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What is This?

Rethinking social criticism: some puzzles

STEVEN LUKES

Stephen Kemp's article argues for a 'viable notion of internal criticism' which works by identifying the 'internal contradictions' among actors' understandings. He holds that such 'immanent critique' is based on 'logical judgments of contradiction and coherence' and that such judgments are – indeed, I presume, must be – cross-culturally valid.

This argument raises a number of puzzling questions.

First, I do not see why we must accept that social criticism can only be 'immanent critique' and, more generally, why 'external' analyses and explanations of social practices, behaviour, phenomena, etc., are taken to be inappropriate. I believe that Kemp takes over too readily Peter Winch's focus on rules as constitutive of social reality, confining himself to showing that Winch's account of rule-following is too restrictive in its implications for the possibilities of social criticism.

But the excessive restrictiveness of Winch's account extends far beyond this limitation. This is brought out in Kemp's use of phrases such as 'actors' meanings are an essential constituent of the social realm'. Well, yes they are (and there are, of course, different kinds of rules), but then so are the institutions and organizations that create, execute, apply and sustain them. So are the physical and social environments in which they are to be found. And so are the various motivations that lead actors to follow them, deviate from them and violate them. In particular, the rules do not adequately define institutions or explain how they function and what their consequences, whether intended or unintended, are. The environments within which they function can, indeed must, be characterized independently of the rules and the same goes for the motivations of actors. Of course, some social scientists hold that rules are not

essential to social life – or at least that all we need to account for them are the incentive structures within which agents act. Consider present-day political economists' treatment of political and legal institutions. I hold no brief for them, but such social scientists typically think that one can explain the functioning of institutions by equilibrium reasoning based on actors maximizing their self-interest within complex games. Nothing that Kemp asserts shows this explanatory approach to be misconceived. But, even if we grant that rules cannot be reductively eliminated in this way, we must, I submit, grant that they are no more essential than the other elements of social life above indicated, and their counterparts. Rules, embodying actors' understandings of their social world, are, let us say, essential constituents, among other essential constituents – but they are not essentially constitutive, which was Winch's and is apparently Kemp's position.

Secondly, against Winch Kemp writes that 'rules have content in themselves' that does not reduce to the agreement of actors. That seems entirely plausible, though it needs considerable spelling out: clearly, the 'intrinsic content' of concepts will be (in different ways) tied to human purposes and social practices, and so, in a more indirect way, arising out of and maintained by normative agreement. For one thing, as Kemp himself observes later in his essay, schemes of classification are culturally diverse, and so we will need accounts of the genesis, functioning and evolution of concepts that will go beyond merely reporting on their use and, obviously, their correct usage will not depend on the adventitious agreement of actors at any given time. And, of course, concepts and rules are of many different kinds. Some will be inescapable within any form of life, because of commonalities inherent in the human condition, others highly variable across societies and cultures. And some, of course, such as the concepts of assertion, negation and non-contradiction, will be necessary to all human beings capable of thinking.

Thirdly, Kemp assumes that the role of the critic, when faced with understandings that are contradictory, is to suggest 'more consistent ways of understanding the relevant people, objects, processes and consequences'. The internal critic is to resolve contradictions within the actors' understandings by offering an account that is 'demonstrably better, on the actors' own terms, than those previously offered by the actors themselves'.

But why is the critic's – or analyst's – task to be thus restricted? In the first place, why must the analysis be 'on the actors' own terms'? Is it not, indeed, an egregious error to confuse analytic categories with what we may, following Pierre Bourdieu, call 'practical categories'? The latter are 'categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts'.[1] The latter are sometimes labeled 'lay' or 'folk' or 'native' categories, but such labels only accentuate the distinction which it is Winch's and Kemp's purpose to obliterate. The question is: are practical categories the

appropriate conceptual tools for analyzing their role – their genesis, functioning and consequences – in social life? Consider such categories as 'nation', 'ethnicity' and 'race'. These are reifying concepts which typically postulate the existence of nations and ethnic or racial groups as real, primordial communities. To describe and explain how their development and deployment succeed and sometimes fail to mobilize actors, to sustain loyalties and encourage enmities, and so on, the social scientist needs to treat them as objects not tools of inquiry. As Loic Wacquant has well put it, when discussing the category of 'race', 'the continual barter between folk and analytic notions, the uncontrolled conflation of social and sociological understandings of "race" ' is 'intrinsic to the category. From its inception, the collective fiction labeled "race" . . . has always mixed science with common sense and traded on the complicity between them.'[2] To regard the 'actors' own terms' as essential to sociological explanation is to confound *explanandum* and *explanans*.

But, in the second place, why must we assume that it is the critical analyst's task to resolve contradictions and inconsistencies in agents' understandings or 'within the practice being analyzed'? The assumption being made here seems to be that there is always a more consistent story to be told; and indeed in the latter section of his paper Kemp seems to argue that, when faced with apparently irrational beliefs, the inquirer engaged in interpretation/translation should assume that the right interpretation is the one that makes the most consistent sense. But why assume that either of these claims is true? The latter in particular seems to be an excessively particular interpretation of Davidson's Principle of Charity, which enjoins only the maximization of agreement in beliefs (whatever that may mean – how are beliefs to be counted?), not the assumption of such agreement in any particular case. But, more generally, people's beliefs – 'ours' and 'theirs' – all too frequently are based on 'collective fictions' and riddled with contradictions. Often they are, as Dan Sperber once put it, 'semi-propositional' – juxtapositions of half- or poorly understood thoughts that are held to, sometimes ferociously and with large consequences. In the 30-year-old article to which Kemp refers, I suggested that religious or 'mysterious' beliefs typically violate the laws of logic – something noted long ago by William James. Is there a more consistent story to tell about the logical coherence of the doctrine of the Trinity? Are Buddhist sayings to be rendered non-contradictory in order to make sense? Do they make sense? I suggest that what is at issue here is the difference between a contradiction and a paradox: a paradox is capable of resolution, a contradiction is not. Why should we assume that all apparently irrational beliefs are merely paradoxical?

Which brings me to Kemp's critique of my contention that there are local or contextually specific criteria of rationality. All that I had in mind here was, and is, not alternative local 'strange, alternative forms of logic' or

'context-specific logics' (whatever they might be) but simply the idea that there are local norms of appropriateness and reasonableness, such that what it is rational for local actors to commit themselves to, and refrain from questioning, is contextually given and subject to normative pressure. This is just the old idea of Pindar's that custom is 'the Queen and Empress of the World' who can come into conflict with the conclusions of reflective reason. No one has expressed this thought more powerfully than Montaigne in his reflections on 'custom's imperial sway'. What I was after in distinguishing general and local criteria of rationality was much better expressed by Montaigne when he observed that

> . . . the principal activity of custom is so to seize us and to grip us in her claws that it is hardly in our power to struggle free and to come back into ourselves, where we can reason and argue about her ordinances. Since we suck them in with our mothers' milk and since the face of the world is presented thus to our infant gaze, it seems to us that we were really born with the property of continuing to act that way. And as for those ideas which we find to be held in common and in high esteem about us, the seeds of which were planted in our souls by our forefathers, they appear to belong to our genus, to be natural. That is why we think that it is reason which is unhinged whenever custom is – and God knows how often we unreasonably do that![3]

NOTES

1 Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 4). See also Geertz (1985: 57).
2 Wacquant (1997: 222–3).
3 Michel de Montaigne, '*De la coustume*' translated in the *Complete Essays* as 'On Habit: and on Never Easily Changing a Traditional Law' (Montaigne, 1993: 130).

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STEVEN LUKES is Professor of Sociology at New York University. He has held previous positions as Fellow and Tutor in Politics and Sociology at Balliol College, Oxford, Professor of Political and Social Theory at the European University Institute, Florence, Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Siena, and also Visiting Centennial Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics. He is co-editor of the *European Journal of Sociology* and is the author of *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (Penguin Press, 1973); *Individualism* (Blackwell, 1973); *Power: A Radical View* (Macmillan, 1974); *Marxism and Morality* (Clarendon Press, 1985); *The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat: A Comedy of Ideas* and, most recently, *Liberals and Cannibals: The Implications of Diversity*.
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