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The Cooperative Frame of Mind

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Today the United States has become an intensely tribal society, people adverse to getting along with those who differ, but Europeans certainly can’t feel smug about this: tribalism, in the form of nationalism, destroyed Europe during the first half of the twentieth century; a half-century later the Netherlands, once so inclusive, now has its version of American talk radio, where the mere mention of the word ‘Muslim’ triggers a Wagnerian onslaught of complaints.

Tribalism couples solidarity with others like yourself to aggression against those who differ. This is a natural impulse, since most social animals are tribal; they hunt together in packs, they lay out territories to defend; the tribe is necessary for their survival. In human societies however, tribalism can prove counter-productive. Complex societies like our own depend on workers flowing across borders; contain different ethnicities, races and religions; generate diverging ways of sexual and family life. To force all this complexity into a single cultural mould would be politically repressive and tell a lie about ourselves. The ‘self’ is a composite of sentiments, affiliations and behaviours which seldom fit neatly together; any call for tribal unity will reduce this personal complexity.

Aristotle was perhaps the first Western philosopher to worry about repressive unity. He thought of the city as a synoikismos, a coming together of people from diverse family tribes – each oikos having its own history, allegiances, property, family gods. For the sake of trade and mutual support during war, ‘a city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence’; the city thus obliges people to think about and deal with others who have different loyalties. Obviously mutual aggression cannot hold a city together, but Aristotle made this precept more subtle. Tribalism, he said, involves thinking you know what other people are like without knowing them; lacking direct experience of others, you fall back on fearful fantasies.
Cooperation can be defined, drily, as an exchange in which the participants benefit from the encounter. This behavior is instantly recognizable in chimpanzees grooming one other, children building a sandcastle, or men and women laying sandbags against an impending flood. Instantly recognizable, because mutual support is built into the genes of all social animals; they cooperate to accomplish what they can’t do alone.

Cooperative exchanges come in many forms. Cooperation can combine with competition, as when children cooperate in establishing the ground rules for a game in which they then compete against one another; in adult life this same combination of cooperation and competition appears in economic markets, in electoral politics and in diplomatic negotiations. Cooperation becomes a self-standing value in rituals both sacred and secular: observing the Eucharist or a Seder brings theology to life; rituals in civility as small as ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, put abstract notions of mutual respect into practice. Cooperation can be informal as well as formal; people who hang out at a street corner or drink together in a bar exchanging gossip and keep talk flowing without self-consciously thinking, ‘I am cooperating.’ The act of doing so is wrapped in the experience of mutual pleasure.

As human tribalism makes clear, cooperative exchange can produce results destructive to others; bankers practice such cooperation in the form of insider trading and buddy-deals. Theirs is legal robbery, but criminal gangs operate on the same social principle. Both bankers and bank-robbers engage in collusion, which is the dark angle of cooperation.

... I want to focus on a small corner of what might be done about destructive cooperation of the us-against-you sort, or about cooperation degraded into collusion. The good alternative is a demanding and difficult kind of cooperation; it tries to join people who have separate or conflicting interests, who do not feel good about each other, who are unequal, or who simply do not understand one another. The challenge is to respond to others on their own terms. This is the challenge of all conflict management.

The philosopher-politician Michael Ignatieff believes that such responsiveness is an ethical disposition, a state of mind inside us as individuals; my view is that it emerges from practical activity. One result of managing conflict well is that such cooperation sustains social groups across the misfortunes and upheavals of time. Practicing cooperation of this sort can, moreover, help individuals and groups grasp the consequences of their own actions. In the spirit of generosity, let’s not write off the bankers as a human being: to find an ethical yardstick for his own behavior, he would need to reckon the effects of his actions on people unlike himself, on small businesses, mortgage-defaulters, or otherwise struggling customers. Which is to say more largely that we can gain from demanding sorts of cooperation is insight into ourselves.

The most important fact about hard cooperation is that it requires skill. Aristotle defined skill as techné, the technique of making something happen, doing it well; the Islamic philosopher Ibn Khaldun believed that skill was the special province of craftsmen. Perhaps you, like me, dislike the phrase ‘social skills’, which suggests people good at cocktail party talk or adept at selling you things you don’t need. Still, there are social skills of a more serious sort. These run the gamut of listening well, behaving tactfully, finding points of agreement and managing disagreement, or avoiding frustration in a difficult discussion. All these activities have a technical name: they are called ‘dialogic skills’.

... ‘People who do not observe, cannot converse.’ This wisdom-nugget of an English barrister evokes the essence of ‘dialogics’. This technical word names attention and responsiveness to other people. The barrister’s bon mot particularly calls attention to the listener’s share in a discussion. Usually, when we speak about communication skills, we focus on how to make a clear presentation, to present what we think or feel. Skills are indeed required to do so, but these are declarative in character. Listening well requires a different set of skills, those of closely attending to and interpreting what others say before responding, making sense of their gestures and silences as well as declarations. Though we may have to hold ourselves back to observe well, the resulting conversa-
tion will become a richer exchange for it, more cooperative in character, more dialogic.

A common vice consists of believing that our own experience has great symbolic value, and for a few pages I’m going to indulge in this vice. One model for listening skills appears in adult rehearsals of a professional sort, the kind necessary in the performing arts. This is a model I know well. As a young man, I worked professionally as a musician, both as cellist and conductor. Rehearsals are the foundation for making music; when rehearsing music, listening skills become vitally important, and in listening well, the musician becomes a more cooperative creature.

In the performing arts, the sheer need of others can often prove a shock. Young musical hotshots are often brought up short when they are playing chamber music; nothing has prepared them to attend to others. (I was like that, aged ten.) Though they may know their own part perfectly, in rehearsal they have to learn the ego-busting art of listening, turning outward. It’s sometimes thought that the result moves to the opposite extreme, the musician blending in, submerging his or her ego in a larger whole. But sheer homogeneity is no recipe for making music together – or rather, a very dull recipe. Musical character instead through little dramas of deference and assertion; in chamber music, particularly, we need to hear individuals speaking in different voices which sometimes conflict, as in bowings or string color.

Weaving together these differences is like to conducting a rich conversation.

In making music, there’s a basic distinction between practicing and rehearsing; the one is a solitary experience, the other is collective. Common to both is the standard procedure of attending initially to a whole score, then focusing on particular testing passages. The two forms of work on music divide, first, because rehearsing drags musical habits into shared consciousness. When practicing alone, the musician goes of his or her part again and again so that passages become ingrained routines; this is especially necessary for the musician preparing his or her part for public performance – only a very few performers, like the violinist Fritz Kreisler, or Pierre Monteux, can commit a sore to memory after a couple of run-throughs. The danger for the rest of us lies in losing sight of how ingrained passages sound to others. In rehearsing, one player can jolt another into this awareness.

A rehearsal will not progress of one player comes in with an explanation of the ‘Meaning of the Schubert Octet’ or if all the players discuss its cultural significance; the rehearsal itself would then become like a seminar. But in fact few rehearsals run like philosophy seminars. Musicians with good rehearsal skills work forensically, investigating concrete problems. True, many musicians are highly opinionated (I certainly am), but these opinions will sway others only if they shape a particular moment of collective sound. This empiricism is perhaps the most resonant point about artistic cooperation in a rehearsal: cooperation is built from the ground up. Performers need to find and work on telling, significant specifics.

Rituals makes expressive cooperation work – and this is a large point. As will appear, ritual enables expressive cooperation in religion, in the workplace, in politics and in community life. It’s certainly true that nights devoted to the mysteries of the Schubert Octet are not what is now called a ‘mainstream activity’; this is an arcane way of life. Nor have I discussed here the straightforward comparison between the rehearsal process among musicians and our near cousins, professional athletes, another highly specialized form of cooperation.

Yet the experience I’d had as a young professional is built on an elemental human foundation. The point of contact with early childhood lie in communications which address ambiguity; practices which become structured and focused in time; conversations about differences; practices subject to reflexive self-criticism. Musicians in rehearsal are adult Eriksonians; they need to interact, to exchange for mutual benefit.

Listening carefully produces conversations of two sorts, the dialectic and the dialogic. In dialectic, as we learned
in school, the verbal play of opposites should gradually build up to a synthesis; dialectic starts in Aristotle’s observation in the Politics that ‘though we may use the same words, we cannot say we are speaking of the same things’; the aim is to come eventually to a common understanding. Skill in practicing dialectic lies in detecting what might establish that common ground.

About this skill, Theodore Zeldin writes, in a small, wise book on conversation, that the good listener detects common ground more in what another person assumes than says. The listener elaborates that assumption by putting it into words. You pick up on the intention, the context, make it explicit, and talk about it. Another kind of skill appears in the Platonic dialogues, where Socrates proves a very good listener by re-stating ‘in other words’ what his discussants declare – but the re-statement is not exactly what they have actually said, or indeed intended. The echo is actually a displacement. This is why dialectic in Plato’s dialogues does not resemble an argument, a verbal duel.

Dialogic is a word coined by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin to name a discussion which does not resolve itself by finding common ground. Though no shared agreements may be reached, through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another. Bakhtin applied the concept of knitted-together but divergent exchanges to writers like Rabelais and Cervantes, whose dialogues are just the opposite of the converging agreement in dialectic. Rabelais’s characters shoot off in seemingly irrelevant directions which other characters pick up on; the discussion then thickens, the characters spurred on by one another. Sometimes great performances of chamber music convey something akin. The players do not sound entirely on the same page, the performance has more texture, more complexity, but still the players are sparking off one another – as true in classic chamber music as in jazz.

Of course, the difference between dialectic and dialogic conversation is not a matter of either/or. As in Zeldin’s version of a dialectical conversation, the forward movement in dialogic conversation comes from paying attention to what another person implies but does not say; as in Socrates’ cunning ‘in other words’, in a dialogic conversation misunderstandings can eventually clarify mutual understanding. The heart of all listening skills, though, lies in a picking up on concrete details, on specifics, to drive a conversation forward. Bad listeners bounce back in generalities when they respond; they’re not attending to those small phrases, facial gestures, or silences which open up a discussion. In verbal conversation, as in musical rehearsal, exchanging is built from the ground up.

Notes
Colophon
This text is composed of fragments from the introductory Chapter in Richard Sennett, Together (London, Penguin Books, 2013), pp.3-20. It is published at the occasion of the conference ‘Constructing the Commons’ at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of the Delft University of Technology on March 3rd and 4th, 2016, where Richard Sennett is one of the keynote speakers.

Constructing the Commons
The conference is part of the project ‘Constructing the Commons’, which is organized by the Chair of Methods and Analysis of the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment of the TU Delft. This project is initiated at the occasion of the visiting professorship of Momoyo Kaijima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto of the Tokyo based architectural office Atelier Bow-Wow. The project investigates the commons from an architectural point of view, first as tangible architectural and urban figures, and second as the rituals and politics of co-operation that articulate architectural projects.

Organization
Visiting Professors Atelier Bow-Wow, Momoyo Kaijima and Yoshiharu Tsukamoto
Chair of Methods and Analysis, Tom Avermaete and Hans Teerds
With the help of Soscha Monteiro de Jesus

Registration
If you wish to attend the conference, register on www.constructingthecommons.com

Contact
For more information on the project and conference ‘Constructing the Commons’, please visit our website: www.constructingthecommons.com or contact Hans Teerds: p.j.teerds@tudelft.nl

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