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CIVILIAN SCHOLARSHIP

Jeffrey M. Perl

Volume 8, number 1, of *Common Knowledge* succeeds volume 7, number 3, after a hiatus in which the editorial office has moved from the United States, where our primary concern was with the “culture wars,” to the Middle East, where the belligerence is less metaphorical. *CK*’s progress from the New World to the Old has been logical, an extension of its commitments extramurally and internationally. A journal with a name implying quiet cooperation has its work cut out for it in this place and now: I am writing from Jerusalem in the ninth month of the “Al-Aqsa Intifada.”

A tacit premise of this journal’s first seven years was that poststructuralist and, more generally, skeptical theories of knowledge, meaning, and value should never have become a field of battle. To the extent that such theories (or anti-theories) have worked to lower the pretensions of *true*, *real*, and other hazardous words, postmodernism has been a project that traditionalists and moderates should appreciate and support. Even when arrogantly framed, poststructuralist claims give the old-fashioned wisdom of humility a new life. It has not been the argument of sober theorists that “nothing is true” or that “anything goes.” What’s been claimed, first, is that being right is not such a big deal—and second, that (as Susan Sontag put it last year from a podium in Jerusalem) “something else is always going on.” There is too much truth for anyone or any combination of us to take in, digest, and utter. As for “anything goes”: what-goes depends on who’s going, and when. No one serious in these debates has proposed that reality and

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validity are imaginary or even unavailable (in principle) to our understanding, but on the contrary that reality and validity are inexpensive and in plentiful supply. As for facts, it's not that we don't know any, but rather that we know so many and that the ones we know, much of the time, don't well cohere.

The most effective transmitters of this avant-garde wisdom have, in my experience, been lullabies, the tunes accompanied by stories that help us get some rest. Once the melody of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is in your repertoire, the hypertension that attends on using *real* and *true* in sentences subsides. Unfortunately, we have as yet no lullaby that calms us down about our use of *just*, as shrill an adjective as ever. Justice, truth, and peace are the principles that the Mishnah says maintain the world (Avot 1:18)—of the three, justice and truth have always had obsessive partisans among scholars; but peace? Living where I do, peace seems to me an *idée fixe* over which intellectuals could usefully obsess now. But even within the poststructuralist common room, there are voices shouting as though ontologies were in conflict. How is that possible, now that the big words have been lower-cased and scare-quoted? About what can *those* people be arguing?

Rorty has on occasion said that, despite all (“all” being historicism), he'd like us to feel that we can fight and die for a cause we know is not transcendent, but historically situated and conditioned. I would have thought that the prime benefit of his kind of relativism is that we would feel no longer any such needs. I used to think—it seemed possible—that we contend over territory, even where, as in the academy, the territories are trivial (Who gets the corner view? Whose protégé gets tenure?). But I've come to think that we fight in order to evade peace, which apparently some of us fear and others despise. Heraclitus is quoted on the beauty of conflict in so many epigraphs and book reviews, it's untoward—yet knocking our heads together seems an unobvious route to enlightenment. Constructing a reality, as postmoderns tend to say we do, is, one would think, a tranquil and cooperative labor, involving negotiation, compromise, patience, and plenty of time.

The assumption that strife is productive is a prejudice. The symptoms are so widespread, we hardly notice them. For a study of “civilian” intellectual values, I have been noting down revealing expressions in common use—“celebrated quarrel” is among those I do not understand. Many of us celebrate birthdays, national holidays; some celebrate mass—but quarrels? More pertinent adjectives are available: *notorious* makes more sense. I am also assembling a library of recent tomes and essays with terms like *consensus*, *conflict*, and *disagreement* in their titles or subtitles, and I am finding relatively few in the humanities—these few tend to be in the philosophical vein of Donald Davidson or Jürgen Habermas—that do not presuppose that agreement is ominous. Jacques Rancière's book *Disagreement*, for example, associates consensus with “the reign of the inhuman.” Certainly I

can think of instances, many instances, in which a consensus has had dire consequences—but in theory? as a general maxim? *Terror and Consensus*, edited by Jean-Joseph Goux and Philip Wood, likewise “characterizes any community, political or other” in terms of “the agonistic, the dimension of conflict present in it.” Democracy, it is argued (I am summarizing the contribution to this collection by Françoise Gaillard), requires a divided community; democracy in an undivided community, she holds, is necessarily “a cosmetic vision.” Mark Poster, also writing in the Goux-Wood volume, describes Habermas’s theory of communicative action, which is premised on the desirability of consensus, as “a terroristic subordination of concept and meaning to instrumentality.” (*Terroristic?*) Not one essay in the collection disagrees about agreement: the consensus against consensus is firm.

In this genre, Stuart Hampshire’s book *Justice Is Conflict* (his epigraph is the usual from Heraclitus) is the most helpful, in that it misses a possibility that we can use in pursuit of a justice that is not conflictual. Hampshire writes that “every soul is always the scene of conflicting tendencies and of divided aims and ambivalences, and correspondingly, our political enmities in the city or state will never come to an end while we have diverse life stories and diverse imaginations.” I am not sure what diversity has to do with ambivalence in that sentence—ordinarily we use *diversity* to refer to the relationships among stable, self-identical types—but I think it’s interesting that Hampshire believes our ambivalence as individuals is a guarantee of strife when it could very well be the opposite. If each of us is ambivalent, if none of us represents a stable, self-identical type, then ambivalence could be an inchoate and dynamic principle of consensus. Montaigne’s self-evaluation is to the point:

Anyone who turns his prime attention on to himself will hardly ever find himself in the same state twice. I give my soul this face or that, depending upon which side I lay it down on. I speak about myself in diverse ways: that is because I look at myself in diverse ways. Every sort of contradiction can be found in me, depending upon some twist or attribute . . . anyone who studies himself attentively finds in himself and in his very judgement this whirring about and this discordancy. There is nothing I can say about myself as a whole simply and completely, without intermingling and admixture.

Montaigne is writing here of multivalence rather than ambivalence, and to that degree is a more pertinent psychologist than Freud. Because it will pay to think of ourselves, each of us, as a parliament of incompatible parties in which elections must be held frequently; there must be governance, we must go on. The coalition in control today will present a prime ministerial face reflecting none of the conflict that lurks behind it; likewise the next face tomorrow. The faces may differ widely, as Montaigne observes, and if we insist, each of us, that each new face

is ours, our only face, the only face that we have ever had—that our opinions, in other words, are unconflicted and consistent—it is clear that we will come to blows with each other. But if we recognize, each, that *we are internally more than externally diverse*, that we are poor forked and bewildered creatures negotiating life on a planet hospitable basically to fish, then a devaluing of our external diversities is possible. Peace, of all things, could ensue.

Or regard the matter this way: disagreements are complexly historical, they by and large have histories that long antedate the disputants—histories so entangled and subtle that disagreement has become, paradoxically, a kind of sharing. The antagonists, as Wittgenstein might say, agree in or to the language of their dispute—their dispute is almost a community—and, in such a case, neither the word *disagreement* itself, nor the terms of whatever disagreement is in question, have any longer a genuine or stable referent. Some philosophers view this problem as an effect of untranslatability. Rorty says of the opposing sides in a particular dispute: “Both are right, but there is no way to make both speak a single language.” However, the most serious misunderstandings may arise—or so it seems to me, these days—when parties to a dispute speak the same words but mean different things by them or do not mean what they say at all. “There is a general law,” P. N. Furbank has written, that “what historians refer to . . . as ‘beliefs’ or mental ‘representations’ are better described as rhetoric.” Much of what enemies, or even friends, say is wishful thinking; enmity, like friendship, is perhaps a milieu, rather than a consequence of beliefs or acts. In any case, when it comes to history, it seems perversely wishful to describe the past, in Lawrence Stone’s manner, as “a battle-ground which has been heavily fought over . . . beset with mines, booby-traps and ambushes manned by ferocious scholars prepared to fight every inch of the way.” (*Ferocious?*)

What I am trying to describe, to adumbrate, is not a position. It is a *meta*-position, a position about holding positions. Call it *relativism* and scare the neighbors; give it blessedly no name at all, and what is it? A civilian approach to living four-score years. Skepticism is nothing but sophistication, its maxims written down for occasional reference. In our time, thanks to the fires of hell, that sophistication is widely shared. Following on this column are two by intellectual statesmen whose precursors in their exalted seats would by no means have written, prior to World War II, the pieces that they have honored us by publishing here. The guest columnists for this reinaugural issue of *Common Knowledge* are the senior prince of an Arab kingdom, forty-second descendant in a direct line from Muhammad, and a prince of the Catholic Church in the Vatican Curia, both writing self-consciously in the aftermath of genocide, both writing in solidarity, or a kind of solidarity, or the beginnings of solidarity, with a people and religion they have reasons to regard with hostility or suspicion. Prince Hassan and Cardinal Cassidy are preeminently what I mean by relativists, though I have

little doubt they would prefer the application of another term. Relativists of their kind have deep commitments, but peace is one of them; they value peace over truth and justice—or rather, they know that truth and justice are often used as excuses for war. I myself would add that, in both the short and long runs, truth and justice are themselves better served by those whose preference is for peace.

Some readers, I imagine, are by this paragraph squirming with embarrassment and responding with disdain. The intellectual community needs to get its affective house in order before it can claim any other community's regard. I am convinced that Joyce wrote seventeen intellectually demanding and acidly ironic episodes of *Ulysses* just so no intellectuals could smirk when he said a heartfelt “yes I will Yes” in the eighteenth. After the Second World War, Beckett was able—there had been enough death by then—to arrange plays (I am thinking of dramaticules like *Not I* and *Footfalls*) that are sentimental-philanthropic and ironic-brutal-cool at once. But if scholarship is waiting for its Beckett, it could wait too long. The cultivation of pity, mercy, compassion, approbation, love of peace, and the other virtues whose invocation leaves us green and squeamish will take much time and conscious effort in a community that prefers to see itself as rough-and-tumble. Quarreling appears to be a game, much as war is often said to be, a game with human casualties and cultural casualties that, once it's started, there seems no reliable way of ending until sufficient damage has been done. The world deserves better of those employed to think and write and educate.

Common Knowledge has, from the appearance of its first issue, done what it could to ease the polarization and factional strife in its own immediate neighborhood, the academy. Besides maintaining diligently a policy against polemic, the journal in its first series published numerous pieces correlating figures generally thought of as in opposition (“improbable feats of mismatch,” a call for papers termed them) and made a point of presenting articles that appeared unclassifiable or self-subverting ideologically. *CK* worked to find resolutions for intractable disputes and artificial distinctions: a long-running discussion of countertransference in psychoanalysis was intended to develop a model for intellectual labor that defies any rigid distinction of objectivity from subjectivity; in a similar vein, the journal sponsored a group of articles on ambivalence as an achievement rather than a predicament of human beings and societies. Most concerted were the efforts in *Common Knowledge* to conceive a new type of intellectual and a new model for what intellectuals do. The new type was to be “no *type* at all”: an intellectual who resists his or her own conclusions and declines to assert magisterium, but whose responsibility is nevertheless soteriological. The new model was to be based on metaphors of conversation or friendship rather than on metaphors, adopted from those of sports and war, of “sides” that one must “take.”

The future of *Common Knowledge* has more fundamental and expansive vari-

ations in store. The editors have felt a sense of incompleteness, and our transfer to a virtual war zone expresses a desire to get-on-with-it. Our initial brochure in 1991 bore, without comment, a motto that Berliners had carried on placards as the Wall fell—"We are Cain *and* Abel"—and it is time to make that promise of self-redefinition a more realistic prospect. We invite the intellectual community, on both sides of the ivy curtain, to join us in renewing the velvet revolution that politics-as-usual has for too long set off course.

Addendum

I wrote this column toward the end of June 2001, and I am adding these lines to it soon after the staggering events of September 11. A week that I had set aside for reviewing the proofs of this issue has been divided, instead, between ministering to articles on enmity and seeing a myriad of people suffering in New York and Washington. I lived in New York for many years, and my initial response has been physical. The return to coherent thought is slow.

But as the calls for emotional and then political solidarity give way to accusations, to recrimination over failures of the intelligence community, I have one thought that I feel compelled to share about and with another community, similarly named: the intellectual community, the republic of letters. We have policed our bailiwicks and tended our fields; we have written our peer-reviewed articles on what interests us, and perhaps a few peers. We have done little to justify our privileges and prestige. Intelligence, in both senses, can be indolent and squandered.

Stand up and be counted is not what I am saying. To stand up and be quantified is to stand, not for this or that, but for the continued conflict of this and that. *Sit down and rethink* is more what I mean. Why, after so much time—millennia upon millennia upon millennia—do sapient beings understand so little about each other and themselves, about their cultures, about all their cultures do to enable and inhibit understanding? There is important, painfully complex, long-term work to do at the confluence of peace and mind. Let us grieve, then do it—whatever our separate interests—together.