism? I think not. I think it is an entirely different methodology altogether. But even if it is I would like to make a separate reaction paper on it, because I think that it is quite a few leaps ahead of the postmodernism determined by Derrida and Foucault, and the best of all the anthropological theories I have encountered so far.

Sherry Ortner's preliminary description of practice theory only skims the surface. She has been able to glean its beginnings, but has not yet quite worked out its full methodology. One suspects that she is still tied down to "the failed social movements of the 60s and 70s," and for that reason cannot take off. That those social movements failed should be one thing; that social movements will always fail is another. Just because social movements failed in one era does not mean that they will crumble again in another.

On the other hand, I cannot subscribe to Pierre Bourdieu's "constructivist structuralism" because it is still too much of structuralism, and therefore also ties down its actors to structuring structures much more than actors can ever, in his paradigm, structure structures. I believe he is in this sense a child of Foucault, overwhelmed by the imperialist Western Panopticon.

My bet is placed on Anthony Giddens rather than on the first two, or Habermas. His eclecticism, resulting in his structuration theory, is the best of all, not so much because it unites so many strains of thought but because it gives due place to the capacity of social actors to engage in recursive and reflexive practice, no matter that intentions often have unintended consequences. This is the true dialectic of society. If Ortner was tied down to the 60s and 70s and Bourdieu to structuralism, Giddens is very much 21st century, foreshadowing the phenomenal growth of the Internet and its push effects on the rapidity of social change.

My preliminary hypothesis (to emphasize its tentativeness) is that we are presently at a stage of a radical shift in social systems worldwide. Anthropological theories since the beginning have been merely reflections of the state and stage of society in which they were born, and so structuralism was strong in the latter part of the 19th to the greater part of the 20th century, reflecting the strength and power of the imperialist countries that engendered them. The first try at upsetting this power took place in the late 60s, 1968 specifically, with the student revolts worldwide. However, this attempt was only the first gust of wind coming from the technological revolution that was beginning to take place. The advent of electronics was not enough to bring about too radical a shift in the ranks of the productive forces, but it was enough to send electrical signals through their future ranks. That is why the social movements of the 60s and 70s were failed movements.

Electronics turned out to be only a harbinger of the greater technological revolution ahead, one that gave rise to the personal computer in the 80s and finally, the advent of the Internet in the mid 90s. The Internet is not only Information Technology; it is, finally, power in the hands of the masses of the world – and power not only because Knowledge is power, but because this power, which is already in the hands of the actors, will shortly become veritably economic.

And that is why Giddens, more than any other anthropologist, belongs most to the 21st century.