



## Reassessing Agency And Power: Anthony Giddens And Michel Foucault

**Dr. Jati Sankar Mondal**

Associate Professor

Department of English

Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University

**Asish Kumar**

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University

**Abstract:** The proposed paper would attempt to study the phenomenon of power and its relation with human agency. Agency has broadly been defined as an Individual's capacity to act. The exercise or manifestation of an agent's actions hold some form of power. In this regard, agency and power are intricately connected with each other. Powerless individuals fail to exercise their agency in the society. Interestingly, powerlessness does not refer merely to the absence of physical power, but all forms of power in Foucauldian sense. Individuals in a societal structure are not equally positioned in relation to power. The dominated groups or marginalized individuals face greater constraints in exercising their agency due to the power imbalances which is prevalent in the society. This paper, thus aims at expounding the Foucauldian forms of power and its relation with the individual agency as propounded by Anthony Giddens.

**Keywords:** Power, Agency, Foucault, marginalized, Society, Structure

In social sciences the term ‘agency’ is used to refer to the capacity of an individual to make decisions and act upon his/her decisions. The exercise or manifestation of this capacity of a particular individual is known as agency of that individual. It is the human capability of an individual to act independently, make choices, and shed off various influences over their lives and their decision-making abilities. This notion of agency got emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s and it was Anthony Giddens who first popularized the idea of agency in social sciences. Giddens along with other anthropologists namely Pierre Bourdieu and Marshall Sahlins, focused on the way in which human actions are intricately related with the social structure. Social structure refers to the way in which a particular society is formed. It includes individuals from various communities as well as various classes. The behaviours of the individuals in a society becomes the rule or norms of that society and it determines the relations of the individuals in that particular society. Human actions are shaped and modified by the social structure in a particular society. Sherry Ortner who carries forward this study, names this school of thought as “Practice theory”. This notion of agency has been broadly discussed by Anthony Giddens in his books titled *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979) and *The Constitution of the Society* (1984). In his theory of structuration, Anthony Giddens points out two major parts of agency. The first one focuses on the action which is related to consciousness and the other one is related to the power. He argues that agency is exercised by the particular individuals having consciousness about the self and the society. Society is a recursive phenomenon and again society is constituted of the continuous practices of individuals and their behaviours. Giddens observes agency as the capability of an individual to act as per his/her intentions. In his *The Constitution of the Society* (1984) Giddens observes:

Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capacity of doing those things in the first place (which is why agency implies power: cf. the Oxford English Dictionary definition of an agent, as ‘one who exerts power or produces an effect’). Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened. Action is a continuous process, a flow, in which the reflexive monitoring which the individual maintains is fundamental to the control

of the body that actors ordinarily sustain throughout their day to day lives. (Giddens, *The Constitution*, 9)

The notion of agency is closely connected with concepts such as – free will or autonomy of the individual, individual's determination, empowerment as well as resistance. However, Giddens in his theory of agency critiques the idea of free will. The notion of free will, which is similar as the intention of the individual, is full of complications. In fact, the idea of free will is complicated in itself. There is always a limitation that an individual can perform. Therefore, Giddens prefers agency to be the capability of an individual to perform an action. This performance of an act, carries a form of power that the individuals possess. In the same line of argument Ivan Karp in her 1985 article titled “Agency and Social Theory: A Review of Anthony Giddens” engages with the concept of agency and there she argues that the agent engages in his/her exercise of power. It is the exercise of one's ability to perform according to one's decisions. Keeping the notion of power in mind, Karp argues:

In the exercise of power in its primary sense of the “bringing about of effects” that is engaged in action that is constitutive. Agency implies the idea of “casual power” through which we realise the potential of the world. (Karp 137)

In social sciences, power suggests to the capability of an individual or a group to exercise control and make influence over others in the society. However, Michel Foucault's conception of power is complex and multifaceted. He challenges the traditional view of power as possession and repression, that is generally used by the dominant class as a form of domination to dominate the powerless groups in a society. The theme of power emerged as an important component after the publication of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* in 1975. Foucault in his theory of power focuses not the traditional views of power, rather he focuses on how power relations create inequality as well as domination in the society.

Foucault started his genealogical examination with the query of how power is exercised and what is the relation between power and knowledge. Foucault's argument regarding the relationship between power and knowledge is that:

Power produces knowledge; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault, *Discipline and, 27*)

Henceforth, in Foucauldian sense, power and knowledge are not two different things, rather both are intricately connected with each other and they function through 'discourse'. Foucault interrogates this idea of power and he opines that power is not a tangible thing that the individuals possess, rather power is dynamic and it exists in a particular situation in a society.

Power is not an institution, and not a structure, neither it is a certain strength we are endowed with, it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge, 236*)

Foucault further suggests that power is not something which is possessed by a group of people, rather power is present in all social relationships as well as in interactions.

Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (Foucault, *The History of, 93*)

Foucault dealt with the questions regarding how and through which medium, power is exercised. In short, power is not a property of any individual or the ruling group, rather "it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, *The History of 93*).

In his book *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* (1978), Foucault points out that power is not oppressive but it is also positive, productive as well as creative. Unlike the Marxist thinkers who believed that power has oppressive characteristics; Foucault focuses on those individuals or groups who challenge the power when it is exercised on them. Lois McNay argues in this regard that:

Most of the social analysts tend to regard power in an essentially negative manner, as a repressive force which is the property of an elite and is used to maintain social hierarchies. Foucault rejects such a uni-directional and repressive notion of power, replacing it with a

concept of power as an essentially positive force which permeates all levels of society, engendering a multiplicity of relations other than those simply of domination. (McNay 90)

It is worthy to mention that the exercise of power does not impose any prohibition upon the powerless groups. Foucault argues that power co-exists with resistance.

Where there is power, there is resistance, that power depends for its existence on the presence of a multiplicity of points of resistance. (Foucault, *The History of 93-93*)

In an equal tone, Mark G. E. Kelly opines that power in Foucauldian sense “coextensive with resistance, productive, producing positive effects; ubiquitous, being found in any kind of relationships” (Kelly 38).

Foucault's notion regarding power/knowledge is intricately related with the agency of the individuals. According to Foucault, power is not a repressive force exercised by one group over another, but a complex network of relationships and practices that permeate all aspects of society. Power operates through various mechanisms and techniques that regulate and shape individuals' behaviours, thoughts, and identities. And knowledge is equally not separate from power but both are intricately related with each other. The production and control of knowledge are connected to the exercise of power. Foucault points out in his book *The History of Sexuality* (1978) that:

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable processes whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, *History of*, 101)

Knowledge as theorised by Foucault is another central point to be an agency and use his/her agency. Knowledge and power both are interrelated. Foucault also highlights the limitations of agency. While individuals have the ability to resist and challenge the power, these acts of resistance are not always transformative or revolutionary. Individuals in the societal structures are not equally positioned in relation to power, and certain groups, particularly dominated individuals or groups face greater constraints on their agency.

As pointed out earlier, the very definition of agency suggests that agency holds some power as pointed out by the critics mentioned in the earlier part of this chapter. Giddens who first popularised the term 'agency' opines that agency holds some 'casual power' that the agent deploys. His argument is that, for an individual to act against the prevalent practices, the agent needs some 'casual power'. Without 'casual power', the agent cannot perform and therefore, he would have to refrain from such acts. The action of the agent depends upon the 'casual power' of the agent who will be able to make a difference to the existing power that is prevalent in the society. The individual would must be in possession of the capability to make influence upon the society to be an agent.

To be able to 'act otherwise' means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs. This presumes that to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically in the flow of daily life) a range of casual powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a preexisting state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to 'make a difference' that is to exercise some sort of power. (Giddens, *The Constitution*, 14)

In the same line of argument Ivan Karp has equally observed that "Agency implies the idea of "casual power" through which we realise the potential of the world" (Karp 137). If one looks at the article of Sherry B. Ortner, there he equivocally points out that agency can be labelled as a synonym of power that individuals possess. Agency as pointed out by Ortner is important in case of both 'resistance' and 'dominance'. Ortner finds that the dominating groups possess more agency when compared with the dominated groups. But in case of the dominated groups, resistance can be labelled as 'power agency'. As he argues:

In probably the most common usage, 'agency' is virtually synonymous with the forms of power people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their own behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain some kind of control in their own lives. Agency in this sense is relevant for both domination and resistance. People in positions of power 'have' – and are authorised to have – what might be thought of as 'a lot of agency,' but the dominated too always have certain

capacities, and sometimes very significant capacities, to exercise some sort of influence over the ways in which events unfold. Resistance then is a form of ‘power agency,’ and by now we have a well-developed theoretical repertoire of examining it. It includes everything from outright rebellions at one end, to various forms of what James Scott (1985) so aptly called ‘foot dragging’ in the middle, to – at the other end – a kind of complex and ambivalent acceptance of dominant categories and practices that are always changed at the very moment they are adopted. (Ortner 78).

Hence, power becomes a significant component when one theorizes agency. There remains some ‘casual power’ with the individuals of both the dominant and the dominated groups. In exercising agency as per the desire or intention of the individuals power plays a significant role. Without this power, one will fail to make an influence in the society. Although, it is true that the power is not equally distributed in the society and the dominant groups enjoy more power or more agency as compared to the individuals of the dominated groups. Consequently, this power imbalances give birth to the barriers especially for the individuals belonging to the dominated groups to exercise their agency freely in the society. Individuals from the dominated groups face various forms of barriers in exercising their agency. Due to the prevalence of the power imbalances in the society, individuals from the dominated groups fail to acquire knowledge which ends up in resulting their socio-economic and political deprivations.

## Works Cited

Ahearn, Laura M. “Agency.” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 1/2, 1999, pp. 12–15. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43102414>. Accessed 12 February 2022.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, 1978.

---. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books, 1995.

---. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. Pantheon Books, 1980.

Giddens, Anthony. *Central Problems in Social Theory*. Macmillan Education Ltd, 1979.

Giddens, Anthony. *The Constitution of the Society*. Polity Press, 1984.

Karp, Ivan. "Agency and Social Theory: A Review of Anthony Giddens." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1986, pp. 131–37. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/644591>. Accessed 30 June 2024.

Kelly, Mark.G.E. *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*. Routledge, 2009.

McNay, Lois. *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*. Polity Press, 1994.

Ortner, Sherry B. "SPECIFYING AGENCY The Comaroffs and Their Critics." *Interventions*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 76–84, doi:10.1080/13698010020027038.

