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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BELONGING

and the Logic of Relation

Which came first? The individual or society?

Which is the chicken and which is the egg?

Too much cultural and social theorizing has proceeded as if this were a reasonable place to begin. On one side are those who look first to the individual and see feathers. When notions such as function, exchange, contract, or reason are used to explain the constitution of society, the individual is the chicken. The inaugural gesture is to conjure away society with the fiction of an atomistic flock of individuals who forge a relation with one another on the basis of a normative recognition of shared needs and common goods. These "foundationalist" approaches have been roundly criticized, in particular since deconstruction, for appealing more or less explicitly to a myth of origins. But what has not been remarked often enough is that approaches defining themselves against the individual-chicken wing are, in their own way, just as foundationalist. Approaches privileging such notions as structure, the symbolic, semiotic system, or textuality look first to what the other wing puts second: an intersubjective frame. Society now figures as an a priori, a principle of intersubjectivity hatching individual subject-eggs. The "foundation" in this case is not a mythic origin, but a foundation it is nevertheless. It effects an inversion of the first foundationalism. The inaugural gesture in this case is to conjure away the individual in order for it to return as determined by society rather than determining of it. The individual is defined by its "positioning" within the intersubjective frame. The foundation is transposed from a time axis to a spatial one, becoming topographical, the lay of the social land: we are no longer in the once-upon-a-time, but in the always-already. For in this approach, the individual is in

a sense prehatched, since the topography determining it is itself predetermined by a mapped-out logic of baseline positions and combinations or permutations of them.

Along came a third, mutant wing that saw this quarrel as little better than the Swiftian controversy over whether it is better to spoon the egg out of the narrow end or the wide end. Why can't they see that it's best to break it in the middle? More recent theories privileging notions of hybridity, bordering and border culture, and queering attempt to defuse the chicken-and-the-egg scenario by valorizing the in-between. The ultimate aim is to find a place for change again, for social innovation, which had been squeezed out of the nest by the pincer movement of the needful or reasonable determination of a legislative norm on one side and topographical determination by a constitutive positionality on the other. But to the extent that the in-between is conceived as a space of interaction of already-constituted individuals and societies, middle-feeders end up back on the positional map. The tendency is to describe the in-between as a blending or parody of the always-already positioned. Social change is spatially relegated to precarious geographical margins, where unauthorized positional permutations bubble up from the fermenting mixture. Even more precariously, in the case of theories of subjectivity as performance, change is confined to sites whose "marginality" is defined less by location than the evanescence of a momentary parodic rupture or "subversion." How the subversion could react back on the positionalities of departure in a way that might enduringly change *them* becomes an insoluble problem. Concepts of mixture, margin, and parody retain a necessary reference to the pure, the central, and the strait-laced and straight-faced, without which they vaporize into logical indeterminacy. Erase the progenitors and the hybrid vanishes: no terms have been provided with which to understand it in its own right. The middle wing ends upon the same plate as the others: determination. When everything is served up in founding terms of determination—"of" or "by"—by design or by default—change can only be understood as a negation of the determination: as the simply indeterminate. This dilemma haunts all three wings in different ways, and its valorization is characteristic of postmodern celebrations of aporia.

Similar conundrums haunt other oppositional pairings that contemporary theorists try to think with or around: body and culture, community and state, East and West.

There may be another approach, close in many ways to the mutant third wing of the hybrid, but mutated again, with a different philosophical twist—away from determination. From one point of view, the weakness pointed to in theories of performance is a strength. Articulating change in a way that retains a necessary reference to the already-constituted preserves a crucial role for formations of power and marks a refusal of spontaneism or voluntarism. The problem arises when no way is provided to conceptualize the in-between as having a logical consistency, and even ontological status, of its own. The necessary connection to the already-constituted then becomes a filiative dependence to which the “subversion” must continually return in order to re-engender itself. The foundation eternally returns.

What would it mean to give a logical consistency to the in-between? It would mean realigning with a logic of relation. For the in-between, as such, is not a middling being but rather the being *of* the middle—the being of a relation. A positioned being, central, middling, or marginal, is a *term* of a relation. It may seem odd to insist that a relation has an ontological status separate from the terms of the relation. But, as the work of Gilles Deleuze repeatedly emphasizes, it is in fact an indispensable step toward conceptualizing change as anything more or other than a negation, deviation, rupture, or subversion. The terms of a relation are normally assumed to precede their interrelating, to be already-constituted. This begs the question of change, because everything is given in advance. The interrelating simply realizes external configurations already implicit as possibilities in the form of the preexisting terms. You can rearrange the furniture, even move it to a new location, but you still have the same old furniture. Assuming the precedence of terms in the relation is common to approaches characterized as empirical. Taking pre-given terms, extracting a permutational system of implicit positionings from their form, projecting that system to metaphysical point before the givenness of the terms, and developing the projection as a generative a priori mapping—these moves are common, in varying ways, to phenomenological, structuralist, and many poststructuralist approaches. They back-project a stencil of the already-constituted to explain its constitution, thus setting up a logical time-slip, a vicious hermeneutic circle. What is given the slip, once again, is change.

It is only by asserting the exteriority of the relation to its terms that chicken and egg absurdities can be avoided and the discussion diverted

from an addiction to foundation and its negation to an engagement with change as such, with the unfounded and unmediated in-between of becoming. The need for this diversion is nowhere more evident than in terms like “body” and “culture” or “individual” and “society.” Is it possible even to conceive of an individual outside of a society? Of a society without individuals? Individuals and societies are not only empirically inseparable, they are strictly simultaneous and consubstantial. It is an absurdity even to speak of them using notions of mediation, as if they were discrete entities that enter into extrinsic relation to one another, let alone to wonder which term takes precedence over the other in determining stasis and change. If they cannot be seen as terms in extrinsic relation, then perhaps they can be seen as products, effects, coderivatives of an immanent relation that would be change in itself. In other words, they might be seen as differential emergences from a shared realm of relationality that is one with becoming—and belonging. Seen from this point of view, the “terms” might look so different that it might be necessary to redefine them thoroughly, reconfigure them, or perhaps forego them entirely. What follows is just a beginning.

An example: Michel Serres’s ball. A soccer ball. Bruno Latour is well known for taking up Serres’s concept of the quasi object, introduced through the example of a ball in a sports game. Serres and Latour used it to rethink the relation between the subject and the object. More recently, Pierre Lévy has used the same example to redeploy the relation between the individual and the collectivity.¹ What follows flows from Lévy, moving toward a notion of collective individuation around a catalyzing point. Here, that point will be called not a quasi object but a part-subject.

To the question of what founds a formation like a sport, or what its conditions of existence are, an obvious answer would be “the rules of the game.” But in the history of sport, as with virtually every collective formation, the codification of rules follows the emergence of an unformalized proto-sport exhibiting a wide range of variation. The formal rules of the game capture and contain the variation. They frame the game, retrospectively, describing its form as a set of constant relations between standardized terms. A codification is a framing derivative that arrogates to itself the role of foundation. It might be argued that all foundations are of this nature: *ex post facto* regulatory framings rather than effective foundations. Once they apply themselves, the rules do effectively frame and regulate the play, taking precedence. Their precedence is retrospective, or fic-