



Society and the Individual: A Theoretical Exploration of the Contemporary Era

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Abstract The theoretical discussion of the relationship between society and the individual is fundamental to the field of sociology. A shift into the contemporary era of social theory begins to accredit the individual with a greater sense of agency in terms of interacting with and recognizing the impact of structures rather than being unconsciously controlled by them. The following work discusses the positions held by seminal contemporary theorists regarding the relationship between the individual and society. A comparative analysis among a number of the theorists highlights similarities and differences in approaches and illuminates the core concepts, terminology and theoretical perspectives generated in this era.

If asked to give a simple explanation to the field of sociology, one could say it is the study of the relationship between individuals and society. This deceptively simple axiom becomes increasingly complicated as one tries to understand just how the relations between individuals and society affect, influence, and perpetuate our everyday lives. The academic work intending to better explain this core principle of sociology is vast and heterogeneous in content. However, one cannot hope to completely grasp the complexity and multidimensionality of this concept in reading one theoretical perspective alone. Therefore, it is necessary to examine, evaluate, and compare multiple theoretical perspectives to truly begin to understand the relationship between society and the individual. That will be the key thesis of this paper, to identify how various theorists of the modern and contemporary eras have conceptualized the individual-societal dynamic. To do so, this paper will recognize classical theoretical influences as they shaped the perspectives and

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work of the theorists to be discussed, establish the role ideology plays in determining the relationship in question, and compare and contrast multiple theoretical perspectives along the way with the intent to highlight the complexity of the task at hand.

A logical approach to organizing a discussion of theoretical perspectives on the relationship between society and the individual would be to place the theorists in question on somewhat of a continuum. For the purposes of this paper, the poles of the continuum at hand will be represented by the perspective of societal structures dominating individual behavior on one end, and the perspective of individuals leading autonomous lifestyles, free from the influence of structures on the other. To begin, this paper will examine theorists who align with the idea that social structures largely influence individuals.

Louis Althusser addresses the significance of structures in society throughout his discussion of the reproduction of the means of production. Largely built upon the Marxian perspective of power and coercion utilized by structures within society, Althusser acknowledges that in order for social formations to exist, they must continuously reproduce their objectives while they are being produced in society. This is accomplished, according to Althusser, through the means of ideological and repressive state apparatuses (Althusser 1971). The term ideological state apparatus, or ISA, refers to institutions that ideologically reinforce state goals. Examples of ISAs include educational systems, religions, and families. ISAs are distinguishable from Althusser's concept of repressive state apparatuses, or SAs, in that ISAs primarily utilize ideological coercion to mold their subjects whereas repressive state apparatuses predominantly utilize physical force or punishment to enforce the power of the state (Althusser 1971). Examples of SAs include prisons and the military.

It is the objective of ISAs and SAs to see that the subjects of a society undergo the process of interpellation and take in the ideological values provided by the apparatuses in power

in order to continue the production of those apparatuses (Althusser 1971). In this sense, Althusser recognizes that societal structures are in place and maintained through normalizing processes and producing cultural realities.

Karl Mannheim also contributed to the discussion of ideology. However, Mannheim's contributions to ideology allow us to take a step away from the structure-dominating end of the continuum. To a certain degree, Althusser's ISAs force their ideologies upon the subjects within a society. Such acts are necessary in order to maintain the production and reproduction of those ideologies. Although Mannheim recognizes a significant structural component present in the historical context of ideology, his concept of the ideology of knowledge permits individuals to establish various perspectives on issues as they present themselves (Mannheim [1936]1955). Mannheim justifies his claim for individual perspectives suggesting that individuals from different social positions who belong to different social groups think differently (Mannheim [1936]1955). So, although he agrees with Althusser in the extent that social structures are forced upon us, Mannheim acknowledges the historical and social variation among individuals and the role that plays in establishing perspective.

Such variations within the superstructures of their ideologies lead to overall differences between Althusser and Mannheim's broader conceptualizations. Although both recognize that ideology is perpetuated and maintained through social groups, Althusser's general ideology develops from the basic human need to have a value system, or ideology, to live by. Thus, according to this concept, individuals require the structures provided by society in order to survive. Such a concept is reminiscent of Durkheim's egoistic and anomic suicide, wherein society's inability to regulate human behavior yields catastrophic results. Whereas Althusser's general ideology stresses the necessity of structure for social existence, Mannheim's total ideology

concentrates more so on understanding the historical context of structures and how they shape the ideology in power.

Perhaps more closely aligned to – and, therefore, able to help explain – Althusser’s all-pervading concept of general ideology is the critical theory posit of the culture industry. The term, generated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno ([1944] 1972), refers to mass production and dissemination of culture through means of various media. Being critical theorists, Horkheimer and Adorno strove to better comprehend how ideological forces are able to penetrate the psyche of social beings to the extent that they are driven to succumb to such propaganda. Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussion of the culture industry addresses the naively held belief that structures function independently. Recognizing the role ideology plays in the perpetuation of the culture industry may afford individuals the ability to better understand the role structures play in their lives. Critical theory suggests that exposing the ideological influences connecting structures is a step towards interaction between individuals and the society.

It is Alvin Gouldner who, above all those previously discussed, most clearly identifies the germane relationship between individuals and the societies they are a part of. Although Manheim may have given the individual credit for establishing a perspective within his concept of total ideology, he did not attribute the individual with the ability to recognize the forces of structures at play. Gouldner brings to light the importance of reflexivity between the individual and society. In his discussion of reflexive sociology, Gouldner challenges the conventional positivist agenda wherein the researcher must exist in isolation from the subjects being researched. Conversely, Gouldner not only suggests that continuous exchanges and interaction between the researcher and participants is permissible, but it can be advantageous to the study at hand (Gouldner 1970). In recognizing and accepting that a researcher’s sense of self cannot be extracted from his person and, therefore, cannot be extracted from his research, reflexive sociology enables the researcher

to address the personal transformation that is likely to take place in the research process. In accepting that the researcher is not entering a study to discover a truth but rather attempting to gain awareness of a truth through a reflexive process of relations, the individual is given the opportunity to better understand the influences of society on those he studies in relation to his own experiences and socialization.

Such a process is unlikely to occur when adhering to the principles of methodological dualism, which largely focuses on the differences between the researcher and those being researched. However, if no critical assessment is to be made of such historically supported methodological dualist research agendas, reflexive sociology is unlikely to make potentially profound contributions. Gouldner addresses this concern applying Weber's bureaucratic philosophy to the field of sociology regarding its support of methodological dualism. Such an application creates a paradox wherein the very aim of this particular social science, to better understand the relations between society and its individuals – is thwarted by its own hand in an attempt to establish and maintain a status quo for the methods used to attain such knowledge (Gouldner 1970). Researchers who follow such an agenda are often rewarded with publications, occupational advancements, and the power and prestige that coincide with such accolades.

Gouldner's critique of methodological dualism along with his endorsement of reflexive sociology largely entitles him to be recognized as a critical theorist. In defending and supporting the evolving relationship between the subjects and objects of research, Gouldner enables the humanistic demeanor of the researcher to be viewed as a component of the research process rather than as a detriment.

Despite the political agenda that may attempt to counter it, the practice of reflexive sociology provides a platform to theorists who wish to better understand the interplay between social structures and cultural influences as they shape the individual. Such theoretical inquiry is

emulated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus take into consideration how structures and individuals affect and perpetuate one another. Bourdieu's concept of field can be thought of as an arena or realm with specific rules and regulations that must be practiced within it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The rules practiced within a field may be formal or informal, written or expected. Agents within a field who do not follow the appropriated rules may be sanctioned. In order for the regulations of a field to be carried out successfully, fields must have clear, definitive boundaries. Although the presence of widely accepted and understood boundaries is essential, fields are not static realms and continuously change. As such, boundaries can be pushed out from individuals and class structures within the field, or field boundaries can be pushed in from exterior structures. Whenever a change in the boundaries of a field occurs, it is the result of a new agreed upon equilibrium that has been established. It is possible for fields to exist independently, but it is also possible for fields to overlap. In such instances of intersections, new independent fields may be created.

As the agents living within fields follow the expected rules and regulations, they practice mundane, ritualistic behaviors in their day to day lives. The repetitive completion of these practices start to mold the dispositions of the agents within a given field or set of fields. An agent's mental structure created through habits shaped by socialization within a field is referred to as habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu's concept of habitus largely relates to the core area of concern for this paper: the relationship between individual and society. Bourdieu theorizes that an individual's habitus is largely shaped by the capital he or she is able to access. Further developing Marx' broader term, Bourdieu propounds that there are several different kinds of capital – chiefly, cultural, social and economic – accessibility to which contributes to the development of an individual's habitus.

Bourdieu's concept of field may seem similar to Althusser's apparatus. However, there are a number of key differences that distinguish one from the other. Althusser's apparatus holds a central power source. According to his theory on general ideology, there is a constant battle with the apparatus to gain control and access the power of the apparatus (Althusser 1971). Contrastingly, Bourdieu's field doesn't occupy a central power source. Rather than struggling to gain complete control, fields are focused on the interplay between their agents and interior and exterior structures. Whereas Althusser's theoretical motivation was to determine how individuals or groups of individuals infiltrate and break down the apparatus, Bourdieu's motive was to better understand the dynamic process of society in hopes to illuminate how habitus, particularly class habitus, is relatively static and difficult to change.

Although Bourdieu largely focuses on the interplay between the individual and structures, he doesn't grant the individual a significant amount of autonomy in the construction of his/her habitus. Jay MacLeod, on the other hand, acknowledges that individuals are relatively conscious of structural influences. Building on Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus, Macleod sought to better understand how individuals coming from the same social class can develop significantly different perspectives (MacLeod 2009). In attributing the individual with the ability to cognitively evaluate the forces of structures and society at large, Macleod was able to more effectively explain the autonomous behaviors of individuals from homogenous strata. As such, Macleod believed that an individual's perception is molded by his/her habitus which is shaped, but not completely formed, by the fields he/she lives in. Macleod's significant ascription of the individual's structural omniscience largely distances him from the structure-dominating pole of the continuum mentioned earlier.

Bourdieu's theoretical framework can be very beneficial in developing social research. His ideas of field and habitus conceptualize how societal structures affect the individual. However,

after acknowledging a more individually-aware approach to the development of habitus, one may be unwise to apply Bourdieu's theory in full context. To do so may result in the ignorant overlooking of self-reflection that, as suggested by Macleod, occurs during the formation of habitus. As such, when conducting research, one may choose to utilize Bourdieu's theoretical concepts to establish and define the phenomena being examined, but one should be circumspect of the blind spots that could arise should he or she adhere too closely Bourdieu's agenda.

Whereas the previously mentioned theorists have all provided detailed explanations as to how society and the individual interact and shape one another, Harold Garffinkle and Harvey Sacks are less concerned with establishing definite conclusions. Rather, the duo seeks to understand how the social world is being continuously built through social interactions. Being highly micro-analytic, Garffinkle and Sacks sociologically examine the individual in an attempt to better understand society as a whole. According to the duo, individuals define structures through practical day-to-day practices (Garffinkle and Sacks 1970). As such, the definitions of structures are often indexical expressions in that they occupy different meanings depending on the context in which they are used.

Garffinkle and Sacks' ethnomethodological approach is quite different than that of any of the other theorists discussed in this paper. The distinctions can be best illuminated by means of a cross-comparison. Consider Bourdieu, for example. Accrediting fields the power to influence individual behavior, Bourdieu's theory suggests the agents within a field will develop a relatively common habitus, considering that the rules of the field are being followed consistently. Garffinkle and Sacks would unlikely draw such a conclusion. Recognizing a high degree of contextuality within every social situation, the micro sociologists would be prone to observe a situation for its face value rather than encasing an individual-structure interaction within a theoretical frame.

Instead of establishing a common expected outcome for any given situation, Garffinkle and Sacks explore structures with a sense of contingency.

Having analyzed perspectives that focus largely on structures shaping the individual, individuals shaping structures and multiple shades between, now may be the most relevant time to incorporate the perspective of Anthony Giddens. While the previous discourse has largely focused on placing the theorists at hand on the illusive continuum described in the beginning of this paper, Giddens is unlikely to fall anywhere on such a spectrum. Rather than suggesting that society predominantly constructs the individual or vice versa, Giddens structuration theory presents the idea of interdependence between agents and structures. His concept of the duality of structures suggests that structures are both the medium and the outcome of social practices, and that social life is created through the mutual dependence between structure and agency (Giddens 1993). A far cry from Althusser's agent-free theory, Giddens structuration theory is built upon the constant interaction between agents and structure, the micro and the macro. Unlike Bourdieu who attributed little reflexivity to the individual in terms of constructing one's habitus, Giddens suggests that agents have the ability to reflect upon their actions. Building upon Freud's concepts of id, ego and superego, Giddens advocates that although we may not always be aware of the unintentional consequences of our actions, we still act with agency (Giddens 1993).

If one conclusion may be drawn from this prolix dialogue regarding the relationship between society and the individual, it may be that the relationship is complicated. Such equivocation is supported considering the theorists highlighted in this paper have covered the continuum conceptualized from the beginning of this discussion. With such a broad range of perspectives on the issue, there may not be a uniform description of how society and the individual relate to one another. It should be further noted that, although a trend was identified among the theorists highlighted in this document, it is still an open inquiry whether social theory

in its entirety has shifted in this direction. That is to say, had a different collection of contemporary social theorists been analyzed in this symposium, an alternative trend may have been conceptualized. However, the theorists addressed in this particular discussion were selected due to their interconnectivity as it relates to their perspectives of agency and structure in social theory. In sum, the diversity of responses provided on the debate of the relationship between society and the individual enables social researchers to choose the theory that best aligns with their endeavors. Therefore, being able to explain the relationship between individuals and society may not be as important as being able to recognize the different ways in which the relationship itself is explained.

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