The Uncanny and the Sublime in Human Experience: on the relevance of critical philosophy and psychoanalysis for sociological interpretation.

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Introduction

Sociological interpretation normally reveals its object through generalizations that serve as warrant for further generalizations. In that case, not only does the object pose little resistance to interpretation, but the need to reflect on what is being said disappears. Thus, interpretation is able to pose concepts that appear both superior to other forms of interpretation and identical with the object to which they refer. This also makes interpretation unreflective and assertive, since it becomes necessary to show that other forms are misguided for some reason, for example, people lack a vantage point from which to see a course of activity objectively, or that they lack a proper understanding of the concepts that govern their own activity. In turn, it becomes possible to claim that one is presenting discoveries instead of making claims or theorizing.

The assertive nature of sociological interpretation creates a figural backdrop against which it seems to be constantly making progress over what was said before and by outsiders who rely on nonsociological systems of knowledge. This problem is most apparent when practical problems of meaning and relevance are subject to categorical determination and only lip service is paid to how language and concepts mediate and are mediated by alternative meanings and principles of selection. Alternatively - it will be shown - any attempt to deal with the practical meaning of concepts, which is to say meaning in the
context of use, including their use for the purpose of sociological interpretation and writing, inevitably confronts the problem on non-identity. While this problem typically goes unrecognized in sociology, it is foundational to both critical philosophy and psychoanalysis.

**Categorical determination**

Kant’s critique of pure reason illustrates the problem of non-identity prior to the advent of sociology and psychology, as part of a movement from the figurative notion of a universal imperative to the imperative of an assumed and pre-figurative universal, from moral philosophy to a critique of practical reason which seeks to bind its object to logical grounds. However, Kant himself realized the merely stipulative aspect of his own terminology by envisioning a series of exceptions to activities, events, and presentations that are categorical (generalizable) and category-bound (practical). It is nonutilitarian activity, in the third critique, the movement to a critique of judgment, that warrants an understanding of mediation as problematic, immanent to experience, and purposively tied to objects which bear marks of essential difference and cannot be understood by analogy or as instances of general categories.

What is in this way sublime is not a matter strictly of beauty but of artfulness and thus critical distance and ironic disposition toward practical reason and the (sociological) principle of utility and function. The sublime is available as an object to be engaged subjectively, through the ‘earnest labor of interpretation’, which moves beyond sense-experience, empirical judgment, and logic. It is this transcendental quality of the sublime, in Kant’s phrase: ‘purposiveness without purpose’, that renders it hostile to the categories of instrumental reason which form a tangent with reactive apprehension. No-thing, in this sense, is identical with the concept of the sublime, not for lack of sublime works, ideas, or emotions, but because that which is sublime demands the movement of experience outside itself and toward that which manifests the sublime. Experience, therefore, finds no place in which to settle, to be at one with the concept and lost in the properties of its self-identity. What is sublime does not and cannot respond to reified universality. If it safeguards against conceptual reification, it is also not a concept which can posit itself as an identity. Rather, it, the Kantian notion of the sublime, constitutes a transformative
moment in the ‘schematic’ cognition of objects. It is tied therefore to practical situations and events that take place as anomalies within the purview of sociological interpretation.

And from this notion there is a question not only of the aesthetic form of objects and the way that they are perceived but of the idiomatic structure of events and the way it is reproduced in the mind of the participants and observers. It is a question that is solved by Kant through the evocation of the sublime. Whereas sublime ‘objects’ attest to spontaneous genius, events go by proper names that are amenable to ‘the faculty of rules’. The sublime object remains sovereign over the meaning of the actor’s activity as well as the materiality of objects (produced through language). In Kant’s view, it is ‘an outrage to the imagination’ (1951: 84). The actor is attuned to a language of presentations, which is first of all aesthetic; that is to say, judged by its properties - time, rhythm - which underlie the texture of events.

Furthermore, according to Kant, aesthetic judgment is manifest as either empirical or pure - the former which asserts whether a certain object is pleasing or not, the latter which asserts whether an object is beautiful or sublime. Pure aesthetic judgment, then, can be understood as a judgment of taste. Inversely, judgment of fact, viz., logical judgment, ‘subsumes a representation under a concept of the Object’ (1951: 64). Whereas the object is material, for Kant, by virtue of a combination of aesthetic and logical judgment, sublime qualities are without proper form. They are anomalous as such, marked by oscillation and play of attraction and repulsion. The judgment of ‘form’ with respect to the sublime, in turn, is predicated on reflection (1951: 82). Accordingly, the form of the object is not something that can test the concepts that are ordinarily brought to bear on the object. We might say, then, following Kant, that if the sublime object does not exist in any sense apart from an engaged subjectivity, neither does it exist without ambiguity.

Around the notion of aesthetic judgment, wherein there is something like consistency of receptivity to presentations, (which Kant calls, simply, sensibility,) there is presupposed a world of sense that is based on nothing but semblance and appearance, a normative intuition of concepts that are not at all empirical. Synthetic a priori judgments are aesthetic because they revolve around appearance and the representation of the object as a thing outside its concept, on a tangent from one concept to other. Because sensibility is
present throughout and what is judged relies on appearances and not any concept, there is
the prospect of that which cannot be named and, consequently, cannot be violated
(Lyotard, 1988). The indeterminacy that is assumed to be integral to aesthetic judgment is
problematic then because it posits a notion of solidarity that is unpredictable and unjust.

**Psychoanalysis and judgment**

Much of psychoanalysis speaks to the fact of a contradictory relation between events in the
context of memory mediated by communication and interaction, and the experience of
events that is, presumably, immediate and unformed. It is not always the case, however,
that the displaced and reconfigured events of experience themselves (in memory) hold any
significance for the development of self-reflective consciousness. Freud himself, who
constantly wrote of the tension between psychoanalysis as an interpretive art, ‘analysis’,
and the practical analytics of the therapeutic profession, remained ambivalent as to what
kinds of connections among mental contents, and between such contents and reality,
analysts are warranted in identifying as significant and then pursuing. What appears most
relevant in Freud’s metatheory of interrelation are the (unconscious) traces of experience
embodied in particular symptoms, such as recurring dreams, compulsions, fixations, etc.

Significantly, in Freud’s work on dream distortion (*Entsellung*, literally ‘different
placing’), events appear ‘uncanny’ in a different way from what is described in his essay on
‘The Uncanny’. They appear in the later essay as frightfully encountered and therefore in a
censored and distorted form. In the earlier work, by contrast, what is uncanny is the
thematizing of experience such that ‘its’ events are rendered intelligible through an intricate
network of connections with other experiences and events. It appears that this uncanny
lucidity, in effect, confers on the present event an aura of necessity beyond a certain
absence, namely of evaluation. Freud reasons that what has no ‘powerful emotion’
attached to it, including ‘everyday and indifferent events’, should not appear to memory as
troublesome to daily preoccupations; yet it does. This is because something is missing
from the lucid present, namely a sense of motion, a ‘prospective’ and ‘retrogressive’ feel,
texture, and undeniable presence of time. And this is why the displacement of events in
memory, the uncanny lucidity with which they appear among similarly displaced events,
presents us to ourselves for evaluation no longer (acting) ‘in the middle of a situation’ but (recollecting) ‘as an object among other objects’ (1963: 249). On the other hand, memory itself is endlessly tested against an orientation to the present that is tendentious to perfect lucidity, ‘with the help of every legitimate intermediary idea […] till it can find further points of contact’ (1963: 245). In view of those features of events which ‘are of most significance for our whole future [but] leave no pictures behind in our memory’ (1963: 248), Freud concludes that the unconscious, its manner of cognition and representation, has the ability to shift ‘an event to a place where it did not occur’, substituting ‘one thing for another’ (1963: 249).

This notion problematizes the relation between psychoanalytic theory and ‘analysis’, indeed more than what practicing psycho-analysts typically seem to realize. Freud himself remained tied to the idea of the symptom-complex but with a sense of the irony created by the arbitrariness of the connection between the significance of an experience and the memory of it. All experience is untimely as is all memory. The eventfulness of both thereby puts into question the way in which the biographical trajectory appears as an inevitable sequence. The idea that things could always be different (for anybody) assumes therefore that it is necessary to elucidate existing, affective, pressing, recurring connections between the possible and actual. And, indeed, these connections between what might be and what is can be read against Freud’s putative individualism by elucidating their non-rational connections beyond psychoanalytic closure, that is, beyond the concern with individual problems toward cultural ‘analysis’.

**Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Sociology**

The possibility that the psychological is intrinsically social is ominous within established schemes of theoretical interpretation. It is for this reason, perhaps, that sociological theory has been essentially functionalist whatever its form, preoccupied with the problem of delineating ‘levels of analysis’, and with issues connected with the idea of emergence. It cannot however be translated directly into diagnosis and judgment. Nor is it possible to
themmatize individual experience without destroying what is practical and alive about it. Such experience nevertheless remains an insoluble problem for sociological theory not only because of the obvious pressures of affect, but because of the impossibility of assigning final meaning to conduct from either the observer’s or the actor’s point of view. In addition, one must reckon with the arbitrariness of memory (representation) in regard to experience, and therefore with the event created in every instance of recollection.

Sociological interpretation holds that things are real by virtue of their consequences; that how one sees things is not simply peripheral to the eventuality - or ‘outcome’ - of some occurrence, even in clustered or recurring form. But this tacit assumption remains observational and unaccountably motivated (Schutz, 1967). It posits a unity of context with correspondent forms of perception and behavior, hence, too much already. What is an outcome of what is ultimately a question of context and not a solution to the question of context. Conjunctive idioms are vivid as singular, motivated, monological processes; they secure the grounds of evaluation, recognition, and judgment. That is, they reduce all three to one and the same act of thematization - ‘The dialogue between oscillation and immobility […] what gives a culture life and life form’ (Paz, 1969: 36).

Inasmuch as analysis is drawn only to form, or to ‘outcome’, it takes part in the reification of context. That is, dialogue can only be localized observationally as something that ensues immediately from situation, as a reflection of a prior difference. To localize dialogue is to accept its ostensible terms, therefore to treat it as an interaction oriented by something objective about which subjects can only come to agree. Such a notion of context assimilates dialogue to action but at the cost of recognizing life in events. Every ‘act’ of interpretation is, for this reason, problematic: in talking ‘about’ events, interpretation establishes and re-marks, in Derrida’s phrase, ‘a hermetic closure’ (1981: 83-4). This closure is the basis on which ‘form’ is taken for granted as a ‘fact’. Conversely, the reflexive and motivated understanding is not simply innocuous in ‘representing’ (Blum and McHugh, 1984) the meaning-context of dialogue and communication as a framework for rational action. What sociological observation and interpretation take up at a distance, whether strictly ‘rational’ actions or ‘relevant meaning complexes’, in Weberian terms, or ‘the constituting process of meaningful action’ of which Schutz speaks of eloquently, is also
constituted through intermediary terms in the process of a dialogue with self and other. Naming and representing can only be understood, in turn, as caught up in that dialogue and not activities beyond it.

**Communication and interaction**

Transversality in the relationship between an indeterminate flow of experience and the sequential form of events external to it is a phenomenon significantly embedded in language (Schutz, 1967; Saussure, 1966). On the one hand, language provides the basis for recognition insofar as it is not dependant on any particular speaker and receiver. It adheres to a landscape of figuration that is, in Barthes’ terms, mythical, and thus constitutes a cumulative basis for misrecognition because it operates with the force of immediacy. In that regard, Adorno is right to argue that demythizing is, first of all, a dividing, and therefore an occasion for self-reflection in which what was immediate becomes the object of mediation. On the other hand, independent of the relation of language to myth, the individual utterance resonates with already existing presentations and recoils upon itself in endless spirals and fragmentary connections, rather than merely back and forth.

For this reason, too, dialogue is inherently opaque so far as interpretation is concerned. The desiring component of dialogue must be seen as moving, then, against the language-thing rather than in regard to it-self. Outside of the processes of formal and contractual reciprocity, dialogue can be seen as the vehicle upon which new experiences appear as more than ‘uncanny’ or disorganizing and other than novel. They are not simply, in other words, ‘reference[d] back to the schemes we have on hand, followed by a ‘failure to connect’” (Schutz, 1967: 84). When the issue of misrecognition is approached assertively, as if any life can be recognized by way of another that need not be lived and recognized, the question of experience is ultimately ironical. Then, what is ‘referenced’ poses no resistance to schemes. At least, it becomes a ‘jargon of authenticity’ (Adorno, 1973b). On the other hand, experience is problematic wherever there are gaps in meaning, and because of inflections that flow through the whole ‘stream’ of consciousness. The closure of experience by meaning is always tendentious and never complete.
Facticity and the material world

That which has been posed since Durkheim as a problem of method - extricating causal factors from the apparently seamless web of everyday life - may be recast accordingly. Goffman’s (1986) work is exemplary in that respect. In his various analyses, the relevance of topics to members appears both spontaneous and superimposed by virtue of context: ‘immediately available events which are compatible with one frame of understanding and incompatible with others’ (1986: 441). From this point of view, a great deal of social life is spent dealing with negative aspects of experience and tendencies to contaminate context with ambiguities of meaning. Neither can be avoided, and, as a result, social life is understood as a form of labor inevitably involved in its own constitution. This explains, for instance, why interviews of random populations routinely bear out a kind of experience that is vague, ill defined, and untrustworthy, changing in the tone, mode of assertion, and degree of openness (to dialogue) of the interviewer. A certain stupidity is constantly evidenced outside of natural attitude and rhythm (of dialogue). This mode of self-repeating interpretation, moreover, mirrors the tendency of philosophy to speak about people in condescending ways and only abstractly, by reference to categories they are said to share or else to need.

The issue then is how to reveal sociological objects such that the seductive play of the sublime is not undercut for the purpose of clarity. It is not only in the mode by which the language of sociology communicates the existence and particular meaning of a thing, but in the play and eventfulness of its discourse, by which an event is known from within, in Garfinkel’s phrase as ‘an event in a conversation’ (1972). The sociological relevance of ‘sublime’ features of everyday life has to do with prefiguring and magnifying concepts that are drawn from outside of interpretation. It is not recognized in Kant’s critical philosophy, where the classical configuration of metaphysics is taken to be distinct from objectivity and the subject’s point of view, and occupies the intuitive space between noumena and phenomena; Hegel, by contrast, considered this configuration to be essentially notional (Begriffen), and thus to underlie a need for and possibility of self-consciousness, including
the reconciliation of theory and practice, in cultural formation (*Bildung*). Marx considered it to be what is material about both ideology and practice; hence what is relevant to praxis. It was the materialist turn in critical philosophy that put into question the moralistic distinction between the sublime (the mystery of genius) and the everyday (the banal). When the everyday is seen as a site of the sublime, as mysterious, it is reasonable to speak of different kinds of cultural work and competency in contrast with a stratification of culture and everyday life as separate levels of experience. The aesthetic mode of appearance which seems to arise in nature, and therefore as a given, and the sublime, in which social life is transfigured without passing through systems of meaning, are contradictory when they are predicated on the manner of presentation by which an object appears sublime or material. Aesthetics are consistent with the generation of mystery on the part of the everyday so long as the two are understood as features of a generative process. In that case, the givenness of the aesthetic is the basis against which the self-constituting mysteriousness of everyday life makes itself felt as a negation of interpretation.

**Conclusion: The politics of interpretation**

Sociological accounts are problematic to the extent to which they impute motivation, not only through ‘psychological reduction’ but also in their alignment to a single, observational (and depoliticized) mode of presentation and receptivity, upon which they seek to generalize. In that case, meaning and relevance are superimposed without envisioning the mediation of concepts as a problem, and structures of media, popular discourse, cultural representation, etc., appear wherever the analyst requires them. However, within an eventful series, as within the stream of consciousness, there is always something the relevance of which has escaped recognition in all instances of representation. This has to do with ‘the politics of experience’. It is what lies at the margins of experience when the latter is normalized by positive information; what inevitably confronts such interpretation and demands of it more by way of self-reflection than it is normally able to or willing to do.

**References**


