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A PERSPECTIVE ON PERSPECTIVISM

Smith, Kenneth. *Perspectivism. A Contribution to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2022. 320 pages.

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Ken Smith's very stimulating book has in a sense two starting points. One is to take the notion of perspective literally, in its visual sense, in the opening pages, the numerous diagrams and the appendix. The other starting point is Walter B. Gallie's classic paper of 1956 on "Essentially Contested Concepts,"¹ which he had first addressed in a paper from 2002² and which has been very widely discussed before and after that date, notably in a massive article in the *Journal of Political Ideologies*³ and in Steven Lukes's classic *Power: A Radical View*.⁴

If Smith takes perspective literally, he very properly takes "concepts," as Gallie had done, in a broader sense. Just as a train can hide another (in the classic French warning sign), behind many concepts there are others, and often entire world-views. "Concept formation" or *Begriffsbildung* always means this broader notion of conceptualization.⁵ Gallie's claim, in essence, was that some disputes over concepts such as art or democracy are irreducible because of this Hinterland of background assumptions. Positivists tend

¹ Walter B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956): 167–96.

² Kenneth Smith, "Mutually Contested Concepts and Their Standard General Use," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 2, no. 3 (2002): 329–43.

³ David Collier, Fernando Daniel Hidalgo, and Andra Olivia Maciuceanu, "Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11, no. 3 (2006): 211–46.

⁴ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 2005).

⁵ The title of my PhD thesis book, published as William Outhwaite, *Concept Formation in Social Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), was probably inspired by earlier work on Rickert's *Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1902).



to brush aside “mere” definitional questions, following the mathematician and logician better known as the children’s author Lewis Carroll:

When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less. The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”⁶

Realists, by contrast, argue that real definitions are truth-functional and, if successful (as far as we can judge at present), capture real features of the things they designate. Smith does not enter these controversies, except in passing, but argues for a synthetic perspective which brings together alternative definitions or descriptions and assesses them for their explanatory power. “Perspectivism [...] argues [...] that while all views of the same object are equally worthy of consideration, not all of these views are equally interesting” (p. 14). To give an example which Smith does not mention (though he has written elsewhere at length about Marx and Durkheim), Marx did not just write about *Capital* but also, as the sub-title indicates, a *Critique of Political Economy*, distinguishing between “classical” and “vulgar” (apologetic) political economy.

Smith adds the German *Perspektivismus* to the title of his book, and he traces the term meticulously through Nietzsche and Karl Mannheim. The key quotation, as he notes (p. 30) is the following, from the *Genealogy of Morality*:

There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival knowing: the *more* the affects we are able to put in words about a thing, the *more* eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complex will be our “concept” of the thing: our “objectivity.”⁷

Mannheim, without referring to Nietzsche, picks up the theme in his summary account from 1931 of the sociology of knowledge appended to the English translation as Chapter 5:

⁶ Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*. The US sociologist George Lundberg wrote more formally that “To the scientist [...] words have whatever meaning is assigned to them.” See George Lundberg, *Sociology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 42.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 87.

The controversy concerning visually perceived objects (which, in the nature of the case, can be viewed only in perspective) is not settled by setting up a non-perspectivist view (which is impossible). It is settled rather by understanding, in the light of one's own positionally determined vision, why the object appears differently to one in a different position. Likewise, in our field also, objectivity is brought about by the translation of one perspective into the terms of another.⁸

Another passage which Smith emphasizes, rightly in my view, comes a little earlier in the essay, where Mannheim argues that the sociology of knowledge can reach "a point where it also becomes a critique by redefining the scope and the limits of the perspective implicit in given assertions."⁹ This seems to fit well with the earlier chapter, translated with the bland title "The Prospects of Scientific Politics" but better rendered as "How is Politics Possible as a Science?"

Chapter 3 of Smith's book addresses the concept of objectivity referred to above by Mannheim and discussed here in relation to Max Weber. He argues, convincingly in my view, that what Weber means by objectivity is something like Smith's own conception of a "full and complete" account, as illustrated by Weber's stylistic tic in which, to the despair of his translators, almost every assertion is accompanied by qualifications and clarifying parentheses.

Chapter 4 concerns pragmatism which, as it happens, had been the subject of a book by Gallie, *Peirce and Pragmatism*, published four years before his more famous essay.¹⁰ Against Durkheim's critique of what might be called the vulgar pragmatism of "anything goes," Smith (p. 143) endorses Peirce's view that "the objectivity of truth really consists in the fact that, in the end, every *sincere* inquirer will be led to embrace it [...]."¹¹

The rest of the book is devoted to particular social scientific concepts: power, equality, crime and sexual difference, Smith having, as he says, earlier written substantially about class. Power is particularly relevant since Steven Lukes explicitly uses the language of "dimensions" in which Smith structures his own argument for perspectivism, adding a fourth dimension to capture the temporal variability of social phenomena. What

⁸ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 270–71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁰ Walter B. Gallie, *Peirce and Pragmatism* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1952).

¹¹ Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955), 288. This is the conception defended for some time by Habermas, though later modified in a more realist direction.

Lukes presents as his three-dimensional view of power goes beyond a one-dimensional focus on who prevails in overt conflicts of interest and what Bachrach and Baratz¹² had identified as a second face of power which keeps potential conflicts off the agenda. 3D power involves the shaping of people's understanding of their situation so that they do not perceive that something could be done about something against their interests, for example corporate atmospheric pollution.

Whereas Lukes argues that his view is better because it goes further than the others but also that, "because of its links with no less contested notions of freedom, authenticity and real interests, it is not" (uncontestable),¹³ Smith argues that he should simply have presented a multidimensional conception incorporating the others. In relation to equality, he takes a similar line that the conflict between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome is removed if outcome is replaced by income. (This might be seen to raise further problems which I cannot address in this review.) On crime, he argues that alternative conceptions are adequately captured by a definition in which crime consists of actions which harm others against their consent. Finally, on the currently fraught issue of sexual difference, he argues for a continuum of both sex and gender which allows for a large intermediate area. As for the status of perspectivism itself, Smith argues in his concluding chapter that it is "both a theory *and* a method, but it is also a concept, *as well* as a philosophy of the social and natural sciences, and a doctrine *and* an idea" (p. 260). The book concludes with some further reflections on objectivity and truth and an appendix on perspective in art.

Having just printed up an emailed copy of *Perspectives Budapest* (<https://www.perspectives-budapest.com>), I close with some sceptical queries. Some concepts are almost *made* to be misused. When West German rightists spoke of the "so-called German Democratic Republic," I disliked their arrogant dismissal of the other German state but could only agree that it was not *really* democratic. The term "peoples's democracies" was, as Raymond Aron said, "mensonge par pléonasme." I understand the term "sin," but it belongs to a religious discourse which I have no use for. I have a lot of use for "immorality," but not when it was used by the *apartheid* regime, as a local equivalent of the Nazi "Rassenschande." A concept of democracy which is *merely* majoritarian, like Orbán's, even if not based on rigged

¹² Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, *Power and Poverty. Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

¹³ Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 108.

elections, is surely defective. And though we can and do argue about what should count as human rights, whenever someone says that in their country they have a different concept of human rights, you can reasonably suspect that they trample on them.

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