

THE MISSING LINK

Vernon Reynolds asks the social anthropologist: 'Are you content to give up on "reality"? ... how do you imagine that your World III, your ephemeral chimera of the signified, relates to the atomic particles of which all physical matter is constructed...?' (Reynolds 1978:30). It is a well-established enthusiasm - and one that still ostensibly guides research programmes around the world - that attempts to build the sciences one into another, from the micro- to the macro-, in a hierarchy of chinese boxes where each one is fully explicable in terms of all the others, such that the only distance between sub-atomic particles and development economics is one that research can be expected to fill, given time. Do we still cherish that ambition in social anthropology, or, indeed, in human biology? We have certainly discovered, as Reynolds observes, that the simple institutional unities of our academic discourse have, perhaps as the necessity of their existence, the capacity to create their own orders of significant reality, hermetic to the intrusive intellectual from down the road. At the same time, we have found that applying our accustomed 'realities' of economics, politics and law to alien societies has shaken ready guarantees and collapsed the easy security quietly offered by common-sense. But this collapse has not required that such 'categories' be jettisoned as unreal, any more than it has opened a path to 'reality', or to a final referent on and around which a whole and integrated edifice of man could henceforth be neatly erected.

We have, perhaps, admitted reluctantly that all assumptions of definite judgement involve an a priori claim to clear sight, and that to interrogate that claim as to the source of its security is to embark on the chase for some ever-unstated or ineffable warranty, to risk 'infinite regression' and 'circularity'. Nevertheless the claim to security continues to be made with many idioms for its expression. And it seems that the safest, the most irrefutable, the one least likely to collapse beneath the blow of a stout Johnsonian fist, is materialist reality (which we will spare, for the moment, the cosmetic embarrassment of its quotation marks). The problem has, of course, a long and amply - (if not well) - documented history, and it is no dissolution of the problem merely to point this out. However, if we are to be asked how the real (the atomic particle) relates to the idea, and if we are advised to fill the evident gap with biology, then, persuasive as this might seem, there are certain rather common-sense and smaller-scale queries that we are entitled to make. Now, for example, does the atomic particle relate to the chemistry of the protian? How does the biochemistry of DNA relate to the concept of the gene as popularly it is understood in evolutionary theory? How does cell chemistry relate to brain function? These might all seem to be answerable questions, and until they are answered the student of the social can be forgiven for not bothering himself with elementary particles. Of a slightly different order, and perhaps more pertinent here, are questions like the following: how does neurology relate to social psychology? how does psychology relate to psychiatry? how does behavioural genetics relate to primate ethology? The answer 'not very well' means that the social anthropologist, however keen he is to find the solid empirical grounding for his study, has no clear path to it through the various disciplines concerned with man that all consider themselves, in their amiably different ways, 'hard'.

There can be little doubt that man is living in a real world - and yet it would be no surprise if, say, freezing out on the Downs,

and getting on with the job, should feel more real than musing through the night with music and memories. It's that arbitrariness again, putting the ground under our feet and ideas in our heads, and still sending us off in pursuit of the real. Man's ambitions and ephemeral significations always are inscribed, and not just as simple 'bias', or 'prejudice', whether he sits alone amidst baboons, or among an international scientific elite at the centre of a cyclotron, or in uneasy co-existence with an alien people. And to say this is not to deny the potency of scientific rationality, or to render fictional the achievements of modern medicine, or to deny the efficacy of atomic bombs. Moreover, it is emphatically not a retreat into the word garden, into the clutches of an ephemeral chimera, or into shimmering ideality. To say that social anthropological work contains, of necessity, elements of the 'artistic' is not primarily to rejoice in the uniqueness of man, and it is not to recommend that we all become poets. To celebrate the Popperian World III as the ideal where only poetic licence need be sought would be only to summon up all the easy conventions of knowledge, and to refuel the search for a real and true that poetic fiction, by definition, is both permitted and required to ignore.

Efforts to subvert the privilege of particular claims to truth are not a leap into the irrational, or an irresponsible frivolity, but an attempt to find a theoretical problematic whose powers of ventriloquism are more interesting than those to which we are accustomed. It is, after all, a more or less simply empirical discovery that the debates wherein the search for positivist reality and secure rationality is conducted are interminable, and that to escape by invoking the 'artistic' is only to 'encourage an untimely subsidence into the same old entrenchment' (Chapman 1977:94). We have been trying to examine the structure of claims to truth that have the 'power of epistemological derision' (McDonald 1978:13), and to suggest how that same symbolic power, that same metaphorical persuasion which allows of such privilege, could equally be summoned in their own belittlement and dismissal. It is already incorporated in the script that we be seen to be wandering among 'scintillating flowers' or to be having 'great fun with words' (Reynolds 1978:130). As prophesied, 'we can exploit the richness of the riddle' (McDonald 1978:27). We have tried 'to examine the space in which these arguments exist, not perhaps to secure any theoretical advance, but merely to prevent ourselves making endless journeys whose only destination is the starting point for the journey back' (Chapman 1978:43).

And all this self-reference is not merely discursive promotion; if it seems to invite accusations of idealism, then we are back in a well-rehearsed dialogue. We risk travelling again a well-trodden path between idealism and materialism, only now within the architecture of the sign where arbitrariness becomes merely unliability, and the signified is still somewhere else, in the material world. And so on.

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