

# Theory Without Practice :

## The Work of Anthony Giddens

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Anthony Giddens has been engaged for some time in writing an extended and serious critique of historical materialism.<sup>1</sup> While his work has a tendency at times to 'expose' problems that all but the most dogmatic marxists have long since disavowed, this has never led him towards the current fascination with Nietzsche or into the easy and increasingly commonplace talk of a terminal crisis in marxism. Even in his most off-hand polemics historical materialism does not receive the short shrift afforded to some of the other traditions. His earlier writing was an assault upon the orthodox conservative consensus of positivism, functionalism and evolutionism. However, neither his dissatisfaction with orthodoxy nor his immersion in marxism has influenced him to go beyond an interpretative philosophy of the world. He remains, I will argue, a synthesizer and critic of social theory, not a theorist of the possibilities of political practice.

Social theory *à la mode* has also been the object of his methodical style of criticism. In lines delivered in uncharacteristic throw-away style at a recent series of talks in Melbourne, Giddens suggested that although Jürgen Habermas was probably the most brilliant writer in contemporary social theory his approach to critical theory should be forgotten as quickly as possible.<sup>2</sup> Habermas certainly leaves himself open to such disparagement. He argues

\* With thanks to Geoff Sharp and John Hinkson.

that the way out of the contemporary crisis is through extending the 'Enlightenment project' towards the fulfilment of the autonomous, rational individual in undistorted 'ideal-speech situations'.<sup>3</sup> No matter how sophisticated the clothing of an argument for reasoned communication as the basis of a new democracy, an unconvincing utopianism is exposed by the simple question, what would an 'ideal speech situation' look like in practice?

If Habermas is one of the key figures of contemporary social theory then his 'adversaries', the various 'adherents' to post-structuralist method such as Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, are afforded a similar high-profile status. Giddens argues that they too have reached the limits of theoretical usefulness. In the Melbourne talks he pronounced the relatively youthful gaudy of structuralism/post-structuralism to be a celebration with a dead heart.<sup>4</sup> These are remarks of confident prognosis, especially given that the post-structuralist party appears to be still in full swing. However, Giddens does not take into account the powerful resonance that 'dead heartism' has in these times through its politics of detached cynicism. It revels in the joy of 'doing theory' as it legitimizes a withdrawal from relating theory and practice. Social theory has become trendy with a wider than academic audience. This has occurred even as its *particular* heroes are perhaps be-

1. Particularly in: *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism. Volume 1, Power, Property and the State*, London, Macmillan, 1981; *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984; and *The Nation-State and Violence, Volume Two of A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1985.
2. For his more considered views on Habermas see Giddens' critical essay (from which the title of this article comes) 'Reason Without Revolution?', in Richard J. Bernstein ed., *Habermas and Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1985.
3. See Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1979, chapter 1; and his 'Modernity — an Incomplete Project', in Hal Foster ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Washington, Bay Press, 1983.
4. For Giddens on post-structuralism see 'From Marx to Nietzsche?', in his *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1982. I intend the metaphor of 'dead heartism' to convey multiple senses. Firstly, like Habermas's critical theory, post-structuralism has taken a 'linguistic turn', abandoning the over-emphasis on production in the base-superstructure model only to reductively treat the structure of society in terms of language and signification. Secondly, it has rightly 'de-centred the subject', but to the extent that people as knowledgeable human subjects are left out of history. Thirdly, the cynical survivors of May '68 leave us with an implicit politics of radical individualism and a universe of indeterminacy and proliferating significations.

coming more vulnerable to the trends of criticism. Strikingly, the gatherings to which Giddens spoke hardly mounted a challenge to the death knells he was tolling for what were dearly-held theories. (On the other hand they did question the terms of his 'new synthesis'.)

### *Giddens' Critics and the Flight from Practice*

Anthony Giddens' own work is receiving increased attention as he attempts, like Habermas, a reconstructed historical and materialist theoretical synthesis. His concern is to theorize the constitution of society in relation to the person, and the relationship of the objective and the subjective. Thus while Giddens' response to marxism is ambivalent, it is not incongruous for him to describe his recent work as reflections upon Karl Marx's famous phrase, that people 'make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing'.<sup>5</sup> Giddens is right that historical materialism is in need of considerable reworking. But this conclusion has had ironical consequences. In recognizing Giddens' contribution to rethinking marxism his marxist critics have been left in a quandary. This has been evidenced by divergent styles of response, each, in effect, illustrative of further theoreticist lines of flight from the intimidating task of conjoining theory and practice.

In one response Erik Olin Wright almost wanted to reclaim Giddens for the Grand Tradition concluding that: 'It is important not to overstate the differences between much of what Giddens proposes and the basic tendencies of current Marxist theorizing.'<sup>6</sup> Wright's concerns were defensively methodological. His standpoint on the primacy of class politics left him nothing else to say with any political edge. In an article more pointedly critical of Giddens' (methodological) limitations, Gregor McLennan closed by conceding that he could offer no alternative which was unproblematically superior.<sup>7</sup> This line of response is a critique with only a residual standpoint (in this case he still holds to the marxist notion of social determination). It inadvertently confirms what the post-structuralists would call a 'crisis of knowledge', or more accurately,

5. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. xxi. Marx, cited from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
6. Erik Olin Wright, 'Giddens' Critique of Marxism', *New Left Review* 138, March 1983, p. 34.
7. Gregor McLennan, 'Critical or Positive Theory? A Comment on the Status of Anthony Giddens' Society Theory', *Theory, Culture and Society* 2, 2, 1984, p. 129.

what should be recognized as a 'crisis of relating theory to practice'.<sup>8</sup>

Ian Craib's 'Back to Utopia: Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory'<sup>9</sup> points to another line of flight. In the present milieu an article with such a title can no longer be expected to be about the way people live. Rather, in critically arguing that the 'real utopianism' is Giddens' vain idea of the possibility of a synthetic theoretical project, the article's author takes us back to the post-structuralist fallacy. This is the position that a (proper) rejection of the possibility of generating a grand-totalizing theory or correct-line blueprint for change entails also giving up a generalized exploration in theory *and* practice of transitional pathways of resistance to the dominant social whole.

The irony is thus that Giddens at least maintains a theoretical rhetoric of practice while his critics are reduced to questions of methodology and epistemology.<sup>10</sup> They do not want to ask, as in fact Giddens himself has asked of other theorists: what are the implications for social practice of a particular social theory? However, a query still remains to be addressed: will Giddens, and Polity Press, despite their honourable belief that critical theory 'is a practical intervention in society, a political phenomenon in a broad sense of that term',<sup>11</sup> be taken up within the academic world as merely new entrepreneurs of social theory?

Furthermore, is Giddens' attempt to offset the anti-humanist, structuralist de-centring of the subject through emphasizing the self-reflexive agency of people just as likely to reinforce the current ideological practice of autonomous individualism as serve as a critique of it? We need to consider that the predominant form of individualism in Western, late-capitalist societies (leaving aside the many ways of its expression) is lived not only in terms of the assumed but unequally realized belief in natural rights espoused

8. Stuart Sim, 'Criticism and Crisis', *Radical Philosophy* 43, 1986, p. 38.
9. Ian Craib, 'Back to Utopia: Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory', *Radical Philosophy* 43, 1986, pp. 17-21.
10. An important exception is Richard J. Bernstein, 'Structuration as Critical Theory', *Praxis International* 6, 2, 1986, pp. 235-49. Bernstein's questions take us beyond even his professed interest in 'understanding the critical functions of social theory'. He writes: 'Giddens may well find all the talk of grounding critical theory abhorrent and unnecessary. But he must at least squarely face the issue that such a project is intended to confront. What, if anything, is the basis for our critical judgements and proposals? ... Otherwise "firing critical salvos into reality" will be like shooting in the dark.'
11. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 340. See also pp. xxxv and 237.

in nineteenth-century liberal individualism. Changing social relations have brought a more recent 'overlay'. This emergent new 'level' based in the extended relations of the information society is expressed in the extolling of freedom from constraint, in people *experiencing* themselves as agents of their own destiny, 'inventors' of their identity, 'autonomously' choosing their lifestyles and privatized personal associations in a manner which takes an ontological step beyond the era when the 'possessive individual' first 'claimed' commodity rights. Hence to restate the earlier question, is not a theory which gives priority to putting the individual as self-active agent back in the centre of the picture in danger of merely serving to reinforce a contemporary and historically specific ideology?<sup>12</sup>

Giddens writes for example about the way in which Machiavelli's theorems about state power became 'reflections about phenomena which they have helped to constitute'. So to turn Giddens against himself and again ask the same question, is he related to the ideology of autonomy as, say, Machiavelli was to the ideology of the state? Related to this: why, given the sophistication of his position and his concern for questions of social ontology and human motivation, is this reader left feeling that 'human agents' are empty shells, actors interacting on a stage, bounded by sets which if removed would only reveal to the actors that they are located on yet larger stages?

### *Giddens in Theory*

To do more than raise such questions we need to begin by working back into some of the detail of Giddens' impressively comprehensive approach. In *The Constitution of Society* (1984), a volume presented as a summation of his theory of structuration, he organizes the discussion beginning with the individual, and then later goes on to accent social structure. The problem with this is not that he is open to the orthodox charge of 'methodological individualism', of which, incidentally, he provides as developed a critique as found anywhere. Rather it is that from whichever side of the dichotomy he begins he has consequently set up an organi-

12. For an elaboration of the concept of the ideology of autonomy see Geoff Sharp, 'Constitutive Abstraction and Social Practice', *Arena* 70, 1985, pp. 48-82. Also, from a quite different standpoint but arguing for changing forms of individualism, see Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner, *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1986.

zing principle which makes it seem sufficient that person and society are put back together on a single *constitutive* level (that is the level described earlier as constitutive of the modern individual, the self-active agent making history 'knowledgeably' and 'autonomously'). Despite its title *The Constitution of Society* is not about the way in which different social forms are constitutive of, and through, different modalities of subjectivity. To put 'person' and 'society' back together Giddens depends largely on a theory of contextuality and regionalization. That is, people are located in overlaying clusters of relations of time and space, so avoiding as he says the assumption that societies are homogeneous, unified systems.

People are thus left as active agents (which indeed they are, but in qualitatively different ways in different societies). They are understood as 'positioned' in relation to each other rather than theorized as constituted in the very form of their agency. This is a different category of criticism from those usually, and I think ineffectually, made of Giddens. Various critics have made the easily countered point that his view of structure as both enabling and constraining does not sufficiently emphasize the degree of constraint upon the actor.<sup>13</sup>

Persons in reciprocal tribal groups are for Giddens reflective agents in the same way as individuals in late-capitalist nations. We are all 'social theorists', he says: the difference is to be found in the settings (stages) or 'locales' in which we move. It is these sort of propositions which need to be carefully taken apart. Giddens wants to 'disclose features of co-presence [that is, of people in face-to-face relations] that are found in all societies'.<sup>14</sup> The problem with this, as I will argue in more detail later, is that he treats co-presence *ahistorically*.

Face-to-face relations are certainly the primary constitutive level of human interaction. And as Giddens rightly maintains, the level of the face-to-face continues to be basic even when the predominant form of societal integration is extended beyond 'high presence-availability' and across time and space through such means as the media of storage and relay of information. However, his approach

13. See for example John Thompson, 'The Theory of Structuration: An Assessment of the contribution of Anthony Giddens' in his *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984; and those sources listed by Giddens, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-80, 221-2.

14. Giddens, *ibid.*, p. 69. He passingly acknowledges in this work that he concentrates upon material relevant to modern society (p. xvii) but this does not qualify the point.

significantly underplays the way in which face-to-face relations, like the form of 'personhood', is reconstituted at different levels of (in his terminology) 'time-space distantiation'. It is this which gives rise to the impression that people are psychologically complex but otherwise empty shells walking on a multidimensional stage,<sup>15</sup> I will come back to this in the next section and, drawing implicitly on work previously developed in this journal, suggest one line of development for the formulation of an alternative position. For the moment discussion of the implications of treating co-presence ahistorically can be extended through introducing the notions of 'routine' and 'actor'. They work to link the objective and subjective but remain two sides of an over-generalized relation.

A crucial part of understanding why Giddens treats co-presence as a transhistorical form of social interchange is the centrality he affords to the practice of routine in day-to-day life:

The term 'day-to-day' encapsulates exactly the routinized character which social life has as it stretches across time-space. The repetitiveness of activities which are undertaken in like manner day after day is the material grounding of what I call the recursive nature of social life. (By its recursive nature I mean that the structured properties of social activity — via the duality of structure — are constantly recreated out of the very resources which constitute them.) Routinization is vital to the psychological mechanisms whereby a sense of trust or ontological security is sustained in the daily activities of social life. Carried primarily in practical consciousness, routine drives a wedge between the potentially explosive content of the unconscious and the reflexive monitoring of action which agents display.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the discussion of how we are to understand the constitution of persons and the nature of face-to-face integration — what he calls social integration to distinguish it from societal or system integration, which occurs across extended time and space beyond the limitations of the face-to-face — is located in a notion of how we know at the level of practical consciousness the ways to 'go on' in habitual routine.

There is, however, a tension here in Giddens' approach which will become apparent if we shift focus for a moment from social integration to look at a schematic representation of his view of the principal forms of societal integration:<sup>17</sup>

15. Here I am agreeing at least impressionistically with Craib (*op. cit.*) when he says 'Giddens often talks about different levels of social organisation as if the social world possessed a depth... However, in the course of his bridge-building he loses sight of this depth.' (p. 17).
16. Giddens, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii. The 'duality of structure' as referred to here is in turn defined as: 'Structure as the medium and outcome of the conduct it recursively organizes', p. 374.

TRIBAL SOCIETY	<table border="1"> <tr><td>Tradition (communal practices)</td></tr> <tr><td>Kinship</td></tr> <tr><td>Group sanctions</td></tr> </table>	Tradition (communal practices)	Kinship	Group sanctions	[Fusion of social and system integration]	
Tradition (communal practices)						
Kinship						
Group sanctions						
Dominant locale organisation	Band groups or villages					
CLASS-DIVIDED SOCIETY	<table border="1"> <tr><td>Tradition (communal practices)</td></tr> <tr><td>Kinship</td></tr> <tr><td>Politics — military power</td></tr> <tr><td>Economic interdependence (low lateral and vertical integration)</td></tr> </table>	Tradition (communal practices)	Kinship	Politics — military power	Economic interdependence (low lateral and vertical integration)	[Differentiation of social and system integration]
Tradition (communal practices)						
Kinship						
Politics — military power						
Economic interdependence (low lateral and vertical integration)						
Dominant locale organisation	STATE	Symbiosis of city and countryside				
CLASS SOCIETY (CAPITALISM)	<table border="1"> <tr><td>Routinisation</td></tr> <tr><td>Kinship (family)</td></tr> <tr><td>Surveillance</td></tr> <tr><td>Economic interdependence (high lateral and vertical integration)</td></tr> </table>	Routinisation	Kinship (family)	Surveillance	Economic interdependence (high lateral and vertical integration)	[Differentiation of social and system integration]
Routinisation						
Kinship (family)						
Surveillance						
Economic interdependence (high lateral and vertical integration)						
Dominant locale organisation	STATE	The 'created environment'				

Although routinization of day-to-day life is posited as transhistorical when Giddens refers to the forms of societal integration, 'routinization' only enters the schema with class society. This is not explained in *The Constitution of Society* and only partly addressed in his earlier book, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. There he says that in tribal and class-divided society routinization is normatively embedded in tradition. The ontological security of tradition, which he is rightly careful to say is not wholly positive, is radically undercut by a series of related transformations: the commodification of labour, the breaking of normative connections between work and 'private life', and the clear demarcation of nature and culture particularly as lived in the manufactured environment of the city.<sup>18</sup> Thus: "The dissolution of the foundation of society in relations of presence substantially replaces the ground-

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-2, and elaborated in Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, *op. cit.*, p. 159 and *passim*.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 150-4.

ing of those primordial sentiments in tradition and kinship by a *more* routinised, habitual round of "everyday life".<sup>19</sup> (emphasis added) However, in *Central Problems in Social Theory* he argues that the 'disavowal of tradition' is 'the most profound potential source of deroutinisation'.<sup>20</sup> In short, although he has never put it this way explicitly, the passing of tradition leads to more routinization even as it is deroutinizing. Such a position is sustainable but not in the way Giddens presents it.

A related example of a terminological difficulty, one this time which Giddens does in fact recognize, is contained in the term 'actor'. He says: 'It is precisely because there is a deep, although generalized, affective involvement in the routines of daily life that actors (agents) do not ordinarily feel themselves to be actors (players).'<sup>21</sup> It is a passing acknowledgement. It is not adequately taken up as an indication of the different forms of subjectivity. So far as I understand his approach, he consequently does not have an adequate way of explaining why the 'Discovery of the Individual' is a relatively recent phenomenon in world history.<sup>22</sup> As Agnes Heller's detailed examination of the historical shift of the form of personhood from feudal to Renaissance life indicates, it is an anachronism to generalize the metaphor of self-as-actor until at least the sixteenth century: 'In feudal society a [person] did not "play a role"; a [person] was what [s/he] had been born to be.'<sup>23</sup> And even thereafter the concept of self-as-actor both changes in time,<sup>24</sup> and can be distinguished according to intellectual training and class.

In one sense it seems petty to concentrate on the shifting of terms such as 'actor' or 'routine', for Giddens is usually a pedantically careful writer. But there is a more important point to make. There are enormous difficulties in attempting to theorize a discontinuity of social forms while not rethinking the notion of a continuity in the form of synthetic agency. It is not just a matter

19. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

20. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1979, p. 221.

21. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

22. The term is used by Abercrombie *et al.*, *op. cit.*, taken from the book by Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200*, London, SPCK, 1972, but it is becoming a common enough theme.

23. Agnes Heller, *Renaissance Man*, New York, Schocken Books, 1981, p. 206.

24. See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

of saying as Giddens does that there are divergent forms of the structuration of day-to-day life.

### *Continuity in Discontinuity*

Perhaps a more fruitful way of conceptualizing this continuity-in-discontinuity would be to say that as a particular mode of integration is supplanted *in dominance* by (as has tended to happen through history) a more abstract mode of integration, the routine of the day-to-day 'continues' as it is reconstituted. So as tribal societies constituted predominantly in the face-to-face are drawn as specific locales into a wider relationship of a new kind, one which for example in the case of the absolutist state separates out institutional spheres in an overarching religious, legal, and military system, kinship relations and reciprocal exchange continue at one level to be basic, even as they are fundamentally reconstituted. Kinship relations are still basic to feudal society as they were (and are) to the tribal person,<sup>25</sup> but in feudal Europe kinship was overlaid by, and eventually re-formed within, universalistic juridical categories. These categories were, in effect, part of the condition of 'routinizing' what was previously taken for granted (or what could be called the 'routine of a prior level'). This helps explain the apparent paradox that, as Marc Bloch records, it was from the twelfth century onwards as kinship groups began to break down or rather change in form that family names first appeared:

Thus in Europe, long after the demise of feudal society, the permanent family name, which today is held in common by people often devoid of any feeling of solidarity, was the creation not of the spirit of kinship, but of the institution most fundamentally opposed to that spirit — the sovereign state.<sup>26</sup>

Here we see the 'coming together' of two forms of social/societal integration. With changing social relations, including changing relations of production, the more abstract level assumes (an uneven) constitutive dominance and becomes the 'setting' for reformulating something as basic as how we name ourselves.

In one way Giddens does in fact have a conception of levels built into his analysis. The 'positioning of actors' occurs within a

25. This is to qualify Giddens' statement that 'traditional societies of all types have become more or less completely dissolved', *The Nation-State and Violence*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

26. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, Vol. I, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, translated 1961, p. 141. See also Giddens on the abstraction of law, *ibid.*, pp. 98-101, as well as Gianfranco Poggi, *The Development of the Modern State*, London, Hutchinson, 1978, pp. 60-116.

series of intersecting regions embedded in widening reaches of time and space. These are levels of what he calls (and I have already referred to as) 'time-space distantiation'. But he misleadingly says that in tribal societies where social integration (co-presence) and system integration are effectively coextensive, 'positioning is *only* thinly "layered"'.<sup>27</sup> (emphasis added) It would be better described as the integrative level being highly condensed. This would allow for a double point to follow: through such media as writing, a practice which facilitates the storage and retrieval of information, relations between people can be extended, and, to make a political point, they are thus attenuated across time and space. It should be said that Giddens makes important use of the recognition of the significance of time-space extension, pointing out that electronic communication marks a crucial disjuncture from prior media of communication which were until only some hundred years ago (usually) coextensive with the mobility of the human body.

However, as I have been concerned to stress, the notion of extension carries only half the picture. Having your breakfast companion read you the lead story from the morning's national newspaper is qualitatively different to listening to a story which confirms your being as of the Red Macaw totem.<sup>28</sup> There is a difference that makes it only partly relevant that these interactions are both instances of face-to-face relations. Giddens recognizes that writing contributes to a constitutively different sense of history. In the extending of time-space relations people are afforded a consciousness of historicity, 'tradition becomes visible as "tradition" . . . no longer a time-honoured basis of custom but a discursive phenomenon open to interrogation.'<sup>29</sup> As Paul Ricoeur puts it, texts 'project new ways of being'.<sup>30</sup>

But it does not seem to matter how many times Giddens concurs that what 'the "individual" is cannot be taken as obvious', the

27. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

28. On story telling see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, pp. 20-3 and Robert Darnton, 'Peasants Tell Tales' in his *The Great Cat Massacre*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985. On the newspaper as part of a new mode of apprehending the world see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso, 1983, chapters 2 and 3: 'The very conception of the newspaper implies the refraction of even "world events" into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers; and [is] also . . . important to that imagined community [as] an idea of steady, solid simultaneity through time', p. 63.

29. Giddens, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

30. Ricoeur, quoted in Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

full implications of this as a facet of the way in which the discontinuities between the forms of face-to-face interaction are as important as the continuities do not sink into his theory. It would entail, as I have argued, substantially qualifying the emphasis he places on the transhistorical reflexivity of social agents. As it stands Giddens only qualifies reflexivity in terms of constraints to knowledgeability. Knowledge it seems is empirical knowing. But in the terms I was drawing on earlier to restate Giddens' argument, 'historicity' is only possible as the subject is 'lifted' into an abstract relationship to tradition-as-lived. Here time itself is constitutively more abstract *as well as* distantiated.<sup>31</sup>

The distinction he draws between social and societal integration is used as an apparent but ineffective way out of some of these difficulties. It allows him for instance to recognize that the media of time-space distantiating (which are acknowledged in a cryptic phrase to be simultaneously the means of societal integration)<sup>32</sup> perforce extend time and space by an "alienation" of communication in circumstances of co-presence.<sup>33</sup> However, the social/societal integration distinction is part of the problem, to the extent that it bypasses the necessity of thinking of the dominant level of societal integration as itself constitutive of and constituted by the *form* of personal subjectivity.

In late-capitalist societies, integrated as abstract 'communities' through the circulation of 'information' and commodities, with kinship 'relegated' to an aspect of an individual's personal history, and with institutionally bounded role designations such as one's job being less secure and no longer as basic to personal identity, we are increasingly forced to be self-active in constructing our place in the world. When Australian Airlines advertise themselves as essential when you need to 'say "I love you", face-to-face' it is not just that the context has changed. Facing one's much-loved, occasionally-visited grandparents to hear nostalgic stories of a 'disappearing' past has a different *ontological* meaning from facing the village story-teller. As various writers associated with *Arena* have suggested, it is that the dominant form of subjectivity has undergone a number of transformations, now in Western late capitalism heightening the ideological practice that we 'are' auto-

31. The argument about constitutive abstraction also allows for an escape from implicitly leaving time and space as privileged categories. This is a tendency because of the use of conventional self-referring metaphors — time being distantiated turns time upon a spatial metaphor.

32. Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

33. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

mous authors of our own identity. The avant-garde must most intensely live the paradox that we experience multiple difference within a common constitutive form.

This limitation in developing an historically constitutive theory has debilitating implications even for Giddens' historical research. It limits what is in some respects one of the most forceful studies of the formation of the nation-state I have read. In *The Nation-State and Violence* Giddens draws a line between nationalism as a psychological phenomenon and the nation-state as an institution, and thus leaves himself unable to account for the subjectivity of being of a particular nation except via the problem-ridden Freud/Le Bon theory of crowd suggestibility.<sup>34</sup> For someone who is usually so circumspect about taking on board the unwanted baggage of other theorists this is a strange move. (It is explicable I would suggest in terms of the foregoing discussion.) He elaborates the rise of the nation-state in terms of the separation of 'immediate' communication from presence; reflexive monitoring of administrative control; the extension of surveillance; the industrialization of war; urbanization; and the development of capitalism and industrial production. But the discussion of nationalism is limited to a few pages.

### *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Politics*

Part of the reason, I suspect, that Giddens baulks at a thoroughgoing constitutive theory of the person is that he sees it as part of his political project to de-centre élitist theories of the subject which reduce people living in day-to-day routine to inconsequential, non-comprehending, Coronation Street dwellers. (This is not to say that when enunciating a position he is drawn to E. P. Thompson's privileging of human experience any more than he is to Louis Althusser's reduction of people to 'structural dopes'.)

Similarly, he is critical of the ethnocentrism of evolutionary history in its linking of the 'development' from traditional to modern societies with that from simplicity to complexity. This rightly includes a rejection of those theorists who, like Jürgen Habermas and Herbert Marcuse, argue for a correspondence

34. Ironically, in a context outside discussing the nation-state Giddens acknowledges that Freud drew upon highly inadequate sociological texts (such as contemporary discussions of crowd psychology), *ibid.*, p. 59, whereas in *The Nation-State and Violence* he is happy to preface his remarks by saying that 'if the Le Bon/Freud theory of leadership is correct . . .', p. 219.

between stages of social evolution (so-called phylogenesis) and stages of personality development (ontogenesis). He is appropriately critical of the thesis which runs through Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* to Norbet Elias's *The Civilizing Process* that we have moved from less complex societies of child-like volatility to a complexity of social relations which entails increased psychological repression. So Giddens concludes: 'If this view is wrong, as I believe it to be, there is a variety of implications that can be drawn as regards both the nature of modern capitalism and the liberatory potential that it might contain.'<sup>35</sup>

But there he stops. What *are* the implications? We are directed to an as yet unwritten book. A critique of the janus quality of the contemporary form of individualism in terms of a constitutive theory of the person might help here to take Giddens' academic 'critical theory' beyond having, at best, unrealized implications for political practice. At worst the assertion of people as acting agents serves to confirm contemporary ideologies.

The ideology of autonomous individualism 'voices' a trajectory of liberation free from all constraints, from the limitations of nature, from the bounds of prior historical 'inventions', but it is a form of liberation which like the liberation from war through nuclear deterrence, or the liberation from birthing problems through *in vitro* reproduction, promises to annul the ground which makes liberation meaningful. The meaning of Marx's original dictum, people 'make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing' can thus be given a further dimension. If the ground of our historically constituted (and therefore non-transcendental) being has been founded upon levels of co-presence, under conditions of social constraint not of individualistic choosing, what are the implications of this for a liberationist politics? In the necessary and pressing task of struggling for freedom from exploitation and oppression we can no longer assume that liberationism is an uncontradictory ideal. At a primary constitutive level we can include as contradictory in their outcomes struggles against the limitations of being historically embodied as sexed, ageing, differently capable, ethnically distinguishable, mortal beings. At a secondary level, it can be argued that the green-socialist and anarchist hope for liberation in the 'withering away of the state', and its replacement by small self-managing communes, would conceivably negate the constraints imposed by the extended, more abstract level of association only to be confronted by the tyrannies of the face-to-face level — parochialism, intergroup conflict, in-

35. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

tolerance of internal difference, discrepancies in the means of subsistence and so on.<sup>36</sup>

Here again it is possible to find passages where Giddens is aware of the problem of liberationism. He is critical of the creed that the 'cognitive appropriation' of history will necessarily allow people to take control of their own history: 'any "understanding" of a particular of social life or of history, in becoming part of social life, may', he says, 'act to fracture the very forms of control it was introduced to achieve'.<sup>37</sup> In a narrower but parallel point he is worried that radicalism can become radical chic and thus counterproductive in its consequences.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, back in 1981 he wrote of the hope that his writing would be part of the project epitomized by Marx's work as furthering the transition to forms of human society allowing unprecedented freedoms and modes of self-realization. As yet, apart from a few undeveloped pages at the end of *The Nation-State and Violence* he has done little to put together the dual perspectives of what we might call 'liberation from what' and 'liberation to what'.

The only hint we have in *The Constitution of Society* for the development of an alternative to the 'bloody and frightening' world of the twentieth century which he analyses in *The Nation-State and Violence* is that critical writing is itself a political practice. And of course it is. Machiavelli's writing on the state was part of its constitution. Bernstein reminds Giddens that he 'fails to realize how much of what he says is compatible with the "technological" attitude that he opposes'.<sup>39</sup> It is important to keep in mind that writing is in its form one of the media extending and attenuating social relations, part of the broader process of the abstraction of presence which overlays the existential contradiction of being human, in all its constraints, with a sheen that entices us to rationally create the possibility for our own extinction.<sup>40</sup>

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Anthony Giddens is a thoughtful academic. It is precisely because

36. This is not to say that retaining the state in its present form is the answer. Here I am in agreement with at least the direction of Boris Frankel's critique of the 'withering away' thesis and his proposed alternative of overlapping neo-autarkic structures: *Beyond the State? Dominant Theories and Socialist Strategies*, London, Macmillan, 1983, part of the Contemporary Social Theory series under the general editorship of Anthony Giddens.

37. Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

38. Giddens, 'An Interview', *Melbourne Journal of Politics* 18, 1986-87, pp. 61-79.

39. Bernstein, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

he is attempting such an all-encompassing theory of human society that a political rather than just methodological critique of him becomes pressing. Is his theory one of reason without revolution? As one of his colleagues claims, Giddens is uncompromisingly questioning of Habermas on this issue:

- The 'never silent, although seldom redeemed claim to reason' [Habermas, 1979] which provide[s] the ultimate grounds within his communication-theory approach to the justification of critical theory, appears to be a remarkably abstruse point to uphold in a world where the possibility of nuclear annihilation, and the reality of exploitation, torture and other forms of oppression, as well as the stultification of cultural meaning confronts us every day.<sup>41</sup>

But in Giddens' writings up till this time his approach has remained within the bounds of explicating theoretical logic and reason. As he said himself 'interpretations of the world are ten a penny'.<sup>42</sup> There remain two possible directions for his work. Because he can write faster than most of us can read he can look forward to the frenetic task of staying with the front-runners of entrepreneurial abstract theory. Or alternatively, he can, in his own words, contribute to a 'process of critique that does not recoil from connecting material possibilities of social reform with an utopian element'.<sup>43</sup> However, even in its initiation an alternative practice will depend on more than the claim to reason, in whatever guise. Intellectuality is seductive as a retreat from practice. The reconstitution of practice will, perforce, only begin and develop as a transitional project. And it has to begin in practice not just in theory.

- 40. See Giddens, *op. cit.*, p. 196 on the expunging of 'existential contradiction'. For an elaboration of the logic of this sentence see John Hinkson, 'Beyond Imagination? Responding to Nuclear War', *Arena* 60, 1982, pp. 45-71.
- 41. Ira Cohen, 'The Status of Structuration theory: a reply to McLennan', *Theory, Culture and Society* 3, 1, 1986, p. 132.
- 42. Giddens, *op. cit.*, p. 335.
- 43. *Ibid.*, p. 337.