

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN SOCIOLOGY

Agency without Actors?

New approaches to collective action

Edited by

Jan-Hendrik Passoth, Birgit Peuker
and Michael Schillmeier



Agency without Actors?

Agency without Actors? New approaches to collective action is rethinking a key issue in social theory and research: the question of agency. The history of sociological thought is deeply intertwined with the discourse of human agency as an effect of social relations. In most recent discussions though the role of non-humans gains a substantial impact. Consequently the book asks: Are non-humans active? Do they have agency? And if so, how and in what different ways?

The volume offers a critical state-of-the-art debate of internationally and nationally leading scholars within Sociology, Social Anthropology and STS on agency. It fosters the productive exchange of empirical settings and theoretical views by outlining a wide range of novel accounts that link human and non-human agency. It tries to understand social-technical, political and environmental networks as different forms of agency that produce discrete and identifiable entities like humans, animals and technical artefacts. It also asks how different types of (often conflicting) agency and actors are distinguished in practice, how they are maintained and how they interfere with each other.

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1 Introduction

*Jan-Hendrik Passoth, Birgit Peuker and
Michael Schillmeier*

Faire, c'est faire faire.
(Bruno Latour)

Agency without actors?

Is the question concerning “agency without actors” not doomed to fail from the very beginning? For many the answer would be straightforwardly “yes it is”. Interestingly though, the reasons for such a reluctance are related to diametrically opposed perspectives. The concept of agency plays a demarcating role in social sciences: beloved by humanists as a safeguard against structural and/or natural necessities and erased by post-humanists for pleading guilty to *centering* the human subject as the prime world builder and mover. Anthropocentric concepts such as human independency, contingency, reflexivity, volition, free will, imagination, self-consciousness, personhood, have placed the notion of agency at the very center of humanist social theory. Subsequently, actors are humans, and agency without humans is meaningless. System, discourse, network, structure and language, on the other hand, serve post-humanist and post-structuralist accounts to abstract from agency as a human property in order to *decenter* the human subject and to interrogate the modernist subject/object dualism instead. Thus, the troubling question concerning agency affects either its delimitation to humans or its erasure as a valid concept.

Although the concept of agency is thought to be “slippery” (Hitlin and Elder 2007: 170), for (modern, Western) humanist accounts it appears to be highly taken for granted. Agency is treated as a residual category naming a natural inborn capacity of human responsible beings that enables them to resist the stubborn natural relations and the demands of structural forces. Thus, rather than ill-defined or vague, the concept of agency is over-determined as a given, natural capacity of humans. This *capacity concept of agency* is definitely the most common in sociological theory, developed and applied mainly as an alternative approach to tackling classical problems of political and moral philosophy. Agency reappears not only in the guise of Thomas Hobbes’ problem of order (Parsons 1951), but also by assuming that “a capacity for agency – for desiring,

for forming intentions, and for acting creatively – is inherent in all humans [...] [T]hat humans are born with only a highly generalized capacity for agency, analogous to their capacity to use language” (Sewell 1992: 20). For Talcott Parsons, William H. Sewell and numerous others, agency serves as sociology’s pidgin translation of philosophy’s problem of free will. Most conspicuously we meet the capacity concept of agency in theories of rational choice (Becker 1976; Coleman 1990; Kahneman and Twersky 1990) where agency denotes the general capacity of individuals to evaluation and decision making. Second, the concept of agency addresses the problem that marks out the difference of but also the interdependency between micro-processes and macro-structures. It names the *interdependency concept of agency* and refers to the effects of social action through which humans gain power to resist constraining and coercive structures, obstinate rules, or given norms, values, standards, traditions and cultural patterns. Following Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische’s famous formulation, agency articulates “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive responses to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 970). Like Emirbayer and Mische, Anthony Giddens tries to avoid the classical structure-agency problem that confines “the individual” and “society” as two separate and ontologized realities (cf. also Meyer and Jepperson 2000). To bypass this problem, Giddens conceives human agency as the effect of recursive, namely reflexive acts by which actors express themselves and perform the conditions of possible (inter-)action. At the same time, the continuity of action is a prerequisite for reflexivity (Giddens 1984). Thus reflexivity is not just self-consciousness as philosophers of the mind would have it and not the sole effect of an oppressing conscience collective of abstract structures but part and parcel of recursive human social acts. Moreover, pragmatist accounts like John Dewey’s critique of the reflex arc concept of action in psychology (Dewey 1896) or Georg Herbert Mead’s concept of the triad of I, me and self (Mead 1934) outline well-acclaimed attempts to resist a *naturalized concept of agency* (cf. also Blumer 1986). Third, authors like Dewey argued that agency should be understood as a circular process of occurring and adapted activities or events. Similarly, Mead used the idea of a circular process of occurring and adapting for outlining his concept of interactive encounters. These accounts socialize (i.e. culturalize) agency and outline an alternative to the former either-or situation between humanist and post-humanist perspectives. Human agency is caused by and names the capacity to change structural or institutionalized relations, which comprise human *and* non-human entities (texts, materials, technologies, etc.). The proposed alternative of compromising between structure and agency is sociologically seductive, since agency – although nothing but human-made – turns into a social force of humans and non-humans. Still, to treat non-humans as actors remains disturbing, precisely because it suggests agency but without proper actors. The innocuous question: “Are non-humans active, do they have agency?” must shake humanist

sociology at its foundations as if the religious order of polytheism waggles because mountaineers finally went to Mount Olympus and found it inhabited. For post-structuralist, social and cultural models alike, the idea that non-humans have agency is problematic, since it falls prey to the lure of a dangerous metaphysics of objects. And indeed, agency without actors is a risky claim, but not in the sense of substituting the metaphysics of subjects or realms of the social and cultural for a metaphysics of objects. Rather, agencies come into view that question given strategies of delimiting agency to human properties or social-cultural effects of human acts. To talk about *agency without actors* suggests that non-human entities do something unique which is not reducible to what human actors do with them. They change the way in which our social world is organized and they seem to play an important part in realizing it. The dissemination and circulation of technoscientific objects (e.g. computers, digital networks, medical drugs), but also phenomena such as El Niño, melting glaciers and polar bears (Passoth 2010), floods, viral epidemics, genetically modified materials, nanoparticles, etc. enact our world for the better or the worse. Hence, the social world remains inadequately understood if we conceive agency as the sole power of human action or unintended consequences of rational human choices that govern it. Moreover, proposing *agency without actors* does not engage in a revival of technical or physical determinism of social phenomena. Rather it aligns itself with attempts of conceptual rigor that try to rethink the question concerning agency beyond mere materialism – be it humanist, post-humanist or sociologized versions of it (cf. Braun and Whatmore 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Cooren 2010; Haraway 1992; Harman 2002; Hetherington and Munro 1997; Hicks and Beaudry 2010; Latimer 2004; Lee and Munro 2001; Malafouris and Knappett 2008; Scott 2002; Strathern 1991). *Agency without Actors* multiplies agency and complicates related emerging worlds.

A quick glimpse into the daily worldwide news which is globally broadcast in real time should provide enough evidence that the question concerning “agency without actors” is not only an ivory tower question of redefining terms; it also draws upon global empirical concerns whereby heterogeneous actors (human and non-human alike) are involved. Typically, it is the effect of events that questions, disrupts, alters or even obliterates common modes of social orderings and existence that bring to the fore questions of how social orders are generated and maintained (Garfinkel 1967; Moerman 1972; Schillmeier 2008). Such events visualize and gather a multiplicity of actors that remained black-boxed by the normalcy of social orders. The most recent Japanese events enacted by the forces of an earthquake and a related tsunami, for example, had and will have dramatic effects upon Japanese life and beyond (Schillmeier 2011). It ended many lives, annihilated whole families, and destroyed infrastructures and technologies; so much so that for hundreds of thousands, the taken-for-granted personal and social life has been utterly disturbed and has even come to a halt. The earthquake and tsunami also caused the breakdown of a high-risk technological system: the Fukushima nuclear power plant. This meant the serious damage to automated technical processes that endangers human and non-human life, although it was designed to

stabilize and endure social life in the first place. Fearing global radioactive contamination, many people all over the world are scared, have protested against nuclear energy and have bought Geiger-Müller counters and iodine tablets just in case the radioactive clouds reach their homes. Moreover, established but also new and spontaneous public organizations are forming against nuclear energy; non-governmental organizations are demonstrating against national state politics that favor nuclear energy. In trying to trace the Japanese events we meet a highly diverse set of actors and agencies – social and political, human and non-human, natural and cultural. Most intriguing, though, for classical humanist sociological discourse is that most of the action involved is evoked by entities or systems which do not fit with the idea of proper actors, because they are neither human nor social. Natural forces like earthquakes, tsunamis, weather conditions or failing technologies and chemical particles are considered neither social nor political actors. Still, they *are* capable of doing things and of making others do or not do things. We are confronted with agency but without actors; agency that appears highly indifferent to but adversely interfering with present and future human life and social interaction, political power systems, juridical regulations, or economic interests. Hence, the Fukushima events dramatically show that the (re-)construction of social acts is not the sole privilege of human beings.

Agency without Actors, then, is meant to redirect our focus away from given actors and their natural realms to “what is active” (*agissant* in French) in a given situation (Cooren 2010: 4). Agency is not a basic human capacity, not a precondition of the social; it is a relational, ever-changing outcome of its enactment. Following on from that, this book attempts to unhinge the notion of agency from its anthropocentric entanglement and any a priori metaphysics in order to multiply and complicate a central and most valid concept to understand the emergence, settlement and change in social relations. Indeed, “struggles over agency and its attribution are an important feature of social life” (Law 1991: 173). This volume brings together empirical and conceptual debates, and diverse and poly-contextual discussions that are rethinking collective action and the (emerging) agencies involved. Consequently, *Agency without Actors* advocates a thorough revision and reconsideration of our traditional understanding of agency and its activities, which generate, maintain but also question and alter social (i.e., collective) being. Thus, *Agency without Actors* does not erase “the human” and puts “the non-human” instead. Rather, we propose to address the empirically open question of *what* becomes an actor in the different ways of *how* the relevant entity is active. Consequently, we will see that behind our backs and often not very consistent with our intentions and attributions to them, non-human actors contribute to the shaping, maintenance, disruption, change as well as the breakdown of social order.

Reconfiguring agency

Agency without Actors advocates a revision of our understanding of agency and of the ongoing exciting and thought-provoking attempts to reconsider traditional

concepts of the social sciences. It made early suggestions in the field of science and technology studies (STS) that opposed the utilitarian or instrumental perspective on agency and the way in which non-human entities play an active part in the mundane practice of science. The so-called laboratory studies argued intriguingly that instruments, devices, particles and bacteria are more than just the results of what human actors do with them. Rather, these non-human entities contribute significantly to the ongoing achievements of scientific work (cf. Knorr-Cetina 1981; Latour and Woolgar 1979). The conclusion which actor-network theory was drawing from studying science was radical: any actor – human or non-human – is the outcome of a complex process of the punctualization of heterogeneous networks of activities (cf. Callon 1986; Callon and Latour 1981; Law 1986). Such a movement conveys the impression that what is at stake in the stories that STS approaches of this kind have told is a narrative strategy replacing human actors with non-humans. It was this kind of reframing of stories that allowed Willhelm Halffmann in his review essay of “Inside the Politics of Technology” (Barbers 2005) provocatively – and in many respects correctly – to ask: “If agency is the answer, kindly repeat the question!” (Halffmann 2006).

This book takes on Halffmann’s request and considers agency as an open empirical question and not as an answer given by theoretical decisions. In this respect it is in line with more current readings of ANT that extend the “hows” of becoming active by focusing on more heterogeneous and “fluid” settings than those suggested by the network metaphor (Law 2002; Mol 2005; Mol and Law 1994). Hence, the plot that brackets the multi-faceted contributions to this book is based on that twist not to begin with a definitive answer concerning what agency *is*, but to look at diverse situations from where different forms of agency *emerge*.

Part I, “Events, suggestions, accounts”, draws heavily on advancing the following argument: What may count as a form of agency may be different from who or what counts as an actor. An event is carved out by anecdotes, stories and circulating accounts that suggest and shape the actors involved. This insight is of course not entirely new. Such different scholars as Michel Foucault, Harold Garfinkel or Martin Heidegger have each advanced their version of it long ago, but up until now it has not been embraced to rephrase the question of agency. Consequently, the contributions of Part I address different aspects of the question of agency by focusing on the intermingling of suggestions, events and accounts.

Drawing on Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of “actual occasions” and Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of “potentiality”, *Paul Stronge* and *Mike Michael* investigate how agency – as an occurring event – is constantly intertwined with accounting for agency. Accounting for agency helps to freeze agency temporarily. It is the narrative and material structure of these accounts that positions agency in a tension between suggestion and satisfaction (or potential and telos). In every event we encounter a rich assemblage of entities and any of these may be singled out to become privileged as an actor in a potential account. Any accounting for agency – for example, in anecdotes, stories or the like – tends to

“satisfy” the suggestion that this assemblage offers, but only as one telos of the occurred potential. A hasty reading would find a pluralist version of a classic story: things happen in the world and they become meaningful as actions only through our stories and accounts. But it is far more tricky: the occurrence of an event itself is eventually the telos of another set of suggestions and the effect of the historicity of “typical” stories.

Michael Schillmeier continues this line of thought. He shows in his reading of Immanuel Kant’s understanding of science that the question of agency cannot be disentangled from the specific way in which science is understood. By contrasting Kant’s with Isabelle Stengers’ understanding of experimental sciences, Schillmeier exemplifies that the question of agency is not predecided as a mere human affair. Discussing Stengers’ “re-invention of science” brings to the fore that non-human (experimental) objects play a central agentic part within sciences. Subsequently, agency is not merely a human but a situated capacity of humans and non-humans alike to create something that is provided with the ability to object to it. Such a reading differs radically from the normative, humanist Kantian understanding of science that resists a naturalized concept of agency.

By connecting to the works of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, Florence Rudolf argues that the distinction between human and non-human contributions to the formation of agency remains humanist after all. She stresses that by leveling the difference between human and non-human actors and claiming symmetry instead, early actor-network theory restored a distinction between types of actors that was supposed to be overcome. Rudolf suggests distinguishing between those kinds of non-humans that play a role in production, circulation and interconnection of discourse and those that do not. In many cases these special kinds of non-humans play a crucial role in enrolling and mobilizing all kinds of actors. Studying the constellations that form, enable and obstruct mobilization work can be a way to expose their specific role.

Rolland Munro finally breaks the relation of story and event, framing and occurrence down to processes on a micro-level, rethinking agency in terms of our dwelling in worlds of accounts. Against common assumptions about the human as an individual making decisions within an action framing, Munro proposes that circulations of accounts help us conduct our communal and interpretive handling of occlusion wherein we can neither register precisely what is going on in the moral of the moment, nor predict the outcome of any action that is taking place. What interests Munro in the fallacy of individuating agency within the framing of action is the way in which concepts of cause form an erasure of the trace that brackets out material orderings in order to disclose or even hide our humanity.

Part II, “Contribution, distribution, failures”, takes the idea of a deep intertwining of human and non-human contributions to the formation of agency as a starting point. How do the interplay, distribution and failure of these contributions lead to the emergence of entities that count as actors and to phenomena that count as events? How can we think of the mixture of entities that shape

our common words? For all authors, the stability and cohesion of human and non-human collectives is at stake. Struggling in times of crisis and catastrophe they might fail to avoid new arrangements and reconfigurations. How does that affect related knowledge – and how does such knowledge affect their enactment?

For Werner Rammert, the idea of human action and technology as two autonomous spheres can be traced back to modern Western philosophy. Still, human action quite often appears highly mechanical and technologies are neither harmless routines nor do they always produce predictable outcomes. Thus, the idea of bifurcating human rationality from machinic processes names primarily a pragmatic fiction to identify distinct forms of agency and the possibility to assign different kinds of entities to them. Based on a pragmatist understanding of agency, Rammert introduces the concept of “distributed agency” that analyzes and evaluates the constitution and impact of forms of agency on gradual levels: intentionality, contingency and causality. As he demonstrates with a case study on intelligent air traffic systems, the use of such an analytical heuristic may prove to be most fruitful for studying contemporary forms of advanced technologies. He shows that the distribution of agency can even change over time. The gradual heuristic helps in indicating these changes.

Going back to Dewey and Heidegger, Cornelius Schubert votes for a relational character of tools and instruments which enables a complex and non-instrumental concept of the agency of means. Especially in the case of advanced technologies, he argues with reference to Rammert, such a relational character is most evident: Arrangements of various human and non-human contributions to agency have to be constantly rearranged to fit the ever-changing context. Drawing on fieldwork in the operating theatre, Schubert shows that in the case of anesthesia the body of a human patient becomes passive, while doctors and computers play an ongoing active role. Technology, knowledge and embodied practices are, he consequently argues, situated properties, and quite often human and non-human entities do play different roles in technological arrangements to equilibrate and shape collective action.

In contrast to the socio-technical arrangements analyzed by Schubert, Jacques Roux examines an environmental catastrophe in France. Roux looks at the case of a contaminated gold-mine and media coverage of the floodings of the river Aude. He is interested in the spatial dimension of agency and the way it is defined in relation to changing contexts. A community (a “city”, referring to Boltanski’s and Thévenot’s notion of “cité”) is constructed, claims Roux, through processes of contributing to an “in-common”. Articulating their modes of existence, entities (humans and non-humans) are able to contribute rather than participate. In effect, entities may leave or transcend the local setting to be part of a larger setting.

John Law extends the perspective on failures, catastrophes and breakdowns and concludes the second part by reconnecting to the overall topic of the first part: the heterogeneous contributions to the formation of agency are also intermingled with knowledge and the ways of accounting for it – as Munro, Michael

and Stronge stressed. Intriguingly, Law points out how the ongoing enactment of (social) reality and its actors is profoundly interrelated with attempts of knowing: consequently, knowledge *and* realities fail. By examining the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease, Law examines the reciprocity of enacting and knowing multiple realities and their failures.

Contributions to Part III, “Interaction, Partnership, Organization”, concentrate on the evolving dynamics of human and non-human contributions to forms of agency along the attempt to consistently live and work together. It seems like a truism of classical sociology that social life is ordered, although it is based on chaotic and unstable activities. But how are the interdependency of heterogeneous contributions to the formation of agency and the amalgamation of anecdotes, stories and accounts channeled into formats and scripts that enable organization, professional work and mutual understanding?

Bruno Latour tackles one of the most prominent cases of collective action in sociological theory. Engaging with the case of organizations, he explores some of the difficulties in tracing the specific path of organizing (taken as a gerund). An organization’s mode of existence is articulated through the process of constant (re-)configuration and accomplishment of how things are done. On the other hand, to abide by its agency once it is enacted also means subjecting to it. Using some fresh experience of the author in administration, the chapter focuses on the specificity of the organizing script and attempts to isolate this specificity from what sociologists and political scientists have made of it. It shows that, once the sociological fallacy of a macro-actor has been put aside, it becomes possible to detect the “flip-flopping” that is so peculiar to the circulating scripts that generate organizations in their wake.

Christelle Gramaglia and Delaine Sampaio da Silva focus on patterns of unremitting interaction of a certain type of molluscs (*Corbicula*) and scientists that enable the measurement of water quality in a polluted river. In order to empower *Corbicula* to “contribute” (to put it in Roux’s words) to the common research process, they have to be considered as partners and not as something subdued to human will – at least for a certain time. To be able to ask the molluscs for preliminary results from time to time and to enable research together, they have to be treated well and they have to be respected as partners – at least for a time. While scientists and molluscs work together, they both contribute to the same practice, although for their final and definitive measurement of pollution they have to be killed in the end.

Marion Mangelsdorf rounds up the book by exploring the importance of cross-species interaction in leisure riding. Connecting to the works of Donna Haraway, she contrasts different relationships between horses and horse keepers, trainers and riders and how they are enacted by training and riding practices. Riding techniques which treat horses as passive and disciplined objects seem to be less successful and also injurious to the relationship between horse and rider. Conversely, if the common practices of equestrian sports are organized around the trope of horses as partners, something like a third language between horse and humans evolves.