

## BROWN ON THE NATURE OF SOCIAL PRACTICES

I will examine here a claim made by Robert Brown in *Rules and Laws in Sociology* regarding the logical status of statements about social practices.

Brown's position is contained in the following excerpts: "Most universal statements about social practices are accidental generalisations and not statements of law. For most such statements of social practices are not supported by any accepted theory. Yet they bar hypothetical cases which these theories would admit." (p. 162)<sup>1</sup>.

Citing as concrete example the statement "All Australian prime ministers are male", Brown says this is undoubtedly an accidental generalisation. For, "the fact that until now all Australian prime ministers have been men does not support the claim that every Australian prime minister will be, or must be, male. Even if such accidental generalisations turn out always to hold in fact, at all times and places, this will be a happy accident and not a consequence of there being a law-like connection between the properties in question or more basically of there being a scientific theory from which the generalisation can be derived. There seems to be no scientific theory which would preclude a woman from being a prime minister of Australia, and so the fact that no woman has yet filled that post does not seem to support the generalisation that the post can be and must be filled only by a man. The truth of 'All Australian prime ministers are male' is the result of the historical development of local practice and not of scientific necessity." (pp. 92-3)

I shall try and show that there are good reasons, many of which are available in the text of Brown's book itself, not to be so categorical regarding the accidental nature of universal statements about social practices.

Firstly Brown himself notes :

"Sociologists often confuse accidental universal generalisations with *empirical* universal generalisations. The confusion arises for

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if one infers that a generalisation in the social sciences is not scientific for this reason. Surely only the proven nonavailability of *sociological* causal connection can warrant such a conclusion, which as Brown himself assures us, is not a matter to be decided by fiat.

But let us look at the statement 'All Australian prime ministers are male' afresh. Brown asserts that it supports no counterfactual. Is that correct? Surely it does support both counterfactual and subjunctive conditionals. Suppose for argument's sake the existence of an Australian woman politician who has all the statesmanlike and leadership qualities that go to make a prime minister. Would it be absurd today for someone in Australia to say 'Yes, she's ideally suited, but to have been prime minister in this country she'd have had to be a man?' Clearly not. Again suppose the existence of an Australian prime minister with the 'unisex' nickname Pat. To someone inquiring whether the 'Pat' under discussion is a man or woman, would it be inconceivable that the answer given be 'Oh if it's the P. M. we're talking about, it must be a man'. Again the answer is in the negative. What, one is tempted to ask Brown, *would* support the claim that all future prime ministers in Australia will be male? Brown's simple answer would be 'Nothing; it's a sheer happy accident'. But *that* we know is simply not true, since this is clearly just one concrete manifestation of a highly complex and almost universal social phenomenon broadly referred to as the inequality of the sexes and the result of ages of discriminatory social practice. Now claims regarding social phenomena that stem from well-entrenched social practices are not unsupportable; the practices of the past *do* support them. Cf course 'support' here does not mean 'entail'; that it does not in the natural sciences either.

At this point let me make it clear that I am not arguing for a notion of historical necessity. Nor am I attempting to establish that the statement under discussion is a law. Still my criticism of Brown is not born of sheer perversity. Granted that almost all social practices are traceable to some set of historical factors – and to what else could they be traceable? – this fact alone does not tend to rule out the operation of 'scientific necessity' whatever that might mean. In other words the causal connections are no weaker if no stronger than those between the initial conditions and the resulting natural phenomenon in, say, an experiment in physics. Historical antecedents,

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What kinds of answers are left when explanation in terms of rule-following no longer suffices? Essentially two, according to Brown:

"The answer may be historical in that it refers to the origins of the practice, to the stages of its development or to both. The answer may be theoretical in that it explicitly cites empirical generalisations and does not merely presuppose them" (p. 119).

Note that even Brown strongly suggests that empirical generalisations are at least presupposed by both.

How would one decide which of these methods is relevant to any given case on hand? The answer one would expect from Brown to this question would be: 'If its accidental trace its history; if its lawlike look for a theory.' This is not in fact that he says. He says:

"Now which kind of answer is given will depend upon how the investigator phrases his question and thus on what he wants to know." (p. 119).

But doesn't this make nonsense of his earlier claim that "the truth of 'All Australian prime ministers are male' is the result of the historical development of local practice and not of scientific necessity" which *debars* the investigator from asking for a theory?

The fact is that in elaborating a very important distinction between intended rule-following behaviour and that which is the unintended consequence of the operation of laws, Brown leans too far backwards, thus obscuring an equally important point that is implicit in the rest of his work, namely that the presence of social rules and conventions is itself only explainable on the assumption of more fundamental theoretical principles. I quote: "The sociologist can also ask why...conventions are so widely followed and so successfully transmitted: why, that is, there has been so much *rule-establishing* behaviour. He can phrase this...as a *specific question about particular sorts of conventions in particular kinds of situations*....The answer will try to explain the presence of rule-following and will not appeal to it as being the explanation which is required. Hence if the answer is not to be merely historical it must refer to social laws rather than to social conventions." (italics mine, p. 123)

I wish now to turn to something in Brown's claim which might appear to be of minor significance but which in fact tells of Brown's own indecision regarding statements about social practices. Recall

that his claim is only about 'most' such statements, not all. But are not all *social* practices as opposed to purely individual or aberrant behaviour 'the result of the historical development of local practice'? And if an acceptable theory has been found for even one such practice – as according to Brown it must have – can we rule out the logical possibility of either extending already available theories or of propounding more comprehensive ones that will some day theoretically explain *all* social practices? To allocate a 'kind' of statement to a logical category is after all, a conceptual not an empirical matter, but the use of the term 'most' suggests that Brown's statement is a matter of discovery rather of analysis. But one can hardly *discover* that no theory will ever support a statement S.

In the end I wish to draw attention to the distinction between a statement that is itself either a law or at least a potential law and one that is just law like. The former kind of statement serves as a basis for explanation, the latter refers to some phenomenon about which it is assumed that a scientific explanation can be found. Thus from the fact that a statement is not a law it does not follow that it is accidental, for it might be lawlike in the sense that it is subsumable – and here it is irrelevant whether the statement is a pure universal, impure universal or singular – either directly under a law or under another wider generalisation that is subsumable under a law. A number of empirical generalisations which are not laws are lawlike in this sense, for e. g. 'butter melts when heated on a fire.' Surely statements about social practices and regularities of behaviour must be placed along side these rather than statements like, 'All the books in my room are of octavo size'. I conclude that Brown is plainly both wrong and inconsistent when he says: "Many social properties are connected by the regularities of behaviour consequent upon rule-following. These regularities are not themselves law-like" (p. 166).

For he has elsewhere conceded that such regularities are also finally explainable by social laws.

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