

Spontaneous Order, Symbolic Interaction and the Somewhat-Less- Hidden Hand

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Introduction

Frederick Hayek consistently presented the concept of spontaneous order as an idea grounded in the “hidden hand” of Adam Smith. Theoretically, the Smithian hidden hand serves as a kind of *deus ex machina* to account for or dismiss an extremely wide variety of possibilities from statistical error terms to fate or divine intervention. In many respects, the hidden hand often functions as a kind of pseudo-explanation: “then something very interesting happened but we don’t quite know why”. Granted that this is an excellent interim explanation useful in many contexts. However, it is not an entirely satisfactory long-term solution. Thus, claims of “hidden hand” explanations should always be seen, in part, as the jumping off points for possible further exploration rather than terminus. While we must certainly pay attention to mystery and the unexplained in seeking to understand the emergence of spontaneous order, simply writing wide swaths of social reality off to unexplained spontaneity, unpredictability and chance represents merely a virtual abandonment of the theoretical enterprise.

Some incautious followers of Hayek and Smith tend to treat the “hidden hand”, which is to say the workings and processes of economic exchange that Smith noted in the 18th century, as equally hidden and mysterious today. Such is clearly not the case, along a wide variety of fronts in economic, social and political theory. It is my intent in this paper to suggest that while parts of the hidden hand may always remain hidden, some lines of theoretical and empirical investigation since the 18th century – in particular the work of a group of social psychologists and sociologists known collectively as symbolic interactionists – can be read as revealing at least some of the dynamics of Smith’s hidden hand, and that taking into account their work and revelations is important to fuller understanding of the concept of spontaneous order. In this case, revealing

parts of what had been hidden discloses the workings of processes that are equally as wonderful as Smith's ingenious metaphor of the hidden hand.

Spontaneous Order is not primarily an economic issue

The first point I wish to make is that, although Hayek was an economist, his insights about spontaneous order are not, strictly speaking, exclusively, or even fundamentally, economic ones. This is not intended as a criticism; merely the observation of an important disciplinary limit or boundary. Hayek's observations about spontaneous order are, instead, an important interdisciplinary observation whose significance stretches broadly across many topics, disciplines and theoretical perspectives.

The primary reason that spontaneous order is not a fundamentally economic question is simply that "order" – even economic order – is not a primary economic issue or concern.² Order, even in the highly elementary sense my grandmother used – a place for everything and everything in its place – is a fundamentally pre-economic concern. It is, instead, a primary social, political and legal concern with arranging or prioritizing ends, and not with the selection of means for the attainment of those ends which is the central domain of economics. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that the predominantly economic followers of Hayek have not always been particularly interested in looking into the hidden hand of spontaneous order. It is not, in any respect, a centrally important question for them. Depending upon circumstances, markets are simply there or not there. It is the dynamics of markets, and not their emergence or constitution, where economic interest lies.

Aspects of how to organize a market, or to get to a market and back can, of course, be abstracted in the familiar terms of price, cost, supply, demand, and the like, but such abstraction always leaves out a host of interesting things – aspects of what symbolic interactionists call the situation. And such abstracting can be very enlightening and useful. That should not distract us from the main point, however, that order – that is to say, a degree of predictability, determinacy and meaning or understandability – is simply not an economic issue.

They are, loosely speaking, praxeological in nature if by that terms one means something like the science of human action (to borrow von Mises' title.) With not too much effort, one can get from Hayek to a concern for order – whether economic, social or political – in several ways: through something like the general social-political-economic musings of a Gary Becker, or the pseudo-economics of the sociological exchange theorists, like George Humans and Peter Blau. Regardless, one is on interdisciplinary group. The reality is that a concern for order –spontaneous or otherwise – is not in the first instance an

important economic question. One may be concerned, secondarily, with the production of spontaneous order, which is an economic issue. However, concern with the nature and conditions of social order is, by contrast, a central concern in sociology and the conditions of political order are perhaps the foremost question in political philosophy.

Smith's Many Influences

That the hidden hand of Adam Smith continues to inspire the efforts of many working in the tradition of "Austrian economics" is straightforward, at times, almost totemic. Smith, in a totally separate intellectual tradition, has also served as a source of inspiration for the American pragmatists and most importantly for purposes of this paper, those sociologists and social psychologists working in the related tradition of the pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and usually known as symbolic interactionists. (I shall henceforth in this paper drop the term symbolic, as unnecessary Language-based social interaction is what I mean by interaction throughout.)

George H. Mead was an American social philosopher who is generally seen as the fountainhead for the interactionist perspective. The sociologist Herbert Blumer is also by general assent, seen as the developer of interactionism. It is the principal purpose of this paper to explore the concepts of emergence and spontaneous order from interactionist perspectives first laid down by Mead and later sharpened by Blumer, Anselm Strauss and other interactionists.

Interactionism as nonstructuralist sociology

Broadly speaking, we can identify within contemporary sociology two broad positions relative to the idea of spontaneous order: "Structuralist" sociologies, including both the "conservative" brand running from Auguste Comte through Durkheim through Parsons to the present day abstracted empiricists, represent one such perspective. On the whole, concern with social structure tends to downplay, minimize or deny entirely the significance of spontaneous order.

In the same vein, we have the "radical" structuralism of the Marxists, with their dreary inevitabilities and dogmatism. From both a Hayekian and an interactionist perspective, all forms of structuralism routinely succumb to what Dennis Wrong long ago termed the "over-socialized conception of man"; the

view that human action is mostly scripted by social structure and human decision, action and freedom is largely epiphenomenal.

By contrast, interactionism as the vanguard of the other position in sociology directly embraces the concepts of autonomous action, spontaneous order and emergent behavior. Like the Hayekian or Austrian Economic perspectives, it does not view people as tall social ants, programmed only to respond to the dictates of social structure, but as individuals capable of choice and independent action.

Symbolic Interactionism: A Brief Summary

Symbolic interactionism is a social science that many Hayekians, regrettably, will be either completely unfamiliar with or holding a rather jaundiced and inaccurate view of, if my experience to date is any indication. Interactionism and Austrian economics, along with several other subfields of social science and social theory, share the disturbing characteristics of what anthropologists – yet another notably clubby bunch – term ethnocentrism. Focusing primarily amongst themselves on the interests and questions raised by a revered founder and of greatest interest to themselves, they often tend to regard others not as *significant others*, to employ a well-known and fundamental interactionist term.

In interactionist terms, such disciplinary ethnocentrism tends to produce what is discussed below as closed awareness contexts. Such closed awareness contexts, in turn, serve to limit and restrict the range of possible spontaneous orders. For example, it is relatively easy to predict at present that the possibilities of a spontaneous emergence of a major research and theoretical focus combining Austrian economics and interactionist social psychology are at present extremely low, based only on the ethnocentrism (and mutual exclusiveness) of the two fields of investigators. It is a principal intent of this paper to try to raise that probability, however slightly.

I find this particularly regrettable in this case because interactionism shares a number of distinctive common perspectives with all others interested in the problem of spontaneous order and the related problem of independent social action. Further, interactionism has extended a variety of perspectives somewhat akin to the Austrian model of “rational choice” deeply into the understanding of social disorganization: deviant behavior, mental illness, poverty, crime and other topics.

Herbert Blumer outlined three central premises generally acknowledged to define interactionism:

1. People act toward things (including other people) on the basis of the meanings those things have for them;

2. Meanings arise out of the interaction of the individual with others
3. Interpretive processes are used by the person to deal with his/her environment.

Working in an intellectual tradition far from the usual precincts of the Austrians, interactionists and others closely aligned with them have pursued approaches to analyzing ordinary life originating in the literary perspectives of Balzac, Dickens and Zola. In the course of doing so, they have discovered unmistakable tendencies of reasoned choice among skid row bums, the severely mentally retarded, the dying, juvenile delinquents, welfare mothers and many other marginal populations. Indeed, many of these insights provide at least part of the intellectual basis for the Austrian and other “new political economy” and “systems” perspectives that have enabled economists to venture forth from the counting rooms and marketplaces and offer perspectives on all human behavior.

Part of what makes all of this so difficult to sort out is that interactionists have until recently been almost completely silent – at least overtly – on matters of general economic and political theory.³ At the same time, Hayek and Mises, like many of their followers, despite their general theoretical or praxeological interests, were not notably loquacious or convincing on matters of social psychological and microsocial interest – tending primarily to encourage along with their grand theorizing, varieties of social and behavioral reductionism in which the full interesting, terrible and glorious range of human behavior is reduced to a series of quasi-economic demands and price behavior said to be exhaustively explainable through their own interpretations of the mechanisms of rational choice and markets. Let me hasten to add that there is much to talk about here, but it cannot be a one sided conversation with others devoted only to learning the Austrian wisdom, nor a mutual hurling of verbal fusillades over the barricades.

Writing in the interactionist tradition reveals a singular focus on the micro-social behavior of ordinary, everyday life that is, upon first glance, notably void of those same grand motifs of economics and politics so abundant in the Austrian tradition. Skid row alcoholics, unemployed black men gathered on a street corner, “taxi dancers”, rather than high government officials and economic entrepreneurs, are most likely to draw their attention. However, without really intending to, the interactionists have through nearly a century of research extended the domain of “rational choice”, broadly interpreted, to some of the most deviant and marginal of our fellow beings – including children, mental patients, the dying, street corner gangs, juvenile delinquents, prisoners, welfare mothers, and men seeking sex in public restrooms, just to mention a few. There is little doubt that a fully rational account of the

latter could be constructed – in part because interactionist investigators have already largely done so.

The Dismissive Responses

A key question is whether Hayekians and interactionists can ever see past the stereotypes they hold about one another and begin to understand what they may have in common.⁴ Any reference to John Dewey serves to illustrate this point: Dewey had a productive career as a philosopher that spanned nearly 60 years from his first important publications in the 1890s to his death in the 1950s. He was an important expositor of certain interactionist ideas – notably the importance of experience in nature – as well as a friend and close professional colleague of G.H. Mead. He was, through much of that time, a relentless explorer and advocate of the importance of the individual in society and a staunch defender of personal liberty.

For me, the immediate focus of this paper arose out of a recent essay in the once-again left-leaning *New Republic*, for which Dewey was once an important contributor. The essay was entitled with the portmanteau neologism *Liberalterianism* a term that describes a rather iconoclastic notion paralleling that explored in this paper. There is a convergence of interests and perspectives between some of the libertarian-leaning followers of Hayek and Mises, and some of the social liberal-leaning followers of Dewey and Mead.⁵

Yet, such is the polarization of our intellectual life that I have personally observed on more than one occasion the way in which the merest mention of Dewey's name among Hayekians will provoke dismissive responses amidst mumblings of “progressive education” and “socialism”. In the process, Dewey's entire long and creative career as a fearless proponent of ideas will be immediately and summarily dismissed. I hasten to add, of course, that the merest mention of Hayek, Mises and Austrian economists to some audiences of interactionists, is likely to produce an equally dismissive reaction from the majority of those present. This issue becomes even more troublesome, with the mention of other names like Jane Addams, C. Wright Mills, an American intellectual gadfly, Jürgen Habermas, a notable German ex-Marxist on the one hand or Murray Rothbard.

The central figures in this drama Hayek and Mises, of course, and the philosopher G.H. Mead and his symbolic interactionist interpreter Herbert Blumer are, to some extent simpler to deal with – except for active practitioners of guilt by association. All four are fairly “pure” intellectuals and we can concentrate on what they have to say about emergence and spontaneous order without having to consider a lot of this sort of extra baggage. My primary concern here, however, is not with comparative

philosophical exegesis, but the somewhat lighter, and more easily digested parallel tack.

Situation

I want to begin my consideration of interactionism and spontaneous order by suggesting that the interactionist concepts of situation and emergence offer important pointers to begin to identify and assess the interactionist case for spontaneous order. All models of rational behavior place emphasis on the connection between purposes, goals or ends and action, or the application of means. Interactionism is somewhat unique in its systematic emphasis on rational behavior as consisting of creative enactments. This is most evident in the interactionist conception of situation, not as a model of the objective circumstances surrounding a choice or event, but as the active construction of those involved. W.I. Thomas's famous dictum to the effect that what is real is what those involved in a situation believe to be real illustrates this point. How can we determine, for example, whether any particular situation has the potential for the emergence of a spontaneous order? The interactionist response is that the only answer that makes any sense is to ask those in the situation whether they see such potential for such emergence.

Situations as Emergent

Thus, in addition to the usual themes of Hayekian spontaneous order – absence of central planning, spontaneity, uncoordinated plurality – interactionist perspectives on situation and emergence highlight two additional important themes – novelty and indeterminacy. “Emergent events are events that contain novel features that are not entirely derived from antecedent events and experiences,” according to Meltzer and Manis in their introductory discussion of the interactionist approach to emergence. (1995: 180)

The interactionist model uses many of the same indeterminate qualities that Hayekians attribute to the market and hidden hand to generalize about social behavior, but to move the locus of emergence beyond dependence on any particular social institution and make it a lemma of spontaneous order. Meltzer and Manis quote D.L. Miller's summary of the perspective of George Herbert Mead on emergence:

For Mead, the seat of reality is in the present, and presents are characterized by acts of adjustment, or by the novel, the emergent, *that which could not have been predicted either in fact or in principle...* (emphasis added) The emergent being unpredictable in

principle, does not follow logically from the world that was there, from conditions necessary for its emergence, from what is traditionally called its cause.

Meltzer and Manis (1995: 181) interpret this, in conventional interactionist manner, to mean that “the sphere of the social is a creative, open-ended process rather than a static structure.” According to the same authors, Herbert Blumer, the erstwhile father of symbolic interactionism, consistently argued that “novelty, uncertainty, and emergence are integral, not accidental or epiphenomenal in human life.” (Meltzer & Manis 1995: 180)

In literally hundreds of instances scattered throughout the interactionist literature, the interactionist concept of *social process* performs many of the same roles as the Hayekian concept of market production, yet generalizes and universalizes beyond this single institutional setting. Thus, the processual nature of social interaction noted by G.H. Mead and by these sources offers a couple of notable refinements over the Hayekian market model of emergence in this regard: The market condition for emergence is both conditional and narrowly situational. It is conditional because markets, by definition, assume the conditions of large pluralities of both buyers and sellers and at least some interpersonal recognition of an underlying price mechanism as preconditions for spontaneous order to emerge. By contrast, the interactionist claim is more fundamental; it is that emergence is a universal characteristic vested in all human action regardless of social conditions; that it exists prior to any particular institutional claims.

This in no way denies the role of markets as specific situations for the emergence of spontaneous order. Instead, it sets up a more general framework for identifying other occasions, institutions, and “social structures” in which spontaneous order may arise.

Three propositions

The core of the Meltzer-Manis presentation of emergence in the symbolic interactionist tradition is their identification of three propositions for explaining emergence and spontaneous order as a condition of ordinary social life. The three are:

- 1) Humans are active in shaping their own conduct;
- 2) Rational thought involves a conversation with oneself⁶;
- 3) Humans construct their behavior in the course of its execution;

These are, fundamentally, restatements of the basic interactionist position staked out by Blumer above.

Selves and Others: I, Me and You

The first of these is probably self-evident to a group of individualist Hayekians. Humans are, in President Bush's famous neologism, deciders. The second and third take note of G.H. Mead's complex concept of the self as consisting of both the spontaneous actions of the "I" and thought and actions directed toward oneself and others, which he termed the "Me" and Significant Others. The difference is easily demonstrated in a simple exchange involving these statements: "I called you yesterday, but no one answered". To which the other replies: "I heard the phone ring. Was that you?" A question to which "I" answers "Yes. *That was me. I guess I shouldn't have called that early.*" To which "You" responds "Let's set up a regular time for you to call."

These three sentences establish the main elements of the interactionist base model of social interaction which has powerful implications for emergence, and which is deeply embedded in ordinary language: A situation (in this case, one involving an exchange of comments about a second situation the previous day.) important meanings of which are shared by two actors, agents or deciders (termed the self and the other). In this case, the other is clearly a *significant other*, a fact that is situationally evident from the first pair of comments, which require no introductions, or elaborate explanation or justification to understand. It is evident from their words alone that these people know each other. The key to the Meadian concept of self, however, is in the last comments. The original self (I in situation 1) clearly now (in situation 2) recognizes him/herself (Me) in the previous event as a social object in the same sense that (s)he recognizes the significant other (You). Most important in the Meadian model, however, are the last two statements that together reflect the ability of the self (I, in situation 2) to regard itself (Me) on exactly the same terms as it regards the other (You) – in this case, recognizing two simple and equivalent evaluations of the situation.

Further, I, Me and You in this exchange are all recognized not as separate decision points, but as continuities continuing from Time 1 to Time 2 and presumably forward into time 3 (the time of future calls). However, this same self (I, or actually both Me and You's own I) are capable of acting to change the situation: I am aware that you did not want to take my call and I will adjust my future behavior accordingly, precisely because I can act toward myself in precisely the same way I can act toward you. And I know you can do the same. But with your final statement you not only close the situation (evident by the fact that there are no more statements). You also set up the possibility of what interactionists call "joint lines of action". In this case "we" (You and I) can act jointly to set a time for future calls. And thusly a new and spontaneous order emerges; one which allows you and I to reflect individually

and possibly act jointly. And regardless of which choice we make, either of us can ask: Is this new situation good for me? In this way, and particularly in “Your” ability to take “my” interests into account in your evaluation of your own actions and choices (and vice versa), a very powerful evocation of Adam Smith’s conception of self-interest (to which Alexis de Tocqueville applied the phrase *Self Interest Properly Understood*) emerges from the interactionist model.

And, interactionist research has been very prolific in spelling out those connections – revealing the hidden hand, as it were. Full elaboration of this would require at least a book length monograph. We can only offer up a few illustrative examples here.

Situations as Awareness Contexts

Perhaps the most explicit treatment of spontaneous order in the interactionist literature is found in the various writings of Anselm Strauss on what he termed “negotiated order”. This perspective began to emerge in a study of dying patients in a hospital setting by Strauss and his colleague Barney Glaser. (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss 1963) Their study noted two approaches of the hospital staff to dying patients: One they termed closed awareness contexts, which were characterized by the absence of discussion or any form of explicit acknowledgement between medical staff and patients of the reality that patients were terminally ill. They concluded two things: that despite the lack of official confirmation, most dying patients were aware of their status; and 2) that the subject of the patient’s looming deaths was so “closed” as a subject that the silence could only be maintained by an active (albeit) tacit collaboration between staff and patients.

This was at the time consistent with long-standing health care practice supposedly intended to “protect” patients from the overt knowledge of their own pending deaths, but also allowing medical personnel to avoid the harsh reality that their efforts were insufficient to spare the lives of their patients. They found, among other things, that most patients knew anyway that they were terminally ill. Glaser and Strauss contrasted this with “open awareness contexts” in which both medical staff and patients acknowledged awareness of the patient’s immanent death, and the subject could be openly broached by either party.

Most importantly for our purposes here are the ways noted by Glaser and Strauss that these two contrasting situations – termed the awareness contexts – acted to constrain and limit the thinking, actions and decisions of everyone involved in the situation. In brief, they offer extensive detail of how mutual, unacknowledged or tacit cooperation among the medical staff and

patients in closed awareness contexts acted to reduce the range of possible social orders that might have arisen. In the language of spontaneous order, numerous emergent possibilities were blocked or precluded. Patients who wished to see old friends and acquaintances who might help them celebrate their lives (a distinct emergent order that might arise spontaneously out of the wishes of patients) were precluded from doing so by the need of patient and staff to deny that there was any reason for such an emergent event.

This finding on the systematic role of situations in identifying and defining situational possibilities done 40 years ago still represents an important interactionist contribution to the understanding of spontaneous order.

Negotiated Order

The real payoff for an understanding of spontaneous order, however, comes from a second study by these same authors of the more general organizational processes of hospital structure, “The Hospital And Its Negotiated Order.” (Strauss 1963; Strauss 1978) Without taking too many liberties with this second study, one can suggest that, in contrast to the front office and organization chart musings of health care management, the reality of hospitals as experienced by those who work and are served there is of what I have come to term roving gangs of specialists, all of whom talk primarily only among themselves. In a slightly more formal manner we might report the finding that the social order (or social structure) of hospitals is a spontaneous order (which Strauss termed a negotiated order) that emerges from, and is constantly being “reinvented” by an unending series of negotiations. It is from these negotiations and not from the rules, policies and procedures manuals all of which tend to act only as constraints setting limits on behavior, from which the social order of the hospital emerges and is constantly socially reconstructed.

As a result, far from the orderly, hierarchical organization charts drawn up by management experts, the actual, emergent order of hospital life involves unending rounds of negotiation within and among small groups of specialists (including patients and family members; pity the poor patient left alone in a hospital setting without such a support group – usually termed by interactionists the “reference other”).

Total Institutions

Close examination of the interactionist *oeuvre* will reveal evidence of a number of remarkably vibrant libertarian themes also woven throughout the interactionist literature. Perhaps no piece of interactionist writing is more

clearly an illustration of this point than Erving Goffman's *Asylums*, (1961) which offers a thorough and disturbing analysis of the systematic, dehumanizing, anti-individualizing and liberty-revoking character of what he termed "total institutions" – mental hospitals, military units and boarding schools, were the primary examples. Although interactionists might be more inclined to frame Goffman in terms of "anarchist" or "dramaturgical" perspectives, the total institutions paper illustrates clearly the degree to which there is a very deep and wide libertarian-like streak in the interactionist literature. It is neither new nor particularly difficult to locate. And it also has implications for our theme of spontaneous order and emergence.

As initial proof of that, I picked at random (by accident, actually) an interactionist text from my bookshelf. *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction to Social Psychology*⁷ was intended as one of those "best foot forward" introductions to the field aimed at undergraduate audiences. Along with the other standard, introductory topics, including a brief excerpt from Dewey's "Mind, Experience and Behavior" (153-155) and Herbert Blumer's anti-structuralist classic "Society as Symbolic Interaction" this introduction contains an 8-page discussion (180-187) by Bernard Meltzer and Jerome Manis, of "Emergence and Human Conduct" already mentioned.

About the topic of emergence, Meltzer and Manis say further "our interest relates to the indeterminacy found on both the individual and the collective level of human behavior." They are concerned, they say, with the novel, the unpredictable, and the unexplained. They are, in other words, concerned with the emergence of spontaneous order. Emergence, in this sense, is a centrally important theme in interactionist writing, and deeply shapes the sense of social order held by interactionists.

Many "structuralist" sociologists tend to see social order and change as virtually opposites, change being the transitory condition occurring only in the brief moments between the determining order of Condition A and the newly structured Condition B. At least five major differences from the structuralist/social determinist view of individuals "in" society are central to interactionism:

- 1) A social worldview grounded not in collectivities, but in acting persons⁸ whose shared meanings and joint behavior those collectivities are.
- 2) An anti-structuralist sociology in which "social order" is viewed as the deliberate, and continual recreation of acting (and choice-making) individuals;
- 3) An anti-quantitative methodology which rejects completely the notion that great insight is to be found in statistical generalizations;
- 4) An anti-objectivist epistemology, somewhat like the one Mises was struggling toward but never quite fully realized. The "grandstand" (objective observer) position is explicitly rejected. Social scientists may seek to step outside society and become

“objective” observers of social, economic or political reality by interactionists, but they can never quite get there. The best they can hope for is forms of intersubjectivity. 5) An acute awareness of the impact of time on perspectives. Interactionists are acutely responsive to Mead’s model of behavior as fundamentally and profoundly open-ended and future oriented. There are other systematic similarities here that might be noted, but these well illustrate the point.

Constructivism Properly Understood

As a final example of the systematic involvement of symbolic interactionism in spontaneous order, I want to introduce the controversial topic of social constructivism – in the famous words of Berger and Luckman (1967), the idea that reality itself is socially constructed. In suggesting this, they were alluding in part to the much earlier statement by their fellow interactionist W.I. Thomas to the effect that situations perceived as real are real in their consequences.

In introducing constructivism, however, I hasten to point out that the interactionist conception is not the same as all of the popular misinterpretations propagated with this idea by assorted bands of “post-modernist” relativists. I do not mean, in any sense, in other words, to suggest that *the illusion of reality is socially constructed*. That notion, in my view, belongs in the same garbage can as the notion that Adam Smith’s concept of self-interest is a blanket endorsement of all forms of unconstrained selfishness. As the fictional Wanda Gerschwitz tells her brother Otto, in the movie *A Fish Called Wanda*, “The central tenant of Buddhism is not every man for himself. I know, Otto. I looked it up.” Likewise, despite the clear textual evidence in the work itself, the Wikipedia entry on social constructivism, for example, finds the idea derived, among other sources, from Marx and Gransci!

Taking a page from Wanda Gerschwitz, looking it up will confirm that the English language text of *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) upon which constructivism is grounded is primarily a transliteration by Berger and Luckman of work done over many years by the phenomonologist Alfred Schutz and originally written in German. Schutz was heavily reliant on Mead and thus, we can assume with confidence that constructivism in the original is in no way a relativist doctrine as the post-modernists would have it. In an earlier period, Karl Mannheim used the term relationism to distinguish this approach from relativism. The essential point here would be to suggest that self-interest in the constructivist view is always an issue situated in a particular historical, political and social context, and that how narrowly or broadly it is interpreted is fundamentally an issue of meaningful construction of those involved.

Constructivism, emergence and spontaneous order are all of a piece from an interactionist perspective: Reality, order and change are all situationally grounded and their meaning and significance depends in the most fundamental sense on how those involved in and with the situation – including those observing and commenting upon the situation – individually and jointly construct their interpretations of it. In this case, we can predict that Hayekians and interactionists interested in spontaneous order and emergence can either continue to construct separate but parallel meaningful accounts of the reality of emergence and spontaneous order, or they can begin to compare notes more systematically and learn from one another.

Conclusion: And Just as Certainly There are Differences

We actually saw a genuinely marvelous example of the spontaneous social construction of a new world order in the years after 1989, and almost no one noticed this remarkable event.⁹ In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Empire and associated events, we saw the spontaneous emergence of a new world order; one that we are all still struggling to make sense of, but clearly a fundamentally different reality than the cold war world it replaced.

At the same time, we cannot afford to ignore certain real differences in perspective between the followers of Mead and the followers of Hayek. For most of us, the underlying differences were established – and positions were staked out – years, even decades ago, and we see little reason for reconsideration at this point. Yet, certain similarities are there.

I wish to suggest modesty, cautiously and quietly (since I am not actually in attendance) that in the case of the concepts of spontaneous order and emergence, there are large areas of convergences to explore. That makes this paper either a bit of an intellectual adventure or a fool's errand; ultimately you'll have to decide which it is.

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Notes

¹ My perspective has always been an interactionist one; albeit a somewhat maverick one (which in important respects puts me right in the mainstream of that orientation). I began my study of interactionism as an undergraduate in 1962 and was a founding member of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI) in the 1980s, and have presented papers at SSSI conferences in the past. (I am not currently a member, more out of considerations of time than of shifting perspective.) I have been working on applying insights from interactionism to a fuller understanding of rational choice and social action for most of my adult life. I also believe and have said publicly that society

was an illusion for reasons given by Herbert Blumer and Charles Horton Cooley years before Margaret Thatcher – with whom I shared few other political beliefs – was taken to task for making the same point in the 1980s. The contemporary interactionist perspective of “social constructivism” properly understood as relationism and not turned into a form of post-modern relativism, offers both Ms. Thatcher and I a better, more effective way to make that point.

² I am using the term “economic” here in Lionel Robbins’ classic sense of the study of human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means that have alternative uses. From this standpoint, any concern for organization, institution, or other manifestations of order is a secondary, even epiphenomenal, concern. At best, the economic concern for order is a matter of the appropriate application of the scarce resources necessary to create or maintain order. Again, this is not a fundamental concern with order, - in this case, with describing or explaining the emergence of a particular kind of order – but only with the constraints on orderly creation.

³ There is at least one major exception to this and that is the political scientist, Murray Edelman, who over a period of more than four decades beginning in 1964 published a remarkable series of books on politics as symbolic action. Many of Edelman’s themes (1964; 1971; 1974; 1977; 1985) bear directly on the problems of spontaneous order and emergence.

⁴ Stereotype is one of the concepts that has generalized out of the interactionist tradition.

⁵ David Prychecto offered up the beginnings of a very encouraging “liberalterian” analysis of the work of Jürgen Habermas a few years ago, but in the end he did what we all are inclined to do in such circumstances: He faulted Habermas for being insufficiently Hayekian.

⁶ Their actual statement is “human consciousness, or thought, involves interaction with oneself.” Because of the centrality of rational thought as formative of rational choice in the Hayek tradition, I have abbreviated to get to the point. Although there are many important issues lurking in that abbreviation, I do not believe they materially alter the points made in this paper, so I am leaving their full exploration to another time and place.

⁷ By Herman, Nancy J. and Larry T. Reynolds. 1994. Dix Hills NY: General Hall.

⁸ One serious topic of contention, if care is not exercised, involves the interactionist concept of “person” which is generally preferred usage by interactionists to “individual.” Along with a systematic rejection of Cartesian dualisms, interactionists tend to reject the model of the fully autonomous “individual” as a misleading fiction. They tend to prefer, instead, the model of the individual “person” imbedded in a surrounding social life. In this way, many but not all of the features of the Hayekian “methodological individualism” are retained. This is a subject for future exploration. Adult persons, they might argue, can emerge into full autonomous individuality only after thoroughgoing socialization by family, friends and significant others. Yet unlike sociological structuralists, interactionists do not tend to see such socialization in deterministic terms as fully defining the social person. And, the paths to individuality – artistic or scientific creativity, deviance, or some other pathway – are deeply embedded in the interactionist model of emergence detailed below.

⁹ World order is used in a significantly different way here than the usual meaning of the international political order of nation states. This new “order” is, in many respects considerably more complex and chaotic than the seemingly orderly “free world vs. communist order” dual polarities it replaced. In a more fundamental cognitive sense, however, it is a socioeconomic order nonetheless.

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