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COMMENTARY

on

ANGELO PETRONI 'VALUES, PREFERENCES AND EVOLUTION'

by

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1. In the second section of his paper Angelo Petroni asserts that: "Methodological individualists conceive culture not as an entity independent from individuals, but simply as the result of the interaction of a great number of individuals over a long series of generations. The complexity of culture never justifies any concept of the emergence of supra-individual entities." Margaret Thatcher as presumably making a similar point when, in an interview published in Women's Own for 31 October 1987, she made her most abused but almost never correctly quoted remark: "I don't believe in society. There is no such thing, only individual people, and there are families."<sup>1</sup> We may also here compare Marx and Engels in The Holy Family (Vol. IV, pp 5-211 in the Collected Works)<sup>2</sup>

History does nothing; it 'does not possess immense riches, it does not fight battles.' It is *men, real living men, who do all this, who possess things and fight battles. It is not 'history' which uses men as a means of achieving - as if it were an individual person - its own* ends. History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends (p.93).

It is because assertions of this kind seem to me so obviously yet so importantly true that I cannot but side with the methodological individualists. At least/at first hearing/ it therefore sounds absurd to me to maintain - as Petroni tells us that "the mainstream of social sciences" does - "that social sciences must be grounded in super-individual concepts." S/ S/

Consider, for instance, Thomas Sowell's fascinating work Ethnic America: A History (New York: Basic, 1981). This is a study of the often spectacularly different track records of the main ethnic groups after their immigration into the USA.<sup>2</sup> Sowell shows that almost all these differences between the post-immigration track records of these various ethnic groups have to be explained by reference to the differences between the cultures with and from which they came. But the differences between these cultures can<sup>6</sup> *the more* be explicated only in terms of the differences between the typical strength of inclinations or disinclinations to this, the typical amounts of knowledge or ignorance of that, and so on, among the individual members of the sets<sup>3</sup> participating in the cultures in question. Hence

it would seem that - so far from their having to be "grounded in supra-individual concepts" - the concepts of different cultures have to be explicated by reference to, and in that understanding grounded in, the various characteristics of the ordinary individual members of those different cultural sets.

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2. It may be helpful to explore an alternative approach. Way back in the later 1940s there was in philosophical circles in Oxford much talk of logical constructions. The paradigm case of a logical construction was in fact the average man, though it could, of course, have been the average anything else. To say, for instance, that the average runner in some race is a logical construction out of all the individuals who ran it was simply to say that propositions about the average runner were formally deducible from <sup>some</sup> logical functions of, conjunctions of the appropriate propositions about all the individual runners.

In those remote days, and in that place, the application of the concept of logical construction was usually confined to the thesis of phenomenalism, which was reformulated as the contention that material things are logical constructions out of sense-data. But our concern here and now is with the attempt to make out that some of the key terms of the social - or, as I would prefer to say, following Hume - the moral sciences refer to logical constructions. But this attempt, as those of us who made it very quickly realised, was futile and perverse.

The correct response, however, to this realisation is not to try to make out that it is individuals who are somehow the creatures of social wholes, and they (we!) could have no reality save as members of some society. Certainly we should all be very different had we been raised in similarly different social environments. But such different upbringings are not as such and necessarily fatal!

What becomes immediately obvious from any attempt to make out that - say - Germany is a logical construction out of Germans is that it is impossible formally to deduce anything about Germany from any number of statements about individual Germans. And it is, surely, equally obvious that from such statements about Germany as "In September 1939 Germany invaded Poland" it is impossible formally to deduce any statements about particular Germans! But what is possible, and what provides useful work for historians as opposed to logicians, is to discover how it came about that certain particular Germans got into the positions in which they were able to make the operative decisions, and why they made the decisions which they did make.

Again, consider the predicament of those wishing to study the sociology of an army. Since the word 'army' does not refer to a logical construction out of individual members of whatever army is in question, these students cannot progress by making formally valid deductions from propositions either about that army or about its members. There is for them no alternative to empirical research. But neither is there any alternative to those individual members and their interrelations as the subject matter of that empirical research. For there simply is not anything else for them to investigate if what they want to produce is a sociological study of the German army.

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3. One final, rather petty point. In his third section Petroni writes "We have no reason to believe - as several historicist liberal thinkers of the 19th and 20th century did - that "History is the history of liberty." To this he objects: "Almost no produce of social evolution. . . is the result of a process in which liberty was always respected." But this second statement, though true, is not a relevant and decisive objection to the first. Foremost of those Whig interpreters of history who did believe that the progress of liberty was a natural law of historical development, believed that liberty was not always and everywhere equally respected: at best "Freedom broadens slowly down *from precedent to precedents*"

## NOTES

- 1 At the 1988 Labour Party conference, to rapturous applause, the then leader of that party, Neil Kinnock totally misrepresented this statement in an altogether characteristic rant.

‘There is no such thing as society’ she says. No sister, no brotherhood. No neighbourhood. No <sup>honouring</sup> other people’s little children. ‘No such thing as society’. No number other than one. No person other than me. No time other than now. No such thing as society, just ‘me’ and ‘now’. This is Margaret Thatcher’s society.

- 2 Perhaps the most spectacular of all these differences is that at the beginning of the present century “Irish youngsters in New York finished High School at a rate less than one-hundredth of that of youngsters from a German or Jewish background.” (p38.)
- 3 It is often desirable to employ the word ‘set’ in this kind of context since it eschews the perhaps unwanted implications of such words as ‘community’ or ‘class’. For, by Cantor’s Axiom for Sets, the sole essential feature of a set is that its members have at least one common characteristic, any kind of characteristic.