Burnt banknotes

How we are free, in theory, to reject institutional reality but are not free to reject what is physically real

In a characteristically riotous scene from *The Idiot*, Dostoevksy's chaotic anti-heroine Nastasya Filipovna takes a package of 100,000 roubles brought her by lovelorn admirer Rogozhin and throws it into the fire to burn. She is using this gift from one suitor as a weapon against another – the ambitious Ganya – whom she publicly taunts to reach in barehanded and remove the burning bills. Mayhem ensues. By what magic does the burning of paper evoke emotions from bewilderment to horror to panic? When that paper happens to be money, we catch in full view a curious dual reality that characterizes human affairs. There is a realm of facts that do not follow from physical reality, that inescapable world in which slips of paper are worthless other than as fire-starters or snack food for goats. Our trick is the creation of what the philosopher John Searle calls institutional reality, a uniquely human reality in which those otherwise ineffectual slips of paper are readily accepted in exchange for valuable goods and services, based on the trust that someone else will later accept the same slips of paper in turn.

In *Making the Social World*, Searle asks how human institutional reality is possible. His considered opinion is that it is language that carries the entire load. According to Searle, each and every institutional fact that forms another brick in the great wall of humankind is created by exactly one simple linguistic operation, called a Status Function Declaration. This is a verbal operation that makes something true by getting us to agree that it is true. The idea has its root in the performative utterances identified by the Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin, the author of the classic *How to Do Things with Words*, and Searle's teacher in the 1950s. The performative utterance is like a magic trick that creates a new state of affairs simply by the uttering of some words (though, critically, presupposing recognition of the relevant public conventions, and only having the desired effect with the right actors and under the appropriate conditions). Stock examples are "I do take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife", "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother", and "I name this ship the Winston S. Churchill". These utterances do not describe states of affairs, they create them. So, when and because I utter the words "I do" (again, only under specified conditions), I suddenly become married and no longer single, a societal difference that makes quite a difference.

While these performatives seem like special cases of language use, for Searle the powerful mechanism that underlies them has extremely general application. And the reality-changing effect that is typically but not necessarily carried out by words is there, whether I am formally making the marriage vows or handing you a gift on return from my

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W. G. Runciman

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holidays. The gift need not involve words, but the act is a perfect proxy for the linguistic "declaration", with the same essential magic. (Similarly when I hang my coat on a chair in the library, it is a virtual speech act: "This place is mine".) New rights and obligations are born: the gift is now yours to do what you want with, even if no physical or natural facts about the gift actually cause it to belong to you. This, Searle explains, is also how a slip of paper can count as money: "because the actual participants in the institution regard it as money". The promise among participants is a solemn one in that we may be held to account for going against it. I cannot just take the gift back.

The idea that social realities like monetary value and property rights are mere states of mind is counter-intuitive to say the least. The weight of these agreements is heavy, and felt in the heart. Even the fact that these are "mere agreements" is difficult to fathom. Our first-hand experience is that money really is worth what it says it's worth, and the gift really is yours now so others had better not touch. But this just makes the illusion all the more remarkable. No matter how deeply we imagine these to be natural truths, it remains the case that institutional reality, unlike physical reality, can become unreal in an eye blink. Currency becomes worth no more than the paper it is printed on, as memorably illustrated by the hyperinflation of the Zimbabwean dollar over the past decade, culminating in total abandonment of the currency in 2009. When the government's production of ever-higher denominations peaked with the release of one hundred trillion dollar note, *The Zimbabwean* newspaper drew wry attention to the crisis by putting up giant billboards made from thousands of the country's pitiful bills. Like Nastasya Filipovna's gleeful burning of roubles, the bank note billboard poetically exploits a physical property of the paper medium while ridiculing the social contract that it be treated as having an institutional value. We cannot similarly mock its flatness or flammability.

Searle's is a philosophy not only of language, but also of mind. His account of the social power of language is grounded in a received view of belief-desire psychology, a version of mind established in cognitive science partly through Searle's earlier work. He constructs, and is greatly impressed with, an elegant parallelism between the structure of private mental states (like beliefs, desires, intentions and emotions), on the one hand, and of public speech acts as observed in spoken utterances (like assertives, directives, commissives and expressives) on the other. Such parallelism is attractive for a Darwinian account of the human language faculty, because it narrows the gap that has to be bridged in evolving from a nonlinguistic beast into a language-possessing human. Evolutionary biologists prefer their leaps not to be leaps of faith, so the smaller the gap between stages the better.

But language isn't simply a way to take your beliefs, desires or intentions and broadcast them aloud. To let someone know a belief is to introduce social commitments. "If the privately held belief turns out to be false I need only revise it", Searle writes. But as analytic philosophers from Wittgenstein to Brandom have shown, when we make statements, people may ask us to give reasons, and they may take us to be committed to various beliefs that would follow. This is why honesty is the best policy.

Searle's goal is to explicate a human social reality that rides on a universal physical reality. While his job as a philosopher is to get the ontology right, including the underlying cognition, for anthropologists and sociologists looking at concrete historical and causal processes, there are more questions to be asked. Suppose we know what kind of a thing an institutional fact is: How does it evolve in time? How is it distributed in large populations of mobile individuals? Why do some kinds of institutional facts succeed and outcompete others? What are the possible relations of interdependence among institutional facts? These are among the questions the sociologist W. G. Runciman asks in *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection*.

Runciman's puzzle is how to bring

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George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) has been mentioned in the *TLS* about five times as often as Jimi Hendrix (1942–70) since the guitarist died in the house next door to the composer's. The references to Hendrix, however, have been the more varied, from the poetry of Paul Muldoon and novels of Zadie Smith to the history of the transposable chord. We noted once that Wang Bi, the third-century commentator on the I Ching, lived "just long enough to shift the direction of the tradition he had inherited" before dominating its understanding for centuries, asking if this made him the Jimi Hendrix of Chinese thought? Answers may be stimulated by a current exhibition at the Handel Museum in which curators of the clavichord get to work with an iconic cowboy hat of rock.

together different levels of change and differentiation in human existence – from the biological to the social – under a single analytic framework, one that rests firmly on a Darwinian logic of selection. Think of it from the perspective of any individual in the history of humankind. Every child born inherits a double legacy: on the one hand, a personalized genetic make-up from an ancient history of natural selection, and on the other, a social and cultural milieu from a much shorter period of human history and cultural diversification. Sociologists and social/cultural anthropologists study this second legacy, by attempting to describe how things are at certain points in time, and often also by attempting to explain why societies and cultures have turned out that way.

With a remarkable depth of scholarship and insight, Runciman can give penetrating answers to the "why" questions – though like anyone else he will point out that our accounts for why people act in some way are usually given in terms of macro-level forces that are not necessarily the same as the micro-level motivations of the actors involved. When we say things like "The markets rallied", this is shorthand for a million tiny events, each individually instigated by someone with personal motivations. The economist Adam Smith showed that while people will follow their own stomachs in decision-making, an invisible hand will create higher-level outcomes that people hadn't imagined, let alone intended. While at the macro level we can speak in general terms about big things like revolutions and market crises, the micro level is where the real causation happens. Yet this level seems impossible to study, full as it is of butterfly effects. Some role must have been played by every single belief, desire and action carried out by every single actor, rich or poor, famous or unknown, leading up to the French Revolution or the Great Crash of 1929. This is not a reason to shy away from studying the micro level. To the contrary, it is just the kind of enormity we expect when confronted with evolutionary processes. It is at precisely the level of individual people's experience and action that the key ideas of causation in Darwinian evolution – population, variation, inheritance, competition, selection – can be applied to social and cultural change. There is a fast-growing family of Darwinian approaches to culture and society (and especially language) from more biologically and cognitively oriented researchers. Runciman does this developing tradition a real service from his grand vantage point deep in the land of sociology, adding to the weight of interdisciplinary argument and evidence that culture and society can and should be understood as following a form of Darwinian evolution.

Convinced that a Darwinian model is the right one for understanding human history and diversity, Runciman also has a personal mission to establish that "socio-cultural" evolution, as evolution in the non-genetic realm is sometimes described, is not one but two distinct domains for selection, just as the hyphenation implies. Why, then, does everyone else see just one major category for selection beyond biology? For Searle, institutional facts form a single class ranging "all the way from the informality of friendship to the extreme legal complexities of international corporations". Runciman insists otherwise.

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If I say I cooperate with someone because this person is my friend, he argues, this is "different in kind" from saying I do it because he is our hereditary monarch.

Friend and monarch are of different orders, but are the categories cut from different cloth? Good pragmatic reasons for a distinction between social and cultural selection would include making things more manageable for research and more convergent with disciplinary categories that determine funding and jobs. But for theoretical purposes, the distinction will have to promise a significant analytic pay-off before current Darwinian-minded researchers will feel compelled to adopt it. Why? Because the distinction comes at a great analytic cost. The currently standard "dual-inheritance" account of the mechanisms of human history already has enough trouble dealing with its three major components: genetic evolution, cultural (including social) evolution, and the relation between these (so-called gene–culture co-evolution). Runciman's proposal is to double the complexity of the problem by literally doubling the number of major components, first splitting socio-cultural evolution into two, giving us now three separate types of evolutionary process (genetic, cultural and social), with the result that there are now not one but three logical relations of co-evolution which we must explicate (gene–culture, culture–society, and gene–society co-evolution). And will there be a need for further distinct domains of selection, for instance in language, or in technology? William of Ockham warned against explanations that are more complicated than they need to be. The question is whether Runciman is urging us to make this distinction because it is necessary (unclear) or because it is useful (undisputed).

If there is reason to be sceptical of the theoretical necessity of Runciman's distinction in kind between social and cultural selection, it is because the criteria given for exclusively defining social phenomena appear also to be true for cultural phenomena. Social phenomena, he says, are imposed on people, are not interpersonally negotiable, and can be adopted and maintained by means of coercion. But consider constraints on marriage practices associated with culturally distinct models of kinship, for instance that you are required to marry your cross-cousins, as in the Maravar of South India, or that you are banned from doing so, as in the Amhara of North Ethiopia. These are institutional and cultural facts of the kind that must long predate society in Runciman's sense (his social selection has only been operating for a few thousand years), yet are clearly imposed on people, not easily negotiated, and readily subject to sanction by coercion. To undergo the ritual transition required for coming of age and thereby becoming marriageable (and entering lifelong "age set" cohorts with fellow initiates), a Nuer boy of the Sudan would receive deep incisions across his forehead, to the very bone. It does not appear that these young men would resist what was happening to them, but then again it's not as though they have had much of a choice. Kinship is quintessentially cultural, yet these systems are plentiful suppliers of the "non-personal" social roles which Runciman insists uniquely define the social; roles with "successive incumbents" which "replace one another independently of purely personal relationships". Were it not so, how could the mother-in-law joke be the virtual human universal that it is?

Runciman's ontological basis for a culture-versus-society distinction raises further questions. Runciman argues that cultural units are ideas or "memes" found in people's heads, while social units are roles or practices found in people's behaviour. But both sets of phenomena must be both in people's heads and in their behaviour. How could it be otherwise? If cultural phenomena weren't made public somehow, they would die with their carriers and would no longer be passed down the generations. And if social structure weren't somehow carried in people's heads, it wouldn't be transportable from context to context. Take the famous example of milk-drinking in different cultures, associated with differences in human phenotype. For Runciman, certain ideas in people's heads encourage milk-drinking behaviour. But we can just as well say that milk-drinking behaviour encourages certain ideas in people's heads. So is the glass half full or half empty? The question is obviously wrong. Public behaviour and private ideas always work together, because they are adjacent links in ongoing causal chains by means of which social and cultural units circulate. Neither plays a more basic role than the other in causal processes of socio-cultural selection.

Searle and Runciman agree that the distinctly human social world must be grounded in a distinctly universal physical, causal reality. They disagree on the basic ontology of the social realm, with Searle putting all his money on the linguistic "declaration" and Runciman betting both ways with his insistence that social does not equal cultural. Neither have much at all to say about perhaps the hardest problem of all in understanding culture and society in causal terms, the "item/system" problem: if socio-cultural selection works in terms of items like memes or facts, how do large-scale systems (for example, languages, techno-complexes or kinship systems) emerge? How are they created and maintained, and how are their parts related? Can these larger systems ever be units for selection?

Both books deal ultimately with human freedom or lack of it. Our choices in life are constrained, on the one hand by the physical facts of our place in the natural world given our universal evolutionary heritage, and on the other hand by locally varying institutional facts that determine how our behaviour will be interpreted and judged by those around us. Fires and billboards made from dollar bills put the distinctions suggested by Runciman and Searle into sharp relief by exploiting physical properties of artefacts while rejecting their institutional properties. We are – theoretically – free to reject institutional reality, but we are not free to reject physical reality. This is the essence of violence, nicely exploited by state political power with its monopoly on organized coercion. If we choose to reject the institutional fact that we are not allowed to take money that belongs to other people, we may end up dealing with the unrejectable physical fact that we can't leave the grounds of our prison block. This makes physical reality the ultimate arbiter of constraints on our freedom. What, then, to make of the tantalizing fact that in every cultural tradition we know of, people entertain a belief that it is possible to choose against brute facts? From Jesus to Carlos Castaneda, we learn that brute reality is not all it's cracked up to be. Theravada Buddhist monks in Laos say that accomplished practitioners of Samadhi meditation can walk hundreds of miles in just minutes by causing the earth to fold up like an accordion. Perhaps these same men could get merchants to accept the ashes of burnt banknotes.