

## Work, interaction and surplus value

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Last Thursday, I was asked for a title for a paper which I hadn't given that afternoon but might end up by giving a week later if the staff meeting finished in time. I didn't, as it happened, have by me a brief descriptive comment on the squiggles that I had drawn on sundry sheets of paper. So I simply blurted out a few words which I'd heard being swapped around earlier in the day: something like – Work, Interaction, and Surplus Value. I now appreciate that a more satisfactory description would be squiggles, wiggles, and wriggles.

The advantage of this latter description is that it also appears readily applicable to what are sometimes jokingly referred to as concepts and theories in sociology, procedures of empirical social research, renderings of the sociology of knowledge in almost any cursive script, and connoisseurs of exchange theory and metaphorical transactionalism trying to discover who is going to buy the first round of drinks. This latter, I may remark in passing, is not the kind of problem which a methodological individualist is likely to encounter in that kind of practice commonly known as everyday life.

For the purpose of attempting to study the processes of social life and of reporting observations to other selves which may claim, with or without justification, that they were not present on that particular occasion, it has always seemed both appropriate and prudent to use the simplest and most direct possible approach. This is to construct the appearance of manifest virtue from the operation of latent necessity – or at the least inability to find an alternative. Like others – certainly some of my others and very possibly some of yours too – the peculiarities of the English language used in some of these conversations present a variety of problems. One possibility, which certainly cannot be excluded *a priori* (indeed – I'll thank you not to exclude *any* possibility *a priori* for the time being) is that the use of an English language may refract observable and predictable orderlinesses in social life to the extent that they appear as sets of randomly arranged events. The contrary is also a possibility – indeed, by definition, a distinct possibility.

Given half a chance – and you can take that phrase itself as an instance of what an English language can do to the description of stochastic processes and tables of random numbers – the possible structures of the English languages may, independently of their wills, and indeed perhaps contrary to their wishes, foist upon those rash enough to use or perhaps so reduced in circumstances that they have no alternative to using, an English language, the appearance of orderliness.

This is not to assert that suppositions about the orderlinesses of social life, or for that matter, about the existence of social order, are simply a peculiarity of the English – or more appropriately – speakers of an English language. It may be a random loop in a universal generative grammar.

Of social order, we may say simply that there's a lot of it about – or so we're often told – a positive epidemic you might say, if you're not too fussy about the linguistics and philosophical company you keep. If so – a plurality of selves appears to be a likely enough consequence. Perhaps they too are catching.

- D2 *That won't do – that won't do at all. Selves don't just appear without further to do, you know. Let me tell you that you go about 'constrained to sustain a viable image of yourself in the eyes of others ... self work will be continuously necessary'.*
- D1 And who the hell do you think you are?
- D2 *Kindly moderate your language. I'm you.*
- D1 No, I'm not; or do I mean, no you're not? And what do you mean about your language? Am I to understand that you are referring to my language? And as for all this about 'self work will be continuously necessary' – are you trying to couple the Protestant Ethic up with the Spirit of Population Control?
- D2 *Your frivolity is quite uncalled for. A plurality of social situations may generate a plurality of selves, if you follow me.*
- D1 How can I follow you if you're me?
- D2 *The distinction is analytical, not hysterical.*
- D1 Get away with you – you're just having me on. You and your analytical distinction – what's that but a 'vulgar tendency ... to divide the conduct of the individual into a profane and sacred part'. Consider yourself this and dead.

- D2** *No doubt we all have over touching tendencies. You seem to combine touchiness with touchiness. Allow me to point out that, so far, you have been singularly unsuccessful in introducing either work or interaction into the discussion whereas I have introduced both. All that you have done is to draw attention to some difficulties you have in your encounters with the English language and put it all down to role distance.*
- D1** I can see any presentation of no-matter-what is going to be an uphill struggle with you on my back.
- D2** *Oh I don't know – your back appears broad enough to bear the cross of personal character.*
- D1** Aha – now I know you're not me – if you were you would have a bad back, and be noticeably averse to carrying crosses around unnecessarily.
- D2** *I find it odd – not to say, inconsistent – that you should admit to a certain orderliness in the usual arrangement of your vertebrae – from which they, or you, have deviated. Perhaps there is a gap between the sentiments you feel and the domain assumptions you have been taught – that would undoubtedly account for your squeaks of black humour and your inertial apathy.*
- D1** Thanks, Big Al for these words of wisdom. I'm sure that I'd always recognise a domain assumption, yours or mine, if I tripped over one in the street. However – it seems to me – or us – that people do appear to find it convenient to live, and more especially to talk, and even write as if social life is more or less orderly. We may indeed go so far as to speak of social order, and beyond that – *the* social order. Where would we be when we set questions for examination without our trusty standby – 'How is social order possible?'
- D2** *Are you still on that 'social order' kick? I thought we'd straightened you out on that one on Monday evening.*
- D1** May I point out that orthopaedic surgeons prefer to call the treatment 'traction' and they can do this without benefit of a postulate of universal orderliness. All I am trying to point out is that in everyday life we can go around as if all kinds of orderlinesses are local or temporary because so are we. I may add that any passing doubts can be speedily obliterated by appeal to the lord of misrule – Thomas Hobbes.

A well judged reference to the **Hobbesian** problem of order is worth a few canisters of CS gas any day. Perhaps this is just as well – reference to the works of Thomas Hobbes may fail to disclose such a problem. The problem to which Hobbes addresses himself is that of certainty in the conduct of social life – and the criterion of certainty for Hobbes is provided by the deductive procedures of Euclidean geometry. Indeed – for **Hobbes**:

When a man *reasoneth*, he does nothing else but conceive a sum total, from addition of parcels; or conceive a remainder, from subtraction of one sum of another; which if it be done by words, is conceiving of the consequence of the names of all the parts, to the name of the whole; or from the names of the whole and one part, to the name of the other part.

And working with suppositions like these – and depending upon our ingenuity – we can produce an astonishing variety of forms of verbal order to shield us from Chaos and Cosmos; – but nothing that we do will provide additional grounds for preferring a view of the universe of possible events as an ordered Cosmos to a view of the universe of possible events as randomly distributed Chaos.

Now in very large sets of random events, there will be numerous random departures from randomness which we may seize upon as evidence of an underlying order, and in a universe of such events which is infinitely large, the possibility of such departure from randomness will be great enough to get us all into this room together, and out of it again; indeed it would not amaze me in the least to find that Keynes College is still here tomorrow – but that is my belief and not what I *deem to know*; in other words – Hobbes's, not mine.

He that takes up conclusions on the trust of authors and doth not fetch them from the first items in every reckoning, which are the signification of names settled by definitions, loses his labour; and does not know anything, but only believeth.

Let me then only believe Hobbes for a sufficient time to quote his next sentences.

When a man reckons without the use of words, which may be done in particular things, as when upon the sight of any one thing, we *conjecture* (my italics) what was likely to have

preceded or is likely to follow upon it; if that which be thought likely to follow, follows not – or that which be thought likely to have preceded it, hath not preceded it, this is called error; to which even the most prudent then are subject. But when we reason in words of general signification, and fall upon a general inference which is false – though it commonly be called error, it is indeed an absurdity, or senseless speech. For error is but a deception, in presuming that somewhat is past, or is to come; of which, though it were not past, or not to come, yet there was no *impossibility* (my italics) discoverable. But when we make a general assertion, unless it be a true one, the probability of it is *inconceivable* (my italics) and words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound are ... when we make a general assertion – unless it be a true one, the probability of it is inconceivable. And words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound, these we call absurd, insignificant, and nonsense.

And therefore if a man should talk to me of a round quadrangle; or, accidents of bread in cheese; or immaterial substances; or of a free subject; a freewill; or any free, but free from being hindered by opposition, I should not say he were in an *error* (my italics) but that his words were without meaning, that is to say, absurd.

- D2 *Go on – you're making it all up.*  
 D1 Indeed I'm not, I've just copied it out of a book.  
 D2 *I know – Garfinkel, read out with a funny accent.*  
 D1 You are in error.  
 D2 *Alright then, Goffman in iambic pentameters.*  
 D1 Not so – I told you it was Hobbes.  
 D2 *Ah – well – you don't expect me to believe that do you? What next? Where's the work bit, never mind anything else?*  
 D1 You've asked for it mate – now grab this:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces.

The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mark of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

**D2** *But that's absurd.*

**D1** I'm delighted to learn that we share the same domain assumptions. Either the statements are absurd or they are true – they're not errors or mistakes.

**D2** *It's a trick – let me out of here: I want to hear about Goffman.*

**D1** Pin your tabs back – you may hear something else to your advantage:

Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we *not* judge of... a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.