

Homogenizing Difference: Necessary Prejudices and the Rhetoric of Belonging

Recent articles by leading European academics – for instance, those by Ulrich Beck¹ and Bernard-Henri Lévy² – have, in the name of a championing of French culture or the evolution of the European post-nation state, emphasised the “differences” of Europe over against the character of the “sameness” of America, the staging of which appears to trans-Atlantic eyes to be exemplified by the hustings and conventions of the current primaries, where the distinctions between candidates seem less important than the repeated rhetoric of belongingness to a constructed and hoped-for unity of the United States.

Beck’s “cosmopolitan tolerance” posits, not a toleration of difference by that which is inherently the “same”, but an active opening up to the “world of the Other, perceiving difference as an enrichment”, and exemplified on the one hand by the apparent retention of the concept of the nation state by America, and on the other the ditching of it by Europe. Lévy argues not for any intrinsic superiority of French culture, but against the homogenisation of the concept of “global significance” (the words of *Time* magazine), especially in so far as this is equated with a significance to American capital.

¹ Ulrich Beck: *A new cosmopolitanism is in the air*, 2007
<http://www.signandsight.com/features/1603.html> and *Nation-state politics can only fail the problems of the modern world* <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jan/15/politics.eu>

² Bernard-Henri Lévy, *American talk of the death of French culture says more about them than us*, 2007
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/dec/08/france.international>

To what extent is the “staging” that these phenomena exemplify necessary in order to act or argue politically? For one’s initial reaction, in both the case of the hustings and that of the European academics (but neither are simply academics; they are both closely intertwined in a tightly knit political and economic arena), is to think of the stage within a stage of Hamlet and worry with the guilty Queen that there is a little too much protesting going on. For if, indeed, the United States is unified; if, indeed, two hundred or so years of nation-building had achieved the success of citizens belonging without question to the nation-state of America; what would be the rhetorical and political value of repeatedly proclaiming it? If Europe, in its political differences and the labyrinthine political structures to which it has given rise, is secure as an “entity” vis-à-vis the States, Asia and Russia, then what would be the need to contrast, with Beck, such a political entity with its others, and proclaim a new and – the argument appears to go - universal structuring which is well-nigh bound to advance in its inherent superiority over other political structures? If there is an exemplary culture of France (exemplary not so much in its high quality – for Lévy questions this - but rather in its lack of translatability to an Anglo-Saxon method of assessment), then why would one of the principal philosophers of the French state need to defend it against an (ostensibly populist) article in *Time* magazine?

The worry regarding too much protestation is already in play in at least one of these articles. Lévy states that the “ultimate message” – “a secret one, and in code” - of the *Time* article is not the concrete criticism of French culture, nor the underlying simplistic implications of that criticism (which he outlines in five “axioms”), but rather that “what really strikes one is the nervousness of the tone. It is this desire to *prove too much*

which inevitably, as Nietzsche says, exhausts truth." However, this meta-awareness of a structure, need or necessity to "prove too much", of protesting too much, does not appear to save Lévy from the fate of being hoist by his own petard: even a co-European critique of his piece might question whether the evocation of Nietzsche in respect of a *Time* article which asks its readers: "Quick: name a French pop star who isn't Johnny Hallyday'" is not to be using a sledge-hammer to crack a rather small nut.

Beck's thesis is that of a cosmopolitan European Union engaged in the active process of transcending the outmoded idea of a unified national state. It thereby divorces the notions of "state" and "nation" from each other, and thus is setting the scene for the necessarily cosmopolitan politics of the 21st century, just as the Peace of Westphalia separated the church and state in the 17th century and thus brought religious tolerance to Europe (according to Beck's argument, which can certainly be disputed). This stance is contrasted to that of the States which, it is claimed, is wedded still to a "nationalism – a rigid adherence to the position that world political meta power games are and must remain national ones". There is an implied set of philosophical differences which Beck applies across this divide. On the side of "nationalism" and the state regarded as a unity is the outmoded philosophy of "the same", of the object secure in its identity as a criteria of effective action and thought, an associated lack of ambiguity in analysis, and the subsuming of differences and relativity to an essentialising discourse. The side of cosmopolitanism by contrast represents indirectly the 1960s philosophies of difference of (amongst others) Deleuze (*Difference and Repetition*, 1967) and Derrida (*Différance*, 1967), derived in turn from a post-Nietzschean or post-Heideggerian distrust of the notion of the object, secure in its

identity, as a criteria of final knowledge. But the reduction of the argument - and more importantly the political realities of Europe, the States and other nation-states – to this philosophical distinction between ontologies of the same and of difference is surely a caricature of more complex political realities.

Empirically, we could ask whether it so sure that the United States represents an unequivocal “nation state”, and whether the European Union has so clearly departed from the same project. What of the currents within both which run counter to Beck’s argument? Philosophically, we could recall that Deleuze’s expands the realm of “difference” to the point where all notions of the same are derived from it, not *vice-versa*. In other words, the philosophy of difference does not allow any primary sameness from which difference could be derived by way of a contrast between two things. Difference “comes first” and identity is derived. This, says Deleuze, is the “profound” message of Nietzsche’s eternal return of the same³. It means in turn that the field of analysis is, in the ultimate case, not a field of similar items but rather a chaos from which “disorders” can be fictionalised by the workings of the novelist-analyst-clinician. This analogy we take from Deleuze:

There is always a great deal of art involved in the grouping of symptoms, in the organisation of a *table* where a particular symptom is dissociated from another... and forms the new figure of a disorder or illness. Clinicians who... renew a symptomatological table produce a work of art; conversely, artists are clinicians.... of civilisation. It seems, moreover, that an evaluation of symptoms might only be achieved through a *novel*.”⁴

³ see Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy* and *Difference and Repetition*

⁴ Deleuze, G *Logic of Sense* section 33

Thus, on this reading, an ultimate analysis of the difference between the States and Europe, and the effectiveness of a European cosmopolitanism, would need to remain faithful to a doubt as to the coherence of the phenomena being discussed. In other words, if Beck is championing a philosophy of difference over that of the same, is it so clear that the unequivocal deployment of the tool of "sameness" (the States is thus; Europe is thus) is appropriate?

Our argument here is that what is occurring in each of these political fields (the *Time* magazine article; Lévy's criticism of it; the evocation of American unity and belongingness in the hustings; and Beck's championing of European cosmopolitanism) is the use of a necessary staging, and a necessary and *inescapable* prejudice.

We can argue the inescapability of prejudice from a number of positions (and these are not the only ones):

1. Marc Augé, in *Non-places - introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*⁵, in a book which at the outset appears to be a critique of modern denuded notions of space, points to a structural character of anthropological studies (as evinced by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, but common to all anthropology as a scientific discipline) when he states that "behind the ideas of totality and localized society there clearly lies another: that of consistency or transparency between culture, society and individual" (49), which results in an obvious limitation: "to substantify a singular culture is to ignore its intrinsically

problematic character" (50), a limitation he refers to as the "ethnological illusion" (51). Thus a critique of the modern non-place (airports, suburbia, malls etc) comes to call into question the very notion of authentic "place" (the culturally unambiguous meaningful place posited by anthropological studies of other cultures) which was used to contrast to (and therefore construct) this supposed "non-place". We point, however, to the necessity of this ethnological illusion or prejudice in its two-fold result. Augé does not claim that anthropology could (or should) be cured of this "failing"; he acknowledges that it is this prejudice which enables the discipline to arise in the first place and which allows it to learn, to discover, to posit internal theories and to record empirical results. These results are two-fold. On the one hand, explicit: the prejudice or illusion of a substantive, singular culture enables matters to be stated about that culture. On the other hand, implicit: that same prejudice implies and generates discourses about the culture from which the anthropologist hails.

2. Quine, in his seminal essay *Ontological Relativity*⁶, posits the inevitable use of background theories, frames of references and coordinate systems in order to explicate and locate whatever foreground theory is in use. In determining what objects we wish to study, we must have reference back to a "background theory" which in turn gives the criteria for object-like status. In other words, put in the terms we have already used, in order to state something about an

⁵ Augé, M, *Non-places - introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* trans J Howe. London: Verso, 1995 [original: *Non-lieux, Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* 1992.]

object of study, we must use a “prejudice” – a pre-defined background – ie these “background theories”. Now, for Quine as a positivist philosopher, there can be no “prior philosophy” (26) outside the “natural sciences”, which provides the ultimate foundation of all valid analysis. None the less, he states that: “ As for the ontology in turn of the background theory... these matters can call for a background theory in turn” (67). This implies regress, since the background theory in turn falls to be explicated in terms of another, and so forth; and we can see that taken to the limit, we are confronted with an abyssal situation where, in order to make valid statements, we must dispose arguably unfounded prejudices (ie background theories not yet explicated on the basis of another deeper one).

3. Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*⁷, in his re-evaluation of the epistemology of the enlightenment, argues explicitly for the necessity of prejudice, in contrast to the enlightenment’s call for (and use of) the notion of knowledge deriving from the *tabula rasa* of first principles. This structure of prejudice is an essential part of his hermeneutics (his theory, or perhaps more precisely ontology, of meaning), and derives from Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle outlined in the first part of *Being and Time*. Heidegger outlined the essential “fore-structure” of the understanding – a structure which has structural affinities with Quine’s “background theories” – as a positive possibility of the finitude of human understanding. This structure, however, gets deprecated by the enlightenment.

⁶ Quine, WV, “Ontological Relativity” in *Ontological Relativity and other Essays*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1969. [Original: a lecture given at Columbia from 1968.]

Gadamer states: “the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself”(240), and therefore argues that “the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being” (245). Whatever doubts one may have about the political implications of Gadamer’s project and his rehabilitation of tradition in place of reason (thus legitimising prejudice in the temporal diachronic plane rather than the synchronic, as the enlightenment had done) the structural point is clear: in order to study any phenomena, in order to discuss and posit both objects and theories, the logic of necessary prejudice is inescapable. One *must have* a background theory, a prejudice, a fore-structure of understanding or an ethnological (or other) illusion.

This structural necessity of prejudice implies a logic of *staging*, of *spectacle*, of the *construction of sameness* and the desire for the *repetition* of the staging of this sameness. Taking these in turn:

- the moment of staging is the moment of *foregrounding*, of the creation of an object out of the background field of essential differences. This is why Deleuze characterises the clinician who “invents” a disorder - an illness - out of symptoms as a novelist, one who essential *puts on stage*, calls-forth the phenomena

⁷ Gadamer, H-G, *Truth and Method* trans W Glen-Doepel. London: Sheed and Ward, 1979. [Original: *Wahrheit und Methode* 1962.]

- inevitably, this staging constitutes a spectacle – that which one looks at explicitly, curiously, as if within the frame of the photograph. This moment of the spectacle may fall to be deprecated, whether it be from a conservative rhetoric of Heideggerian authenticity; or from a left-wing critique of the society of the spectacle and the spectacular character of capitalist economics and its associated globalisation. However, its deprecation does not overcome its inescapability; and we might essay in the incessant worry about specularisation the nihilism which Nietzsche points to and which Deleuze interprets in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, namely that habit of disparaging existent and finite life in the name of a transcendent or past superior reality- in this case, a supposedly more genuine culture unwedded to the repetition and seduction of the image
- thus sameness, whether posited by or for friend or foe, is constructed. The staging must be constructed. It never falls untainted from the sky. It is not supplied by nature or an ultimate authority. It is thus, if needs be, deconstructable: that which is constructed is capable, by definition, of being deconstructed
- hence an insistent repetition. Hence an insistent logic, deployed across political (and other) spheres, of the “protestation too much”, of “proving too much”. We could say that the regressive logic of Quine’s background theories, potentially and abysally repeating to the limit, are countered (and *must* be countered) in environments where the question of identity and sameness is of critical importance (sometimes of life and death importance) by means of an

equally insistent repetition of staging, of calls to sameness, and constant reproduction. The “replication of what is seen, known, done” may, according to this argument, derive not so much from an inauthentic relation to reality; nor from the infection of genuine existence by capitalism and the exigencies of the market; but from an inherent drive or habit which enables knowledge and allows the active establishment of things in the face of the movement of the abyss

Where, then, does this leave any criteria of critique? If Beck has no choice but to deploy a prejudice whereby Europe is the positive face of otherness as opposed the sameness of the nation-state supposedly exemplified by the United States; if Lévy’s assertion of a “nervousness of tone” in respect of the States’ relation to France (and, by implication, all other cultures) is belied by the melodrama of its own Nietzschean *über*-protestation; if indeed Lévy could not, if he wished to say *anything at all*, escape something like this melodrama; from what non-relative position could they correct themselves or be corrected in turn?

According to the logic of the arguments so far, we might suspect that, if there is a criteria of critique, it must, perforce, be a *structural* one and not a positional one. That is, the device will depend not on the position from which it deploys itself, but the movement which it implies (whatever position it is taking). Such a machine is already namely “critique” by Kant, where in *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* he defines transcendence *not* in terms of a going beyond our existing conditions (ie, he does not

define it positionally) but in terms of a movement back towards that which is doing the analysis. That is, a moment of self-relation or self-critique:

“I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*”⁸

Thus we might say that the critique of Beck and Lévy, and their caricaturing of the United States, would need to turn not on the arguments they are using but rather on their apparent lack of self-critique in using such a rhetoric of sameness and otherness. (We say apparent: we think it is likely that they make a conscious choice in this regard.) Whether this is to deny them all political power, and all possibility of effectiveness - whether, in short, they are condemned (like their adversaries) either to propaganda or emasculation – is perhaps the key question facing global politics today.

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⁸ Kant, I *Critique of Pure Reason* trans N Kemp Smith, 59