

***Against Essentialism: A theory of culture and society* by Stephan Fuchs. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.**

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Essentialism, Fuchs says, “holds that things are what they are because that is their nature, essence or definition. Common sense is essentialist in this sense, since it — along with much of social science, philosophy and cognitive science — validates persons, agency, mental states, free will and the rest of the humanist and liberal inventory” (3). This inventory needs to be replaced, Fuchs argues, with a relational approach that takes essences, natural kinds and things in themselves and turns them into variables. Such entities are not building-blocks for our theories, but rather “outcomes and results of society and culture, not causes” (5). Instead of asking whether persons really exist, “observe under what conditions some observers manage to attribute some outcomes to persons, and when they manage to observe without persons” (21). The same goes for agency, consciousness, class, free will, science, rationality, truth and any other essence or taken-for-granted entity.

If we treat essences as variables, what explains their variation? The answer is “variations in social structure correspond to variations in cultures” (4). We need a “social physiology” (331) to explain how culture works. Fuchs argues for a blend of network theory and Luhmannian systems theory. The network part provides an ontology, expressed concisely in the first of twenty five appended theses: “1. In the beginning, there were networks. Networks are fields of forces. They do not consist of nodes. Nodes are outcomes of networks. ...7. [A] network can condense and converge into kinds and properties that appear natural and essential to it. 8. Natural kinds and stable objects appear when an increasingly self-similar network hums to itself” (337). (The tone here — a mix of the early Wittgenstein and the book of Genesis — is characteristic of the text.) Social structure is comprised of involuted, nested systems of encounters, groups, organizations and networks.

The Luhmannian part of Fuchs’ theory makes these elements of structure “observers”: “Distinctions are not drawn by the world itself, but by observers

in it . . . Distinctions belong in a network of related distinctions. This network *is* the observer” (18-9). To add a little more complexity, observers may observe each other, and some can reflexively monitor themselves. It is out of this process of observing, distinguishing and coupling that essences emerge.

The exposition is sometimes opaque, but the Introduction and Chapter 1 give the reader a clear enough idea of what this relational approach might look like in practice. Treat networks (and other social structures) as observers and watch their distinction-making and monitoring produce identities, reputations, truth, or any other essence. Attend to levels of observation and network structures if you want to understand why some cultures are constructivist and others are realist. If you want to know why something is considered an x (a work of art, a piece of science, whatever) don’t look at x itself, look at the network that observes or recognises it as such and the variable “net-work” done there. All of this is an interesting, vigorously put and, potentially, fresh perspective on a variety of problems. The reader is willing to hold off on questions until she gets a demonstration of the theory at work.

This never comes. Just when a sustained empirical application is needed to show the positive benefits of the approach, Fuchs chooses instead to attack some already well-battered philosophical targets. Examples and illustrations are scattered piecemeal through the text, but are used only to describe the approach, not to test it. Like many an ambitious theorist before him, Fuchs shows how existing research can be folded into his new vocabulary, but the value added by doing this is not so clear.

Rather than put the theory to work, Chapter 2 argues that a slew of philosophical problems disappear under the relational approach. Chapter 3 presents a critique of rational choice theory and a relational alternative. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 further elaborate the conceptual scheme, continually emphasizing the benefits of a relational over an essentialist approach. The discussion of the philosophical literature is generally high-handed. Fuchs is bored by the philosophy he has read and, with Wittgenstein, believes it to be a set of pseudo-problems that spring from the search for essences. His alternatives are sometimes provocative (he makes a good case that sociologists can do a more interesting job of studying agency than philosophers) but more often they are confused. The problem of consciousness, for instance, is central to philosophy of mind. Philosophers argue about what consciousness is and what entities (people, dogs, computers) might be conscious in practice or principle. Applying his strategy, Fuchs “solves” this question by turning

the essence of consciousness into a variable and seeing how it covaries with social structure. Echoing Durkheim, he argues that “whatever is far outside the moral boundaries separating ‘us’ from ‘them’ acquires a more thing-like character . . . The reason we are not sure what bats feel is that bats are not pets, while dogs are — and so Searle is ready to grant consciousness to dogs, but not ‘fleas, grasshoppers, crabs or snails.’ But Searle may change his mind” (105, citation omitted).

This argument rests on a mistake. Fuchs notes that people tend to take an intentional stance towards their pets, “granting them some amount of agency”. We talk as though Rover has all kinds of beliefs, intentions and plans. Thus, “Pets acquire some of the ‘rich inner life’ normally reserved for persons, whereas persons with Alzheimer’s stop being observed as having a rich inner life” (108). But our *attributing* a rich inner life to pets does not mean they thereby *acquire* one. The same in reverse goes for Alzheimer’s. If attribution was all that mattered, we would have no fear of being diagnosed with the disease. You could just move somewhere where people would still attribute an inner life to you.

Strangely, Fuchs registers this point but does not see its force. “The important *sociological* difference is not between things and people, but between the attribution of interpretivism or determinism” (108, emphasis in original). This is exactly right. The attribution of agency is a fascinating sociological question. We can learn a lot by asking how we come to treat our pets like people, or other people like objects. But answering this question does not solve the problem of consciousness, any more than it establishes the etiology of Alzheimer’s. Sometimes Fuchs writes as though he is arguing only that inquiry be redirected along more profitable lines. But more often, he is so determined to discredit philosophy, cognitive science and several other fields that he repeatedly asserts that taking a sociological approach dissolves the philosophical issue altogether. This is why he emphasizes “sociological” in the sentence just quoted. He claims he is overcoming philosophy when he is just switching questions. It is surprising that someone so attuned to the differences between modes of observation keeps making this mistake.

In the final chapter, Fuchs does ask an empirical question: When are cultures likely to be realist (ie, confident about their ontology) and when constructivist? There are some very interesting hypotheses, but again no application, data or test. Fuchs is aware of this problem. In the brief Conclusion he worries that he has only applied the theory in “a cursory and sketchy way” (331) and that he is “unhappy with [his] fuzzy distinctions

between observers, cultures and networks. Much more conceptual precision is required . . . more work should go into analyzing what makes an observer the observer he is” (332). He is right. But the tack he suggests taking — developing a “sociology of mind” to replace essentialist competitors in philosophy and cognitive science — seems to me very unlikely to develop into a real research program.

This is an ambitious and wide-ranging book full of strong claims and sharp observations as likely to frustrate as stimulate. In substance and style it recalls Durkheim, for good and bad. It has some of the Durkheimian virtues: an uncompromisingly sociological vision, a focus on the structural sources of cultural phenomena, and a determination to break new theoretical ground. But it also has the Durkheimian vices: argument by assertion, the tendency to solve problems by fiat, and glib characterizations of alternative approaches. Fuchs wants the book to be “a map as to how research on society and culture might be done” (1). But it is not a map so much as a general exhortation to “Go west, young sociologist,” together with a promise of the riches to be found there. As Fuchs does not lead by example, I wonder how many will follow his directions.