

# Agency

Concept: Agency

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Description A dictionary-style definition of agency will point to an individual's or collective's ability to act and exert power. In the social sciences and humanities, this notion is a hotly debated one as the extent to which the larger socio-political, economic, and cultural environment may constrain or shape that ability is taken into consideration. A frequently used example in the agency debate is that of refugees and displaced persons caught within what is now being referred to as "humanitarian crises." Critics of humanitarian-inspired discourses argue that to view and depict such people as mere victims who are helpless and in need of rescue is to deny them any sort of agency, particularly when they do not perceive themselves as victims. When people are reduced to an absolute state of victimhood they are no longer acknowledged as the owners of their own destinies — as capable of making choices and taking action. A common critique argues that their subjectivity is erased, implying that they can no longer make claims to independent action and moral responsibility.

The example of the refugees and displaced persons helps frame the discussion of agency within the larger debate surrounding globalization. We live in a world in which there are extensive and intensive transnational flows of ideas, images, goods, and people (although in deeply unequal degrees) — a world that is often considered to be interconnected. In such a world, can the issue of agency — understood as possessing the ability to exert power and initiate action — be validly discussed? For example, when considering the several financial crises that have had devastating impacts on different economies, but more concretely, on the lives of millions of people, one needs to ponder whether the people affected by such unfortunate events are capable of exerting any sort of power or independent action.

These issues point to the ongoing controversy within the realm of social sciences with respect to the nature of power. Certain schools of thought regard power as systemic, meaning that individuals have little choice or power in making decisions, because the choices available are constrained greatly by the institutions, values, and practices of the societies in which they live. In contrast, other intellectual camps suggest that even though systemic power cannot be discounted, there are still real choices ahead of us. This position implies that individuals need to become more aware of their ability to make a difference and exert power.

This controversy strikes at the core of the debate entailed by the practice of agency. To assume agency, which is to claim that individuals are

confronted at all times with real choices and that they can exert power and be initiators of actions, is also to assume responsibility for one's actions. To view others as absolute victims, silent and helpless, is also to absolve them of moral responsibility for their actions, and to deny them a sense of human dignity. After all, to act means to be responsible and accountable for one's actions. A "classic" example used in the agency debate is that of the Zapatista movement. Zapatistas are an alter-globalization movement consisting mainly of indigenous peasants from the Mexican state of Chiapas (although numerous intellectual figures have adhered to the Zapatistas ideology). However, to employ this label as the primary descriptor for the movement is misleading given the very rooted nature of the Zapatistas' struggles in the state of Chiapas and Mexican revolutionary history (today's Zapatistas movement has its roots in the Zapata's Mexican peasant rebellion of 1910).

The Zapatistas initiated an uprising which was meant to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), on 1 January 1994. The agreement was viewed as having devastating consequences for the indigenous communities whose livelihood was dependent on farming and agriculture, but also for their collective identity, as the agreement would seriously endanger the ability of the indigenous peoples to continue their autonomous lifestyle that could not be divorced from their possession of the lands. The movement demonstrated their agency by refusing to accept governmental agreements which did not respond properly to the movement's demands. Instead, they organized themselves into autonomous municipalities, independent from the Mexican government, which over the years came to attract support from various NGOs in the fostering of self-sustaining community programs. The example of the Zapatistas can be used to illustrate the notion of taking agency, which means to assume author-ity for one's life, to exert power, and to refuse the status of a victim whose life is determined by the larger system. The example of the Zapatistas can help us illuminate at least some of the problematic aspects of the relationship between structure and agency. Although the national and international economic and political structures have clear and direct impacts on people's lives, there are ways through which communities and individuals can work to counter and/or subvert such impacts. The Zapatistas rejected the current structure of governance which threatened their lifestyles and identities, and managed to construct an alternative system of governance that allows them to exercise collective autonomy, but also sustain the cultural and economic practices of their choice. Moreover, through their efforts of active resistance and self-governance, the movement reminded the people of Mexico and around the world that people often perceived as "victims" (particularly in the case of impoverished indigenous communities) can and do have the capacity to act. As such, over the years, the movement has managed to gather significant sympathy, support, and assistance from social movements across the world.

However, such an example does not intend to cut a neat line between

victimization and resignation on the one side, and agency and self-determination on the other side. Several important questions that haunt globalization debates arise: where does the responsibility (also understood as power) of the system end, and where does the responsibility of the agent/individual begin? To what extent can one escape the limits set by the larger system, and to what extent is the system used as the scapegoat for failures and crises? Let us consider the example of developing countries. The ongoing debates within political economy and development studies point to conflicting positions. On the one hand, the neo-liberal free market system pushed forward by multinational companies, international institutions (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), and Western states is constantly held responsible for the poverty that devastates such countries. On the other hand, some blame this level of poverty on the high levels of governmental corruption and domestic violence that plague the locales of these regions. As such, the delicate issue that arises points to a dilemma: the practice of constantly laying blame on the ruthless mechanics and values (or rather the lack thereof) of a neo-liberal global economy, may very well preclude the notion that people in developing countries have any agency — that is, ability to change their situation, to take action, and exert power. Or, by simply placing responsibility on local conditions, one could make a valid argument that the way in which national economies are interconnected and implicated within a global economy that does not favour those it views as less competitive is being conveniently and complicitly overlooked. After all, the term of global economy is not a mere intellectual artifice. Rather it is a set of practices that impact on the lives of millions of people across the globe. This position implies that while people in developing countries might perceive themselves as agents, indeed they may even have both the willingness and the desire to change their situation, the constraints in the larger environment pose a real challenge and obstacle to their agency and autonomy.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the notion and practice of agency is intimately linked to that of autonomy. Agency and autonomy seem to go hand in hand. To be an agent, to exert power, is to claim autonomy. Another way to look at the issue is to see autonomy as the capability or capacity to act and agency as doing the acting. For example, the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by the Hezbollah has triggered massive (and disproportionate) retaliation from the Israeli army against Lebanon, which resulted in the quasi-destruction of the Lebanese infrastructure (roads, bridges, public buildings), but most importantly, in the loss of lives by numerous civilians. The tragic loss of lives and destruction have provoked numerous protests around the world. In this context, one might have sufficient autonomy to participate in demonstrations against the violence against civilians in Lebanon. If one chooses not to draw on that capacity to act and refuses to participate, then one is an agent. If one chooses to demonstrate, then one is an agent all the same. The point is that one has the capacity (autonomy) necessary to be an agent. However, as seen in the example of developing countries, the practice of agency

requires both a sense and a practice of autonomy. After all, participating in demonstrations implies the existence of a sufficient degree of autonomy. What happens when such an autonomy is lacking, whether due to an internal or external suppression of it?

When set against the larger backdrop of globalization, the questions of agency and autonomy become difficult to grasp. What are the limits of autonomy in the context of agency, and vice versa? If one examines in depth the example of the Zapatistas, then one wonders about the extent to which an agency exerted within the pre-established patterns forged by the system can really be considered autonomous, particularly when the system is deemed to be profoundly unjust and engendering structural violences. After all, the very idea and practice of autonomy imply a sense of self-sufficiency and independence, but also, it allows the possibility of choice. We have the example of Zapatistas, who refuse alignment with a larger system which they condemn as unjust and which has impacted their lives in the most profound ways. But we also have the examples of other social movements or institutions that are happy to operate within the framework already provided (such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Red Cross, etc.). Surely, this statement does not mean that these movements and institutions do not have autonomy nor agency just because they operate within a pre-established framework. While operating within a given framework, their actions and attitudes may be directed at the framework with a desire and intent to both challenge and reform it. However, in the light of the discussion on systemic power and its implications of systemic violence, a difficult and controversial exercise is to imagine a practice of autonomy in an interconnected world. Or should terms and practices such as agency and autonomy always be regarded as implying some sense of uneasy limitation, reserve, conditioning, and dependency?

Suggested  
Reading:

**Le Carré, John.** 2001. *The constant gardener*. New York: Scribner.

**Parents Circle website.** [www.theparentscircle.com](http://www.theparentscircle.com) (accessed 5 September 2006).

**Ronit, A. and Bacha, J. (Directors).** *Encounter Point (A documentary)*. [www.encounterpoint.com](http://www.encounterpoint.com) (accessed 5 September 2006)

**Zapatista website.** [www.ezln.org.mx](http://www.ezln.org.mx) (accessed 5 September 2006)