

Discerning disorder is it really there?

Paper to

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Prolegomenon

The night following British political elections are a source of joy to anyone who wishes to observe with a jaundiced eye how a world-ordering rationality can instantly, if contradictorily, transform myriad divergent sets of polling figures into an ordered picture. First of all though, elections are participatory theatre, more so than Geertz ever dreamed in 'the theatre state' (1980). Large television screens in Trafalgar Square illuminate the results and politicians' explanations to derisory cheers from the audience, who have given up, curiously, the habit of doffing policemen's helmets on such occasions and content themselves with paddling in the fountains. Public scenes of dejected losers are projected into millions of households, where rival television channels vie to dramatize the same events. Like all good rituals, it is its moments of danger¹ and reversal: it takes place through the night when we watch famous, authoritative, self-satisfied figures, who usually order - or like to maintain they order - our lives, briefly undone, writhing to explain away the results or their pronouncements of a few minutes previously, or even occasionally appearing, for once, to express genuinely simulated emotion.

The local elections held last May epitomize an important feature of order. It is something which belongs to models rather than to the world. Twenty years ago the problem of interpreting the influx of information was left to Bob Mackenzie, professor of politics at the L.S.E. who, with the aid of his 'swingometer', and careful *caveats*, set about transforming millions of small decisions into a national pattern. Nowadays, the television networks, of course, use computers which apparently instantaneously tell us every time a result comes in what it would mean for the composition of Parliament, were these national not, as they happen to be, local elections. Delightfully the computers of the main television channels rarely agree. Flesh must be given to such under-determined numbers by cameras and commentators in selected constituencies. 'Selection' is the key term here, because synecdochically a handful of instances come to constitute the country as a whole. Such order as exists lies principally in assertions of order and a charming faith, shared by all parties, in self-fulfilling prophesies. In May, what was a substantial swing away from the conservative Government came to be represented as a resounding victory for the firm policies of that Government, appropriately lampooned by the cover of *Private Eye*. The transformation was made possible by two factors. First the swing against the Government was less than opinion polls forecast, therefore relatively speaking a victory; second two 'flagship' councils (a newly-minted term), where the conservatives won, were given much television coverage. The transition from an inevitably complex and confused state of affairs to order was complete.

The Argument

This divagation is less irrelevant to my theme than might appear. I have been asked to consider briefly in this paper some of the theoretical aspects of the issue

¹ As Adrian Vickers has pointed out for Bali, rituals are moments of real danger (1991). Only viewed from the cosiness of an established church, so marginal that it can consider admitting women into the priesthood, does ritual come to connote safety, order, irrelevance.

of disorder. Before I turn to the simple example outlined above, it may be useful if I sketch out my argument. It is commonplace in the social sciences to consider that disorder, like change, is a problem to be explained. There was a time, for instance, when change used to present a serious explanatory problem. Stable structures or states (the homonymy involved in 'the Nation State' is no accident) were the norm. Where structural-functionalism had difficulty in coping with change at all, structuralism tidied the problem away under the umbrella term 'transformation' which, tautologically, embraced all deviations from postulated structure. Ideas of structure in one form or another are remarkably resilient, because the entire epistemological arsenal - from definitions of logic and propositions (consider the problems of modal or many-valued logics, Haack 1978: 170-220) to language and culture - is predicated on presuppositions of system. Similarly, as the problems of treating 'society' as some unitary systematic entity have become apparent, the idea of 'culture' has come to replace it as a remarkably unanalyzed totality. So approaches like interpretive anthropology, which appear not to presuppose system, smuggle it in as 'culture', 'symbol' or in circular definitions of human nature.²

Have we not though moved beyond such static models? The short answer is no. Change is commonly explained by reference to 'process', a synonym for structure-in-action (drawn by analogy with anatomy and physiology?) operating according to rules (a disciplinary metaphor) or, later, within limits (a spatial metaphor). Even the recent reaction against scientism, or modernism, in historical and philosophical reviews of science (e.g. Kuhn 1962; but cf. Feyerabend 1975) or post-modernist criticisms of the human sciences (e.g. Lyotard 1979; cf. Fardon forthcoming), like chaos theory (see below), is often more a nostalgic attempt to rescue some semblance of order from perceived threats than the radical critique it claims to be.³

Cynically, one can argue that reversing almost any widely-held theory is more instructive than upholding it. For instance one could maintain change to be normal and stasis the *explanandum*.⁴ It is very tempting - and heuristically, indeed it may be very useful - to reverse the 'problem' of disorder and argue that it is order which needs to be explained. Ethnographically, is it not self-evident that a fair measure of disorder is evident in daily life? The failure then of much development planning would stem from the introduction of rationally ordered

² Initially trying to distance himself from culture-as-systematic, Geertz for instance questions whether 'culture is most effectively treated...purely as a symbolic system' because it ignores social action. He then promptly doubly re-introduces system by remarking that it is in social action that 'cultural forms find articulation' (1973a: 17). System is introduced at a third point, by defining human nature in terms of culture: 'our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural products' (1973b: 50).

³ In varying degree residual spatial metaphors of order through constraint permeate more radical poststructuralist critiques, e.g. the 'prison-house' image of language in Derrida (e.g. 1967) or 'exclusion' in Foucault (1971). The clawing back of order is a striking feature of many post-structural commentators, for example White's attempt to provide rules of change from one *épistémè* to another (1973) against Foucault's refusal to do so (e.g. 1966, 1969).

⁴ The predisposition to recreate system at all costs is evident in the recent view that cancer is a normal part of body processes, but explanation then returns to accounting for the failure of suppressive systems.

projects on a disorderly world. While there might seem much to recommend this view, it is as dangerous as it is appealing. Collingwood sounded the caution:

the simple 'intuition' or 'apprehension' of things confronting us which absolutely and in themselves just are what we 'intuite' or 'apprehend' them as being...[such] 'realism' is based upon the grandest foundation a philosophy can have, namely human stupidity (1940: 34).

Let me explore for a moment what lies behind Collingwood's ferocious remarks, because they bear directly upon questions of order. And much needed they are. There is a lemming-like impulse for commentators, sociologists and anthropologists to the forefront, to hurl themselves over the same cliff as the adherents of system. Having recognized that frameworks, models, paradigms, exemplars or discursive formations in practice intervene between reality and what is said and written about that reality, they all too easily ignore their own critiques and, by reversal, presuppose that, if reality is not ordered, it is therefore disorderly.

Nelson Goodman, speaking of the same knee-jerk reaction among philosophers, has put what is at issue here nicely.

Philosophers sometimes mistake features of discourse for features of the subject of discourse...Coherence is a characteristic of descriptions, not of the world' (1972: 24).

Frames of reference, though, seem to belong less to what is described than to systems of description...As nothing is at rest or is in motion apart from a frame of reference, so nothing is primitive or is derivationally prior to anything apart from a constructional system...The uniformity of nature we marvel at or the unreliability we protest belongs to a world of our own making...A world may be unmanageably heterogeneous or unbearably monotonous according to how events are sorted into kinds.' (1978: 2, 12, 9)

The days of nave realism are over. Proponents of the-world-as-disorderly have no better grounds to presuppose that it *is* disorderly in some absolute sense, than do proponents of the view that it is inherently ordered. One cannot wave the blunderbuss of discourse at one's opponents and then look down its barrel and expect not to be blasted oneself.

If disorder is not an inherent property of reality, it does not follow that we cannot instructively explore the implications of treating social life *as if* it is disordered. It does though mean that anyone claiming their ethnography demonstrates empirically that social life to be disorderly has, as the Americans put it, shot their foot off before they start.⁵ Oddly, recognizing disorder to be a function of discourse, or a frame of reference, makes matters easier, not harder. It permits us to consider how different discourses, say to do with development, are constituted, how they differ, what they presuppose, how they construct order and disorder. Perhaps most important, they allow us to consider how western

⁵ Appeals to empiricism, that article of faith to so many bluff practical Dutch and Englishmen, are rarely what they seem. Empiricism methodologically depends on sense data. Apart from well-rehearsed problems of the presuppositions entailed, empiricism cannot deal with such useful ideas as relationships because these are not available to the senses. Only assertions, denials etc. of relationships are. As disorder presumably involves judgements of the relationships between events or actions, it can never be shown empirically.

discourses relate to, and how far they permit recognition of, incommensurable discourses and *other peoples*' possible constructions of order and disorder.⁶ It also allows us to consider such matters as how order and disorder are construed,⁷ and how presuppositions of order are implicated in ostensibly innocuous terminology. It is with this latter that I shall be principally concerned, especially with recourse to hidden 'essences', whether analytically in such notions as 'language' and 'models', or descriptively in terms like 'village', 'peasantry' or 'working-class'. I shall argue that both cover up a multitude of sins, including the elimination of issues of agency and a spurious political neutrality.

A politic lesson

We may now turn to the question of how order is constructed (and its consequences?) by looking at the example of election night. They may be teased out of the outline above. Some points are sufficiently obvious as to need no further comment. (For instance numerical '*data*' are never given, they are simplified abstractions which are massive under-determined, hence their invocation by rogues and politicians. Like statistics, as Andrew Lang remarked, they are often used 'as a drunken man uses lamp-posts - for support rather than illumination'.) Among others is the process of simplification ('Our capacity for overlooking is virtually unlimited' Goodman 1978: 14), when one moves from a micro- to a macro-level. A host of varying factors which affect local results vanish when over-viewed nationally; and new kinds of factor enter into explanation. Anthropologists are familiar with this process, often to the cost of detail when economists and political scientists perceive sweeping patterns which bear little or no known relationship to anything which happens locally. Order becomes the more pervasive, persuasive and transcendent the further one is from any possible encounter with evidence, as the hierarchical gaze can objectify with increasingly little fear of contradiction. It is a truism that the reputations of anthropologists as theoreticians is inversely proportional to the quality of their ethnography. I forebear from naming names!

Following from this, the arguable heterogeneity of actions and heteroglossia of social life (Bakhtin 1981), evident even in glimpses of political exchanges, is condensed into increasingly imaginary homogeneous essences from 'poly-vocality' (Clifford 1986) to the collective representations beloved of

⁶ So to do does not make anthropologists relativists in the sense sometimes suggested by doctrinaire rationalists (e.g. Hollis & Lukes 1982). 'Extreme relativism as [Hollis and Lukes] discuss it is a stance no anthropologist would seriously hold' (Overing 1985: 3, my parentheses). The claim is that such anthropologists hold truth - or is it reality? - to be relative to a frame of reference. In fact what most anthropologists of this ilk argue is that there is no privileged access to reality and that issues of language, frames of reference, paradigms or discourse can, empirically, be shown to enter into statements about reality.

⁷ *Chaos*, now in vogue in chaos theory (see below), was distinguished by classical Greek thinkers from *cosmos*, order, whether in nature (*phusis*) or through law (*nomos*). The Greek proclivity for dichotomy is recreated when order and disorder are treated as antitheses. (As Lloyd notes, various arguments were advanced by the great Greek scholars (1966: 210-303): as usual, in following tradition, we re-invent and simplify it.) Whether complete disorder is conceivable is questionable: order and disorder may perhaps be more usefully thought of as differing in both degree and kind (cf. Collingwood 1933: 69-91).

anthropologists and ideology through some 'enunciatory function' (Foucault 1969). Part of such transformations only is due to the difficulties of representing a complicated reality through language or other media. As much has to do with the idea that reality is to be explained in terms of ordered concepts, by virtue of some correspondence between reality and concepts. The difficulties this engenders are neatly pointed out by Gellner: 'As changing and disorderly reality cannot be the object of determinate and neat concepts directly, it can be the object only indirectly through...a model.' (1973: 93).

Order is achieved by the elimination, or perhaps better the closure, of context. The politicians on election night contextualized the results and their significance by recourse to different frames of reference: 'local factors', 'but in councils where...', 'better than expected', 'compared with opinion polls', 'clear evidence of the success (failure) of our (their) policies', 'if you look historically/nationally etc.'. However context is a slippery thing and far from the guarantor of the orderly interpretation it is often purported to be, because it is always open to human agents to construe it differently. Commentary, including commentary by politicians, tends therefore to extracting essential facts or processes which are, needless to say, disputed by their opponents' rival essential truths (cf. Hobart 1985 & 1986 on essentializing and contextualizing as political strategies). Appeal to context and essence are complementary styles of explanation. While context is a useful construct for those favouring a measure of disorder, positing the view that things, situations and processes have discernible essences underwrites a vision of order.

The closure of context and the constitution of order is widely achieved by invoking models. In a sense order only exists in - or better is constructed through - models. The sceptical point that theory, and so models, is under-determined by evidence (Quine 1953, 1960) and its corollary, that one can always get facts to fit a model (Feyerabend 1975) by interpretation, exclusion and simplification, is sufficiently familiar to readers that I shall not belabour the point. There is nothing wrong with making use of models *per se*. Difficulties arise when models come to be conflated with, or are substituted for, whatever it is they are supposed to be models of. Richard Burghart has described a beautiful instance of this in the co-existence of two Nepals. The first Nepal consists of a population which suffers greatly from water-borne diseases due to poor sanitation, especially the absence of proper toilets. The second Nepal shows the virtual omnipresence of modern concrete toilet facilities throughout the country. The latter is the model of the development bureaucrats. The discrepancy is due, Burghart argues, to rationing of cement, which was available most easily through licences for toilet construction! As it is the paperwork Nepal which is the referent of plans for development, problems occur.

It would be difficult, I think, to overstate the importance of the misplaced concreteness (if readers will forgive the pun) with which models are invested. This is not only a problem well documented in studies of development, it pervades Western academic thinking, especially economics, but anthropology as well. As my ignorance of development is almost total, I shall argue the case by considering how widely shared presuppositions across subjects reproduces the reality of models and the illusion of order. The problems are not confined to

academia. As Baudrillard has sardonically noted, much of the contemporary Western world is built up of simulacra, by models coming to replace their original referents (1983).

Models have many *avatars*. In anthropology, they are commonly encountered *inter alia* in three forms which are worth briefly noting. These are: rationality, structure and metaphor. This is not the place to rehearse the extent to which empiricism, at least as much as rationalism, depends on a highly idealized super-structure about the relation of the world, sense data, language and reason, which has preoccupied much analytical philosophy. Suffice it to say that homogeneity, essence and the suppression of context are constitutive not just of much natural science (*Naturwissenschaft*), but, by emulation, of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) as well and are enshrined in their respective methodologies.⁸ Rationality operates with essentialized constructs, not events; the realization of which drove C.S. Peirce to a theory of semiotics to establish what kinds of relationship linked logical operations and the observable world.⁹

Rationalism classically linked the world and reason by developing deductive models, the inferences of which could then, in principle, be tested and verified or falsified against observable evidence (e.g. the specific and general theories of relativity). Granted this proclivity for transcendent explanatory principles, deriving such models logically - a process aided for complex operations by the advent of computers - is made to seem easier and more reliable than starting from observations (certainly in the social world) and fits pre-existing conceptions and concerns (like predictability, see Hesse 1978). The conviction that the rules, or structure, of natural languages can be revealed by logic or set theory (Tarski 1956; Davidson 1967; Chomsky 1957, 1971; Montague 1974) is a splendid example. Unfortunately, it requires such selection of examples as to become trivial.¹⁰ More seriously, as Vološinov has argued at length, such logical models depend on language being monologic and unspoken. The alternative view of language being dialogic and socially situated challenges the assumption that language is a coherent (i.e. static, structured) system, or indeed is a necessary postulate at all (1973).

The dependence of approaches which stress order, rationalism included, presuppose language to be an inherently ordered phenomenon. There is however nothing inherently ordered about language, indeed an approach that wished to stress relative disorder would do well to dismiss the idea entirely, in favour of a speech-based account. Such a position has been argued cogently by Vološinov, who has pointed to the difficulty of systematic and monologic theories of language to cope with either dialogue (which defeats existing logical models) or context and the actual situations of speaking.

⁸ What it comes to when you say you repeat an experiment is that you repeat all the features of an experiment which a theory determines are relevant. In other words you repeat the experiment as an example of the theory. (Goodman 1978: 9, citing Thompson 1965: 85).

⁹ The resulting confusions between two senses of truth, empirical and logical, as two partly linked forms of reasoning, practical and pure, has dogged the so-called 'rationality debate' endlessly.

¹⁰ 'Jack and Jill climbed up the hill' is one of my favourites. Consider also 'Snow is white' (Tarski), or 'Susie did a strip-tease, Susie took her clothes off; Robin is about to give birth to a baby, Robin is pregnant.' (Kempson 1977: 3-4; as an example of logical entailment).

Multiplicity is perceived as the occasional overtones of a single hard-and-fast meaning. The focus of linguistic attention is exactly opposite that of real-life understanding on the part of the speakers engaged in a particular flow of speech. The philologist-linguist, when comparing different contexts in which a given word appears, focuses his attention on the identity factor in its usage, since to him what is important is to be able to remove the word from the contexts compared and to give it definition outside context, i.e. to create a dictionary word out of it...The various contexts of usage for any one particular word are conceived of as all lying on the same plane. These contexts are thought of as forming a series circumscribed, self-contained utterances all pointed in the same direction. In actual fact, this is far from true: contexts of usage for one and the same word often contrast with one another...

In reifying the system of language and in viewing living language as if it were dead and alien, abstract objectivism¹¹ makes language something external to the stream of verbal communication (1973: 80, 81).

One should therefore be cautious about theories, like structuralism, which adopt the systematic nature of language as an analytical axiom.

Both the tenuousness of the link between logic and the world, and the response when prevailing presuppositions are exposed in what is sometimes called 'chaos theory'. Far from this turning out to be a chink of light in the hermetic world of rationality, chaos theory is effectively an attempt to make the world safe for reason, by introducing the calculating power of computers to plug awkward gaps, where logical models failed to work.¹² While this may be of interest meteorologically, or even for those wishing to discern patterns in the fluctuations of the U.S. cotton market (see the work of Mandelbrot, cited in Gleick 1988: 83-86). The problems in its applicability to social activities may be judged from the following example of chaos and catastrophe provided by Professor James Ramsey, University of New York, to illustrate the explanation of the Wall Street Crash as a 'manifestation of chaos in a social system' (the reference to manifestation is unfortunate).

A group of people all have exactly the same preferences, they have the same wishes and desires, they all go to the same cinema to see the same show, who want to sit in the same seat. Immediately, having all the same preferences, desires and the same information, try immediately to shift to the same alternative seat. Well you have chaos, you can't do it. Similarly, for example in the Stock Market, to be a little more realistic. If everyone is truly convinced at the same time that the price of a given stock is going to go up, then everybody wants to buy, no one wants to sell. You have a very unstable situation. So here we have an irony - by increasing the quality and speed of delivery of

¹¹ 'Abstract objectivism' is the term Vološinov applies to rationalist theories of language as systems (1973: 57). He also makes short shrift of the complementary approach, 'individualist subjectivism', the Romantic vision of language reincarnated as interpretive anthropology, as deriving purely from individual creative acts of speech (1973: 83-94).

¹² The 'discovery' of chaos theory came about, neo-mythically, by a meteorologist, Edward Lorenz, typing slightly inaccurate numbers into a computer and going off for a cup of coffee. The result became the so-called 'Butterfly Effect' by which one tiny event - a butterfly flapping its wings in Beijing - through the cumulative effects of millions of small events, can produce storms in New York. The shift of explanation from micro-level events to macro-level ones should be noted.

information - of creating a situation which is potentially very unstable, suffering potentially from what we call a catastrophe (BBC Horizon television programme on chaos theory).

If humans all had the same preferences, wishes, desires and information, happened to be in the same place at the same time (or were in every feature in identical financial positions in every respect), the model might make some sense (if indeed they would then be human). Ramsey is correct in one respect though. The increased speed of delivery of information because of computerization of the stock market (and the similar programming of investor's preferences and strategies) is relevant. But then the catastrophe is due more to the mechanical exercise of unmitigated rationality than to anything to do with the social world.

Perhaps the model in anthropology that is most obviously predicated *a priori* on a rational order - exemplified by language! - is structuralism. Lévi-Strauss is, perhaps understandably, concerned to avoid defining precisely what 'structure' is. The difficulties of Lévi-Strauss's vision of structuralism have been widely voiced. So I shall consider in particular the status of models and so the 'manifestation' of order in his accounts. Significantly he maintains that structuralism, unlike most models, is held not to add anything to its *data* (sic).

Contrary to formalism, structuralism refuses to oppose the concrete to the abstract, and to accord the second a privileged value. Form is defined in opposition to a matter that is foreign to it; but structure has no distinct content; it is the content itself, apprehended in a logical organization conceived of as a property of the real (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 139, cited in Sturrock 1986: 171).

The idea that structure in this sense can provide unmediated access to reality, or that structuralists are mere instruments, not agents, might seem a little disingenuous nowadays.¹³ As the last clause of the above quotation indicates, Lévi-Strauss has recognized the problematic relationship between his models and observable actions. In his reply to Needham's questions (1958) about the confusion of model and empirical reality in discussing prescriptive and preferential systems of connubium, Lévi-Strauss remarks of the difference that

they do not connote different social realities, but rather, correspond to slightly differing ways in which man envisages the same reality...Rather let us own that the notions of prescriptive and preferential marriage are relative: a preferential system is prescriptive when envisaged at the model level; a prescriptive system must be preferential when envisaged on the level of reality (1969: xxxi-xxxiii).

Whether this gets Lévi-Strauss off the kinship hook is debatable. Perspective implies a visual metaphor of reality (Salmond 1982) as directly perceived, and wraps up difference and contradiction as mere difference of vantage points. Incidentally perspectivalism is not the same as contextual explanation. The latter denies the essential reality of objects in themselves by stressing the relationships between things, acts or events as irreducible.

Models are given a discursive reality of their own; and there is a tendency common in much anthropology for successive levels to intervene, the ontological status and the means of derivation of which are obscure. Recourse to increasingly

¹³ Lévi-Strauss is unashamedly comfortable with his *apriorism*. He cites approvingly Ricoeur's comment that his, Lévi-Strauss's, is 'Kantism without a transcendental subject' (1970: 11).

abstract levels not only simplifies and distorts, it pushes the focus of explanation towards the transcendental. Preferential marriage is not a natural fact from which one can distill progressively more purified essences: it is a disputed construct, in the sense that people make differing statements about what, why and how a liaison is formed. Lévi-Strauss's approach relies on the epistemological transparency of social actions as *data* underwritten by an unsituated monologic correspondence theory of language. One might note that, if actions are differently interpretable, and one does not assume language to correspond with the world in a simple copy fashion, but to be dialogic, the entire edifice of models, levels and rational order collapses.

Metaphor plays an equally significant, and less obvious, part in presuppositions of order. It is less a question of whether metaphor is constitutive of models (see Ortony 1979),¹⁴ but of how metaphor has in fact been used. Whether it is what he wished to achieve or not, Kuhn's original formulation of scientific paradigms (1962) showed the pervasive use of metaphors (see Masterman 1970) in the natural sciences. There is evidence aplenty of the importance of metaphor in the constitution of anthropological knowledge (Salmond 1982). If it is well known that metaphors of organism in structural-functionalism and language in structuralism have at times become constitutive, something similar can be shown for the status of culture-as-text in interpretive anthropology and truth-as-voice in the critique of ethnographic writing (see Hobart 1990). It is high time critics turned their attention to the use of metaphor in economics (see Tribe 1978). The catachretic abuse of metaphor is germane to the issue of order in two ways. First, it clothes transcendental essences in an aura of plausible substantiality, a process with which critics of development planning are familiar. Economies do not stagnate, expand or explode; wealth does not trickle or gush down (as British conservative ministers are discovering). Second, as we saw with language, it permits order to be introduced under the guise of an analogy.¹⁵ There seems to be no simple way of avoiding metaphor because it permeates our speech so thoroughly (Quine 1979). One is obliged to be careful. Consider how the term 'development' itself has been used. To argue that social life (or development planning) is inherently disorderly is as much catachresis ('social life *as* disorderly' → 'social life *is* disorderly') as it is to argue that it is inherently orderly.

Perhaps anthropologists are particularly aware of the shortcomings of models of development predicated on questionable assumptions, because experience in the field shows them both to ignore available evidence of what is happening locally and to work badly. The failure of grand models of ordered development through reason does not justify embracing irrationalism by assuming the world to be disordered. Order and disorder are equally discursive judgements. Epistemological caution does not spell the end of the detailed empirically based research, which are arguably anthropologists' main contribution to studies not just

¹⁴ Once again there is a hidden essentialism at work. The problem is phrased independent of contexts of use, as if the role of metaphor in models could be established by inspection of their respective essences.

¹⁵ Further, metaphor enables arguably disparate processes to be subsumed under a single model, thereby creating the semblance of order.

of development, but of much social life. On the contrary, the epistemological problems of both empiricism and rational model-making, which bedevil, say, economics, if recognized potentially expands the usefulness of detailed anthropological studies.

It is difficult to see, for instance, how one can investigate that Methuselah of the anthropological trade, ‘unintended consequences’, without proper research. I gather that, in the famous ‘Sahel project’, for every 5,000 hectares of newly-irrigated land, another 5,000 hectares turned into wet, salty, unproductive desert. Sometimes, however, liberal ideals can blind one to unintended consequences. It tends to be taken as axiomatic that development aid should help the poor by making them richer (the argument, as I understand it, is over how this should best be achieved). Yet anthropologists are also aware that wealth, however initially distributed, does not mysteriously spread equally, nor does access to productive resources remain static. As Balinese in many parts of Badung and Gianyar are discovering, money from international tourism may lead to the emergence of a class of wealthy entrepreneurs and an increasing number of relatively impoverished landless wage labourers with no access to productive capital. There are consequences of any plan; and policy is never politically neutral.

Discerning disorder

It is as difficult as it is fascinating to consider how one might incorporate disorder into an analytical framework, whether to approach questions of development and its failures or for more general anthropological purposes. The question is: what do we understand by disorder? Is it a definite kind of state or process, or a matter of degree? Is it deviation from some ideal state of affairs (e.g. the failure of a plan)? Or is it the product of misunderstanding or miscommunication (which seems common in development)? Were one to consider disorder as, in some sense, normal, would this be absolute, or relative, disorder?¹⁶ And relative to what?

The problem is that disorder is defined relative to, and as a failure of, order. Disorder is often *represented* in systematic models as complementary to order. Consider the following refractions of the notions of order and disorder respectively:

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|-----------|---|----------|----|----------|---|--------------|
| <i>Models</i> | Structure | : | Theory | :: | Language | : | Propositions |
| <i>Reality</i> | Events | : | Practice | :: | Speech | : | Utterances |

There is a wonderful muddle of purported complementarity, dichotomy and simple difference. In many classifications, appeal to dichotomy opposes two categories, the relationship between which is questionable. For instance, emotion is often opposed to intellect, or reason, and so rendered partly incoherent as a

¹⁶ Is absolute disorder even conceivable? Is it the same as randomness? In which case, is one back to a model of random (Gaussian) distribution, a highly structured, statistical abstraction and far from the kind of frame of reference which permits reflection on detail in which anthropologists are interested?

category, because it is defined asymmetrically both by incommensurable criteria and as a negative category: that which is not intellect. The result is to make emotion peculiarly hard to study successfully. Similar difficulties arise in talking about disorder: it is decentred by being a displaced antithesis to order. Disorder then appears as all the possible forms of what is not ordered.

What is notably missing in the account above is any recognition that people use such classifications in different ways in particular situations. Instead we have abstract concepts, removed from any extension in the world, from time, space, social situations, contexts of use and from the agents who use them. In other words, we have transcendent essences. Just as concepts are obscure mental entities shorn of particularities,¹⁷ so the whole language of such classifications involves recourse to meaning and propositions, which are distillations of actual utterances, of questionable epistemological status and relevance. ‘Meanings of sentences are exalted as abstract entities in their own right, under the name of *propositions*.’ (Quine 1970: 2). Among other problems, such essentialism displaces any situated human agency, such that reason, meaning, myth and so on become transcendental agents (‘myths think themselves through humans’, ‘humans are caught in webs of significance’) and people the mere instruments.¹⁸

Turning the whole issue around proves instructive. After all, events happen and people act. Order becomes a problem only when someone decides to start to explain what is happening. In other words, order - and disorder - is a product of social acts, here of explaining. Explaining happens in particular situations and involves ordering, by asserting or claiming some kind of relationship to hold; and denying or closing off other possibilities. So explaining and ordering are not just epistemological acts, they are acts of power. This may have some bearing upon the ambiguous status of the word ‘order’ in English. It is at once a noun describing a purported status of the world; it is also a verb referring to the perlocutionary act of bringing about that order. British politicians on election night, in claiming to explain or order information, are attempting to order the world by asserting an explanation. The advantage of approaching order and disorder this way is that it enables us to consider ordering, and claiming disorder, as social practices (Bourdieu 1977, 1990), with which anthropologists are in principle well equipped to deal.

Essences and order

The issue is, I would suggest, not so much how to deal with order - or rather ordering - as a social act. It is more the problem of the extent to which our categories have been so essentialized that even using common terms tends to pitch us back into the use of a discourse replete with transcendent entities. I am reminded of Isaiah Berlin’s argument (1974) to the effect that our language is so

¹⁷ The concept ‘redness’ is distinct from any actual red thing. The problems of general terms, such as order or reality, is that they are yet more abstract, being ways of framing whole sets of relationships between concepts (cf. Peirce’s *Thirds*).

¹⁸ My aim is not to return to some Weberian voluntarism (cf. Bhaskar 1979: 39-47), but to a dialectical, situated account of the relationship of humans and other agents to social life.

thoroughly shot through with values of choice or free will that a historically determinist argument would require an undertaking of almost unthinkable magnitude. This reference to history is not accidental because, if we are to stress practice, we need to consider how such practices have been represented in historically situated discourses. Among the many terms one might choose, with a long and varied usage, there are three - village, peasantry and working-class - which illuminate different aspects of the problem.

The notion of the village has long been central, not only to anthropologists and developers, but to those whose job it was to administer, tax, control and develop European colonial territories. (The two activities were, needless to say, not unrelated.) As Inden has put it:

Scholars and rulers of the Anglo-French imperial formation of the nineteenth century took the village in their discourses to be the irreducible unit, the 'atom' of the state in the nations and empires of Asia, not only in India, but in the Ottoman empire or Persia and China as well (1990: 131).

Villages, after all, were pretty evident. One can walk to and through, map, photograph and survey them. The ostensible reality of the village as the fundamental unit of society was underwritten in intersecting, but not co-ordinate ways, by the familiar dichotomies of rural : urban :: traditional : modern :: *Gemeinschaft* : *Gesellschaft* :: 'little' : 'great' traditions :: local : national :: village : state. Above all, villages were the timeless basic building blocks of society and so outside history.¹⁹

Neither the positivistic solidity (and solidarity) of the village, nor its unchanging perpetuity is what it seems. Quite what is it, however, that one is walking through, observing or measuring? A village is an abstraction. What one observes are buildings, plants, trees and people. And it has become clear that even the arrangement of these in formations Europeans recognize may be due to the actions of Europeans themselves. For Java, for instance,

the presumed archetypal village, the closed corporate community, has no great history but is a direct response to Dutch colonialism (see also Wolf 1957). More specifically, whereas villages, in the sense of their being clusters of households undoubtedly existed in much of Java, the village as a land-holding, territory-controlling (and sometimes -owning) formal administrative entity did not. Yet it is precisely these communal, corporate characteristics which have been taken to exemplify the unchanging village community!...

It is evident that the so-called peasant community has been represented and acted upon by a disparate bunch of social scientists, colonial and post-colonial administrators, development workers, and intellectuals. I suggest that this has occurred in such a way as not only to misrepresent the nature of the village and its relation to a wider social universe, but also to actually play a part in changing the pattern of articulation (Kemp 1989: 9, 16; referring to the work of Bremen 1980).

Certainly, from what I am able to gather of Bali, the extent and complexity of people's social ties between villages and with courts (which were physically in, if

¹⁹ 'There is, or has been, no degree of indeterminacy in the formation and reproduction of villages or little kingdoms. One cannot, therefore, speak of them as having a history' (Inden 1990: 157).

not entirely of, the village) were significant. It also seems that the presence of courts, where they existed, militated against the solidarity of the *dorpsrepubliek*.

What is at stake here is not just the displacement of some European imagined community and its recreation elsewhere, but the way in which the entire range of personal, social, economic, political, spatial and historical relationships between people in diverse situations are simplified and at once substantialized and abstracted into an unchanging shared essence. Writing about India, Inden has put it as follows:

the presupposition that some essence, in the sense of a stable, determinate nature or structure, underlies human institutions and even entire civilizations. This essence, present as identifiable properties or characteristics, is assumed to exist as an objective reality which constitutes an ancient or modern society. The recent tendency has been to deny the traditionality of the Indian village in 'factual' terms without questioning the essentialism that lies behind the dichotomy of traditional and modern...The same mechanical (or organic) metaphors that commentators used to constitute the possessive individual and the sovereign nation-state they have also used to imagine the Indian village into existence. Combined with the assumption of homogeneity, that villages are everywhere in India pretty much the same, we are given our picture of a cellular rural society (1990: 158).

As I noted, invoking such essences, at once substantial and transcendental, disposes of the problem of human agency. This is very convenient for planners and administrators who do not therefore have to worry about what people think and do. Somehow, if one tinkers with the institutions, the people will be tinkered with too. Villagers become manifestations of 'the village', 'the village economy', 'peasant mentality' and so forth. Change the village (economy/mentality etc. delete as applicable) and you change the people.

The epistemology that accompanies this essentialism pays no or little heed to the discourse of villagers. In so far as it does, it treats it positivistically either as a transparent medium by which one obtains 'data', or, since villagers think metaleptically, as a smokescreen to be penetrated or as a false consciousness that has to be translated into the rational, clear, scientific, description-language of the ethnographer (Inden 1990: 159).

To this one might add the planners and administrators and note that the metalepsis is projected onto villagers. These critiques are relevant to the question of order. The concept of the village simplifies and extrapolates certain pre-selected features from the vast range of actions of people in widely differing situations. In condensing and abstracting these essential features, it makes it possible to articulate large and heterogeneous populations to pre-existing discursive categories. Order is created at the expense of situated diversity, history and agency.

The themes we have encountered in considering the village appear equally in an examination of ideas of the peasantry. At the risk of alienating the substantial intellectual industry that owns the peasantry, feudalism, class and the Asiatic mode of production, one can consider the notions of 'village' and 'peasantry' as

linked as different refractions of the same essence.²⁰ Whereas the village is the timeless spatial or geographic essence of rural society, the peasantry is its inarticulate economic (i.e. productive) or social essence. This formulation is, above all, agentive. That is it casts peasants as either passive (or lazy, Alatas 1977), or at best as possessed of a narrow, traditional (i.e. unchanging) self-interest (Inden's 'possessive individual'). In either case, the peasantry is so constituted (e.g. 'the little tradition') as to require the effective intelligence and agency of superior outsiders, whether feudal, colonialist, capitalist or leaders of various proclivities within the new nation states.²¹ In development planning of course, it is the active capacities of Western technicians who must cope with the disorder (relative to their own achieved order) and guide, show or do for the passive, or incompetent, natives - here the essence of the peasantry is extended synecdochically to the nation as a whole - what they lack the agency and intelligence to do for themselves. The order that is postulated in the idea of a peasantry with certain set features is not a neutral abstraction. It is one which constitutes the bulk of the population as passive, custom-bound, pre-rational, in need of being led, spoken for and, as we shall see, in need of being told what to think.

If I may be permitted to by-pass here the scholastic arguments about the nature of the eternal, unsituated 'peasantry' as a 'class' (a further essence), almost all the peoples with whom anthropologists work, share another essence, namely that they are working class, in the simple sense that their livelihoods depend substantially on their labour rather than on capital and on their notional situation at the bottom of national social and economic hierarchies. My main concern is less with whether this formulation fits current (and contradictory) arguments about the nature of social class, but to examine the similarities in the ways in which both the 'working class' and 'the peasantry' are constituted as 'to-be-ordered'.

The implications of the construction of a large proportion of the population - whether peasantry or working class - as passive and marginal to the workings of a world-ordering rationality is neatly brought out by Baudrillard.

The masses are no longer a referent because they no longer belong to the order of representation. They don't express themselves, they are surveyed. They don't reflect upon themselves, they are tested...Now polls, tests, the referendum, media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representations, but to one of simulation. They no longer have a referent in view, but a model.' (1983: 20)

²⁰ 'The literature on "peasants", "peasantry", and the "peasant village community" is huge and frequently contradictory...However, further reflection suggests that at least some of these themes and their ordering of the subject are not what they purport to be, that is, fairly objective observations on a set of distinct phenomena. Instead, they have far more to do with the development of *Western* culture and society than with the empirical realities, often of the so-called Third World, which they supposedly describe and explain' (Kemp 1989: 4).

²¹ 'There was little opportunity for African peasants to borrow from the invented traditions by which European peasantries had sought to defend themselves against the intrusion of capitalism...Only through some of the mission churches did European peasant formulations reach Africans, and only then in transformed shape' (Ranger 1983: 213).

The processes of abstracting essence from human social life turns it into a model, in which the object is not only rendered completely passive, but is recreated as a simulation of itself. This bears on the question of order. Simulations are nice and orderly, because they are the product of an unsituated rationality. It is this simulation which arguably is in danger of becoming the object of reality for developers, economists, sociologists and, at times, anthropologists. The removal of disorder is complete. As someone once remarked, unkindly, about a celebrated British anthropologist, whom I shall leave unnamed: ‘the only thing that gets in the way of the social structure is the people.’

Having been constituted as passive, the working class, agentively, must be ordered according to some plan of action.

Whatever its political, pedagogical, cultural content, the plan is always to get some meaning across, to keep the masses within reason; an imperative to produce meaning that takes the form of the constantly repeated imperative to moralise information: to better inform, to better socialise, to raise the cultural level of the masses, etc. Nonsense: the masses scandalously resist this imperative of rational communication. They are given meaning: they want spectacle....Messages are given to them, they only want some sign, they idolise the play of signs and stereotypes, they idolise any content so long as it resolves itself into a spectacular sequence. What they reject is the “dialectic” of meaning...This is always a hypocritical hypothesis which protects the intellectual complaisance of the producers of meaning: the masses spontaneously aspire to the natural light of reason. This in order to evade the reverse hypothesis, namely that it is in complete “freedom” that the masses oppose their refusal of meaning and their will to spectacle to the ultimatum of meaning (Baudrillard 1983: 9-10).

By this stage the familiar bastions of transcendental order are lined up: models, meaning, plans, rationality, communication, levels. And the passive nature of the subject of all this has been converted into an object, a simulacrum.

Exaggerated as it might seem at first, unfortunately it comes perilously close to some accounts of colonial, the new élites’ and developers’ views of native populations. Perhaps more worrying, it fits the assumptions of much liberal and left wing ideology. The working class/peasantry are there to be educated, drawn out from ignorance, short term goals of pleasure etc. into realizing themselves as meaningful human beings, a class for themselves, part of the revolutionary process or whatever. They remain manifestations of an essence. As such they need not disturb our preconceptions and sense of order.

There is an ambiguity in Baudrillard’s laconic depiction of the working classes’ refusal to co-operate in their improvement. It is unclear whether their preference for spectacle (reminiscent of Geertz’s vision of the Balinese theatre state) is to be taken as part of the active middle class’s vision of the working class, or Baudrillard’s idea of what is actually the case. Even the idea of refusal (like resisting, rejection, disorder) to co-operate is an image of the working classes as passively resisting. If, and when, there is a refusal to co-operate with their self-appointed superiors, in my experience it takes a far more active form,

which is hard to express short of resurrecting an old word like ‘oblivate’.²² Whichever it be, it should be evident that these models, or simulacra, have more to do with how other peoples are constructed within a relatively closed discursive formation which serves to order them in two senses.

If we wish to consider disorder seriously, then it looks as if we need first to dismantle an intellectual and administrative panoply of models, simulations and essences, which arguably misrepresents badly the heterogeneity and capacity for agency and reflection of the peoples with whom we work. It certainly ignores their own discourses of which we remain largely ignorant. It may be less they who refuse reason in favour of spectacle, than we who have turned them into spectacle, by refusing to allow them to have their own reasons. Perhaps we should leave spectacles and the simulation of order to those who so obviously relish them: British politicians!

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²² The term arose during the course of discussions on this theme with Richard Fardon, to whom my thanks for helping clarify some of these issues. I would also like to thank Ron Inden for reading an earlier draft of this paper.

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