

The subject, the symbolic and nature

Abstract

This article identifies the standard conception of the relationship between Nature and the Symbolic and contrasts it with that developed by the neuro-sciences, epigenetics and psychoanalysis. These latter develop a conception of nature as neither a self-sufficient totality that renders the human sciences redundant, nor as the merely passive substrate of the Symbolic. Here Nature requires “completion” by the Symbolic and vice-versa. In conclusion, the implications of this new articulation (of Nature and the Symbolic) for the status of the subject are addressed.

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The spontaneous philosophy of the social sciences

As a way of entering the debate let's assume a standard position in the social sciences to which can be attributed to the axiom (conscious or unconscious) that its object, the object of the social sciences, namely, the social, can be *sufficiently* understood in its *own* terms, with nature and the natural sciences *bracketed out*.

Of course the body, the body as natural, is “taken into account” – “taken into account” that is, insofar as it is recognised as a condition of existence of the socio-symbolic – but this is where it stops. Nature is the neutral material substrate of the symbolic, subjectivity and meaning, but *no more*. Note that here the social is effectively cut off from the natural which is a *tabula rasa* on which the social imposes itself from without and on which it writes its script. What we have here is effectively the insulation of the signifier and meaning, of the subject herself, from the body as natural.

Here nature is passive vis-à-vis the socio-symbolic which is given full responsibility for the construction of the human subject and the structure of social practice. This is held to be sufficiently explained by the laws of culture, the symbolic, or, if you prefer, the big Other. What is implied here is that upon entering the space of the symbolic, the subject accomplishes a “total and final subtraction from biomaterial being” (Johnston, 2013b: 330).

Descartes’ error

According to Damasio (Damasio, 1994) when Descartes inaugurates the modern conception of the subject as *res cogitans*, self-sufficient thinking subject – distinct from and master of itself qua physical body, *res extensa* – he commits an “error” whose after-effect is still being felt. Simone de Beauvoir expresses this Cartesian legacy in **The second sex** when she maintains that: “Humanity is not an animal species; it is a historical reality. Human society is an antiphrasis – in a sense it is opposed to nature”. (de Beauvoir, 2010: 62) It doesn’t matter whether the starting point is “autonomous subjectivity” (as in Descartes and Sartre), or “structure” (as in Marx, Althusser, and Foucault). What matters is whether or not the starting point itself is subject to any natural determination, whether or not it is set against and opposed to nature.

The life sciences and the brain sciences, including Damasio’s own neurobiology of affect, not to speak of psychoanalysis, put pay to this neat and idealist “division of labour”. Nature, human nature, makes its own irreducible contribution to the phenomena, to the *explananda*, of the social sciences themselves. Nature is *productive* not a passive material basis. This renders more porous the borders of the social and the natural, of social science and natural science – but does it mean one can never do the one, social science, without doing the other, natural science, and vice versa? That is, does this “reciprocal porosity” undermine any real distinction between the two?

By this point “die-hard” humanists will have already done some “eye brow raising” and will have started to talk of “slippery slopes” leading to subjects becoming the puppets of their brains and bodies, and to the elimination of the social as a *sui generis* dimension with its own specific effectivity.

“Weak nature”: Epigenetics and the drive

However, as many continue to point out including Nikolas Rose and Damasio himself, this is fundamentally to misconstrue how these sciences themselves understand the nature / socio symbolic relation. According to epigenetics an “organism’s genome does not merely express itself during development but is modified from conception onwards as a result of its interaction with extra-genomic factors” (Rose, 2006: 13).

The genome is no longer the book of life, the code of codes, the digital instructions for the making of an organism. The genome is not the prime mover or the uncaused first cause (see Rose, 2006: 13) but “inextricably entangled with and suffused by extended exogenous matrices of mediation, both natural and non-natural” (Johnston, 2013a: 97).

Genes, in other words, determine human beings not to be entirely determined by genes (Bellone, 2012: 18). These cannot dictate the course of a life with an “iron fist. Our parents, evolution and genetics, are lax and liberal. For the philosopher Adrian Johnston – whose project is to revivify “dialectical materialism” (yes, you read that correctly – dialectical materialism, it didn’t die with the Soviet Union) what this points to is a conception of nature at odds with deeply entrenched conceptions and images of nature.

According to this – the standard or conventional view – nature is “strong”, that is, a self-sufficient, coherent and fully complete system – “an uninterrupted One-All” (Johnston, 2006: 13) that always gets the job done. For Johnston however epigenetics is one of the sources of a different conception of nature, as a “weak”, that is, a nature that doesn’t finish the job, that is at odds with itself and constitutively limited, barred – the barred Real of Nature (see Johnston, 2006, 2011, 2013a, 2013b). Another source of this conception of nature as weak is the psychoanalytic concept of drive.

The concept of drive bridges the gap between the somatic and the subjective. On the somatic side, the drive has its source in organic, physio-chemical processes which generate a tension or pressure from which the subject is unable to escape. But, at the same time, by virtue of its aim and of the objects to which it gets attached, the drive undergoes a vicissitude – in other words, “drive is indeterminate with respect both to behaviour it induces and the satisfying object”. (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973: 215).

The structure of the drive thus comprises an axis of iteration (of constancy) – the source and the pressure of the drive – and an axis of alteration (of variation) – the aim and object of the drive (cf Johnston, 2013b: 334).

The psychoanalytic body *is* predisposed – but *predisposed not to be entirely or rigidly predisposed*. This, maintains Johnston, implies a conception of nature as “unnatural”, as internally divided and out of synch; “the anarchy of the drives” involves a nature that is weak or barred, not an “uninterrupted One-All”.

Weak nature, the symbolic and the subject

The “missing mandate” of nature, its failure to finish the job of programming the subject, its lack (in Lacanian terms), enables us to articulate the natural and the socio-symbolic

in a new way, one which avoids both the naturalistic evisceration of the symbolic dimension, and the idealist subordination of the natural to the symbolic.

A weak nature *does not squeeze* out the symbolic, but neither is it just a neutral material substrate of the latter.

Far from rendering the symbolic otiose, a weak nature requires the symbolic to make up for, fill in, its own lack: a weak nature requires the symbolic to suture it, to stitch up its gaps into “coherence”. In other words, the human animal requires immersion in the socio-symbolic in order to complete its natural indetermination. As we now know, the social penetrates the organism all the way down to the molecular level of cell expression.

In this way, the symbolic acquires a foothold in the natural – it isn’t imposed from without – but required from within the natural. However, at the same time, a “weak nature” is not a “passive” nature – a clean slate for the symbolic – on the contrary, it participates in the *construction* of the “speaking – subject” which is no longer the province of the social sciences alone. Genes, for example, have no effectivity independent of the interventions of the social, but, in conjunction with the social, they exercise an effectivity which cannot be reduced to the social.

In conclusion, I want briefly to turn to Adrian Johnston’s “transcendental materialism” – an updated dialectical materialism for the 21st century – in which he sets out to develop a “Spinozism of freedom” i.e. show that and how the free subject is immanently produced out of substance, both natural and symbolic, and is not an arbitrary idealist “add on”.

I have taken from Johnston the concept of a “weak nature” but can’t follow him in the way he conceives the relation between such a “weak” nature and the symbolic. According to Johnston the transcendental condition of free subjectivity resides in the overlapping of the barred Real of Nature and the barred big Other of Lacan. (cf Johnston, 2006: 49; 2013b). Here Nature and the Symbolic are both understood to be barred in that neither is a self-sufficient and enclosed system.

The danger here is that we might conceive the social as itself “weak” in the sense that we spirit away the rigidity of social structure with the consequence that we end up begging the question of how subjects manage to break free from the grip of social structure and identity, i.e. the hard question of how the subject eludes the constraints of nurture and of the symbolic (which is a condition of free subjectivity). Moreover, if nature is weak, the social must be at least strong enough to perform its function of filling in the indeterminacy of nature. The upshot, then, of Johnston’s

attempt too neatly to align a weak, barred nature, and a weak barred Symbolic, is that the symbolic collapses into itself and cannot “complete” nature. By the way, this is what I think happens in post Marxism (Lefort, Laclau, Mouffe) and in post structuralism more generally; i.e. structure is just dissolved leaving the “substance – less” subject. Scratch a poststructuralist and you’ll find a Sartrean. Take Laclau for example, in spite of his insistence on the necessity of sedimentation and ideology, modern democracy is, for him, more than anything else when the signifier comes into its own, at the expense of the signified.

Thus it doesn’t help to try to account for the advent of free subjectivity simply by cancelling out the causality of the big Other, that is just to beg the question. And because we can’t, by definition, explain its advent in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, it has to remain what Žižek calls that “unfathomable x”: not because it comprises any “weird stuff”, but because the stuff – natural and symbolic – that it is made of, enables it, from time to time, to defy identity and elude calculation.

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