BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Enabling open access to Birkbeck's published research output

The sensory basis of historical analysis: a reply to post-structuralism

Journal Article

http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/4212

Version: Accepted (Refereed)

Citation:

Publisher version

_____

_____

Deposit Guide

Contact: lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk

The Sensory Basis of Historical Analysis: A Reply to Post-Structuralism

Eric Kaufmann

A centrepiece of post-structuralist reasoning is the importance of sign over signifier, of language over referent, of text over the world "out there."[1] Clearly, for this school of thought, concepts are merely signs in the word game of a self-referential system. For other post-structuralists, it is the crude socioeconomic power of the actor(s) who issue the "performative" utterance of a concept that ensure its validity as a "constative" term.[2] "Conventional" historians have tended to react in bewildered fashion to the new linguistic turn: they have failed to rebut the post-structuralists on their own ground, shying away from the grand theoretical fight. Passively yielding this higher ground, the conventional historian retreats to her empirical work and middle-range generalisation. This is a somewhat myopic tendency that has led to a lack of well-articulated "conventional" theorizing. This paper attempts to correct this omission by welding the unstated, unreflected notions of conventional historians into a coherent rebuttal of post-structuralism.

In short, it is claimed that concepts are not formed *a priori*, detached from the world "out there," but instead are based on *sensory patterns* occurring in the social world. Whether these sensory patterns crystallize in our heads because of the way the mind has been constructed (Kant's argument in his *Critique of Pure Reason*)[3] or whether they accurately represent ultimate reality, is a second-order question which does not affect the position taken here. The importance of historical concepts is that they are largely based on our *shared, spontaneous organization of sensory stimuli*, not powerful actors' cognitive manipulation of terminology. This is why human beings, regardless of time and place, employ similar basic taxonomies and recognize simple concepts like dog, tree and mountain.[4]

Concepts in the human sciences are not as universally apprehended and sharply-defined as those in the natural sciences. Yet, the tacitly accepted post-structuralist claim that concepts in the natural and human worlds inhabit different existential universes is simply unacceptable. The drawing of a sharp epistemological line between concepts that describe animal behaviour or biology, and those that describe humans or society, is an

anthropocentric conceit that cannot be sustained. Rather than inhabiting two worlds, concepts in the natural and human sciences are more properly seen as arrayed along a continuum, with physics at one end and, say, cultural criticism at the other. The importance of sensory determination declines as one moves from the physical world to the human. Nevertheless, the division between the natural and human is not a cliff between order and chaos, but represents a gradual slope. Thus concepts in the human sciences are still largely founded on a concrete sensory base. This is why the human sciences (including history) resemble their counterparts in natural science far more than they resemble the random lyrics of psychedelic poetry.

Let us return to the notion of the concept. Two varieties of concept may be distinguished: *type* concepts and *variable* concepts. Arthur L. Stinchcombe was perhaps the first in the social sciences or humanities to explore the nature of the variable/type conceptual distinction.[5] He began with the idea of the variable concept. A variable concept, like religiosity, national product, or anti-semitism, describes a phenomenon whose value can vary over time and space. On the other hand, the type concept (i.e. Weber's ideal type) refers to a phenomenon that stands outside of history, with values that do not vary. Why? Because type concepts arise at the *juncture of precise values* of variables which consistently appear together in the sensory world. For example, we recognize a cat as different from a dog, or a table as different from a chair, because each phenomenon scores differently on the variables of extension, colour, shape, etc. In effect, we devise labels for *combinations of values* of variables that regularly appear together in nature, a phenomenon so statistically unlikely that it strikes us as worthy of a name.

This is a difficult idea to grasp, so Stinchcombe refers to the example of the chemical elements. If one examines a periodic table, one finds that it considers several variables such as valence, boiling point and atomic weight. Each of these variables has a theoretical range of values from negative infinity to positive infinity. However, is it the case that every combination of valence, boiling point and atomic weight can be found in nature? No. In fact most combinations of their values are never found. Closer examination reveals that only a very small number of combinations actually have been observed. That is, whenever we find elementary substances with a certain atomic weight, we also find an associated value for valence, boiling point and other variables that appears in a patterned way, every time. We could forever refer to how specific value-

combinations of valence, boiling point and atomic weight relate to other value-combinations, but this would entail a level of clumsiness that would render scientific progress almost impossible.

Therefore, to simplify reality, we create labels for the value-bundles in the form of *concepts* like helium (atomic weight is 4, valence is this, boiling point that, etc). Since variables are based on type-concepts and vice-versa, the entire social construction of our reality is based on this process of simplification. If we failed to do this, our entire world would appear as a kind of Heraclitean flux. This is why post-structuralism, despite its penchant for deconstructing type-concepts, cannot escape from their use - without a common stock of typological reference points (i.e. "positivist"), post-structuralists would simply talk past each other and fail to develop a scholarly identity.

The reason type-concepts are possible is because variables in nature are related in particular ways. The weight of an atom cannot rise while its boiling point falls, for instance. Does the same relationship hold in the world of human interaction? I would submit that while variable values are more loosely related in the social world, the sensory data we receive from the world "out there" is striking in its lack of randomness. Working class, capitalism, warfare, Protestant - all of these type-concepts are based on the fact that certain combinations of variable values repeatedly emerge, which is so *statistically incredible that it strikes us as worthy of a label*.

Let us examine one instance of this sensory coincidence. Many individuals possess a low degree of ecclesiastical organization, a high degree of bible ownership and a low degree of sensual expression. That these values of these variables are/were repeatedly found in the social world is not a random occurrence, but is statistically significant enough for us to devise the label "Protestant." Again, what we apprehend is not a sensory flux, but a definite patterned distribution of sensory values - which forms the basis for concepts in history and the social sciences. The process is not as automatic as that of the infant who comes to recognize concepts like "human" and "tree" in its awakening to consciousness. Yet it is far closer to the truth than the post-structuralist postulate that the sign "Protestant" floats above a sea of sensory chaos.

In the social world, it appears that there are more phenomena that lie "in between" ideal-type concepts than is the case in the physical world. We know that in chemistry, one can create "in between" substances like heavy water (H_3O). However, this

occurs less frequently than "in between" social phenomenon like individuals who call themselves Protestants, but manifest a high degree of sensual expression, low bible ownership and a belief in hierarchy. Nevertheless, were we to map the type-concept "Protestant" in three-dimensional space, we would find a cluster of cases at the node where high bible ownership, low sensual expressiveness, low ecclesiastical hierarchy and other variables intersect.

Certainly there would be outliers like the "in between" individuals I described above, but this in no way invalidates the sensory basis for the type-concept "Protestant," which serves as a useful label for a statistically unusual agglomeration of related variable-values. The plain fact is that all historical analysis is based on the reference points provided by concepts, which are underpinned by nonrandom sensory occurrence. This is what generates meaning, not the post-structuralist conceit that meaning is only created by the juxtaposition of signifiers in a self-referential system.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to rebut the post-structuralist contention that concepts are arbitrary social constructions which gain their meaning only in relation to other concepts. Instead, it is demonstrated that concepts in the human sciences, like those in the natural, are underpinned by nonrandom patterns of sensory stimuli. *Variable*-concepts are used to describe phenomena which vary in time and space. *Type*-concepts, on the other hand, occur at the confluence of specific values of variables. As a result, they do not vary over time and space. Type-concepts in the social sciences and humanities appear to possess a less distinct empirical basis than those in the natural sciences. Nevertheless, type-concepts in the human sciences are still based on a strikingly nonrandom empirical substratum that more closely resembles the natural sciences than it does a world of random, sensory chaos. An understanding of this solid empirical foundation can help clear conventional historical analysis of terminological confusion and better defend it from post-structuralist criticism.

Notes

[1] Giddens, Anthony. 1987. 'Structuralism, Post-structuralism and the Production of Culture,' in Giddens, A. and Jonathan H. Turner, *Social Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity), p. 196.

[2] The ability of powerful actors to shape the social world has been a staple of Michel Foucault's writing. For the distinction between performative and constative, see Austin, J.L. 'Performative Utterances,' in Urmson, J.O. and G.J. Warnock. 1979. *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 233-52.

[3] See Durant, Will. [1926] 1953. *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster), pp. 268-270.

[4] This is an argument that has appeared in the work of Clifford Geertz, among others.

[5] The classic exposition of Stinchcombe's argument appears in Stinchcombe, Arthur L. 1968. *Constructing Social Theories* (Harcourt, Brace & World), pp. 43-45.