

THE FUTURE OF AGENCY

Between Autonomy and
Heteronomy

Edited by Harry F. Dahms

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES
IN SOCIAL THEORY

VOLUME 41

THE FUTURE OF AGENCY

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY

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CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIAL THEORY
VOLUME 41

**THE FUTURE OF AGENCY:
BETWEEN AUTONOMY
AND HETERONOMY**

EDITED BY

HARRY F. DAHMS

University of Tennessee – Knoxville, USA



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

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SURVIVING (IN) A WORLD OF CONTRADICTIONS: CONCEPTUALIZING AGENCY BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND HETERONOMY

Harry F. Dahms

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Whatever experience the reader may register has to be thought out on the basis of the reader's own experience. Understanding has to find a foothold in the gap between experience and concept. Where concepts become an autonomous apparatus . . . they need to be brought back into the intellectual experience that motivates them and be made vital, as they would like to be but are compulsively incapable of being.

– Theodor W. Adorno (1963/1993, p. 166)

ABSTRACT

Agency is a concept whose status as a social-theoretical tool in and for the 21st century is a challenging question. Sociological theorists endeavor to identify agency's analytical and systematic usefulness for social research. Social theorists and critical theorists are less concerned with agency as concept and tool but may be more dedicated to assessing and tracking the fate and future of agency as a historically and socially variable phenomenon. While social theorists recognize the importance of socio-historical variations, critical theorists also are concerned with how modern societies are inherently contradictory and problematic, especially when accounts try to balance a society's "official" validity claims with the realities they obscure. Many sociologists study the societal conditions that have a bearing on whether, how, and to what extent individuals are able to engage in self-determined actions and practices. Correlating a person's location in the social structure with the status of agency

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in human and social life, within the matrix of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, geographic location, education, and similar indicators, is essential to delineating individuals' ability to pursue opportunities for success and to take advantage of life chances. In societies that are reproducing, fraught with, and burdened by myriad contradictions and proliferating corollary dangers and threats, individuals' locations within the social structure effect their chances for and modes of survival. In the end, agency as a function of socio-historical specificity visualizes how individuals are making decisions and choices (agency ~ autonomy) within contexts that are beyond their control or understanding (determinism ~ heteronomy).

Keywords: Theoretical sociology; social theory; sociological theory; critical theory; classical theory; politics

AGENCY AS A CONCEPT

“Agency,” like many other social-theoretical and sociological concepts, is a notoriously amorphous and contested word that refers to an equally ambiguous and disputed phenomenon or genus of phenomena. Generally, agency is of interest to social scientists as it is located at the intersection of voluntary action and determinism: to what extent and how are individuals capable of determining their own conditions and fate, as opposed to “society” determining their choices and lives? Theoretically oriented social scientists often use and treat *agency* as a *word*, whereas recognizing its importance and potential value as a *concept*, along with its history and implications as a theoretical tool, is much more appropriate and productive. On the one hand, conceptual clarity and focus are preconditions for careful and pertinent research and analysis. Yet, on the other hand and by their very nature, socially and sociologically important phenomena appear in many different forms and variations, which often overwhelms even narrowly focused efforts to capture reality. Moreover, most languages and terminologies are too limited and limiting to facilitate capturing social phenomena in accurate and satisfactory fashion. There are many reasons for corollary difficulties. For instance, absent rigorous related training, the problem of interpretation is a major hurdle to recognizing the gravity of context, both as far as social situations are concerned, and the need to appreciate a social theorist’s works and overall objective. Furthermore, the size of the human population today is larger than ever, which has been producing a relatively new type of contradictory effect, among many others. The more persons there are, the greater the opportunity for conflicting and countervailing patterns to take hold and persist. On the one hand, many pervasive patterns pertain to and reflect differences, divergences, disagreements, conflicts, incongruities, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations. On the other hand, the greater the variety and opportunities for differentiation, the stronger the impulse among many persons to insist on their distinctiveness and “singularity” while also seeking a semblance of security in conformity with and to others who appear to be similar to oneself. In the early 21st century, little remains that has not been contested, controversial, or offensive in one form or

another, to members of certain segments of a population, and in many different forms.

In any case, all social and sociological phenomena of any import are far too multifarious for a concept, however refined, to be able to capture their nature or to do them justice. As the classics of social theory pointed out in different ways, as far back as Hegel, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, the notion that modern societies can be in tune with themselves, well ordered, stable, immune to crises, is inconsistent with their very nature *as* modern societies. Any working definition of modernity must include acknowledgement that this type of society has a proclivity toward disorganization, instability, crises, and so forth. Even if certain types of government or modes of governance are successful at integrating a specific society sufficiently to “maintain order” (or to create the impression, which largely is the same), they can do so only for a certain period of time. Yet, maintaining order in any society is neither straightforward, nor is it possible to grasp at an intuitive level how order is being maintained, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

As far as “agency” is concerned, both the concept and the phenomenon directly relate to issues and challenges theorists and social researchers have struggled to acknowledge, consider, confront, and address, in the course of efforts to grasp the human condition in modern society under changing societal circumstances. Who or what influences, shapes, or determines how we exist and live, individually or as members of the human species? What is the balance between individual freedom and autonomy, on the one hand, and heteronomous societal forces and patterns that individuals may or may not be aware of and contemplate but must contend with throughout their lives, on the other? The importance of revisiting, refocusing, or revising specific established or neglected concepts is an indispensable task in social theory, to keep track of social change and to enhance our understanding of social and societal conditions, or both, together or separately.

Yet, for the most part, and perhaps categorically, the social and societal phenomenon or challenge a concept such as *agency* denotes and makes accessible typically is extremely difficult to capture, identify, or delineate. This difficulty precisely is the main reason why concepts nevertheless are indispensable, as opposed to terms or words, not least because rigorously conceptual thinking is rare in the social sciences, albeit slightly less so in social theory. Most practicing social scientists and many social theorists view concern with concepts as part of the domain of philosophy, despite the undeniable prominence of such works as Max Weber’s “Basic Concepts in Sociology” (1913/1962). The methodological purpose and potential productivity of Weber’s concepts, when deployed for the purpose of focusing and enhancing empirical social research, appears to be lost on many sociologists today. Especially in the aftermath of Hegel’s influence, the reluctance of social scientists to engage in careful conceptual reflection, analysis, and application appears to be made of the same cloth as the refusal to consider the power of dialectical thinking.

Part of the reason for the difficulty to capture a social and societal phenomenon with the help of a corresponding concept is that the social world in general,

but especially under modern conditions, is not static but inherently dynamic. What appears to be stable in fact rests on an ongoing process (or set of processes) prone to being self-sustaining, but this stability does not adhere to, nor is it directly a function of, human standards or values. Nor is it a generic dynamic and without identifiable qualities but tied to specific ways of doing things, including “doing business” (see, e.g., Postone, 1993). Concordantly, virtually every aspect of our reality involves a historical (and historically specific) dimension, and increasingly so, including what we term “nature.” Yet without a probing, focused, and powerful concept, addressing effectively a particular phenomenon or an issue it refers to, in the singular or in its diverse multiplicity, would be impossible, absent the persistent search for more powerful concepts. Thus, advocating the usefulness of an established or a newly introduced concept to denote, delineate, or circumscribe a phenomenon largely is suggestive. Whether a promising attempt or an experiment that is bound to be preliminary is successful also is impossible to determine “objectively” but depends to a large extent on its impact on other members of one’s discipline, the productivity and relevance of new insights it has the potential of engendering, or the direction of historical change. A concept’s continuing or newly discernible usefulness often has less to do with its inherent worth (however it may be determined, according to what kind of criteria?) than with whether fellow social theorists and social scientists find it useful, intriguing, legitimate, compelling, or disturbing, often in comparison or support of, or in competition with, their own work and efforts.

Typically, in social theory, and especially in sociological theory, the concept of “agency” is associated with particular types of “action”: generally speaking, human action in society or social action, i.e., action that is socially consequential or relevant. More specifically, agency also may refer to types of action along a spectrum, e.g., from reproductive to productive, from regenerative to transformative, or from regressive to progressive. Types of action that affirm, support, revert to, or protect an existing social structure or order may fall into the category of “agency,” as well as types that reject, try to subvert, to change, or to improve a social structure or order. Agency that belongs into the first category may fall under a continuum from “conservative” or “reactionary,” while agency that belongs into the second category may range from “liberal” to “revolutionary.” In both cases, however, it is important to retain a certain amount of skepticism about whether either type of agency truly amounts to genuinely “conservative,” “liberal,” “reactionary,” or “revolutionary” forms of action, as actors often are prone to imagining (and projecting) that their or their opponents’ and enemies’ actions are consonant or consistent with such designations. Yet, are these distinctions relevant for the sociological study of agency?

Agency in the 21st Century

Since the beginning of the 21st century, as the totality of social and societal life has been going through major reorientations, upheavals, and convulsions at an accelerating pace, the future of agency in the broader sense has become increasingly unclear. One mode of approaching *agency* would be to conceive of it

in proximity to autonomous action or self-possession: agency would apply to *actors who know what they do, why they do it, in what context, for what reasons, for which purpose, how, and with what kind of goal in mind*. Under currently emerging circumstances, agency in this sense of an individual's circumspection about their actions and activities would appear to be increasingly difficult to sustain, as even the vision of such a stance towards action would seem to be incongruous with the state of the human species, the proliferating challenges we are facing, and the future of humankind. On the other hand, does this larger context and its problematic condition even matter as far the place of agency in sociological theory is concerned? Should this larger context be part of the equation? Who today is truly "in control" – of themselves or their environment, not to mention anyone else? The very idea of any individual being in control does not seem to resonate with but may impede an adequate understanding of the character of social and societal life today.

The so-called "anxiety epidemic" draws attention to the fact that the 21st century has been a time when especially many younger persons are feeling less and less well-prepared or able to face the many uncertainties, threats, and dangers the future is holding. The intensity of experiences of cognitive dissonance appears to be reaching a breaking point for many, especially in the absence of schooling that should have prepared them to manage such experiences constructively and productively. At the same time, segments of the elites and political classes in many countries are adopting stances vis-à-vis many of their own societies' institutions and traditions which they used to endow with proto-religious qualities and which they were committed "to protect against all enemies foreign and domestic," until doing so became inconvenient or a hurdle to amassing power. Given that it is categorically impossible to keep at bay the future as a source of uncertainties in highly complex, integrated, and contradictory politico-economic societies, whether "people" or many individuals are determined to "prevent" uncertain futures is of little consequence. Making the future more predictable and reliable, e.g., by "turning back" the clock on progress, is bound to aggravate further the element of uncertainty, although in the short term, doing so may come with certain direct and indirect benefits for some, perhaps for many.

Unsurprisingly, the future of agency, too, is fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity, both the concept and the multiplicity of phenomena to which the concept refers. The projection of a better future has enabled modern societies to compel individuals to act in ways that appear to be consonant with the possibility of continuous progress, but what we are observing today is a process of inverted progress overtaking the potential for actual progress – the opposite of regression – that remains. The resulting field of intensifying tensions has a direct bearing on "agency" and its meanings, purposes, and forms in the 21st century. Agency refers to types of *action* whose specific manifestations and underlying intentions require careful analysis and examination. The meaning, role, nature, status, and legitimacy of human agency currently is undergoing major changes, along with and as part of the totality of modern social and societal life, even though at the level of surface appearances, everyday life may seem to be flowing along at it has for decades, if not longer.

AGENCY IN THEORETICAL SOCIOLOGY: SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY, SOCIAL THEORY, AND APPLIED CRITICAL THEORY¹

As a concept that has been especially prominent in sociological theory, agency has been at the center of efforts to pin down its meaning for analytical and systematic purposes in social research. *Sociological* theorists especially have been concerned with agency as an abstract concept intended to illuminate aspects of modern societies that are located at the intersection of voluntarism and determinism and the question of whether, how, and to what extent individuals' actions are the result of free will or of structural and systematic features that prefigure human actions or inaction. By contrast, *social* theorists and *critical* theorists appear to be less prone to reference and address agency explicitly in their works and possibly more concerned with assessing and tracking the fate and future of human and/or social "agency" across time and space, in history and particular societies. By implication, social and critical theories treat agency and its variable uses as a tool intended to capture specific conditions and circumstances as they find expression in individuals' ability or inability to make choices on their own rather than on society's terms. Social and critical theorists often provide insights that rely on and pertain to empirical specificity in a manner that typically is not part of the purview and self-understanding of sociological theorists. To be sure, most "theorists of the social" in the broader sense do what they do without clearly and rigorously distinguishing between sociological, social, and critical theory: concern with the nature of the social is the driver, and the underlying motivation often remains just that, *underlying* and *implicit*. Although theoretical sociologists by definition study the modern condition, it is not uncommon to refrain from making related distinctions, instead purporting to study "society in general." Yet, the kind of society sociologists are interested in resulted from the parallel spread of capitalist market economies and the industrial revolution, and the entire apparatus of methods and tools sociologists developed to study this genus of society co-emerged with the spread of this type of society.

Many sociologists engaged in social research regard it as part of their charge as social scientists to delineate the societal conditions that have a bearing on whether, how, and to what extent individuals are able and have the opportunity to engage in agency. Correlating a person's location within the matrix of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, geographic location, education, and similar indicators, with the status of agency in human and social life is essential to delineating a person's ability to pursue opportunities for success and to take advantage of life chances.² Increasingly, in the context of social structures that are fraught with and burdened by myriad contradictions and proliferating corollary dangers and threats, individuals' locations within the matrix also impact their chances for and modes of *survival*. In every instance, concern with agency would need to consider historical and comparative specificity and how exactly, in what ways, and to what extent individuals, depending on their position within the social structure, are able to make independent decisions and choices. How autonomous are we, how much agency do we have, within contexts that are