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HOW TO SPOT THE BEHAVIOURAL SHIBBOLETH AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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IN A REMARKABLE PAMPHLET TITLED THE WESTERN ILLUSION OF HUMAN NATURE, Marshall Sahlins wrote the following:

Time and again for more than two millennia the people we call “Western” have been haunted by the spectre of their own inner being: an apparition of human nature so avaricious and contentious that, unless it is somehow governed, it will reduce society to anarchy. The political science of the unruly animal has come for the most part in two contrasting and alternating forms: either hierarchy or equality, monarchical authority or republican equilibrium: either a system of domination that (ideally) restrain people’s natural self-interest by an external power; or a self-organizing system of free and equal powers whose opposition (ideally) reconciles their particular interests in the common interest. Beyond politics, this is a totalised metaphysics of order, for the same generic structure of an elemental anarchy resolved by hierarchy or equality is found in the organization of the universe as well as the city, and again in therapeutic concepts of the human body. I claim it is a specifically Western metaphysics, for it supposes an opposition between nature and culture that is distinctive of our own folklore – and contrastive to the many peoples who consider that beasts are basically human rather than humans.
basically beasts. These peoples could know no primordial “animal nature,”
et alone one that must be overcome. And they have a point, inasmuch as the
modern human species, *Homo sapiens*, emerged relatively recently under the
aegis of a much older human culture. By our own paleontological evidence,
we too are animal creatures of culture, endowed with the biology of our
symbology. The idea that we are involuntary servants of our animal dispo-
sitions is an illusion – also originating in the culture (Sahlins 2008: 1–2).

*Animal Spirits* (Akerlof and Shiller 2009), together with *Nudge* (Thaler and
Sustein 2008), *Driven* (Lawrence and Nohria 2002) or even *The Map and the
Territory* (Greenspan 2013), to name a few recent achievements, exemplify quite
well the type of social-scientific streams that justifies the worries expressed by
Sahlins in the above extract, as well as in earlier disquisitions (Sahlins 1976a;
1976b). The paragraph following the preceding quote also applies:

I am going against the grain of the genetic determinism now so popular in
America for its seeming ability to explain all manner of cultural forms by
an innate disposition of competitive self-interest. In combination with an
analogous Economic Science of autonomous individuals devoted singularly
to their own satisfaction by the “rational choice” of everything, not to men-
tion the common native wisdom of the same ilk, such fashionable disciplines
as Evolutionary Psychology and Sociobiology are making an all-purpose
social science of the “selfish gene.” But as Oscar Wilde said of professors,
their ignorance is the result of long study. Oblivious to history and cultural
diversity, these enthusiasts of evolutionary egoism fail to recognize the
classic bourgeois subject in their portrait of so-called human nature. Or
else they celebrate their ethnocentrism by taking certain of our customary
practices as proof of their universal theories of human behavior. In this
kind of ethnoscientific, *l’espèce, c’est moi* – I am the species (Sahlins 2008: 2).

The breadth of what may be called the ‘behavioural shibboleth’ is indeed
observable in numerous quarters of the social sciences, but also in the conduct
of policy and, more widely, in the worldviews that control mundane talk about
what is meant when ‘the social’ is uttered. Why a ‘shibboleth’? A shibboleth determines the extent to which one is a legitimate member of a community on the grounds of how authentic the use of a keyword sounds. The shibboleth shall here denote the belonging to an all-encompassing folklore in which the thing that is referred to as ‘social’ (e.g. ‘social phenomena’ or ‘social dynamics’, but also ‘social problems’ and their ‘solutions’) is haunted by the idea of units of behaviour that interact with each other (through whatever medium, including electronic mass telecommunication), and which partakes, in one form or another, of the ultimate social science, i.e. an extended ‘Economic Science’. What follows is an attempt to contribute to the preoccupation signalled by Sahlins, but to do so in a rather condensed and purposeful manner. The point here is not to analyse, but to alert – and to provide, accordingly, a counter-shibboleth, a sort of an amulet. This might, arguably, be of some interest to those who already share Sahlins’ sense of dismay, but it is addressed more emphatically to those who have found themselves carrying out research inside a medium of data excitement (electronic mass telecommunication, for example) or participating in creative disciplines (design, computing, architecture) in which the shibboleth often goes unremarked.¹

BEHAVIOURAL FOLKLORE

The constant reference to the idea of ‘human nature’ seems to be, for Sahlins, one particularly salient cultural trait of the phenomenon under scrutiny here. Other manifestations, less vividly marked by the rule of naturalism, might however play a deeper role in the establishment of the behavioural shibboleth. Googling ‘society’ (vernacular for the quick harvesting of dominant expressions of the shibboleth) might of course precipitate the proverbial images of wolves, sheep and a few leviathans. But a far more telling render of the shibboleth might be observed, in scientific guise, if one looks more carefully: the drawings of little dots with arrows that one is likely to encounter in the course of this visual exercising (Fig. 8.1).² Epstein and Axtell (1996) provided a landmark with their pioneering ‘agent-based’ computational models of ‘society’ and their collections
of 51 x 51 cell grids in which agents look around for sugar. With the refinement of the cybernetic imagination came the time of ‘emergent behaviour’ in ‘complex systems’, a time which duly blended into that of the ‘social network’ (Watts 2003). The magic of ‘network visualisation’ augmented this time with the spectacle of order springing from the disorder of information (Lima 2011).

One might very well just raise an eyebrow at all this and then pass on. But the task here consists in furthering the characterisation of the shibboleth within these visions in order to address its dangers at root level.

The behavioural shibboleth can be recognised through at least two important structural traits. The first is indeed what might be called the ‘little dotted agent’. The unit of analysis takes the form of a schematic, delineated individual agent whose conduct corresponds to the conjunction of contextual signals (be they consumption offers, regulatory constraints, data impulses, monetary incentives, or such like) and internal schedules (be they preferences, orientations, aversions, beliefs, habits, desires, or such like), often considered in terms of more or less neat or limited forms of computation. The analysis of the conduct of this little dotted agent indeed requires the intervention of hypotheses on human nature (because such agents are considered to be human) which usually go along the line of selfishness (maximisation of utility, reputational gaming, opportunism, survival, strategic solidarity) doubled with some kind of narrowness (bias,

**Fig. 8.1** A usual rendering of society (adapted by the author from a quick online search)
opacity, knowledge deficit, bounded rationality). The conduct of sets of these agents translates into the emergence of aggregate phenomena (also termed ‘social’) that are mapped and analysed in terms of influence, network dynamics, imitation, calculation, herd behaviour, contagion, socially-driven rationalities and irrationalities, and so forth. Critics have claimed extensively and intensively that this view is flawed – e.g. ‘reductionist’ – when not silly (e.g. Barnes 1995). But these terms, which may seem rather absurd if one tries to apply them seriously to one’s own acts in one’s own life, lose their absurdity and gain in relevance when applied to the little dotted agent (Fig. 8.2).

FIG. 8.2  The little dotted agent

The second important trait of the behavioural shibboleth is ‘scientific estrangement’. Knowledge produced about the little dotted agent is in essence knowledge possessed by an actor – the scientist – who is qualitatively different from the little dotted agent. In short, otherness is crucial: I am not the little dotted agent. Although reflexivity and self-analysis are not excluded in principle, the idea of the behaviour of agents is in practice usually at odds with that of the behaviour of oneself as a scientist. Scientific estrangement is in part the cause of an interesting paradox in the behavioural sciences: the more the analysed situation gets closer to a process of ordinary life as experienced by oneself (e.g. shopping in the bazaar), the more it will appear as scientifically messy and meaningless (e.g. it cannot be modelled), and the more the scientist will feel alienated. Conversely, the more trivial and alienating for participants is the analysed situation (e.g. bidding in a blind auction), the more the scientist will find it meaningful and controllable (e.g. it can be modelled). This is what Jean-Pierre Dupuy once called ‘Von Foerster’s Conjecture’, in reference to a conversation with Heinz Von Foerster (Dupuy 1982: 11–28; 1992: 255–62). The behaviour of agents is always a curious
object for ‘us’ scientists, even if our scientific penchant is, naturally, for trivial machines (waiting lines, computer clicks, traffic jams). ‘Our’ behaviour, conversely, irrespective of how poorly trivial it might be (e.g. writing this, arguably), would not strike us as a curious object at all. Otherness, produced through the device of an overhead view, thus stands as a crucial element of the behavioural shibboleth (Fig. 8.3, Fig 8.4).

Both the little dotted agent and scientific estrangement are perfectly legitimate ingredients for particular kinds of scientific endeavour. They are also terribly enticing. But they are also both artefacts of our behavioural folklore, and this piece is just a humble guideline to help us recognise where we are. The academic areas where this can be noticed (once the incantatory effect has been dispelled) are abundant. For a rewarding catch, one has only to follow the track of the ‘animal spirits’ literature signalled above. It leads inevitably to the realm of behavioural economics and to one of its favourite fetishes, namely the stock market ‘crowd’, which it willingly shares with the sociological perspectives that see in financial markets, and in markets in general, yet another version of the Empire of Information and its cortege of ‘dynamics’ (see Preda 2009). Another, quite different variant of the syndrome under scrutiny here can be observed in the particular blend of ‘people textures’ or ‘scalies’ offered in competition renderings of architectural designs as a way of improving their behavioural plausibility (Houdart 2013). But what should be done about the shibboleth once spotted?
SCIENTIFIC CORRECTIVE

Once it has been correctly identified, the behavioural shibboleth invites a number of possible objections. It is, at this point, particularly crucial not to fall into the trap of what may be called ‘chimeric scientism’. This refers to the all-too-often heard critique of the inhuman aspect of the scientific, positivistic logic governing behaviourism, that is, the implicit assumption that the trouble with the behavioural shibboleth is that it subjects the mystery of human experience to the cold rule of metric reason – the problem, it is said, is science itself, and its monstrous objectifying power. Why not indulge in this otherwise affable critique? Because this would be, precisely, the triumph of the behavioural shibboleth: that of equating its science with sound science, for better or worse. It is as if in effect the two main ingredients of the behavioural shibboleth (the little dotted agent and scientific estrangement) were in fact ingredients of the scientific viewpoint as such (Fig. 8.5). Its condemnation would then waver between impressionistic rejections of scientific ‘objectification’ in general (a basically hollow idea) and lateral disquisitions on the ‘politics’ behind the science (e.g. it comes from neoliberal cold warriors). Chimeric scientism leaves the heart of the behavioural shibboleth untouched.

Let us position ourselves instead in the positive, propositional realm of sound science. It is necessary to point to the fact that the ingredients of the behavioural shibboleth, despite the noise they make, have been disqualified to a great extent.
by scientific investigation, and especially by the scientific specialty whose object is, precisely, scientific culture – namely, science studies. One thing that has been shown and repeated ad nauseam in such quarters is that anyone with an interest in the behaviour of people should develop an interest in the behaviour of people studying the behaviour of people. And this is not a chimera deviation from the subject matter (an elevation into intra-academic reflexivity) but a result of scientific evidence. I am referring here to the well-known fact that behaviour is an artefact of the behavioural apparatus.

Well known? Well, just think about one particularly pressing problem of behaviour today: that of energy consumption. The contemporary engineer-led turn towards the consumer in large utilities translates into a particularly powerful invocation of the behavioural shibboleth. We are talking about ‘demand response’ in the energy sector, for example, and the now pervasive use of social sciences to serve it. Two increasingly relevant and quite contrasting constraints seem to justify this invocation. The first is privatisation, and hence competition, with the idea that the disarticulation of public services follows a focus on the requirements of demand (the demanding little dotted agent). The second is the rise of the ecological preoccupation, with the idea that price signals would suffice if the objective shifted from obeying demand to taming it.

But what kind of behaviour is energy consumption? It is the behaviour of electrical equipment and of electricity grids linked to electricity sources. It makes sense to say that people consume kilowatts, willingly or not, but it only makes sense insofar as we acknowledge that ‘people’ is here a euphemism that stands in reality for buildings, rooms, heating technologies, appliances and machines. Economists may not understand that quite straightforwardly, but engineers do. They do because their job consists precisely in engineering these electric apparatuses. Hence the counter-shibboleth: the study of behaviour shall be but, to begin with, that of engineers and their engineered and engineering creatures. Or, in other words, the right science of behaviour starts when one looks not at the little dotted agent but at the other end of scientific estrangement.

Examples abound in which sound social-scientific knowledge requires precisely abandoning the two ingredients of the behavioural shibboleth indicated
above. The little dotted agent fades out in favour of what one can readily call
the ‘behavioural configuration’: collective assemblages, socio-technical devices,
institutional apparatuses. There is no shortage of names with which to refer to
these units of analysis (Fig. 8.6). And scientific estrangement disappears to the
benefit of both a reflexive sense of affinity (the behaviour of science is part of
the problem to be dealt with, as scientists should know) and an honest meth-
odological acceptance of the performative condition of social-scientific inquiry
(Law 2004). We might want to call ‘performative entanglement’ the articulation
of a scientific antidote to the behavioural shibboleth (Fig. 8.7).

**Fig. 8.6** The behavioural configuration

**Fig. 8.7** Performative entanglement
But let us take a step aside. Not all is about science, and one has the right to enquire into other kinds of concerns. Drawing attention to the ‘juristic damper’ is here in order: the function of the killjoy has been eloquently assumed by a number of comparatist jurists, anthropologists and historians of law that are severely preoccupied with the growing role of the modern social sciences in general, and the behavioural in particular, in the institution of society (Fig. 8.8). Pierre Legendre has been quite explicit about that, in his usual reactionary way (Legendre 1995), and, in different style, Yan Thomas has also dealt with this quite clearly (Thomas 1999, 2005; see also Supiot 2005, 2015). First, these critics claim, ‘the social’ is, if anything, a legal artifice. The law is the prime vehicle for the institution of society. It is through juristic craft, and more precisely through the performative technology of the juristic fiction, that parties are delineated, objects formulated, agencies attributed and properties ascribed. And it is through jurisprudence, widely understood, that human institutions can be shaped and made sense of. But, second, this does not mean that the law is about human facts, not at all. What the juristic damper tends to emphasise, especially through its interest in Roman Law and its Christian interpretations, is that juristic formulation is an artifice. It is through the articulation of a legal fiction that society can be formed. The ‘operations of the law’ – to use an expression that happens to be shared by both the French school of the historical anthropology of law and by the North American tradition of legal realism (Thomas 2011) – are performative in essence. They are not there to respect a supposedly positive, social-scientific appraisal of social behaviour, but to institute what society is
about. The conclusion is that any attempt by judges to ground their decisions on a sound scientific appraisal of social reality is silly at best, reckless at worst.

How does the juristic damper speak to the behavioural shibboleth? The shibboleth serves several purposes. One is to recognise fellow social scientists, people skilled in the arts of observing and comprehending social behaviour. But the second is political: to recognise fellow policy advisers and social engineers preoccupied with the improvement of society (e.g. Banerjee and Duflo 2011). It is through a sound – that is, economic – recognition of behavioural patterns and social mechanisms (their wording) that collective wealth and wellbeing can be augmented. What is the trouble, then? It is not just that the proverbial ‘Nudge Unit’ (the expert political cabinet that you may enter as you pass the behavioural shibboleth) is fostering an undemocratic understanding of what the improvement of society means (how can the little dotted agent be considered as the locus of sovereign power, that is, as the people in ‘We the people’?). In the end, technocratic paternalism is not the worst thing that can happen. The problem is rather the anthropological menace of the collapse of the foundations of society – significantly more daunting. Reinventing society on the ground of the behavioural shibboleth (e.g. through a behavioural analysis of law) would only amount to destroying it, according to the juristic damper.

**THE RIGHT BEHAVIOUR**

But would society really be destroyed by such a reinvention? Perhaps not. The juristic concern is not raised here with the purpose of intimidating us or of hampering the arguably inescapable progress of the reconstitution of society by other means. What we need is just an antidote to cancel the full impact of the behavioural shibboleth, not another religion. A juristic approach is only fine to the extent that it lays open explicitly how society is constructed. But this reactionary statement is helpful for the articulation of what the antidote should consist of. As we have seen, both the little dotted agent and scientific estrangement can be easily countered in the domain of science, provided we equip science with the right kind of science studies. But, as we very well know,
the fact of being scientifically right does not guarantee sanity in the business of constituting what the social should be about.

Social research today is marked by two imperatives that can, unfortunately, turn the researcher into easy meat for the behavioural shibboleth: these are data and design. ‘Data’ is the name that is given in our own culture of computer business to the traces behaviour (social or otherwise) leaves behind, and ultimately consists of. Abundant and complex, by the very same cultural standard of the behavioural shibboleth, data can orient the researcher towards archetypical problems of visualisation (Fig. 8.1), and modelling (Fig. 8.2), but also of epistemic perplexity and informational escalation (Fig. 8.3, Fig. 8.4). ‘Design’ is a new word for politics – especially when connected to other crucial notions of our economic cosmology, such as that of innovation – but with politics understood as the modern art of the informed fix. How appropriately informed a design solution is to anything social depends, quite naturally, on the intelligence felt by or conferred to the researcher-qua-designer (Fig. 8.4), but also on the eradication of a view that would downplay this intelligence hubris, or consider design to be itself part of the problem (Fig. 8.6, Fig. 8.7).

There is nothing wrong with data and design as such, but they can certainly encourage a form of scientific folklore that paves the way to the behavioural shibboleth. Who has not seen the little dotted agent lurking in the graphs of the internet sociologist, in the renders of the environmental architect, in the models of the crowd economist or in the indicators of the policy consultant? There is no such a thing as a latent behavioural menace in data and design practices. On the contrary, engagement with data and design opens tremendous opportunities for critical awareness and reflexive elucidation (Law and Ruppert 2013; Lury, Parisi, and Terranova 2012; Lury and Wakeford 2012; Ruppert, Law, and Savage 2013). But data and design constitute a medium in which the shibboleth can spread rapidly once it has made its way into it. What an anthropological interrogation can introduce at this point, better than a regressive rebuff (Fig. 8.5), is precisely a critical examination of the juristic complex on which the very political relevance of data and design is grounded (Fig. 8.8). Where does the ownership, alienability and purpose of data reside? When does something qualify as such, under which jurisdiction and for what?
How is the mandate of design? Where does its authority come from? How are its liabilities formulated? Tackling these questions from the standpoint of a pragmatics of jurisprudence (which is what our amulet would consist of) can certainly contribute to an understanding of ‘behaviour’ as a compound of imputations, which is exactly what it is.

Should the researcher, then, behave as a lawyer when facing the behavioural shibboleth? Take at least enough time to examine all relevant clauses? Impose a moratorium? What kind of lawyer, though? An anthropologist in a corporate lawyer suit? Marshall Sahlins might agree: in the latest instalment of his take on the subject, Sahlins sees in ‘the triumph of capitalism’ the crux of our behavioural folklore:

This libertarian political economy is believable because it is an average common experience of the participants in a full-blown capitalist society in which all happiness indeed depends on getting and spending, as virtually everything is for sale including of necessity one’s own commodifiable attributes. The conditions of people’s existence then depend on husbanding their monetary resources, always scarce relative to the possible benefits on offer, in order to acquire the good things in life – to maximise one’s satisfactions, as economists say. And since, as they also say, there’s no going behind people’s tastes, and moreover what people desire is apparently a matter of personal choice, it seems to all concerned that the entire social and cultural order is laid down by economic behaviour (Sahlins 2015: 10).

Notes

1 An earlier version of this piece was prepared for ‘Inventing the Social’, a symposium celebrating the tenth anniversary of CSISP at Goldsmiths, 29–30 May 2014. I thank the organisers and participants, and the CSISP (now CISP) at large, for the discussion. I am thankful in particular to Daniel Neyland for his splendid commentary, and to Noortje Marres for her continuing critique. The argument borrows heavily from an earlier exchange with Catherine Grandclément and Emilio Luque: I thank them for the concern and for half of the ideas. Acknowledgement is also due to the support of the European Research Council (ERC Starting Grant 263529).
Google Images, the image content search service provided by Google Inc., behaves in this regard with more clarity when one augments the usual wording (e.g. ‘society’, ‘social’, ‘behaviour’, ‘conduct’) with the keyword ‘network’.

The notion of ‘bounded rationality’ works as a magic caveat that immediately dissipates the objections that a too narrow view of rational interest might raise. The notion of ‘altruism’ too, conveniently translates into utilitarian nature (i.e. solidarity is good for others and therefore also good for oneself, since oneself is other for others).

One particularly telling example of the behavioural shibboleth’s power to defeat an intellectual mind can perhaps be found in the late Alain Resnais, who, after the unsettling profoundness of Providence, just bought into Henri Laborit and came up with Mon Oncle d’Amérique, a comforting interpretation of the life of characters in terms of their shallow struggle for reward (see Lemerle 2009).

It should be noted that this critique cannot claim to be an STS-informed critique, as STS (the amalgam of approaches that gathers under the rubric of ‘science and technology studies’) can very well and very easily display the traits that are emphasised here.

Is the behavioural movement in the social sciences just bad because of its entanglements with the Cold War (game theory, cybernetics, operations research and other instances of ‘the mechanisation of the mind’)? Or are these entanglements (which are interesting in and by themselves) of little help in preparing a critical reaction to its scientific claims? For a discussion, see Amadae (2003), Davies (2014), Dupuy (2000), Erickson et al. (2013), Hayles (1999), Mirowski (2002) and Turner (2006). Adam Curtis, in his 2011 BBC television documentary series All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace, provides both a vivid illustration of the span of this movement and a daunting examination of its political implications.

I am referring to the portions of STS that engage in an empirical examination of the conditions and productions of scientific activity. For a notable entry-point for the case of the social sciences, see Steinmetz (2005).

For indications on the EDF complex, for example, see Cihuelo, Jobert, and Grandclément (2015).

For an introduction to Legendre in English, see Goodrich (1997).

Among the best antidotes available are Will Davies’ examination of the neoliberal critique of law (2014), immediately followed by his critique of behavioural policy (2015).

‘Nudge Unit’ is the nickname of the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), a service originally set up as a team within the Cabinet Office of the government of the United Kingdom with the purpose of applying behavioural analysis to public policy. The word ‘nudge’ refers here to the central notion of the same-name bestseller (Thaler and Sustein 2008). On the rise of a nudge-inspired behavioural analysis of law, see Alemanno and Sibony (2015).

Engagement with data and design in the field of appropriation art provides, in some particularly remarkable instances, palpable demonstrations of the potentials of juristic
experimentation for the circumvention of the behavioural shibboleth. A particularly relevant example would be *No Ghost Just a Shell*, a project by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno that can be read as a study of juristic artifice in the determination and critique of the behavioural medium (see McDonough 2004; Barikin 2012).

REFERENCES


