



Cultural Realm as Super-organic : Insights for Non-reductionist approach in Social Sciences

KEYWORDS

Super-organic, Culture, Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT *The term super-organic, used in the study of culture, has important implications for human studies and social sciences in general. The paper seeks to draw significant insights for non reductionist approach in social sciences. Understanding culture as belonging to super-organic implies that although it has linkages with, and is related to organic and inorganic domains, it cannot be reduced to organic or inorganic processes of the nature. This saves us from speculative approach that denies any necessary linkages between human and material realm on the one hand, and reducing human realm to material domain on the other.*

In studies aimed at comprehending the cultural and social realm, word super-organic may or may not be mentioned, but more often than not, the thought behind this concept forms backdrop of the studies by informing their basic concepts and methodological tools. Therefore it would be pertinent to note and elaborate this important feature of the cultural realm.

The term super-organic was first used by Lippert and was developed further by Herbert Spencer. But it was elaborated in detail by Kroeber who tried to work out important implications of the concept for the study of culture. According to him understanding culture as belonging to super-organic realm means that it transcends organic world and cannot be reduced to organic processes of the nature. But at the same time he also points out that understanding culture as being super-organic does not mean that it is independent of the influences of organic and/or inorganic reality. It only means that it has necessary linkages with organic reality, but these connections are not sufficient to explain cultural realm as it goes beyond them, and is much more than mere organic or inorganic events and processes.

According to this conception of reality phenomena can be demarcated as belonging to three levels : (a) inorganic, (b) organic, and (c) super-organic. The inorganic realm is considered to be the lowest level that includes material and cosmological phenomena. With emergence of life, a new (i.e. organic) dimension has been added to the reality. Though organic realm has its roots in the inorganic domain and is based on this level, but it cannot be treated as identical with it as various phenomena of life differentiate it from mere inorganic domain. Thereafter during the processes of organic evolution, *hominæ* species emerged and in homo-sapiens the brain developed significantly. The body also underwent important changes including the ability to stand erect, specific formation of hands, focused vision, ability to speak, etc. Emergence and development of complex cultures was enabled by these abilities. All these abilities have organic basis, but culture that developed on these organic foundations is much more than mere organic phenomena. It is in this sense that Kroeber described culture as super-organic. He sought to stress the point that just as organic phenomena belonged to a higher category as compared to inorganic phenomena, similarly super-organic phenomena belong to a higher category as compared to organic phenomena. He used the category of super-organic to stress that cultural phenomena are radically different from the biological abilities belonging to organic realm.

The conception of culture as super-organic realm is reinforced by the fact that unlike organic traits it is not of he-

reditary nature and cannot be transferred genetically to next generations. Isolate a few eggs of ants from other eggs and give them favourable conditions to hatch. The offsprings from these eggs will not lack anything in comparison to other ants and will exhibit all the traits associated with ants as these traits being organic are transferred genetically through the generations.

Similarly, Kroeber suggests, keep a few new born children apart from the cultural community and place them in isolation. Provide them all the physical comforts and material things, but cut off all types of human interaction with them. They will grow physically but will not acquire the traits of higher cultures in which they were born. It means that humans are born *in* culture but **not** *with* culture. Mere heredity cannot make these children possess cultural traits as culture -rather than being organic- is super-organic.

The above hypothetical experiment suggested by Kroeber also underscores another important point : that though creators and carriers of culture are human beings but in real-life situations culture can only be acquired through the processes of culturalisation and socialisation, meaning thereby that individuals are creations of culture.

This categorization of culture as super-organic provides insights for accepting the multiplicity and heterogeneity of phenomena and encourages us to look at them as they actually are. It also enables us to recognize that there are different and distinct levels of phenomena –each having its distinct nature. An effort should be made to study them by appreciating their distinctness and grasping their nature without reducing them to one another, but recognizing the necessary linkages at the same time. It also has important and significant implications for the language used to comprehend the reality that is peculiarly human. Social realm and phenomena peculiar to human reality such as consciousness, self-awareness, reflection and related phenomena of cultural objects, symbols and constructs, though have necessary linkages with physical and biological realms, but they cannot be reduced to organic or inorganic reality. Nor can they be understood in categories appropriate for lower realms as these concepts fail to capture the richness of phenomena that are peculiarly human, social and cultural. Such an approach shows us a path of avoiding the two extremes : on the one hand it saves us from mere speculative approach that denies any necessary linkages between human and material realms; and on the other it protects us against reducing phenomena peculiarly human to material phenomena to be studied by the methodology of natural sciences.

If former has been the orthodoxy of times prior to *renais-*

sance, the latter has been a dominant trend -under the influence of positivism- in the post-renaissance period.

REFERENCE

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