

Complexity, Scale and Realism

Peter Somerville

Van Wezemael describes two approaches to social complexity. In the romantic approach, the researcher looks up at the object of research in order to look down; in the baroque approach, s/he looks down at it in order to look up. Van Wezemael, therefore, following Kwa, defines the approaches in terms of a metaphor, which encompasses two distinct issues: that of the scale of the research and that of the perspective of the researcher. Scale is most commonly understood as the ratio of representation to object ('larger scale', for example, means larger size of the representation in relation to what it represents). 'Looking up to look down' then suggests that the researcher is looking at a larger (and complex) object (e.g. 'society as a whole'), but their representations of that object are 'small' (in the sense of being simple or lacking complexity). It suggests further that their aim is to reduce the complexity of the object to achieve conformity with their representation of it. Romantics therefore combine research on a smaller scale (arguably infinitely small, in that the object is infinitely larger than its representation) with an idealist ontological and/or subjectivist epistemological perspective.

In contrast, 'looking down to look up' operates on a larger scale because the representations it seeks to develop are more detailed ('larger' than romantic representations) and the objects of its research tend to be smaller (e.g. specific organisations). Further, this approach aims to be 'grounded' in its research objects in order to make sense of how they work. Baroque researchers therefore combine research on a larger scale with a realist ontological and/or objectivist epistemological perspective.

Distinguishing scale from perspective suggests the possibility of other approaches to social complexity. One example would be 'looking up to look out', where the researcher focuses on a larger object but attempts also to extend their representations, using a variety of methods (e.g. hypothesis formation and deductivism). Another example would be 'looking down to look in', where the researcher investigates smaller objects, to gain deeper insight into interconnections (e.g. through use of ethnographic methods). Another approach altogether would be non-scalar and non-representational, in which understanding grows through performance by actors in complex fluid networks (Thrift, 2007) – acting rather than looking.

Overall, it seems to me that van Wezemael is arguing for medium-range theorising, rejecting grand narratives on one hand and positivism on the other. If so, it would be relevant to consider more explicitly approaches such as grounded theory, neo-institutionalism, actor network theory and what Bo Bengtsson and I previously termed 'contextualised rational action' (Bengtsson and Somerville, 2002). Crudely speaking, these represent different ways of 'looking up *and* looking down', i.e. approaches that cut across different scales.

I agree with van Wezemael that a Weberian approach, involving the construction of ideal types, followed by empirical investigation, identifying deviances from the ideal types, and leading to improved typologies, is too romantic. It is not clear to me, however, how far his own approach succeeds in improving on this. He still aims to

‘reduce complexity’, for example, and this looks like a romantic project rather than a baroque one, as it involves abstraction and homogenisation (Can complexity actually be reduced, anyway? Isn’t it a matter of discovering what Gribbin, 2004, has called ‘deep simplicity’ in the phenomena, whether these be natural or social or abstract?). The romantic conception of an abstract and homogenised global order or system is replaced by what looks like an equally abstract and homogenised concept of *local* order. The key concept of an assemblage (as a synthesis of entities on a ‘lower’ scale¹), introduced to make sense of this order, seems indeed to be a classic case of abstraction and homogenisation – and on a larger scale than in traditional romantic accounts.

Van Wezemaal is conscious, however, that DeLanda’s theory of assemblages does not deal effectively with power relations (or with social causation or relations of contingent obligation, for that matter), and makes two attempts to improve on it. First, he interprets virtualities (understood as whatever can happen) as Weberian ideal types, which reinforces the tendency to Weberian romanticism and yet also reads very like a neo-institutionalist position (e.g. concepts of resource dependency, organisational practice, etc). Second, he argues that linguistic interventions play a key role in moving assemblages in one direction or another, which seems to imply an idealist theory of power that conflicts with the realist orientation implicit in much of the rest of the paper. So neither of these attempts succeeds in making the theory seem convincing or useful (e.g. in comparison with the medium-range theories mentioned above).

The overall result of van Wezemaal’s arguments appears to be a neo-Weberian form of neo-institutionalism whose concepts are in need of considerable development, explication and clarification if they are to act as an effective new guide for research into social complexity.

References

- Bengtsson, B. and Somerville, P. (2002) ‘Constructionism, realism and housing theory’, *Housing, Theory and Society* 19, 3-4: 121-136.
Gribbin, J. (2004) *Deep Simplicity: Chaos, complexity and the emergence of life*. London: Allen Lane.
Thrift, N. (2007) *Non-Representational Theory*. London: Routledge.

¹ A confused concept, anyway, as scales can only be larger or smaller, not higher or lower.