

Modernity and Ambivalence

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There are friends and enemies. And there are *strangers*.

Friends and enemies stand in an opposition to each other. The first are what the second are not, and vice versa. Which does not, however, testify to their equal status. Like most other oppositions which order simultaneously the world in which we live and our life in the world, this one is a variation of the master-opposition between the inside and the outside. The outside is negativity to the inside's positivity. The outside is what the inside is not. The enemies are the negativity to the friends' positivity. The enemies are what the friends are not. The enemies are flawed friends; they are the wilderness which violates friends' homeliness, the absence which is a denial of friends' presence. The repugnant and frightening 'out there' of the enemies is, as Derrida would say, a supplement: both the addition to, and displacement of the cosy and comforting 'in here' of the friends. Only by crystallizing and solidifying what they are not, or what they do not wish to be, or what they would not say they are into the counter-image of the enemies, may the friends assert what they are, what they want to be and what they want to be thought as being.

Apparently, there is a symmetry: there would be no enemies were there no friends, and there would be no friends unless for the yawning abyss of enmity outside. Symmetry, however, is an illusion. It is the friends who define the enemies. It is the friends who control the classification and the assignment. The opposition is an achievement and self-assertion of the friends. It is the product and the condition of friends' narrative domination, of the friends narrative as the domination.

The rift between friends and enemies makes *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* into mirror reflections of each other. More importantly, it guarantees their co-ordination. Subjected to the same principle of structuration, knowledge and action chime in unison,

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so that knowledge may inform the action and the action may confirm the truth of knowledge.

The friends/enemies opposition sets apart truth from falsity, good from evil, beauty from ugliness. It also sets apart proper and improper, right and wrong, tasteful and unbecoming. It makes the world readable and thereby instructive. It dispels doubt. It enables one to go on. It assures that one goes where one should. It makes the choice look like nature-made necessity — so that man-made necessity may be immune to the vagaries of choice.

Friends are reproduced by the pragmatics of co-operation, enemies by the pragmatics of struggle. Friends are called into being by responsibility and moral duty. The friends are those for whose well-being I am responsible before they reciprocate and regardless of their reciprocation; only on this condition the co-operation, ostensibly a contractual, two-directional bond, can come into effect. Responsibility must be a gift if it is ever to become an exchange. Enemies, on the other hand, are called into being by renunciation of responsibility and moral duty. The enemies are those who refuse responsibility for my well-being before I relinquish my responsibility for theirs, and regardless of my renunciation; only on this condition the struggle, ostensibly a two-sided enmity and reciprocated hostile action, may come into effect. Though anticipation of friendliness is not necessary for the construction of friends, anticipation of enmity is indispensable in the construction of enemies. Thus the opposition between friends and enemies is one between doing and suffering, between being a subject and being an object of action. It is an opposition between reaching out and recoiling, between initiative and vigilance, ruling and being ruled, acting and responding.

With all the opposition between them, or — rather — *because* of that opposition, both sides of the opposition stand for relationships. Following Simmel, we may say that friendship and enmity, and only they, are forms of sociation; indeed, the archetypal forms of all sociation, the two-pronged matrix of sociation. Between themselves, let us add, they make the frame within which sociation is possible, they make for the possibility of 'being with others'. Being a friend, and being an enemy, are the two forms in which the other may be recognized as another subject, construed as a 'subject like the self', admitted into the self's life-world, be counted, become and stay relevant. If not for the opposition between friend and enemy, none of this would be possible. Without the possibility of breaking the bond of responsibility, no responsibility would impress itself as a

duty. If not for the enemies, there would be no friends. Without the possibility of difference, says Derrida (1974:143), 'the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing space. That means by the same token that the desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. Difference produces what it forbids, making possible the very thing that it makes impossible.'

Against this cosy antagonism, this conflict-torn collusion of friends and enemies, the stranger rebels. The threat he carries is more awesome than that which one can fear from the enemy. The stranger threatens the sociation itself — the very possibility of sociation. He calls the bluff of the opposition between friends and enemies as the complete *mappa mundi*, as the difference which consumes all differences and hence leaves nothing outside itself. As that opposition is the foundation on which all social life and all differences which patch and hold it together rest, the stranger saps social life itself. And all this because the stranger is neither friend nor enemy; and because he may be both. And because we do not know, and have no way of knowing, which is the case.

The stranger is one (perhaps the main one, the archetypal one) member of the family of undecidables — those baffling yet ubiquitous unities that, in Derrida's (1981a: 71) words again, 'can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, without ever constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics'. Here are a few examples of 'undecidables' discussed by Derrida:

The *pharmakon*: the Greek generic term which includes both remedies and poisons, used in Plato's *Phaedrus* as a simile for writing, and for this reason indirectly responsible — through the translations which aimed at eschewing its inherent ambiguity — for the direction taken by the post-Platonian Western metaphysics. *Pharmakon*, as it were, is 'the regular, ordered polysemy that has, through skewing, indetermination, or overdetermination, but without mistranslation, permitted the rendering of the same word by "remedy", "recipe", "poison", "drug", "filter" etc.' (Derrida, 1981a: 99). Because of this capacity, *pharmakon* is, first and foremost, powerful because ambivalent and ambivalent because powerful: 'It partakes of both good and ill, of the agreeable and disagreeable (Derrida, 1981b: 99). *Pharmakon*, after all, 'is neither remedy nor poison, neither good or evil, neither the inside nor the outside'.

The *hymen*: a Greek word again, standing for both membrane

and marriage, which for this reason signifies at the same time the virginally uncompromising difference between the 'inside' and the 'outside', and its violation by the fusion of self and other. In the result, *hymen* is 'neither confusion nor distinction, neither identity nor difference, neither consummation nor virginity, neither the veil nor the unveiling, neither the inside nor the outside, etc.'

The *supplement*: in French, this word stands for both an addition, and a replacement. It is, therefore, the other that 'joins in', the outside that enters the inside, the difference that turns into identity. In the result, the *supplement* 'is neither a plus nor a minus, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside, neither accident nor essence, etc.' (Derrida, 1981b: 42-3).

Undecidables are all *neither/nor*, that is, simultaneously, *either/or*. Their underdetermination is their potency: because they are nothing, they may be all. They put paid to the ordering power of the opposition. Oppositions enable knowledge and action; undecidables paralyze. They brutally expose the fragility of a most secure of separations. They bring the outside into the inside, and poison the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos.

This is exactly what the strangers do.

The Horror of Indetermination

Cognitive (classificatory) clarity is a reflection, an intellectual equivalent of behavioural certainty. They arrive and depart together. How closely they are tied, we learn in a flash when landing in a foreign country, listening to a foreign language, gazing at foreign conduct. The hermeneutic problems which we then confront offer a first glimpse of the awesome behavioural paralysis which follows the failure of classificatory ability. To understand, as Wittgenstein suggested, is to know how to go on. This is why hermeneutical problems (which arise when the meaning is not unreflectively evident) are experienced as annoying. Unresolved hermeneutical problems mean uncertainty as to how the situation ought to be read and what response is likely to bring the desired results. At best, uncertainty is felt as discomfiting. At worst, it carries a sense of danger.

Much of the social organization can be interpreted as sedimentation of a systematic effort to reduce the frequency with which hermeneutical problems are encountered and to mitigate the vexation such problems cause once faced. Probably the most common is the method of territorial and functional separation. Were this method

applied in full and with maximum effect, hermeneutical problems would diminish as the physical distance shrinks and the scope and frequency of interaction grow. The chance of misunderstanding would not materialize, or would cause but a marginal disturbance when it occurs, if the principle of separation, the consistent 'restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest' (Barth, 1969: 15), were meticulously observed.

The method of territorial and functional separation is deployed both outwardly and inwardly. Persons who need to cross into a territory where they are bound to cause and to encounter hermeneutic problems actively seek enclaves marked for the use of visitors and the services of functional mediators. The tourist countries, which expect a constant influx of large quantities of 'culturally undertrained' visitors, set aside such enclaves and train such mediators in anticipation.

Territorial and functional separation is both a reflection of existing hermeneutical problems and a most powerful factor in their perpetuation and reproduction. With segregation continuous and closely guarded, there is little chance that the probability of misunderstanding (or at least the anticipation of such misunderstanding) will ever diminish. Persistence and constant possibility of hermeneutic problems can be seen therefore as simultaneously the motive and the product of boundary-drawing efforts. As such, they have an in-built tendency to self-perpetuation. As boundary-drawing is never foolproof and some boundary-crossing is difficult to avoid — hermeneutic problems are likely to persist as a permanent 'grey area' surrounding the familiar world of daily life. That grey area is inhabited by unfamiliars; the not-yet classified, or rather classified by criteria similar to ours, but as yet unknown to us.

The 'unfamiliars' come in a number of kinds, of unequal consequence. One pole of the range is occupied by those who reside in *practically* remote (that is, rarely visited) lands, and are thereby limited in their role to setting the limits of familiar territory (the *ubi leones*, written down as danger warnings on the outer boundaries of the Roman maps). Exchange with such unfamiliars is set aside from the daily routine and normal web of interaction as a function of special category of people (say, commercial travellers, diplomats or ethnographers), or a special occasion for the rest. Both (territorial and functional) means of institutional separation easily protect — indeed, reinforce — the unfamiliarity of the unfamiliars, together

with their daily irrelevance. They also guard, though obliquely, the secure homeliness of own territory. Contrary to widespread opinion, the advent of television, this huge and easily accessible peephole through which the unfamiliar ways may be routinely glimpsed, has neither eliminated the institutional separation nor diminished its effectivity. McLuhan's 'global village' has failed to materialize. The frame of a cinema or TV screen staves off the danger of spillage more effectively still than tourist hotels and fenced off camping sites; the one-sidedness of communication further entrenches the unfamiliar on the screen as, essentially, *incomunicado*. The most recent invention of 'thematic' shopping malls, with Caribbean villages, Indian reserves and Polynesian shrines closely packed together under one roof, has brought the old technique of institutional separation to the level of perfection reached in the past only by the zoo.

The phenomenon of strangeness cannot be, however, reduced to the generation of — however vexing — hermeneutic problems. Insolency of the learned classification is upsetting enough, yet perceived as something less than a disaster as long as it can be referred to a missing knowledge: if only I learned that language; if only I studied those strange customs. . . . By themselves, hermeneutic problems do not undermine the trust in knowledge and attainability of behavioural certainty. If anything, they reinforce both. The way in which they define the remedy as learning another method of classification, another set of oppositions and meanings of another set of symptoms, only corroborates the faith in essential orderliness of the world and particularly in the ordering capacity of knowledge. A dose of puzzlement is pleasurable, as it resolves in the comfort of reassurance. This, as any tourist knows, is a major part of the attraction held by foreign trips, the more exotic the better. The difference is something one can live with. The different is not really different. 'There' is like 'here' — just another orderly world inhabited by either friends or enemies with no hybrids to distort the picture and perplex the action.

The strangers are not, however, the 'as-yet-undecided'; they are, in principle, undecidables. They are that 'third element' which should not be. The true hybrids, the monsters: not just unclassified, but unclassifiable. They therefore do not question this one opposition here and now: they question oppositions as such, the very principle of the opposition, the plausibility of dichotomy it suggests. They unmask the brittle artificiality of division — they destroy the

world. They stretch the temporary inconvenience of 'not knowing how to go on' into a terminal paralysis. They must be tabooed, disarmed, suppressed, exiled physically or mentally — or the world may perish.

Territorial and functional separation cease to suffice once the mere unfamiliar turns to be the stranger, aptly described by Simmel (1971: 143) as 'the man who comes today and stays tomorrow'. The stranger is, indeed, someone who refuses to stay in the 'far away' land or go away and hence a priori defies the easy expedient of spatial or temporal segregation. The stranger comes into the life-world and settles here, and so — unlike in the case of mere 'unfamiliar', it becomes relevant whether he is a friend or a foe. He made his way into the life-world uninvited, thereby casting me on the receiving side of his initiative, making me into the object of action of which he is the subject — all this being a notorious mark of the enemy. Yet, unlike other, 'straightforward' enemies, he is not kept at a secure distance, not on the other side of the battle line. Worse still, he claims a right to be an object of responsibility — the well known attribute of the friend. If we press upon him the friend/enemy opposition, he'd come out simultaneously under and over-determined. And thus, by proxy, he'd expose the failing of the opposition itself. He is a constant threat to the world order.

Not for this reason only, though. There are more. For instance, the unforgettable and hence unforgivable original sin of the late entry: the fact that he had entered the realm of the life-world at a point of time which can be exactly determined. He did not belong 'initially', 'originally', 'from the very start', 'since time immemorial'. The memory of the event of his coming makes of his very presence an event in history, rather than a fact of nature. His passage from the first to the second would infringe on an important boundary in the map of existence and is all the more impossible for being resolutely resisted; such a passage would amount, after all, to the admission that nature is itself an event in history and that, therefore, the appeals to natural order or natural rights deserve no preferential treatment. Being an event in history, having a beginning, the presence of the stranger always carries the potential of an end. The stranger has a freedom to go. He may be also forced to go — or at least forcing him to go may be contemplated without violating the order of things. However protracted, the stay of the stranger is temporary — another infringement on the division which ought to be kept intact and preserved in the name of secure, orderly existence.

Even here, however, the treacherous incongruity of the stranger does not end. The stranger undermines the spatial ordering of the world: the fought-after co-ordination between moral and topographical closeness, the staying-together of friends and the remoteness of enemies. The stranger disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance — he is physically near while remaining spiritually remote. He brings into the inner circle of proximity the kind of difference and otherness that are anticipated and tolerated only at a distance — where they can be either dismissed as irrelevant or repelled as inimical. The stranger represents an incongruous and hence resented ‘synthesis of nearness and remoteness’ (Simmel, 1971: (45)). His presence is a challenge to the reliability of orthodox orientation points and the universal tools of order-making. His proximity (as all proximity, according to Levinas [1982: 95–101]) suggests a moral relationship, while his remoteness (as all remoteness, according to Erasmus, [1974: 74, 87]) permits solely a contractual one: another important opposition compromised.

As always, the practical incongruity follows the conceptual one. The stranger who refuses to go gradually transforms his temporary abode into a home territory — all the more so as his other, ‘original’ home recedes in the past and perhaps vanishes altogether. On the other hand, however, he retains (if only in theory) his freedom to go and so is able to view local conditions with an equanimity the native residents can hardly afford. Hence another incongruous synthesis — this time between involvement and indifference, partisanship and neutrality, detachment and participation. The commitment the stranger declares cannot be trusted, as it comes complete with a safety valve of easy escape which most natives often envy yet seldom possess.

The stranger’s unredeemable sin is, therefore, the incompatibility between his presence and other presences, fundamental to the world order; his simultaneous assault on several crucial oppositions instrumental in the incessant effort of ordering. It is this sin which rebounds in the constitution of the stranger as the bearer and embodiment of incongruity; indeed, the stranger is a person afflicted with incurable sickness of multiple incongruity. He may well serve as the archetypal example of Sartre’s *le visquex* or Mary Douglas’s the slimy — an entity sitting astride an embattled barricade (or, rather, a substance spilled over the top of it and making it slippery both ways), blurring a boundary line vital to the con-

struction of a particular social order or a particular life-world. No binary classification deployed in the construction of order can fully overlap with essentially non-discrete, continuous experience of reality. The opposition, born of the horror of ambiguity, becomes the main source of ambivalence. The enforcement of any classification means inevitably production of anomalies (this is, phenomena which are perceived as 'anomalous' only as far as they span the categories whose staying apart is the meaning of the order). Thus 'any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces, except at risk of forfeiting confidence' (Douglas, 1966: 39). There is hardly an anomaly more anomalous than the stranger. He stands between friend and enemy, order and chaos, the inside and the outside. He stands for the treacherousness of friends, for the cunning of enemies, for fallibility of order, penetrability of the inside.

Fighting Indeterminacy

Of the pre-modern, small-scale communities which for most of its members were the universe in which the whole of the life-world was inscribed, it is often said that they had been marked by dense sociability. This shared verdict is however variously interpreted. Most commonly, 'dense sociability' is misinterpreted as a Toennies-style intimacy, spiritual resonance and disinterested cooperation; in other words, as friendship with no, or with suppressed, enmity. Friendship, however, is not the only form of sociation; enmity performs the function as well. Indeed, friendship and enmity constitute together that framework inside which the sociation becomes possible and comes about. The 'dense sociability' of the past strikes us, in retrospect, as distinct from our own condition not because it contained more friendship than we tend to experience in our own world, but because its world was tightly and almost completely filled with friends and enemies — and friends and enemies only. Little room, and if any then a marginal room only, was left in the life-world for the poorly defined strangers. Thus the semantic and behavioural problems the friends/enemies opposition cannot but generate arose but seldom and were dealt with quickly and efficiently in the duality of ways the opposition legitimized. Community effectively defended its dense sociability by promptly reclassifying the few strangers coming occasionally into its orbit as either friends or enemies. Ostensibly a temporary station,

strangehood did not present a serious challenge to the neat and solid duality of the world.

All supra-individual groupings are first and foremost processes of collectivization of friends and enemies. The lines dividing friends from enemies are co-ordinated, so that many individuals share their friends and their enemies. More exactly, individuals sharing a common group or category of enemies treat each other as friends. For communities characterized by 'dense sociability', this was the whole story, or almost a whole story. And this could remain the whole story as long as reclassifying strangers into one of the two opposite categories of either friends or enemies was easy and within the community power.

The last condition is not, however, met in modern urban environment. The latter is marked by the divorce between physical density and dense sociability. Aliens appear inside the confines of the life-world and refuse to go away (though one can hope that they will in the end). This new situation does not stem necessarily from the increased restlessness and mobility. As a matter of fact, it is the mobility itself which arises from the state-enforced 'uniformization' of vast spaces — much too large for being assimilated and domesticated by old methods of mapping and ordering deployed by individuals. The new aliens are not visitors, those stains of obscurity on the transparent surface of daily reality, which one can bear with as long as one hopes that they will be washed off tomorrow (though one can still be tempted to do this right way). They do not wear swords; nor do they seem to hide daggers in their cloaks (though one cannot be sure). They are not like the enemies one knows of. Or at least that is what they pretend. However, they are not like the friends either.

One meets friends at the other side of one's responsibility. One meets enemies (if at all) at the point of the sword. There is no clear rule about meeting the strangers. Intercourse with the strangers is always an incongruity. It stands for the incompatibility of the rules the confused status of the stranger invokes. It is best not to meet strangers at all. Now, when one cannot really avoid the space they occupy or share, the next best solution is the meeting which is not quite meeting, a meeting pretending not be one, a (to borrow Buber's term) mismeeting (*Vergegnung*, as distinct from meeting, *Begegnung*). The art of mismeeting is first and foremost a set of techniques of de-ethicalizing the relationship with the other. Its overall effect is a denial of the stranger as a moral object and a moral

subject. Or, rather, exclusion of such situations as can accord the stranger moral significance. This, however, is a poor substitute for the ideal perhaps lost, but at any rate now unattainable: when the opposition between friends and enemies is not challenged at all, and thus the integrity of the life-world can be sustained with the simple semantic and behavioural dichotomies operated matter-of-factly by community members.

Like all the other self-perpetuating social groupings, both territorial and non-territorial, the national states collectivize friends and enemies. In addition to this universal function, however, they also eliminate the strangers; or at least they attempt to do so. Nationalist ideology — says John Breuilly (1982: 343) — ‘is neither an expression of national identity (at least, there is no rational way of showing that to be the case) nor the arbitrary invention of nationalists for political purposes. It arises out of the need to make sense of complex social and political arrangements.’ What has to be made sense of in the first place, and thus become ‘livable with’, is a situation in which the traditional, tested dichotomy of friends and enemies cannot be applied matter-of-factly and has been therefore compromised — as a poor guide to the art of living. *The national state is designed primarily to deal with the problem of strangers, not enemies.* It is precisely this feature that sets it apart from other supra-individual social arrangements.

Unlike tribes, the nation-state extends its rule over a territory before it claims the obedience of people. If the tribes can assure the needed collectivization of friends and enemies through the twin processes of attraction and repulsion, self-selection and self-segregation, territorial national states must enforce the friendship where it does not come about by itself. National states must artificially rectify the failures of nature (to create by design what nature failed to achieve by default). In the case of the national state, collectivization of friendship requires conscious effort and force. Among the latter, the mobilization of solidarity with an imagined community (the apt term proposed by Benedict Anderson [1983]), and the universalization of cognitive/behavioural patterns associated with friendship inside of the boundaries of the realm, occupy the pride of place. The national state re-defines friends as natives; it commands to extend the rights ascribed ‘to the friends only’ to all — the familiar as much as the unfamiliar — residents of the ruled territory. And vice versa, it grants the residential rights only if such an extension of friendship rights is desirable (though desirability is often disguised

as 'feasibility'). This is why nationalism seeks the state. This is why the state spawns nationalism. This is why for the duration of the modern era, now two centuries old, nationalism without the state has been as flawed and ultimately impotent as state without nationalism — to the point of one being inconceivable without the other.

It has been stressed repeatedly in all analyses of modern states that they 'attempted to reduce or eliminate all loyalties and divisions within the country which might stand in the way of national unity' (Schafer, 1955: 119). National states promote 'nativism' and construe their subjects as 'natives'. They laud and enforce the ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural homogeneity. They are engaged in incessant propaganda of shared attitudes. They construct joint historical memories and do their best to discredit or suppress such stubborn memories as cannot be squeezed into shared tradition. They preach the sense of common mission, common fate, common destiny. They breed, or at least legitimize and give tacit support to animosity towards everyone standing outside the holy union (Alter, 1989: 7ff.). In other words, national states promote uniformity. Nationalism is a religion of friendship; national state is the church which forces the prospective flock into submission. The state-enforced homogeneity is the practice of nationalist ideology.

In Boyd C. Shafer (1955: 121) witty comment, 'patriots had to be made. Nature was credited with much by the eighteenth century, but it could not be trusted to develop men unassisted.' Nationalism was a programme of social engineering, and the national state was to be its factory. National state was cast from the start in the role of a collective gardener, set about the task of cultivating sentiments and skills otherwise unlikely to grow. In his addresses of 1806 Fichte wrote

The new education must consist essentially in this, that it completely destroys freedom of will in the soil which it undertakes to cultivate, and produces, on the contrary, strict necessity in the decision of will, the opposite being impossible. . . . If you want to influence him at all, you must do more than merely talk to him; you must fashion him, and fashion him, and fashion him in such a way that he simply cannot will otherwise than you wish him to will. (quoted in Kedouri, 1960: 83)

And Rousseau advised the Polish king on the way to manufacture Poles (at a distance, the 'man as such' was better seen in his true quality of the national patriot):

It is education that must give souls a national formation, and direct their opinions and tastes in such a way that they will be patriotic by inclination, by passion, by necessity. When first he opens his eyes, an infant ought to see the fatherland, and up to the day of his death he ought never to see anything else. . . . At twenty, a Pole ought not to be a man of any other sort; he ought to be a Pole. . . . The law ought to regulate the content, the order and the form of their studies. They ought to have only Poles for teachers. (1953: 176–7)

Were the national state able to reach its objective, there would be no strangers left in the life-world of the residents-turned-natives-turned-patriots. There would be but natives, who are friends, and the foreigners, who are current or potential enemies. The point is, however, that no attempt to assimilate, transform, acculturate, or absorb the ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural and other heterogeneity and dissolve it in the homogeneous body of the nation has been thus far unconditionally successful. Melting pots were either myths or failed projects. The strangers refused to split neatly into ‘us’ and ‘them’, friends and foes. Stubbornly, they remained hauntingly indeterminate. Their number and nuisance power seem to grow with the intensity of dichotomizing efforts. As if the strangers were an ‘industrial waste’ growing in bulk with every increase in the production of friends and foes; a phenomenon brought into being by the very assimilatory pressure meant to destroy it. The point-blank assault on the strangers had to be from the start aided, reinforced and supplemented by a vast array of techniques meant to make a long-term, perhaps permanent, cohabitation with strangers possible. And it was.

Assimilation, or the War against Ambivalence

Literally, assimilation means making alike. Some time in the seventeenth century the reference field of the term had been stretched, to embrace its at present most familiar and common social uses. Since then, the concept began to be applied freely and widely. Like other terms born of the novel experience of rising modernity and naming heretofore unnamed practices, it sharpened contemporary eyes to previously unnoticed aspects of distant times and places. The processes the new term tried to capture were now, retrospectively, postulated, sought, found and documented in past societies whose consciousness contained neither the concept nor the visions it awoke. A conscious, historically framed action has been, so to speak, ‘dehistoricized’, and envisaged as a universal process, characteristic of all social life. It suddenly seemed that everywhere

and at all times differences between the ways human beings behave tend to disappear or at least blur; that whenever and wherever human beings of distinct habits lived close to each other, they would tend, with the passage of time, to become more like each other; some habits would gradually give way to others, so that more uniformity will result. This understanding stood in a stark contradiction to the quite recent and previously unquestioned, but now rapidly suppressed and forcibly forgotten, pre-modern practice which accepted the permanence of differentiation, considered 'sticking to one's kin' a virtue, penalized emulation and boundary-crossing — and on the whole viewed the differences with equanimity as a fact of life calling for no more remedial action than spring storms or winter snows.

If the metaphorical origin of the term 'culture' has been amply documented, the same is not true of the concept of assimilation. This is regrettable, as the beginnings of modern uses of 'assimilation' provide a unique key to the sociological hermeneutics of the term, i.e. to the disclosure of such strategies of social action as originally sought expression in the borrowed trope, only to hide later behind its new 'naturalized' interpretations; and of such aspects of those strategies as made the borrowed term 'fit' in the first place. We learn from the OED that the earliest recorded use of the term 'assimilation', which preceded the later metaphorical applications by a century, was biological. In the biological narrative of the sixteenth century (OED records 1578 as the date of the first documented use) the term 'assimilation' referred to the acts of absorption and incorporation performed by living organisms. Unambiguously, 'assimilation' stood for conversion, not a self-administered change; an action performed by living organism on its passive environment. It meant 'to convert into a substance of its own nature'; 'the conversion by an animal or plant of extraneous material into fluids and tissues identical with its own'. First inchoate metaphorical uses of the term date from 1626, but it was not before the middle of the eighteenth century that the meaning was generalized into an unspecific 'making alike'. The contemporary use, in which the onus is shifted towards the 'absorbed material' and away from the converting organism ('to be, or become like to . . .'), came last, and became common currency only about 1837.

It seems that what made the established term attractive to those who sought a name for new social practices was precisely the asymmetry it implied; the unambiguous uni-directionality of the

process. As a part of biological narrative 'assimilation' stood for the activity of the foraging organism, that subordinated parts of the environment to its own needs and did it by transforming them so that they become identical with its own 'fluids and tissues' (the organism as, simultaneously, *causa finalis*, *causa formalis* and *causa efficiens* of the process and its outcome). The imagery that the concept evoked was one of a living, active body, bestowing or impressing its own form and quality upon something different from itself, and doing it on its own initiative and for its own purpose; of a process, in the course of which the form and quality of the other entity went through a radical change, while the identity of 'assimilating' body was maintained and, indeed, kept constant in the only way it could. It was this imagery that made the biological concept eminently suitable for its new, social, semantic function.

The metaphorical function of the concept captured the novel drive to uniformity, expressed in the comprehensive cultural crusade on which the new, modern nation-state had embarked. The drive reflected and augured the coming intolerance to difference.

Modern state power meant disempowerment of communal self-management and local or corporative mechanisms of self-perpetuation; it meant, therefore, sapping the social foundations of communal and corporative traditions and forms of life. This, in turn, broke the unthinking automaticism and the 'matter-of-factness' with which the patterns of human behaviour used to be reproduced and maintained. Human conduct lost its appearance of naturalness; lost as well was the expectation that nature would take its course even if (or particularly if) unattended and left to its own devices. With the backbone of communal self-reproduction disintegrating or crushed, the modern state power was bound to engage in deliberate management of social processes on an unheard of scale. Indeed, it needed to generate by design what in the past could be relied upon to appear on its own. It did not 'take over' the function and the authority of local communities and corporations; it did not 'concentrate' the previously dispersed powers. It presided over the formation of an entirely new type of power, of unprecedented scope, depth of penetration, and ambition (see Bauman, 1987: Chapters 3 and 4).

The ambition was to create artificially what nature could not be expected to provide; or, rather, what it should not be allowed to provide. The modern state was a designing power, and designing meant to define the difference between order and chaos, to sift the

proper from the improper, to legitimize one pattern at the expense of all the others. The modern state propagated some patterns and set to eliminate all others. All in all, it promoted similarity and uniformity. The principle of a uniform law for everybody residing on a given territory, of the identity of the citizen status, proclaimed that members of society, as objects of attention and vigilance of the state, were indistinguishable from each other, or at least were to be treated as such. By the same token, whatever group-distinctive qualities they might have possessed were illegitimate. They also arose anxiety: they testified to the non-completion of the task of order-building.

In its essence, therefore, assimilation was a declaration of war on foreign substances and qualities. More importantly still, it was a bid on the part of one section of the society to exercise a monopolistic right to define certain other sections and their qualities as foreign, out of tune and out of place, and thereby in need of radical reform. It was one of the many paragraphs in the overall plan of replacement of the natural state of things by an artificially designed order; and hence it was a bid on the part of the designers to exercise a monopolistic right to sort out the 'fitting' from the 'unfitting', the 'worthy' from the 'unworthy' categories, and to spell out the conditions under which passage from the second to the first may take place.

Above all, the vision of assimilation was a roundabout confirmation of social hierarchy, of the extant division of power. It assumed the superiority of one form of life and inferiority of another; it made their inequality into an axiom, took it as a starting point of all argument, and hence made it secure against scrutiny and challenge. It effectively reinforced this inequality through ascribing the discrimination of the 'inferior' sectors of the power structure to their own flaws, imperfections and their very 'otherness'. The acceptance of the assimilation as a vision and as a framework for life strategy was tantamount to the recognition of the hierarchy, its legitimacy, and above all its immutability.

The vision and the programme of assimilation was also an important weapon in the effort of the modern state to further sap the coherence and the power of resistance of those competitive institutions of social control which potentially limited its ambition of absolute sovereignty. Inferiority of the 'foreign' was defined, upheld and enforced as a feature of the category as a whole; of a collectively maintained, communal way of life. The offer of

escaping the stigmatizing classification through acceptance of a non-stigmatized form of life was, on the other hand, extended to the individuals. Assimilation was an invitation, extended to individual members of the stigmatized groups, to challenge the right of those groups to set proper standards of behaviour. It was an offer extended over the heads of, and as a direct challenge to, communal and corporative powers. Assimilation was, therefore, an exercise in discrediting and disempowering the potentially competitive, communal or corporative, sources of social authority. It aimed at loosening the grip in which such competitive groups held their members. It aimed, in other words, at the elimination of such groups as forces of effective and viable competition.

Once this effect had been achieved — communal authorities robbed of their prestige and their legislative powers rendered ineffective — the threat of a serious challenge to the extant structure of domination was practically eliminated. The potential competitors were shorn of their power to resist and engage in a dialogue with even a remote chance of success. Collectively, they were powerless. It was left to the individual members to seek to wash off the collective stigma of foreignness by meeting the conditions set by the gate-keepers of the dominant group. The individuals were left at the mercy of the gate-keepers. They were objects of examination and assessment by the dominant group, who held complete control over the meaning of their conduct. Whatever they did, and whatever meaning they intended to invest in their actions, *a priori* reaffirmed the controlling capacity of the dominant group. Their clamouring for admission automatically reinforced the latter's claim to dominance. The standing invitation to apply for entry, and the positive response to it, confirmed the dominant group in its status of the holder, the guardian and the plenipotentiary of superior values, by the same token giving material substance to the concept of value superiority. The very fact of issuing the invitation established the dominant group in the position of the arbitrating power, a force entitled to set the exams and mark the performance. Individual members of the categories declared as sub-standard were now measured and valued by the extent of their conformity with dominant values. They were 'progressive' if they strove to imitate the dominant patterns and to erase all traces of the original ones. They were labelled 'backward' as long as they retained loyalty to the traditional patterns, or were not apt or fast enough in ridding themselves of their residual traces.

The standing invitation was represented as a sign of tolerance. In fact, however, the assimilatory offer derived its sense from the stiffness of discriminatory norms, from the finality of the verdict of inferiority passed or nonconformist values. The tolerance, understood as the encouragement of 'progressive attitudes' expressed in the search of individual 'self-improvement', was meaningful only as long as the measures of progress were not negotiable. Within the policy of assimilation, tolerance aimed at individuals was inextricably linked with intolerance aimed at the collectivities, their values and above all their value-legitimizing powers. Indeed, the first was a major instrument in the successful promotion of the second.

The effective disfranchisement of alternative value-generating and value-legitimizing authorities was represented as the universality of values supported by the extant hierarchy. In fact, however, the alleged universality of the authoritatively hailed and promoted values had no other material substratum but the expediently protected sovereignty of the value-adjudicating powers. The more effective was the suppression of possible sources of challenge, the less chance there was that the bluff of universality would be called, and that the pretence of the absolute validity of value-claims would be unmasked as a function of power monopoly. The degree to which the locally dominant values could credibly claim a supra-local validity was a function of their local supremacy.

Chasing Elusive Targets

From the standpoint of the grandiose yet unimplementable project of assimilation, some insufficiently emphasized, often overlooked facets of modern society and its uneasy, hate-love relationship with modern culture can be better seen.

Assimilation, as distinct from cross-cultural exchange or cultural diffusion in general, is a typically modern phenomenon. It derived its character and significance from the modern 'nationalization' of the state, i.e. from the bid of the modern state to linguistic, cultural and ideological unification of the population which inhabits the territory under its jurisdiction. Such a state tended to legitimize its authority through reference to shared history, common spirit, and a unique and exclusive way of life — rather than to extraneous factors (like, for instance, dynastic rights or military superiority), which, on the whole, are indifferent to the diversified forms of life of subjected population.

The gap between uniformity inherent in the idea of the nation and the practical heterogeneity of cultural forms inside the realm under unified state administration constituted therefore a challenge and a problem, to which national states responded with cultural crusades, aimed at the destruction of autonomous, communal mechanisms of reproduction of cultural unity. The era in which national states were formed was characterized by cultural intolerance; more generally, by nonendurance of, and impatience with all difference. Practices that departed from, or not fully conformed to, the power-assisted cultural pattern, were construed as alien and potentially subversive for, simultaneously, the national and political integrity.

The nationalization of the state (or, rather, etatization of the nation) blended the issue of political loyalty and trustworthiness (seen as conditions for granting citizenship rights) with that of cultural conformity. On one hand, the postulated national model served as the ideal objective of cultural crusade, but on the other it was deployed as the standard by which membership of the body politic was tested, and the exclusive practices were explained and legitimized which had been applied to those disqualified as having failed the test. In the result, citizenship and cultural conformity seemed to merge; the second was perceived as the condition, but also as a means to attain the first.

In this context, obliteration of cultural distinctiveness and acquisition of a different, power-assisted culture was construed and perceived as the prime vehicle of political emancipation. The consequence was the drive of politically ambitious, advanced sectors of 'alien' populations to seek excellence in practising the dominant cultural patterns and to disavow the cultural practices of their communities of origin. The prospect of full political citizenship was the main source of the seductive power of the acculturation programme.

The drive to acculturation put the ostensible identity of politics and culture to the test, and exposed the contradictions with which the fusion was inescapably burdened and which in the long run proved responsible for the ultimate failure of the assimilatory programme.

(a) Cultural assimilation was an intrinsically individual task and activity, while both political discrimination and political emancipation applied to the 'alien' (or otherwise excluded) community as a whole. As the acculturation was bound to proceed unevenly and

involve various sections of the community to a varying extent and at varying speed, the advanced sectors seemed to be held back by the relatively retarded ones. Cutting the ties with the community offered no way out from the impasse, as the collective maturity for acceptance, like the capacity of a bridge, would be measured by the quality of the weakest section. On the other hand, acting as a cultural broker or missionary on behalf of the dominant culture in order to accelerate the cultural transformation of native community as a whole only reinforced the commonality of fate between the acculturated and the 'culturally alien' sections of the community and further tightened the already stiff conditions of political acceptance.

(b) The evidently acquired character of cultural traits gained in the process of acculturation jarred with the inherited and ascribed nature of national membership hiding behind the formula of common culture. The fact that their cultural similarity had been achieved, made the acculturated aliens different from the rest, 'not really like us', suspect of duplicity and probably also ill intentions. In this sense, cultural assimilation in the framework of a national state was self-defeating. As it were, national community, though a cultural product, could sustain its modality as a nation only through emphatic denial of a 'merely cultural', i.e. artificial, foundation. Instead, it derived its identity from the myth of common origin and naturalness. The individual was or was not its member; one could not choose to be one.

(c) Though it effectively alienated its agents from their community of origin, assimilation did not lead therefore to a full and unconditional acceptance by the dominant nation. Much to their dismay, the assimilants found that they had in effect assimilated solely to the process of assimilation. Other assimilants were the only people around who shared their problems, anxieties and preoccupations. Having left behind their original community and lost their former social and spiritual affinities, the assimilants landed in another community, the 'community of assimilants' — no less estranged and marginalized than the one from which they escaped. Moreover, the new alienation displayed a marked tendency to self-exacerbation. The *Weltanschauung* of the assimilants was now forged out of the shared experience of their new community, and given shape by a discourse conducted mostly inside its framework. In the event, it showed a marked tendency to underline the 'universalistic' character of cultural values and militate against all and any

'parochiality'. This circumstance set their perceptions, their philosophy and their ideals apart from the 'native' ones and effectively prevented the gap from being bridged.

The modern project of cultural unity produces the conditions of its own unfulfilment. By the same token, it creates the unprecedented, exuberant dynamism which characterises modern culture.

Order and chaos are both modern ideas. They emerged together — out of the disruption and collapse of the divinely ordained world, which knew of neither necessity nor accident, the world which just was. This world which preceded the bifurcation into order and chaos we find difficult to describe in its own terms. We try to grasp it mostly with the help of negations: we tell ourselves what that world was not, what it did not contain, what it was unaware of. That world would hardly have recognized itself in our descriptions. It would not understand what we are talking about. It would not survive such understanding. The moment of understanding would be (and it was) the sign of its approaching death. And of the birth of modernity.

We can think of modernity as of a time when order — of the world, of human habitat, of human self, and of the connection between all three — is a matter of thought, of concern, of a practice aware of itself. For the sake of convenience (the exact dating of birth is bound to remain contentious: the insistence on dating is itself a phenomenon of modernity, alien to the process of its conception and gestation) we can agree with Stephen L. Collins, who in his recent study (1989: 4,6,7,28, 29, 32) took Hobbes's vision for the birth-mark of the consciousness of order, that is of modern consciousness, that is of modernity ('Consciousness', says Collins, 'appears as the quality of perceiving order in things'):

Hobbes understood that a world in flux was natural and that order must be created to restrain what was natural. . . . Society is no longer a transcendently articulated reflection of something predefined, external, and beyond itself which orders existence hierarchically. It is now a nominal entity ordered by the sovereign state which is its own articulated representative . . . [40 years after Elizabeth's death] order was coming to be understood not as natural, but as artificial, created by man. And manifestly political and social. . . . Order must be designed to restrain what appeared ubiquitous [that is, flux]. . . . Order became a matter of power, and power a matter of will, force and calculation. . . . Fundamental to the entire reconceptualization of the idea of society was the belief that the commonwealth, as was order, was a human creation.

Collins is a scrupulous historian wary of the dangers of projectionism and presentism, but he can hardly avoid imputing to the pre-Hobbsian world many a feature akin to the post-Hobbsian world of ours — if only through indicating their absence; indeed, without such strategy of description the pre-Hobbsian world would stay numb and meaningless for us. To make that world speak to us, we must lay bare its silences: to spell out what that world was unaware of. We must force that world to take stance on issues to which it remained oblivious: that oblivion was what made it that world, a world so different and so incommunicado with our own.

And thus if it is true that we know that the order of things is not natural, this does not mean that that other, pre-Hobbsian, world thought of the order as the work of nature: it did not think of order at all, not in the sense we think of it now. The discovery that order was not natural was discovery of order as such. The concept of order appears in consciousness only simultaneously with the problem of order, of order as a matter of design and action. Declaration of the 'non-naturalness of order' stood for an order already coming out of hiding, out of non-existence, out of silence: nature was, after all, the silence of man. If it is true that we think of order as a matter of design, this does not mean that that other world was complacent about designing and expected the order to come and stay on its own and unassisted. That other world lived without such alternative; it would not be the other world, were it giving its thought to it. If it is true that our world is shaped by the suspicion of brittleness and fragility of the artificial man-made islands of order among the sea of chaos, it does not follow that the other world believed that the order stretches over the sea and the human archipelago alike; it was, rather, unaware of the distinction between land and water.¹

We can say that the existence is modern inasmuch as it forks into order and chaos. The existence is modern inasfar as it contains the alternative of order and chaos.

Indeed: order and chaos. Order is not aimed against an alternative order; the struggle for order is not a fight of one definition against another, of one way of articulating reality against a competitive proposal. It is a fight of determination against ambiguity, of semantic precision against ambivalence, of transparency against obscurity, clarity against fuzziness. Order is continuously engaged in the war of survival. What is not itself, is not another order: any order is always the order as such, with chaos as its only alternative.

'The other' of order is the miasma of the indeterminate and unpredictable: uncertainty, the source and archetype of all fear. The tropes of 'the Other of Order' are: undefinability, incoherence, incongruence, incompatibility, illogicality. Chaos, 'the Other of Order', is pure negativity. It is a denial of all that the order strives to be. It is against that negativity that the positivity of Order constitutes itself. But the negativity of chaos is a product of order's self-constitution; its side-effect, its waste, and yet the condition *sine qua non* of its possibility. Without the negativity of chaos, there is no positivity of order; without chaos, no order.

We can say that the existence is modern inasmuch as it is saturated by the 'without us, a deluge' feeling. The existence is modern inasmuch as it is guided by the urge of designing what otherwise would not be there: designing of itself.

The raw existence, the existence free of intervention, the unordered existence, becomes now nature: something singularly unfit for human habitat — something not to be trusted and not to be left to its own devices, something to be mastered, subordinated, remade so as to be readjusted to human needs. Something to be held in check, restrained and contained, transferred from the state of shapelessness into form — by effort and by application of force. Even if the form has been preordained by nature itself, it won't come about unassisted and won't survive undefended. Living according to nature needs a lot of designing, organized effort, and vigilant monitoring. Nothing is more artificial than naturalness; nothing less natural than abiding by the laws of nature. Power, repression, purposeful action stand between nature and that socially effected order in which artificiality is natural.

We can say that existence is modern inasmuch as it is effected and sustained by social engineering. The existence is modern inasmuch as it is managed and administered by powerful, resourceful, sovereign agencies. Agencies are sovereign inasmuch as they claim and defend the right to manage and administer existence: the right to define order and, by implication set aside chaos, as the leftover that escapes the definition.

It was the intention to engage in social engineering which made the state modern. The typically modern practice of the state, the substance of modern politics, was the effort to exterminate ambivalence: to define precisely — and to suppress or eliminate everything that could not or would not be precisely defined. 'The Other' of the

modern state is the no-man's or contested land: the under or over-definition, ambiguity. As the sovereignty of the modern state is the power to define and to make the definitions stick, everything that self-defines or eludes the state-legislated definition is subversive. 'The Other' of sovereignty is obfuscation, opacity, and confusion. Resistance to definition sets the limit to sovereignty, to power, to the power of sovereign state, to order. That resistance is the stubborn and grim reminder of the flux which order wished to contain but in vain; of the limits to order; of the necessity of ordering. State ordering creates chaos. But the state needs chaos to go on creating order.

We can say that consciousness is modern inasmuch as it is suffused with the awareness of inconclusiveness of order; moved by the inadequacy, nay non-feasibility, of the social engineering project. Consciousness is modern inasmuch as it reveals ever new layers of chaos underneath the lid of power-assisted order. Modern consciousness criticizes, warns, and alerts. It spurs into action by unmasking its ineffectiveness. It perpetuates the ordering bustle by disqualifying its achievements and laying bare its defeats.

Thus there is a hate-love relation between modern existence and modern culture (in the most advanced form of self-awareness), a symbiosis fraught with civil wars. In the modern era, culture is that obstreperous and vigilant Her Majesty's Opposition which makes the government feasible. There is no love lost, harmony, nor similarity between the two: there is only mutual need and dependence, the complementarity which comes out of the opposition; which is opposition. It would be futile to decide whether modern culture undermines or serves modern existence. It does both things. It can do each one only together with the other. Opposition is its positivity. Dysfunctionality of modern culture is its functionality. The modern powers' struggle for artificial order needs culture that explores the limits and the limitations of the power of artifice. The struggle for order informs that exploration and is in turn informed by its findings. In the process, the struggle sheds its initial hubris: the pugnacity born of naivety and ignorance. It learns, instead, to live with its own permanence, inconclusiveness — and prospectlessness. Hopefully, it'll learn in the end the difficult skills of modesty and tolerance.

The history of modernity is one of the tensions between social existence and its culture. Modern existence forces its culture into opposition to itself. This disharmony is precisely the harmony

modernity needs. The history of modernity draws its uncanny and unprecedented dynamism from it. For the same reason, it can be seen as a history of progress: as the natural history of humanity.

Postscript

Three aspects of contemporary change usually subsumed under the concept of postmodernity, may — just may — put a time limit to the validity of preceding analysis.

1. A pronounced, though by no means conclusive tendency toward 'denationalization of the state'. 'privatization of nationality', or, more correctly, toward separation between the state and the nation (similar, in a way, to the last century separation between the state and the church). This process has been sometimes described as 'resurgence of ethnicity'. The latter term puts in the forefront the unanticipated flourishing of ethnic loyalties inside national minorities. By the same token, it casts a shadow on what seems to be the deep cause of the phenomenon: the growing separation between the membership of body politic and ethnic membership (or more generally, cultural conformity) which removes much of its original attraction from the programme of cultural assimilation. This separation, in turn, is more than incidentally related to the establishment of alternative, mostly non-cultural and non-ideological, foundations of the state's power. For all practical intents and purposes, the era of state-led cultural crusades grinds to a halt.

2. Culture itself, having lost its instrumental role in servicing the systemic reproduction and underwriting the social integration, has been freed from obtrusive and constraining interest of the state and tends to become a part of the private domain. Ethnicity has become one of the many categories of tokens, or 'tribal poles', around which flexible and sanction-free communities are formed and in reference to which individual identities are construed and asserted. There are now, therefore, much fewer centrifugal forces which once weakened ethnic integrity. There is, instead a powerful demand for pronounced, though symbolic rather than institutionalized, ethnic distinctiveness.

3. Under these conditions, ethnic differences may — just may — generate less antagonism and conflict than in the past. It is true that various aspects of heterophobia associated with the boundary-drawing preoccupations are still in operation; but the continuous re-drawing of boundaries typical of contemporary (post-modern)

culture and the easiness with which they are crossed in the absence of state-hired border-guards renders the antagonisms somewhat more shallow, short-lived and less venomous or radical. With the state declaring (and practising) its indifference to cultural and ethnic pluralism, tolerance stands a better chance than ever before.

Between themselves, these three tendencies may well render the drama of the anti-ambivalence war of assimilation a matter of mostly historical interest well before it has reached the conclusion for which it vainly strove.

Note

1. An example: 'The individual experienced neither isolation nor alienation' (Collins, 1989: 21). In fact, the individual of the pre-modern world did not experience the absence of the experience of isolation or alienation. He did not experience belonging, membership, at-home-being, togetherness. Belonging entails the awareness of being together or a part of; thus belonging, inevitably, contains the awareness of its own uncertainty, of the possibility of isolation, of the need to stave off or overcome alienation. Experiencing oneself as 'unisolated' or 'unalienated' is as much modern as the experience of isolation and alienation.

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