

RELATIVE RELATIVISMS AND REDUCED REDUCTIONISMS

by

Eileen Barker
Professor of Sociology
London School of Economics
and Political Science
England

Discussion Paper

on

Peter Munz's
EXPLANATION IN HISTORY

The Thirteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Washington, D.C. September 2-5, 1984

© 1984, Paragon House Publishers

Let me start by saying how much I enjoyed reading Professor Munz's paper. I found it a lucid exposition of a view with which I fundamentally concur, and I shall certainly advise my students to read the essay. My basic agreement does, however, present me with the problem of what to say in response, and I have decided that the most useful procedure for the discussion might be to elaborate a couple of points relating to reductionism in history (or any of the social sciences) which sort of emerge (if I may use the word in this sense) out of the paper.

Before doing this, let me first dispose of a minor task which falls to a discussant: presumably the 'four' in the centre of page 2a should be a 'six'; and presumably the second 'explanandum' on page 9 should read 'explanans'?

My agreement that the employment of a covering law produces the most valuable type of explanation in history leads me to ask a few more questions about the status of such laws in history and, perhaps, to question exactly what is implied by the second of Munz's six requirements for an explanation.

Munz opens his paper with the comment that 'in an important sense, all explanations are historical explanations'. His point is that there always has to be an antecedent condition and a subsequent consequence. This is, of course, perfectly true - although I can never quite make up my mind whether saying that end-A of a see-saw is going up because end-B is going down could count as a synchronic explanation.

Be that as it may, when a covering law is evoked to explain an event, an initial event is also evoked and this event is of an historical nature. The point that I would like to pursue is that, apart from exceptional instances - such as the creation/evolution of the material world (discussed in the Popper text recommended for our Committee) - it is, to most intents and purposes, irrelevant that an explanation of *the covering law itself* has an historical dimension. This is not inevitably the case in the social sciences - and there are, I believe, some particularly pernicious kinds of reductionism which can ensue from forgetting this difference *and* some ways in which this might seem to argue for a 'genetic reductionism' in the social sciences.

Let me try to sketch the argument in terms which are slightly different from (but, I suspect, compatible with) those employed by Munz, and then offer a specific example in order to illustrate a practical problem.

Put crudely, a covering law is a description of a regularity. Generally speaking, it makes little difference to the regularities which we call the laws of nature whether they are occurring in Asia, America, Africa or Europe, and we assume that they could have been applied equally in the nineteenth, eighth and first centuries.

There are, of course, regularities in social behaviour which have little to do (directly) with the beliefs of the actors involved. Such regularities include the structural

constraints and potentialities which emerge from the organization of patterned interactions between people - different power structures or different channels of communication will, for example, result in different consequences for those involved. The relationship between the participants in a dyad will enjoy different potentialities and suffer different constraints from the relationships which can exist in a triad - and these differences will have nothing to do with (cannot be reduced to) the individual personalities or genes involved. The 'laws' describing such irreducible patterns are almost as non-temporal as those of the natural sciences - a bureaucratic structure will exhibit certain properties which are well-nigh inevitable, whatever the continent or century within which it is to be found.

Some of the regularities which are sometimes referred to as covering laws and which occur as part of the social world are, however, qualitatively different in their dependence on a human space/time dimension for their existence. Unlike the laws of nature, they have to be subjectively *known* (albeit sometimes only at a subconscious level) *in order that they should exist*. (It can be argued that Popper's 'World III' has an independent existence, but it has no *effect* except in so far as it is known.) The regularities to which I am referring are the result of (more or less) shared perceptions of reality creating and (more or less) 'upholding' a social reality. Such regularities do have an important historical dimension and are

relative to time and culture. Here I am talking about the phenomenon of a social reality which, while it depends for its existence upon human beings 'knowing' it, is *social* in the sense that it is not reducible to any particular human being, and is a *reality* in the sense that it exists independent of the volition of any individual - the fact that it is, in one sense, only in the minds of men and women does not mean that a man or woman can wish it away. It is the culture - or rather the cultures - of a society, the 'out-there's' which confront, influence, constrain and enable those who share in its knowledge to interact (amicably or with conflict). To ignore it is to ignore a reality which is responsible for shaping many of the actions - and reactions - of both ordinary and extraordinary people as they go about their daily lives 'making history'.

This particular type of social reality has a number of properties which, while not exactly paradoxical, are confusing for the social scientist. Two such properties, which are themselves inter-related in that they are both associated with an historical relativism, are the predictability and the non-predictability to which it gives rise, and the reducibility and the non-reducibility of its nature.

Let me make it quite plain that I am *not* suggesting that there exists a collective conscience in any Platonic sense: to repeat, a cultural reality is dependent upon individuals at the same time as it is independent of any

particular individual. But part of the non-reducibility of cultural reality lies in the fact that it consists of a *Gestalt* - or rather, a series of Gestalten (and of Gestalten within Gestalten). Furthermore, although no two people will ever experience *exactly* the same Gestalt, there is sufficient inter-subjective sharing of the patterns of reality given by a culture for there to *be* a culture within which people can interact and, indeed, negotiate to change that culture. The existence of the (more or less) shared Gestalt not only allows a society to function, it can be seen as a crucial factor in the process (socialization) by which the infant grows into a 'truly human' person - indeed it can well be argued that in this respect, to explain the individual (psychology) one has to understand the whole (culture).

At the same time, due partly to the slightly different experiences of life which individuals have which result in their seeing, hearing, feeling and, therefore, 'knowing' in slightly different ways, the shared, predictable structure of the culture is constantly shifting and adapting to changing (endogenous and exogenous) circumstances. There is, in other words, enough predictability for social scientists to be able - to *need* to - take this Gestalt reality into account in their explanations of historical happenings (which I take to include both change and non-change in the culture itself), *and* there is a fundamentally historical component of unpredictability inherent within the shared culture which makes any 'covering'

law essentially relative to the historical circumstances - which is not to say that we have no means of access to such knowledge.

There is a sense in which the explanation of the origin any particular cultural Gestalt can be reduced to the actions (which do, of course, include the speech) of particular individuals (although these may well be mythical). It is, however, necessary to understand the culture as a Gestalt in order understand how it *works*. One needs to look on it as an irreducible whole if it is invoked for explanatory purposes. It is, in other words, necessary to understand the extent to which people throughout history have seen the world through culturally specific spectacles and that to look at 'what they really see' *without* being aware of these spectacles is to miss out on a crucial element in explaining what they are doing.

But, at the same time, we have to remember that each individual sees reality in different kinds of ways and there can exist a whole battery of different, though inter-related, Gestalten within any particular society - and this is especially significant in modern, pluralistic societies in which there is a high degree of differentiation and there exist cultural supermarkets offering a plethora of Gestalten/spectacles/Weltanschauungen - or what-have-you to provide a plethora of social realities which help (or hinder) the individual as s/he tries to make sense of the world. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of history or anthropology

is unlikely to be unaware of either the relativism or the explanatory importance of these Gestalten, but the fact remains that most people tend to believe that someone who is looking at the world through a different set of (socially constructed) glasses from their own is wrong. One of the current ways of dealing with people who are using the 'wrong' glasses is reductionism.

There are those who make it their business to 'medicalize' the social realities, beliefs and practices of others. An obvious example is to be found in Soviet Russia where political dissidents are proclaimed psychologically ill, confined in mental hospitals and 'treated' with drugs until they learn how to see the 'true' Gestalt. But it is not only the communists who have sought psychological explanations for 'distorted pictures of reality'. Take, for example, the reductionist conversion of conversion that is to be found among certain members of the psychiatric fraternity in America. Perhaps a couple of quotations from an article by Dr. John Clark called "Problems in Referral of Cult members" (*Journal of the National Association of Private Psychiatric Hospitals* Vol.9(4),1978) will serve to make the point:

I have always felt that a medical, biological attitude toward the defining of a mental illness must be attained and maintained if our practice of healing were to be called professional. Thus my working definition of mental illness was of a malfunctioning of the central nervous system, causing a substantial disability because of alterations of consciousness, mood, memory, perceptions, orientations, or capacity to test reality. (emphasis added)

Declaring that he has been disappointed in the matter of hospital response to cult members, Clark proceeds to cite some examples. In one case he talks about a patient who had been persuaded that 'hallucinations' which she had previously had were manifestations of the God that a particular cult worshipped. When he saw her on a house visit

she was in a deluded and manic state, highly disorganized, and unable to handle reality. Characteristically she had been told by the cult to act sane if hospitalized. So effective was her control that the admitting resident could not detect the psychosis, but was persuaded by me and the proper legal papers to effect an admission. Within two weeks, while being evaluated with no medications, she entered a frank psychotic episode and deprogrammed herself.

I do not want to suggest that malfunctioning of the CNS may not, on occasion, give rise to strange views of reality which can, in turn, lead people to behave in strange ways. I am, however, worried about the ease with which people will accept that the acceptance or rejection of certain socially constructed realities (most obviously when these are of a religious nature) is 'really' a manifestation of some kind of malfunctioning of the central nervous system when the only empirical evidence they have is the social behaviour of the person concerned. How, I wonder, will future historians explain twentieth century reductionists?

But now I want perhaps to go a little further than Munz. A scepticism about the adequacy of reductionist

explanations is necessary, but it is not sufficient. I believe that we have to accept both that some psychological phenomena - including some mental illnesses - can be explained (at least in part) in terms of social factors *and* that some social phenomena can be explained (at least in part) in terms of psychological factors. While I certainly have little sympathy for a crude reductionism which rules out the emergent properties of social structures and cultures, it seems to me equally foolhardy to ignore certain elements of reductionist explanations when our subject matter *and* our 'covering laws' are so historically contingent. Furthermore, it does not get us all that far *just* to say that both social and psychological (and biological etc) dimensions are necessary for a greater understanding of history.

More work of both an empirical and a philosophical nature is needed to understand the *relationship* of the interaction between the individuals and the social reality in which they live. This attempt to follow the process of interaction between the two levels is not reductionist in the sense that it denies that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, but it is reductionist in the sense that it attempts to understand how the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, how the whole then affects the parts - and what part *that* process plays in history.