 Kp<"O cuuko q"Ngqpg"*gf 0+<"Cwcpvk"Cwqtk"Ci gpvk0"Ugpuq"f gmc| kqpg"g"c| kqpg"f gnlugpug"F cmg"vgqtkg"ck"vgttkqt{0
Cevcpu."Cevqtu."Ci gpw0"Vj g"O gcpkpi "qh"Cevkqp"cpf "vj g"Cevkqp"qh"O gcpkpi (Htqo "Vj gqtkgu"q"Vgttkqtkgu0
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Disturbing Concepts: from Action Theory to a Generative Concept of Agency

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Italian title: Concetti molesti: dalla teoria dell'azione a un concetto generativo di a-gentività.

Abstract: This paper is a critique of a model of human conduct I call the Standard View of Action. When social action is interpreted in this framework, motives, goals, circumstances and meanings that regulate action are seen as separate elements. A disturbing opposition between objective structures and agency is constructed, and at the same time an opposition between the social and the natural is created. These oppositions have had a central place in sociological theorizing throughout the twentieth century. Awareness of the problems related to them at the abstract theoretical level was revived in the work of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Touraine and Margaret Archer in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the awareness at the abstract level has not removed them from the most influential theories of consumer behaviour such as that by Prochascka, Norcross, et al. (1994) or (Ajzen & Fishbein 1980; Ajzen 1991) The paper proposes that the Standard Concept of Action be replaced with a Generative Concept of Agency, founded on a cyclical structure in which habit is the central element. All action is based on and related to habits formed earlier; images are mobilized when actions change and are transformed into consolidated practices which, in some cases, develop into addictions, or "passions without a name" (Landowski). The Generative Concept draws on Pragmatism, especially on the work of Hans Joas (1996) but it is also related to Bourdieu's sociology. The Generative Concept of Agency allows us to see how actions initiated by meaning–making subjects, generate structures that become the conditions of action while also being its product. In this way it is a move from the traditional sociology of action to a sociology of the actor and its environment.

Key–words: Action theory; actor; agency; habitus; practice theory; social theory; social semiotics.

1. Action, action!

Social theory went through a major revision of emphasis in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Action and actors were put in the centre stage by prominent authors as different as Alain Touraine, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Anthony Giddens, Margaret

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Archer, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, and many others. Touraine wrote about the self–production of society (1973) and pro-claimed the *Return of the Actor* (1984). Bourdieu introduced the con-cept of the *habitus* to allow room for choice and individual variation in class reproduction through style. De Certeau argued that tactics, i.e. short–term choices, are more important than strategies, i.e. structured plans in lifestyle patterns. Giddens (1984) theorized about "structura-tion", i.e. maintenance and gradual change of class structures through class action. Archer argued that culture provides individuals the possi-bility of genuine choice, predetermined neither by cultural structures nor by objective circumstances, and Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) argued that social order needs to be maintained by subjectively ac-cepted and meaningful principles of justification. All of these theories stressed the meaningful moment in the framework of social structure, to take away the stress from causal determination by social structure of the subjective experience of the individual life situation. This is why the new stress on action was a part of what often is called the cul-tural or semiotic turn in social theory.

There were two kinds of motives behind this new emphasis. The first was purely theoretical. Authors were reacting to what they felt to be either structural or cultural determinism. Marxism had seen a ren-aissance in the 1970s in the form of new readings of *Das Kapital* and its early versions, to connect Marx's critique of political economy with his early humanistic critiques of alienation. The over–powering blind forces of capitalism had come to be seen as the causes of alien-ated mass consumption, ideological acquiescence, corrupted lifestyle and social problems. Cultural determinism was seen, for example, in the work of Claude Lévi–Strauss, whose analyses of myths seemed to imply that collective culture by its own laws structures the human ca-pacity of perception and thought. Everything is both relative and fixed at the same time, because cultures are different but their power to de-fine what we observe and think overwhelms even the material objec-tivity of the world (Lloyd 2007).

The second motive was practical and ethical. Explaining human behaviour as law–like and determined puts the sociologist in the back–stage, interpreting the social drama according to his or her structural theory that does not necessarily correspond to that organizing the ex-

perience of the actors themselves. Moral judgments about mass consumption and lifestyle issues are hard to avoid, and historical actors' self–understandings are easily dismissed as false consciousness with such insensitive self–confidence. As Alain Touraine stressed, it is not sufficient to place society in history; sociologists must put historicity — auto–production of society — right in the heart of the concept of society itself (1973: 35).

Taken together, these two motivations amount to much more than a renewed interest in explaining human behaviour. Social theory is an index of what Pitirim Sorokin called *congeries of ideas*: wider complexes of societal understandings of the world, including law, philosophy, scientific knowledge, art, music and literature, which also reflect common ideas and values understood and accepted in society (Sorokin [1947] 1974: 151–153, 703). My argument in this paper is that the emphasis on action and actors in social theory was an affirmation of the value of agency itself. That is to say, action is not only explained but evaluated by the measure of being the product of the operations of willing, responsible, able and competent subjects. The value of agency is the core of the mundane consciousness of contemporary societies, not only of the academic consciousness of social scientists. But this value is not assured to us as given; on the contrary, it must be affirmed and reaffirmed constantly because it is so vulnerable. This susceptibility is also reflected in the academic consciousness of social theory.

The stress on action creates a disturbing ambivalence in sociology, which has its origin in the classical theory and continues in current sociological developments. Action in the sense of reflected behaviour based on meaningful choices involves an element of essential unpredictability in social life, whereas social science is supposed to explain and understand coordination and order and, respectively, explain and understand the reasons why coordination and order sometimes fail to occur. The simultaneous presence of initiative and order is a problem with which all of the action–based theories have struggled. In this paper I will argue that the difficulty underlying this ambivalence stems from what I call the Standard View of Social Action. I shall demonstrate the difficulty by two examples: the so called practice theory and Bourdieu's ambivalence about his central concept, *habitus*. I shall

then show that while the action–theoretical perspective is necessary for understanding social life it does not solve the ambivalence unless it is taken one step further, to construct a *generative theory of agency* instead of simply a theory of action.

2. The Standard View of Social Action

Action and actors did not take a central position in social theory for the first time in the late twentieth century. Modern economic theory since its beginnings in the nineteenth century has been based on assumptions concerning preferences, choice, subjective value of commodities and rational — whatever that means — decision–making of actors in the market. Modern sociological theory in the works of one of its founding figure, the American Talcott Parsons, was also constructed on this basis but it went through an important enlargement with longstanding consequences that still persist in important areas of practical research on human choice especially in consumption and lifestyle bearing on health and welfare.

Parsons reacted against two prevailing tendencies in explanations of human behaviour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: one emphasising the subjective elements of choice (this he called "idealism"); the other emphasising the causal influence of circumstances independently of subjective consciousness (this he called "positivism", more specifically behaviorism). His intention was to overcome these simplifications by combining the two into a single analytical scheme. The basic theoretical unit of social analysis, he argued, must be the single "unit act", which consists of four elements. First, there must be an agent of the act, an actor. Secondly, the act must have an end, a future state of affairs toward which the process of action is orientated. Thirdly, the act must be initiated in a situation that the actor partly can influence (means) and that is partly beyond the actor's control (conditions). And fourthly there must be a normative or a value orientation of action that the agent can assume from the social environment and adapt to it but also deviate from it (Parsons 1937: 43–45; Holmwood 1996:

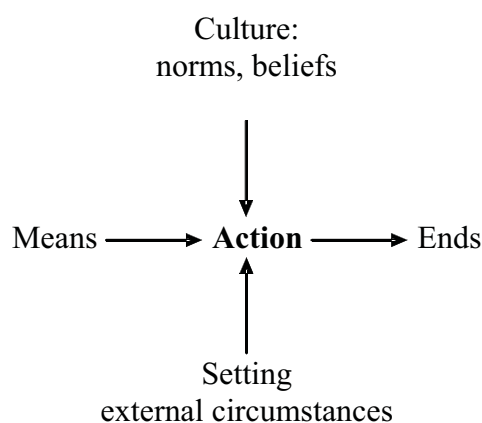56). In a schematic form, the action–theoretical model can be presented as in Figure 1.

Culture:
norms, beliefs

Means ⟶ **Action** ⟶ Ends

Setting
external circumstances

Figura 1. The Standard View of Social Action.

Although a purely analytical construction, the Standard View of Social Action, as Parsons's theory can be called, implies a model for empirical research. It constitutes an inventory of four groups of variables that must be accounted for when explaining social behaviour. From the sociological point of view its advantage is, first, that it is general and not specific to any particular kind of action, and secondly that it allows room for both individual variation and coordination (or social order). The subjective aspects of selecting ends are connected to the social environment by collective values and norms and by the objective nature of the conditions of action.

Although apparently very simple, the Standard View of Social Action has been the foundation of very complex elaborations and thousands of empirical studies on almost any type of social behaviour, including work, family, sexuality, health behaviour, consumption, lifestyle choices. What is disturbing in such a four–component model is that without specifications it is self–fulfilling: if one factor does not explain a behaviour, then one or several of the three other factors will. In empirical research the

disturbing self–fulfilling characteristic of this model has been cured by different kinds of specifications concerning the role of the four components.

A very popular theory in consumer research is the specification of the model developed by Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein (1980; Ajzen 1991). To make it more empirical the authors steer it towards the subjective aspect instead of relying on "unconscious motives or overpowering desires" (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980: 5). They have argued that in empirical research situational factors are poor predictors in general. Researchers should therefore concentrate on what actors actually intend to do, and this is divided into two parts: attitudes toward the behaviour and subjective norms. Also actors' perceptions of the norms and attitudes of their environment must be accounted for, whereas objective conditions and socio–demographic variables are of almost no interest. It is important that measurements concerning all these subjective aspects must be oriented towards behaviour, not the objects of the behaviour. In order to achieve significant predictions researchers should, therefore, ask respondents about their beliefs, attitudes, norms and perceptions of norms concerning *buying and eating* certain kinds of foods, not about the foods themselves. For example, attitudes towards ready meals and takeaways are generally negative even among those who habitually buy them (Mahon, Cowan and McCarthy 2006).

Holm and Gronow (2008) have stressed in their critique of the model that limiting the explaining variables to the subjective elements results in higher predictive power but the explanations themselves tend to be tautological or absurd. There is no reason to suppose that people who buy certain kinds of food, for example, would do so without intending to behave that way, and vice versa, it is not very informative that people who intend to buy a car are more likely to buy one than those who do not have such intentions. The explanans and the explanandum are simply not logically independent, as they should in proper causal explanations. On the other hand, the reduction serves pragmatic purposes. Marketers and nutritionists have no great interest in variables they cannot influence, such as availability of products or socio–demographic background of consumers.

Another popular version of the Standard View of Social Action is the so–called Trans–theoretical model of behavioural change, or Phases of change–theory developed by Prochaska et al. since 1977 (Prochaska et al. 1994). It amounts to a series of six steps where people who have weight problems, addictions or other habitual behaviour disorders may change their lifestyles: pre–contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and termination. Therapeutic practices called Motivational Interviewing have been developed to promote and sustain the efforts of people who attempt or should attempt to quit their bad habits. As the terminology already indicates, also this version of the Standard View stresses the subjective elements in action at the expense of unconscious or situational factors.

Both of the developments of the Standard View discussed above stress the subjective element of action. This is their weakness as well as the reason for their popularity: they are part of industries that attempt to influence individual behaviour. The research instruments of TPB and the instructions for Motivational Interviewing are widely available and under permanent assessment and improvement, covering ever wider areas of application. Their contribution to understanding social life is modest but they meet practitioners' needs to help their clients.

Parsons's original work was intended to explain how social coordination (or "integration" in his own vocabulary) was possible even in societies where force, tradition and traditional social bonds have a lower degree of importance than free individual choice. As Adriaansens (1980: 27–31) has pointed out, his work contains cycles of "phase movements" in which he sometimes stressed the subjective moment of social action, at other times the mechanisms of social determination through norms, social differentiation and division of labour and other situational factors that compose the functional integration of the social system out of individual actions. The disturbing ambivalence between structure and action was built into the Standard View already from the start.

3. Practice Theory

One limitation of the Standard View was challenged by the new wave of interest in action theory that I referred to in the beginning of this paper. It has been said that the work of Talcott Parsons established a marriage between the concept of action and the theory of social integration. This limited the scope of the cultural element in the theory to values and norms of acceptability of different kinds of behaviours. As Parsons wrote in the middle of the functionalist phase movement of his work:

> value standards are involved in the *evaluative mode* of the motivational orientation as rules and recipes for guiding selections […] These standards guide selection (a) by narrowing the range of alternatives open and (b) by amplifying consequences of the various alternatives. These [are] standards of acceptability and they (i) narrow the range of cognitions, (ii) narrow the range of objects wanted and (iii) narrow the number of alternatives." (Parsons and Shils 1951, 72).

The meaningful element of subjective action is reduced to the evaluative mode of motivation regarding the value of a specific type of action, and the normative constraints regulating it, as if it were always clear and known to everybody what each type of action is and how it is interpreted by actors themselves and by others. Although the two applications of the Standard View discussed above stress the subjective moment of the structure–action ambivalence — to the point of being tautological — they share this same assumption of a fixed meaning of behaviours. Yet eating specific kinds of food, having sex, drinking wine or any other activity may serve very different functions and have a diversity of meanings, even given that some of the psycho–physiological mechanisms of pleasure and satisfaction may be the same in different contexts and for different people. Alfred Schütz (1978: 24), the founder of phenomenological sociology, formulated this point saying that the Parsonsian scheme adopts a point of view of an external observer for whom behaviour is permanently problematic (needs to be influenced by someone), whereas it neglects the subjective point of view of the actors themselves — and we might add, of the others with whom they interact.

Meaningfulness of human behaviour itself was not the new idea of the cultural turn in sociology; it was the multilayered interplay of meanings in interaction that was at stake. Although the cultural turn sprang from several different sources — German hermeneutics and Phenomenolgy, French structuralism and semiology or semiotics, Wittgensteinian theory of language and American Pragmatism — two major points were decisively new and important for sociology (Sulkunen 2009). First, the meanings associated with actions by agents themselves and by others are not relevant only from the point of view of coordination and social integration. The symbolic exchange involved in activities such as the use of commodities consists of a bundle of messages of many different kinds, including self–definitions, social relationships, interests in gaining external benefits such as prestige or even power, internal benefits from enjoying one's competence in using commodities such as cars, or from just collecting them. The second important point brought out in the course of the cultural turn was that the symbolic loadings transmitted by activities are not finite. There is no such thing as the complete social world. Meaning is not a property of things; it is not even a property of language. It is an ephemeral relationship between objects, their producers, media messages including marketing, users — and non–users. Richard Rorty (1989) elaborated this point very well in his essays on contingency. Bruno Latour used the metaphor of translation to argue that there is never a direct way between technologies of production and the needs for and uses of it: translations are always incomplete and full of surprises. A third way to express the same idea comes from Eric Landowski (2005), who has said that the most meaningful interactions among people, and between people and things, are always risky because they are not completely predictable and thereby not trivial. They leave room for interpretation — and for misinterpretation.

Formulations of what is now commonly called Practice Theory in sociology (Reckwitz 2002; Warde 2005; Schatzki 1996) have drawn three implications of these major points. First, human activities should be understood as bundles or wholes connected to each other. The classical theory saw action as linear or episodic whereas practices should be seen as a whole with related component parts. Pierre Bourdieu's work on correspondence between different aspects of taste and social

position is a prime example of this approach; another is the research conducted by the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies on cultures as "ways of life as a whole" (e.g. Willis 1978). Separate activities such as listening to a certain kind of music, attending distinct kinds of sport, collecting items, food and drink preferences, or any other particular patterns of consumption make (more) sense if they are understood in relationships with each other, and not separately.

The second conclusion, particularly stressed by Reckwitz (2002) is that practices cannot be reduced to discourses alone — neither personal, nor "textual" or collective, nor inter–actional. Practices involve bodies and technologies (these points have been also stressed by Bourdieu and Latour respectively), and are always open to new interpretations. Most practices are acquired as routines and not loaded with spectacular "meanings" at all, such as ordinary everyday consumption of daily meals, shopping for daily necessities, the ordinary daily rhythm etc. (Warde and Gronow (2001). There can be no fixed taxonomy of "cultural practices" that could be univocally associated with a class or a gender, for example, but a relative bodily traces of a practice can often be recognized.

Thirdly, most of our practices must be learned but once they become part of our everyday life they are routinized or, as I would say, they become habits. The classical action theory starts from an end, a motive, a reflected goal, and is constrained by the conditions of material means and cultural norms. But practices once acquired do not need to be reflected in this way even when very complex, like driving a car or speaking our native language. Therefore, the linear or episodic structure of the classical theory must be replaced with a cyclical one.

Alan Warde (2005) has added a fourth important point: intensity and coherence of action/practice are variable. He divides practices into three dimensions: understandings, competences and engagements. Often understandings require no special discourse or talk because practices and the actions are taken for granted, like in ordinary consumption. Sometimes, however, the context of or the activities involved in a practice are unexpected or unconventional and a lot of discourse develops, but even then it may not be very coherent. In some practices, competence is highly valued, such as cultural activities; in other contexts the required competence level may be rather low, such as going

to sports events or visiting pubs and fast–food restaurants. Engagement can be quite high, even in practices that require rather little competence, but often the intensity of commitment co–varies with the requirements of competence and also understanding, for example in cultural activities.

Practice Theory combines a very useful set of presuppositions that are sometimes of a philosophical nature but also approach the requirement of empirical investigations. Further sociological development of the theory is required to define the empirical criteria of how bundles of activities, or alternatively understandings, competences and engagements, are delimited into specific practices; and in what way the practices are connected to the social environment.

From a theoretical point of view in terms of action theory, however, two much more disturbing difficulties remain, and these are the weaknesses for which a *generative* theory of agency is needed as a cure. The first is the same ambivalence that appears already in the classical action theory, namely that between (subjective) meanings of action and its (objective) circumstances. The other weakness is the lack of specification of what exactly is the relationship between routines — or habits — and innovation in a practice.

In both respects Practice Theory so far has so far resorted to what Latour has called the "disgusting brew" of both–and logic. To call it disgusting is to me an exaggeration, because to admit that practices are *both* meaningful *and* dependent on external circumstances is far better than to insist on only either one or the other. The same is true with stability and change, or habit and innovation. It is far better to start from the assumption that practices are both structured and structuring than to leave either stability or change unexplained altogether. What we need is not a rejection of the logic of both–and but *specification* concerning the conditions in which and how the relative role of meanings or cognitions grows vis–à–vis the objective circumstances, and respectively how continuity and change are related. This is what generative concept of agency is able to contribute.

4. The double compromise of habitus

But before going to the solution, we should look at a parallel weakness or ambivalence in Bourieu's theory, because it offers us an indispensable element to solve the disturbing ambivalence of action theory.

The long–standing theoretical significance of Bourdieu's sociology is borne out by his efforts to evacuate mechanistic interpretations from the concept of action. This is why it is a central reference in treatises of Practice Thory. However, representatives of Practice Theory tend to see in it a theoretical model, or a meta–theory of sociological explanation, whereas in terms of the generative concept of action it should be understood as a theory of society. This will be seen if we compare it with the ambivalences of classical action theory and current Practice Theory.

Also Bourdieu's work involves a double theoretical compromise in the concept of *habitus,* parallel to the both–and logic of Practice Theory. The first is the 'alchemic' (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]:172) capacity of *habitus* to convert individual acts into structure. The second is an ambivalence between, on the one hand, *explaining* practices by external factors such as class, age or gender, and on the other hand *interpreting* them as representations or meanings.

The first ambivalence stems from Bourdieu's critique of functionalism. There is no functional calculus between the exigencies of survival or social integration and people's practices. They are constantly innovating rules, using existing ones to their advantage, breaking them sometimes but always far from being determined by their conditions. Practices are expressions of "interest in the game" (Bourdieu 1990 [1980]: 51–70). Nevertheless, somehow by a logic that participants themselves cannot recognize, their authentic and original choices get coordinated and sustain the social hierarchies of economic, cultural and social capital.

The second ambivalence originates from Bourdieu's critique (1990 [1980]: 160–162) of his teacher, Claude Lévi–Strauss, for seeing practices only as functions of logical integration (Reckwitz 2002 describes Levi–Straussian structuralism as objectivist mentalism). For Bourdieu *habitus* is formed in daily practices, and while it is a structured system of meanings, it does not follow any formal or 'algebraic' logic. People

do not simply reproduce their meaning systems; they also produce and use them in unexpected ways. Actions and thoughts should not be interpreted as 'logics' but in terms of sense (hence the title *Le sens pratique*).[1] The compromise of *habitus* leads to contradictory interpretations: either meanings associated with practices (e.g. consuming high modernist art) organize actual behaviour, or the social functions of practices give structure and meaning to them[2]. In a schematic form, Bourdieu's ambivalences can be presented as in Fig. 2.
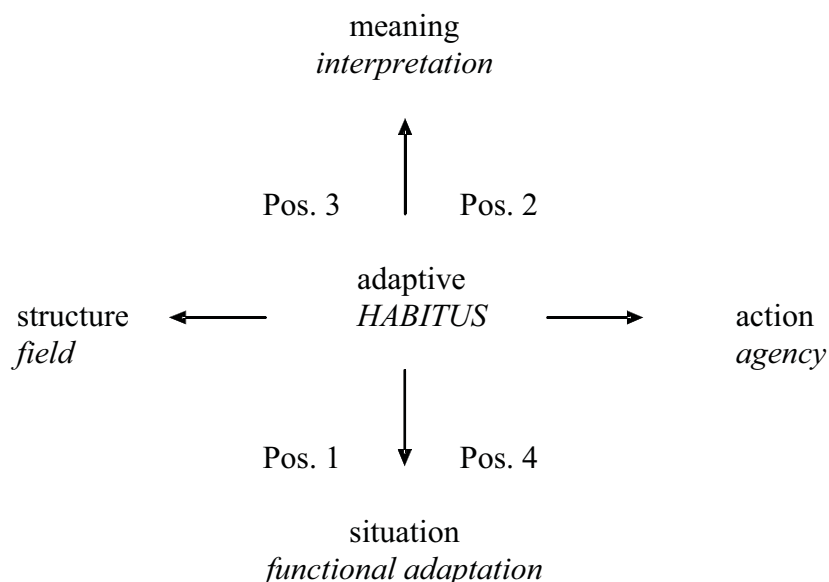

Figura 2. Bourdieu's ambivalence.

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[1] The argumentation is very similar to Margaret Archer's (1988: 1-21) critique of 'the myth of cultural integration' where she — at that point apparently unaware of Bourdieu's work — refutes commonly held assumptions that cultural meaning systems ('cultural integration') automatically reflect and are in congruence with social structure ('social integration').

[2] These interpretations correspond to what Archer (1988: 25–71) calls 'forms of conflation', or temptations to emphasize the meaningful and active aspects of practice at the expense of the structural ones (downwards conflation, from culture down to practices), or the contrary temptation of letting social structure orchestrate the actions of people and take their beliefs for nothing more than outcomes of factors beyond their control (upwards conflation, from social functions up to culture).

It is typical and symptomatic that Bourdieu himself discusses *habitus* in terms of compromises between the two axes of oppositions. For example:

> I believe that all those who used this old concept [*habitus*] or similar ones before me, from Hegel's *ethos*, to Husserls's *Habitualität*, to Mauss's *hexis*, were inspired (without always knowing it explicitly) by a theoretical intention akin to mine, which is to escape from under the philosophy of the subject without doing away with the agent, as well as from under the philosophy of the structure without forgetting to take into account the effects it wields upon and through the agent. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 121–122. Italics in the original)

The effect of Bourdieu's neither–nor logic is much the same as that of the both–and logic of more recent Practice Theory; only the tone is more critical and less constructive, but at the same time more prone to circularity. The logic of neither–nor translates all too easily not into both–and (two necessary causes) but into either–or (two alternative sufficient causes), i.e. into circular or ad hoc explanations. Bourdieu was aware of this danger and assured repeatedly that critics would look in vain to find examples of circular or ad hoc explanations in his researches (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 129). However, this negativity in itself is a cue to its standing as *a theory of society*, not only as a meta–theory of social explanation.

Let us take a closer look at his argumentation by spelling it out with the help of some semiotics. The difference between meaning or interpretation and functional adaptation to the situation corresponds to what Eric Landowski (2005) has defined as the opposition between 'programmed' and 'strategic' action. Strategic action is reflected and meaningful (Position 2 in Fig. 2.) whereas 'programmed' action follows automatically from the requirements of the situation, like mechanically driving a car or following rules (Position 4 in Fig. 2.1). The other dimension between structure and action corresponds to the opposition between what Landowski calls 'adjusting' and 'accidental regimes' of action. To be precise, Landowski's characterizations describe the spaces between the axes so that strategy is meaningful action exercised by individual actors, whereas programmed action is determined causally by the situation, like the reactions of an organism to

stimuli, or the functioning of a mechanism operated by an engineer. (Position 1 in Fig. 2.) Meaningful but unreflective adjustment to collective meaning–making, such as mass events, is opposed to unreflective individual adaptations to the situation that appear to the observer as accidental, unpredictable and illegible behaviour. (Position 3 in Fig. 2.)

Landowski's concepts, like Bourideu's dimensions of the habitus, attach values to the different positions. For Bourdieu, the struggle for being recognized as a subject of strategic action, i.e. as a subject possessing individual taste, is at the same time a struggle for maintaining a high position within the class equipped with cultural capital and esteemed accordingly. But even those whose taste is making virtue of necessity and places them objectively in the category of those whose actions are determined by the situation, in Landowski's language, programmed, believe to have a taste, i.e. act as agents. Even more so, those who have a good cultural will but no stock of cultural capital, tend to cherish the illusion of originality even though their real behaviour is adaptive (meaningful but not reflective submission to the taste of the many), rather than strategic.

Bourdieu's work reflects the central disturbing problem in action theory but also points in the direction of solving it beyond the both–and logic of current Practice Theory. Like Practice Theory, Bourdieu argues that the tacit logic of practices is not the logic of the logician. It cannot be represented by a set of rules; it cannot be prescribed by norms, and it cannot be explained as a causal outcome of external or internal circumstances of the acting persons[3].

Nevertheless, if *habitus* is carelessly translated to mean practice, as it often is, and the theory is understood as a theory of practices, the risk of circularity is near. This problem disappears if it is understood that the theory intends not to explain action, but to develop a theory of agency

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[3] Margaret Archer (2000: 151-152; 166-167) confuses things completely in her arguments against Bourdieu. She insists that the tacit logic of practice is accessible to the public and logical representation, like maps represent landscape, knitting patterns represent knitting or sheet music represents the acoustic experience. Maps are neither meanings nor explanations of the landscape, knitting patterns do not represent the practices of knitting, and sheet music is only a small part of the cultural practices, institutions, emotions and experiences and cultural capital invested in music. Archer's critique is of questionable value also because it is based on *The Outline of the Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu's very early (1977 [1972]) attempt to formulate his theory.

itself. The theoretical compromise of *habitus* is necessary because it represents ambivalences that constitute *not practices* but *actors as agents*. *Habitus* should be understood not as an explanatory model, but as the way in which the ambivalences of autonomous agency itself are reflected. Persons who experience life as if they were situated in Position 1 in Figure 2, being prey to accidental adaptations to their situation, would feel extreme existential uncertainty, not only because their life is unpredictable but also because they have no sense of why they act — or rather react to circumstances as they come. Few people would want their actions to be interpreted in this way by others. They will therefore attempt to escape this painful insecurity and therefore imagine for themselves a 'dispatcher' (*destinateur* in semiotic language) who has commissioned them to accomplish a mission associated with values. The image of a dispatcher affords a necessary sense of security derived from the experience that life has a meaning. The dispatcher can be whatever gives meaning to action: a parent, a manager, a god, a class, a nation or why not simply self–interest. Possessing such values, people no longer maintain an image of themselves as acting randomly; they become strategists planning ahead; they can no longer be treated as objects in their interactions, but as partners who must be persuaded to enter into a contract rather than forced to obey orders. They are agents (Position 2). Their life is ordered by modal meanings such as will, competence[4], obligation and ability. The security thus gained tends to become habitual, even routine, and agents have a risk to fix the routines to the extent that they fall prey to being programmed by others (Position 3). They become programmers themselves, for whom order or predictability becomes a value in itself, and the slightest deviation from that order becomes an existential risk that threatens their whole form of life. They either lapse into deadly boredom, and tend to rediscover the sense of life through transgression and disorder, or more likely, they 'adjust' (Position

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[4] *Competence* defines one particular type of value, which is acquired by somebody by experience or held as an innate capacity (in myths it is often described as of divine origin). Other groups of values are related to *obligations* (someone is considered a hero/traitor for keeping/failing to keep a promise, for example), *abilities,* which are gained through an alliance with a helper, or a *will*, which is an innate capacity to control oneself. Competence, obligation, will and ability are called modalities, and they have a fundamental role in constructing values in images. (Sulkunen and Törrönen 1997a).

4) to their community and identify with the values of predictability, order and security to the point of becoming maniacs, closing off from the rest of the social world to maintain their own purity, constantly endangered by unexpected hazards and expected dangers (Landowski 2006: 73–76).

It must be emphasized once again that from the point of view of sociology of the actor, the oppositions structure/action and meaning/situation, or in the more fitting vocabulary of Landowski, programmed/strategic and adjusted/accidental action, should not be understood as modes of explanation, let alone as behavioural patterns pure and simple, but as *images* of actors expressed in many different ways in mundane consciousness as well as in sociologists' theories. The ambivalences of *habitus* articulate our real ambivalence as social beings also as *interpreted by others*. We are constantly vulnerable to the possibility that whenever we believe we are making autonomous strategic moves in the field, we might be *reputed* to adapt and act as if programmed from the outside, and vice versa, when we believe to act in a disinterested way, we might be *perceived* to be orchestrating our own hidden agendas (strategies). The mutual struggle over interpretations is the essence of the social bond.

5. The generative concept of agency

My semiotic re–interpretation of Bourdieu's version of the action–structure ambivalence gives rise to three conclusions that to me seem to recover the weaknesses of Practice Theory as it stands. First, action should be looked at as having a generative capacity. Second, innovation and stability should be seen not as complementary moments of action but as a relationship in which both are preconditions of each other. And thirdly, action theory should be developed into a theory of the social bond instead of a meta–theory of social explanation.

The third conclusion turns the intentions of Practice Theory upside down. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is not a principle of explaining practices but the site on which interpretations of the actor are contested by the reputation of the action among others. (Bourdieu 1980: Ch. 4). There *is* no way of explaining social behaviour from the objective point of view, conceptualised as practices or otherwise, because the explanation is part of this

contestation. What we need to develop further is not so much how practices are related either to intentions or to objective conditions such as class, but the dimensions that are relevant in this struggle of representation along the lines of Landowski's paradigm of programmed, strategic, adaptive and accidental regimes of action. It may be less informative to keep on studying the cultural of consumption practices of different social groups per se than to develop concepts for a more precise analysis of the images that people have of these practices.

I have argued elsewhere (Sulkunen 2009) that the ambivalences of the *habitus* are a form of the critical ambivalence of presenting oneself and being represented by others as agents of our own actions. The social bond is more than ever based on lifestyle, not on the structural predestinations of class position in the labour market. Choice is *really* part of everyday life here and now, not a distant dream for the future. Choice is what links us to the communities to which we belong, choice is what determines our biographies, choices that we make tell others about our autonomy, and about our capacity to assume and execute our authenticity.

However, choice is a precarious social bond. We are not only what we choose but also what we are *perceived to be,* and in contemporary society we are principally judged by the standard of being the subjects of our own destinies. From this arises the problem of legitimacy concerning claims for historical agency, or for spearheading the public good. The ambivalences of the *habitus* contaminate any claims by self–selected groups for social reform that they represent the public good. Greens, feminists, public health advocates, animal rights activists, anti–globalisation demonstrators or other groups with their self–representation as defenders of the weak 'others' — the future generations, the 'environment', the battered wives or victims of tobacco and alcohol industries — are always suspected of having hidden agendas of interested adaptation and strategic calculation behind their subjective constructions of disinterest. It is very difficult to make universal validity claims in politics over lifestyle. To escape the indictments of self–interested strategy it is easier to charge citizens themselves with the expectation of agency and let moral responsibility rest on them. The contemporary moral order is an order of suspicion, and this suspicion is articulated in the "congeries" of social action theory itself.

My first and second conclusion belong together and depend on the first. All action has a generative capacity not by its own effect but by its

representation by others. Doing begets being, and the products of action turn into its conditions. Making meaning and exercising power have permanent effects on social facts. Doing gender becomes being gender; doing class turns into being class; doing ethnic difference becomes part of the production of otherness. This is the way that economic, cultural and social capital are reproduced and accumulated in Bourdieu's theory. From this perspective there is no need to account for "both" structure "and" meaning or intention, because they are always already both involved in our images of the social process and our images are part of the social process itself. What we need to develop further is the dimensions of these images, again keeping in mind that constructing and maintaining agency in them is the most vulnerable and therefore most contested part. As we have seen, Practice Theory already suggests at least one or two dimensions, those of competence and filling one's duty, but we need more work on them using the semiotic theory of modalities, including willing and ability (Sulkunen 2009b).

Finally, the generative concept of agency has no trouble with the simultaneous presence of innovation and stability in all action, because actions generate new structures while being themselves the product of earlier ones in a cyclical manner (Fig. 3).
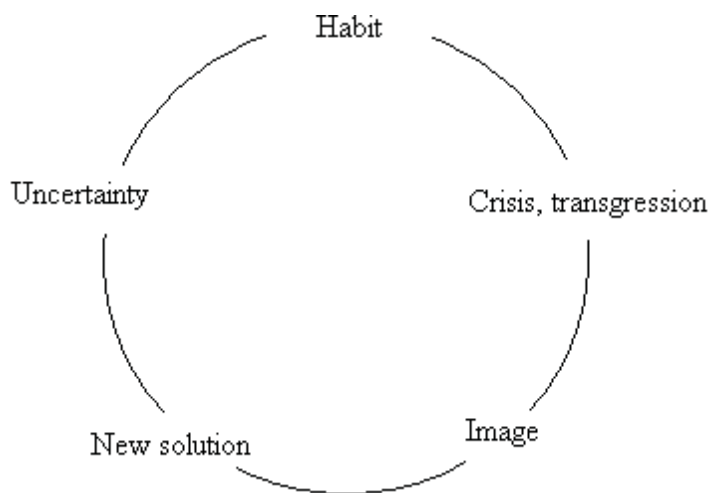

Figura 3. The Action–Habit Cycle.

The Standard View of Social Action is episodic: it purports to explain isolated events or sequences of action. The agent of these episodes is the intending and planning motivational individual, placed under the constraints of socially produced beliefs, and steered by partly biologically hard–wired dispositions, partly by socially conditioned circumstances.

As the current Practice Theory suggests, human life is a continuous stream of indistinct habit–based practices that we are hardly aware of. As practices are understood as continuous cycles — or rather spirals, — there is no problem about the simultaneous presence of stability and innovation, or structure and meaning. Habitual action is occasionally reoriented by perceptions, reflected evaluations, influences from others, and expectations that we form of others' expectations. Habits and emotions are by far more important than calculative cognition in piloting our conduct. We are hardly aware of these guides, even in activities that involve extremely complex cognitive competences such as driving a car or speaking our native language. Only when something extraordinary happens and we face a crisis, for example the engine stops or our voice breaks down, do our perceptions and more complex cognitive resources get activated. Sometimes, like when someone is driving towards us on the wrong lane, our perceptions evoke a direct emotional (fear) and behavioural reaction; when we have more time, we start looking for causes and interpretations of the situation, come to a conclusion, and find a solution. If the situation is repeated sufficiently, we build up confidence in our conclusion and develop a new routine of our solutions, but even if we do not others' perceptions of our practices may change and we need to respond with our own images and actions. Again, we have no use of accepting the simultaneity of stability and change, but it will be useful to specify, following Alan Warde's suggestion discussed above, in what way the coherence and intensity of understandings, competences and engagements are related to what kind of derailments of habitual action.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the ambivalences of structure and meaning, or (collective) stability and (individual) innovation that have continued from classical action theory to contemporary Practice Theory are a theoretical necessity that no amount of compromising — either both–and or neither–nor — can do away with, if (a) we accept that we must account for people's interpretations of action in our explanations, and (b) if the purpose of theory is to construct a meta–model to explain action. Practice Theory has come a long way to expand the concept of "meaning" from that of the Standard View of Action, to recognize its infinitude, to stress the importance of linking activities together instead of seeing them as separate, and to stress the importance of routines and continuities of practices. However, as long as we see the task of theory only as a meta–construction of explanatory models of behaviour there is no way out of the disturbing mixes of both–and or neither–nor. Action theory itself must be seen as an index of the anxieties that our contemporary society arouses about agency.

Bourdieu's work on habitus, too, carries the ambivalences inherited from classical action theory, which he amply acknowledged. However, it is much more interactionistic than is usually recognized by current Practicce Theory, stressing that the habitus is not only practice or a bundle of practices but a field of struggle over interpretations as well as bodily (and technology–driven) behaviour. The bias in favour of the middle class and intellectuals at the expense of the working class that often has aroused criticism (Schulze 1992) can partly be understood as a concern with the anxieties of agency among people whose sense of worth depends on their capacity to see themselves as agents of their own life and convince others to accept that.

The generative concept of agency proposed in this paper comes close to the current Practice Theory but in one way deviates radically from it. It builds on Bourdieu's work, especially in so far as it is *not* understood as a meta–theory of social explanation but as a theory of society, especially modern contemporary society. This concept suggests some ways of not only accepting the simultaneous presence of structure and meaning and stability and innovation in all action but also specifying their

role in the different phases of the action–habit cycle. Furthermore, it highlights the role of practices as the site of symbolic struggles, and therefore stresses the need for further semiotic theory to analyze how agency is constructed and maintained in these struggles.

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