

Philosophy of Social Science: the Hollis-tic way

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I am perhaps unusual here in that I was not a colleague of Martin Hollis (1938-1998), nor a graduate student of his. My contact with Martin was wholly limited to my time as an undergraduate at UEA. It is not inappropriate that this aspect of his work should be remembered – he was, of course, an extraordinary undergraduate teacher. I remember the one class on moral philosophy I took with him: the intimidating Socratic style, his neatly ordered lecture cards... and (especially) the hapless visiting American from Bowling Green, who had written an over-excited (possibly religious?) paper on Alasdair MacIntyre. The poor boy was shot down in flames, a merciless dissection. I had been too, although I got away with a B+, and a bruising tutorial in which I tried and failed to talk my mark up. I recall the comments on the paper. “Very well written,” Professor Hollis wrote, “but fine writing alone will not bring home the bacon”. I was still writing pretentious literary theory papers, not doing analytical philosophy yet. Well, I learned the lesson, and came up with a few rashers in my next paper – on Bernard Williams’ wonderful *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, in hindsight, a remarkably destructive place to end a first course on moral philosophy. This was probably the most important lesson that I learned at UEA – and in the long run analytical philosophy won.

That was it, in fact, for direct contact, although Martin had obviously been part of the examiner team for my eventually successful degree in philosophy and comparative literature, and was very supportive in my move to the EUI to work with Steven Lukes. The last time I saw him was at a conference at the Badia (Steven’s conference on Condorcet, I believe), where he rather awkwardly congratulated me on my progress, and said I seemed to be “thriving”. I have drifted away from analytical philosophy, for sure, from comp lit, through political and social science, to geography and now sociology, but the longer I work in the business, the more some of Hollis’s lessons stand out. Notably, in going back to teaching theory at UCLA, I have gone back to teaching Hollis and his *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction*, as quite simply the best way I know of getting graduate students to think about the foundations of social research. It is a necessary lesson for American would-be social scientists. American sociology graduates are not plagued too much

by the woolly socio-speculations of postmodernism and critical theory – this is, mercifully, still a very empiricist discipline in the US – but they are amazingly short on philosophical awareness and background. Plato to Nato clearly doesn't cut it any more. The relativistic closing of the American mind is part of this, but mostly it's just a lack of background in classic and enlightenment thought, which can be quite easily converted into a thirst for the subject with the right introduction. They have Marx, Weber and Durkheim, of course, but scarcely anything of Descartes, Hobbes, Hume, Smith, Kant, Mill, or Hegel – and how can you really understand the birth of sociology without these foundations? Even the social science-y number crunchers (who are often the smartest students we have at UCLA), tend to have only the slightest knowledge or background in, say, Popper, let alone Kuhn or Wittgenstein. Hollis's seemingly straightforward text, which may even be his best in its own way – certainly his most characteristic – is quite simply a great introduction to all this – and more.

Here I want to reflect upon three dimensions of his work that appear to me the most important from the point of view of bringing philosophy into the social sciences – the issue which I take to be the most central concern in Martin's career.

1. Analytical thinking: the fight to reduce complexity

Some of us fight a minority corner in sociological theory: in the name of analytical social theory – social mechanisms, explanatory logic, nuts and bolts and all that. It is the counter current to a different majority conception of theory (basically Giddens, Alexander and co.), who started out with similar philosophical awareness, but have ended up producing huge synthetic systems in the tradition of 'grand theory', German and French style. This is what usually gets called 'critical theory', nowadays.

The essential difference comes down to the attitude towards complexity. Yes, everyone agrees the world is complex. It's too darn complex for any of us to understand, sure. Trouble is, by saying this, you have said precisely nothing; added no new knowledge to the world. But critical theorists tend to love and revere the word 'complex', and insist that their theories be 'complex' too. They laugh at the naivety of empiricists, positivists and rational choice theorists. They like things to be reflexive, paradoxical, synthetic, difficult. They like to transcend analytical distinctions, rather than work with them. Analytical social theory, of which I think Martin could be the patron saint, thinks the opposite. By analytical theory, I mean the kind of work exemplified by Jon Elster, Diego Gambetta or Michael Hechter, or many of the authors who crop up in Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg's *Social Mechanisms*. The intro to this book is a nice manifesto for what sociology should be about as an explanatory science. Break it down, simplify, analyse things into components. Reduce complexity, don't mystify it. That is after all what a theory should be doing. A 'model' is meant to be a 'model', not 'real'. A theory that was as complex as the 'reality' it is supposed to capture would no longer be a theory. It would be reality itself (which is of course what all forms of idealism claim...).

Martin's example here (or, my reading of it) perhaps is as much about style as anything – but I do take it to be the essential lesson of "old school" Oxford philosopher style thinking, which I have in my own esoteric way continued to try to uphold. You can summarise it with the phrase: *cut the crap*. And there is a hell of lot of crap out there. In teaching terms it means you have to embrace, as did Hollis, methodological individualism, rat choice, prisoner's dilemmas, and all that as an essential starting heuristic for bringing in upfront the micro to our always macro/structural leanings in sociology (this applies also to political economy, geography; political science and economics, obviously, don't need so much reminding). It is also the way you can convert elemental ideas from Popper, Bacon, Descartes, Wittgenstein, into brick-by-brink analytical thinking, in which the clutter of biography, philology, rhetoric, jargon, complex synthesis (take a look any social theory text book) is banished. I suppose it's the synthetic/analytic distinction that makes sense for me (and how "old school" is that!); although of course Martin didn't spare us Quine's two dogmas (just to make it a little more difficult...).

Now I know complexity is all the rage, which in the US has translated into a new vogue for apparently anti-humanist evolutionary thinking, married with state-of-the-art simulations technology. Rat choice is dead; long live complexity science. In fact, of course, complexity science can be every bit as much about reducing complexity as old style analytical philosophy and rat choice, and the best is still distinctly humanist in tone (my favourite intros being, of course, Schelling, then Axelrod, then Brian Skyrms', *Evolution of the Social Contract Contract*, who I think Martin would have approved of, stylistically at least, and certainly would have made us read). Axelrod and Skyrms get to complexity through the problem of social contract, rational choice, multiple iterations, and smart computer programs. Networks, too, the other rage out there, have to be understood as models built from elemental parts (individual social relations), not as a gestalt-like metaphor of the 'system'. We learn a lot more theoretically about networks from, say, journalist Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*, a mechanistic exposition of network theory for a general audience, that, say, Manuel Castells' gargantuan, *The Information Age*, the most famous sociological study of global networks. Of course, the individual, Hollis's *autonomy*, does tend to disappear in all these neo-structuralist works. And this is a problem. But one adjective that I have at least banished from my students' vocabulary is "complex". As in "This phenomenon is more complex than that theory grasps". Here is a good example, from one of the most highly regarded critical theorists in my own field, the study of international migration.

"The patterns of migration that emerge from these contradictory aspirations are so multiple and of such a complex nature that it is now impossible to either generalise about the logic which determines its causes, or to map its flows according to the binary co-ordinates of departure and destination...A

current map of global migration would have to be as complex as all the migrant biographies.”¹

Almost everything that is wrong about the contemporary social sciences, from an analytical point of view, is continued in this eloquent phrase. We can't analyse, we can't model, we can't do causality, we can't generalise, and our 'critical theory' is the same thing as the totality of our interview transcripts and ethnographic fieldnotes. It is good to go back to Hollis and point out to students that actually there was something *positive* about positivism. It helped you study the world, not dissolve into it. Please, don't be overwhelmed by 'reality' out there. Then come up with a simple mechanistic theory that we can go out and falsify empirically; not a vague and lumpy description, written in fancy jargon, that is actually quite meaningless.

2. Explanation versus interpretation

This neo-positivist reading is not the only one that might be made. A friend of mine, a leading political science professor at the LSE, groaned with frustration when I mentioned Hollis as the key reading in my theory classes. He was tired of trying to talk the positivist hardline with IR students tempted by critical theory. More often than not, they'd got hold of Hollis and Smith's *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, using the canonical *methodenstreit* cleavage, in which Hollis was the soft interpretivist (sic!), as their justification for turning their back on the nomological pretensions of modern day political science. This book was, of course, another classic product of the UEA years, those mythical social science/philosophy seminars with Smith and co. that resulted in this very fine teaching book. Years later, I used to try to think of myself as 'doing PPE', although I never had at UEA, had wanted to study Literature at Oxford (I didn't get in, fortunately – UEA was much better for me), and was never much good as a straight analytical philosopher anyway. Although years later, I read the books, I'd even missed out on all the great work Martin was doing with Robert Sugden, Shaun Hargreaves-Heap and others at the time (although I was fortunate enough to be introduced to Rawls and political philosophy, by Tim O'Hagan, Martin's closest associate in the UEA Philosophy department, which is where my PhD started out). But my friend's comment caused me to pause for thought. Was the Hollis influence unquestionably a good one on this score?

I think my friend might be right in a way. I use the *methodenstreit* cleavage routinely, of course, as a way of setting up boxes (Martin's classic 2 x 2), for sociology students to make sense of their own philosophical cleavages, without them descending into the usual methodological bickering and *dialogue des sourds* so typical of the post-positivist era. They learn to dance around the four non-reductive

¹ quote p.50 from Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration* (2000), quoted in Adrian Favell, 'Migration and mobility and globaloney: metaphors and rhetoric in the sociology of globalisation', in *Global Networks* 1 (4), Oct 2001, pp.289-298 <<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/favell/GLOB-NET.htm>>

positions, and that they actually do *need* a foundational position – that they have to make a philosophical choice, and that a pure relativism is not actually a very practical option on this score, however tempting the relativism of a Winch-style reading of Wittgenstein is to smart young minds (this was emphatically not the Wittgenstein we were taught by Alan Hobbs and others at UEA). Faced with this kind of hole under your feet, a berth back in, for example, a Hegelian modernity – sharing Charles Taylor’s type of interpretative modern project – is a much better place for such students to land than some postmodern quagmire. Hollis does not provide the solution, but he forces the self-questioning and the search. He is not exhaustive. He clearly has little or nothing to say philosophically to feminists (70% of graduates and undergraduates in sociology are female), and this is a weakness of the imperial rationalist project. But if students – including feminists – can end up realising that some kind of commitment to the enlightenment project in some shape of form is necessary, then this is lesson enough.

But... my friend is still right. I guide discussions in this direction, but Martin can open doors to other conclusions. The more you read, the more ambiguous it becomes, as rationality, science, and explanation, give way to scepticism, interpretation, and finally a none-too clear philosophy of roles and autonomy and doubt. At the heart of his books, of course, lies a queasy ambiguity – that can upset the poor young readers, who expect foundations, but find them first shaky, and then that the floor beneath them is being dismantled. Of course, we all know that this is the philosophy experience *tout court* – as much as the endless return back to familiar places that you now see again and know for the first time (Martin’s favourite quote from T.S.Eliot that ends both *The Philosophy of Social Science* and *The Introduction to Philosophy*). It’s the vertigo of intellectual adolescence, and the realisation that intellectual maturity only comes when you calmly learn to NOT PANIC – don’t get philosophically hysterical about that gaping hole under your feet.

3. Bringing Kant back into the social sciences

I suppose Martin was not really a Kantian (maybe he was – I don’t really know what the label should be), but what emerges ultimately for trainee social scientists from this first philosophical encounter (at least in my mind), is the realisation that what lies at the base of rationality and the rational enlightenment goals of the modern project, is some kind of Kantian ‘autonomous’ individual. A sort of untouchable inner freedom (not a very Hollisian, or should I say, *Hollis-tic*, phrase), from which we can derive the explanatory – and normative – individualist humanism of enlightenment-compatible thought, however sceptical our thoughts get. Sociology, in particular, is a discipline with a poor sense of the individual amidst its irrevocably macro- and structural habits of thought. When it has developed some kind of micro base, it has usually been in the phenomenological tradition (Schutz, Goffman, Garfinkel), which again hovers between cynicism about structural power, and a more existential impulse to say, yes, it is freedom that matters in the end, the freedom of the individual from social determination, and the responsibility that

comes with it. Martin was, I remember, fascinated, by Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* – notwithstanding his brutal treatment of the American from Bowling Green – and despite its obviously non-Hollis-like style and leanings. The reductive reading of Goffman/Sartre given by MacIntyre stands out as the most stark portrait I can remember of philosophical style sociology when it rejects all notions of the autonomous individual. Let's not go there. And I guess it was because this book, perhaps more than any smart-alec postmodern tome, actually nails the weaknesses of modernity, in its anti-modernist Aristotelean position. Williams' *Ethics* – Martin's other fascination at the time – did a parallel hatchet job on Kant and modernity. You didn't need post-modernism (of which there was no end in literary studies at UEA), to have your enlightenment project torn down before your eyes. I suppose I inherited this scepticism, as Martin's other lesson, a scepticism that pains all thoughtful liberals, trying to find something moral to hold on to amidst all the moveable feasts (now that is a Hollis-tic phrase!) of late late modern thought, society and politics.

In the face of this, my message to graduates is in the end a kind of old fashioned, almost metaphysical philosophical position, about the necessity to always find the individual in the heart of any social system – and if you can't find it, to keep looking for it. Hollis's 'autonomous' individual, his 'mystery man', I simply see everywhere in modern thought as the bottom line that we should not cross. I mean by this an individual whose rationality is not merely the reductive instrumental kind (Weber); whose calculations are not only about immediate self-interest but also long term 'self-identity' over time (Pizzorno, my other teacher in Florence...); the 'voluntarist individual' of Parsons (as read by Alexander); the individual who is 'not a looking glass self' (Mead, and even Coleman); the individual who is not a 'cultural dope' (Garfinkel); even the last free 'queer' of Foucault, read in a despairing modernistic, Weberian way (and this may be the final scene of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* talking), in which the prison guards, the doctors, the civil servants, the journalists, and the Republican Party, can control everything – freedom, reason, religion, science, sexuality, power – but they still cannot get at that moral inner space in there, whatever it is, the ghost in the machine, whatever we call it. I read all of this into Hollis's notion of 'autonomy', the fundamental motor of the 'cunning of reason' and the 'enlightenment project'... I apologise for clumsiness, and collapsing one theory into another. I'm not all that careful about the distinctions here, because I think it important enough that students get the general idea that anti-individualist social structural reduction, the *hous clos* of field/habitus, for example (where Bourdieu is just Marx + Weber + Merleau-Ponty – Kant) is just not good enough. I think this message is more urgent, at least, than the careful analytical distinctions that one would need to draw between all these characteristically modern, enlightened positions on the 'self'.

What is the alternative? Modern social science, minus the Kantian individual? My course can end in post-humanism, Luhmann-style, for the graduates, in which individuals dissolve into communications, everything is reduced to autopoietic cybernetic systems evolving in mute environments, and we as humans can't even

hear the messages that the dying forest is trying to send us. Scary stuff, and a lot more scary than the daft, anglo-american postmodernism of contemporary social theorists, who read Baudrillard (in translation) and didn't realise it was all a Gallic joke. For the undergraduates (who also get to read Hollis), Luhmann is too hard, so I throw in some complexity theory, talk about people as ants you can watch making patterns from outer space, and show them some simulation games of cars driving on the freeway (which of course they love in LA). Because the autonomous individual has been removed from these theories – if we take Hollis out, as it were – this is the *end* of sociology as we know it, not a very good place to end a compulsory foundational course on the subject. So the true end is, I suppose, when we come back round to where we started – Hollis's little book – and they see the place anew for the first time. Some of them, if I'm lucky, realise that you don't necessarily understand a really good book – however straightforward it appeared – the first time you read it.