



## **AGENCY**

*AK Thompson*

AS NOTED IN THE *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*, THE first uses of “agency” and “agent” in the English language date from the late sixteenth century and slightly predate the radical Protestant sects that sought to enact God’s will without relying on the Church as intermediary and the Enlightenment-era deliberations about human freedom that continue to underscore the concept’s modern meaning. Initially designating action pursued beyond or in opposition to determining frames or—in the case of “agent”—the force that actually carried out (rather than merely instigated) a given action, the meaning of “agency” gradually expanded to denote a fundamental but intangible attribute of Being itself. Words associated with this

latter meaning include “choice,” “freedom,” “purposiveness,” “volition,” and “will.”

In North American social movements, popular usage dates from the period following the sex wars of the 1980s, during which sex-positive feminists charged radical feminists with ignoring the capacity for “sex workers” (a term that only came to prominence following the publication of the 1987 anthology *Sex Work*) to engage in purposeful action despite the industry’s constraints. Consequently, radical feminists were thought to have *produced* or *exacerbated* (rather than merely to have described) women’s victim status. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, this characterization had become so ubiquitous that a sociologist writing in the journal *Critical Sociology* could assert—without citation—that agency “can be defined as the capacity to evaluate and make choices for oneself regarding self definitions as a sexual being and personal sexual performances regardless of the external dominant social forces and social consequences” (Corsianos 2007, 865).

Commonsense contemporary usage of the term by radicals thus emphasized the innate capacity for action possessed by an individual regardless of the particular circumstance in which they found themselves. Consequently, “agency” is perceived to be an intrinsic quality, always in operation, needing only to be recognized. It therefore followed that a major focus for radical action was to further the recognition (and valorize the representation) of existing capacities for agency. On occasion, this emphasis has shown signs of supplanting attempts to modify or extend the field of action itself. Drawn from an article published in a blog maintained by a Harvard law student committed to international human rights and gender justice, the following formulation is characteristic: “One problem with writing about women’s rights and poverty . . . is that most such writing ends up denying its very subjects . . . agency. . . . Women and girls are portrayed as victims of abuse, domestic violence, and forced marriage. But even the most ‘victimized’ of women have a strong voice, and stand up for themselves daily in ways we do not think about. . . . Unfortunately, this strength and beauty is all too often ignored and forgotten” (Kolisetty 2011).

Prior to the term's conceptual mobilization by contemporary social movements in the period following the sex wars, radical interest in the *question* of "agency" arose in part from dissatisfaction with the dominance of various forms of structural analysis in both the social sciences and in socialist organizing during the mid-twentieth century. Figures associated with these trends included Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, and Talcott Parsons. This dissatisfaction, which found practical expression in the New Left's occasional turn toward a subjective politics of self-actualization, coincided with the emergence of similarly inflected intellectual movements. Among others, these included the "people's history" associated with Howard Zinn (1980) and the "history from below" associated with E. P. Thompson (1963).

The point of connection between these various attacks on structural accounts was their common emphasis on people's capacity to make history through individual and everyday actions, and to be present—as Thompson proposed—at the moment of their own emergence. Recalling those figures he took to be precursors to a communist tradition indigenous to Britain, Thompson underscored the importance not only of evaluating but also of *valuing* their experiences—even if they did ultimately prove to be "casualties of history" (1963, 12). "Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies," he wrote, "but they lived through these acute times of social disturbance and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience" (1963, 13).

But though these intellectual critiques and the sensibilities of the new social movements combined to ensure that calls to recognize people's agency would become ubiquitous by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the meaning of the term itself remained unclear. As a result, even though the concept is widely used in social movement settings today, it is generally deployed as a gloss. This ambiguity corresponds to (and no doubt arose in part from) disputes taking place contemporaneously in philosophy and the social sciences. Writing at the turn of the century and a decade after the sex wars, two prominent American sociologists recount how "the concept of agency has become a source of increasing strain and

confusion in social thought.” Indeed, “variants of action theory, normative theory, and political-institutional analysis have defended, attacked, buried, and resuscitated the concept in often contradictory and overlapping ways. At the center of the debate, the term *agency* itself has maintained an elusive, albeit resonant, vagueness” (Emirbayer and Miche 1998, 962).

In light of this ambiguity, the prevailing radical concept of “agency” has been made meaningful primarily through its juxtaposition to “structure,” its putative antonym. For its part, “structure” continues to be used (although with decreasing frequency) to denote institutions or relations that give shape and coherence to the social world. The structure-agency dyad gained prominence in the 1980s when it was foregrounded in the work of prominent British sociologist Anthony Giddens.

One of the principal intellectual forces behind the elaboration of a “Third Way” politics and influential during the British Labour Party’s rebranding as “New Labour” during the 1990s, Giddens’ work had a disproportionate effect on social democratic and labor movement forces. Along with his canonization in the field of sociology (a status that has since begun to wane), this traction facilitated the broad diffusion of his concepts into radical scenes. And though these scenes tended not to endorse Giddens’ (1984) sociological solution—“structuration”—to the posited irreconcilability between structure and agency, they proved less reluctant to adopt the anti-theoretical terms themselves.

In contrast to Giddens’ structuration, contemporary radicals have tended overwhelmingly to line up on the side of agency in an effort to undermine structural accounts and even structures themselves. Coextensive with this development has been the increasing importance attributed to recognition and representation within the political field. If, as this position maintains, agency is always operative, and if it is the means by which people make history, it follows that radicals must cultivate the capacity to recognize agency in action. It is in this context that other terminological shifts that took place around the same time can be understood. These include the “empowering” new emphasis on “survivors” rather than “victims” of

various forms of violence, and on “clients” or “consumers” rather than “patients” in various health industry settings. Significantly, the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* lists “patient” as one among several antonyms to “agent.” Meanwhile, “empowerment” itself has become a contested term under neoliberalism, where it is frequently invoked to justify forms of deregulation purportedly aimed at broadening the realm of choice.

But while the characterization of agency as an ever-present force undermining the determining power of social structure has achieved a commonsense ubiquity within radical scenes, it’s important to recall that, from the seventeenth century onward, “agency” has in fact denoted two separate and nearly antithetical ideas. In the first, and as already described, it coincides with the desire expressed by moral philosophers and political liberals to pinpoint the force that generates action among free subjects. In the second iteration, however, the term is associated with organizational coordination, instrumentality, and even the division of labor.

According to the *OED*, “agency” in this second sense denotes “one who acts for another.” Significantly, the *OED* also highlights how, in the seventeenth century, the “agitator” (a figure who stands as an obvious precursor to today’s radical) was regularly conceived as “a person who acts on behalf of others, an agent.” Although less widely acknowledged by radicals today, this second usage continues to enjoy widespread traction in both popular culture and institutional settings.

In the social sciences, the concept of “agency” as instrumental action carried out at the behest of an instigating force gained traction again in 1974, when Stanley Milgram published his now-famous study *Obedience to Authority*. Theorizing his findings, Milgram advanced the position that “agency” described the tendency for autonomous individuals to subordinate themselves—and thus to become agents—when doing so produced less direct conflict with authority than would defiance. In Milgram’s words, “a person is in a state of agency when he defines himself in a social situation in a manner that renders him open to regulation by a person of higher status. In this condition the individual no longer views himself as responsible

for his own actions but defines himself as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of another” (1974, 134).

Although this characterization is a near-perfect antithesis to the current dominant conceptualization among radicals, it aligns more clearly with commonsense usage, for example, “an agent of the state” or “the Central Intelligence Agency.” In a similar but distinct move away from conceptions of “agency” that posit it as a unique and intrinsic quality of the free individual, social scientists following the Actor Network Theory (ANT) of Bruno Latour have recently begun contemplating the agency of *objects*. According to Latour (2005), “ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things ‘instead’ of human actors.” Instead, “it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans” (2005, 72).

In a similar way, feminist philosopher Karen Barad has also sought to decouple agency from the autonomous liberal subject. For Barad, “agency is not an attribute of a subject or an object.” Instead, it is “an enactment . . . of iterative changes to particular practices” (2007, 178). Following this observation to its logical conclusion, Barad maintains that agency can therefore and in no way be limited to humans.

Elaborated in movement-related scholarly works, these shifts have also been echoed in contemporary radical discourse, where “people” have come regularly to be designated in their object status—for example, as “bodies.” This nominal-conceptual change—noted by both David McNally (2001) and John Sanbonmatsu (2004) in their respective accounts of the explosion of scholarly works that, since the 1990s, have prominently featured “the body” in their titles—may itself be read as an indication that the philosophical concern with the body, which can be traced from Spinoza through to Deleuze and Guattari, has now become an inexact but hegemonic preoccupation suturing together currents as various and contradictory as neoliberal biopolitics and radical posthumanism.

Practically speaking, all of these developments have meant that the tension between radical evocations of “agency” and common-sense ones has been exacerbated. If agency is not an innate individual and subjective capacity that can be cast as antithesis to both structure and object, and if—by extension—recognizing a subject’s agency can no longer be considered a sufficient means of overcoming objective structural constraints (and, indeed, if objective constraints and objects themselves are now viewed as constitutive aspects of agency), then the formulation that holds agency (once recognized) to be the source of historical transformation begins to reveal its limit.

SEE ALSO: Bodies; Experience; History; Liberal;  
Representation; Vanguard