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A Civil World Beyond Individual and Community

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When I began thinking about my contribution to this symposium my focus was the civil society. How are we to theorize voluntary social movements in a way that ties them neither to individual rights nor communal obligations, and in what ways can such theory be important for societal practice? These were central issues for me. This was before the terrorist demolition of the Trade Towers in Manhattan and the loss of 5,000 common citizens. For many of us, that day also brought to a close consideration of "the society" as the preeminent unit of analysis. Just as the concept of culture has begun to whither under the force of globally circulating goods, institutions, and signifiers, so are we brought up short in presuming an array of independent societies, each with their particular forms of civil movement. Further, there are increasing manifestations of a civil world movement, as evidenced, for example, by the mercurial expansion of NGOs in the last 20 years - voluntary organizations working across national boundaries on problems of AIDs, hunger, the environment, human rights and much more.

It is also with this global shift in emphasis that we come face to face with one of the most difficult challenges of today - again, both theoretical and practical: if the civil society is a handmaiden to democracy, as many propose, then how are we to confront globally pervasive forces of totalitarian fundamentalism? As Dominique Colas has illuminated, the tension between civil society and religious fanaticism can be traced to at least the beginning of the 16th century. This tension must be confronted today if we are to make any significant advances toward a civil world.

My concerns in this paper begin with what I take to be common discontent with visions of civil society lodged in either individual or communal ontologies. This discontent is both conceptual and material. On the conceptual level the concept of the individual agent as the fundamental atom of society has long been open to question. Yet, so central is individual agency to both theorizing democracy and legitimating its institutions, that the burden of proof has remained on the critic. Within recent years, however, we have confronted a barrage of assaults on individual agency, from literary deconstruction theorists, ordinary language philosophers, feminist theorists, cultural critics among the most visible. Not only do such arguments demonstrate deep problems in the presumption of individuals as originary sources of reason, motivation and moral decision making, they demonstrate the impasse in epistemology and hermeneutics resulting from the dualist presumption of a mind within the body. In effect, the burden of proof has shifted to those who wish to defend individual agency as pivotal. Interlaced with these conceptual attacks are passionate critiques of the

ways in which the concept of individual agency plays out in societal practice. Critics variously point to the contribution of self-contained individualism to broad distrust within society, alienation, narcissism, competition, colonialism, exploitation, and the dissolution of community.

For many, this falling away from an individualist orientation to societal life, is coupled with a return to what might be viewed as an earlier Western tradition, namely the prizing of the community. It is from the community, it is variously held, that the individual derives concepts, values and moral responsibility- the very tools required for democratic participation. And without a stable community in place, the fora for public participation recede. Yet, the community is scarcely an unquestioned good, either conceptually or practically. Conceptually, theories that posit a community to which individuals may or may not contribute are obfuscating. Community and individual are terms with identical referents; remove all individuals and there is no community, remove the community and no individuals remain. Thus, interaction between community and individuals is conceptual mischief. As others propose, the community is a constructed term. There are no communities in fact, only the idea of community, and this idea may variously be used to index anything from a tryst to a lynching. In terms of societal practice, many point to the stultifying and oppressive effects of strong communities, the ways in which community standards obliterate difference, and promote intolerance. As a colleague from China recently related, you in the West want to replace your individualism with a communalism, at the same time that we in China are turning to Western individualism to remove the yoke of communalism from our shoulders.

In effect, our two esteemed traditions for understanding societal life and generating viable practices of living together approach impasse. As we enter a new millennium, can we enter new corridors of the imaginary, corridors that may yield more promising futures? In what follows I want to open discussion on at least one emerging alternative. Specifically I wish to open discussion on forms of understanding that may be viewed as relational in nature. After outlining the possibilities for a relational ontology, I shall return to the challenge of creating a civil world, a challenge that is as urgent as it is significant for us as scholars and citizens.

Articulating the Relational

Traditional theory of the civil society is built upon an ontology of bounded units or entities - specifically "the individual," "the community," "the state," and so on. Such a theory not only creates a world of fundamental separation, but invites the use of traditional cause and effect models to comprehend relations. One is either an actor, directing the course of events, or is reduced to an effect. How can we comprehend the social world in such a way that it is not composed of entities, but constituted by processes of relationship? This is no easy task for we at once confront the implications of Wittgenstein's pronouncement that "The limits of our language are the limits of our world." Our common language of description and explanation virtually commits us to understanding the world in terms of units (nouns) that act

upon each other (transitive verbs). Even the concept of relationship, as commonly understood, is based on the assumption of independent units. If and when such units act upon each other we speak of them being related. Thus, for example, we say, "A relationship developed between them," or "They no longer have a relationship." If we turn to relevant social theory, we find that perhaps the most significant candidate for relational understanding, namely systems analysis, is lodged in the view of systems as a collective array of entities linked through processes of cause and effect. Thus, systems diagrams, flow-charts, feedback loops and the like.

We might consider at this juncture vacating the house of language in the traditional sense, and locating an alternative means of representation. For example, if our medium of articulation were music or dance, what kind of ontologies might be possible? And if music or dance were our mode of representation, would the very concept of ontology possibly slip from view? Yet, rather than moving in directions that might require entirely new negotiations of meaning, let us remain within our common traditions of discourse. How, in this case, can we build toward understanding the social world as relational while simultaneously employing an instrument of entification?

We begin to gain some insight into this possibility through developments in semiotic and literary theory of recent decades. Drawing particularly from literary deconstruction theory, we may see language as a system in which each integer (or unit) gains its capacity to mean by virtue of its difference from at least one additional unit. The word "bat" comes into meaning by virtue of its difference from "bit," "but," "bad," and so on. In this sense, the terms of the language are *co-constituting*. Each integer serves to constitute the others, and vice versa. Or as Derrida might put it, none of the terms possesses meaning in itself; its meaning requires deferring to other terms, and so on in a web of relationship without end. However, a second relational concept also grows from the literary soil. Typically, as we speak or write we do not find meaning embedded within each isolated word. Rather, we draw sustenance from patterns of words - phrases or sentences. And these linguistic confluences generate meaning that cannot be reduced to individual word meaning. In effect, combinations of integers function in a process of *co-creation*; together they create an outcome that cannot be reduced to the individual units themselves.

Now, let us by analogue lift these concepts from the precious garden of text, and set them loose in the jungle of human relationship. Consider a conversation between what we typically conceptualize as two individuals. One speaks. Yet, if the other silently gazes into space, what has been said? The words are present, but meaning is absent. It is only when the other responds (and I am not eliminating the possibility of significant silence here), that the words become candidates for meaning. Following our preceding analysis, we may locate two relational moments within this response. First, the response contributes to a process of *co-constitution*. It will constitute the initial utterance as something (a candidate of communicative significance), while this something will simultaneously constitute the response as something else (an affirmation of candidacy). Thus, if one says, "Shall we eat?" and the other responds,

"What a good idea," the response constitutes the first utterance as a question, the fact of which simultaneously constitutes the second utterance as an answer. It is important to note here that to achieve co-constitution the response must essentially be different from the initial utterance. If the respondent simply parrots everything said by the speaker, the speaker's words are rendered meaningless (as every child knows who has reduced a parent to frustration through echoing.) The important point is that the interlocutors essentially co-constitute each other as agents of meaning through their differences.

The second relational moment derives from the process of co-creation. As the utterances of the participants are conjoined, they bring forth meaning not contained within either alone. If a speaker announces, "I am very angry with you," and his or her interlocutor replies, "Oh, I am very sorry about that," the response creates the announcement as an expression of anger. Likewise, what is now created as anger, simultaneously affirms the meaning of the response as an expression of sympathy. The words of each participant acquire their specific meanings by virtue of the juxtaposition. (In the same way, if the interlocutor replied to the apparent expression of anger with, "You know, I don't really think you are angry so much as you are afraid," the initial statement is potentially transformed from anger to fear.) Of course, these meaning couplets stand open to continuous supplementation as the conversation unfolds. Meaning in this sense is never fixed or locatable. There is never meaning in itself, only a continuous process of meaning under way.

Let us add several contours to this developing sketch. First we find that the concept of the individual person as an origin of meaning, reason, passion, or moral concern is illusory. Any action of the individual body - whether verbal, gestural, or otherwise - acquires its meaning only by virtue of another's response (direct, implied, or vicarious). A response is required to constitute the act as an act of some kind, and to give it the particular meaning it has. There is no "rational argument," for example, until it is granted the right and privilege to be rational by another. Rationality, on this account, is the achievement of social coordination, and by the same token, passion, moral concern, and all other so-called residents of the individual mind.

At the same time, we must be careful not to isolate the dyad in this case, singling out person/other as the originary unit from which all meaning grows. Drawing from Bakhtin in this instance, we may view all those utterances or actions that serve as candidates for meaning in a given relationship as drawn from previous relationships. Such utterances as "Shall we eat?" or "I am very angry with you," do not emerge de novo in the course of conversation. They are born of preceding relationships, as are the responses they invite or invoke. This does not commit the relationship to simply replicate tradition. Novel juxtapositions of utterances and actions can always bring forth new possibilities for meaning. The primary point here is that meaning in any local instance requires extended participation, or more simply, cultural traditions. Our capacity to generate meaning here and now rides the backs of untold numbers; we bear their traces in all that we say and do. Ultimately it will be useful to expand the relational process from which local meaning issues to what we otherwise call the

worlds of nature and technology. A sophisticated account of relational process must ultimately be both environmentalist and cyborgian. But these issues must await another occasion.

Finally, we may conclude from the present account that all individual units, from atoms to individuals, communities or nations, are constructed. That is, the very idea of an individual unit or entity derives from processes of relationship. To be sure, the discourse of units ("things") may be highly useful under many circumstances, but they are also optional. And, as I have argued earlier, there are good reasons at this juncture in history for locating alternatives. In the case of the present theorizing, I have made use of entifying language. I have spoken extensively of "this utterance," "that reply," and so on. However, as the analysis also suggests, these terms only appear momentarily as isolated units or entities. They do not come into meaning until there is co-constitution and co-creation. And that process does not terminate at the conclusion of this presentation.

Relationalism and the Civil World

With this sketch in place, let us return to the challenge of the civil world. As I am suggesting, we may suspend for the time the idea that civil movements are the outgrowth of free individuals who chose to associate with others for purposes of realizing a common good. Nor, is it essential that we posit the existence of communities of the good, to which participants are (or should be) obligated. Rather, there is much to be gained by commencing our analysis with a focus on relational processes from which ontologies and ethics emerge, and from which certain actions become favored while others are forbidden. Such processes of creating and carrying out meaning/full worlds are at all times and everywhere under way. In this sense, civil movements are always in the making. As any two or more persons negotiate about the nature of their lives, what is worth doing or not, they are establishing rudimentary grounds for civil life in their terms. The activities we might select as exemplary of civil society - for instance, environmentalist protest, feminist activism, or neighborhood organizations - are simply more elaborated, codified, and organized outcomes of ongoing, informal and largely discursive interchange. Global civility, fostered for example by the NGOs, is an outcome of the same forms of relational process, but relying now on technologies of long-distance communication.

The present argument enables us to bracket many of the seemingly artificial distinctions between what is and what is not a civil movement, a community, the state, the economy and so on. All such distinctions are essentially optional. Rather, our attention moves to processes of generating meaning. Here it is vital to distinguish between two moments in this process, the generative and degenerative. On the one hand, consider the positive coordinations among people, those moments in which their discourse and action move into synchrony and a recognizable "form of life" comes into being. This generative process may characterize the development of attachment bonds between mother and infant, as well as a conversation among neighbors that yields a neighborhood security system The formation of all civil

movements require just such generative coordination. Contrast this movement into organized action with instances in which the interlocutors' actions function as mutual inhibitors, in which the actions of one rob the other of significance or destroy his or her capacities to mean. The hostile argument (e.g. "That is pure rubbish.") serves as a good example here, but so does imprisonment and war. All function to destroy the conjoint process of making meaning,.

While this distinction between generative and degenerative moments in relationship seems clear enough, the case becomes more complex when we consider that every movement in the generative direction creates the grounds for degeneration. To explore, consider that when two or more people come into a state of positive coordination, they will generate together a locally agreeable ontology, ethic, and rationale for acceptable as opposed to unacceptable action. At the same time, such agreements will also create an exterior, a range of contrasts (that which does not exist, is not true, not good), or essentially a domain of the "not we." This will be so by virtue of the principle of co-constitution described earlier: all "being" requires the creation of a "not being." Thus, for example, if we were to continue our negotiations here for as many months as required to reach a set of agreements on the nature of civil society, we should simultaneously create the imaginary of "the opposition." Further, because of the highly agreeable views of civil society we would come to share, we would also create the opposition as less than agreeable. They would be positioned as "less than knowledgeable," "not so insightful," or just plain "wrong." The degenerative moment is at hand. And as we came to write our celebratory books, and to create our own journal and society, so would connection with the exterior cease to compel. Nor would we wish their alien views to appear in our midst. And if new positions developed in our academic departments, we might deny candidacy to "that kind of scholar." Effectively we move toward the annihilation of alterior meanings. To put it more bluntly, for every civil movement, there is potentially an uncivil outcome.

It is at this point that the present proposals touch significantly on two major thrusts in the literature on civil society. On the one hand there are the arguments ranging from de Tocqueville in the 1800s to the more recent writings of Fukuyama and Putnam, to the effect that civil movements are vital to the democratic process. Similarly, the present analysis suggests that during the generative phase of development, civil movements may indeed function in just this way. This has certainly been the case in the US with the emergence of identity politics - myriad groups of the otherwise marginalized whose voices now vitally enrich democratic dialogue. Yet, this optimistic vision suppresses the degenerative moment in meaning development. Identity politics in the US is also responsible for what we locally call "the culture wars." And it is in this same vein that in Algeria, where a popular movement of Muslim fundamentalists succeeded in gaining the democratic majority, democracy was suspended. In this latter respect, my arguments resonate with Foucault's concern with the potentials for subtle domination inherent in any organized vision of the real and the good. Yet, Foucault's analysis is ultimately suspicious of all civil movements, as all are potentially hegemonic in their thrust. In terms of our present analysis,

however, such suspicion fails to take account of the generative processes inherent in such movements.

In this context, let us turn to the challenge of religious fundamentalism, or what outsiders often characterize as religious fanaticism. In many respects fundamentalist movements may be considered manifestations of civil society par excellence. They are frequently counter-posed to existing governments and economic institutions, and they are inspired by grass roots inclinations to protect and sustain that which is most valuable in life. In this sense, they bear a distinct resemblance, for example, to environmentalist, pro-life, and gay liberation movements. (One might be tempted to say that the latter movements differ from fundamentalism in their ultimate investment in the democratic process. However, I suspect there are few environmentalists, pro-life or gay liberation enthusiasts who would give their lives to protect the voice of their opposition.) The major difference between the fundamentalist and the kinds of grass-roots movements that many of us endorse may simply be in terms of the extremes to which they have been pressed in protecting their vision.

Toward Second Order Civility

At this point we confront the possibility that all movements toward a civil world harbor within them what John Keane would call uncivil potentials. Required is yet another phase of inquiry, now into second order civility, that is, into theoretical and practical means of restoring the civil process undermined or destroyed by first order civil movements. To confront this challenge I am again drawn to the potentials of the relational stance developed earlier. First order civility is essentially achieved by those processes of meaning making that bring into being the various movements identified with civil society. However, such first order processes do not seem adequate to the challenge of confronting the second order problem of conflicting traditions of meaning. The discourses of the real and the good that sustain any particular tradition, seem ill suited to the task of hammering out a rationale for mutual viability. It is difficult to reflect critically and disruptively on one's own reality posits outside the vocabulary of those posits themselves. Alternatives forms of discourse are required, second order intelligibilities that enable us to soften the edges of otherwise embittered and embattled traditions. On the level of global civility, such discourses seem particularly required as 20th century technology brings the varying cultures of the globe into increasingly jarring proximity.

At this juncture that the present analysis conjoins with scholarly debate on discourse ethics; are there means of securing an ethics governing interchange among otherwise hostile parties? As Habermas has proposed, we might usefully articulate and justify *ideal speech conditions*, conditions that would enable otherwise conflicting parties to achieve consensus. However, the debate stimulated by Habermas' important proposal has not left us sanguine about the outcome. As scholars variously argue, in a world of multiple realities and values consensus is not an ideal goal of dialogue; a vital democracy depends on sustaining differences. Further, these ideal conditions may continue to favor those possessing the most commanding rhetoric - typically the

result of training at our elite institutions. Further, any appeal to logical or moral foundations of dialogue will inevitably be tied to the ideology of the founding culture. And too, any foundational arguments will themselves demand legitimation, thus thrusting us into an infinite regress of legitimation.

More recently, Anthony Giddens has entered this same territory. As he proposes the division between the power blocks of political left and right are no longer adequate for political deliberation. He proposes instead a concept of dialogic democracy, where relationships are "ordered through dialogue rather than through embedded power." He aspires through such dialogue to develop "personal relationships in which active trust is mobilized and sustained through discussion and the interchange of views, rather than by arbitrary power of one sort or another." Dialogic democracy is unlike liberal democracy, in which participants are committed to achieve self interested gains, or represent their own rights. Rather, we assume a complex array of opinions and values, and the unlikely outcome of "the one right answer." Giddens is also careful to avoid any "transcendental philosophic theorem" upon which such procedures would be based. There is much to be said for Giddens' vision, but there are reasons to press further. Giddens proposes, for example, that such dialogue would "stand in opposition to fundamentalism of all types." A relational view would search for means of including all voices in dialogue. Giddens also premises his vision on a concept of "individual autonomy," a concept that we have already found to be counterproductive.

In other works, I have tried to develop a concept of *relational responsibility*. My argument in this case is that we bracket the tradition of individual autonomy, out of which the presumption of individual responsibility, blame, alienation, and guilt arise. Rather, we might justifiably foreground our responsibility to ongoing processes of relating. If all meaning derives from relational process - as proposed earlier - then the destruction of this process brings to an end all that we would consider valuable, ethical, or worthy of our pursuit. When we are responsible to the process of relating from which meaning issues, we essentially support the possibility of a good life, society or world. The specific form of relational process that is valorized in this argument is the generative, as outlined earlier. In degenerative relational process we essentially slouch toward the end of meaning. The ethic of relational responsibility is itself non-foundational; all of its constituent assumptions are themselves open to continued dialogue. But if we move in this case, as in any other, to annihilate the premises we also diminish the domain of difference and thus the possibilities of continuing the very process from which meaning derives.

Restoration Practices

What would it mean to implement relational responsibility in practice? This is no small question, as it confronts us with a profound problem confronted by all theoretic attempts to establish a form of life as either desirable or undesirable. Like the term "community" discussed earlier, words such as "democracy," "government," "economy," "power," and so on are all "essentially contested." Such terms carry no

meaning within themselves, but are co-constituted by that which one selects as the contrast, and subject to co-creation by virtue of the linguistic context in which they occur. Most important for present purposes, There is no necessary relation holding between any theoretical term and any particular form of action. Theories do not themselves determine what counts as their instantiation in practice. The practical implications of social/political theory are always subject to negotiation.

In this light, I have avoided the attempt to lay out a blueprint for second order civility. Rather, I have found it more congenial to reflect on actual practices emerging in the hurly-burly of daily life in terms of theoretical criteria. The aim here is to generate a vocabulary of dialogic action, a vocabulary that may contribute to what I call *transformative dialogue*, dialogue that is generative and thus responsible to the process of relating. We begin, then, with the world of action, cases in which people are wrestling with problems of multiple and conflicting realities. Can we locate on these sites discursive conventions or conditions that seem favorable in bringing otherwise hostile peoples into more generative relationships? This is not to establish a set of rules for transformative dialogue, but again, a set of dialogic resources. On any given occasion one might then draw from this vocabulary as best suited to the moment. Nor can this vocabulary ever be fixed, for as meanings are transformed over time, and as further voices are added to the mix, the vocabulary itself will be altered and augmented. There are no universal rules for transformative dialogue, for dialogue itself will alter the character of transformative utility.

To illustrate, let us consider a single form of practice and its transformative components. My Taos Institute colleague, David Cooperrider and his associates, have developed an organizational change practice termed *appreciative inquiry*. The practice is particularly useful when an organization is riven with conflict. Typically one approaches such cases by defining and discussing "the problem" and how to solve it. Yet, from a relational standpoint, "problems" are constructed entities. Problems exist primarily because of the way reality is negotiated. There are problems if we agree there are problems. Further, to focus on the problem not only creates the "reality of deficit," but the very form of talk itself often alienates the organizational participants. If there is deficit, there must be a cause, and if there are causes then individuals or groups become candidates for blame. Defensiveness, fear, and distance result. Rather than assaying the problem, the aim of appreciative inquiry is to generate compelling visions of the future, to replace corrective and divisive discourse with generative collaboration.

The specific means of fostering appreciation draws from the social constructionist emphasis on narrative. People carry with them many stories, and within this repertoire they can typically locate stories of positive relations with the adversary. To place such stories in motion is also to sew the seeds for alternative visions of the future. As participants listen to each others' stories so is there a reemergence of positive potential. In listening to such stories confidence is stimulated that indeed there is strength and inspiration for building a new future. A single example will

convey the potential of appreciative inquiry:

Acme International, as we shall call it, suffered from gender conflict. Women in the company felt poorly treated by the males, seldom acknowledged, sometimes harassed, underpaid and overworked. At the same time, their male counterparts felt unfairly blamed, and accused the women employees for being up-tight, paranoid and hostile. Distrust was rampant; there was talk of litigation, and the organization began to falter. An appreciative inquiry was thus carried out in which small groups of men and women employees met together; their specific challenge was to recall some of the good experiences shared within the company. Were there cases where men and women worked very well together, had been effective and mutually regarding; were there times when men and women had especially benefited from each other's contributions; what were these experiences like and what did they mean to them as employees? The employees responded enthusiastically to the challenge and numerous stories were recalled about past successes. The groups then shared and compared their stories. As they did so a discernible change began to take place: the animosities began to melt; there was laughter, praise, and mutual regard. In this positive climate, the employees were challenged to envision the future of the company. How could they create together the kind of organization in which the experiences they most valued would be central? How could they make the organization the kind of place that could sustain the relations portrayed in the narratives? As the organizational members began their discussion of the future, they began working optimistically together, generating new policies, structures, and plans. A high sense of morale prevailed as a new organizational culture was formed.

Of course, the process of appreciative inquiry is only one form of dialogic transformation; numerous others deserve attention, and especially those emerging naturally within everyday transactions. However, appreciative inquiry has been successfully used throughout many countries of the world, and is now the key ingredient within the present attempt to establish a United Religions organization, an analogue to the United Nations.

While transformative dialogue has its desirable aspects, I scarcely see the process of relational responsibility exhausted in its development. For one, the focus on verbal dialogue is excessive. Ultimately we should take into account the entire range of corporal activities in which people engage. Generative coordination may be achieved in athletics, music, dance, cuisine, erotics, and more. Further, there are technologies that may enhance the possibilities for relational responsibility. The primary fault with mass media as devices for restoring viable relations is their monologic character. In contrast, the internet fosters dialogic relations. Dialogue itself does not necessarily contribute to restoration. However, attention is increasingly directed toward ways of using the internet to bring otherwise alienated peoples together. Murray Bookchin speaks optimistically of an emerging process of "gradual confederalism - the step-by-step formation of civic networks." With the continuous criss-crossing of these networks on the internet, and the simultaneous immersion of individuals in multiple

networks, we may take a major step toward relational responsibility on a global scale.

Footnotes to follow.

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