

Description, Meaning and Social Science

I would like to isolate and refute, briefly, some of the gross misconceptions advanced by Clammer in his essay "The Analytical and Phenomenological Approaches to the Social" (JASO 1.1 Hilary 1970). The following three are on the whole representative of the tenor of his argument:

1. Description (in some sense which phenomenology attributes to this term) is "fundamental to accurate understanding of what is happening in the world".
2. The role of the social sciences is to understand the meanings that people give their social behaviour.
3. Society is the object of philosophical enquiry.

Merkeau-Ponty has advanced the phenomenological standpoint in simple unequivocal terms. Phenomenology is a matter of describing, according to him, not of explaining or analysing. When Husserl recommended the return to the "things themselves", he was rejecting science at the very start. The demand for pure description excludes equally the procedure (i) of analytical reflection and (ii) that of scientific explanation. The axiomatic basis of this position can be put as follows: the world is there before any possible analysis of mine. Looking for the world's essence is not looking for what it is as an idea once it has been reduced to a theme of discourse; it is looking for what it is as a fact for us, before any thematization.

In short, phenomenology assumes that a theory-independent description of the world is possible and advocates a return to such description. But can there be such a thing as a theory-independent description in either the natural or the social sciences? Kuhn has argued, quite plausibly, that the "facts" of natural science are only determined as facts within a pre-given theoretical framework, a paradigm (Bachelard's term is "problematic"). "No language restricted to reporting a world fully known in advance can produce mere neutral and objective reports on 'the given'" (Kuhn:126). Thus the "scientist who sees a swinging stone can have no experience that is in principle more elementary than seeing a pendulum. The alternative is not some hypothetical "fixed" vision, but vision through another paradigm, one which makes the swinging stone something else" such as constrained fall. If this argument is valid (and Clammer does not show why it isn't), what would a phenomenological description be? 'Describing what there is' does not seem to correspond to any known experience or procedure in the practice of natural science.

Now this argument applies a fortiori to the social sciences. If the natural sciences know what a "scientific fact" is, the social sciences do not - at least not at the moment. As in the natural sciences, so in our experience of the social, our perceptions are fixed in advance, structured by models which we have each internalized unconsciously. The difference is that in the former the scientist's perceptions are determined by paradigms, that is, models which have been rigorously constructed as part of a scientific practice and which the whole scientific community accepts for a given epoch; in the latter our perceptions are determined by non-rigorous models, and there is no single model accepted unanimously by the entire community: these "models" are not paradigms in the strict sense; they are closer to what Marx calls "ideology" and Levi-Strauss "conscious models". This radical difference between the two situations, that of the natural scientist and that of the social scientist, explains why in the second it is more

difficult - and has hitherto proved impossible - to elaborate a coherent uniform concept of a "scientific fact."

So far the argument has asserted two separate theses: (1) that neither in the social nor in the natural sciences are there such entities as "pure facts", because in both cases our experience is theory-dependent. In neither case are pure descriptions ever possible. (2) that the kind of "theory" which determines perception in the one and in the other diverges radically. Thus it would be difficult to find in the social sciences any homologue of the following fact of chemistry: that a molecule of water is made up of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen.

Clammer's first proposition is therefore based on a radical misconception of the structure of experience. It could only make sense for a world in which the "data of experience" were fixed and neutral, i.e., for a world of which we have no experience.

The second proposition is asserted as a dogma, it is nowhere argued for. In the form in which it is presented, it is clearly untenable or only tenable at the cost of eliminating from the field of the social sciences two of the most decisive advances that were made in it in the 19 century: historical materialism and psycho-analysis. It also, incidentally, makes nonsense of structural anthropology - a consequence which is perhaps not immediately obvious.

"The meanings that people give their social behaviour and institutions": subjective meanings. The implication seems to be the following: either (a) there are only 'subjective meanings' in the world, meanings which men consciously produce and internalize or (b) phenomenology is inadequate, because there are certain meanings which can escape the consciousness of social and historical "actors", i.e. objective meanings. As far as I know Being and Nothingness was the only work to argue for (a). Since then Sartre has abandoned this position. The Critique de la Raison Dialectique is about a world in which people's conscious intentions, their pro-jects, are constantly producing other-meanings: a process which Sartre describes variously as "alienation", "reification" and contrefinalite. That (a) is a completely untenable position is obvious from psycho-analysis which takes it as axiomatic that behind the meanings men consciously attribute to their acts are other deeper meanings of which they are wholly or only half conscious; from marxism which precisely holds that the meaning men give (i.e. consciously confer on) their "behaviour" and "institutions" is never identical with the real meaning of their "behaviour" and "institutions" (theory of ideology); from structural anthropology which holds that social structures are entities independent of men's consciousness of them (i.e. the way men apprehend them consciously through a certain system of meanings/ conceptual scheme) and from the image which men form of them. What unites marxism, psychoanalysis and structural anthropology is precisely the theory of illusion which each elaborates. If the role of the social sciences is to understand the meanings that people give their social behaviour and institutions - and only that - then they must imprison themselves within illusions - they "must" because that is their "role"! But if that is not their only role, if beyond comprehending conscious meanings, they must disengage the gap (distortion) which separates the illusion from the reality, the spontaneous consciousness of a structure from the structure itself, then phenomenology is, as Levi-Strauss has said, only a point of departure.

If phenomenology were identical with the totalization which is science, neither historical materialism, psychoanalysis nor structural anthropology would be possible, or, at any rate, not as sciences. If they are not scientific, and this is what Clammer is arguing, he does not show why.

It is difficult to see what the last of the three propositions means beyond saying what has already been said in (i) or (ii). If by "philosophical enquiry" we are to understand "phenomenological enquiry", then the arguments against this have already been proposed above. If the enquiry is "philosophical" for a related reason, namely that it resorts to "motive" explanations rather than casual ones, then the arguments against (ii) are valid against (iii). It is however, worth making the point by a different route.

The idea that only "motive" explanations are valid in the social sciences springs from a fundamentally idealist conception of society. And this precisely is the reactionary and inept conception Winch offers us in his little book. We are told, for example, that "social relations are expressions of ideas about reality" (Winch:23). There are two concepts involved here and it would be worth separating them for a moment.

First, there is the notion of "social relations". These to Winch are the particular relationships which are established, by sets of rules, between roles. Winch's concept is therefore the traditional one familiar, for example, from functionalist anthropology. It refers to a more or less immediately perceptible world of social interactions. Next there is the notion of "reality". This, however, seems to be only a more comprehensive term which includes social relationships as one component and everything else as the other. So the proposition seems to amount to the circularity: "social relations are expressions of ideas about (social relations)" i.e., social relations are what men think they are. Who are these "men" however? They include monks and workers - to quote two of Winch's examples. So the social relationships into which workers enter are the relationships into which they think they enter. What happens however, if two groups of workers conceptualize their relationships in diametrically opposed terms? If some workers believe that they are the objects of exploitation, that a fraction of their labour is stolen from them by the boss - while another group thinks that by their work they are benefitting the "national economy" - that as members of a "country" (rather than say as members of a class) it is their duty to work as hard as the management, who of course "know" (this too is part of their "ideas"), requires? What becomes of their social relationships? Can these be different for any two workers though they work in the same factory, for the same wage, and in most other respects have a similar "status"?

Or, to transport the argument to a slightly less mundane level, which are the true social relationships in those societies which superimpose on an asymmetrical class system a symmetrical moiety system? Obviously the relationships pertaining to their moiety system. In short, Winch's idealism radically eliminates the distinction between conscious and unconscious models, experience and reality, ideology and science. It makes science impossible, for if the "appearance of things coincided with their essence" what would be the purpose of science? And what else does "social relations are the expressions of men's ideas of reality" mean except that? Winch would like to privilege 'common sense' which is and has always been "the practical wisdom of the ruling class" (Gramsci) How would Clammer reconcile this with the concept of a "critical philosophy" (Marcuse)?