

Critical social science and psychological explanation

I would like to thank Andrew Collier for his interesting review ('Mind, Reality and Politics', *RP* 88, pp. 38–43) of my book *Agency, Health and Social Survival* (Taylor & Francis, 1996). There is no space here to acknowledge all I have learnt from it, or to address more than our most basic disagreement. In his book *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (Verso, 1994), as in this review, Andrew sees social mechanisms as constrained by human biological nature, but not by human psychology. Similarly, in an earlier work, his 'Tree of Sciences and their Objects' situates the 'psychological and semiological sciences' at the top of a hierarchy of strata, each of which ontologically presupposes and is in some sense explained by the one below (*Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, p. 45). I prefer a tree with branches, so that the social and the psychological are on the same level. Both presuppose and emerge from (and affect) human physiology and ecology. Human social relations and human psychological nature presuppose, enable and constrain each other in a variety of ways. Andrew agrees that 'the social, psychological and semiological levels all ontologically presuppose each other' but claims that attempts 'to vertically explain social mechanisms in terms of psychological ones ... are all wildly implausible' (*Critical Realism*, p. 133). My position is not that human psychological nature explains social structures and processes, but that it establishes the range of possibilities for these.

I mean by 'psychological human nature', not vague descriptions such as 'humans are competitive', but species-specific mechanisms and processes which, when realized, have determinate effects in particular social contexts. As well as those investigated by cognitive psychology, proposed mechanisms include 'deep structures' of language acquisition, unconscious desires, the capacity for empathy, and the vulnerability to certain sorts of hurt which affect functioning. Social possibilities are realized through human action. They depend on agents' perceptual and cognitive capacities, motivation, emotions and understanding. The actual form these take depends on social context: it does not follow they can take any form.

Some theorists dismiss the idea of psychological human nature altogether, as either too basic to be interesting (the phenomenon of memory being, in that respect, rather like the circulation of the blood) or as a mere reflection of the society in question, viewing motivations and emotions, for instance, as discursively constructed. With his interest in psychoanalysis, and his realist understanding of it, Andrew cannot take this position. But what he does has a similar effect in releasing the social from its moorings. He assumes that while it is logically possible for psychological human nature to limit social possibilities (as with the possible incompatibility between anarchism and a Hobbesian view of human beings), in fact our psychic apparatuses are so flexible that they are compatible with any sort of society. Indeed, he gives examples of social variability to prove his point. If societies as diverse as these are compatible with psychological human nature, he is saying, an ecosocialist world order is no less so.

I hope and believe Andrew is right to maintain this possibility exists. If so, this does not mean that social structures are causally unaffected by psychological human nature, but rather that our psychology is indeed so flexible that it is with historical causality that we should be immediately concerned – the possibilities implicit in our starting point. Nevertheless we need to know about psychological mechanisms if, through collective human

action, we are to move from this particular point in human history to a desired and safer space. On the question of how to get there, Andrew tends to be over-rationalist. In the book I identify the need to build movements with good internal relations as one of the preconditions of change, and ask whether this is psychologically possible. Andrew doubts whether this is a psychological matter. If Bolshevik organization failed in a particular instance, he suggests, next time we could try a Menshevik style. In fact, bringing about intended changes in organizations is not just a question of switching at will to another model. It also seems that relationships between groups within movements are qualitatively different from relationships between individuals. In the book I discuss Alford's suggestion that reparative groups are rare, and large ones even rarer. If true, this might explain the common tendency to self-destructive splittism in social movements. If real psychological mechanisms produce projective processes in which potential allies are seen as enemies, analysts and activists need to understand these processes and their triggers to devise ways of overcoming them.

Andrew rightly says that it is not individuals, but capitalist corporations, that destroy the earth. It does not follow that the psychological mechanisms which might explain individual spoiling are irrelevant. Psychological mechanisms are involved in our daily acceptance of the destruction we live with, which our own routines prolong. Moral indifference, ignorance, denial and collusive fantasies are produced and drawn on by corporate decision-makers. The more we know about the psychological processes involved, the more chance we have of bringing about social conditions that promote 'alloplastic realism'.

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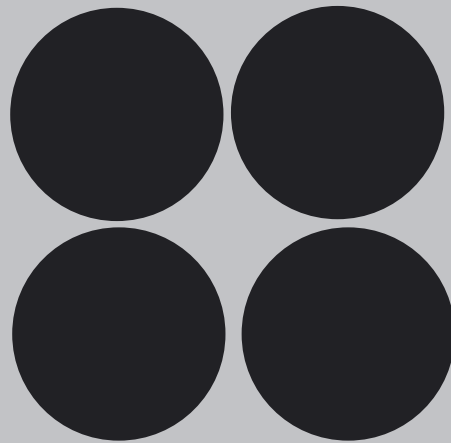
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