

Agency

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Agency and agents

In worldwide sociological research, *agency* is a familiar and widespread term, frequently used without translation in other languages. When translations exist, they are usually heterogenous and not univocal, and sometimes they introduce slight changes of meaning, as in the case of the French *agentivité*. As a matter of fact, agency is a concept developed and popularized mainly in the Anglo-American sociological debate in order to study the phenomenology of action, while in Europe it has been used mainly in the discussion on the agent/structure dualism. On the one hand, the notion of agency is used to explain, in relational terms, the potential to construct society from a grassroots perspective, where agency is the expression of material practices and communicative performative capacity (Emirbayern and Miche, 1998). On the other hand, the notion of agency is rooted in power relations and in the tension between the single individual and the social structure with its coercive rules; it denotes a person's capability in reference to autonomous action, margins of choice and decision, and his/her capacity to deal with interiorized forms of domestication. Moreover, most of the studies specifically devoted to agency and the agency/structure relationship have considered them as interconnected and recursive, rather than as radically opposed (Giddens, 1984). This has led some scholars, especially in political sociology, to include agency in institutionalization processes (Hay and Wincott, 1998).

As a result, in spite of its widespread use, agency remains a polymorphic concept, whose heterogeneity can be traced back to the foundation of sociology, to the modern philosophical conceptualizations of the subject as *agent*, to the debate between functionalist and interactionist approaches, to the definition of rationality as an individual's capacity for decision-making, to the articulation of agency as performativity of practices, as well as to the association of agency with self-reflexivity (Bratman, 2006). To sum up, the popular and sometimes impressionistic uses of the notion of 'agency' are proportional to its complex and controversial background of approaches.

Arguably, this complexity is due to the intertwining of the idea of agency with that of the agent, and to the variability of their conceptualizations. While

theoretical reflections on the subject as agent subordinate those on agency – considered as a consequential definition – the sociological conceptualization of agency in phenomenological terms usually takes a definition of the subject as agent for granted. Indeed, at least in Europe, the golden era of the sociological reflections on agency, during the 1980s, was immediately subsequent to the discussions on the notion of subject enhanced by French philosophy – and especially by the historical analysis of Foucault (2005), the linguistic deconstruction of Derrida (1974) and the materialistic references of Deleuze (1988), to name only the most influential – and by the German philosophical tradition, with its contrast between Heidegger and the Frankfurt School (Habermas, 1987). Moreover, whilst the European discussion on agency by Bourdieu (1980), Touraine (1998), Habermas (1988), Giddens (1984) and Archer (1996) cannot be isolated from a philosophical background in which the subject's capacity is crucial, the discussion developed in the USA was influenced by different premises. These were rooted in the pragmatist philosophical tradition and connected with interactionist and phenomenologist sociology (Emirbayern and Miche, 1998; Schatzki, 2002), without a specific reference to the discussion on subject, subjectivity and subjectivation (Rebughini, 2011). Furthermore, in the same years, parallel discussions around gender studies, world history and postcolonial approaches, together with the development of science and technology studies (STS), were destabilizing the cultural and ontological premises of the notion of agent, extending its references far beyond the original European modern legacy. Although agency can be defined empirically by observing individuals' behaviours and communication practices, it cannot be separated from an analytical definition of the agent, who is not a neutral entity: the agent has a material body, a gender, a colour, a social position, a culture and a history, can be human or not human.

The aim of this chapter is to focus, on the one hand, on the unresolved issue of agency's intertwining with the definition of the agent, and on the other hand, to shed light on the consequences of this on the possibility of a critical agency. After a cartography of the debate on agency in social sciences, the following sections analyse the entanglement of the theoretical approaches to agency, as the capacity of an agent, with the theoretical definitions of what an agent can do. As we will see, such definitions are connected with other issues discussed in this book, such as the intersectionality of identifications and categorizations, the capacity of individuals to cope with uncertainty and singularization, or the necessity of downscaling the centrality of the human amid the epochal transformation of the Anthropocene.

Agency as human capacity

Most interpretations refer to agency as a capacity, or capability, of human subjects in regard to their social, institutional, political or natural environment: without an agent there is no agency. This capacity to act, in terms of doing or saying, is mainly expressed in relation to social change, or as the individual's opposition to

structural constraints or social inertias. This capacity has been discussed implicitly in terms of *intentionality*, that is, as a cognitive and logical impulse starting from the mind of an individual in a given situation; in terms of phenomenological and relational *situatedness*; or as a *practice*, where the capabilities expressed by an agent are embedded in social relations, routines, know-how, constraints and forms of justification, so that the intentional action can never be separated from its cultural and material environment.

The problem of intentionality

In modern Western thought, most of the theoretical approaches to action – starting from Husserl’s classical phenomenology – are based on the topic of intentionality, and there has been a notable debate on whether the agent’s intentions are the causes of the action, and how this makes the action comprehensible for the agent him/herself and for other actors. For example, intentionality can be related to an aim specified before the action, or to an aim elaborated ‘during’ the action, that is while the person is performing that action (Ascombe, 1963; Davidson, 1980; Searle, 1983). In the Weberian legacy, the teleological structure of agency is explicit; agency as intentional action is connected to a goal, and it is based on a decision related to the assessment of possible options or contextual constraints and opportunities. The agent can give a meaning to the action and can explain it in relation to the past, present and future, so that the intention involves a motivational commitment to action. However, in the phenomenological tradition developed in the USA, under the influence of Alfred Schütz, there is a weaker interpretation of such intentionality, since the observation of successful or unsuccessful agency, and of its appropriateness, is at the basis of the evaluation of the autonomy of that agent (Lyotard, 1991; Joas, 1996).

From a historical perspective, since Hannah Arendt’s unfinished book on the life of the mind (Arendt, 1978), the reference to the intentionality of agency has concerned the association of intention with freedom and autonomy as typical modern issues, unknown to Greek philosophy and developed only during Christianity and modernity. Absolute intentionality was considered nonsense in a culture, like the Greek one, based on the circularity of time. As Arendt noted, it was only with the creation of a linear notion of time typical of monotheist religions that agency arose as a notion related to freedom, choice and responsibility. Intentional action became an autonomous possibility to choose among alternative values, opportunities and risks. However, the tension between the crucial or illusory status of intentionality continued to be present in the history of Western thought. This is explicit in the bifurcation between Spinoza – for whom in a world of necessity, interconnections and becoming, intentionality is an illusion – and Descartes, who considered reason and intention to be the most important faculties of a mind separated from the materiality of the body (Israel, 2001). In the Cartesian version, intentionality became the central issue of modern thought, and the subject was identified by his/her capacity to transform the world. Although

minoritarian, the Spinozist option survived as steady critical approach of the modern subject as an intentional agent, and it was fully rediscovered first by Nietzsche and later by Whitehead, Deleuze, as well as by American pragmatists such as Peirce and James, for whom the meaning of action is given by human interaction in an ongoing situation, so that agency cannot be separated from the contingent doing. Nietzsche's famous claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* – reinterpreted and actualized by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) – was that 'there is no being behind the doing'. The agent is not an essence but a becoming, a continuous process of construction through action.

Overall, the social sciences have adopted a definition of action centred on the intentionality of the acting subject, and on his/her negotiation between opportunities and constraints in a given situation. Action is referred to a goal, and it is based on a decision related to the assessment of possible options. The agent is aware – or has an intuitive awareness – of the logic of the action he/she is performing. In this logic, action becomes *agency* when it is not generally related to an activity, nor to the simple appropriateness of action with respect to its aims, but it has a certain degree of reflexive awareness (Giddens, 1991). This conceptualization of agency is implicitly related to a projective attitude towards the future, and it accordingly refers to the modern idea of the subject as a choosing autonomous agent. This same idea is also apparent in the very first theoretical phase of Talcott Parsons especially in *The structure of Social Action*, published in 1937 and deeply influenced by Max Weber, where action is characterized by purpose and intention.

Because of this focus on of the individual's intention and projective attitude, the sociological debate on agency spread in the midst of the crisis of functionalist, structuralist and Marxist approaches. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was not only a crisis of the self-transparent subject, downsized by post-structuralism and post-modernism, but also a reconsideration of the structure of power characteristic of a post-industrial society. The notion of agency became the topic of a theoretical discussion involving the main voices of social sciences. Bourdieu (1980) and Giddens (1984) were among the best-known participants in such debate, together with Archer (1996), Alexander (1995), Habermas (1987), Joas (1996), Melucci, (1989), Touraine (1988) and Bashkar (1979). All of them sought to define agency, the extent to which an agent is autonomous and can collectively influence social structures, the extent to which an agent is influenced and constrained by social structures no longer those of the modern industrial era.

Reflexivity, as the learning conceived by Giddens or Bourdieu, as well as the 'internal conversation' conceived by Archer, is a fundamental component of agency for all these scholars. These positions can be located on a cline extending from those most interested in domination and interiorized dispositions, to those most attentive to creative and resistant capacities. For example, Bourdieu is more focused on structural developments arising from routines, inequalities and power relations, with specific attention to the power of inertias in everyday life; instead, Touraine mainly considers agency as the product of individual capacity of dissidence from socialization patterns. Midway along the cline, with a more

phenomenological and hermeneutical approach, we find Giddens' and Melucci's recognition that there is not an ontological priority of agency vis-à-vis to the context; nor is there a direct unfiltered struggle between the heroism of a resistant subject and the manipulative structures of a society, but rather a process of self-reflexivity (Giddens, 1991; Melucci, 1989).

Yet, in the popularization of this theoretical discussion in sociological research, the notion of agency continues to be mainly used in opposition to that of domination and structural constraints. At least in Europe, the decades of impassioned debate on subjectivation and domination, on dissolution of the subject and rational choice approaches, have not unhinged a concept of agency that continues to be implicitly associated with choice and initiative, freedom and creativity, from a general basis in intentionality. Consequently, the agency/structure binarism persists as a general framework of reference.

Situatedness, relationality, performativity

In the American sociological tradition, more influenced by pragmatism than by idealism, the notion of agency is more often related to the result of the action itself, rather than to a previous implicit definition of the agent. This is at the basis of a more fluid, situated and communicative definition of agency grounded on the empirical observation of contextualized relational processes of interaction, rather than on the assumption of an intentionality or an ongoing struggle between the agent and the surrounding social structures. The focus is on agency as experience, on its open-endedness in the situational circumstances continuously producing a practical knowledge, appropriate adaptations or contingent objectives in relation to a given context (Goodman, 1995; Alexander, 2003).

In the pragmatist tradition, situatedness and communication have always been important to grasp the margins of manoeuvre available to the social actor in terms of the *conditions* of action. This is evident also in Goffman's idea of *stage* as situation, the place 'where action is' (Goffman, 1969). Rather than being a teleological intentionality, agency is always intertwined with the cultural and material characteristics of the environment (West, 1989). It is the product of human interactions in ongoing situations, where also social order is a flux of adjustments and temporary constraints more than an oppressive and static machine embedded in institutionalized structures (Wright Mills, 1966; Bernstein, 1992). Moreover, the idea of agency propounded by James, Dewey or Mead considers the context and the situatedness mainly as a site of 'problem solving', where actions and practices are responses to everyday problematic situations. For Goffman, Garfinkel, and more generally interactionist sociology, improvisation is a fundamental component of agency against contingency. The epistemological consequence is that, because knowledge and experience are located in a given environment, agency does not have a purely cognitive dimension, and the subject is not opposed to a world of objects that have to be represented (Rorty, 1982). Hence, the subject is part of the environment, of social and material relations where s/he acts.

From this perspective, the opposition between object and subject is not the starting point. In the philosophical environment of pragmatism, the opposition between hard sciences – especially in the case of Darwinian biology – and social sciences was less radical than in Europe, and the notions of experience and agency could be rapidly conceptualized as both mental and physical (Massumi, 2021). The reference to the human subject as an ‘organism’ in the pragmatist literature is proof of an approach based on the interface between body and mind, and of a perspective for which there is no self or agency without social and material relations, as is evident in Mead’s sociology of action (Mead, 1943). More than a resistance against structures and constraints, agency is the result of a circular process of adapting activities in a given context; it is a temporally embedded process of social engagement made by iterations and reproductions as well as by innovations and projections towards the future.

It is not by chance that the connection of the single individual with larger social structures was at the centre of the attention of all the founding scholars of American sociology, and the *meso-level* of social relations, typical of civil society, was a focal point for many of them (Fine, 2021). The sociology of Mead, Goffman, and of the Chicago School was based on an idea of agency as a result of the phenomenology of situatedness and of the contextualized relational processes of communication. Consequently, agency was conceived as relational, rather than individual, and it was likened to a creative opportunity of an agent as part of a specific social context (Joas, 1996). Human action was fully part of the social construction of the social environment, to which it was not opposed but instead sought to transform – as was also argued by Berger and Luckmann in their constructivist analysis (1968). Put in Goffmanian terms, agency is part of the interaction order, and it is not a pure expression of the agent’s intentionality. Agency has a practical evaluative dimension related to the contextualization of actors’ experience, where social references orient expectations, select attention and construct ‘systems of relevance’ (Schütz, 1962), but they can be also negotiated and transformed. Structural constraints cannot be separable from the creativity of action, because any action can potentially create new structural constraints and any action is based on socialization to rules and environments. Creativity and imagination were not considered to be subjective gifts, as capacities present or absent in agents, but as means to evaluate and reconfigure the situation, to deal with a repertoire of references, with local constraints and temporary opportunities to transform the situation. The situated and relational characteristics of agency are associated with the actors’ capacities to make judgments and evaluations, to contingently adapt themselves and to justify their choices.

This interpretation is evident also in how agency has been framed in gender studies. Especially under the influence of the work of Butler (1990), as well as of intersectionality as a theoretical perspective (see Chapter 5), agency has been conceptualized mainly as a situated performativity and a contextualized form of embodied critical knowledge. Because identities and subjectivities are always in becoming, and always in tension with external discourses and categorizations,

agency acquires significance mainly in its contextual and conflictual intertwining with social dispositions, and in its situated performativity as the subjective appropriation or dismissal of such discourses and categorizations. Agency is the capacity to develop a critical relation with the social normativity of such social constructions by differing their necessity, rather than negating them. Agency resides in this paradox. It is related to the subject's ability to justify his/her choices, as well as to his/her vulnerability to the contingencies of the social environment. The focus of gender studies on the body highlights mutual dependencies, as well as the way in which agency – always expressing itself through a body – cannot be associated with illusions of sovereign self-sufficiency. Overall, this is an approach to agency that extends it beyond the mere idea of isolated intentionality or resistance. As Butler maintains, 'agency is neither fully determined nor radically free. Its struggle or primary dilemma is to be produced by a world, even as one must produce oneself in some way' (Butler, 2005: 19). Because it is always situated and relational, agency is within and outside, compliant and subversive, with respect to social laws. This is always a way to separate agency from the modern idea of the sovereign subject and its phantasy of completeness and autonomy. Agency has nothing to do with independence; nor is there a self-inaugurating agency.

Agency as practice

Another attempt to open the 'black box' of agency centres on the topic of practice. Indeed, practice was a mediating concept between subjectivism and objectivism for a generation of scholars such as Bourdieu and Giddens. The focus was on the performativity of actors and the way in which such performativity transforms the environment and the individual at the same time. For Bourdieu, there was a tension between interiorized dispositions (*habitus*) and practice as creative 'sense of the game', but the possibility of change was situated more outside the social actor – that is, in structural historical changes – rather than in agency itself (Bourdieu, 1980). For Giddens, on the contrary, the focus was more on the way in which agency contributes to structuration through individual reflexivity and the capacity to learn from experience and information (Giddens, 1991). Yet, these approaches did not completely unhinge the classic overlap between agency and autonomy: that is, the idea that agency is related to intentionality, while – especially in Bourdieu – practice recalled the inevitable constraints reproduced by societies in everyday life (Schatzki, 2002).

More recently, a new wave of studies focused on the agent as *practitioner* has sought to overcome this impasse by drawing on American pragmatism, as well as on new fields of research like STS studies and other heterogeneous resources (Hui et al., 2016). From this perspective, agency is enacted by a practitioner, an individual doing something, including thinking. Here the notion of practice is a bridge between an acting individual and the material and normative structure where such acting takes place. 'How to do' is already there: it is a knowledge, or

a more general orientation of action, that precedes the individual situated 'acting', even though the individual can modify or innovate the practice (Knorr-Cetina et al., 2000). Again, the reference to agency as practicing underscores that agency is not a pure cognitive process of decision-making. Rather, the issues are to what extent an agentic practice is a reproduction or an innovation; it is a way to follow rules and routines, models, features that people have learned, or an innovative interpretation, in material or normative terms (Reckwitz, 2002).

When agency between interiorized routines and reflexivity is investigated, the focus is not on the agent but on the practice; and the notion of practice frames different elements such as activities, knowledge, cultural orientations and meanings. The sociology of consumption has been one of the favourite fields of analysis (Warde, 2005). Agency can be understood as a *performance of a practice*; and practice is a sort of organized action in a given contingency or field, with given rules, routines and values (Schatzki, 2002; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). This means that any particular action relates to a specific time and space, and to the individual who performs that action. Hence, action is not totally open, because it is embedded in given rules, competences, knowledge, emotional patterns; but it is also free in terms of interpretation and performance. However, agency as performing practice cannot be considered the result of an intentionality; while acting, individuals pursue a goal as a process of doing (or saying), rather than as a teleological end planned by the subject in the isolation of his/her mind. In short, this interpretation of agency as performativity of a practice tends to underscore the continuity among knowledge and action, ongoing learning, and creativity of action.

Working on the idea that agency can be grasped through practices is another attempt to overcome long-standing sociological dualisms (Knorr-Cetina et al., 2000). In a globalized and interconnected world characterized by uncertainty (see also Chapter 9), know-how and internalized dispositions can change according to the environment, to the normativity of a given context; and they can change also according to more suitable aims and goals of who is acting. This includes the possibility of critical capacities based on learning experiences and the sharing of common orientations of action, as highlighted by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999); as well as the possibility to innovate by starting not from one's intentionality but from the objects of the environment, as is evident in research on scientific knowledge and STS studies (Latour, 2005). The general frame adopted by these approaches is that agency is at the same time acting and being enacted. Accordingly, social change, resistance or creativity is never the result of a single intentional and subjective act; nor are they the impersonal result of a chain of modifications. To understand agency through practice requires bypassing the primacy of representation and cognitive teleology of intentions, and concentrating on how individuals are embedded in an ongoing engagement in the world – that is, in contextual, processual and temporal forms of activity where cognitive and material aspects cannot be separated.

What an agent can do: expanding agency

Especially in Europe, the discussion on agency in sociology sought to find a theoretical and epistemological way to overcome the subject/object dualism. This goal was boosted by the so-called *linguistic turn* debate, particularly successful in the humanities departments of the USA during the 1980s, but which originated mainly in European structuralism and post-structuralism as critical approaches to modernity (Rorty, 2007). Bourdieu (1980) claimed to have been inspired by Wittgenstein's well-known affirmation of the non-existence of a 'private language', so that the social context is the only basis of the temporary and linguistic meaning of an action. Taking this standpoint into account, he concluded that even though habitus is not a mere reproduction, social practices acquire their stability from their inscription in linguistic structures. On the opposite side, Touraine (1988) was obliged to utterly bypass the dimension of language to affirm the resistant and creative capacities of the agent. Linguistic structures and communicative dimensions were neglected in favour of a combination of cognitive, emotional and embodied attitudes with which to detect and to oppose forms of domination. Giddens (1984, 1991) approached the reference to language in his structuration theory, with a hermeneutical circularity approach to agency: the deliberate action of individuals makes day by day the structures of society that then determine – by laws, habits and linguistic rules – the possibilities for the expression of agency itself.

Yet, the enduring process of deconstruction and decentring of the modern subject by the linguistic turn, together with the connected criticism developed by gender studies and postcolonial studies, has more recently produced the contention that for too long the focus has only been on communicative and linguistic perspectives, ignoring the material dimensions of the body, of nature and the environment (Lugones, 2010). This has gradually paved the way for new visions in the conceptualization of agency. Indeed, this turn started not only from the exhaustion of the post-modern and post-structural stance and its pivot in language, but even before from cybernetic and complexity theories of the 1970s such as that of Betsen (1979), as well as from internal criticism of existentialist and hermeneutical philosophical approaches to agency (Jonas, 2016).

Again, the focus is on the necessity to bypass the old subject/object, actor/structure, autonomy/domination and culture/nature dualisms. But this time the path is not the search for a linguistic or hermeneutical mutual influence between these poles, but rather the focus on the web of material connections by which agency is composed. In conceptualizing agency as a frame of material and cognitive elements, most of these approaches extend the notion of the agent to non-humans like animals and plants, as well as to inanimate objects such as technological tools (see Chapter 8). Notably, most of the approaches entirely bypass linguistic and symbolic references, and to some extent also history and temporality, all of which are considered only elements of the hybrid networks made by manufactures, laws or biological entities. Put in Marxian terms, there is no longer a spectatorial or prefigurative *theorein* detached from praxis and immediateness of the world.

These theoretical perspectives are usually labelled ‘neo-materialist’ or ‘neo-ontological’, and they range from STS, through the critique of the Western separation between the natural and the cultural developed by anthropological research on indigenous cultures (Descola, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 2009), to feminist ecological approaches underscoring that nature has been shaped by cultures and that these are made of ‘natural’ components (Merchant, 1996; Alaimo, 2010). The focus on *matter* – which is never inert matter – is often presented as a theoretical reaction, as a historical pendulum swing, against the previous overemphasis on the Western modern subject and more generally human exceptionalism, but also against logocentrism and linguistic structuralism, representationalism, ideology – in a word, against ‘anthropocentrism’ (Coole and Frost, 2010). This convergence of interests considers the epistemic division of nature and culture, human and non-human entities to be a Western and male-oriented legacy related to the hegemony of this kind of subject over all that has been naturalized – and consequently inferiorized – such as women, native and indigenous people, but also nature as a whole and as a resource to be exploited.

The critique of classical humanism as anthropocentric and Eurocentric implies a critique of notions such as autonomy, independency and intentionality. As suggested by Butler (2005), it implies the recognition of an ontological interdependency, with the consequent necessity of an ethics of cohabitation among cultural and material differences. Including non-humans in the definition of actors is a way to unhinge an anthropocentric social theory, and a subject/object dualism, disguising a western-male standpoint. Current post-human approaches celebrate mainly the dissolution of this implicit point of view, rather than the subject as such, from which the relationship between humans and objects can be evaluated both critically and emotionally (Haraway, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). As also Derrida claimed (2008), the problem is not how we feel in regard to other living beings, as well as tools and machines, but *what we are* together with them.

Certainly, taken to its extreme consequences, the crisis of the agent/structure dualism can drive towards an idea of ‘agency without actors’, where actors are continuously shaped in assemblages of plural entities and mutually constituted (see also Chapters 3 and 8). However, most of the post-anthropocentric interpretations try to save the concept of agency while they abandon any subjectivistic reference to the rational autonomous agent. The relation with the structure is no longer a struggle between intentionality and social constraints, imaginative beings and natural limits, but it becomes an intertwining of events whose protagonists – the agents – are not exclusively humans. Agency does not stem from a single agent’s will; rather, it is a result or an attribute of a given network of actors. Agency becomes the outcome of recursive events, where humans, non-humans, artefacts and acts themselves are part of a common interplay. Hence, agency is not a prerogative of the human, but instead an impersonal and ever-changing output of enactments that address the question of *what* can become an actor. In this case, agency is more than ever an open empirical question based on the neutral observation of *how* things happen. The focus is no longer on the characteristics of the

agent, as a rational and self-reflexive subject, but on agency itself, as an ensemble of elements and entities involved in a given transformation of reality (Delanda, 2000).

In one of the best-known attempts to de-subjectivize agency, Latour (2007) explains that the result of the modern subject/object dualism has been the creation of an idealistic definition of matter – present also in the phenomenological tradition – while we are made by webs of relations, and our agency is itself the result of multiple relations where the actor is enacted and acts at the same time. ‘Nothing pertains to a subject that has not been given to it’, Latour claims (2007: 213). Again, more than focusing on the agency of non-humans as unique and different from that of humans, the idea is to reconceptualize agency as what humans and non-humans do together. Impersonal forces like weather conditions do not have agency in themselves; instead, in their intertwining with human activities they make humans act, experience, and decide in a given way. Agency is relational not only because it is intersubjective, but also because it is a collective product in relation with material and non-human entities.

The constellation of post-anthropocentric approaches to agency challenges the long-standing cultural processes of human exceptionalism, but certain notions differ among these approaches. For example, in eco-feminism sidestepping the separation between human action as intentional ends, on the one hand, and matter such as technological tools or natural resources on the other, does not imply a radical rejection of intentionality and subjectivation processes. Even though living matter is an actor in itself, and it is able to express its own ends, this does not eliminate the agency and responsibilities of the human agent; rather, the focus is on the ethical advantages of broadening the concept of agency (Braidotti, 2018). While in Latour there is a more explicit commitment to putting an end to the modern approach of intentionality as a ‘black box’, self-constituted in the mind of the subject, the post-humanism of eco-feminism is on the contrary based on the necessity to enlarge the analysis of the connections, to foster the alliances between the human and the rest. In this case, the aim is to reject a causal approach. Actions cannot be studied as simple relations between causes and effects, but instead in terms of immanent assemblages (Ahmed, 2010). In regard to agency, this is also a way to connect this position with other feminist approaches – such as that of Judith Butler – interested in investigating how bodies (not only humans but also those of the natural environment) – are shaped by history. Bringing materiality back into agency is considered a way to overcome a male universalist point of view whereby agency is mainly related to an isolated Ego separated from nature, objects and social relations.

By contesting the separation between nature and culture, these approaches support a different interpretation, where sense-making is no longer the main object of study of a researcher living in a separate *sui generis* entity, such as a ‘society’. For example, conceiving agency within the framework of the Anthropocene – thus, in that not only of inter-subjective relations but also of their material, historical and geological consequences – challenges the phenomenological basis of agency

as intentionality, although this does not necessarily mean radically substituting a subject-centred phenomenology with an impersonal ontological assumption. More than a downsizing of agency, this seems to be a recipe for its expansion.

With different emphases, such approaches do not deny human agency; rather, they do not consider agency as exclusive to humans, and they liken the dependence that humans can have in relation to objects to a form of agency – and as an agency of objects themselves. More than being a project, agency is a multidimensional path where situated knowledge, vulnerability and dependency are taken into account (Braidotti, 2018). It is not possible to see and to act (and hence to judge and to represent) without being seen, involved and positioned. A situated knowledge can be able to recognize the agency of those – humans or non-humans – with which the one who knows is in contact. To recognize the agency of non-human entities is not a mere upside-down of the subject/object dynamic.

Especially feminist epistemology is engaged in an effort to open and to enlarge the possibility of agency to reduce violence and purely utilitarian relations. Agency is vulnerable and never totally independent because it is performed by an unfinished agent, always imperfectly connected to social relations, but also to the environment made up of natural or inanimate material elements (Haraway, 2007; Alaimo, 2010). This is explicitly in contrast with the idea of cumulation of resources for the self and self-positioning as exemplified, for instance, by Bourdieu conceptualization of capital. Far from the logic of the cumulation of being, sense and goods, recognizing the vulnerability of agency is an attempt to dissociate it from any predatory control. Accordingly, overcoming the dualism between passive matter and active mind is considered as necessary to bypass the historical discriminatory use of the idea of matter for gender or colour in reference to the (non-western and non-male) body. The gender perspective and an intersectional gaze are considered sufficient guarantees against the danger of resorting to the classic instrumental use of biology to promote discrimination, as in modern forms of essentialism and biologism (Ahmed, 2006).

Nevertheless, reference to such a wide notion of agency gives rise to various ambivalences. In its strong versions – where there is an ontological primacy of material reality over the epistemic dimension of observation, experience and judgement (Bennett, 2010) – this stance is in contradiction with an analysis of power relations or a conceptualization of critical agency, because with the radical rejection of subjective intentional processes there is also the elimination of the political dimension. In the more moderate versions – even though the constellation of post-humanist, post-anthropocentric and Actor-network perspectives share a common hostility towards intentionality as an idealistic and phenomenological legacy – agency assumes a wider meaning which extends beyond human subjects' actions. This weaker version seems more promising in the critical reconsideration of the self-referential modern subject. Between the Scylla and Charybdis of the underestimation of purposive action, expelling any reference to interpretations, values or judgements, there is the risk of the erasure of agency as a valid analytical concept; there lies the narrow channel that can lead to a new perspective on

agency beyond previous celebrative or auto-confutative stances. This is especially evident when we focus on the critical contents of agency as the possibility of social change or material improvement.

Critical agency's new clothes

Agency is at the core of social theory, and one of the core questions on agency is how it is possible in a world of power relations. In short, the critical resource expressed by agency consists in the way in which it exceeds the power by which it is enabled (Butler, 1997: 15).

Today, escaping the classic dichotomies of modern thought – such as between autonomy and domination – has become a challenge also in conceptualizing agency as a form of critique. In recent decades, two bodies of critical analysis have created new ways to conceive the critical potential of agency, beyond the classic Kantian self-reflexivity: a critique arising from an embodied and not only existential condition of the agent related to gender, colour, coloniality and previous histories of domination; and a critique arising from the inclusion of the material condition of the environment in the definition of critical capacity. Globalization, postcolonialism, feminist movements, as well as the growing embeddedness of technology in everyday actions, have highlighted a detachment of critique from the universalized points of view, from which ensued the unveiling of domination. This has called into question the conceptualization of a critical agency as a privileged moment of rupture, what Dewey called ‘the spectator perspective’ (Dewey, 1929), for which the origin of critical action is external to the environment and rooted in the mind of a cultureless and bodyless critical actor. This interpretation is related to a generalist critical capacity to demystify the false consciousness that tends to be associated with an ‘external’ intellectual knowledge.

In modern thought, criticism is a fundamental component of agency when conceptualized as a subjective capacity. Here, agency as critical capacity is embedded in the ambivalences of Western thought about critique: on the one hand, it is a possibility of ‘negation’, as resistance to potential relations of domination, false consciousness, and reification that have to be unmasked and rejected; on the other hand, agency as critical capacity is based on the search for alternatives, other ways to act and live, and on the possibility to imagine and project the new (Rebughini, 2018). The association of agency with emancipation and autonomy is related to the possibility of negation of what is judged to be wrong, and it stems from the necessity to distance oneself from the given, while critique as a search for alternatives is focused on the unpredictable nature of reality. In modern thought, this search for the new has been expressed mainly in the form of utopian projects, or in terms of creative reaction to the social and material environment (Joas, 1996).

Overall, in recent decades, gender perspectives, postcoloniality and global history, STS and post-anthropocentric approaches have generated a sort of ‘critique of modern critique’, and especially of its expression in terms of negation. Despite

their important differences and internal distinctions, all these theoretical perspectives are intended to overcome dualisms, underscore connections instead of oppositions, pluralism instead of a sole source of critical vigilance in the self-reflexive subject. For example, on the wave of the rise of ‘Global South epistemologies’ (Santos, 2016), scholars have started to discover silenced histories of a different critical agency that does not correspond to the pathway of modern industrial Europe but pertains to other stories of resistance against domination (Bhambra, 2015). This challenges the teleological account of agency as stages of human civilization, where some actors are supposed not to have a critical agency corresponding to the Western patterns, because they do not have a notion of history – in the sense of Western linear time (Chakrabarty, 2018) – or they are judged as pre-modern because they do not conceptualize nature as an entity separate from the human sphere (Viveiros de Castro, 2009).

The modern conceptualization of critical agency, as unveiling action and emancipative intentionality, has been radically shaken by post-subjectivist perspectives, precisely because it is the centrality of the subject, with his/her intentionality, reflexivity and critical capacity, that has been unhinged. Although the positions on the role of subjectivity differ within these approaches, critical agency is disconnected from the capacity to intercept domination and from the critical/uncritical dichotomy. On the contrary, the aim is to underscore how the limitations and the vulnerability of human action should be considered as the starting point of a new conceptualization of critique, where there is no intentional aim of individual autonomy separate from the material experience of the context (Braidotti, 2013; Butler, 2005).

This new conceptualization of critique aims to add to the end of eurocentrism, and to the construction of pluralist spaces of recognition, the assumption that all living beings are involved in agentic processes. The reconsideration of critical agency in a world where the stakes are not only power relations and hegemonic/subalternity dynamics among humans, but also the very survival of life on the planet, becomes a crucial issue. The Anthropocene condition (see Chapter 3) highlights that history is not only a human affair; it also involves other living entities with which humans have always interacted while producing the human sense of separateness from ‘the rest’, whence derives an anthropocentric notion of agency (Haraway, 2007). Most of the ecological commitment of the post-anthropocentric approaches is related to a revision of what it means to be a human in the present condition, with the current potential of human impact on oneself and the surrounding environment. Even though this commitment cannot be realized without reference to a typically human self-reflexive capacity to criticize and deconstruct one’s promethean ambitions, this fosters a further extension of critical agency: Anthropocene implies multi-layered forms of power relations and social injustice, including those related to climate crisis, highlighting that humans are not the only protagonists on the stage. The awareness of being a geological force requires humans to assume new and unprecedented responsibilities

and to make new interpretations of the omission of such responsibilities (Moore, 2015). Hence, the expansion of critical agency's boundaries, beyond the doing, thinking and practicing of the human agent, raises theoretical and epistemological challenges, as well as new horizons for investigation into the meaning and effectiveness of critique. The task is to transform critical agency conceptualized exclusively in subjective terms into a sort of eco-systemic critique where human reflexivity depends on a complex environment of living and non-living entities, rather than on an exclusively cognitive force of resistance or unveiling capacity.

As mentioned earlier, the risk is that a more impersonal idea of agency could undermine the plausibility of critical agency. Post-anthropocentric critique in a world that could exist without human subjects may sound like a metaphysical 'exit' vis-à-vis of the weakness of a political 'voice', and it reveals a sense of powerlessness in front of a catastrophic horizon. While the ecological critique of industrialization was part of modernity itself and was based on reflection concerning the dialectic between human and nature, the accumulation of goods and ecological limits, the current post-subjectivist perspective focuses on a sort of paradox of modern hubris, with humans lapsing into the condition of objects while they are achieving growing control over nature. This sometimes provokes a sort of self-hatred in front of the magnitude of the harm caused by humans and generates mistrust in the effectiveness of human critical capacities. Moreover, this could lead to a theoretical approach to agency compliant with neoliberal culture – also in terms of adaptation, self-government, and positive attitude towards uncertainty (see Chapter 9) – incompatible with a critical stance and an attitude of political vigilance.

Conclusion

In the legacy of modernity, agency is related to the capacity of a subject to act autonomously and reflexively; and critical agency represents the possibility to act in a dissident and innovative way against forms of domination and constraint. Especially in Europe, this idea of agency, always in relation with that of structure or system, has been a central pillar of modern and industrial societies, necessary to frame social conflicts and citizenship struggles within the borders of a nation-state. In other traditions, such as the American one, agency is more often connected to local networks and frames, where agency as practice is fully part of the construction of the social environment. But the notion of agency implies other meanings as well, ones less focused on intention, struggle or creative practices whereby any change is embedded in a wider flux of material transformations, where the individual agency, with its culturally situated differences, is down-scaled to an element of a complex scenario of micro and macro connections, in a chain of events where 'my' agency is only a fragment. The ambitions of the *homo oeconomicus*, or the critique of power as structure materialized in state institutions, become relative and situated episodes of human agency, thus considered

in a wider cultural and historical perspective, especially if situated in the ‘deep history’ of Anthropocene (Chakrabarty, 2018).

In its genealogy, reflection on agency is related to the conceptualization of the agent as a human subject, taking into account his/her uniqueness and cognitive separation from all the rest, even though a persistent underground analytical tradition – which has recently emerged with post-anthropocentric perspectives – conceptualizes agency as a wider network extending beyond the human, and which also comprises the many other living and non-living entities in which the human agent is embedded. Interestingly, all the conceptualizations of agency aim to overcome mediations. In the first case, they seek to unveil social dominations and interiorized dispositions, ideological stances, textual and linguistic mediations. In the second case, they seek to reveal the extreme complexity of interconnections and networks of which agency, as single analytical unit, is composed. Indeed, in Western modern thought, the problem of finding the *immediateness* of one’s agency has been an issue for both materialism and idealism. Conceptualizing agency is a way to gain direct access to the real, and this is a stake for both subject-centred approaches and systemic onto-centred perspectives, for which access to the site ‘where action is’ is not the exclusive result of subjective experience but a more choral process.

In complex and globalized societies facing rapid changes and growing uncertainties, the context where agency develops is seen as a network of growing multiplicities, where not only social and cultural, but also material and natural elements interact, while the human search for freedom and control faces not only institutional frameworks, such as that of the nation-state or of global connections, but also the meta-historical consequences of agency itself on the material environment. Hence, in spite of its polymorphous meanings, agency remains an indispensable conceptual tool with a flexible extent. It can be used to frame analytically the meaning of the action of an individual but also the material consequences of the transformations included in the agential process. Agency is immediateness and situatedness, but it also embeds elements that extend far beyond the lifetime of a single subject, of a generation, or of a social structure. Agency embraces both the situatedness of personal interpretations, decisions and practices, and the downsizing of one’s subjective agency in the perspective of a complex chain of relations where bodies, environment, technological tools are likewise components of the agential process.

If agency is the transcendence of the ‘I’ in the material and symbolic relationship to the world, together with other bodies and entities, it cannot be the result of a single unit or of an isolated intention. Instead of pursuing the self-downsizing and anti-foundational shift of a radical anti-subjectivism, the challenge is to take into account both the modern legacy of the subject, with the related capacity of interpretation and resistance, and contemporary reflections on the material, environmental and technological consequences of human agency, and thereby also expand the range of critical agency and its ethical potential.

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