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Religion in Urban America Program Chicago Conversations

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RELIGION IN URBAN AMERICA PROGRAM

Chicago Conversations

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Structure, agency, and adaptation in congregations

In debates over the relationship between structure and agency, Lowell Livezey took the position that religion as an institution, in particular the congregation, had “agency.” By this he meant that the structures in which all social activity is nested could be changed by the cultural impact of religion. He contrasted agency with adaptation, the process by which congregations adjusted to forces in their environment but did not act positively—which often meant normatively—on it. I would like to discuss this tension between agency and adaptation, why I think Livezey found it provocative, although it remained preliminary in his work, and how I think Livezey might have wanted to push it further.

In much of Livezey’s work, he was engrossed in the problems of how to change structures of inequality and rebuild forms of community, and how religious organizations could be leaders in achieving these ends. He rejected traditional approaches of urban ministry, based on the Protestant concept of noblesse oblige, because of their limited scope and insufficient attention to and ability to work with the social structural sources of resistance to change. To that end he engaged in scholarly explorations of what he termed religious agency. His central question on agency was how congregations that are themselves embedded in the structures that constrain action, such as meaningful social integration among members,

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be agents for changing those very structures? Rather than being merely a recipient of the push of economic and political forces, i.e., a dependent variable, Livezey asked how religious groups are a part of the “ensemble of forces” that act on the social system. Livezey wanted churches and other religious congregations to be transformative, and he often found that they wanted to be so as well. With this goal, it is not easy to accept religion as subject to the determination of other systems.

In the language of social science, individuals are presumed to have agency, but how groups or institutions possess agency is less clear. Some writers deny that groups (much less institutions) can be said to possess agency. Others forge ahead without theoretically specifying how group agency happens. In addition, we can observe that agency is multidimensional—connoting a range of meanings—“selfhood, motivation, will, purposiveness, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:962). This leaves much ambiguity in the meaning of agency and Livezey worked in the midst of that ambiguity. But Livezey was above all an empiricist, much inspired by the grounded theory approach in which the data provided (almost all) the leads into conceptual meaning. The “actions” taken by congregations is clearly a group representation of the choices individuals within congregations make. Sometimes individuals in those groups work cohesively and in a unitary direction; other times they fragment into conflicting views that either stymie an anticipated direction or result in organizational splits. As Durkheim pointed out, a group is larger than the sum of its parts and the identity and purpose of a group exceeds the identity and purpose of any individual within it. I do not claim to theorize the behavior of groups in this short piece, yet we can also observe, as Livezey did, that groups such as congregations “act” when moving to a new location, invest in additional property, or send its Peace and Justice Committee to participate in a rebuilding project in New Orleans.

Livezey would have found Hans Joas, a German sociologist in the American pragmatic tradition, whose work I just recently came across, most provocative in this regard. Joas suggests a theory of creative action in which the conception of action “needs to be reconstructed in such a way that this conception is no longer confined to the alternative of a model of rational action versus normatively oriented action, but is able to incorporate the creative dimension of human action into its

conceptual structure” (Joas 1996:72). From this perspective action is no longer a choice between means-ends rationality (entirely individualistic) and normatively determined (entirely subject to the binding power of tradition), but a framework that incorporates human choices and decisions. “By participating in the organizations and institutions of democratic politics and culture [of which Livezey would argue religious congregations is a form of producing culture], as in the social movements which form the fluid substratum of democracy [here again religious congregations, sometimes through their denominations contribute to, for example, in congregations going ‘green’ or participating in action against gentrification in a neighborhood], people are able to experience a rational pursuit of interests, moral commitment and creative self-fulfillment in a form in which these three are not separated from each other” (256).

Livezey’s tendency was to interpret agency as actions that privilege change and, its inverse, adaptation, as one that creates a fit within a changing environment but does not fundamentally challenge that environment or structure. Adaptation in Robert Park’s human ecology usage meant that immigrants from impoverished rural areas of Europe arrived in Chicago and found a way to apply their limited agrarian resources and skills in an economically foreign environment so as to survive. For Livezey, adaptation sometimes connoted that organizations and individuals were unwilling to challenge various kinds of problematic social and economic structural conditions, such as economic inequality or racial disparity. It was this form of adaptation that Livezey found problematic. In contrast, groups that sought to confront systems that socially or otherwise disadvantaged them were defined as having “agency,” with a connotation of being foresightful or prophetic. But such uses are overly broad and do not distinguish among groups that are both foresightful and adaptive to the environment in which they must work if they are to survive organizationally. Furthermore, as is commonly known, having the desire to intervene in a problematic situation does not guarantee the effect a group intended.

Perhaps Livezey’s focus on social change obscured the multiple dimensions of agency. The work of Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische (1998) helps us to understand multiple dimensions of human agency through their imbrication of time dimensions and goals for action. First, the actor’s stance in time can be either present, past, or future regarding; and second, an actor has three kinds of goals for his or her action.

They are to create ontological security that comes through habitual action, in which the actor is oriented to the past; to overcome taken-for-granted habits of thought with the aim of seeking new solutions for a particular situation in which the actor is future-oriented; or having to choose in a situation of ambiguity with multiple interests in mind in a situation where the actor must make a decision in the present. It is in the third case that we can see the value of an adaptive approach on the part of a congregation. Agency indeed “entails actual interaction with its contexts, something like an ongoing conversation...” (973). But in addressing a new problem, actors are facing a present in which multiple contingencies, ambiguities, and uncertainty are likely to be high. “*Choices can be a matter of tacit adjustment or adaptation to changing contingencies—including feedbacks from experience—as well as the product of articulable explicit reasoning*” toward the goal of solving a problem in the present (999, emphasis added). Hence, adaptation can be seen as one form of agency, one in which practical judgment is prominent.

For example, ethnic or racial residential or social enclaves are typical expressions of society’s segregation. Livezey would claim that to the degree congregations act to create diversity in congregations, they are exercising “agency.” However, we know that multiracial congregations are unstable (see work of Emerson and Smith 2000, also Wedam 1999, 2002). We also know from some case studies that monoracial congregations provide many cultural benefits for their members—comfort, opportunity to be protected from the stresses of mainstream society, cultural approbation of traditional (their own) ways of singing, interacting, etc., understanding God as an expression of a particular reading of historic tradition. So how do congregations that provide these kinds of important benefits get evaluated in terms of our understanding of religious agency? (I also note that there are gentrifying black neighborhoods in Chicago that are valued by their residents importantly because they are black and not interracial.)

It is useful to recall “Goffman’s stress on multiple embeddings of situations in different frames or vantage points on action” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:1,008). Livezey indeed identified all three dimensions of agency in the choice-making apparatus of congregations he studied. Congregations can be either reproductive of standards, rules, or projects within the congregational or denominational hierarchy while

simultaneously execute plans for transformation in the local neighborhood in which other hierarchies of control (police behavior, zoning rules, and school administration) are being challenged. As Livezey (1998) noted, Carter Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago upholds a traditional biblical authority stemming from its nineteenth century social origins in the post-slavery American South, while incorporating recently recognized African roots and African culture as part of that biblical heritage. In other words, congregations may be pioneers in one way but fall back on received well-recognized patterns of action and interaction in another. This occurs particularly strongly in contexts that are changing and uncertain such as experiencing the direct impact of immigration and racial and ethnic changes, gentrification, or crime and other forms of neighborhood ill health. In the case of Carter Temple, the church has taken its traditional teachings yet Afrocentric identity to a local public elementary school to “help students resist the temptations and pressures of drugs, gangs, and pregnancy”...while building “their self-esteem by presenting positive role models and teaching about the history of African peoples” (Livezey 1998:29).

The structures of the past may be dysfunctional for many social groups, but not all past structures are dysfunctional merely because they are traditional. A congregation that tries to change its musical style may meet deep resistance from members. Two congregations of diverse race or ethnicity seeking to merge have struggled sometimes in vain to create a single worship service that satisfies its combined membership (Priest and Priest 2006). A congregation's identity is often emotionally embedded in a particular way of praising God. Anthony Giddens (1991) has suggested that the need for “basic trust” and “ontological security” drives humans to routinize their practices so as to give order and stability to their relationships, especially in the face of the growing complexity and diversity of modern society (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:978).

Livezey sought a more careful parsing of agency to investigate closely which actions of congregations can be identified with which sources of change and how those changes can be sustained in these unstable times. As he hypothesized in a paper he gave in Durban, South Africa in 2006, “religious organizations both resist and participate in the “community-eroding” process, and that the extent and direction(s) of their influence depends heavily upon their own spatial structures—i.e.,

the geographic scope and configuration of their jurisdiction, authority, constituency, and discursive universe.”

The background structure of the congregation’s social world was the fundamental context within which Livezey worked and taught others to do likewise, but his real interest lay in the future directed agent, the one seeking the sources of innovations in institutions and recognizing that the taken-for-granted habits of the past were inadequate to the problems of the present. As Emirbayer and Mische conclude their theorization of agency, “We need further studies of the communicative processes of challenge, experimentation, and debate by which actors formulate new temporally constructed understandings of their own abilities to engage in individual and collective change, as well as how these microlevel processes intersect with longer-term social, political, and economic trajectories” (1,011). Livezey’s contribution lay in directing congregations and those who lead them to be reflective, and through a stroke of imagination, to be willing to improvise solutions in their communities.

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