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First and Second Nature

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The figure of thought Ananta Kumar Giri introduces in his poser, namely 'roots and routes', is thought-provoking. His interpretation of it is apparent from conceptual pairs such as 'tradition and modernity', 'home and world', 'near and far' and 'closed and open'. The dialectic these formulas capture allows him to offer a penetrating diagnosis of the currently fraught situation, particularly in parts of India, and to suggest ways of interpreting and ameliorating it. The key component of his proposal turns on a single vital idea expressed in a variety of ways: 'dynamic process', 'cross-fertilisation', 'border-crossing', 'bridging', 'translation' and 'communication'.

Formally, fault cannot be found with Giri's argument and much of the substance is convincing, but there is nonetheless something striking about his development of his figure of thought: the confinement of the argument to sociocultural parameters and, hence, the corresponding lack of attention to nature. The rootedness of the sociocultural world in nature and the consequences thereof are not contemplated. In response, therefore, I propose to introduce yet another figure which assumes the same meta-problematic but embeds it considerably deeper: first and second nature.

This conceptual pair invokes the relation between nature and the sociocultural world which can no longer be ignored, given our appreciation today that the human form of life is part of nature. Awareness has to be maintained of our acute ecological consciousness, but even more important is that the evolutionary descent of anatomically modern humans, the natural roots of their form of life and their cognitively fluid species mind be throughout considered. To compensate for any vestiges of sociologism, culturalism or idealism, I thus introduce a weak-naturalistic cognitive perspective to offer suggestions as to the relation in question. Since Giri's aims to improve our ability 'to understand…multiple and multi-dimensional processes of genesis, on-going dynamics and reconstitution', I simultaneously suggest strengthening social science's formal grasp of its object and of its methodology which could enhance its critical capacity and practical efficacy.

I

An elucidation of roots in the case of humans and their form of life is inadequate as long as it remains confined to ethnicity, community or the sociocultural world to the neglect of the natural historical processes which spawned them in the first instance. Humans and their characteristic mind are products of nature, as is also their unique form of life which itself presupposes the workings of both nature and the mind. After 5.6 million years of hominin evolution, the process of hominisation 400,000 years ago gave rise to archaic *Homo sapiens* which were superseded by anatomically modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, with a brain size of 1200-1700cc. Between 60,000-30,000 years ago, however, the mind enabled by this neurological infrastructure was remarkably enhanced by the acquisition of a meta-level capacity which is characteristic of contemporary *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Two aspect of human evolution are crucial for an adequate grasp of their roots and routes. One is the very core of the microbiological form of the human species, the other the form of the human mind.

First, having inherited the life-giving, oxygen-processing mechanism in our cells which is passed on to their offspring only by women, all the humans alive today are descendants of the formally identified, closest direct ancestor in the female line. However pronounced ethnic, communal and sociocultural differences may be, it has thus been demonstrated that all of us have one and the same arch-mother, in biology known as 'Mitocondrial Eve'. This evolutionary fact reveals a much deeper dimension that sheds light on the roots of humans and their form of life which are in need of being made explicit and appropriated generally.

The second fact is equally important but has a bearing on the variety of routes taken by humans and, hence, the diverse forms of life they create. For long, the human brain had been accompanied by a mind consisting of a number of distinct, unconnected, cognitive domains (social, physical, biological, technical and incipient musical-linguistic), but the development of language and linguistic communication contributed to the emergence of an overarching meta-level module which enabled a reflexive capacity. The outcome was *Homo sapiens sapiens*' cognitively fluid mind which is characterised by the flexible interrelation of once sharply separated intelligences. Since this remarkable spurt, we humans are able to see virtually all connections, the whole context as it were, and increasingly to sense the transcendental or conceptual-logical structure that allows us to create a human world and repair whatever breaks down in it. On the basis of this enhancement, art, religion and deliberate technological innovation originally emerged some 40,000 years ago – what is called 'the cultural explosion'. Today, consequently, we are in principle able to appreciate the whole of diversity rather than short-sightedly fixing on the differences composing the diversity. Despite this significant capacity, however, contemporary humanity nevertheless seems unequal to the task of imagining the whole of diversity and of working toward realizing a world fitting to it.

II

We humans belong to both nature and the sociocultural world. An explanation for the conspicuous contradiction between the phylogenetic capacity and the sociocultural incapacity of contemporary humanity has to be sought, therefore, in the relation between first and second nature. This weak-naturalistic proposal accepts that there is continuity between nature and the sociocultural world, but simultaneously insists that the latter together with its conceptual-logical structure must be acknowledged in its own right. Ontological primacy is ascribed to nature, yet for everyday action and social science the sociocultural dimension serves as the priority epistemological perspective.

To grasp first nature, one has to appreciate with Darwin that nature is not just a force but also a law. Not only does it lie behind the spontaneous springing forth of things, including humans, but it is also an inheritance by giving its offspring a general resemblance of itself, affording them a variety of opportunities while simultaneously imposing limitations and restrictions. Hominisation is thus complemented by different natural processes that generally shape and give form to the sociocultural world. There are ecological as well as coordination processes – the former including group membership, alliance formation, cooperation, competition, rivalry, dominance, subordination and conflict, and the latter attending, comparing, relating, combining, ordering, interacting, evaluating and judging. As with our *Homo* ancestors and contemporary primates, these processes provide humans and their form of life with elementary social and practical forms which are categorially graspable – for primates pre-verbally and for humans linguistically. Humans therefore possess the means to extrapolate these elementary forms by both inferring their conceptual-logical structure and constructing corresponding sociocultural forms which – in felicitous cases – become emancipated from and surpass nature. Concepts such as truth, justice and authenticity stand for the structure, while forms such as scientific practice, human rights and democratic practices and, finally, responsive and responsible selfhood practices are in the best case scenario free from the limitations and restrictions nature.

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Second nature refers to the sociocultural world as a quasi-reality that arises from first nature, builds on it and potentially stretches beyond the limitations and restrictions given with its handed-down resemblance. The concept has a protracted, albeit submerged, history in Critical Theory where it pinpoints the inherently ambivalent and even contradictory nature of society and culture. This feature becomes more intelligible still with reference to the elementary social forms that ontologically and cognitively secure continuity between first and second nature. For example, group membership is a natural property shared by primates and different evolutionary representatives of the human species, but in the case of *Homo sapiens sapiens* in-group and inter-group cooperation is a socioculturally learned achievement going beyond the basic form provided by natural mechanisms and intuitive experiential cognition. In reality, however, *Homo sapiens sapiens*' second nature, despite its characteristic form-giving conceptual-logical structure and openness to the cognitively fluid mind, is often marred and distorted by the intrusion and even dominance of natural mechanisms and intuitive cognition. Instead of arrangements justifiable in conceptual-logical terms, criticisable phenomena such as antagonistic particularisms, murderous identities, humiliating domination, injurious conflict and destructive war come to predominate together with their erosive and disintegrative consequences.

The crucial point is that it is precisely these ambivalent and contradictory forms that represent the proper object of a critical social science able and willing to make a practical contribution by simultaneously extrapolating the opportunities opened by first nature and neutralising the debilitating impediments it harbours. By unearthing, explaining and critiquing the retention in the sociocultural world of certain drawbacks of appropriated elementary forms, and by disclosing worthwhile routes to explore beyond first nature, such a social science is well placed to help cultivate a general sense of the conceptual-logical structure of the sociocultural world and the realisability under particular conditions of a justifiable selection of its potentials. In social life, such a sense of structural supports – e.g. ideas such as truth, justice and authenticity, to mention but a few – allows not just a slow process of recursive feedback on the elementary forms. Under crisis conditions, especially ones steeped in communication, it could also exert a powerful incursive impact. Emancipation from unmodified or hardly modified natural forms retained in some reified version in personality structures, social institutions and cultural models – reified forms generating particularisms, domination, conflict and war – depends on and demands the transformative, counterfactual force of such intervention.

In sum, then, the creation and repair of an adequate human world, Giri's central concern, basically requires two things to which social science can contribute: a general recognition of contemporary humanity's common evolutionary roots, and actualisation of the cognitively fluid mind allowing both a diversity of routes and their productive interrelation.