

INTEGRATING STRUCTURE AND AGENCY: THE CULTURAL THEORY OF RAYMOND WILLIAMS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF PIERRE BOURDIEU

Roxana Elena Doncu

Assist. Prof., PhD, "Carol Davila" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Bucharest

Abstract: In cultural studies, the transition from poststructuralist theories that emphasized structure and the role of supraindividual machines in the constitution of identity to contemporary theories of human and non-human agency was accomplished by works that focused on practice as the field that merged structure and agency. Among such works are the cultural theory of Raymond Williams and the sociology of Paul Bourdieu, both of whom offered dynamic models of culture and society, models that allowed for a dialectic of structure and agency. This paper is going to highlight the ways in which both thinkers conceive agency, identifying a common propensity to think of agency as social rather than individual, thus locating the possibility of change either at the level of culture or community.

Keywords: structure, agency, cultural materialism, practice

1.Introduction

A key difference between the poststructuralist theories that emphasize structure and the role of supraindividual machines in the constitution of identity and the work of thinkers such as cultural theorist Raymond Williams and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is the understanding of practice as a major area of re-conceptualizing the relationship between structure and agency. Although in many respects both Williams' and Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social practice highlight the difficulty to change existing patterns, their interactional models of culture and society allow for dynamism and a dialectic of structure and agency. A common feature of their thought is their propensity to conceive agency as social rather than individual, locating the possibility of change either in culture or community. Thus their work constitutes a conceptual transition from poststructuralism and feminism to contemporary theories of agency such as Bruno Latour's 'actor-network' theory.

2.Raymond Williams and the Emergent 'Structures of Feeling'

Raymond Williams was one of the pioneers of Marxist literary and cultural studies. He coined the phrase "cultural materialism" and developed what is now a major orientation in British cultural and literary studies in a series of influential books: *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Long Revolution* (1961) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Along with Stuart

Hall, on whom he had a profound influence, he is considered the founder of the British Cultural Studies school of thought associated with the University of Birmingham.

Williams reinterpreted classical Marxism, which analyzed literature and all cultural phenomena as a 'superstructure' grafted and dependent on the material 'base'. Drawing on Gramsci's argument that the relationship between economics and ideology was not to be understood in a one way direction (the base determines the superstructure, and so economy determines ideology and culture-the latter seen as an embodiment of the ideology of a particular class) but rather as a mutual exchange between economics (which determines the social position of the proletariat) and ideology (which determines the consciousness of the same), Williams stressed that literature was just another mode of production. Culture and cultural practices like literature were conceived as processes which create different ways of life. At the same time, the practices of signification and meaning-creation are seen as practical and material activities, not as secondary to economic practice and dependent on it. Consciousness, which for Marx was the reflection of the economic position of a class, was given the active role of a mode of social being. Terry Eagleton sums up Williams' reinterpretation of Marxism in his definition of cultural materialism as

a form of analysis which examined culture less as a set of isolated artistic monuments than as a material formation, complete with its own mode of production, power effects, social relations, identifiable audiences, historically conditioned thought forms.[...] It could be seen either as an enrichment and a dilution of classical Marxism: enrichment, because it carried materialism boldly through to the "spiritual" itself; dilution, because in doing so it blurred the distinction, vital to orthodox Marxism, between the economic and the cultural. The method was, so Williams himself announced, 'compatible' with Marxism, but it took issue with the kind of Marxism which had relegated culture to secondary, 'superstructural' status (*Literary Theory* 198-99)

In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams outlines a Marxist theory of power relations, arguing that a cultural system shouldn't be defined only through its dominant features. By dominant cultural system he understands bourgeois modern culture - going back to Marx's observation that the bourgeois class conceives its specific conditions of existence as universal and characteristic of all humankind, and imposes its ideology on the proletariat, whose conditions of existence are different. Williams makes a distinction between the dominant features of a cultural system (given by the dominant class) and the tendencies apparent in the whole cultural system, which have very little to do with the dominant social group. He calls remnants from previous cultural systems still active in the present one residual elements of a culture (for example, feudal relations still persistent in capitalism) and he advances the claim that in every cultural system there may be tendencies indicative of new cultural systems. These new tendencies make up the emergent element in culture, which is where Williams locates both resistance to domination and the possibility of change. It is important to stress that change is experienced at the social, not personal level, as Williams strives to emphasize both the social nature of change and the fact that it is not the direct result of transformations in the economic structure:

The methodological consequence of such a definition, however, is that the specific qualitative changes are not *assumed* to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations, and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes. At the same time they are from the beginning taken as *social* experience, rather than as ‘personal’ experience or as the merely superficial or incidental ‘small change of society’. They are social in two ways that distinguish them from reduced senses of the social such as the institutional and the formal: first, in that they are *changes of presence* (while they are being lived this is obvious; when they have been lived it still remains their substantial characteristic); second, in that although they are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action. (131)

Williams simultaneously transcends the boundaries of orthodox Marxism by imagining cultural change as independent of economic change and class relations as well and distances himself from anti-humanist theories of social constructivism which posit the equivalence of the social and the institutional while at the same time rejecting any notion that the individual or society could be conceived in terms of a metaphysics of presence. Agency resides in the emergent elements of a new culture, yet how exactly can we identify the emergent remains a moot point. Furthermore, Williams argues, emergent forms are constantly threatened with inclusion into the dominant cultural system, which dramatically reduces their potential for resistance and subversion. In spite of the difficulty to detect the emergent and the danger of its being incorporated into the dominant, Williams stresses that the dominant culture is never omnipotent:

no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy and human intention. This is not merely a negative proposition, allowing us to account for significant things which happen outside or against the dominant mode. On the contrary it is a fact about the modes of domination, that they select from and consequently exclude the full range of human practice. (125)

In *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams attempts to sketch a model of cultural interaction. Following the Marxist tradition (greatly indebted to Hegel in this respect) he builds both structure and agency into this model, insisting on a dialectical relationship between them. Mutual determinism arises whenever we encounter a binary opposition. There can be no question of what causes which as social structure and agency are defined as one whole composed of different parts with different functions that reflect back on the other. First, the world around us determines how we perceive it; on the other hand, we are endowed with a particular sensory apparatus (different, for instance, from the olfactory apparatus of dogs or the vision of fish) that determines the way we experience the world. Purely objective determinism or purely subjective indeterminism does not exist. What exists instead is an area where subjectivity tries to construct logically objective models. We all look at the same world through the same senses, so it is no surprise that we see similar things. However, we as individuals have various perspectives and the conclusions we reach, though to a large extent

matching each other, differ to a smaller or larger extent (according to our distance from one another, both in time and space). The generation gap is explained through the historically different perceptions of individuals. This is how Williams arrives at the concept of “structures of feelings”. They comprise the ways in which an individual is affected by, and responds to his/her culture. Structures of feeling are, as the term implies, both systematic and subjective. Because they are structures, they are culturally determined, they are organized formally and hierarchically; at the same time, Williams chooses to call them feelings, and not ideology, in order to emphasize that the rules that govern these structures are of a highly subjective nature and cannot be subsumed under rigid academic concepts such as ideology.

The structures of feeling that have governed previous historical epochs are mostly inaccessible to us. They can become visible in the artifacts and works of art of that particular period, yet the fact that we experience the objects of a lost world through our own structures of feeling means that we are not wholly capable of understanding them. We organize these cultural artifacts according to a selective tradition, where the selection is always based on our own values and beliefs. That is why the study of historical periods, Williams argues, does not yield a representative image of a particular period, but it is more a study of ourselves. Because structures of feeling are not universal, they can differ not only in time, but in space as well. Cultural affiliation could be defined as the sharing, by a certain number of people, of a specific structure of feeling. If the population is more or less heterogeneous, they tend to share the same structures of feeling. If, on the other hand, the population is greatly divided along lines of class, ethnicity or race (as happens in multiracial societies and most postcolonial countries), people living very close to each other may not share the same structures.

3. Pierre Bourdieu: Practice, Habitus and Fields

In an anthology edited by the University of California, *Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Loic Wacquant defines Pierre Bourdieu’s oeuvre as “a *science of human practice* in its most diverse manifestations and a *critique of domination* in both the Kantian and the Marxian senses of the term” (3). Bourdieu’s scientific and political project is summarized along the following lines:

Bourdieu’s sociology is critical first of inherited categories and accepted ways of thinking and of the subtle forms of rule wielded by technocrats and intellectuals in the name of culture and rationality. Next, it is critical of established patterns of power and privilege as well as of the politics that supports them. Underlying this double critique is an explanatory account of the manifold processes used by the social order to mask its arbitrariness and perpetuate itself by extorting from the subordinate the practical acceptance of, if not the willed consent to its existing hierarchies. This account of *symbolic violence* - the subtle impositions of systems of meaning that legitimize and thus solidify structures of inequality - simultaneously points to the social conditions under which these hierarchies can be challenged, transformed, or overturned.(3)

That Bourdieu is a scientist of practice and a critic of domination may be explained by the influence that both Marxism and structuralism have exerted on his thinking and his

subsequent work. His books tackle a wide array of themes, ranging from early ethnological studies on kinship and ritual (inspired by his experience in Algeria during his mandatory military service), to the sociology of art, intellectuals and schools (where he developed the theory of reproduction), and in the last decades of his life concentrating on symbolic goods and the critique of social suffering, masculine domination, the bureaucratic state and neo-liberalism.

As Wacquant stresses in the chapter dedicated to Bourdieu, his conception of social structure and agency is resolutely “monist or anti-dualistic”(4). If Raymond Williams tried to dissolve the oppositions between structure and agency in the realm of cultural practice, Bourdieu strives to do the same in the area of social practice, reconciling binaries that used to generate intense debate in social studies: the objectivist and the subjectivist strands of theory, the material and the symbolic extensions of human experience, the micro and macro analytic perspectives (4).

Before focusing on the concepts of habitus, capital and field, which Bourdieu elaborated in order to bridge the antinomy between subjectivist and objectivist theoretical stances, I want to dwell a moment on his early notion of “strategies”, defined in a study entitled *In Other Words* and refined later as the “logic of practice” in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and *The Logic of Practice*. Distancing himself from structuralism, he elaborated the concept of strategy/practice as something which was neither totally unconscious nor a direct result of rational calculation. Bourdieu compared the logic of practice with our reaction when immersed in a game. During play we are both free and determined, limited by the moves of others and yet free to exercise control when our turn comes. Because we have to adapt to endlessly variable circumstances, games require permanent invention on the part of the player. We have to play by the rules of the game, yet concomitantly we can bend them to our advantage. Our freedom to improvise gives birth to an endless number of moves allowed by the games, but it is subjected to the same restrictions as the game itself.

This relationship between a subjective outlook and objective possibilities was central to Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus. The French sociologist forged a conceptual apparatus of habitus, capital and field in order to overcome the opposition, prevalent in social as well as cultural studies, between the objectivist and subjectivist stands. Objectivism (the line that Durkheim initiated in sociology) holds that society is produced by forces and relations that act upon agents irrespective of their conscious will. Sociology’s aim is to uncover these hidden forces that determine individual behavior and representations. Subjectivism asserts the opposite: social reality is the result of the numerous individual acts through which social meaning is constructed. The social world can be thus read in two ways: a structuralist one that attempts to identify the invisible forces that manipulate subjects and a constructivist one which emphasizes the crucial role of individual agents in the weaving of social reality.

Bourdieu combines the two perspectives by elaborating three major concepts: habitus, capital and field. The habitus is described as a system of “durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (*Outline* 72) These durable and transposable dispositions are schemata through which subjects perceive, judge

and react to the surrounding world. They are acquired as a result of the subject's immersion in the social world and its exposure to particular historical and local circumstances. Like Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling" they tend to be shared by people with similar backgrounds, even if each of us has a unique individual version of the shared matrix. Habitus describes the way present influences of the social world are internalized by subjects within an area delimited by previous experience. It is simultaneously a structure, being produced by social forces and influenced by the social milieu (school, family, church, work), and a structuring: the dispositions acquired by the subject in the past provide orientation in present practice. It is important to note that in Bourdieu's theory habitus accounts both for continuity and discontinuity in a subject's life: it gives continuity because it transposes larger social forces into the individual, while at the same time allowing for discontinuity and innovation, as new dispositions can be acquired and integrated.

The subjects' position in society is determined by the capital they possess. There are three major types of capital: economic (money, property), cultural (education, skills, academic titles) and social (family, friends, acquaintances, a person's social network). A fourth type, symbolic capital, refers to the effect that any of the three forms of capital may have on other people when they are misrecognized or misrepresented - for instance, when we believe that someone possessing economic capital is also well-educated. These types of capital are not strictly separated: economic capital can be transformed into cultural (by paying for higher education) or social (making friends by doing financial favours to people).

The social space in which subjects increase their capital by competing for different positions is called a field. The different compartments of life, science, economy, the law, politics, religion, literature and the arts form distinct universes, each with its own rules and regulations and systems of authority. Fields have two characteristics: first, they are structured spaces, hierarchies organized according to certain principles; second, they are agonistic - spaces of struggle, where agents and structures fight in order to maintain or to overturn the current distribution of capital. This means that fields are not stagnant structures: their hierarchy may change throughout the course of history. Their capacity to protect themselves from outside intrusion is defined by Bourdieu as autonomy. An autonomous field is able to preserve its constitutive principles, values and criteria, although there is a permanent battle between fields to influence and subordinate one another. Politicians, for example, always want to impose their views on the media and the education system that try to preserve their autonomy.

If habitus is used to explain practice from the perspective of subjects, the concept of field is employed to elucidate the ways actions are structured from the outside: each existing field offers a subject a certain set of possible moves, strategies that it can adopt along with the list of both profits and liabilities. The position they occupy in a field predisposes agents towards different ways of thinking and behaving: those already at the top will pursue a strategy of conservation (preserving the current distribution of capital), while those in subordinate positions will opt for strategies of subversion.

4. Conclusion

While poststructuralist and feminist theories remained anchored in conceptualizing identity as the product of supra-individual machines, Raymond Williams in cultural studies and Pierre Bourdieu in sociology tried to overcome the dichotomy structure/agency: the first through his concept of emergence and emergent cultures and the second through his conceptual triad: habitus, capital and field. However, none of them conceived agency as individual, but as located at the level of either cultural or social systems.

Works Cited:

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008

Wacquant, Loic. "Pierre Bourdieu." *Key Contemporary Thinkers*. Ed. Rob Stones. London and New York: Macmillan, 2006

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977