

Thinking the multiple: Michel Serres and the deconstruction of social unities

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Abstract: In *Genesis*, Michel Serres offers “a new object for philosophy”, the multiple as such. His aim, he says, is “to raise the brackets and parentheses...whereby we shove multiplicities under unities” and warns of the dangers of subsuming “multiplicity under unity”. This paper will explore this challenging idea in relation to “the daunting complexity of the contemporary world”. It will argue that by applying Serres’ work to the social we are forced to challenge traditional concepts concerning social unities such as distinct societies, cultures or nation states. This paper will further argue that Serres’ work, with its focus on the relations between the local/micro and the global/macro, provides a general methodology that can be made specific to the social through the development of his notion of social exchange into that of the social expectation – a development aided by reference to Gilles Deleuze, to Dennis Wrong’s use of the term ‘expectation’, and to the role played by the ‘statement’ in Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse. This paper will conclude by arguing that this radical re-conceptualisation of the social has the potential to resolve many of the contemporary problems associated with multiculturalism, nationalism and fundamentalism.

Key words: Michel Serres, noise, multiplicity, complexity, emergence, self-organisation, expectations.

Nicholas Gane has recently called for “a new conceptual vocabulary, one better equipped to negotiate the daunting complexity of the contemporary world than the classical one that is still commonplace today.”¹ In an interview with Gane, Bruno Latour is emphatic that “what is blocking the whole interpretation of the social is the macro and micro distinction”,² a distinction that I consider to be between the macro views of large-scale social unities, like nations, societies, cultures, on the one hand, and the belief in the unity of the individual, rational, free-willing social actor on the other. Niels Albertsen and Bülent Diken raise similar concerns, asserting that “social theory has a basic problem related to the nature of its object of investigation”, namely the nature of ‘society’ itself.³ They aim at “a deconstruction of social

theory in terms of...three images of thought [unity, homogeneity and order] and...a reconstruction in terms of other concepts such as differentiation, heterogeneity and ambivalence.”⁴ They refer to W. B. Gallie’s notion of ‘essentially contested concepts’, an idea that I will return to a little later, and, after a brief survey of contemporary social theorists, explore the work of Deleuze and Guattari in search of a resolution to the problem. Whilst being sympathetic to this approach I would like to suggest that the work of the French philosopher Michel Serres offers, dare I say, a more beautiful resolution – one that does not fall foul of what I consider to be the main failures of a Deleuzian model: a process that tends towards an overly global structure, too greatly influenced by both Freud and Marx; one that fails to acknowledge the importance of local relations; and one that fails to take into account what I will term the *fractal dimension*.

In the opening section of his book *Genesis*, Serres offers “a new object for philosophy.” This new object is the multiple as such. His aim, he says, is “to raise the brackets and parentheses...whereby we shove multiplicities under unities”. He warns of the dangers of subsuming “multiplicity under unity”, and asks a profound and challenging question: “Can I possibly speak of multiplicity itself without ever availing myself of the *concept*?” Space, all space, any space, whether it is biological, geophysical, socio-political or epistemological, is composed of the multiple; but, Serres, points out, “we are fascinated by the unit; only a unity seems rational to us.” Even our attempting to think the multiple as such seems to require our use of conceptual unities. We only seem to attach the status of being to the groupings of the world, he says, when we subsume them beneath a unity. The problem is that when we attempt to delimit such a multiplicity, when we try and draw a line, a boundary around and between the fragments or crowds within such a multiplicity, we try and capture what we like to think of as a pre-existing a unity, a being that has up until now avoided our capture. But in this search for unities, for beings, warns Serres, we are compelled to disappointment. Following Serres, therefore, it is my suggestion that, if we wish to understand the phenomena of human societies, cultures and nations, and the relations between and within them, we need to find a way of thinking the multiple as such – a term defined by Serres as “a set undefined by elements or boundaries. Locally, it is not individuated; globally, it is not summed up.”

Serres’ overall argument in *Genesis* (though ‘argument’ is by no means the most appropriate word for his methodology) has a close resonance to what is termed complexity science, and by some the science of self-organisation.⁵ He does not so much deny the existence of classes or unities as endeavours to demonstrate that they are secondary to, and emergent from the background multiplicity, chaos or *noise*. As such they are fuzzy and temporary – they can be described but not defined. Now, as I have implied,

whilst this is not a particularly revolutionary idea in the natural sciences, it is being taken up only slowly by the social sciences – an area, I suggest, that desperately needs such a reappraisal, but, as Francis Heylighen points out, an area where “our lack of understanding of social self-organization makes it dangerous to introduce radical changes”.⁶ Whilst throughout his many works Serres’ is uncompromising in saying that these ideas apply to the humanities and social sciences as well as to the natural sciences, he only implies how they can be applied to the social. My research is aimed at working this through in detail, and the remainder of this paper outlines my thoughts so far.

In *Genesis*, Serres suggests that it is “the emergence of the object” that stabilises human relationships and slows down our history such that human societies can form. He coins the term ‘quasi-object’ to refer to a relational object, an object that “is more a contract than a thing”,⁷ a contract or relation that, I suggest, can be described reflexively as a type of exchange. In his essay on Molière’s *Dom Juan*,⁸ Serres describes the play as “the work of the classical age’s most ingenious sociologist” in that it “is a complete treatise on giving and counter-giving”. What is exchanged, what circulates under the watchful eye of Hermes himself, the Greek god of commerce and thieves, are atoms or elements of social discourse, what I want to term ‘expectations’. I have taken this term from Dennis Wrong, and use it very much as he does, but also very much in the same manner as Michel Foucault uses the term ‘statement’ in his exploration of discourse in general.

Wrong acknowledges the importance of the intentional act of the individual social actor but, in a similar manner to Foucault, and in line with Serres, seeks order in the series, in the relationships that form out of those intentional acts. The advantage of ‘expectation’ over ‘intentional act’, he argues, is its ambiguity, in as much as it can be taken in both a predictive and an imperative mode, and thus carries both the sense of expected or predicted order that is objective along with a sense of wanting or commanding that is subjective. Expectations, he argues, in as much as they “guide and constrain action...exemplify what sociologists call ‘social norms’”, but they also exemplify the “subtle interplay of tacit understandings and non verbalized expectations in face-to-face encounters [that] endows social life with its varied and spontaneous character”. Further, they form a continuum that “runs from conscious adherence to clear-cut norms to the sheer automatism of ‘blind’ habit”.⁹

In describing a statement as an ‘atom of discourse’ Foucault is at pains to point out, again in line with Serres, that it is neither a structure nor a unit, but rather ‘a function of existence’ that only has meaning in the relationships it holds together. Foucault describes in great detail a multiplicity of variables, any number of which can come into a relationship to produce a statement or series of statements, and notes that “behind the visible façade of the system, one posits the rich uncertainty of disorder...an

immense density of systematicities, a tight group of multiple relations”.¹⁰ Statements, though, are neither actual propositions nor actual sentences, they are not what is actualised in or through discourse, but lie in the shadows, as it were, having a virtual existence in their differential relationships with other statements, to my thinking, very much as a Deleuzian intensity. It is my argument that expectations perform the same function within social discourse, that they establish a virtual network or multiplicity. Whilst any number may become actualised through social action or through a social event, this action or event cannot be understood as a unity, and cannot be defined – only described. It is impossible to delimit them, and boundaries cannot contain them. This is so because their appearance or actualisation as social phenomena takes on the characteristics of Gallie’s ‘essentially contested concepts’.¹¹ They are internally complex in that behind each event lies a multiplicity of expectations – a multiplicity that is not only temporally open, because they are continuously being exchanged, because they are continuously flowing and evolving, but also spatially open in the sense that they are variously describable – different observers will have differing priorities for the selection of the variables used to describe the event, no set of which could exhaust the totality of expectations being actualised. So whilst it is possible to offer various descriptions of the phenomena experienced, it is not possible to offer a definitive concept; a concept that would, in effect, delimit and unify its variables. These variables are radically different in kind from the social acts they give rise to – their being is virtual, or, more accurately, if we follow a Deleuzian terminology, intensive, as opposed to the actual existence of the phenomena. Having a ‘unit’ or ‘atom’ of exchange or social discourse is one thing, but we still need to understand how they emerge from the noise.

In *The Birth of Physics*, Serres traces the origins of modern physics back, via Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of the Universe) to the atomists of ancient Greece. This offers us a way to model the emergence of systems – any system, including living systems (individual human beings and social systems). In the ‘zero state’ atoms ‘fell’ without deviation – everything was repetitive and in full symmetry, was undetermined and undifferentiated. With the chance formation of a clinamen, a minimal deviation, within this symmetry, a turbulent state (*turba*) is produced; a state that achieves relative stabilization through the formation of a vortex (*turbo*). This is possibly the first description of an emergent and self-organising system, and one that describes the formation and continued existence of virtual social systems from the flow of expectations. Expectations self-organise through the formation of relatively stable, reciprocal, reflexive relations with other expectations, an organisation from which higher order expectations emerge – higher order expectations which in turn form similar relationships with other higher order expectations, and so on adding a fractal dimension to the

process; they are vortices that form larger vortices that become individual social actors; actors who interact with each other locally by way of these expectations to form larger scale vortices or systems, but systems that, because they are open, resist boundaries and unification. Throughout his work, though, Serres is emphatic that these relations are *local*, and it is as a result of these *local* relations that global phenomena emerge.

A recent paper on the links between complexity science and philosophy gives a clear description of these local relations:

agents only interact with (and thus get the chance to ‘know’) a small number of other agents which form their local neighbourhood. Yet, in the longer term these local actions typically have global consequences, affecting the complex system as a whole...The system spontaneously arranges its components and their interactions into a sustainable, global structure that tries to maximise overall fitness, without need for an external or internal designer or controller.¹²

Order, therefore, becomes an emergent property of the system, a product of local interaction. But perhaps order and structure are not the best words. A further feature of complexity science is the state that is often referred to as ‘the edge of chaos’. This is the state when a system is at its most creative, when it is neither controlled with mechanical precision by universal laws of operation nor when it is in a state of chaos with no or very little control by laws of operation, when it is near to collapse but survives through continuous adaptation or learning. This is what Serres refers to as the third place, an area of creativity that is not double, not just caught between two banks of a river where one is and the other is not, but that “it is really triple or third, inhabiting both banks and haunting the middle where the two directions converge”, it is the excluded middle, the creative confluence of order and chaos – *chaosmos* to coin Deleuze’s word. Serres argues that there are two forms of communication, two different contracts with nature. The *foedera fati*: where Mars or Martial law asserts a global control that effectively denies the existence of local laws or relations. Here the linear process of cause and effect triumphs; here the system is, in effect, in a mechanical state with the process moving smoothly from the global to the local. The *foedera naturae*: where Venus, or creativity or complexity triumph. Here laws are local, and any global effect is the result of a non-linear process – a particular cause could produce many different effects, a particular effect may have had many different causes, and the effect may have no proportionality to its cause. According to Serres, this “third position [is] between law and non-law”, between order and chaos. It is in this creative middle ground, through the formation of local relations based on reflexive expectations, and through their

self-organisation into a flowing equilibrium, into a homeorrhesis as Serres terms it, that social entities form, change, adapt and evolve, but do so in a manner that resists the imposition of boundaries.

When we impose a boundary, when we subsume multiplicity under unity, when we search for beings rather than the multiple relations that give rise to them, we attempt to impose a ‘false’ or ‘unnatural’ order on the multiple – whether the multiple are social actors or social ideas. This idea has a strong resonance with the over-codification of the molar described by Deleuze & Guattari, as opposed to their nomadic molecular. In the former, under the influence of Mars, people attempt to hold onto the actualised and emergent in the mistaken belief that they have found the ground of the social – a ground that, if anything, lies in the virtual multiplicity, in the noise that has given rise to it. This over codification has dire consequences. By forsaking the soft sensual touch of Venus for these firm dictates of Mars we lose the creative middle ground and gain a false certainty, a false certainty that takes many guises – traditional ideas, fundamental beliefs, transcendent knowledge, categorisation and compartmentalisation, essentialism – but a certainty that, nevertheless, has an appeal because it is certain, because in its certainty it offers comfort. But it is the false comfort of a supposedly good intentioned dictator, a comfort that is all sound and fury, a comfort that leads to war. The remedy is, I suggest, to follow Serres’ lead and attempt to think ‘the multiple as such’, to think in terms of relations rather than beings. In losing these certainties we lose all unities – at least in the sense of a definable unity, a being with a definable essence. Instead, whilst still being able to view any ‘unity’, any individual social actor, organisation, community, or nation state, as a describable set, we would need to accept that what we describe is emergent, nomadic and temporary, and that any boundary is arbitrary and contingent. By attempting to think ‘the multiple as such’, I suggest, we will be “better equipped to negotiate the daunting complexity of the contemporary social world”.

Notes

¹ Nicholas Gane *The Future of Social Theory*, p1

² *Ibid.*, p84

³ Niels Albertsen & Bulent Diken ‘What is the Social?’, p1

⁴ *Ibid.*, p2

⁵ See, for example, Francis Heylighen’s paper, ‘The science of self-organization and adaptivity’.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p24

⁷ Michel Serres *Genesis*, pp87-88

⁸ In Michel Serres *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*

⁹ Dennis H Wrong *The Problem of Order*, pp46-47

¹⁰ Michel Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p85

¹¹ W.B. Gallie 'Essentially contested concepts' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (Vol 56: 167-198)

¹² Francis Heylighen, Paul Cilliers & Carlos Gershenson 'Complexity and Philosophy'

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