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TOWARDS A RADICAL RECONSTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT: SOCIAL  
THEORY AND HUMAN NATURE

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**ABSTRACT**

This article analyses some assumptions about human nature and subject agency apparent in two approaches to social theory: liberalism, particularly Giddens, and structuralism/poststructuralism, particularly Foucault. Feminist and Critical theory are also drawn on. Disagreements between these approaches in relation to subject agency and structural influence are noted but an attempt is made to find complementary and common ground and to that extent to reconcile them. In so far as an integrated theoretical approach is achievable from the work of Foucault and Giddens, it is suggested that the term radical liberal best describes it. Nevertheless, this term sits more comfortably with Giddens than Foucault. I seek critical leverage on both thinkers by adopting an explicitly Freudian view of human capacities and a politically egalitarian perspective.

**KEY WORDS**

agency/structure,, human capacities, determinism/voluntarism, liberalism, post/structuralism, radicalism, subject.

**WORD COUNT:** 7,895

In this paper, I will present two theoretical approaches to human nature and social theory although they may not always be precisely termed as such by their authors. These are the poststructuralist and modern liberal. The particular focus is on the relationship of subject agency and social structure. Poststructuralism is discussed mainly through the work of Foucault and liberalism mainly through that of Giddens. I will argue that these

approaches are potentially more complementary than is generally perceived. I will also refer to the Freudian-Marxist theory of Marcuse as this offers an important dimension missing in Foucault and Giddens. Some of the issues I confront have been explored in feminist literature, and I refer particularly to the work of Lois McNay (2000) and Bev Skeggs (1997). A key theme of the paper is the tension generated between the theories in their exploration of radical routes to human emancipation. This issue is briefly addressed in the conclusion where it is suggested that the term *radical liberalism* best describes the common or complementary ground I have indicated between these theories. Of course, I am not suggesting that this term should replace more specific ones.

By human nature I mean the general and innate *capacities* of humankind. Precisely what these are is a matter of dispute and it is clearly beyond the bounds of this article to attempt to prove one account at the expense of others. Equally clearly, such an entity as human nature must exist as it is only those born (or cloned ?) into the human species that can develop full human character. This article examines the explicit or implicit approaches to human nature and related conclusions of the above theorists with a view to suggesting some reconciliation between them. My own preferred working model of human nature is that of Freud. In stating this I will already have provoked disagreement among some readers. However, it is better to be explicit than to risk making unacknowledged assumptions about motivation and action.

A working knowledge of Freud's thought will be assumed here and I will simply list the main characteristics or basic capacities of human nature that occur in his work. These are:

## Consciousness

The potential to develop a social(ised) conscience

Rationality (instrumental but capable of development towards objectivity)

Sex/aggression (which can be sublimated into, respectively, love/idealism and work/competitiveness);

The Unconscious (seat of memories, dreams, fantasies and other processes fuelled by psychic energy)

Freud was fully aware that the development and expression of the above capacities is stimulated, shaped and limited by society. In this respect he posed two different and partly opposing principles: the pleasure principle by which the individual is driven to pursue gratification and the reality principle by which society needs to direct and control the instinctual energies of individuals in a socially productive manner (mainly through the regulation of work and reproduction). This compromise is, in effect, Freud's version of Locke's social contract except that there is no moment – real or hypothetical – when a formal contract between the individual and society is struck. Instead, Freud envisages a constant tension between instinctual forces and those of social order in which he increasingly came to fear the potential for social chaos and destruction of the former (1930: 308-14).

Two points need to be made in relation to my use of Freud's model of the psyche as a point of reference. First, it does not imply acceptance of his theories of psycho-social development, including the Oedipus complex. Second, I am not presenting Freud's model

in the spirit of liberal universalism.. In particular, there is no equation between Freud's attribution of rationality to human beings and the belief widespread during the Enlightenment in the likely triumph of reason and progress. The first refers to a human capacity mediated both by social context and by other mental processes and the second is a particular cultural formation.

Freud's map of the psyche remains an essential reference point for understanding human nature in the social context. His work influenced both the Freudian-Marxists of the 1960s and French poststructuralism. Freud's pre-eminence in the understanding of psycho-social processes has tended to obscure the extent to which Marx, Weber and Durkheim also more or less explicitly employed notions of human nature. Marx's early 'humanism' is well known even if he later shifted to an over-socialised concept of human beings. Weber's ideal type of social action implies a model of human beings variously motivated by reason, emotion, sentiment and self-interest. Interestingly, Weber is reported to have commented in 1908 that it might take two or three decades before psychoanalysis became sufficiently established for confident use by sociologists (cited in Gerth and Mills, Introduction to *From Max Weber*: 20). Although Durkheim ruled out subjective meaning as a proper area of sociological enquiry, he acknowledged the strength of human instincts and believed that they required firm moral and social control. Matthias Junge cites a fascinating reference of Durkheim to the 'constitutional duality of human nature' which he believed society should keep in check – a point on which he is in agreement with Freud (2001: 106-7)(4).

Giddens, the most influential contemporary liberal theorist, is relatively dismissive of Freud (1984: 7). In contrast, a positive reinterpretation of Freud is basic to Marcuse's theory of liberation. This disagreement is discussed later. In any case, Freud himself deals with certain aspects of the human psyche given little attention by Giddens, particularly the instincts and unconscious. These aspects of human nature need consideration in any plausible reconstitution of the subject in the wake of the poststructuralist critique.

Two issues of terminology need addressing. Firstly, although the term human nature is problematic it helps to focus on the core sociological dualisms of individual/society and agency/structure central to this piece. Secondly, where I refer to structuralists and poststructuralists collectively, I will use the term *post/structuralists*. Briefly, this is because, whatever their other differences, both agree in disregarding 'the myth of the Enlightenment subject'. It is the intention of this article to retrieve aspects of the so-called 'Enlightenment subject' while accepting some key post/structuralist criticisms.

### **Post/structuralism and the Critique of the Subject**

Foucault became as influential in the 1980s and 1990s as his compatriot, Jean Paul Sartre had been in 1960s and 1970s. Whereas the latter built a model of a conscious, choosing and responsible human subject, the former set out explicitly to destroy the intellectual basis of humanism (including existentialism which he saw as an example of it) (Foucault: 1966). Foucault's early work particularly attacked the view that the individual subject has an innate capacity to think and act with any significant degree of autonomy. Instead he

sought to illustrate how identity is structured in or constituted through discourse. There are enough descriptions of discourse theory not to require another one. What is emphasised here is that discourse theory, as developed by a series of mainly French intellectuals, locates meaning primarily or exclusively in linguistic or semiotic structures rather than in the capacity of authors or readers to create or divine their own meanings in relation to these structures. While discourse theory has contributed greatly to our understanding of the role of deep linguistic and cultural structures underlying thought and action, it tends to understate the role of human agency (for a fuller critique, see Sokal and Bricmont, 1997; O'Donnell, 2001). However, it is central to the theoretical reconciliation suggested here that Foucault's later writings began to indicate greater scope for human agency.

The post/structuralist attack on liberal humanism has tended to give the idea of human nature a bad name not only among sociologists but also among many literary scholars. Post/structuralists tend to see human subjects as little more than texts inscribed by external discourse. For them, there is no greater intellectual condemnation than that of 'essentialism', a charge routinely made against any who argue a significant degree of biological effect in relation to race and sex/gender identity. However, it is liberal humanists who have attracted most opprobrium from Althusser (1968) and Foucault (1966) and their followers. Liberals are accused of inventing a range of human characteristics and related rights which, far from benefiting the mass of humanity, in practice reflect the values and interests of liberal capitalism.

Liberal thinkers such as Giddens and Gellner have riposted, arguing that people can in part be the subjects or authors rather than merely the objects of history (Giddens: 1982; Gellner: 1992). Giddens comments that '(p)ower moves in mysterious ways in Foucault's writings, and history, as the actively made achievement of human subjects, scarcely exists' (1992: 24).

There is some evidence to support Giddens's comment in Foucault's first volume of his three-part *History of Sexuality*. Even the latter's treatment of the concept of *resistance* is ambiguous on the point of agency – never quite breaking from a passive construction of how resistance emerges (1976, 94-6). Thus, he writes of 'points of resistance' as typically 'furling across individuals, cutting them up and remoulding them, marking off irreducible regions within them, in their bodies and minds (96). Kate Nash argues in her article on the 'cultural turn' in social theory, that the notion of resistance presumes some capacity *to act* against dominant forces but this is not the emphasis Foucault wishes to make in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (2000: 84).

However, as has frequently been observed, a qualified shift to a greater emphasis on agency occurs in Foucault's later writings (Ball, 1992: 1-7; Weeks, 1995: 54-8; Nash, 2000: 84). In his final books, the second and third of his volumes on sexuality, he begins to explore 'the forms and modalities in relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognises himself qua subject' (1984: 6). Foucault links such 'recognition' to elite education but implies that other cultural influences could stimulate it (85). The notable

shift from a preference for passive syntax in his earlier work to more active syntax in volumes 2 and 3 of his history of sexuality indicates some theoretical re-alignment.

In a seminal article, *The Subject and Power* (1982), Foucault gives a procedural rather than an intellectual explanation for the above change of emphasis. He describes three phases of his work:

*The first is the modes of enquiry that try to give themselves the status of sciences...*

*In the second part of my work I have studied the objectivizing of the subject in what I shall call "dividing practices"...*

*Finally, I have sought to study ... the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject.* (Foucault (1982) reprinted in Faubion, 1994: 326-7)

Whatever the precise reason for his own shift in emphasis, there is serious ambiguity in the post/structuralist tradition on the question of subject agency.

### **Post/structuralist Influenced Interpretations of the Subject**

Clearly, Foucault's works can sustain more than one interpretation about the relationship of agency and structure. He is cited in works variously taking more voluntarist (Weeks, 1995), determinist (Hall, 1996) and integrated approaches (Skeggs, 1997) to agency and the structure.

A number of feminist works have taken an integrated approach of the kind preferred here. Lois McNay's *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* is a major theoretical contribution to this emerging tradition. She finds that what she terms Foucault's '*tabula rasa*' approach to the subject 'does not really offer a satisfactory account of agency' (40, 9) and adopts a more robust account which includes 'the capacity of individuals to engender change within the socio-cultural order' (46). Specifically, McNay is arguing that people have 'the capacity' to contribute to the structuring of the gender order. My contention is that this capacity extends, to a greater or lesser extent depending on circumstances, to all areas of social life. Further, Giddens certainly, and, the later Foucault probably, would agree.

Bev Skegg's *Formations of Class and Gender* (1997) is an empirical work which adopts a similar theoretical framework to McNay. She gives an account of 'how the subjectivities' of 83 white working-class women 'are constructed across a range of different sites' beginning when the women enroll on a 'caring' course at a local college (1). She states that:

*The women of the study are not just ciphers from which subject positions can be read off; rather they are active in producing the meaning of the positions they (refuse to, reluctantly or willingly) inhabit* (2).

Skegg's follows the logic of her position by fully referring to the biographies of the women and substantially citing their opinions. The women are not presented as fully in

control of their lives but nor are they seen as cultural dopes. A book which achieves a similar effect in relation to 'race' is Tony Sewell's *Black Masculinities: How Black Boys Survive Modern Schooling* (1997). The boys are not presented as helpless victims or stereotypes but as actively engaged in producing their own lifestyles and even politics.

Other thinkers influenced by post/structuralism have not followed Foucault's putative transition to a more active concept of the subject. For them, the subject remains empty of any innate capacities with a resulting problem when theorising agency. Even some who do accept individuality and difference tend to reflect Derrida in seeing them as the outcome of discourse/language games inscribed on more or less passive subjects (Derrida, 1967). We are constituted differently without in any significant way choosing to be so. This is a diminished notion of difference in contrast to one which links difference to reason, consciousness and choice as well as to the influence of culture.

Stuart Hall's piece in his co-edited book with Paul du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996) illustrates these criticisms. In *Who needs Identity*, Hall argues that Foucault came to recognise that his account of 'the discursive production of the subject' (decentred but not destroyed in Hall's interpretation of Foucault) lacked a complementary account of 'the practices of subjective self-constitution' (13). This seems to pave the way for the reintroduction of conscious agency. This is the route Foucault himself seems to seek in his later work. However, as far as Hall is concerned, Foucault's late turn to agency concedes far too much to 'intentionality' (14).

Significantly, the only reconstitution of the subject that Hall allows is via the unconscious. He suggests that the 'mechanism' for this is 'desire' through which subjects make identifications with new – to them – discourses. Hall seems unwilling to accept that meaningful action, including, the reshaping of self-identity or identifications is a capacity of the individual subject. Presumably this would concede too much to the liberal humanism he has long opposed and might seem to endorse a 'revival' the 'Enlightenment subject'.

While Hall embraces the role of the unconscious in the constitution of 'identifications', he ignores the role of consciousness. This is a major vacuum in his thinking and reflects a characteristic tendency to determinism. Indeed, he routinely uses the terms 'determinism' and 'mechanism' in this article to explain the processes he presents.

Liberalism offers a stronger account of will and choice than post/structuralism and Freudian-Marxism a more vital concept of the creative potential of the emotions (see below). Factor these capacities back into the individual – reconstitute the subject - and the cultural forces so powerfully described by the post/structuralists seem less overwhelming.

Confusingly, as well as contributing to a deterministic strand in some contemporary social theory, some writing influenced by the post/structuralist and/or postmodern tradition presents the individual as unrealistically autonomous. Gellner made this observation some years ago but confessed himself perplexed to explain these

opposing interpretations (1992: 22-3). Somewhat similarly, Bev Skeggs has commented that some academic feminists have reveled in their own personal preoccupations and 'cleverness' at the expense of hard structural analysis (1997: 6-7). This confusion about the intellectual thrust of post/structuralism may lie more with Derrida than Foucault. It perhaps emerges from a much more voluntarist interpretation of Derrida's theorisation of difference than he intended (1991: 60-67). In fact, Derrida describes different identity formations as the products of the play of cultural signs on the unconscious, not as freely chosen. Given Derrida's anti-humanism, this is unsurprising.

Despite the above comments, linguistics, semiotics and discourse theory from Saussure to Hall have contributed profoundly to our understanding of how cultural formations can shape human conduct by penetrating the unconscious and so forming consciousness. This tradition offers a range of techniques and concepts for analysing or decoding cultural signs unmatched even by the Frankfurt School.

However, in respect to individual and collective emotional expression, the Frankfurt School offers, in certain respects, a fuller picture than either Hall or Foucault. In particular, Marcuse takes an approach to the instincts or drives and emotions which offers the potential for 'liberation'. The post/structuralist tradition seems to have settled, rather minimally, for 'desire' (Hall, 1996) as the basic disposition of the unconscious whereas Marcuse retains the full Freudian model. While he accepted the reality principle – that there are necessary limits to the free pursuit of individual pleasure if society is to achieve productivity and order - he argued that the United States of the early post-war period was far more repressive than

necessary, particularly culturally and sexually.

Marcuse employed two concepts which developed this theme: *the performance principle* and *surplus repression*. The *performance principle* is ‘the prevailing historical form of the reality principle’ (1955: 44). He argued that in order to expropriate *surplus value*, capital requires to generate *surplus repression*. *Surplus value* refers to the value left of a product/service after the costs of labour have been met and *surplus repression* refers to ‘the restrictions necessitated by social domination’ (1955: 44). Surplus repression is the price in emotional repression and unfulfilled potential people pay for capitalism. For Marcuse, this involved a misallocation of time and energy that could be better used in more pleasurable and creative activity.

The relevance of Marcuse’s work for this paper, then, is his emphasis on the positive potential of human nature to flourish in the context of affluence. This is missing in Hall’s work. Not only is Hall parsimonious in his concept of agency but he even presents the unconscious as little more than a ‘mechanism’ for attaching, seemingly rather arbitrarily, to cultural signs. Rojek and Turner refer to Hall’s tendency ‘to analyze all forms of human life in terms of texts and intertextuality’ (2000: 637). They argue that the ‘cultural turn’ in social theory has led, paradoxically, to the politicisation of the personal but to a disinclination to engage in practical politics. They suggest that Hall is reluctant to develop ‘a tenable or sustained political agenda’ because to do so ‘would be to take a position and therefore challenge the commitment to relativism’ (639).

### **Anthony Giddens and the radical liberal Tradition**

Recently, Giddens has emerged as a leading defender of the liberal tradition although that may not quite have been his intention as a young sociologist or, even now, quite the description he would choose for himself. A chronological reading of his work shows him moving progressively closer to a liberal perspective while still attempting to maintain a non-Marxist radical stance. Giddens's work up to the early 1990s was largely concerned to appraise the classics and critique a range of contemporary theory from Parsons to post/structuralism and postmodernism. His approach was more precisely sociological than it has latterly become. His tone was that of a radical iconoclast sweeping aside what he regarded as redundant intellectual clutter in the process of staking out his own terrain.

Giddens does not work with the concept of human nature as such but he does employ a quite detailed model of the capacities of the individual (1984). Set out in a way comparable to Freud's model of human nature given above, Giddens's model can be presented as follows:

Discursive consciousness

Practical consciousness,

The Unconscious

Giddens regards these mental capacities as hierarchical in the above order but it is convenient to explain them by starting with practical consciousness. This refers to the individual's knowledge of how routinely to act in society. Practical knowledge can be most effectively employed when it is taken for granted – simply put into practice.

Discursive consciousness is reflective consciousness and enables individuals mentally to scan and review matters when practical consciousness proves ineffective. Discursive consciousness appears to complement Giddens's concept of reflexivity in its application to the individual (as distinct from its broader application to late modern society).

Individuals are capable of reflecting upon and learning from experience and so of changing things (within the limits of circumstances). It somewhat helps the task of seeking common ground between Giddens and Foucault that the former uses the term 'discursive', so central to Foucault, in describing one form of consciousness. Giddens gives the term a much more active connotation than Foucault and applies it primarily to individuals but there is no necessary incompatibility between this use of the term and Foucault's broader cultural concept of 'discursive formations'. The one can be taken to imply the other.

Giddens is quite specific in stating that practical and discursive consciousness are human capacities:

*To be a human being is to be a purposive agent, who both has reasons for his or her activities and is able, if asked to elaborate discursively on those reasons (including lying about them) (1984: 90).*

Giddens's has maintained a robust account of agency, first against deterministic Marxism and structural-functionalism and then against post/structuralism. As early as 1982, he acknowledged "the brilliance" of Foucault's analysis of power but rejected what he saw as the latter's attempt to empty the social process of the active subject:

*...I do not at all accept the idea of a 'subject-less history', if that term is taken to mean that human social affairs are determined by forces of which those involved are wholly unaware. It is precisely to counter such a view that I have developed the tenets of the theory of structuration. Human beings, in the theory of structuration are always and everywhere regarded as knowledgeable agents, although acting within historically specific bounds of the unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences of their acts (1982: 222).*

While Giddens endorses the universal reality of human agency he clearly sees it as structured by potentially complex circumstance. In the latter respect he implicitly acknowledges that discourse has a passive aspect, as post/structuralists maintain, as well as an intentional one. On the key matter of language, Giddens acknowledges some common ground with Derrida in that the author of a text cannot be the sole authority on its possible meanings (1979: 9-48). Crucially, however, he argues that Derrida fails to

recognise language as a social practice, the main purpose of which is to convey meaning – however imperfectly this may be achieved (see Susan Hekman in Clark et al. 1990: 159-60, for a discussion of this issue).

Giddens regards the unconscious as well as consciousness as a universal part of the human psyche. However, it plays little explicit part in his theory of structuration. He considers that ontological security is the main unconscious human need. Ontological security is a sense of personal safety or absence of threat which enables the individual can act routinely.

Giddens states that he offers ‘these concepts in place of the traditional psychoanalytic triad of the ego, super-ego and id’ (1984: 94). I do not intend fully to debate the relative merits of the Freudian and Giddensian models of the human psyche. However, I agree with Mestrovic that in the areas of the instincts and the unconscious, the Freudian model is far more convincing and comprehensive (1998: 80-4). Giddens’s emphasis on consciously meaningful action leads him away from considering the influence of the unconscious on individual and collective action and the related social effects. His theory of structuration is about the relationship of agency and structure. As far as agency is concerned, Giddens focuses mainly on intentional action (while fully acknowledging that intentions often go awry). His later, relatively rare foray into the world of personal relationships, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), maintains a stress on the primacy of conscious over unconscious processes.

Giddens's near dismissal of Freud creates a sizeable gap in his own description of the psyche. The unconscious is a much vaster part of the psyche than he explores. Individual and collective fantasies and emotions, fuelled by *eros* and *thanatos* or both, can have immense social consequences. Human beings do seem to create societies in which their own unconsciously driven self-misunderstandings generate as much trouble as their misunderstanding of others. The instincts and unconscious may complicate social analysis but they require theoretical incorporation. In this area, the Critical Theorists and even the post/structuralists offer more insight than Giddens whose social psychology is perhaps the least impressive aspect of his work. However, Lacan's concept of *suturing*, adopted by Hall, indicates a weak role for the unconscious compared to Marcuse's radical reinterpretation of Freud's theory of the instincts (1996: 5-6).

Giddens explicit political turn occurred some ten years after his main published engagements with other social theorists. His rejection of determinism and his emphasis on the human subject as a knowledgeable and skillful agent has translated easily and logically into a commitment to civil and political freedom. In the 1990s he developed the concept of *dialogic democracy* (1994). This goes beyond representative democracy to include democratic dialogue throughout public and private life. Dialogic democracy is a radical extension of liberal democratic thought rather than entirely innovatory. It also owes much to the feminist emphasis on consistency between the personal and public spheres.

Given Giddens emphasis on agency, it is unsurprising that he has moved towards supporting a universal human rights framework within which a secure but regulated freedom might flourish. That he regards this as a radical position is shown by the subtitle of *Beyond Left and Right - The Future of Radical Politics* (1994). Having rejected value relativism and the despair that some feel at its pervasiveness, Giddens goes on to state:

*As against both views, however, one could say that this is probably the first time in history that we can speak of the emergence of universal values – values shared by almost everyone...*

*Values of the sanctity of human life, universal human rights, and the preservation of species and care for future as well as present generations of children may perhaps be arrived at defensively, but they are certainly not negative values. They imply ethics of individual and collective responsibility, which (as value claims) are able to override divisions of interest (1994: 20-1).*

Although Giddens's suggests that near consensus on certain universal values is a recent development, the human rights tradition is centuries old and its adherents claimed universal relevance for it from the beginning (Lynd, 1969: chapter 5). Despite their general nature, these values establish guidelines and limits for action which require a global dimension of governance. In his edited book, *The Global Third Way Debate* (2001), Giddens advocates more developed and integrated global governance (which is not the same as a global state):

*'Global governance is best described as a set of prescriptions and conventions that nations agree to be bound by'* (2001: 17).

In referring to 'the emergence of universal values', including 'universal human rights', Giddens implies that these have developed historically as has the suggested consensus around them rather than that they exist in some absolute, trans-historical sense. In contrast, Marcuse bases his argument for liberation on a specific theory of human nature and potential. Both positions imply a rejection of the value relativism many associate with Foucault's work. They meet the charge of 'essentialism' by locating values in material context while still filling 'the moral vacuum' created by Foucault's anti-humanism. Relating human capacities to human liberation and both to an evolving notion of 'the good society' is perhaps the most convincing, if not the only, way of achieving this. However, recent stated attempts by some Western powers to secure and extend human rights argue for extreme caution. Chomsky's book, *The New Military Humanism* is a chilling reminder of the problems of moral policing (1999).

Giddens has sought a consistent application of his principles to the private as well as to the public sphere. In his *Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), he applies democratic values to intimate relationships. He argues that relationships should be based on equal decision-making power, openness and trust (an echo here, perhaps, of his earlier emphasis on ontological security), and an equal and fair balance of rights and duties (184-8). Giddens is aware that a democratic framework is only a framework – what happens within it is

part of the process of what he terms 'life-politics', and can be fraught with risk and uncertainty (197-8).

In the years either side of the millenium, Giddens has sustained a stream of publications addressing national and global issues from his Third Way perspective. These include: *The Third Way* (1998); *The Third Way and its Critics* (2000); the collection he edited, *The Global Third Way and What's Next for New Labour* (2002). He typically stresses responsibilities as well as rights at all levels (1998: 65-6). Despite the Third Way gloss, his values stand more secure in the tradition of radical liberalism. What can be termed a radical liberal perspective was already implicit in his earlier work and his recent publications can be seen as applying principles already largely worked-out.

If Giddens has long been a liberal in terms of his basic values, he has clearly 'rejected neo-liberalism or market fundamentalism' (2002: 70). As Kilminster says, he often uses 'highly evaluative and emotional language' about 'the destructive effects of capitalism' (quoted in Smith: 666). Radical liberalism is distinct in its moral principles and political implications from neo-liberalism although the two philosophies share some common roots and propositions and are incompatible only in their most extreme formulations.

It has taken some time for it to become clear – perhaps to Giddens as well as to others – that the most practical expression of his liberal values lies in social democratic politics. Denis Smith recognises this in arguing that the 'liberal baton was handed from the social reformer, T.H. Marshall to Giddens' (1998: 667). Were it not for the fact that in his early

work Giddens expresses reservation about what he terms the liberal humanist concept of 'transparent consciousness', it would also seem accurate to describe him as a 'liberal humanist' (1979: 47). However, 'radical liberal' will suffice.

### **Post/structuralism and Radical Liberalism: Suggestions towards Integration**

To demonstrate significant complementarity between Giddens and Foucault requires the relatively voluntarist interpretation of Foucault's later work suggested above and an appreciation that Giddens has accommodated key insights from post/structuralism (typically with qualifications and using his own terminology). Where necessary I will address liberalism and post/structuralism more widely rather than confine myself to Foucault and Giddens. I will deal in turn with agency and structure, discourse theory, and the unconscious.

Historically, it is particularly liberal social theory, and more recently an emergent feminist stream of thought, that offer accounts of the agency/structure dualism that emphasise agency. From Weber, through symbolic interactionism, to Giddens, liberal theory presents individuals as able to construct meanings and to act with intent. Giddens does not, of course, disregard structure, presenting agency and structure as a recursive process, as a duality. Nevertheless, he has consistently attributed more autonomy to individual and collective action than occurs in most post/structuralist writings.

The main contribution of Foucault to our understanding of agency has been to show how difficult it is to achieve to any great extent. It has been argued here that the early Foucault overstressed this point largely because his attack on humanism led to a view of the subject with few capacities at all. This remains the case with some writing in the post/structuralist tradition. The anti-humanist project and attack on universal meta-narratives has led to an over-determined approach to agency, to cultural relativism and to a degree of political pessimism. The comment made by Rojek and Turner on what they refer to as Stuart Hall's 'decorative culturalism' also applies to Foucault – both are highly political in their attack on modern meta-narratives but, because of their relativism, hesitate to articulate their own politics of liberation (643-5).

Other critics have found post/structuralism condescending and obscure. In Gellner's ascerbic view, they 'decode, or de-construct, or de-something, the meanings which spoke through the author, had he (sic) but known it' (1992: 23). Famously, Sokal, a traditional socialist, wrote a wordy pseudo-postmodernist critique of empirical science which was in fact nonsense. He had no difficulty in getting it published in a leading postmodernist journal ! (Sokal and Bricmont, 1997).

A more active and clearer concept of the subject is needed than is apparent in much post/structuralist writing. As Giddens puts it, this involves '*the capacity of individuals to be selective and self-determining: to deliberate, judge, choose, and act upon different possible courses of action*' (1992: 185). While these capacities are general to humanity - in much the same way that certain physical attributes are - they are mediated by individual difference in intelligence and character and by social context.

Giddens's structuration theory encompasses the limitations as well as the power of agency. Structural constraints include lack of power and resources. As was noted earlier, he also observes that language constrains the generation of meaning and therefore action. Presented in this way, Giddens need not seem so antagonistic to Foucault and the post/structuralists. Both see social life as an integrated whole, refusing to separate the individual from society even for theoretical purposes.

Liberal and post/structuralist approaches to difference can be linked to the debate on agency. From Saussure and Levi-Strauss onwards, post/structuralism has greatly contributed to our understanding of how different identities or identifications are influenced by 'deep' cultural structures. However, if, as Giddens maintains, actors can, at least potentially, understand and negotiate cultural difference, then post/structuralism enhances but does not replace the liberal-rationalist approach to difference. If cultural difference is not rationally understood, it is more likely to stimulate ethnocentrism and undermine rather than sustain pluralism.

However, if Giddens is more convincing on agency, Foucault is the more original in the area of cultural theory. Foucault's intellectual approach and terminology stretch across traditional disciplinary boundaries producing a holistic perspective on society. Ironically, the scourge of the meta-narratives has produced one himself! His theory of discourse conveys in a single concept how cultural formations, institutional categories, subject values and attitudes, and physical, including bodily, positionings are or can be part of an

integrated whole. Of course, Foucault does not preclude himself from analysing distinct elements of discursive formations but he perhaps uniquely conveys their interconnections in one workable concept.

Many of Foucault's distinctive contributions to social theory emerge from discourse theory. These include his analysis of the pervasive, capillary nature of power; the introduction of the body into social theory; and his exposition of the limitations and dangers in the modern project of progress and the hubris with which it has often been pursued.

In contrast to the deep and complex texture of Foucault's analysis of discourse, Giddens's treatment of cultural issues can seem somewhat superficial in that it seldom conveys an authentic, let alone profound, sense of the experience of the other. His division of culture into the traditional, modern and late- modern is useful in constructing 'the big picture' but it is very much the view from above. Even *The Transformation of Intimacy* – Giddens' odyssey into the personal – contains little in the way of biographical case studies and is typically schematic. In contrast, whether using his 'archeological' or 'geneological' methods, Foucault does the detailed graft of piecing together from within a picture of cultures and their practices.

Giddens's use of the term discursive consciousness does open up an opportunity to develop some common as distinct from simply complementary ground with Foucault. The wide scope of discursive consciousness presumably depends on the prior existence

and impact of cultural phenomena as well as innate capacity. Unfortunately, in his eagerness to assert agency, Giddens tends not to explore how culture penetrates the unconscious. This is greatly exacerbated by his limited concept of the unconscious.

Even a modest integration of Giddens and Foucault clearly requires more than ‘a bit of give’ from Foucault on agency and the same from Giddens on culture/discourse – albeit that complementarity is the nub of the matter. At a more detailed level, complementary ground must be eked out in the area of language, particularly in its construction and use. Does language ‘speak’ the subject or does the subject speak for her/himself using language. Does the self ‘experience’ subjectivities/identities or make her/his own. Put his way, it seems obvious that the extreme assertions of Giddens and Foucault’s positions are unsustainable. Given that Giddens believes that identity and self-expression are formed within language and culture, it is surprising that he does not more routinely explore the relative aspects of all cultural discourse, including the liberal humanist. On the other hand, Foucault’s concept of discursive formations should not preclude analysis of those points and periods when history is punctuated by acts of will, choice and imagination either individual or collective. Liberal and post/structuralist social theory currently tend to be written to imply, respectively, a more active and more passive concept of agency. A more integrated approach is likely to have implications for language expression.

On the matter of the unconscious, neither Giddens nor Foucault improve on the Freudian model whereas I believe Marcuse does add a compelling dimension. To make the link with language again, the unconscious does speak an emotional and symbolic language of

its own – though one linked to everyday life. Giddens’s work typically lacks a sense of the dynamic struggle of *eros* and *thanatos* within both the species and the self. For Marcuse *eros* represents both the source and symbol of human potential currently frustrated by the *surplus repression* exacted by capitalist culture. On the other hand, unlike the neo-Freudians, Marcuse retains the concept of innate human aggression – a view for which the state of the modern world offers some support. Giddens offers no comparable dynamic link between the psyche and society. Part of the power of the Freudian model is that it embodies the paradox of ‘good and evil’ in the form of innate aggression and sexuality/love. The ‘risk’ that Giddens so often refers to lies within the self as well as without, in society - as does the potential he wishes to release. However, if Giddensian man is over-rational, much of Foucault’s work seems to allow for little mental functioning at all. This may be why Hall and others have turned to Lacan to explain psychic processes (1996, 6-10).

### **Conclusion: Is a radical Liberalism possible?**

This article contends that the Foucault’s later work and Giddens’s mature social and political theory can be broadly reconciled under the term radical-liberalism. The case that Giddens is a radical liberal has been made at length above. Before attempting the more difficult task of justifying the term in relation to Foucault, the issue of whether liberalism can claim still to be a radical tradition of the Left needs to be dealt with.

At a talk given in late 2000, Stuart Hall made reference to ‘the radical liberals’ (Westminster University 11.12.2000). Although he did not elaborate, this was significant because it shows that Hall, long associated with the Marxism, recognises that there is a tradition within liberal thought that can appropriately be termed radical. I agree and I would further argue that in respect to liberty, radical liberalism is more radical than Marxism, self-evidently so than totalitarian Marxism.

The roots of radical liberalism lie in a theory of human rights which goes back to the revolutionary periods of the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Clearly and necessarily, there has been an extension both of the content of human rights and the constituencies to which they apply. Most notably women and members of excluded ethnic and other groups have won inclusion within a human rights framework – formally, if not always in practice. The radical nature of liberalism’s commitment to human rights is sharpened by its heuristic quality. In many parts of the world the implementation of human rights requires radical change, including the defeat of totalitarian regimes.

Despite its radicalism in relation to human rights, compromise and pluralism are inherent in radical liberalism. Mutuality is the only consistent basis on which to establish a liberal society. The legal guarantee of others’ liberties restricts the individual’s freedom of action in relation others. Absolute freedom is virtually synonymous with absolute power and tends not merely to corrupt but, paradoxically, to totalitarianism..

But can a description of Foucault as a 'radical liberal' be sustained given his scepticism of fixed positions and desire to avoid being labelled himself. Foucault was not a Marxist nor, in any specific ideological sense, a socialist. In his political comments, his focus was on the issue of power and domination rather than class inequality. Put positively, he was committed to freedom rather than to distributive equality. Further, in one of his last published pieces, he expressed this concretely in terms of support for human rights (Foucault (1984), in Faubion, 1994: 474-5).

A commitment to human rights is at the core of liberalism and of Giddens's current thought. Where Foucault differs from the contemporary Giddens is that he saw the New Social Movements rather than governments of the Left as the best champions of these principles. Yet, both their approaches are pluralist and can be seen as differences of strategy rather than principle. While it is difficult to see Foucault getting as close to any government as Giddens has to that of New Labour, he spoke favourably of the Mitterand government – not in terms of socialist ideology but in relation to specific reforms such as the abolition of the death penalty. (Foucault (1981) in Faubion, 1994: 454-58). Foucault, too, was capable of compromise in the cause of reform.

Finally, it may seem perverse to claim Foucault for humanism but, as John Sturrock states, 'there is, inevitably, a certain humanism in Foucault' (1998: 65). Indeed, it is difficult to know how else to characterise his many statements on behalf of the oppressed.

Characteristically, radical liberalism focuses on liberties. A criticism of Giddens and, arguably, Foucault is that neither sufficiently incorporates an analysis of the sources and effects - material, cultural and psychological - of inequality. Greater equality of resources provides a wider basis for and means of achieving greater liberty – at the individual, national and global levels. Giddens’s attempt to define equality primarily in terms of opportunity and inclusion is inadequate without much greater actual equality (2001 b: 178-88). While, the liberal human rights tradition does include social rights, this has not been its area of greatest emphasis or achievement. The continuous development of human capacities requires that this issue be more effectively addressed.

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