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HISTORICAL ACTOR/AGENCY FROM A PRAXEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

This paper attempts to scrutinize a concept of historical actor/agency from the epistemological perspective of praxeological theories as formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and Andreas Reckwitz. These theories are examined as potentially fruitful starting-points for theoretical re-articulation of the concept of historical actor/agency, mainly for their heuristic values and empirical research possibilities from the disciplinary perspective of historical anthropology. Moreover, the focus is put on detecting possible convergencies/divergencies of the praxeological notions of actor/agency with “grammatological” anthropology, the theory of intersectionality and dispositive analysis. In conclusion, this paper highlights indeterminacies, resistances and “residues” of agency as well as the (im)possibility of theorizing phenomena of ontological and phenomenological “différance”.

Key words: historical actor/agency, historical anthropology, praxeological theories

After some decades of epistemological domination of the “linguistic paradigm”, which conceived language as the main factor and medium of individual and social (re)production of identity and knowledge in historical theory, the beginning of the 21st century brought to the fore a need to revise the culturalist interpretation of historical agency alongside post-semiotic lines (Bonell and Hunt 1999; Joyce 2002; Biernacki 2003; Canning 2005). Therefore, rather than being governed by impersonal semiotic codes, historical actors are now conceptualized as engaged in the dynamic and transformative processes, which shape their understanding of reality and constitute their experience of the life-world [*Lebenswelt*]. Although there is a great variety of approaches on the scale from “weak intentionalists” like Mark Bevir (Bevir 2002:209-217) to Foucaultian-oriented “discursivists” as is Elisabeth Deeds Ermarth (Deeds Ermarth 2001:34-58), all these “revisionist” interpretations share a common epistemological presumption that there exists a recursive relationship of actors with a given and always historically determined cultural order, as well as that these two ontological domains are somehow mediated

in the process of their mutual and dialogical (re)production. However, this does not mean a radical break with poststructuralist heuristic concepts such as culture, identity, discourse and power but rather their epistemological reinterpretation with the main aim of neutralizing their “totalizing” pretensions and dissolving inherent dichotomies inscribed in their structure.

Accordingly, post-poststructuralist historical theory, heralded by Gabrielle M. Spiegel’s book *Practicing History. New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (2005) explicitly strives to complement cultural with socio-anthropological analysis and to re-introduce the concept of “historical actor”. The first goal has to be achieved through “attenuated concept of discourse as that which creates the conditions of possibility for and the constituents of, a given culture” combined with “the revisionist emphasis on practice, agency, experience and adaptive uses of historically specific cultural resources” (Spiegel 2005:25). As for the second aim, the theoretical and research focus of post-poststructuralist praxeologically-oriented history is put on the tactical, adaptive and creative competences of historical actors, actively construing their culture by re-appropriating meanings and bending them to the conditions of daily life, or “the capacity to recognize the plurality of normative fields and to identify their respective specific contents; the aptitude to discern the characteristics of a situation and the qualities of its protagonists; the faculty, finally, of inserting themselves into the interstitial spaces that the universe of rules manages between them, to mobilize for their own profit the most adequate system of norms and taxonomies, to construct on the basis of disparate rules and values the interpretations that differentially organize the world” (Spiegel 2005:17).

Drawing upon diverse congeries of theories such as Bourdieu’s praxeology, Giddens’s theory of structuration, Foucault’s genealogy, feminist theory, ethnomethodology and neo-phenomenology, post-poststructuralist history is aimed at establishing a dialectical relationship between discursive and non-discursive practices, with a conjoint intention to “embody” the historical actor and to “materialize” culture. As a matter of fact, starting from the premise that simultaneously having and being a body is a basic feature of human existence, the body is no longer seen as an “instrument” that the historical actor uses in order to act, but the place where mental, emotional and behavioural routines are inscribed. On the one hand, the emphasis on embodiment and bodily competencies is a linking point with praxeological theories that are conceptualizing unconscious, routinized bodily performances, which include a complex set of cognitive and affective corporeal dispositions and material objects, as the constitutive factors of agency in general (Spiegel 2005:19). On the other hand, there is a new accent on things (material objects), which are conceived not only as carriers of meanings and objects of interpretation but also as indispensable and constitutive elements of social practices simply thanks to their inherent materiality and (non)usability.

Seen from a metatheoretical perspective, the described epistemological currents in post-poststructuralist history are in obvious concordance with dominant trends in historical anthropology, which builds its epistemological presumptions on Bruno Latour's concept of symmetrical anthropology (Latour 1993:91-129). Attempting to resolve the binary relationship between nature and culture, a definition of "human being" as a research object of symmetrical anthropology should include human interaction with non-human beings, material objects and communication media and constantly take into account a creative tension between anthropological universals and cultural differences (Tanner 2004:164-189). Accordingly, historical anthropology is now establishing more intensive co-operation with co-evolutionary and medial anthropology in order to grasp how men not only humanize but also technicize, rationalize and mediatize both nature and culture, which are no longer envisaged as dichotomies or binary opposites but are viewed symmetrically. As far as its methodological procedures are concerned, this kind of "symmetrized" historical anthropology is increasingly more open for adaptive employment of various non-linear explanatory models and theories of game to explore and explain as accurately as possible historically conditioned processes of overlapping and amalgamating nature, human agency and material things, including media and technology, which are also recognized as crucial factors for (self) defining and (self) understanding of the human being as its research object (Tanner 2004:136-163).

Another vital epistemological premise of recent historical anthropology, with concordant important metatheoretical consequences, is an attempt to "symmetrize" the historical, cultural and social Other, which is not conceptualized as "otherness in time and space", but as a constitutive element of the Self. Consequently, the very question of limits of understanding the Other must take into account that this process is always a hermeneutical act of oscillation between the boundaries of the known and unknown, understandable and non-understandable and that it has to include a deep hermeneutical respect to impermeable and irreducible aspects of Otherness (Kogge 2002).

The mentioned epistemological stance is in close congruence with the "grammatological" anthropology of Gerd Baumann and André Gingrich, who define identity as social subjectivities of persons and groups of persons simultaneously including sameness and differing. They claim that these subjectivities are multidimensional and fluid and include dialogical power-related inscriptions by selves as well as by others, which are procedurally configured, enacted and transformed by cognition, language, imagination, emotion, body and (additional forms of) agency (Baumann and Gingrich 2006:3-52). Consequently, difference and differing produce complex cultural dynamics characterized by consent and conformity as well as resistances and oppositions, which simultaneously (de)construct and (de) stabilize individual and collective identities.

A theory of intersectionality which is, especially in a recent articulation of Gabriele Winker and Nina Degele, under the strong influence of praxeological theories, could offer welcome cognitive and research orientation to identity-building processes as well. Aimed at finding both accurate and epistemologically valid theoretical description and a methodological platform for empirical analysis of the phenomena of inequality and difference, they conceptualize intersectionality as “context-specific, concrete and adjusted to social practices interaction of social structures, symbolic representations and identity constructions which produce inequality” (Winker and Degele 2009:15). Thanks to the accurately elaborated methodological framework moulded on Bourdieu’s theory of practice and structuration concept of Anthony Giddens, the phenomena of intersectionality can be simultaneously analyzed on micro, meso- and macro-social levels as dynamic interferences of analytic categories such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, profession, religion etc. (Winker and Degele 2009:63-98).

From the all abovementioned, it is obvious that praxeological theories are in the epistemological, cognitive and research focus of contemporary social and cultural analysis and their various disciplinary offsprings. Thus, this fact brings about an imperative to scrutinize the concept of historical actor/agency from the epistemological perspective of praxeological theories, as formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and Andreas Reckwitz. Besides profound and sometimes irreconcilable differences, their common feature is an explicit endeavour to bridge theoretically a structure/agency dichotomy as well as to emphasize adaptive, tactical, routinized and automatized uses of cultural patterns, which were actualized, reproduced and transformed in the very act of their performance. Although all these theories contain inherent problems and aporias, they can undoubtedly serve as fruitful starting-points for theoretical re-articulation of the concept of historical actor/agency, mainly for their heuristic values and empirical research possibilities from the disciplinary perspective of historical anthropology.

Pierre Bourdieu articulated his theory of practice as early as the 1970’s, endeavouring to highlight the dialectics between the mode of production and functioning through which social actors exercise their practical mastery of the underlying schemes and codes of a certain cultural configuration, and ambiguities and indeterminacies of actual, lived human practices. Thanks to the fact that he analysed how culture is used by individuals in pursuit of their goals and interests in and through time, Bourdieu opened a possibility for theorizing (though conditioned) intentionality and agency, which are epitomized in the concept of *habitus*. He defined *habitus* as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations” or “an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted”, which, as a kind of *lex insita*, “engenders all the thoughts, all the

perceptions and all the actions” (Bourdieu 2003:72, 81, 95). These schemes operate mainly as body dispositions and mental operations that function as “maps” of actions limited by the historically and socially existing conditions under which they are produced. For Bourdieu, bodily dispositions (including motor functions or *hexis*) represent a transference of the logic of the structure embodied in practical techniques of the body which are “the instruments of an ordering of the world, a system of classifying schemes which organizes all practice and of which the linguistic scheme is only one aspect” (Bourdieu 2003:123-124). Thus, while Bourdieu attempts to stress the relatively free and ambiguous nature of social strategies and tactics performed by individuals, they are in the end mostly governed by the generative schemes acquired via the cultures they inhabit (Spiegel 2005:179-180).

This kind of “deterministic trap” in theorizing social practices has been more successfully bypassed by Anthony Giddens, who emphasizes the productive role that actors play in the maintenance and recreation of social norms and codes. On the theorem of the “duality of structure”, which implies that the constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, he coined a concept of structuration that represents “the structural properties of social systems” which “are both medium and outcome of the practice they recursively organize” (Giddens 1986:25). In other words, according to Giddens, structure comes into being and is sustained through the continuity generated by the social practices of human actors whose activities embody and enact, but never accurately replicate its constituent components. Although Giddens’s theory of structuration offers more than stimulating impulses for praxeologically-oriented theoretical examination and empirical research of agency (especially thanks to his emphasis of practical consciousness and routinized practice, complex definition of the socio-temporal context and importance of power in the social analysis), it cannot avoid a typical problem of every interpretative theory – insolvability of the hermeneutical circle.

Lastly, the most “symmetrical” version of culturalist-oriented practice theory is formulated by the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, which, together with his most recent “cultural theory of subject”, could provide very inspiring guidelines for theorizing the historical actor/agency issue as well. In opposition to alternative forms of social and cultural theory, which he labels “mentalism”, “textualism” and “intersubjectivism”, Reckwitz works out the novel claims embedded in the concept of practice and the specific ways in which it construes concepts of the mind/body, human agency and cultural interpretation. This can be clearly traced in his definition of practice [*Praktik*] that he describes as “routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge”, or, putting it more bluntly, the “routinized way in which

bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (Reckwitz 2002:243-263). The innovative aspect of Reckwitz’s theory of practice manifests itself not only in “decentring” rational/mental and textual/discursive and privileging, both theoretically and empirically, bodily movements, emotions, sensations, practical knowledge, material objects and routines, but also in putting a strong emphasis on the importance of historization and detailed contextualization of the actor/agency complex.

This is even more accentuated in Reckwitz’s recent outline of culturalist theory of a subject, aimed at examining the ways in which “subject position is formed”, which codes, bodily and mental routines and structures of wishes have to be appropriated by the individual in a certain historico-cultural context in order for it to become “subject”, which social practices and technologies of self are crucial for individual (auto)reflexive *habitus*, what is the level of importance of the cultural Other towards which the subject is implicitly or explicitly self-defined and, finally, how strong is the influence of other subject orders and their respective cultural codes on the affective stance of the ideal (auto)reflective subject (Reckwitz 2008:16-17). What could be emphasized as the key metatheoretical feature of Reckwitz’s subject theory is the dialogical relationship between the processes of objectivation and subjectivation, presupposing a kind of (socio-political, ideological and cultural) interpellation and heuristic decision not to differentiate the discursive and non-discursive, which are subsumed in the definition of practice as the “temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996:8). Besides, he constructed a complex heuristic network of categories appropriate for examining the constitution process of subject forms, which include social and cultural practices and codes, bodily and mental performances, explicit and implicit knowledge, textual and visual discourses, constellations of practices and artefacts, identities and differences, subject forms, social fields and classes, homologies and hegemonies, historico-cultural conflicts and hybridities and mechanisms of destabilization (Reckwitz 2008:135-144). In addition, Reckwitz’s cultural theory of subject shows sensitivity for perplexing and often paradoxical dynamics of processes of subject constitution. Therefore, concepts of “over-determination”, “supplement” and “constitutive outside” have been introduced as useful heuristic tools for detecting immanent instabilities and inconsistencies both within cultural forms and subjective culture (Reckwitz 2008:144-147).

Dispositive analysis elaborated by Andrea D. Bührmann and Werner Schneider starts from similar theoretical premises, but with explicit distinction between the discursive and non-discursive and with stronger emphasis on the structural relationship between knowledge and power (Bührmann and Schneider 2008). Metatheoretically describing itself as re-constructive research-style and research-perspective, dispositive analysis endeavours to discern conditions of emergence and transformation of a certain dispositive, conceived as meaningful, and material

social practice or complex configuration of knowledge, power and social being [*gesellschaftliches Sein*]/practice. Starting from the assumption that a dispositive, as an element of the historically constructed social world encompassing the (typical) ways of human communication and doing, symbolical and material objectivations and rules for their cognition, and organization and use, is crucial for establishing social relationship between human beings, their material environment and (self)-experience (subjectivation), dispositive analysis attempts to explore its research question in a recursive and relational way. However, on the grounds of Bührmann's concept of "ways of subjectivation" [*Subjectivierungsweise*], it is explicitly aimed at systematic study of the subject, ways of its formation and positioning, together with generative and representational practices of self-understanding of a subject and the relations between subjects within the particular dispositive (Bührmann and Schneider 2008:68-74, 100-102). In summary, relying on Foucaultian genealogical theory, dispositive analysis conceptualizes subject/*acteur* as the cognitive-theoretical and praxeological "doublet", simultaneously disposed and disposing, subjecting and subjected, active and passive, while inextricably interwoven in the network of discourse, power, knowledge and practice (Bührmann and Schneider 2008:155).

Although the mentioned praxeological theories display some serious problems and inconsistencies when the notions of subject/agency is concerned, especially in respect to theoretical treatment of epistemological and ontological binaries such as subjective/objective, discursive/non-discursive, social/cultural, in my opinion they can still provide stimulating impulses for the historico-anthropological conceptualization of an actor. First of all, they all successfully overcome the anthropocentrism inherent to traditional anthropological definitions of its own research topic, which now must include not only human beings, but also the non-human, such as the animals and technology according to the logics not only of the social and cultural, but also of the material world. Possible incentives in that sense would be derived from cybernetics focusing on the phenomena of the circuitry of interconnectedness of the seemingly unrelated spheres of life and experience on the basis of comparative analysis of ir/regularities within technical, social and biological systems (Rieger 2003).

Another important aspect of praxeological theories is certainly their emphasis on the multifarious and interconnected ensemble of embodied practices, which permit the actor to "perform" the world, transforming it into the body/mind that "carries" and "carries out" the social, thanks to which they epistemologically dissolve the dichotomy between the inside and outside, between the mental and corporeal (Spiegel 2005:19). As a forthcoming "neuro-biological turn" heralds, it seems unavoidable that humanities and social sciences in general, and historical anthropology in particular, establish a creative transdisciplinary co-operation with natural sciences (Bachmann-Medick 2007:388-395). This refers especially

to recent neuro-biological research, which explores the relationship between psychological mechanisms and forms of cultural interactions and social practices on the one hand, and neuro-cognitive approaches that attribute an important role to emotions and affects in the cognitive processes of an individual on the other, which means an important step towards blending the binary opposition between categories of the rational and irrational (Tanner 2004:146-151).

As far as the metatheoretical problem of “overriding dichotomies” is concerned, I think that both culturally-oriented praxeological theories and dispositive analysis could help historical anthropology to develop appropriate heuristic means for analysing the complex dynamics of the inter-subjective, inter-objective, inter-discursive and, so-to-say, the inter-practical, as well as to explore the mutual interdependences of these elements of the historically determined *Lebenswelt*. A useful orientation in that respect might well be provided by “the recursive principle”, which allows that processual character and, consequently, ambiguity, as inherent features of both human, material, discursive and practical domains and the social system as a whole, would be theorized.

Nonetheless, the question of indeterminacies, resistances and residues (in the sense of Alf Lüdtke’s *Eigensinn*)¹ of agency, or, rather, a contingency of historically determined conditions of “being-in-the-world”, is still open to discussion, despite all attempts to formulate all-inclusive and integrative theory of actor/agency. The main challenge in this respect provides a concept and phenomenon of experience of historical actors conceived as the “ground of a new knowledge that is located in bodily and material conditions of existence and situated outside textually mediated discourses in the actualities of everyday lives” (Canning 1994:374). This is, certainly, in close connection with the issue of cognitive and explanatory limits of theory in (historical) anthropology which, to use a famous Derrida term, more or less successfully tries to deal with the phenomena of ontological and phenomenological “différance”.² Somewhere between the historically different and differed

¹ The term *Eigensinn*, coined by Alf Lüdtke, a famous advocate of *Alltagsgeschichte*, is an almost untranslatable combination of self-reliance, self-will and self-respect or the act of reappropriating alienated social relations in work or at school which are externally determined by structures and processes beyond the actor’s immediate control. In that respect, the concept of *Eigensinn* enables that mediation between social restrictions and subjective worlds of meaning can be established since historical actors do not use cultural resources in the given form but in a transformative way, creating individual and socially undetermined grammar. For a more detailed account see Lüdtke 1994:139-153.

² Jacques Derrida describes “différance (spelled with an “a”) as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other. Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the différance of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (the intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred; the concept as different and deferred, differing-deferring intuition; culture as nature different and deferred,

lies the hidden homeland of the historical actor, which is dead but has left traces of his existence and agency. So there is no better conclusion for the perplexed issue of historical actor/agency than Michel de Certeau's famous dictum:

Such is history. A play of life and death is sought in the calm telling of a tale, in the resurgence and denial of the origin, the unfolding of a dead past and result of a present practice. It reiterates, under another rule, the myths built upon a murder of an originary death and fashions out of language the forever-remnant trace of a beginning that is impossible to recover as to forget. (De Certeau 1988:47)

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differing deferring; all the others of physis – *tekhne, nomos, thesis*, society, freedom, history, mind, etc.—as *physis* different and deferred, or as *physis* differing and deferring. *Physis* in *différance*. And in this we may see the site of a reinterpretation of *mimesis* in its alleged opposition to *physis*. And on the basis of this unfolding of the same as *différance*, we see announced the sameness of *différance* and repetition in the eternal return" (Derrida 1982:17).

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POVIJESNI AKTERI/DJELOVANJE IZ PRAKSEOLOŠKE PERSPEKTIVE

SAŽETAK

U članku nastojim istražiti koncept povijesnih aktera/djelovanja iz epistemološke perspektive prakseoloških teorija kako su ih formulirali Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens i Andreas Reckwitz. Te su teorije ispitane kao potencijalno plodonosna ishodišta za teorijsku reartikulaciju koncepta povijesnih aktera/djelovanja poglavito zbog svoje heuristične vrijednosti i mogućnosti za empirijska istraživanja iz perspektive historijske antropologije. Povrh toga, naglasak je na otkrivanju potencijalnih konvergencija/divergencija prakseoloških konceptata aktera/djelovanja s "gramatološkom" antropologijom, teorijom presijecanja i analizom dispozitiva. Zaključno, članak upozorava na neodređenosti, otpore i "preostatke" djelovanja te (ne)mogućnost teoretiziranja o pojavama ontološke i fenomenološke diferencije.

Ključne riječi: povijesni akteri/djelovanje, historijska antropologija, prakseološke teorije