
Theories of Modernity

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Theorizing modernity

- Core question: what characterizes “MODERNITY”???
- Complexity, division of labor/differentiation
- Technological advances -> efficiency of production, communication, coordination
- Progress in “emancipation” of humanity
- BUT: loss of community, alienation, isolation, bureaucracy
- Increasing individualism and instrumentalization

(Durkheim’s mechanical vs. organic solidarity)

(Weber’s purification and rationalization of value spheres)

(Simmel’s intersection of social circles)

(Marx’s forces of production, alienation, etc.)

*** What do you see as the strengths of modern society? New technologies?*

*** Are there any problems associated with all these rapid changes?*

Habermas: Communicative action

Jürgen Habermas: 1929-

- German professor of philosophy and sociology
- Influenced by Frankfurt School / “Critical Theory” (European anti-fascist intellectuals)
 - Critique of technological society
 - Belief in promise of human rationality
 - Theory of civil society and the “public sphere”
- Synthesizes Marx, Weber (as well as Mead) in his theory of “communicative action”
- Shows both the dangers and the possibilities of modernity
- A prominent “public intellectual”



Instrumental vs. communicative action

- Different aspects of “**rational**” action:

Action Orientation Action Situation	Oriented toward success	Oriented toward reaching understanding
Non-social	Instrumental action	-----
Social	Strategic action	Communicative action

*** How do we know the difference between these kinds of action?*

Instrumental vs. communicative action

- **Competent speakers** “can themselves distinguish situations in which they are causally **exerting an influence upon others** from those in which they are **coming to an understand with them**, and [they] know when their attempts have failed.” (Habermas p. 157)
 - Not just “de facto” agreement or like-mindedness
 - Rational deliberation; **free, not coerced**
 - Based on debate, persuasion -> **common conviction**

- ** *When do we act more strategically, and when more communicatively?*

- ** *Why is communicative action often so difficult???*
 - ** *What are the obstacles? Social? Structural?*

System and lifeworld

- Modernization involves the increasing rationalization of society
 - **Marx:** Alienation and dehumanization of capitalism
 - **Weber:** “Iron cage” of bureaucracy
- Core question: how is modernization actually experienced by individuals?
 - Habermas gives an answer that has to do with the changing relationship between
 - The communicative “**lifeworld**” and
 - The instrumental/strategic “**system**”

**** *Do you ever feel like it's difficult to find downtime? Meaningful connections to others? What gets in the way?***

LIFEWORLD

- Taken-for-granted consciousness of shared social world; intersubjectivity
- Based in face to face interaction within social groups
- Sustained through “communicative action”: taking the point of view of the other (MEAD)

SYSTEM

- Systems of institutions steered through power: markets, states, bureaucracies
- People are involved with each other instrumentally or strategically, without sharing lifeworlds
- Sustained through instrumental-purposive rationality

*** Where and when do these predominate??*

Colonization of the lifeworld

- Modernization -> uncoupling of system from lifeworld
- New kind of action coordination: mutual consensus (lifeworld) vs. functional interconnection (system)
- The system **COLONIZES** the lifeworld
 - Systemic constraints “instrumentalize” a communicatively structured lifeworld”
 - **STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE**: distortion of communication based on instrumental rationality

**** *What examples can you think of systemic relations “taking over” communicative ones? Is this happening today?***

The (unfinished) project of modernity

■ BUT: THERE IS STILL HOPE FOR MODERNITY

- **Communicative rationality** can still win over instrumental/strategic rationality
 - Deliberation over common good in the **public sphere**
 - Understanding point of view of the other
 - **Consensus-formation:** values and practices of society

**** *In what ways can public debate overcome the distortions of the system on communication?***

■ Modernity's "UNFINISHED PROJECT"

**** *What does modernity still need to achieve? Do you think it is possible??? WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN??***

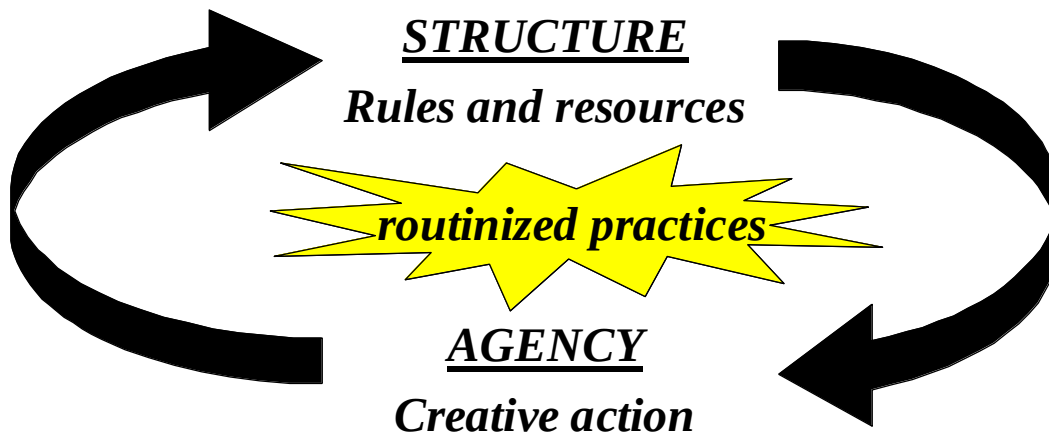
Giddens: Structuration theory



- **Anthony Giddens (1938-)**
- British theorist
- Taught at Cambridge University
- Former Director of London School of Economics
- Advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair
- Attempts to develop a synthetic theory that incorporates BOTH structure and agency
- Joins elements of structural-functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism
- Preoccupied with **transformations of modernity: dilemmas, tensions, and possibilities**

Structuration theory

- Critique of Habermas: we can't separate system and lifeworld!!!
- Both come together in **"PRACTICES"**
 - Abstract, technological systems AND taken-for-granted knowledge
 - **BOTH** strategic and communicative action ** HOW??
 - Both reproduce and TRANSFORM structures



**** Do you carry your "lifeworld" experiences with you when you act within the "system?"**

**** In what ways do our practices transform structures as well as reproduce them?**

The juggernaut of modernity

■ Alternative conceptions:

- Weber: “Iron cage” (bureaucracy)
- Marx: “Monster” (capitalism)
- Habermas: “Unfinished project” (communicative rationality)
- Giddens: **“JUGGERNAUT”**

“a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, **we can drive to some extent** but which also **threatens to rush out of our control** and which could rend us asunder. The juggernaut **crushes those who resist it**, and while it seems to hold a steady path, there are times in which it veers away erratically in **directions we cannot foresee**”
(Giddens 488)

**** *What do you think he means by comparing modernity to a juggernaut? Is this a good analogy?***



The juggernaut of modernity



Hindu “Chariot festival” of journey home of Lord Krishna (Jagganath) and his brother and sister. Chariots are hand-drawn through the streets to recreate the story.

“The ride is by no means wholly **unpleasant** or **unrewarding**; it can often be **exhilarating** or filled with **hopeful anticipation**. But, so long as the institutions of modernity endure, we shall never be able to control completely either the path or the pace of the journey.”
(Giddens p. 488)

**** Why does modernity arouse such mixed feelings?**

The juggernaut of modernity

- Modernity causes both **anticipation** and **anxiety**:

“In turn, we shall never be able to feel entirely secure, because the terrain across which it runs is fraught with **risks** of high consequence. Feelings of **ontological security** and **existential anxiety** will co-exist in ambivalence.” (Giddens p. 488)

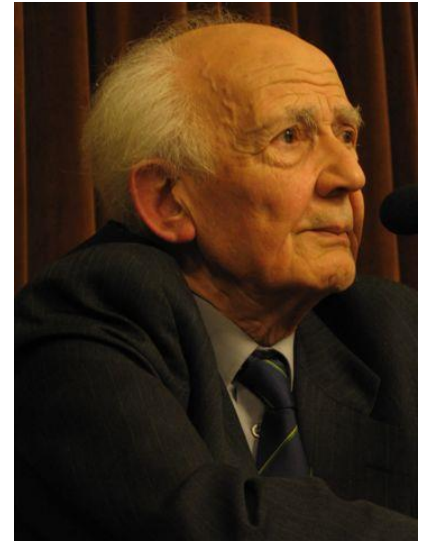
- **ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY:**

- a basic sense of security and trust underlying one's sense of the orderliness and predictability of life

**** *What forces might undermine ontological security in today's society and foster a sense of existential anxiety?***

**** *When/How have the forces of modernity led to this nervous and threatening existence?***

Zygmunt Bauman – *Modernity and the Holocaust*



- The Holocaust as a crisis of modernity
 - Modernity necessary for the Holocaust to have occurred
 - The bureaucratic organization of genocide
 - Control and categorization
 - Rules and regulations
 - Procedural rationality (compartmentalized tasks)
 - The bureaucratic language of mass killing
 - Soliciting the cooperation of the victims
 - The rationality of self-preservation
 - The morality of obedience
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Tensions of modernity

- **Displacement and reembedding:**

the intersection of estrangement and familiarity

- Change from “face-to-face” communication to communication across “time-space extensions”

“The sense of the familiar is one often mediated by **time-space distancing**. It does not derive from the particularities of the localized place.” (Giddens p. 489)

- **New opportunities** for “reinsertion” (NOT JUST LARGE, IMPERSONAL SYSTEMS)

**** *In what ways do people feel more or less “familiar” and “secure” amidst time-space distancing?***

Tensions of modernity

- **Intimacy and impersonality:** the intersection of personal trust and impersonal ties
 - Not just a loss of trust, but a “**transformation of intimacy**”:
“Intimate relationships can be maintained at a distance...and personal ties are continually forged with others with whom one was previously unacquainted” (Giddens p. 490)
 - **Ambivalence of trust:** intimates can become strangers (and vice-versa)
 - Intimacy necessarily demands “opening oneself up,” A **demand for constant self-revelation**
 - But this puts personal ties at risk -> **REASSURANCE AND ANXIETY**

**** Do relationships today demand more self-revelation?**

*****How might the demand for constant self-revelation be both enriching and stressful for relationships?***

Tensions of modernity

- **Expertise and reappropriation:** the intersection of abstract systems and day-to-day knowledgability
- EXPERTISE replaces TRADITION (No one can be an expert in everything!!) **WE MUST RELY ON EXPERTS!!!**
 - **BUT:** “there are many ‘filter-back’ processes whereby technical knowledge, in one shape or another, is reappropriated by lay persons and routinely applied in the course of their day-to-day activities.” (Giddens p. 491)
 - **(JUGGERNAUT!) Increased fulfillment WITH lack of control**

**** *In what ways does dependence on expertise make you feel more or less in control of your lives?***

Tensions of modernity

- **Privatism and engagement:** the intersection of pragmatic acceptance and activism
 - **HUMAN SURVIVAL AT RISK:**

“Basic trust in the continuity of the world must be anchored in the simple conviction that it will continue, and that is something of which **we cannot be entirely sure**” (p.491)
 - Deep **existential anxiety** -> “there’s nothing I can do” (taking refuge in routine)
 - BUT: pragmatic retreat is interspersed with activism
 - REFLEXIVITY, CHOICE -> collective organization

**** Under what conditions do people tend toward privatism as a survival mechanism? When do they turn to activism?**