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Review Essay: The Theory of Structuration

The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration. By Anthony Giddens. Oxford: Polity Press, 1984; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. Pp. xxxvii + 402. £19.50; $35.00.

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Anthony Giddens's *The Constitution of Society* is exactly what its subtitle proclaims, an "outline of the theory of structuration." As an outline, it is comprehensive in scope and sparse in detail, but nonetheless it does represent the most extensive statement thus far of Giddens's theoretical approach. Therefore, I think it timely to review here Giddens's conceptual work as it has evolved over the past decade and to offer a general assessment of his theoretical project. Let me turn first to his criticisms of social theory that appear toward the conclusion of *The Constitution of Society* and in long critical notes at the ends of various chapters. Then, I will summarize Giddens's theory and assess his general strategy for developing social theory.

Giddens's Critique of Social Theory

At the core of Giddens's work is his renouncement of positivism, especially of theory that seeks to develop timeless laws of human organization (pp. 334–54; see also 1976, 1979). This rejection of positivism stems from a conviction that patterns of human organization are changeable by human agency and therefore cannot evidence invariant properties. Indeed, the generalizations of science can be used by lay actors to alter the social reality depicted by such generalizations, thereby obviating their relevance for understanding this reality. According to Giddens, the best that social theory can offer is a series of "sensitizing concepts" that alert investigators to processes among active human agents. Giddens links functionalism, evolutionism, and positivism; and in so doing, he further indicts positivism in terms of "guilt by association." From his fairly standard list of criticisms of functionalism and of evolutionism, which, for him, includes

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most brands of Marxism (pp. 227–80; see also 1983), emerges the central point that functional analysis ignores the active processes of interaction among human agents, whereas evolutionary analysis sees societies as marching inexorably along an evolutionary path in response to some prime stimulus, such as the means of production.

Giddens also criticizes many of the theoretical traditions that inspired his own key ideas. He views symbolic interactionists as ignoring social structure and underemphasizing motivational forces, whereas he accuses role theorists of seeing roles as a conceptual surrogate for normative constraints on passive actors who dutifully perform their assigned tasks. He attacks the structural idealism of Lévi-Strauss for ignoring human agency in favor of immanent systems of codes that push people around. He criticizes macrostructuralists, such as Peter Blau, for defining away reflexive capacities of actors in favor of structural parameters that conceptualize interaction in terms of statistical rates. Indeed, Giddens believes that all structuralist theory fails to conceptualize structure as being actively produced and reproduced by reflexive human agents.

Giddens thus criticizes sociological theory for its unwarranted faith in positivism, for its functionalism and evolutionism, for its failure to implicate motives and structure in the process of interaction, and for its tendency to see structure as an ex cathedra entity disembodied from the actors who produce and reproduce it. Unlike many critics, however, Giddens does not, at this point, dismount from his soap box and go home. To his great credit, he has tried over the past decade and particularly in *The Constitution of Society* to develop an alternative mode of theoretical analysis that, he believes, overcomes these deficiencies.

The Theory of Structuration

Because Giddens rejects the search for abstract laws, his only theoretical alternative is to develop a system of sensitizing concepts. As a result, much of Giddens's work is a series of definitions of concepts that are presumably meant to denote, more adequately than in current social theory, the important processes in the social world. The definitional texture of *The Constitution of Society* is underscored by a glossary on the "terminology of structuration theory" (pp. 373–77). This system of concepts is highly eclectic in that it draws from a wide variety of theoretical traditions—symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, and, yes, even functionalism, and Marxism in a drastically revised form. In figure 1, I have tried to delineate this eclecticism by listing the key points of emphasis in Giddens's scheme and stressing some of the important interrelations among concepts. Giddens provides many such diagrams that interrelate

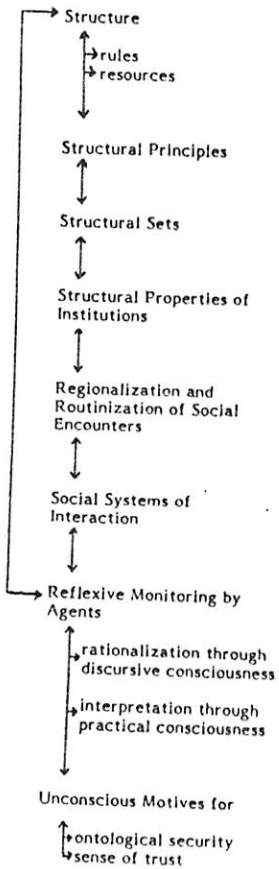

FIG. 1.—Key elements in the theory of structuration

concepts, but I have rarely found them to be very clear or illuminating. So my effort in figure 1 to collapse his diagrams together suffers from the problem of oversimplifying text that is frequently ambiguous and its equally unclear diagrammatic representations.

I believe that Giddens's use of diagrams is dictated by a theoretical strategy that does not rely on the development of abstract laws or propositions. When one does not wish to state relationships among concepts propositionally, the only alternative strategies are to use discursive, typologic, or graphic arguments. Giddens employs all three, and the result is a highly definitional and typologic discursive text, which at times seeks to represent relationships among concepts with lines and arrows. Figure 1 is thus very much in tune with Giddens's theoretical strategy, although it does synthesize several diagrams from *The Constitution of Society*.

As is well known, Giddens conceptualizes "structure" as "rules and resources" used by actors in interaction. Rules are "generalizable procedures" and "methodologies" that reflexive agents possess in their implicit "stocks of knowledge" and that they employ as "formulas" for action in "social systems" (specific empirical contexts of interaction). These rules of structure reveal a number of important properties: they are tacitly known; informal; widely sanctioned; and frequently invoked and used in conversations, interaction rituals, and daily routines. With this reconceptualization, Giddens subsumes functionalists' ideas about "institutional norms," ethnomethodologists' emphases on "folk methods," and structuralists' concerns with "generative codes." Structure also involves the use of resources that are the "material equipment" and "organizational capacities" of actors to get things done. Those who have resources can mobilize power, although power itself is not a resource but the result of possessing material and organizational facilities. Rules and resources are "transformational" in that they can be created, changed, and recombined into different forms; also, they are "mediating" in that they are what actors use to tie social relations together. Rules operate in situations of interaction by specifying "rights and obligations" that are the bases for "sanctions" and by providing "interpretive schemes" and "stocks of knowledge" that are necessary for effective "communication." Resources operate in interaction situations by providing "allocative" (material) and "authoritive" (organizational) "facilities" for mobilizing "power." Thus, rules and resources are "transformed" into power, sanctions, and communication among agents in interaction; in the process, they "mediate" social relations.

For me, the most obscure part of Giddens's scheme is his conceptualization of "structural principles," "structural sets," and "types of institutions" (pp. 163–206). As I understand these ideas, "structural principles" involve using rules and resources to create congeries of generalized formulas and facilities that "stretch systems across time and space" and that allow for "system integration." Depending on which of the structural principles has prevailed, three different types of societies have ever existed: tribal, class divided, and class (capitalist). Through acts of human agency, structural principles produce "structural sets" that are, I sense, bundles or configurations of rules and resources that constrain the form of social relations across time and in space. Giddens's example here and in all his other works on this topic (Giddens 1983) is the structural set of "private property–money–capital–labor contract–profit" for class or capitalist types of societies. As rules and resources are "transformed" by agents into general "structural principles" and "structural sets," such as "private property–money–capital–labor contract–profit," they become the "mediating vehicle" for producing and reproducing "structural properties" that are "institutional features of social systems, stretching across time and space" (p. 185). For example, the structural set of "private property–money–capital–labor contract–profit" limits the kinds of institutional arrangements that agents can produce and reproduce. However, not wishing to resurrect Parsonian functionalism, Giddens is quick to introduce notions of "structural contradiction" and "conflict," with the former being contravening structural principles and the latter actual struggle among agents in concrete empirical contexts. For instance, a structural set that contains "private profit" and a "socialized pool of labor" reveals a "structural contradiction" that is manifested in specific types of "conflictual relations in social systems," as in labor-management struggles in capitalist societies.

I have presented these structuralist-inspired ideas disembodied from those dynamics of human agency that are shown in the lower portions of figure 1. In *The Constitution of Society* and other major theoretical statements, Giddens typically begins with a discussion of agency in order to emphasize that—despite their transformation into structural principles, sets, and properties—rules and resources are produced and reproduced by agents who "reflexively monitor" interactions. Giddens terms this the "duality of structure" since, in using rules and resources of structure, agents reproduce these very rules and resources that mediate institutionalized patterns of interaction.

In conceptualizing human agency, Giddens presents what he terms a "stratified model," which appears to be a combination of psychoanalytic theory, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and elements of action and interactionist theory. As is summarized in figure 1, actors reflexively monitor their own conduct and that of others. Such monitoring is influenced by two levels of consciousness, "discursive" and "practical." Discursive consciousness denotes the capacity of agents to "give reasons" and "rationalize" their conduct, whereas practical consciousness refers to agents' "stocks of unarticulated knowledge" that they use implicitly to orient themselves to situations and to interpret the acts of others. Human agency also has an unconscious dimension, and it is in this that Giddens sees the major motivating force behind action as being the necessity for "ontological security" that arises from a need for a "sense of trust." Without a sense of trust and the resulting ontological security system, Giddens believes that actors suffer acute anxiety in their social relations.

Such ontological security is achieved not only through successful reflexive monitoring of interaction situations but also through their routinization and regionalization. Unconscious motives for ontological security require routinized interactions (predictable and stable over time) that are regionalized (ordered in space). Such regionalization and routinization are, of course, the results of the past use of rules and resources as trans-

formed by agents into structural principles, sets, and properties; and it is the need for ontological security that drives agents to reproduce these routinized and regionalized interactions.

For Giddens, "the routinization of encounters is of major significance in binding the fleeting encounter to social reproduction and thus to the seeming 'fixity' of institutions" (p. 72). Borrowing from Goffman but adding his own interesting phenomenological and ethnomethodological twist, Giddens proposes several basic procedures, or "mechanisms," that humans employ to sustain routines: opening and closing rituals, turn taking in conversations, tact, spatial positioning, and framing. Thus, social relations are reproduced across time by a variety of implicit techniques, contained in actors' implicit stocks of practical consciousness, that are used to sustain routines and, hence, ontological security and trust. Interactions are also ordered in space as well as time; and therefore, Giddens needs to introduce spatial/geographical concepts to explain how interactions are regionalized. Agents use their stocks of knowledge to define "locales" that indicate the appropriate use of physical space as well as the relevant procedures for talk, tact, gesturing, and other interactive procedures. Giddens classifies locales in terms of their "modes" that order locales with respect to variations in their physical and symbolic boundaries, their duration across time, their span in space, and their ways of articulating an interaction context with larger institutional patterns. Locales also vary in terms of their requirements for high "public presence" (Goffman's frontstage vs. backstage regions) and their demands for "disclosure" or "enclosure" of self.

I have now discussed all of the key elements in the theory of structuration as I have outlined them in figure 1. Such is the basic nature of Giddens's theory of structuration as it is presented in *The Constitution of Society*. Naturally, I cannot do justice to the subtlety of Giddens's analysis, but I have presented enough of the basic approach to make a general assessment useful.

An Assessment of Giddens's Approach

Perhaps more than anything else, Giddens is to be commended for *doing* theory as opposed to tracing the history of ideas or providing yet another metatheoretical analysis of the early theoretical masters. In my judgment, far too much social theory consists of the history of ideas and general hero worship of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and other luminaries. Although Giddens is obviously well versed in the classical works (1971), he does more than restate their ideas; he tries to build theory. The strongest feature in this building of theory is its eclecticism. More than any other

contemporary theorist, Giddens is masterful at blending and reconciling the useful elements of very diverse schools of thought.

I find the discussion of routinization and regionalization particularly significant because it attaches institutional analysis to the interactions among reflexive agents. Moreover, the conceptualization of discursive and practical consciousness draws from phenomenology and ethnomethodology in ways that connect these schools of thought to mainstream interactionism. The time has come to discard the rather silly and extreme ontological assertions of phenomenologists, ethnomethodologists, and some symbolic interactionists in order to reconcile the useful portions of their respective schemes. Giddens demonstrates persuasively the utility of reconciling very diverse intellectual traditions and, for this reason alone, his work is one of the most significant theoretical projects since mid-century. But his approach is not without major flaws; my discussion of these follows.

One significant problem with Giddens's approach to building theory lies in its definitional quality. In many ways, he has given us only a system of definitions linked by imprecise text and diagrams. In addition, I sense that his theory is rather overconcerned with its own architecture in an ongoing effort to complete the great conceptual edifice by adding still another set of distinctions and definitions.

While the substance of Giddens's concepts is considerably different from and clearly superior to that of Parsonian action theory, I find the general form of their respective theoretical approaches very similar: concepts are piled on concepts, with no effort to state propositions. Such conceptual schemes are, as Popper (1962) and others have stressed, very difficult to test empirically; they must, in essence, be accepted on faith. As a result, Giddens's scheme is much like Parsons's in that it must be intellectually and perhaps emotionally internalized if it is to be used to interpret empirical events. Indeed, I have always found Parsons's empirical essays to be insightful, primarily because the overgrown conceptual scheme was kept in the background and implicitly used only as an "orienting" device. Similarly, Giddens's interpretation of empirical studies is illuminating (pp. 305–27). My sense, however, is that the structuration scheme is useful only when one has been converted to Giddens's cause. Thus, explanation becomes a matter of interpreting empirical events with Giddens's jargon and definitions, which, to use concepts of structuration theory, become the implicit stocks of knowledge in the discursive and practical consciousness of the social analyst.

Most of these problems seem to stem from Giddens's rejection of positivism and its search for timeless and universal laws about invariant properties of the social universe. Of course, much of this rejection is the

result of associating the search for abstract laws with such highly deficient forms of theorizing as functionalism and evolutionism. Furthermore, it is easy for Giddens to reject efforts to formulate abstract laws by conveniently equating a sociological law with an empirical generalization. For Giddens, a law is an empirical generalization—a statement of regularity among empirical events. If this is your vision of law, it is simple to assert that there are no universal laws, because empirical events do change (in accord with many of the timeless and invariant processes outlined in Giddens's own scheme).

Thus, I think that Giddens's rather shrill attack on positivism and its search for laws should be ignored. For if there are no invariant properties in the social universe, his construction of an elaborate conceptual scheme does not make any sense. If there are no basic and fundamental processes that transcend time, why construct and use an abstract conceptual scheme? Why bother? Will it not be outdated as soon as lay actors incorporate it, as Giddens argues is the case for sociological laws? My answer is no, and Giddens agrees, at least implicitly. In truth, Giddens has isolated some of the invariant properties and processes of the social universe; and these properties will not change just because lay actors know about them and lock them into their discursive and practical consciousness. Moreover, despite his assertions to the contrary, his scheme is filled with lawlike statements. For example, here is one somewhat simplified law that Giddens articulates: *the level of anxiety experienced by reflexive agents at the level of discursive and practical consciousness is a positive function of the degree to which their day-to-day routines are disrupted*. There are many propositions like this one in Giddens's scheme; I assert that a good many of these *are* universal laws. If there were no lawlike properties in Giddens's scheme, I do not think that it would be as interesting as it is, nor would his entire effort make much sense. Why bother to discuss such properties of the social universe as routines, consciousness, and anxiety at a conceptual level if they are not fundamental and invariant properties of the social universe?

What makes the relations among these properties and other invariant processes in the universe a sociological law is that, even if agents know about those relations, they cannot obviate the forces specified in the law. For example, in my simplified example given above, would the relationship among routines, consciousness, and anxiety be obviated if it became a part of an agent's consciousness? I think not, for even if an actor understands the processes specified in the law, this same actor will still experience anxiety when his or her routines are disrupted. Indeed, this actor may use knowledge of the law to diagnose the problem and take corrective action, but in so doing, he or she has confirmed rather than refuted the law.

In conclusion, I can only hope that others working with Giddens's ideas are not as antipositivist as he. His scheme offers too much insight into the basic properties and dynamics of human action, interaction, and organization for it to be used as a mere "sensitizing device." And I believe that it has far more potential than Giddens would admit for developing a natural science of society—that is, for articulating the abstract laws that govern the operation of our universe.

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