Those At The Margins Do Speak In Their Own Voices

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Max Scheler (1874—1928) brings reflection to bear upon a heterogeneity of modes of being-together in the human community. There is, firstly, the simple *herd or mass* where human togetherness consists in emotional contagion and involuntary imitation.[1] Autonomous persons are unable to operate in a herd, which moves blindly, led along by its drives. There is, secondly, the *life- or vital community*, consisting of aggrupations of people in families, tribes, social classes, the professions; there is no real distinction between the I and the other, no individual action or experience, only a common experiencing, a common will, common operations under the impact of mores, customs, traditions, life-ways defined by the collective.[2] To the extent that the social whole mediates to individuals not only their activities, but also what they take to be their own experience, any member within a group can be substituted with any other. There is, thirdly, *society*, a non-organic unit of social togetherness. Persons implicated in this form of togetherness have no original or natural experience of co-responsibility, and as much as they might freely enter into association with one another according to their needs and in the manner prescribed by their contractual agreements, they remain autonomous of one another. A contract based on needs defines this form of social togetherness; it dissolves

[1] Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and the Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt Toward the Foundation of and Ethical Personalism*, trans. by Manfred Rings and Roger Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 528.

[2] *Ibid.*

as soon as the terms of coming together are dissolved.[3] There is, finally, the highest form of communal existence, the *collective person*, comprised of individuals capable of making free and informed decisions that relate to a common vision for the whole. Every individual within the *collective person* remains individual even as he or she is being shaped in the presence and under the impact of the very same values that spell "salvation" for every other person in the whole.[4] No less than the individual person, the collective person actualizes itself by means of the free action it undertakes on behalf of the highest communal values; and no less than the collective person, the individual person conducts himself or herself in accordance with his or her nature as a dynamic ground of action, albeit within the framework of communal values. The highest, most authentic, form of human solidarity consists in the communion of autonomous persons whose collective existence flows out of a shared concern to foster one another's self-actualization as persons. Both society, understood in the above sense of a structured unity grounded in the contractual participation of persons in a collective project, and the collective person, understood in the above sense of the solidarity of persons who have freely engaged in mutually life-giving and life-enhancing work, can be depended on to produce, not blind agents in thrall to unconscious drives including the drive to slavishly replicate (and, therefore, caricature) something of the communal mind or spirit, but individuals who understand their individual and communal needs, and who act accordingly and decisively.

But how, in view of the multiplicity of rationalities present in society, grounded in specific conceptions of the good (that is, of human becoming and human fullness) concomitant to the aforementioned modes of being-together, is consensus to be built among the autonomous persons operating on the basis of these rationalities? On this point, Jürgen Habermas provides a helpful perspective:

> Under the pragmatic presuppositions of an inclusive and noncoercive rational discourse between free and equal

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 528-29.

[4] Max Scheler, "*Ordo Amoris*," *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. by David R. Lachterman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 110.

> participants, everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else and thus to project herself into the understandings of self and world of all others; from this interlocking of perspectives there emerges an ideally extended 'we-perspective' from which all can test in common whether they wish to make a controversial norm the basis or their shared practice; and this should include mutual criticism of the appropriateness of the languages in terms of which situations and needs are interpreted. In the course of *successively* undertaken abstractions, the core of generalizable interests can then emerge step by step.[5]

At the same time, that is, that discourse keeps us rooted in our particular system of values, it enables us to move beyond it to "the core of generalizable interests" which comprise an authentic "we-perspective." Discourse, as such, must be kept alive, to ensure, in particular, that under the impact of the collective existence the sub-communities of "the other" do not come to be marginalized. People come together in societies, after all, for the establishment of what John Rawls describes as a system of fair cooperation between members of a society for their own rational advantage.[6] They come together, that is, not for the extinction, but rather for the mediation, of their diverse and competing life-worlds and rationalities. The state is crucial to this development,[7] for through its adoption of laws and establishment of contractual agreements, it enables citizens to engage one another on the basis of clear and certain rules, and thereby to participate in shaping the collective world. It enforces the rules of the shared becoming of people in a society. It facilitates dialogue in face of the potential war of totalities. It establishes and maintains structures of discourse that empower a society to come to the fullness of a shared we-perspective, a shared realm of values. By answering to the discursive needs and requirements of all stakeholders in the shaping of the collective world,

[5] Jürgen Habermas, "Reconciliation Through a Public Use of Reason," The *Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 58.

[6] John Rawls, "Political Liberalism," *The John Dewey Essays in Philosophy*, 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 9.

[7] Jürgen Habermas, "A Genealogical Analysis of the Cognitive Content of Morality," in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, p. 39.

it is able to guard against any single rationality coming to dominate the discourse while remaining flexible enough to acknowledge and accommodate to the most diverse rationalities.

Trouble arises, however, wherever local and national elites, global political and economic interests, succeed in taking the state captive. For given its power and authority, a government is potentially an oppressive totality, advancing the interests of the dominant rationality by suppressing whatever is disjunct from it, beginning with those rationalities that operate at the margins. While, ideally, a government deploys its power and authority to regulate the movements of the various centers of power in society and to ensure that fair terms of cooperation remain in place, all too often it happens that it mainly serves the interests of the elites that have succeeded in co-opting it.

In view of this, it is incumbent upon those who operate at the margins to find the means to break up the structures of totality that continuously threaten to consume them. They might, of course, think to foster an uprising at the margins. This, however, is no solution, because it tends merely to create new classes of the other. The better course of action might be to institutionalize structures of discourse that in addition to inspiring will underwrite the participation of the marginalized in the national discourse. A first step in this direction would be for the people in the most basic, organic communities to reflect on their lived experience as the other in society, as those who have suffered collective trauma, exhilarated in face of collective triumph, and operated in and through a shared history. They must examine their collective otherness, especially insofar as this otherness has been suppressed or co-opted by the dominant rationality. When the other becomes aware of himself or herself as the other in the totality of the same, he or she can make a dash for it, away from the totality that tries to consume them. Only upon awakening to the realization that as persons they are autonomous centers of personal becoming, can the communities of the other succeed in breaking up the oppressive hegemony of the totality, and opening the way to a more collective acknowledgment of the legitimacy of their other-ways of being, and of flourishing, and of contributing to the public conception of the good. The totality that is society provides the space of reflection, articulation and discourse enabling those at the margins to assert themselves in their otherness, in order to enrich the collective becoming of society.

To be sure, the process of reflection leading to the critical self-awareness of oneself as other can be fraught, for all too often, the other is so co-opted by the panopticon-like arrangement of things that it is only through the latter's eyes that the other is even able to view himself or herself; it is only through the latter's rationality and language that the other is able to frame and articulate his or her understanding of himself or herself. In view of this, discourse assumes even greater importance. For the view of our world(s) discourse offers is a view refracted through the prism of different horizons of understanding and different orders of valuation.[8] To be sure, discourse must affect not only the oppressed or marginalized, but those as well in society who need to allow their own oppressed and oppressive selves to emerge, co-dependents, if you will, in a social order that delivers traumatic blows to the deepest selves of all concerned by perverting their perceptions of themselves and of their world, most especially by allowing the values of violence and oppression to define their human becoming.[9]

Beyond the reflection on the self, there is the defense that one must learn to make of one's views before others.[10] Discourse is the vehicle for transcending the ego, because in discourse, we reach out to the other. In discourse we are invited to articulate our world to another. Discourse exists between the I and the other.[11] In this regard, Carlos Santiago Nino observes that the value of a democracy is that it requires "people [to] participate in the democratic debate not only to present their interests but also to justify them on the basis of normative propositions, which

[8] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (New York: Crossroads, 1988), pp. 337-338.

[9] Jürgen Habermas, "'Reasonable' versus 'True' or The Morality of Worldviews," in *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 98.

I would like to suggest that the types of popular education pioneered by the Philippine Catholic Church in the 1970s and 1980s, and by non-governmental organizations, were a step in the right direction. As a result of these methods of popular education, several groups of the oppressed began freely to reflect on the roots of their oppression, the effects of this oppression on their selves, and the possible paths to liberation.

[10] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press), pp. 209-121.

[11] Carlos Santiago Nino, *The Constitution of Deliberative Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 133.

should be general, universally applicable, final and acceptable from an impartial point of view."[12] The process of deliberation opens the participants to objectivity. Because they participate in a process of the articulation of interests, those engaged in discourse must present their positions with an awareness of the positions and interests of others, as much as of their own worldview. Deliberation and discourse require those who participate in them to transcend their interests or at least to be able to express their interests with the understanding that they must articulate these interests before others. This puts pressure on them to temper their positions and even view their positions from the standpoint of others, because in the arena of deliberation, pure parochial interests are indefensible. Before other interests, we learn to come to an articulation of common interests. This is impossible if all participants in discourse are incapable of a measure of objectivity that allows them to understand the legitimacy of the positions of others and the legitimacy of their own positions before the interests of others. Thus, structures of discourse allow all participants to transcend excessive self-interest so as to remain open to the articulation of the needs of others.

Those engaged in discourse, however, even before they can open to others in objectivity, must engage others from a position of self-awareness. They must have enough self-awareness to understand that they are autonomous persons capable of engaging other autonomous persons in discourse. They must be aware that they have a position that is their own and that they have a capacity to know the good and the truth of their society which they can fruitfully engage others with in the collective effort to define this good and this truth. They must not be mere echoes or sounding boards of a dominant rationality. We must remember that this discourse is a process for articulating the best possibility of a collective existence for all stakeholders in a society. Thus, all points of view are important for they potentially bear an understanding of the good society.

These processes must of course be more than a discourse on the expedient. They must be a process of coming to awareness of the call of one's genuine system of valuation. Scheler spoke of a people's destiny, referring to their recognition of the potential for

[12] *Ordo Amoris*, p. 100ff.

fullness of their collective, and personal becoming *in a particular time.*[13] The collective and individual person responds to the call of a particular time, a specific situation. This is only possible if one has a consciousness of one's situatedness as a person, of one's system of valuation, and of the potential perversions of self that come as the effect of one's communal history, environment and community. This complex task of coming to an awareness of one's destiny is difficult. It could certainly borrow from the methods of psychology and psychiatry. It could learn much from the insights of sociology and anthropology. Through this process, the people must be able to reflect on the question of historicity, the relations of power, the idea of culture, the question of rationality, the relation of real and ideal factors in the shaping of the person and society, and a host of other questions that cut across disciplines. The explorations of self must be rooted in the pressing questions of the people, must be expressed in their language and life ways, and must move within the participant rationalities.

This is a difficult task that will take generations and will require the participation of a plurality of rationalities, disciplines and life worlds. However, it is a necessary task that begins with the practical task of making the existing systems more discursive. It means lobbying for greater participation in governance, for the decentralization of power and the organization of the grassroots into discursive communities. However, these are interim tasks given whose real task is to ensure that the dominant discourse is one that is open and participatory. This is the only true solution to the violence that besets this nation. This is the only response to the eruptions of violence that have been necessary for the marginalized.

For now, we must listen to these irruptions of the alternate rationalities. Millenarian movements and people's revolts must be listened to. In these exercises in alterity, we might be able to discern the nature and the extent of the perversion of our own social order, because oftentimes they offer the clearest expressions of our people's oppression. Through these irruptions we come face to face with the other and his rationality. We must take steps to ensure that the meeting of this rationality is made before other, more violent irruptions occur.

We must remember that the oppressed and marginalized are not passive. They have at their disposal various means for subverting the

dominant rationality. Social structures must work to institutionalize discourse and make it just and fair so that subversion is no longer a necessity. The social reality is a dynamism that always already contains the dynamic discourse of the stakeholders in society. We must inject justice into this discourse so that avenues remain always open to the oppressed, so they can effectively participate in the definition of the public discourse that defines their lives. ⟲