



On Recurrence and Retribution as Basic Ideas for Social Sciences and the Humanities

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To introduce myself as a new member of the Editorial Board, my work as an historian of ideas concerns two fundamental ideas: recurrence and retribution, which I take to be the most basic conceptual tools for human interpretation of changing affairs (*Trompf* 1979-2021; 2008). These ideas are often neglected or bypassed because they are part of our assumptive worlds as scholars and we do not delve into them as we should.

Apropos the idea of recurrence, nothing make sense if it has not (in some preconceived way) happened before, re-appearing to be a recognizable thing and re-occurring to be a named event. No event, though, appears to repeat any other exactly (or 'numerically' in older language). Unless one subscribes to a very strict theory of eternal recurrence (taught by the earlier Stoics and accepted by Friedrich Nietzsche as held by the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus), every discrete event that happens is a singularity, because it takes place in its own unique temporal context (even if somehow in a 'reversing' and 'spring-back'). If perceived events remain as undigested and isolate happenings, however, human thought cannot operate in the resulting chaos, disorder, or meaninglessness, and so recognizable repetition becomes the necessary antidote to the overstress of difference (cf. *Deleuze* 1997). Recurrence is a hidden background idea for all would-be social scientific endeavour. Social scientists need to grasp what are basic conceptual 'dominants,' types, common features, profiles, patterns, configurations, generalities, heuristic 'rules of thumb,' theoretical principles, statistics, putative laws, etc. to say anything at all; and yet that only goes to show how we should be reflecting on our assumptive worlds to better assess the nature and apparent status of our scientific discipline.

If physicists can posit that no two sub-atomic events are exactly the same or two snow-flakes perfectly alike, and if biologists cannot clone perfect replicas, we can hardly be embarrassed about deducing that

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the inevitable quest for recurrence faces a never-ending problem of provisionality. We must always be ready to have challenges over whether what we think repeat themselves (*coups d'état*, business cycles, fashion trends, and so on) are 'sufficient realities,' what are variabilities and relativities involved in their usage, and what are the semantic and substantial qualities of the events (or collections of them!) we go on reckoning to have similar, parallel or repetitious characteristics. The French utopianist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon arrestingly declared ([1843] 2000), "everything that can be thought by the mind or perceived by the senses is necessarily a series." The point is, if series or successions of 'things' are spotted, what is the epistemological status of the 'things,' because they can be as precise as the count of cars surpassing a speed limit, or as broadly conceived as a 'revolution' or 'paradigm shift' (a colligation or critical mass of many events).

As for retribution, even if contemporary coinage gives it too much negativity, in recurrence terms it denotes a pattern of consequences, traditionally with pre-conceived kinds of good and bad deeds bringing benefit or woe, rewards or punishments, or in modern secular terms, well thought-out actions bringing desired effects and folly failure. But *retributio*, better expressed by the neologism payback (or perhaps the Italian *ritorsione*) conveys the basic, independent idea that people generally concede to others who are pleasant to them ('reciprocity') and react adversely to those showing ill will ('revenge'). Now, just as recurrence is fundamental yet a largely assumed, hidden and epistemically neglected factor in the Social Sciences, payback is 'the hidden elephant' in rooms of the Humanities. The Humanities are obviously more qualitative in their purview: judgements, positions, tastes, insights, etc. are defended as worthier than others and the chances of 'philosophical schools' bickering against each other are greater. Of course overlap applies to the Social Sciences: it is not as if schools of social scientific thought do not clash (how scholars deal with Marxian interpretation is now a perennial issue); and value judgements constantly creep in unawares into every science. If one wishes to quantify how many presidents of republics have courteously, even magnanimously, conceded electoral defeat, deciding on criteria of gentility will have to come into play.

Yet with payback there are innumerable lurking issues that the average undergraduate will not suspect without an educator's 'deconstruction.' Every historian since Day One has 'had an agenda,' or some interpretative slant, whether to defend the ways of Providence, justify a regime, etc. In two universities where I worked, one had espousers and non-espousers of F.R. Leavis's literary criticism of "moral strength" refusing conversation, and the other had two separate and competing philosophy departments. The point here is that, with the more qualitatively oriented disciplines, we constantly need to be asking who might scholars be writing against (and also for), and putting this axiological query to our own work. In a hotly contested post-modern, post-colonial intellectual arena, it will probably have to become a hallmark of goodwill to be upfront about our worldview, especially if one cries out for rectification against distortion or misguidedness. Why, for the first time in my own discipline, the History of Ideas, I have just reviewed a huge and brilliant work on the enticements of capital(ism) in American thought, culture and religious life since 1650 that is written as a call for national "repentance" over succumbing to so erroneous a path (McCarragher 2019: 6).

Just ponderings on commonly by passed issues to keep us on our toes.

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