

Introduction

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On emergence:

The conceptual terrain of emergence as it concerns us here today begins to take on teical contours in the British philosophical tradition of the mid-nineteenth century. It is very much a middle ground. It stands between a mechanism that presumed the ultimate resolution of all causal processes into the single plain of the physical and a vitalism that rejected the physical determination of life processes, of consciousness, of will and intention. Occupying the terrain of emergence in the work of such logicians as John Stuart Mill are properties, entities and systems that (in one or another sense) depend upon the phenomena and the processes of which they are constituted but are logically and so ontologically irreducible to them or explicable in their terms alone. There is thus something a little mysterious about things emergent and their mystery has left them the focus of philosophical controversy to this day. The concept of emergence has come to admit of "strong" and "weak" varieties as well as varieties of merely epistemic purchase without any ontological import at all. The latter-day positivists who are known as "causal fundamentalists" generally understand emergence accordingly to be an aspect only of our ignorance of how things really work and not an aspect of how they work in fact. I don't think that our panel includes even a single causal fundamentalist, however, so I feel I have license to proceed unapologetically.

Emile Durkheim's "society" is an emergent entity, a thing constituted of the human beings and institutional orders that compose it but, as Durkheim famously put it, a "reality *sui generis*." Yet, Durkheim's sociology does not focus on emergence as a problematic, as a systematic source of methodological and substantive questions. We might want to argue about whether Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is not in fact an emergentist treatise, or whether Marx shouldn't really be read as an emergentist, as Louis Althusser effectively read him, rather than the quasi-vitalist teleologist that he (like Hegel before him) so often appears to be when read without Althusser's guidance. Whatever we might conclude, I think it fair to say that emergence per se has been the systematic focus of neither methodological nor substantive investigation until recently and still not at all widely.

Its neglect seems to have little to do with ontologically uncertain status, about which only analytical philosophers are inclined excessively to worry. Perhaps it has something to do with its simply being taken for granted. Yet, serious attention to emergent phenomena has also been occluded and displaced due to countervailing habits of attention of a much more dominant and enduring sort. I have three such habits in mind and will address each of them briefly in turn.

The first is a preoccupation with the codification and formalization of the laws or general law-like principles of social and civilizational development. If Darwin's adaptationism had not so rapidly suffered transformation into social Darwinism, had "the survival of the fittest" not so immediately overshadowed mutation as the prevailing slogan of the biological-sociological analogy, emergentism might have had more time to yield a proper program of social and cultural research. The intellectual and social ecology that persists with industrial capitalism and colonial imperialism from the middle 1800s to the 1960s, however, had little in it to facilitate the ascendance of any program centrally engaged with questions of the conditions of the production and effects of the unexpected, the contingent, the para-physical, the hybrid, the cyborgic, the rhizomatic. This was the stuff of strange laboratories in Moscow and even stranger enclaves outside of Carmel, California, but it had and could have no place in the Program for Social Relations at Harvard, much less the Laboratoire d'ethnologie in Paris. Under the force of that ecology, even Weber could not sustain the emergentist diagnostics of the "specific irrationality" of the growth of capitalism upon Calvinist subsoil. In the twentieth century, even his fascination with the *hiatus irrationalis* that seeming marks so much of the historical process gives way to a properly developmentalistic sociology of rationalism and the rational differentiation of "spheres of value."

The second habit of attention or inattention I have in mind is that of a preoccupation with the now very well developed problematic of sociocultural reproduction. In Durkheim as in the British tradition of structural-functional anthropology, that preoccupation unfolds as the investigation of the conditions that do and do not sustain solidarity or the maintenance of society as an integrated whole through time. Focusing on the production and repetition of the same, the problematic of reproduction endures in social theory from Durkheim to Pierre Bourdieu, whose theory of practice may prove to be its consummation. It has considerable reinforcement, however, not merely in the British but also in the French and U.S. anthropological traditions, so long as and for as long as they sustain a categorical portrait of the primitive and the traditional as ahistorical and anti-historical and a method of inquiry directed toward the revelation of recursive patterns of thought and feeling and conduct and yielding monographs inscribed in the infinitival conditionlessness of the ethnographic present.

The third habit is already immanent in the second and the first as an aversion to or at least a setting aside of the historical process in its particularity. The Germans exhibit considerably less of such an inclination than the French or the Americans, for many of whom even today German "historicism" is precisely what is wrong with German social thought, Marxist or Weberian. Durkheim's variant is standard nineteenth-century fare and its precedent is specifically biological; for Durkheim as for other organicists, Malinowski included, "genetic" processes are one matter and structural-functional interdependency quite another. With Lévi-Strauss and if with considerably different implications still with Bourdieu, "history" is by definition the opposite and the antithesis of "structure." It is difficult even to begin to develop an analytical apparatus suitable to inquiry into the emergent without granting to the historical process a structurally generative and not merely structurally destructive role. It is further difficult to develop such an apparatus without casting historically events in their radical particularity as logically (and so ontologically) necessary conditions of emergent phenomena, since the

unfolding of standard--lawful or law-like--causal processes produces not emergent but instead merely resultant (and so logically and ontologically reducible) outcomes.

If one of the properties of the contemporary is that it is emergent, then the contemporary itself had at best a marginal place in our social and intellectual ecology and so in anthropology between the middle 1800s and the 1960s. Most of the instruments we have agree that we no longer reside within that ecology, at least in some respects. Our present is that of computer capitalism, digital democracy, and virtual personhood. Information theory is our Holy Grail and information theory happens to be far more serviceable an apparatus for the conceptualization and characterization of emergence than most of the theories that preceded it. It permits us to think of (strongly) emergent phenomena as "uncomputable" relative to a given computational or algorithmic system. Should we seek to appease the causal fundamentalists, it permits us to think of (weakly) emergent phenomena as those that, depending for their existence on the iteration and aggregation of its constituent causal interactions (M. Bedau, "Downward Causation and the Autonomy of Weak Emergence"). It effortlessly affords a definition of novelty or the unexpected. Whether we are conscious advocates of or subliminal devotees of either the weak or the strong versions of emergence, it carries us to the threshold of the relation between any ontology of emergence and the relative weight that might have to be given in engaging with emergent phenomena and conceptual innovation and so to the collaborative work that conceptual innovation must involve.

So should we then think of this panel as the manifestation of a certain "informational modernity" whose great, seamy mesh of systems open and closed and the uncomputable hiatus and hybridizations between them press emergent contemporaneity to the forefront of any adequate attention to the everyday? Perhaps. Yet, if one is to believe the newspapers, and especially the Science pages of the New York Times, it would seem that quite another regulative idea governs the present horizons of social and cultural analysis, namely that of the evolutionary-psychologistic explanation of absolutely everything. Perhaps the newspapers are wrong. In any case, I'm sure our panelists will weigh in on this and many other subjects as they see fit.