

MUSICAL IMPROVISATION AS A TYPE OF ACTION

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ABSTRACT

This presentation reflects upon musical improvisation from the perspective of the sociological theory of action. While a notion of human action as “composed” action dominates in the social sciences and has often been used to explain human behavior, an understanding of improvisation as a type of action has been neglected, despite its potential fruitfulness as a means of comprehending important aspects of human action, such as spontaneity or creativity.

Musical improvisation can be defined as the simultaneous composition and execution of music; one of its fundamental characteristics is its contrast to the principles of construction and rational planning which dominate the traditional idea of composition in western music. The improviser typically plays in an “unprepared” and spontaneous way in accordance with the defining feature of improvised music: its absence of predetermination. The sociological theory of action has in the past tended to conceive of the notion of human action as a rational drafted, conscious type of behaviour which is meaningful for the subject and which works according to the principle of a means-end-scheme. Drawing on scientific literature on musical improvisation, this analysis demonstrates that the current conception of action is not sufficient for a sufficiently differentiated understanding of the structure and processes of human action and that it does not take the spontaneous aspect of human conduct into consideration.

1. BACKGROUND

My presentation draws on the sociological theory of action, which seeks to identify and describe the general structure and the defining characteristics of human action. Within this framework, I reflect from the subjectivist perspective, trying to understand human action from the point of view of individual agents, which is also the aim of the phenomenologically oriented action theory of Alfred Schutz and his student Thomas Luckmann.

Within his theory of action, Schutz defines “action” as “an ongoing process which is devised by the actor in advance, that is, which is based upon a preconceived project” (Schutz 1962: 67, see also Luckmann 1992: 48ff). The term “act” designates for Schutz “the outcome of this ongoing process, that is, the accomplished action” (ibid.). Thus, Schutz and Luckmann argue that the actor must have projected¹ the act as a necessary

condition to his/her being able to act at all, with the result that he/she can orient his/her action towards the projected act as his/her goal. Schutz/Luckmann distinguish between two types of action: habitualized action and problem-solving action. While performing habitualized actions, such as brushing our teeth, our aims in acting remain more or less unconscious and we perform what we have already learned or habitualized “as usual”².

Within habitualized actions, the creation or emergence of new forms of action or of new “products” of action is not possible. However, within “problematic” situations in which the steps leading to the completion of the action or its goals are uncertain and the possible consequences of the act may be of great significance, we must take the action project and the aims of the action into careful consideration. In this case, different grades of creativity are required. For Schutz/Luckmann, an action takes place only when we have actually decided to carry out – or refrain – the project. In the case of habitualized actions, this decision does not present itself as an act of volition that is difficult to carry out. Instead, the processes of projecting and decision-making set in almost automatically. In contrast, in the case of problematic acts we consciously draft the project and the decision is a matter of considerable weight. This does not mean that we do not project routinized everyday acts; we project every act before we undertake it. The project, however, appears with different degrees of clarity in our consciousness, depending on which kind of action (habitualized or problem-solving) we undertake. In the case of problematic or uncertain action (i.e. not habitualized action) and while executing the act – while acting –, the actor orients him- or herself consciously to the succession of the single steps comprising the action. Each step in the action is a step “in-order-to”: seen from a temporal perspective, the current-prospective meaning of the action steps constitutes itself as a chain of “in-order-to-motives”, i.e. as the “wanting-to-reach” the projected aims of the action (see Luckmann 1992: 52-57).

Consequently, Schutz/Luckmann conceive of action as an activity of consciousness (ibid. 38) which is realized on the basis of rational, more or less well-considered decisions. According to Luckmann, purposefulness, the capacity to orient ourselves to goals in the future, characterizes human action (see Luckmann 1992: 6).

The defining features of human action proposed by Schutz/Luckmann – purposefulness or goal-directedness, the actor’s reflective attitude – coincide on the whole with the basic

¹ “All projecting consists in anticipation of future conduct by way of phantasying” (Schutz 1962: 20). Luckmann defines a “project” as a fantasy that is directed to the real expected future. The fantasy presupposes the attainability of a certain future and the practicability of a certain plan and must include an intention to realize it. The imagined act can be either vague or planed down to the smallest detail (see Luckmann 1992: 51ff.).

² This is possible because actions with typified aims can be stored in our stock of knowledge. If we possess these action “labelings” with their habitualized aims at our disposal as a part of our stock of knowledge and if the aims and action steps that lead to the aims are built into our daily routine and have been already carried out successfully, then we do not need to reflect upon the action project. It starts up automatically and, unnoticed by us, gets the action underway.

assumptions of the social sciences about human action.³ Despite their fundamental conceptional differences, most of the currently predominant sociological theories have, in terms of their definition of action, been clearly influenced by a means-end-scheme. This is the case in utilitarianism's individualistically motivated action model⁴, in Parsons's⁵ theoretical model of action as normatively conditioned, in Max Weber's ideal-typical classification of action⁶, and in the action model of the pragmatists⁷, George Herbert Mead, Hans Joas and also in Niklas Luhmann's⁸ model, all of which are anchored in practice (see also Fuchs-Heinritz (ed.) 1995: 263).

I nonetheless postulate that there exists at least one type of action – musical improvisation – which cannot be explained in terms of the rational, conscious means-end-scheme of action discussed above⁹.

³ This is especially true in Anglo-American scholarship, which has formulated the most influential theories of action with respect to political philosophy and economy (see Luckmann 1992: 11).

⁴ E.g. Hobbes and Locke – later termed “utilitarians” by Bentham –, conceived of human action as individual, purposeful, rational and carried out by egoistic acting subjects. While Joas defines this model of action as a “utilitarian rational model of action” (see Joas 1996: 22), Luckmann argues that, for Hobbes, egoism was the fundamental cause of all passions that determine human action (see Luckmann 1992: 10).

⁵ Parsons, too, conceives of action as purposeful. However, he sees – in contrast to the utilitarians – a guarantee of the existence of a social order in the existence of values a group has constructed together. He states that the “utilitarian rational model of action” can be overcome through the consideration of normative orientations that play a role in how we frame the purposes of our actions and how we as actors select means to our ends (see Joas 1996: 29). As in the utilitarian model, in the Parsonian theory the means-end-scheme remains as *definiens* of every action (ibid. 54).

⁶ Max Weber constructs his theory of action on the basis of the reasons for which we purposefully chose to act in a certain manner. In this way, he arrives at the categories of instrumentally rational action, (*zweckrationales Handeln*) value-rational action (*wertrationales Handeln*), affectual action, and traditional action, all of which are based on a kind of “rationality scale”. Types of action that deviate from rational action are understood as its deficient modi (see Joas 1996: 63). However, in Weber's definition of action, the means-end-scheme does not determine every (type of) action; consequently, action lacking an ends-rational-structure is also possible, to the extent that the actor associates his/her action with a meaning. According to Weber, “we shall speak of ‘action’ insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior—be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is ‘social’ insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.” (Weber 1978: 4).

⁷ From the pragmatists' perspective, we do not plan purposes and means of action before acting, rather *within* action, and these are always determined in relation to a concrete situation.

⁸ Although Niklas Luhmann, the most representative author of the systems-theory, does not deny the means-end-scheme in his conception of “action”, he argues that action is a process which is *not* structured according to ends and means of means-end-chains and within which purposes can increasingly become means for higher ones (see Luhmann 1968). For him, the ends of an action are instead mostly relatively uncertain and become specified only through the decision about which means are to be employed (see ibid. 227). This is also the assumption of pragmatists like Dewey, who do not de-contextualize their conception of action from practice (see Joas 1996: 223).

2. AIMS

My presentation is theory-driven and my goal is to contrast these dominant conceptions from the sociological theory of human action with scholarly literature on musical improvisation. This phenomenon has not yet been taken into consideration as relevant to the conceptions on which the theory of this sociological field are based. The sociological theory of action has in the past tended to conceive of the notion of human action as a rationally “composed”, conscious type of behaviour which is meaningful for the subject and which operates according to the principle of a means-end-scheme. My paper will demonstrate that this way of conceiving of action is not sufficient for an understanding of how we act, nor does it address other forms of human action. In order to do so, I will use scholarly literature on the phenomenon of musical improvisation as an example which confirms my assertions.

3. DISCUSSION AND MAIN CONTRIBUTION

Musical improvisation can be defined as the simultaneous composition and execution of music; one of its fundamental characteristics is its contrast to the principles of construction and rational planning which dominate the traditional idea of composition in western music. The improviser typically plays in an “unprepared” and spontaneous way, demonstrating improvised music's defining feature: the absence of predetermination. I will examine the main characteristics of improvising in music in order to demonstrate that there are (other) types or aspects of human action which have been neglected in the social theory of action, despite its potential fruitfulness as a means of understanding spontaneity or creativity in our behavior.

3.1. Action Theory and Musical Improvisation

In contrast to the theoretical models of action described above, I base my thoughts on the assumption that human action cannot be conceived of as an exclusively purpose-oriented conscious process. Human action is *not only* a reflexive, rational, more or less conscious “doing” (*Tun*) nor does the emergence of new forms and “products” of action result only from conscious reflection¹⁰. Musical improvisation can be conceived of as an exemplary

⁹ Bailey (1992: xi), for instance, writes the following in relation to musical improvisation: “At the actual time of performance, the musician does not calculate the procedures that will guide his playing. Rather he plays from a level of consciousness somewhat removed from the purely rational”.

¹⁰ MacKinnon (1968: 438), for instance, includes among other things “excessive analytical attitude” under the obstacles to creative thinking and acting. Contrastingly, mental states such as day-dreaming promote creativity. Composers such as Beethoven, Chopin and Mozart – along with many others – composed many of their works in a day-dreaming state, shortly before sleeping or especially while waking up. “This mental state taps so productively into creativity because, once one has attained it, one becomes distanced from the outer world and experiences bodily well-being, and because it is characterized by the release and agility of all of our thought and imaginative processes” (see Rauchfleisch 1996: 32ff; for states of trance and subconscious composing processes see ibid. 40ff.).

type of action which enables us to fundamentally question the conventional sociological conception of the characteristics which define human action.¹¹

Consequently, a special field of human action, the process of making music¹², more specifically musical improvisation, is of particular interest for the present discussion. Musical improvisation can be “provisorily” defined as a singular type of action which is characterized by ambiguity: in the process of musical improvisation, automatism occurs simultaneously with creativity.

The paradox of musical improvisation consists in the fact that, on the one hand, it is characterized by creativity, which is why musical improvisation is generally considered a valid method of composition. On the other hand, however, musical improvisation seems to be a reproductive way of arranging music, in the sense that the musician, while playing, employs automatized processes in that he/she reproduces internalized sequences¹³ (see Müller 1994: 84).

Hence, improvisation combines *automatism* with *creativity*. What characterizes automatism is a non-reflexive, in some cases even unconscious way of acting, within which learned, inflexible mechanized schematized processes are repeated. Automatic acting is neither creative nor “problem-solving”. On the contrary, creative action as the result of which “something new” emerges is characterized by flexibility. Creative action *may* occur through conscious reflection, but this is not always the case. In this sense, research on musical improvisation may very well present a challenge to the conventional assumptions of the sociological theory of action. This phenomenon represents a “new” type of action within which the subjects do not necessarily project¹⁴ their action and which is neither necessarily reflexive nor purposeful, i.e., it is internally indeterminate.

Thus, in terms of its structure, musical improvisation must be distinguished from other types of action because it is *internally indeterminate*. In other words, neither the aims nor the steps of the action are projected before it is undertaken. “Internally indeterminate” means that not only are the contextual circumstances of action initially unlimited and unforeseeable, but also that both the process of acting as well as the act as a result of acting are unforeseeable for the acting subject himself/herself before he/she takes action. To use a musical metaphor, the act has not yet been composed when it is performed. The following descriptions of musical improvisation seem to confirm these assertions. Müller (1994: 82), for instance, defines musical improvisation as the simultaneous invention and performance of music, and at the same time as an independent art form. Defining features of different sorts of improvisation are that they are necessarily unprepared and spontaneous, in contrast to the composition of music, which is typically determined and thought-out. Unlike the principles of construction and rational planning present in composition, it is the principle of organic growth which dominates musical improvisation. Whereas the ‘architecture’ of complex musical forms requires rational planning, musical improvisation develops as part of a process, advancing gradually in small increments. However, composition and improvisation are not opposites, rather two types of action which do not preclude the existence of mixed forms (see *ibid.* 88). Furthermore, Kader (1993: 57) compares musical improvisation with fractal images and affirms that improvisation could be understood as a fractal¹⁵ structure. He defines musical improvisation as a process of “thus-and-also-differently”: the improviser chooses the tone he/she plays, but he/she realizes that this is a choice and that, next time, he/she can choose otherwise. Consequently, improvisation is never brought to a close, is continually incomplete; its very existence thrives on the ideal of variability, with the result that it relativizes itself continuously (see *ibid.* 51). The aim of improvisation is to attain a freedom, which, despite its limits, is eternally enduring. Within the structure of improvised pieces, one can detect a finite number of alternatives (mostly two or three) and that, exactly because of this, they could be “thus-or-also-differently” (*ibid.* 56f).

¹¹ Bourdieu (1977: 79) follows a similar line of argument concerning his concept of regulated improvisation (*improvisation réglée*) as a product of habitus. He “solves” the problem of freedom/creativity vs. determinism in action by means of the familiar term of habitus as “the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent’s practices, without either explicit reason or significant intent, to be none the less ‘sensible’ and ‘reasonable’” (*ibid.* 79, see also 95). Bourdieu sees in the habitus “an endless capacity to engender products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production”, so that “the conditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditions”. However, although Bourdieu illuminates the problem of simultaneous creativity and determinism or “automatism”, he does not solve it.

¹² Blaukopf (1996: 3), following Weber, defines musical action as an “action oriented towards the generation of sound events which is intended to have an impact on the behaviour of others” (for musical action see also Schutz 1972: 129ff.). It must be emphasized here that we also include others in our actions when we are alone, for instance, and play music (see Luckmann 1992: 4).

¹³ Even when the “materials” (for instance musical phrases) used in improvisation have already been provided (learned or composed) before improvising, they must nevertheless be adapted to the concrete situation of the actual performance (for instance, in relation to what the other musicians play).

¹⁴ Gustav Mahler used to say that he didn’t choose what he composed, rather the composition chose him (see Amis and Rose 1989: 74). Joseph Haydn asserted the following about composing: “Musical ideas pursue me to the point of torture. I cannot get rid of them, they stand before me like a wall. If it is an *allegro* that pursues me, my pulse beats faster, I cannot sleep; if an *adagio*, I find my pulse beating slowly. My imagination plays upon me as if I were a keyboard.’ Then Haydn smiled, the blood suddenly flamed in his cheeks as he said ‘I really am a living keyboard’” (*Ibid.* 78).

¹⁵ According to Kader (1993: 57), what distinguishes fractals in particular is “a certain regulation of the chaotic and a chaotization of the regulated”. Or, to put it differently: these kind of structures do not impose themselves *despite* the presence of chaos, rather they exist *together* with it, they include chaos.

4. IMPLICATIONS

In my presentation I have asserted that the current sociological conception of human action is incomplete and that musical improvisation can be seen as an example of a type of action which cannot be explained by means of the current assumptions of the social theory of action. Further research in the field of musical improvisation will not only have consequences for the current theory of creativity. In addition, gaining a deeper knowledge of musical improvisation will bear decisive consequences for the sociological theory of action, above all in the following fields: 1) in the conflict between deterministic theories of action that emphasize the (socially) learned patterns anchored in how human action is carried out and theories of action that emphasize human freedom and spontaneity in order to explain human behaviour; 2) in relation to the significance accorded to rationality and even its very presence in (the theory of) human action; 3) in the classic question regarding the emergence of novelty and spontaneity in human action.

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