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Part VI. Making a Difference

3. Agent of What?

As I have established, Sociology borrowed the word ‘agency’ from legal discourse in the 1980s. Agency means having the capacity to act *on behalf of* some other actor, generally a structural or corporate actor. The significance of being an agent is that it confers specific resources and authority, but does not oblige you to carry out any specific action nor guarantee any particular outcome.

‘Agency’ has since migrated into everyday usage meaning, something like having a say in the affairs of the world, or at least in the conditions of one’s own life: self-determination, the capacity to have some control over what people do to you, for you and around you – especially in your profession, your community, or your family – or moral responsibility for certain actions or outcomes, your own or those of others.

‘Agency’ has been embraced by the general public in response to an anxiety felt by people about the powerlessness they feel in the face of great social, political, economic, and natural forces beyond their control, but witnessed daily in their living room, thanks to modern means of communication, and wreaking havoc in their lives and sowing uncertainty. At the same time, the postmodern, neoliberal ethos encourages people to believe that they are responsible for their own fate and that of their dependents. It seems that the word ‘agency’ was embraced simply because it was taken to be the opposite of ‘structure’, even though, in sociological terms, it is only thanks to its agents that structures exist. Further, it is only thanks to structure that an individual has the capacity to do *anything*.

The concern expressed in this anxiety has been a focus of philosophical and scientific concern since Saint Augustine’s personal crisis in 391 CE, but under the heading of the Will. It seems that it was only after World War II that people largely stopped talking about ‘the Will’.

‘Agency’ has now migrated from everyday discourse back into scientific discourse. In 2020, I identified at least seven different meanings attached to ‘agency’ in education journals alone. In each case, the authors knew exactly what they meant by ‘agency’, but seemed to be unaware that other writers in the same field meant something different by the term. This degree of ambiguity is unacceptable in scientific discourse. It is also very unfortunate for everyday discourse, because it mystifies the source of agency. Scientific terms often migrate into the everyday language with their meaning diluted through loss of rigour. Here, however, a term with diverse meanings has migrated from the everyday language back into science. This problem has to be addressed.

The starting point for giving meaning, whether in scientific or in everyday usage, to agency is to ask: agency *of what*? Agency is a relative term.

Agency is *not* a personal attribute, but nor is it bestowed exclusively by formal organisations such as corporations and government. It is not acquired by assertiveness or ‘empowerment’, but it does require effort on the part of the subject.

I refer the reader to my explanation of the term 'commitment' (*otnoshiniye*) in Part III §3:

> A 'commitment' is some *really existing* project or activity to which someone is committed.

'Commitments' include, for example, the organisation that employs you or the nation of which you are a citizen. They can also include feminism or racism, solidarity or liberalism. The very existence of the concept in a given community is testimony to the existence of a commitment, positive or negative, to the principle involved, because concepts arise only in the course of representing and resolving some problem.

If you are feeling the *need* for agency, it is very likely that you are facing a threat to a *specific* commitment. The first step then is to clearly identify *which* commitment is being violated.

The context from which I appropriated the word 'commitment' was Fedor Vasilyuk's book about 'impossible situations'. Vasilyuk was a counsellor. For his clients, the threatened commitment might have been a life partner who had died, a career that had collapsed or a situation forcing a choice between two equally loved projects, or being bereft of *any* viable life project. The disaster afflicting the subject's commitment made it impossible to go on, and Vasilyuk's aim was to *reconcile* the subject to the apparently impossible situation.

The person seeking agency is not someone seeking reconciliation. But even here, Vasilyukoffers sound advice. He advised the subject to *critically examine* the commitment, the loss of which had made it impossible to go on.

This can be illustrated this by the example of Rosie Batty. Batty was the victim of domestic violence. In February 2014, her 12-year-old son, Luke, was murdered by her former husband while the boy was at cricket practice. An order that Batty had obtained barring the man from contact with Luke during activities had been overturned by a court six months earlier.

When the TV cameras turned up at Batty's door seeking footage of the grieving mother, from the very moment that Batty opened the door, she refused to act out this role and stepped forward to become the foremost advocate demanding that the government and the courts take action to protect women and their children. In 2015, she was named Australian of the Year and a Royal Commission into Family Violence was convened which recommended sweeping changes.

Rosie never got her son back. That was impossible, but she recognised that she was far from alone in her experience of family violence. What would otherwise have been a brief media exposure to display and reinforce her lack of agency, she turned around and drew on a deep public commitment to the eradication of family violence and became the agent for that commitment. For the four years that Batty spent campaigning before returning to private life, political leaders trembled before her. She used the disaster in her own life to became an agent for the struggle against family violence.

Batty did two things that are relevant to our topic here. First, she *generalised* her problem. The desperate powerlessness that she had been experiencing while failing to get adequate support from the police and courts had ended just as she had feared. By generalising this experience, and perceiving that countless

women experienced the same trauma, she made her life bearable, and changed the world in the process. She had accurately read the *Zeitgeist* and understood that her situation had placed her in a position to take up the role of agent for the wider commitment to eradicate family violence.

This concept of the *Zeitgeist* is important. The world is made up of countless commitments. 'Commitment' includes both the objective actions taken in pursuit of people's commitment and the subjective orientation to those actions. The '*Zeitgeist*' indicates the *ideal* aspect of the totality of commitments. This is not to be understood in terms of inaccessible mental states, but in terms of the material expressions of commitments – the 'texts' that people speak, write, act out, and live within.

To become an agent, you have to be sensitive to the *Zeitgeist*. You have to recognise which ideas have traction in the world and which do not.

Generalise your situation in such a way that you can identify commitments that have traction in the world, even if they are not dominant in the *Zeitgeist* at the moment. Not necessarily in the world at large, but at least in the part of the world where you live, the field in which you work or the habitus surrounding you.

Very often, in order to break through the dominant commitments in a society, it is not enough simply to *appeal* to your commitment, it is necessary to commit a symbolic *transgression*. Most shifts in the *Zeitgeist* begin with a transgression which galvanises support. But if properly understood, it is always unlikely that your situation is unique.

The trade unions were built on this principle. In a labour market where your employer can purchase your skills from many others, you don't have a lot of 'agency', to use the current idiom. But this situation is shared with all the other employees or potential employees in your field. The early nineteenth-century founders of the trade union movement recognised the power of the principle of solidarity among workers in the same trade. Back in the early nineteenth century, such solidarity was not a given. However, through decades of work the principle was embedded in what came to be called 'the workers' movement'. This interpretation of the principle of 'solidarity' was initially limited to workers in the same trade, but by the mid-nineteenth century it had come to be universal. Regrettably, the complexity and differentiation of labour in the labour process today has seriously undermined the principle of solidarity.

Nonetheless, even where trade unions have been marginalised, commitment to solidarity exists. Even Rosie Batty relied on this principle to reach beyond the community of victims of domestic violence and gain the support of the great majority of people, male and female.

I have already referred to Rhea Liang (2019) who is a breast and general surgeon on the Gold Coast, Australia and 'researches, advocates, and consults in breast cancer, medical education, workplace culture change, diversity and inclusion' (Johnson, 2026) and 'her efforts towards helping people in medicine to thrive are often driven by seeing them very much *not* thriving (including, sometimes, herself)' (*ibid*.).

Liang and her colleagues addressed the fact that only 11% of specialist surgeons in Australasia and the UK were female, despite evidence that 'women might be

more able applicants on entry to the training programmes (2019). Women were leaving the profession at a higher rate than men.

In order to investigate the reasons for women leaving surgery, Liang used a 'purposive snowball sampling strategy' to recruit as subjects twelve women who had chosen to leave surgery. Her team explicitly approached the problem through the lens of feminist ideology (i.e., the feminist commitment). This included engaging the subjects in participatory research along with the authors. Feminism is the commitment that arose in response to patriarchy, and had produced an elaborate critique of patriarchy over more than a century; feminism has also objectified many of its ideals in legislation and provided innumerable means for women to combat discrimination and male violence. Feminism was also responsible for the existence of the telephone tree that made the 'snowball' strategy work.

Among the reasons for leaving surgery that the women identified were: unavailability of sickness and bereavement leave in contravention of institutional policies, poor mental health to the point of suicidality, bullying, fear of repercussions for complaint, sexual harassment during training, long working hours, lack of learning opportunities, sleep deprivation, unpredictable lifestyle, pregnancy and childbirth, and impact on relationships.

The 'surgical habitus' was one dominated by upper class men. It was *impossible* for women to conform to the expectations of this habitus. Even demands of childcare or menstruation were regarded as 'female reasons' and inappropriate. But they were more than capable of working in the field

Liang and colleagues not only self-consciously drew on feminist ideology to analyse the marginalisation of women in surgery, they had turned to female networks to recruit subjects and in line with feminist theory engaged the subjects in participatory research. This not only gave depth to the insights of the research but equipped a group of female surgeons be willing and able to tackle the problem in the profession. They then published their research in *The Lancet*, the foremost medical journal in the world, not in order to denounce their male colleagues – though the facts themselves were shocking enough – but to advise as to improvement in the training of surgeons.

Liang made herself an *agent of feminism* in order to overcome the marginalisation that she and her associates experienced in their chosen profession, recruited others to join her in this commitment, and then enlisted *The Lancet* which shared her commitment to improvement of medical training.

Liang also utilised conceptual apparatus that Pierre Bourdieu had built in order to understand the cultural means of oppression and exclusion, albeit in a different context.

You can achieve very little in this world unless you can gain the solidarity of others who share your commitment. The problem of gaining agency consists in *identifying* the commitment which is being frustrated by your situation; *generalising* the commitment so that it can encompass others; *attracting the solidarity* of others sharing your commitment; and *collaborating* with those others to overcome your shared situation.

This is not to say that oppression and marginalisation can be solved exclusively in the local domain. *Commitments* penetrate the whole society, and by acting as

an agent for the relevant commitment, you reach across out the community. During the 1960s and '70s, the 'revolutionary socialist' parties often inserted members recruited from the universities into blue-collar, unionised trades. In many cases, these activists became effective union delegates and leaders, but the best advocates are those who arise organically from the class they represent. They can always hire a lawyer if they need one.

As Althusser showed, however. becoming an agent has its dangers.

If you are a young man who feels that your virtues are not recognised in the world and in particular, who can not attract interest from women, then appealing to the incel movement may give you agency and can partially overcome the feeling of powerlessness. However, in this case, it will lead only to further isolation.

Only a commitment that is consistent with Aristotle's aphorism: 'The good life for man is seeking the good life for man' will do.

Or as Immanuel Kant put it:

> Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.
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> Kant, 1785

References

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