

Chapter 15

Intersection

The Art of Balance, or Else...

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Ours is a society of balances, of equilibriums and resting points. The macro is balanced by the micro, the local by the global, the self by the other. Our liberal, plural society is a balanced society, insofar as we can accommodate new (minority) perspectives to net out and balance existing (majority) perspectives. Gift giving is balanced by debt honouring, and the donor by the beneficiary. Society is never outstanding: there is always a balance that tricks the social back into its proper whole.

Balances evince symmetries and commensurabilities. In the language of liberal pluralism, the commensurable looks very much like a partner in commensality, too. In John Rawls's famous theory of justice, it is our partnership in mutual ignorance that defines the inaugural conditions for all future political and juridical contracts. Because we are all originally interchangeable (that is, commensurable) as socioeconomic actors, we are therefore also taken for commensals in the same polity. The new digital economy takes the fantasy of liberal commensality one step further. If in the Rawlsian model the liberal polity followed a contractarian programme, in the digital age it has become a self-performative engine: gift givers and gift takers turn economic commensurability (file sharing) into sociological commensality (peer exchange), or so digital evangelists argue.

Theories of political ethics and freedom have long partaken of the proportional fantasy of ecumenical commensurability/commensality. In this context development and progress are but

classic teleological exemplars aiming for an elusive utopian whole – an imaginary country of plenty where we all live in harmony and balance. Catherine Trundle’s charity workers idealize benefaction as *compassion un-interreptus*; Nayanika Mathur’s bureaucrats take ironic distance from the fantasy of development as *coitus interruptus*. The interruptions gesture towards encompassing histories of hope, for the history of political ethics is indeed full of what I have elsewhere called ‘autarkic justifications’: minima moralias that posit an elemental moment of balance to the human condition (Corsín Jiménez 2008: 10). These are the foundational endowments that are required to complete or balance out the integrity of the human project: contemplative reason (Aristotle), primary goods (John Rawls), the capability to function (Amartya Sen) or the inalienability of property rights (Robert Nozick). They remainder-out human life by positing a missing weight that completes it: to produce human life as a rounded, balanced whole.

Aesthetics of Form

That the discourses of political sociology, economy and justice are inflected by the imaginary of balancing should not come as surprise, however. The oldest known meaning of the word *logos* is, precisely, balance or proportion. Holding the world to account – balancing its multifarious meanings and tensions – is what the work of reason accomplishes. The reasons that people give for their actions, the terms through which they make sense of their world, are but measured im/balances of their existence. We proportion the world as we apportion and accommodate to its ongoing irruptions. We reason through the world via exercises in dis/proportionality. The art of balance yields the *aesthetic of form* of worldly experience.

However, balancing and proportionality are cultural categories, ones that are deeply entrenched in Euro-American habits of thought. They dictate in profound ways our expectations of *logos*, of reason and accountability, although they do not, of course, hold universal validity. Anthropology's claim to theoretical status rests precisely on this capacity to elucidate modes of reason and engagement in/with the world that do not rely on proportion, but rather proportion or tend towards other aesthetics of form.

A corollary of the Euro-American art of balance is its epistemic persuasiveness. It is very difficult to show or point to an epistemic effect in social theory that does not work as a netting-out effect of something else. Insofar as one of the aims of social theory is the production of analyses, it becomes very difficult not to think of analyses as levelling mechanisms: the output of abstraction that levels the input of the empiric; the *simplex* on the other side of the complex. There are few arguments in social theory that work as free-fallers; most stand squarely and assuredly atop a hill. Some manage as cliff-hangers. The art of balance, or else...

Take, for example, critique. As Yarrow and Venkatesan show in their introduction, critique has always been presumed to social theory. Anthropology's encounter and engagement with development *had* to produce critique, or else be seen as falling short of its authentic epistemic/knowledge mission: anthropological knowledge as counterbalance to developmental practice. Without critique, there can be no point (to anthropology). Yarrow and Venkatesan's alternative reads instead as a courageous cliff-hanger, a form of analysis that is internal to the engagement (between anthropology and development). The terms of such internal engagement are spelt out by ethnography. If the internal relation is rich, the anthropology is self-enhancing, resulting in 'anthropologies with development in them', as they put it. But what form does an analysis that is internal to itself take? How can we see it for an *analysis* and not simply for a

singular and contextual relational engagement between (say) anthropology and development? If ethnography works analytically (tenuously, in cliff-hanger mode, but analytically nonetheless), what form of knowledge performs the counterbalance?

Perhaps the ethnographic counterbalance is *itself*, in the guise of (yet more) ethnography. The ethnography that is balanced by ethnography is of course (anthropological) *comparison*. All ethnography is singular, contextual and emergent, but it can work analytically nonetheless because it refers to other ethnography. In its fashioning as a unique piece of description ethnography does not require, nor does it depend on, a proportional imagination. The ethnographic world does not have to net out. Its terms of description are internal to those who inhabit it at the time of reportage. ‘Getting the work done’ in charity work, as reported by Trundle, collapses for instance any presumed distinction between ‘detached [anthropological] knowledge’ and ‘engaged [developmental] action’. Knowledge and action no longer stand in proportional (inverse) relation. Instead, ethnographic analysis deploys a *form* that is internally fashioned by its own descriptive register; it does not require balance to function as an analytical effect.

Anthropological Baroques

If critique works as an intermediation between knowledge and action, perhaps it is fair to redescribe the anthropology of critique as the cultural perspective of ‘double vision’: a perspective from which knowledge and action may be uncoupled or coupled back again for novel perspectival effects. We see through knowledge to its actions and explain actions back to knowledge – except that certain bodies of knowledge are very often weighed as capacitating of

their own accord, and certain sets of actions impress us with their reflexive power. The intermediation, as noted, works both ways.

Nayanika Mathur, for instance, finds this type of intermediation among her bureaucratic informants in the shape of cynicism. The cynics ‘see through the ideology of development’ and yet do so by becoming the very optical mediators of such knowledge. Cynicism is the form of (self-)knowledge through which the social agency of the state is reproduced. The image recalls Annelise Riles’s noted description of networking as a bureaucratic and sociological form. As she puts it, ‘networkers deploy the *optical effect* of Network form as a “fulcrum or lever” that generates *alternative inverted forms* of sociality by projecting an image of each – Network and “personal relations” – *from the point of view of the other*’ (Riles 2001: 115–116, emphases added). Thus the optics of networking and cynicism enact the perspectivism of double vision that characterizes the culture of late liberalism: forms of knowledge that double back on themselves, generating their own reversible effects – their own ‘inside-outs’, in Riles’s wonderful formulation.

Optics, double vision, the aesthetics of form, the pulsations of effects: these are all idioms of analysis that exude a certain mannerism, a splendour of formalization, a baroque aesthetics. In an important essay, David Mosse has recently observed how the ethnographic study of public policy and professional communities operates upon anthropological knowledge to work an uneasy relationalization of that very knowledge (Mosse 2006). Whereas anthropologists are intent on producing knowledge, the professionals with whom we work demand that we produce (novel) relationships with them. Perhaps we entered the field as outsiders (academics) but are in time recast as insiders (colleagues, advisors). The inside-out of knowledge is thus confused by new or unexpected exit and entry points (Mosse 2006: 936–937). Analytical forms pop up where

we least expect them: in a document, an email, a cynical statement. It would seem that the art of balance demanded by ethnography (as opposed to that of critique, or of proportional social theory at large) is cajoled into existence by a profusion of form.

Echoing Leibniz, the new ethnographic sensibility must remain alert to the self-perpetuating complexity of form: ‘Every bit of matter can be conceived as a garden full of plants or a pond full of fish. But each branch of the plant, each drop of its bodily fluids, is also such a garden or such a pond’ (Leibniz 1991: 228, cited in Kwa 2002: 26) Forms elicit their own hopeful connections and extensions: drops that become gardens or swell into ponds. Perhaps the present move to learn how to differentiate ethnographic developments signals a return of such a baroque epistemology where interruptions, if scrutinized, contain self-proliferating economies of hope – ethnography, that is, as critical hope.

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