

From the One to the Many

From Pierre Bourdieu's habitus theory to the concept of Bernard Lahire's l'homme pluriel

Bernard Lahire (1963), a sociologist of family and education is one of the most significant figures of contemporary French sociology. Many consider his concept of the 'plural man' ('l'homme pluriel') the fundamental theory of the so-called 'sociologies of the individual'.

French studies concerning the sociology of the individual in the last decade are based on the literature of the (second) modernity, as the problem of individualisation is perhaps the most significant pinpoint of modernity. It is a French characteristic that (unlike English and German social sciences) the examination of modernity does not appear as a challenge to form a theory but as an inquiry on and possible conclusions about methodology (especially in the subfields of sociology of education and of family). In empirical researches such scholars are faced with the problem that there is no appropriate conceptual means, nor an appropriate theoretical background to describe current developments of our contemporary society. That is why there is a tendency to apply various intermediary theories and methods with the common premise that in order to understand social processes, a so-called individual scale (l'échelle individuelle) is to be applied. Social analyses based on this paradigm intend to grasp macro changes through *personal* experiences of the individual, not through identification or some collective idea.

His theory (although Lahire is reluctant to use this term) is outlined in his 1998 book *L'homme pluriel: les ressorts de l'action* (Man In Plural: Drives and Spheres of Action). 'The frame of interpretation' is set up as opposed to Bourdieu's single dimensional concept of the 'habitus' and other generalising theories as such. At the same time he is admittedly a follower of Bourdieu, „thinking along with and as opposed to” Bourdieu (Lahire 1998: 11.).¹

When comparing the two approaches, among the criticisms of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the ones concerning socialisation are most meritorious. Socialisation from Bourdieu's standpoint is completely free of problems and brings the desired results i. e. naturally accepting the circumstances. That is why he does not consider such basic sociological concepts as 'deviants', 'withdrawers', 'rebels' or 'revolutionists'. With reference to the excellent study of Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Wehler 2001) Bourdieu's concept of the habitus can be described based on the following premises (in italic; regular styled fonts stand for Lahire's counter-arguments):

¹ He said in an interview: „I am more Bourdieuan than the Bourdieuians themselves” (À propos de L'Homme pluriel).

- a) *The individual 'internalises', 'interiorizes' the structures of society.* Lahire's objection to this: but which segment of society is primary and which one is secondary? Family, school, job or social class?
- b) *The development of the 'habitus' is an extremely unaware imprinting.*² Why does Bourdieu not examine the self reflection of the individual?
- c) *Habitus has a clear, constant element which is primarily based on early childhood and family socialization.* Besides the fact that Bourdieu does not do justice to research on socialisation, there can be a valid objection concerning the decrease of the stability of the family, therefore its socialisation potential. Unstable relationships, break-ups have become so frequent that the existence of constant forms of habitus is not evident, even questionable in today's society. Even the frames of childhood socialization cannot be described unequivocally when taking into consideration the phenomenon of post adolescence.
- d) *The habitus postulates a homogenous empirical world. Class habitus can only develop by that.* The extent of heterogeneity of society appears to be increasing. Segregation based on work shows a decreasing tendency: crossing class boundaries is difficult, yet more and more frequent.
- e) *Strategy-oriented practice is governed by the habitus.* Individuals are not completely determined socially according to Bourdieu, however, the concept of the 'overstructured individual' can be interposed reflecting upon his concept.
- f) In the theory of habitus the elements of coercion and violence are not explored, and nor is the rational action based on the relations of aims and means.

Based on his researches on sociology of education and of the family, Lahire demonstrates how family socialization is not homogenous any more. From the many examples he has, let us examine the family where the father is illiterate, the older sister is extremely diligent, is already at university, and the other child fails to accomplish at school. The question is what the nature of attitude toward school is like in such a family. Does the mother force school and doing homework while the father is oblivious, neutralising the mother's efforts? What is the attitude towards reading in this family? The author tries to demonstrate the contradictions and differences within the institution of the family. The many-foldness of socialization is present from infancy: babysitter and nanny relationships are widespread throughout France, nurseries and kindergartens often impose expectations that are in disharmony with the ones of the child's own family.

Lahire thinks that this many-folded socialization (plurisocialisation) results in the variants of social behaviour of the individual, as well as the feeling of unique-

² The subjects are unaware of the habitus – in a sense that subjects are unaware of its coming into existence (but that does not mean that the habitus is equal with the freudian unconscious).

ness and originality, becoming partly independent of the social environment. Multi-dependencies (pluridépendance) and the multiplicity of determinism decrease the feeling that we are products of our environment, a social group or any other community. At the same time it triggers the feeling of 'I am alone', loneliness, not being understood and frustration: due to the multi-level socialization there are many dispositions that cannot manifest.

The individual, who is described as a complex set of dispositions, is socialised in many various, sometimes even contradictory environments, therefore they can act in many, even converse ways. The individual has an immense collection of roles at disposal that are activated in the given situation.³

The author has a two-folded intention. On the one hand he describes the tensions and contradictions among various fields of sociology, and on the other hand he characterises practical dispositions (school, cultural skills etc.) at their locations (school, media etc.) and examines how these skills are shifted to a different context. From the many relevant empirical works he has, only researches of cultural literacy and dissonance are examined here. His work concerning literacy points out that in everyday life, women tend to accomplish tasks that involve reading and writing more (official errands, correspondence, shopping lists and other types of lists), which is due to their position and role in the family and not to better education than that of men. In terms of cultural dissonance he examined how young people face the constraints of different social circles (school, parents, peer group) and how they react activating different dispositions.

Lahire came to the conclusion that the multiplication of dispositions makes the transfer from one situation to the other uncertain. The success of the transfer depends on the activation of the similarity of the contexts, which depends on the analogical, cognitive and practical competence of the individual. This also means that the individual differences due to various socialization processes make it impossible to predict the reaction of the individuals in a new context.

The author takes stands on the determinism of behaviour ruled by incorporated past as well as contextual openness that prevents predictability.⁴ He gives a definition for the drives for action: „Action is always a meeting of individual past experiences incorporated in action patterns (sensory-motor patterns, perception patterns, assessments, decision-making etc.), habits of attitude, feeling, expressing oneself, action and present social situation” (Lahire 1998: 82.).

Due to the complexity of a certain situation the same stimulus can trigger in the same individual different, even contradicting responses resulting in the unpredictable nature of the action. Another important consequence is that the individual has to re-build oneself in each and every moment, according to the requirements of the action.

³ Lahire applies the example of folding paper origamis: he pictures the individual as folded paper, which always shows different surfaces depending on the folding (cf. Deleuze 1988).

⁴ „The action of the actor is certainly socially determined, but it is impossible to predict it, just like the outcome of a chemical experiment.” (Lahire 1998: 66.)

This leads to the recognition that the illusion of a sociology that examines the individual as a ‘coherent, homogenous self’ needs to be abandoned. He admits that this is not an easy task as the effects of Western philosophy, especially Cartesian philosophical tradition still have their influence in traces, and social practice is also based on the idea of the coherent nature and autonomy of the individual. This is expressed in proper nouns, signature, the discourse patterns of self-introduction (cvs, autobiographies, traditions of the Bildungsroman etc.). The literature on sociology is based on this idea: different subfields of sociology always examined the individual in one certain context, one sphere of action, so they did not arrive at the conclusion that an actor would act differently in a different situation and the behaviour is not predictable. In order to avoid this latter mistake, Lahire proposes the thorough acquaintance with at least two subfields of sociology.

Different uses of language, competences, emotions, desires, arguments are not mutually exclusive and do not picture the same actor or action, do not assign the same reality and value to the same behaviour.

Lahire’s aim is to construct and mobilize dispositions, as well as to examine the construction of the inner structures of the actor. Therefore, in order to understand the individual as a coexistence of multiple dispositions, we need to examine the development (genesis) of those dispositions that construct the individual. To achieve this, he proposes the composition of so-called sociological profiles with help of longitudinal studies (Lahire 2002). Lahire attempts to elaborate a ‘psychological sociology’, which relies on the plurality of action logics and patterns. The aim is to describe the effects of social structures on a micro level providing a more detailed description of plurality in the process of socialization.

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