

# To Each His Tribes: From Contract to Pact

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**T**he prevailing attitude in political and journalistic circles is to cling onto this widely-held belief, rooted in the philosophical and social systems of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, that individualism remains triumphant. Yet the plural person and emotional tribes – this is the reality we see all around us every day, and one which is difficult to deny or to refute. In place of *civilisation* given to reasoning, that of a masterable history and a contractual social bond, comes a *culture* of instinct. The former rested on a predictable project: the project of life, economics, education. The latter plays on chance, risk and adventure. The contractual and rational individual existing within stable institutions, the indivisible lynchpin of political science (of surveys, for example, in which we see ever more inanity) is replaced by a person, nebulous to say the least, but for whom a deeply rooted desire to live (*vouloir-vivre*) seems irrepressible.

## Accessing a larger Self

Fickleness of opinions and diminishing political engagement are the most visible manifestations of this shift, which we might consider a kind of ‘desubjectivisation’. The spirit of the times is no longer of subjectivism, but an *outflow* of self, a loss in the other. A transfiguration of politics where it is no longer the ‘individual’ that participates, but the ‘person’, who tears himself free of the shackles, bursting apart to access a larger Self: the Self of the tribe, the Self of nature, the Self of religiosity. In this fragmentation *of* the self *to* the Self, everything is relative, and everything is relation. Our obsession with role-playing games, cats, and social networking sites is the manifestation *par excellence* of such a diffusion. Or are we just not to speak of all this?

We could cite countless quotations from perceptive spirits in every field who have spoken of the fragility of the individual. From Nietzsche’s discussion of ‘uncertain identity’ to Proust’s differentiation between an individual me and ‘deeper being’, many are the authors who have

expressed a tentative premonition that has today become an everyday reality. But it's so obvious that we can't even see it. Our intellectual dogmata prevent it. And yet this fragmentation of identity in multiple identifications *is here*.

Under the auspices of the modern education system, the child that had been successfully led out of animalism to civility, from barbarism to humanity, was provided with an inviolable identity. Sexual identity first: male or female. Its kind should be established and stable. A professional identity likewise, bringing it into line with clearly-defined contours according to which it had to go about for the rest of its active existence. Finally, ideological identity, integrating it into some or other functional division: political, intellectual, perhaps spiritual, in all predictable and reassuring. It is on the basis of such 'identification' that all were 'locked away' in the famous social classes or 'occupational categories'. Thus, everything was in order, and the cattle well-guarded: political and trade union votes, societal reactions, diverse impulses and consumer behaviour could only ever be a function of predefined boxes and the distinctions they generated.

This fine edifice has been brought down by advertising, fashion, role-play, where it is successive sincerities that seem to predominate. This, by the way, confounds the pollsters and other protagonists of 'social engineering' who take themselves for sociologists, faced with such-and-such a view at one time, 't', and another at 't + 1' or 't + 2' – a day, an hour, a second later. And this of course in the same individual (for we dare not say 'person').

The plural person is also evident in the ambiguity we see in advertising with regard to issues of sex. Even discerning the gender in question may itself sometimes be a delicate issue. Unisex fashion, galloping androgynisation, the development of male cosmetics, indefinable body postures, interchangeable hairstyles, the ubiquity of tattoos and piercings, all things which, in the image of other baroque periods, and close to the precise etymological meaning of *barroco* ('irregular pearl' in Portuguese), play on the 'irregularities' of human existence.

We might reflect on the sexual ambiguity manifested in bisexuality, the increase in partner swapping, the proliferation of ad hoc liaisons and exploration of alternative sexualities, all of which are symptomatic of cultural change underway: the 'shadow of Dionysus' projecting itself onto the postmodern megalopolises. Dionysus is, as I recall, according to the historians of religions, a 'god of a hundred names', multiple, changing, always somewhere other than where he was thought to have 'stowed away': the emblematic figure of fragmentation.

## A Tribal World

Another phenomenon is irrefutable here: the tribes. And yet we don't want to see it. Or at best we admit to its existence, but as transitory moment: 'youth being youth'. Those who purport to analyse this youth will increasingly be forced to recognise the numerous manifestations of such tribalism. Some speak of groups, bands, clans, but the postmodern tribes are specific, and should be thought of as such.

I would suggest three main features of the tribal phenomenon: the importance of the territory on which it is situated, the sharing of a taste, and the return of the figure of the eternal child, all of which are paradigmatic of a *feeling of belonging* which is both cause and effect.

Taking these in order, let us consider the first of these characteristics: place, territory, localism. The social is linked closely to time. Sociality is in the space: *place makes link*. From an ethnological viewpoint, the tribe, *strictu sensu*, was a way of collectively combating the multiple forms of adversity of which there was no shortage in the jungle. The place that had been tamed was a guarantee at once of survival and solidarity. Is not something like this in play in the concrete jungles of the postmodern megalopolises? The neighbourhood, the city, the four streets are as so many areas one can share with one's tribe, which it strives to defend, sometimes even violently. This is the veridical matrix where living together finds its natural expression. The tribe might leave its territory from time to time to embark on deviations in some other part of the city, in some alluring place which, although unfamiliar, attracts it for whatever reason. But the point of attachment, the source of its communitarian rhythm, remains that place where it has its *habitus*, its customs and its traditions.

Those who prefer to whinge and launch into grandiloquent mantras on national unity would do well to recognise the development of such a tribal localism, if for no other reason than to obviate its more injurious effects. Thinking in terms of localism certainly means going counter to the grand theories of emancipation characteristic of the 19th century, which sought at all costs to deracinate ways of life, of being, and of thinking, but what is also certain is that the concept of a Republic one and indivisible, the defining feature of the 19th century, is no longer the formula that prevails in a pluralistic mosaic: that of the many and varied tribes which make up social life.

A form of rootedness is returning. And while 'the welfare state no longer works', it is from these very roots that new forms of solidarity are developing, new ways of expressing generosity and everyday mutual aid, even taking into account sufferings, maladies and other manifestations of

human distress. Rootedness becomes dynamic and delimits the perimeter of a societal link in profound mutation.

The sharing of territory must be linked to the sharing of a taste, not least since taste is more often than not a tributary of the place where it can express itself. The postmodern tribes can be considered a way of sharing a particular taste. Our cities thus become a mere punctuation of places, sometimes “high places” where musical, sportive, cultural, sexual and religious tribes meet to celebrate the taste which serves as cement. It is important to stress this latter point, since it is on the basis of emotions, passions, specific affects that we think and organise social relations. While ‘tastes and colours’ do not feature in contemporary discourse, it is extremely problematic to continue to try to represent the world from the starting point of the universalism to which we have become habituated.

Taste is a world in miniature. As English novelist and academic David Lodge so aptly put it, ‘a small world’. Whether we are speaking of a cocktail party, a trade union demonstration, a political rally, or any number of diverse cultural and social events, we often hear it said: ‘everyone was there!!’ That ‘everyone’ is simply the known, familiar, habitual world. In other words, a tribal world; a world where shared taste serves as legitimation, as perfect rationalisation of pleasure, of the desire to be together, to live together.

Place and taste lead us to this other distinctive feature of the post-modern tribes, which is the accentuation of the ‘eternal child’. Indeed, playing in places, urban hotspots, wherein to live out his tastes and passions – isn’t this, despite the pejorative connotations of the term, an expression of a childlike wonder? The myth of the *puer aeternus* is a recurring theme in human history. Stories, legends, mythologies and established histories recall that the figure of the child has been the very essence of certain social imaginaries. In the modern period the *emblematic figure* was that of the serious and rational adult, the producer and reproducer; a contaminating figure that was the standard on the basis of which social life imagined itself and organised itself. Rationalism, the ascendancy of work and the social contract all rested on this foundation. But through a process of saturation, and hence recalibration, that figure, which can be described as Promethean, gives way to this, Dionysian, the perpetual adolescent. This latter figure, in the same way as its predecessor, becomes emblematic and contaminating.

Everyone behaves young, talks young, dresses young, stays young, and we could cite countless examples pointing in this direction. But it becomes apparent that the natural structure of such an eternal child is a symbiotic, even cosymbiotic structure: another way of saying ‘tribe’. It is in this sense that the contemporary cult of youth, while having solid and

deep anthropological roots, is perfectly inscribed in the evolving tribal constellation. And here again, rather than seeing this as something to be regretted or lamented, perhaps we should view it rather as the expression of a genuine vitality making us attentive to another way of being together. What I have referred to as the emergence of a communitarian ideal; that is, the development of a new public sphere, no longer based on a pyramidal and/or unified structure as it used to be, but on fragmentation, dissemination. This is precisely what is referred to in the communitarian tribal ideal.

### **A Fractal Society**

The very term postmodernity to describe the evolution of society is borrowed from the vocabulary of architecture, in which ‘postmodernism’ refers to organic constructions formed from disparate elements brought together from dissimilar environments in space and time. This quotation from antiquity, another from the Renaissance, and so on. Everything working together: it is diverse, yet still it holds. Mandelbrot sets in mathematics show something of this. What are, after all, the *objets fractals*, if not creations whose form is made up of irregularities, fragmentations? This field of mathematics does nothing more than theorise the myriad examples provided by nature (snowflakes, bronchioles etc.). We find this fractality also in social networks, bolstered by developments in interactive means of online communication.

The art world is under no illusions about this. Visual artists have made the fractal a privileged object of their experimentation. The same can be said of choreographers such as Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham, who have emphasised the organicity of fragmented moments that constitute their shows. Postmodern dance is a good illustration of the intimate connection between the body, in this at its most archaic, the most recent technique, and the environment in which the whole is situated.

During the modern period – the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – differences were erased, specificities denied, particularities permanently excluded. All had to genuflect to the traditional rule of unity: of place, of time, and of action. In the image of one God, the individual had to have a single unique identity, the state had to be unified, institutions rationalised. Auguste Comte’s formulation, which bears repeating, aptly summarises such a process: ‘*Reductio ad unum*’. It is because our intellectual subconscious remains marked by monotheism that we find it difficult to acknowledge that individualism has had its day, as has the unity of the one and indivisible Republic.

As for what has been said about these artistic examples (postmodernism, fractal, postmodern dance), the figure of the mosaic is

not inappropriate in illustrating the evolution of the social fabric from a pyramidal and hierarchical construction into this patchwork of tribes. Tribes themselves are fluid and versatile, each person having cause to belong to multiple tribes successively and concomitantly. And yet despite the diversity of its constituent elements, society is able to demonstrate a greater organicity. To put it in historical terms, no longer the Republic in its Jacobin sense, but the *res publica* of ancient memory, *la chose publique*, allowing for the confluence of opposing forms and forces.

The historian Philippe Ariès, known for his invigorating nonconformism, used the terminology of “immediate groups” or “small collectivities” in reference to these spontaneous entities, anterior to a more rational level of organisation, and which constitute the very basis for all being-together. Perhaps we are bearing witness here to the return of such entities. These would constitute the *communitarian ideal* of the postmodern sociality: a society outside or alongside the State, a vital social space with a specific autonomy – these TAZs, the ‘temporary autonomous zones’ of which Hakim Bey speaks, and which are not without resonance with the younger generations. No longer the search for a distant utopia, abstract and rationalised, but its fragmentation into little interstitial utopias, lived, as far as possible, day to day, here and now.

### **Towards Another Social Relationship**

The societal mosaic would henceforth be the adjustment of these micro-communities forged from the solidarities of the everyday, from the customs and traditions of the tribe and the countless specific rituals that all this induces. One finds – bearing in mind here the spirit of the Dionysian times and the myth of the eternal child – that this self-adjustment will come about through all of the aesthetic, ludic aspects inherent in this sociality.

Throughout history there have been cultures which rested on such a festive foundation. Moments where, beyond any centralising and unifying principle, the ‘being-together’ in its *uniqueness (unicité)* is constituted from reciprocities, interactions, shared passions and emotions; in short, from a coparticipation, a world in which the various communities fine-tune themselves each in relation to each other.

We thus find echoes here of characteristics of periods that preceded modernity: the Renaissance and the late Roman Empire to take just two examples. This inevitably makes us uneasy, as the domestication of mores, the taming of passions that prevailed throughout modernity is in the process of being superseded by a *réensauvagement* of the world. But the disappearance of one form of social relationship – that of modernity, based on the social contract, individualism and the protector state – does not mean that there are no longer social bonds. On the contrary: a kind of

relationship is emerging which is more emotional than rational. This signifies neither the end of the feeling of collective belonging, nor the end of solidarity.

The adjustment of the tribes among themselves certainly conduces to a form of equilibrium more precarious than the belonging of individuals to the nation state. But one perhaps better equipped to resist the myriad tectonic upheavals inherent in the march towards globalisation. In this sense, tribalism is an effective form of the strengthening of social cohesion which it behoves us to understand rather than to deny, knowing that, just as the modern man existed according to the rational contract, planned over the long term, so the postmodern man will live, more and more, with pacts: emotional, and ephemeral.

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