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1-800-How-Am-I-Driving?

Agency in Social Science History

As agents, we all act on behalf of others and of our own accord: these are socially and historically interrelated orientations to action in contemporary America. But as chains of accountability erode at work and in the economy, as layers of aides and representatives proliferate in social welfare, and as outsourcing comes to define prisonfare at home and mercenary warfare abroad, the challenges of agency relations come to the fore. These processes are counterposed to and entwined with more playful forms of action through self-representation, now in Facebook and its ilk increasingly mediated through technics, but rooted in far older forms of confessional speech and writing. How, then, do we begin to understand postmodern agency? This address, an invitation and a first step, locates the vicissitudes of everyday agency in America in comparative-historical context.

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.
(William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence")

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I

If you've ever driven on an American highway, you will have seen trucks sporting some version of a "1-800-How-Am-I-Driving?" sticker. You will also be familiar with what are—in some key ways—the truckers' female analogues at Walmart, Target, and other big-box stores. "How May I Help You?" read the buttons or stitching on their uniforms. This is the Blakean grain of sand with which I began thinking about this essay, and about a burgeoning series of problems in contemporary American life. The form of address of these stickers, buttons, and uniforms, seemingly so immediate and casual, is in reality, of course, highly stylized. Nor is the "I" that of any particular driver or clerk. In fact, he or she would not want to know what you really think, and for good reason. "Who the hell cares?" one trucker asked me as he was idling by the side of I-90 outside Buffalo, New York. The other drivers on the road aren't his customers, supervisors, coworkers, or friends. They are just . . . passing by.

Some of you will have driven trucks, if only for a summer job. Others will have worked as cashiers or clerks and had to wear buttons or uniforms like these. Most readers are not on the receiving end of reports or calls, however, but instead might have reported or called in. At the 1-800-827-SAFE or the 1-800-2-ADVISE Web site, the trucker's fictive "I" rapidly gives way to that of a putative employer, who is pitching to a prospective client. For example: "DriverCheck helps its clients reduce collisions and collision-related costs—saving lives, saving jobs, and increasing profits. A unique number identifies each vehicle in your fleet . . . etc."¹ Do those 1-800 phone numbers look familiar, by the way? Many companies outsource to DriverCheck and its cousins, and that is why all numbers on the backs of trucks start to ring a bell.

Let's say that you've had trouble on the road and you've called in. Or that you have been especially impressed with a clerk's service and want to put in a good word. After navigating a Web site or negotiating the phone tree, you may reach somebody (a live person) on the other end of the line. That person is sitting in a call center, reading a customer service script, somewhere in the United States, or overseas, where workers are trained to impersonate Americans and then are themselves evaluated by similar standards and scripts. The breadcrumb trail of that fictive "I" is scattered far and wide. The Teamsters may represent the worker in dealing with the consequences of your call. NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Services Com-

panies), the Indian consortium, may represent the call center. Depending on what transpired, you might contact a lawyer to represent you, dial the police, seek help from friends and family, or write the Better Business Bureau, the *New York Times*' Haggler, or your representative in Congress. Truckers have their own networks of representation and support and their own routes of reply; some of the more spontaneous ones, if you look closely at the scribbled and profanity-laced editorializing on truck stickers, you have actually seen.

None of the above is seamless. Whether you are a consumer, a worker, or both, you certainly will have found that trails tend to peter out in uncharted quasi-bureaucratic wastes, with no clearly localizable sense of ultimate responsibility or decision. That, too, is part of the field of agency of contemporary postmodern life, a radiating network—or crazy quilt—enveloping not just America but also the globe. Like today's consumers and workers, social science historians are probably more likely to be irritated and intimidated than to grapple with this frustrating relational field. Nevertheless, it makes sense to explore and better understand the social plumbing of modern American agency if we are to have any hope of repair.²

II

agency

1 a : the office or function of an agent b : the relationship between a principal and that person's agent

2 : the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power : OPERATION

3 : a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved : INSTRUMENTALITY <communicated through the *agency* of the ambassador>

4 : an establishment engaged in doing business for another <an advertising *agency*>

5 : an administrative division (as of a government) <the *agency* for consumer protection>

(Merriam-Webster 2003)

In our line of work, *agency* is a word to conjure with. As anybody who has ever taken or taught a social science history or historical social science class knows, *agency* connotes capacity, power, free will, action—which in this day and age are positively inflected ideas. Sometimes it is a trump card in a seminar and a useful intellectual bludgeon—as in the perennial question, posed to the authors of many a book or paper found lacking by seminar partici-

pants: “But what about agency?” The flip side is also familiar. An agent is somebody to whom someone gives orders or entrusts a task. An agent is also someone who or something that acts “on behalf of” someone or something else. Both major meanings, summed up in the dictionary definitions above, are familiar from everyday life. Both flourish in the Social Science History Association annual conference programs, an indication of their place in our collective scholarship from the ground up. These meanings are fertile, familiar, and—at first glance—contradictory. The power to act on one’s own and the necessity of acting at another’s behest are difficult to reconcile.

The classical European social theorists thought that the contradiction of agency developed over time. But as long as there have been parents and children, action “on behalf of” has been foundational, always already there as a social, biological, philosophical condition of all societies. How then can the forms of agency that constitute action “on behalf of” also be . . . historical?

On one level, the classical theorists’ answers to that question look quite different. Take Thomas Hobbes (2010), in *Leviathan*. By dint of their very energies and desires, Hobbes argues, in a war of all against all, men lose control even of their basic conditions of life. But they can reestablish order, and at a higher level than before, by consenting to sacrifice their individual aims and capacities, submerging them in the sovereign’s. If the early modern historical problem was politics by other means, in other words, the answer was state building. The sovereign sword arm is both more fragile and more threatening than it looks. But let’s leave aside for the moment the possibilities of individual opt-out and political devolution or rulers run amok—the principal-agent problem, in which either the agent charged with a task on behalf of the principal acts off his own bat, or the principals systematically encroach on the agents’ rights. Contemporary utilitarians like James S. Coleman (1990) and Avner Greif (2006) have explored these features of state formation with more technical brio, but the original historical caesura, the one-two punch of delegating agency first to the sovereign and then to the sovereign’s lieutenant, is still recognizably Hobbes’s.

For Karl Marx, the historical prime mover was “capitalism.” In his early writings Marx analyzes how workers lose control of the products of their labor, their relations with others, their selves, and their species being. The alienated fragments take on lives of their own, whether as religion or as fetishized commodities. Marx envisions “an enchanted, perverted, topsyturvy world in which *Monsieur le Capital* and *Madame la Terre*, who are social

characters as well as mere things, do their *danse macabre*” (quoted in Lefort 1999: 105). *The Communist Manifesto* forecasts the climactic resolution of these agency problems in the destruction of capitalism—and capitalists—and the liberation of the working class in proletarian revolution (Marx and Engels 1998). By knowing its abasement as the culmination of the development of capitalist crisis and then acting accordingly, the proletariat will abolish the dichotomies between subject and object, self and others, and put a period to the alienated dynamics of history.

For these classical theorists, and the legions of others whose works have a similar structure, the roots of this modern romance are deep and tangled. They arise from subterranean Christian vocabularies; from nostalgia for childhood identified with visions of country and family; from the stirrings of science; from epochal colonial encounters; from mythology, poetry, and literature; from the teachings of rhetoric; and from traditions of staging politics and envisioning politics in dramaturgical patterns. They flower in the vortex of modernity, where all that is solid melts into air. To repair what has been sundered, to make whole both the person and social life, is a dream as old as or older than that articulated by Aristophanes in Plato’s (2001) *Symposium*. To perfect or even abolish action “on behalf of,” even if ironically through an agent like the vanguard party or Emile Durkheim’s (1997) professional associations—the belief that this is not just possible but historically and dialectically driven is the core of these arguments and visions. In all of them, agency as freedom and power of self is reconciled with a utopian vision of agency as acting for, and along with, others. Such arguments have diffused far beyond Europe, not least in the spread of secularized forms like Marxism or therapeutics via Sigmund Freud, that infused their logic into cultures lacking other original presuppositions of these styles of modernity.

In my view, Max Weber best captured the historical inevitability and potential anguish of these antinomies. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in 1905, Weber (2001) analyzes the individual’s sacralization, developing in tandem with his or her heightened organizational surveillance in sectarian governance. Weber also traces the rise of empires, states, and modern rational-legal corporations. He taps the great increase of power and reach and, at the same time, the constitutive vulnerability at the core of the ruler-staff and other hierarchical ties that multiply, intensify, and extend in time and space (Weber 1968). Weber does differ from other classical social theorists in that he foresees no resolution, no “end of days.” In his 1918

essay “Science as a Vocation,” partisans of *Wissenschaft* are enjoined to face the lack of ultimate foundations for that or any other enterprise, to nevertheless continue to do good work and otherwise meet the demands of the day (Weber 1946).

So the classical theorists told stories—staged dramas—of how agency was originally split, how it exists in fallen form, and how it will be dialectically resolved and transcended. (I bracket the question of how the scientificity of these accounts is related to their literary-dramaturgical structure or their millenarian strivings.) These theorists converged on a set of big, collectively researchable “why questions”—with agency-related hypotheses—that galvanized decades of tremendous social science history. Why, under what conditions, does patrimonial power give way to democracy and rational-legal bureaucracy? Why does the category of the individual arise? Why are some peoples deemed uncivilized by others? Why do men and women make revolutions? Why do we have economic crises, and, when we do, why haven’t we seen them coming? Why do women’s status and capacities initially drop with the rise of the state? Why do people in cities feel powerful one moment and puny the next? Why are some things sacred to us, and how do we ourselves seek to make them so? These are still important questions, and not merely at preliminary-exam time. As Charles Kurzman notes in his 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article “Reading Weber in Tehran,” for example, the hard-line government there was running show trials and imprisoning social and human scientists (its own words), extracting coerced confessions “admitting” that Weber’s concept of patrimonial government cannot apply to contemporary Iran. We have the luxury, hard-won in the past, of addressing these matters under more comfortable conditions.

III

In contemporary America, however, these “why questions” are no longer enough. For agency relations haven’t been perfected or transcended in modernity; instead, they’ve spread like wildfire in every sphere of life.

There is, first of all, the sheer increase in size of agencies (plural) charged with doing on behalf of others. William Novak (2008: 766) remarks on the “characteristic sprawl” of the American state, which assumed most of its mass in the twentieth century and now weighs in at over 89,000 separate, unsystematically related governmental units. Hobbes’s sovereign has given

way to Google for Government, and the mouse is mightier than the sword. Second, the service sector, both public and private, now accounts for perhaps 80 percent of the American economy. Jobs and professions dedicated to doing on behalf of others have increased by leaps and bounds. Financial services alone have reached 20 percent of overall economic activity. Even among other advanced industrial, capitalist countries, the United States is service-heavy. These rough quantitative movements encode a qualitative transformation that social scientists have tried to name in various ways: postindustrial or postmodern society; network society; information society; risk society. Underlying these catchy and unevenly applicable terms are, I think, fundamental changes in agency relations. The key dimensions of doing on behalf of others in service jobs have been systematically abstracted, commodified, xeroxed, and regulated, while multiplying in unforeseen ways.

In *The Managed Heart* Arlie Hochschild (1985) highlighted the “emotion work” and presentation of self embodied in personal service jobs. She illuminated the gender and sexual division of labor that characterizes the worlds of the smiling flight attendant and the threatening collection agent. Whether the performative display of commodified self is always alienating, as Hochschild contended, or in some circumstances enabling and enjoyable—as Rachel Sherman (2007) argues in *Class Acts*, an ethnography of workers in luxury hotels in northern California—is still under debate. But the sunnier side of this, “carework,” has become more pervasive, in part via cultural memes, in part as women have moved into new areas of the division of labor and have infused—or been expected to infuse—their work with a stylized feminine touch.³ Carework reaches its organizational apotheosis in the “welfare state.” Simply by using those terms, social science historians mark off—and normatively privilege—the state as public agent of social well-being. In reality, that marked boundary is highly permeable. As any of you know who have personally shepherded even one case—perhaps your own or a family member’s—through the circuits of social welfare, the case’s path traverses public and private, family and business services, church, friends, courts and parties. Professional advocates also get in the game. You and your agents (if they actually act as agents, always an open question), have to fight to keep even that one case from wandering off track. The concatenated natural histories of such cases would, I think, bear out Andrea Campbell and Kimberly Morgan’s (2009) comparative argument that the U.S. welfare state is unusually “delegated.”

Surely this fact owes something to the convoluted history of social provision, which stretches from the Little Commonwealth and Catholic missions through ladies' visiting and the Progressive Era; New Deal class pressures and alliances; the sixties-era social movements and racialized regional pacts of the Nixon White House; and the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act to the ongoing struggle over national health care. But as an emergent sphere of action, carework has also taken on a level of generative complexity and indeterminacy, and sometimes just plain weirdness, that nobody has foreseen. This has happened in the United States and other national welfare systems. Emergent jobs like "patient advocate" exemplify the negotiated space of action on behalf of . . . whom, or what? The patient? The patient's family? The hospital? Insurance companies? The state? Lawyers? Subcontracted business services? The advocate himself or herself? If there was ever a site that testified to the fantasy of unitary sovereignty, this is it. Nowadays the thickets of social welfare seem like Charles Darwin's tangled bank. When we try to make sense of them, we have definitively departed from even Weber's theoretical universe.

While apparently leagues apart from social welfare, the American coercive apparatus has been subject to similar dynamics. Waves of outsourcing have blurred the lines between public and private, both in the recent shift of prison management to private companies and in the opening of prison labor to business services. They have also created agency problems that fall most heavily on America's poor and minorities, for since the 1970s the leap in the number of imprisoned—who are, disproportionately, black men—has shown another, crueler face of the American state (see Wacquant 2009). To see this as the unilateral consequence of a top-down command-and-control hierarchy, however, would be a mistake. Never established in anything like European terms, America's incomplete state monopoly on force, coupled with an armed culture of honor that is most salient in urban ghettos and in the South, plays a significant part. In this context Jill Lepore (2009) recognizes the work of Pieter Spierenburg (2008), as well as the late Eric Monkkonen's (2000) argument that the loose weave of federalism (among other factors) imparts a particularly volatile dynamic to the American way of punishment—now, of course, in full-scale crisis.

Top-down delegation loosely and contingently coupled with local powers and actors: this nexus also characterizes the U.S. state's settled military commitments and imperial ventures. The peace dividend that held down

corruption and kept military spending more or less constant in real terms for decades ended in 2001, and Americans have entered an intensified era of executive presidency at the same time that problems of delegation have taken on new urgency. Private security agencies like Blackwater (now Xe) and Custer Battles alternately skirmish and collaborate with local warlords, indigenous state builders, and semiautonomous imitations of U.S. state governments. Right now there are more security contractors than military personnel in Afghanistan, and their use is expected to increase as American forces shrink (Glanz and Lehren 2010). This (chaotically) reconstituted patrimonialism is strangely familiar to early modernists, who are necessarily well versed in the long global history of mercenary and military chartered companies. Those companies were putative agents of metropolitan merchants and states, but they quickly became actors in their own right: innovators, exploiters, and loose cannons that changed the fate of colonies, the *metropole*, and the overall shape of history. Centuries later, without ever having wanted it so, we find ourselves in an even more fraught and unpredictable place.

In welfare, prisonfare, warfare, and beyond, the principal-agent problem is proliferating into entirely new social dimensions.⁴ This strange proliferation, with its emergent puzzles, impels us to leave behind, however appreciatively, the classical theorists. People have tried to gesture at the novelty with terms like *risk society*, but the concepts fall short because they fail to foreground the principal-agent problem as the challenge of the twenty-first century.

IV

“On behalf of.” “As if.” Parts of speech trace linguistic operations. They also capture the variable language of subjectivity. Sometimes, as in the case of the trucker on I-90 or the Walmart clerk, the distance between the ascribed, stylized pronoun—that “I” or “you” or “we”—and the self can feel as unbridgeable as the Grand Canyon. At other points it is as if the self had vanished in the magic of successful social hailing. This is true in humdrum moments that rely on workaday identifications and also in moments of collective emotional effervescence: as if I were that “I” or we that “we” and the existential distance inscribed in the proffered agency relation just disappears.

This particular genre of hailing is culturally structured, and it can get complicated if it is to feel simple. People tasked with advertising on behalf

of political campaigns—for example, those who borrowed the famous Shepard Fairey “Hope” image of Barack Obama or repurposed, again for Obama, the “Yes We Can!” slogan originally assigned to Rosie the Riveter—create or take up representations based on what has seemed to work in the past, in this case the forms of address and visual tropes of earlier popular-culture campaigns, including wartime propaganda, 1930s social realism, and Mount Rushmore-style statist commemoration. Such sweeping identifications can have a nasty underside, if the “them” that is juxtaposed to “us” is made the repository of all of the negative characteristics expunged from the representations with which “we” then proudly identify. This is one of the core arguments in Frantz Fanon’s 1952 work *Black Skin, White Masks*—which Fanon (1994) made eloquently about how white men envision black men but then unconsciously replicated when it came to women, his own negative Other.

In the Rosie the Riveter image and slogan, however, the Others against whom the “we” is defined are not condemned; rather, all women, and even men who identify with the “we” of American nationhood, are tacitly invited to join. The appeal in the “Hope” poster similarly embraces the nation as a whole, and although America is necessarily juxtaposed to other countries in a system of nation-states, the air of afflatus suggests that they could ally with “us” in some wider collective enterprise. The poster in this sense functions like the song “We Are the World,” originally recorded on behalf of Africa in 1985 and now a meme replicated in charity organizing campaigns. When it works, the felt dissolution of that distance between the self and a proffered stylized pronominal “I,” or “we,” can be a thrilling experience. Without it, great collective political movements would simply not be possible.

When the circuit of identification is broken, the affirmative “as if” becomes, in the Valley Girl locution, the snarky “as iiiiff!”⁵ These moments are the bane of the political consultant’s existence, and they make us all unhappy when they mean that things aren’t going our way. But such miniature refusals are also reassuring. Personally, while “Yes We Can!” resonates with me, I also take comfort in the glitches and gaps in big pitches and interpellations and in the opening to individual human freedom that they signal. This touches, again, the conundrum of agency, which can be writ small yet be large in its consequences and which is fissured yet whole, historical and always being renewed. The “I” is painfully and triumphantly built up in each of us at our parents’ knees, in schools, amid our peers, from beloved books, on the job, with friends and lovers, at church, with counselors and other pro-

professionals, in encounters with media of all kinds, and in and against multiple interpersonal and mass publics. And the converse? People invent ways to store their more or less authorized offshoots. So as to connect with others, accomplish things, and understand and perform identities, they outsource their evolving “I’s.”

Stephen Greenblatt gives a nice account of this with respect to the lyric poems of Thomas Wyatt, penned as Wyatt was trying to make his way in Henry VIII’s minefield of a court, uncomfortably in love with Henry’s mistress Anne Boleyn while working as a diplomat in Henry’s interests. “[A] poem itself is a kind of agent, sent forth to perform the bidding of his master,” writes Greenblatt (1980: 142). Refracted through rules of language, it is “governed by its overarching purpose, which is to enhance its creator’s personal position, to manifest and augment his power.” Power political and power erotic: the two were hopelessly entangled in courtly poems like “They Flee from Me” and “The Lover Despairing to Attain unto His Lady’s Grace Relinquisheth the Pursuit,” the latter known more familiarly as “Whoso List” (Wyatt 1978: 77):

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
 But as for me, alas, I may no more:
 The vain travail hath wearied me so sore.
 I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
 Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
 Draw from the Deer; but as she fleeth afore,
 Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
 Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.
 Who list her hunt I put him out of doubt,
 As well as I may spend his time in vain:
 And graven with diamonds in letters plain,
 There is written her fair neck round about:
Noli me tangere, for Caesar’s I am,
 And wild for to hold though I seem tame.

Wyatt’s poem did many things at the time, including intervene in the sexual politics of the English court and the power games of Renaissance diplomacy. It now does some different things, if no longer on behalf of Sir Thomas himself. For where does any Wyatt poem go, eventually? “It finds its way into commonplace books, is set to music, and circulated outside the court,

is included in anthologies and quoted in handbooks on the art of poetry” (Greenblatt 1980: 142). Perhaps surprisingly, since Greenblatt wrote *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Wyatt’s poems, and Wyatt, continue to live on in Anglo-American popular culture, in forms low—say, the steamy bodice-ripper Showtime series *The Tudors*—or, as in Wyatt’s literary portrait limned in Hilary Mantel’s brilliant novel *Wolf Hall* (2009), not so.

People are more likely today to tweet than to pen a lyric poem, though, like Wyatt’s courtly poems, Twitter can make a difference in high politics. Instead of picking up a pen, we deploy our iPhones—that little machine (or should we say, horcrux?) prefaced with funky lowercase “i,” signifying information/internet but also, let’s face it, the stylized self—to record, remember something or not have to remember it, solve problems, get ourselves up in the morning, organize demonstrations, serenade ourselves, impress others, explore, play, and sometimes even make a call. Connect. Only connect.

The fictive “I” that is simultaneously the representation of a revealed interior self with which we are solicited to identify “as if” we were the speaker—this is a language and a way of acting in the world that is created from many agencies. Wyatt’s greatest poems are part progenitors of Facebook and its ilk. They are part of the heritage of the indignities of the “1-800-How-Am-I-Driving?” bumper stickers and the “How May I Help You?” Walmart uniforms. In a small but distinctive way, too, the poems have widened human capacities for self-knowledge, enabled identification with others, and engendered an imaginative space of gorgeous, dangerous literary and political play. Can we have the good without the bad? Can we even sort out which is which? How?

V

Technics play a growing and more general role in the autonomization of agency. In the recent, or rather the ongoing, financial crisis, there were many subsidiary disasters—for example, with incentives and with the “multitask agency problem,” in which bank loan officers and other originators of mortgages were rewarded on the volume instead of the quality of the business that they wrote. But one of the key problems involved the rules for pricing complicated assets in terms of simpler ones.

Let’s say, following Avinash Dixit’s (pers. com., November 2009) amusing example, that you are an investor who hates inflation and loves gold:

But gold bars are difficult to buy, and costly to store (with the added risk of theft). You can buy stock in South African or Russian gold mining companies whose share prices will be strongly correlated with the price of gold. But that will expose you to exchange rate risk, which you can offset by selling short South African rands or Russian rubles. You may also want to buy political risk insurance, especially in the case of Russia. So the appropriately designed package (gold mine stock, short position in foreign exchange, and political risk insurance) can create the same return-risk profile as gold bars in the United States, and be easier to hold. Of course you could create such a package yourself, but as an individual investor you will have to bear higher transaction costs for the three assets. A mutual fund company can create that portfolio for you, price it using the no-arbitrage formula, and sell it to you as a single asset, for a lower transaction cost, exploiting scale economies because it can sell the same asset to many “gold bugs” like you.

In the crisis, Dixit points out, several things went wrong. Some were about properties of the specific distributed agency relationships, unrelated to the technical formulas of finance, but others were about how the formulas were used or even, inherently, about the formulas themselves. The formulas translate one asset into the terms of another rather than into connection with fundamentals of the political economy. But in my incorrigible noneconomist view, I wonder about a more general quandary. The sets of agency relations, including the technically encoded ones that helped engender the crisis, were flawed. They were based, via the return and risk profiles, on wildly inaccurate assumptions about actors and states of the world, and they encouraged those who held others' money in trust to waste or plunder it.

Yet we need those agency relations, or some version of them. We can't return to a situation in which each of us buys gold bars, let alone mines the gold in them. Likewise, most of us are not going to abandon our jobs to become subsistence farmers, homeschooling our children and eventually employing them on our farms. Our personal capacity to act in this world will continue to depend on many other people, most of whom we will never know or whose actions on our behalf, or the techniques and products that they devise, we will never control or even understand. The financial crisis is a stark reminder of the hidden depths and difficulties of that necessary interdependency.

At the core of the most autonomic structures is also the sanctified and authorized “I,” a historical creature-in-relationship that now has a voice in everyday life. What the crisis reveals is how much better we need to understand the tremendous complexity of principal-agent problems, and agency in general, in a postmodern world. Those equipped to do so should think about that, as our agents, and share proposed solutions, and the reasoning that lies behind them, in public debate.

VI

In a *New York Times* column that really moved me, Bob Herbert (2009) expresses his worry about Americans’ political passivity. “This is so wrong,” he writes.

It is the kind of thinking that would have stopped the civil rights movement in its tracks, that would have kept women in the kitchen or the steno pool, that would have prevented labor unions from forcing open the doors that led to the creation of a vast middle class. . . .

With that kind of attitude, Andrew Goodman would never have left the comfort of his family home in Manhattan. Rosa Parks would have gotten up and given her seat to a white person, and the Montgomery bus boycott would never have happened. Betty Friedan would never have written “The Feminine Mystique.”

Herbert attributes this passivity—very un-historical-sociologically, to be sure—to Americans’ refusal to acknowledge any sense of personal responsibility, such that “being an American has become,” he says, “a spectator sport.” He counsels individuals to get involved. Some would dismiss Herbert as hopelessly voluntarist and naive, and it is true that his call to action washes out many of the complexities that bedevil us. But with a nod to the irrepressible spirit of the seminar participant who pipes up, “But what about agency?” I think that the recovery of the possibility of a collectively enabled self acting on behalf of others, Americans but not *just* Americans, is a shared hope and a noble one. What can we do to bring this about? Part of the answer will be theoretical, so good theoretical practice has its place, I strongly believe. So do research, teaching, and working in the public spheres of social science history and *Wissenschaft* in general. So does time for one’s own idiosyncratic pursuits. And maybe—here is Herbert again—

maybe you want to speak up publicly about an important issue, or host a house party, or perhaps arrange a meeting of soon-to-be dismissed employees, or parents at a troubled school.

It's a risk, sure. But the need is great, and that's how you change the world.

That's right.

It seems essential to demand better technics and more civic participation and transparency in the instruments of finance, in the workings of government, and in the multiple spheres of associational life, but without falling prey to the classical theorists' utopian—to me, *dystopian*—dream of agency overcome or perfectly disciplined. These challenges are enormous and ineradicable. They are even part of what makes us human: we are compounded of other people, from birth, and our intersecting lives consist of the messy action of historical selves and others in felt connection and imagined interaction. That mundane reality is repressed in the more rationalist and individualistic paradigms that structure capitalist economic activity, fantasies of dispensing with government, and grand, go-it-alone global political strategies. Nor does it surface in the theories of the Right or Left that envision a perfectly unified collectivity on some utopian horizon.

Now is the time to take agency seriously, on behalf of the future.

Notes

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- 1 For example, the DriverCheck How's My Driving? site can be found at public.drivercheck.net/index.php/main/main.
- 2 The evocative phrase *social plumbing*, meaning agency relations, is Harrison White's (1991: 188).
- 3 See, e.g., www.carework-network.org.
- 4 Wacquant (2009) coined and popularized the term *prisonfare*, which I borrow here in my contrast to the apparatuses of warfare and welfare.
- 5 According to Wikipedia's Valspeak entry, *as if!* is used "as its own sentence," contradicting the previous sentence or demonstrating skepticism: "As if [I would ever do that!]."

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