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Autor: Isernhagen, Hartwig

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The regulation of conflict, or: Territory, order, power – On the imperiousness of cultures. (A provisional polemic.)

Hartwig Isernhagen

I wish to raise here the question of *the regulation of conflict*: how, to put it simply, do societies or cultures, as discursive systems, regulate intra- and inter-group conflict, how do they deal with the inevitable conflict of interpretations that exists in them and between them?

Conflict is obviously productive of change, which may be for better or for worse. How, then, can it be prevented from becoming destructive, rather than constructive, of "a good life?" This question, to my mind, at least in part refers one back to the form the conflict itself takes, or should take. Unless it is in some manner *balanced*, unless what one might call *a spirit of adjudication*, of judging the adequacy of one's own and the other's reactions, is *habitually* injected into the moment and process or act of interaction, a mediation breaks down that may be essential to a constructive working-out of conflict: a mediation between the conflict of interpretations and some overarching view of the interactive or "communication"[1] situation in which it takes place, which prevents the conflict from destroying the situation. It needs to become an internalized perspective (and check) upon the act of interacting – a perspective and check that is implicitly accepted as valid and necessary by all actors, because it ensures their ability to continue interacting. (Once they do not want to do that, we have war, which, as we see again and again, is not capable of real regulation.)[2]

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[1] The scare quotes indicate that one should not postulate, by using the term communication, a mediation in the interactional situation that can only, under conditions of conflict, be the result of negotiation.

[2] Our time seems largely also to have lost sight of that *politeness* or *consideration* in interpersonal interaction that was so extensively and relentlessly thematized by earlier periods – it seems to me because they were (by constraint of experience, but perhaps also by choice) more overtly interested in the potential destructiveness of conflict.

It seems to me that currently the question should be asked in many places and manifold ways: with regard to multiculturalism, to intercultural writing, to discourses of gender and race, and their theorizations. All these pursuits or agendas have elicited standard "conservative" reactions: rallying-cries around this or that universally or culturally shared trait or bond that will supposedly prevent the total fragmentation which they supposedly threaten. Such charges are motivated by a fear that the conflict of interpretations might tear the social fabric apart irreparably, or that it might be exacerbated to the point of war, real or metaphorical. The "reactionary" attack on what one might in shorthand designate *discourses of difference* is not only just that (a backward-looking reaction), but also a (possibly misguided and misguiding) diagnosis of a real danger that arises from a refusal to discuss the regulation of conflict. Nowhere does literary/cultural theory, criticism, and history in our time seem to be able to evade questions of hegemony, of consensus formation and the playing out of dissent, of power, conflict, and communication. Thematizations of gender, race/ethnicity, and class have specified and concretized the perspective; in more general forms it is present "everywhere," from the modernism/postmodernism debate via the New Historicism to the New Americanists. There is everywhere, in other words, the recognition of the existence of conflict; but there does not seem to be an equally clear recognition of the problems inherent in the interaction between conflicting standpoints or "parties."

There are good reasons for such avoidance. From the point of view of discourses of difference (which will also naturally stress the relevance or legitimacy or dignity of the local) the very notion of regulation may appear as a dangerously universalizing gesture, or more specifically as an attempt to pre-empt the outcome of conflicts by establishing rules that govern their interaction. My point against this objection is the very simple one that we cannot avoid positioning ourselves with regard to the question of regulation. All discourses of difference, even those in which the notion of contestation is the *ultimate* term in the sense that reflection stops in and with the gesture of defining a cultural situation, or culture itself, as always already conflicted, imply rules: either negative or zero ones, in which case conflict is a free-for-all and *bellum omnium contra omnes*, or (the more frequent case) tacit norms of more or less peaceful exchange. It is in the latter context that acts of communication/interaction/translation are grounded almost tautologically in notions of *sharing*: communication is grounded in communicability, translation in translatability. . . . And the suspicion with which any attempt to address the question of regulation (and, if possible, to solve it) is viewed by discourses

of contestation may be grounded in the insight that we will all automatically define those acts of communication in terms of the culture from within which we speak. If this is not to prove debilitating, there is no way but to subject emergent notions of regulation, in their turn, to contestation, though once again in regulated contexts, and so on, *ad infinitum*. The infinite regress is not a sufficient reason to give the enterprise up.

Fears of pre-emption may then be a major if unthematized reason why the question of regulation tends to be in the blind spot of many or most such discourses of difference, why it seems to demarcate the aporetic vanishing point of many different contemporary discussions of the conflict of interpretations.[3] It has been foregrounded, for me, by Wolfgang Iser's discussion of *translatability*, in which two perspectives appear to battle against one another in not untypical a fashion: according to the one, the play of translatability, which is also that of interculturality, is self-regulating; according to the other, its basic regulation in terms of peacefulness is a tacitly inserted precondition of its working "properly." Both gestures together, in their reliance on the saving character of "communication," remove precisely those conflicts that endanger communication from the discussion. They separate, one might say a little melodramatically, language from war. Elsewhere – notably in simpler versions of pragmatism – the two are debilitatingly and hypocritically identified with one another. The result is the same, and I would argue with Burke that our agenda should be the purification (or pacification) of war through or in symbolization, i.e. in language. In fact, Burke reminds us that the "today" in which I have placed the discussion is probably no more than the myopic time horizon of our present turn-of-the-millennium

[3] If one had all the space and time in the world, a brief disquisition on the character of such spots, as both enabling and vitiating knowledge, would be in order. Our terms are our problems: creating, without our noticing it, those very realities that are presumably "only" analyzed through them, they have a tendency to remain at the blind spot of any project that they enable – unless, that is, we establish a proper critical distance from them. In discussing them as tools that are only good in the measure of their use, or only in so far as they work to solve problems, pragmatism has always recognized this fact; for it seems to me that pragmatism will allow reflection on this usefulness and workability only "philosophically," and not in the act of using them itself, acknowledging implicitly that as they are thematized they will momentarily lose their use value, which, in other words, appears to be linked to this situatedness in the blind spot of the acting mind. Also, it seems to me that pragmatism has intentionally forgotten to ask what it means to speak of a "good solution to a problem," and thereby created its own blind spot. We cannot get out of this type of regress, but we can (and therefore should) step outside of our paradigms again and again, and attempt to identify those spots – undoubtedly creating and making use of other ones, but then we can shift our perspective again and look at *those*. All of this is truism, but it needs to be remembered as an unbeatable argument for a multiplicity of methods and perspectives in our academic enterprises, and against too rigid a formulation and organization of our projects in terms of ruling paradigms – or fashions.

generation, and that it is not improbable that the regulation of conflict is really the defining problem of civilization as such.

What does all of this have to do with *empire*? I take that term to refer to *social constructions of order that operate in terms of territory*. We are, with the *OED*, in the area of "imperial rule or dignity," of "supreme and extensive political dominion; esp. that exercised by an 'emperor' or by a sovereign state over its dependencies," and of "paramount influence, absolute sway, supreme command or control"; we are also in the area of "that which is subject to imperial rule," of "an extensive territory (esp. an aggregate of many separate states) under the sway of an emperor or supreme ruler; also, an aggregate of subject territories ruled over by a sovereign state."[4] The term addresses the fact of domination, of supremacy and subjection, of asymmetry; it also addresses the question of unity and multiplicity: empire is "esp. an aggregate of many separate states."

Both the inevitable internal multiplicity of such constructions (all impositions of order elicit dissent) and the historical fact that all past empires had an outer border beyond which there was that which lay outside the order raise my pet question of the regulation of conflict as referring to internal and external relations. It is my suspicion that such regulation can be effected differently, both in different forms of empire and in different historical states of one and the same empire. A closer look at the particular way it is "handled" in this or that empire and at this or that historical moment, *and* some analysis of conflicts over such modes of regulation, should tell us something about the respective societies and/or moments – possibly more than other perspectives, since with the question we are somewhere in the area of the ground rules of social/societal construction, or of the construction of the social/societal.

In how far, one might ask, is this an Americanist question?

It is that for a number of reasons – and the following is probably not an exhaustive list:

> The US has during the last couple of decades or so developed some of the most sophisticated discourses on culture-and-difference.

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[4] That the term is easily used figuratively, from "the celestiall empyre" or "the Empire of Death" encountered by Christian and other souls via the "watery empire" of fishermen and "Love [that] is an Empire only of two Persons" to "the empire of virtue," or even the "Empire City, State" of New York, only testifies to the capability of the notion of order to adapt itself to different thematic areas.

The US has from very early on thematized the question of the one and the many (*e pluribus unum* as a project that is subject to ongoing contestation), which cannot but raise the question of the regulation of conflict.

The US has also quite early regarded as dominant in the formation of its own socio-cultural order the Christian (above all the Puritan) rhetoric of election and mission, which has led to the reiterated postulate that the origins of the American self are Puritan. This rhetoric has according to more recent views (especially after Bercovitch) been characterized by its ability to convert dissent into consent, or to regulate conflict by taking away from it its reality, or by abolishing it outright.

And the US emerges in contemporary discourse after contemporary discourse as the one and only global force, militarily, economically, and culturally: it is written (in a perspective that integrates a lot of the preceding points) as an empire that is built upon the pre-emption of dissent and that (for the first time in history) has no borders – at least no external ones.

I am not so much interested in the truth or otherwise of this latter view – though in my darker moments I tend to believe that after the fall of the Wall we are quickly (or, to take up a cliché of much of the postmodernism discussion: we are with ever greater acceleration) moving towards the self-constructed collapse of the West. At this point I would rather wish to discuss briefly what the perspective on the regulation of conflict may lead one to say about this particular empire.

Empire as order must attempt to be pre-emptive. Its aim must be to integrate opposition to itself into its own scheme; its dominant strategy must be to reinterpret or reconfigure its antagonist(s) as part(s) of itself, or to redraw its outer border as an internal one. Its multiplicity is thus partly of its own making. It is also of its own making in so far as *divide et impera* is an imperial slogan; to pit its internal opponents (as also its external ones, of course) against each other is to strengthen its power.[5] Concrete empires may be more or less monolithic in appearance and intent (the intent of the rulers), but they will be built on multiplicities; and multiplicity will be imposed on them in so far as any order will elicit dissent from itself within itself.

In the one complex motif of hegemonial American civilization[6] several pre-emption motifs have been fused, among them Marxist ones, from Marx

[5] The Jamesonian notion of American capitalism that has become canonical to a considerable extent – and at least as much in the shape of an affirmation of a type of order as in that of a critique of a dubious state of affairs – combines both aspects, the expansionist and the *divide et impera* one.

[6] And it is *only* this imperial motif that I am dealing with here. Obviously, within the intended polemic, no differentiation among the various (self-)definitions of *America* can be intended.

through Gramsci to Althusser,[7] but also, in Bercovitch (et al.), a revision of the traditional account of the Puritan origins of the American self, and the identification of modern capitalism with America that has according to Jameson been the "real" topic of the Frankfurt School writers since the 40s.[8] The fusion amounts to a revalidation of the old rhetoric of *election*, which by the same token pre-empts the outcome of any conflict of interpretations – not only by always already knowing its outcome, but more importantly *by establishing itself as the regulating perspective*. It is this point that I need to explore briefly; for it basically suggests that *a* or *the* reason why the question of regulation remains unasked in so many American critical and theoretical discourses is that it has tacitly already (always already . . .) been answered by the invocation of America as empire.[9]

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[7] Cf. also that in its sketch of what it perceives to be the salient differences, within an overarching sameness of perspective and purpose, between the (American) New Historicism and (British) Cultural Materialism, Richard Wilson's "Introduction" to *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* points toward a different reception of Gramsci and Foucault, in that the Americans tend to stress the component of pre-emption in their thought, and the British critics the seeds of resistance. (1-18, esp. 12ff.; cf. also Richard Dutton's "Postscript," 219-226, esp. 220!)

[8] The fusion has been guaranteed by a knowledge of what is the case that sits awkwardly with the various canonical *construction* arguments which dominate the discussion of late 20th c. intellectual history. (The tension is there, unresolved, already in Jameson.) This might perhaps be discussed further in terms of Rose's *fantasy* motif, in *States of Fantasy*: every such fantasy needs a "fact" to build (itself) on! *But* simultaneously it is often a question what is the fact, and what the building erected on it: does globalization always provide the fact for the ideology of election, or does the fact of election also support the globalizing view of the world? Certainly, in Israel (Roses's topic) the biblical promise supports the fantasy of nation-building, even while the fact of "the flourishing desert" supports the reading of the Bible.

[9] The *New Americanists*, as "constructed" by Donald E. Pease – the term recurs in the beginning of his introduction to *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives* – , do, of course, attempt to shed the imperial axiom together with the national-unity one as the basis of their disciplinary self-definition. Cf. Pease's "Preface": "The idea for this volume germinated in the wake of three events – the breakdown of the Cold War, the breakup of the Soviet Empire, and the 'emergence of global democracy' – whose impact on global politics was registered in the collective recognition of a postnational world. In its making heterogeneous cultural histories available to public and scholarly debate, multiculturalism was representative of this new political formation. It no longer authorized belief in an Americanness that somehow contained a plurality that it also transcended. In place of the melting pot capable of assimilating immigrants, the United States was understood as but a single unit of a global network. [/] To facilitate the production of an alternative to the national narrative confirmative of the 'melting pot,' I have gathered essays in this volume that trace the grand narrative of U.S. nationalism from its inception in antebellum slave narratives to its dissolution in the aftermath of the Cold War. The contributors examine the various cultural, political, and historical sources – colonial literature, mass movements, health epidemics, mass spectacle, transnational corporations, super-weapons – out of which this narrative was constructed, and propose different understandings of nationality and identity following in its wake." (vii) In how far nation and empire creep back into it, already in the "Introduction," as a self-evidently true combined image of precisely that global-

Any rhetoric of election, be it of the *jihad* or the Old Testament, of the Aryan or the American kind (to allude only to some that are currently again or still under discussion) precludes exchange from a position of symmetry. This does not mean that all such kinds of rhetoric will have the same effects; it is obvious that historically they have *not* had the same effects, and to point that out is part of the function of the pairings made above, which have something intentionally oxymoronic about them. But it seems to me that unavoidably the asymmetry of value that is at the core of any rhetoric of election will, *in external conflicts*, make all checks on the suppression or even extermination of "others" *internal* to the system that arrogates such election to itself. Restraints on totalitarianism and terror will have to be internal to the hegemonic culture or society itself, because it is by definition not affected by suggestions from the non-hegemonic one(s), nor is it in a position to acknowledge the existence of a superior law. (It *is* that superior law.) It is to be expected that as such a culture of election comes under external pressure, it will tend to adapt its laws to expediency; or, to put it differently, in any conflict between the specifics of its moral law and the sense of election, *which is also the supreme imperative to realize a future state of perfection*, the moral laws will tend to go by the board. In order not to be unnecessarily controversial, I will not give any examples, which would unavoidably be subject to contestation and to contamination by other types of argument. (It is, incidentally, also obvious that in the degree that a culture/society comes under pressure, it will tend to abolish recognition of superior laws inside itself, to make itself the supreme law again and to construct or revive a sense of election that had seemed to have been eroded by processes of secularization and pragmatism. Cf. the Balkans.)

Such internalization of the laws that regulate conflict, as part of the imperialism of election, has a double effect. It includes and it excludes: it includes what can be included, and it excludes what cannot. This appears trivial, but as we look at the moment in which, under whatever pressure, dissent (in Bercovitch's terms) becomes consent, we see how the construction of *the American* is inextricably, if unwittingly bound up with the construction of its Other, *the Un-American*. The former does draw whatever appears remotely usable into its own systemic sphere, but it also by implication rejects whatever may not be capable of integration as unusable or useless: as lying outside the pale of civilization, history, humanity, etc. Walter Benn Michaels, for instance, in the discussion of modernist nativism in the beginning of *Our America*, auto-

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ization that is initially designated as the motive of multiplication and contestation, remains to be seen.

matically invokes the opposition "American"/"un-American" *and* its historical mutability, when he argues that "nativism in the period just after World War I involved not only a reassertion of the distinction between American and un-American but a crucial redefinition of the terms in which it might be made" (2).[10] Even Bercovitch's own gesture of defining *the American* in terms of such integrative capability implicitly rejects as un-American (though he would presumably not use the word) a habit of mind that does not have such capabilities.[11]

The arrogation of regulation affects different dimensions differently. Territory and class, for instance, are constructed as predominantly unitary, gender and race as saliently multiple. As American Capitalism becomes a global order, in a gesture that effectively forecloses the discussion of the relation between the global and the local, notions both of territoriality and of class are affected. One territory (*America*) becomes all-encompassing – and what is a territory without borders? Does it, in order to affirm its territoriality, have to internalize *and de-realize* borders, either by discovering and allowing difference(s) within itself, or by discovering and annihilating enemies within itself, or both? At the same time, the "class" of those that can profit from and in a *capitalist* order become the real citizens. These are not necessarily primarily the owners of capital, but at least as much its managers, and the managers of both real and symbolic capital; they may in fact have the opportunity to be the real *profiteurs*, which may account for their frequent single-minded support of the order.[12] As, on the one hand, territory and class "become" single or unitary – "frozen" entities that guarantee the unity of the world view and mirror the fact that the global economy needs to erase territorial and class

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[10] He goes on to identify that redefinition as one in terms of the family (6); this is true even of that brief section entitled "Nation or Empire?" (16-23), from which precisely these two terms, *nation* and *empire*, very quickly vanish. Michaels's topic, as it is developed with increasing clarity in the book, is culture and race, and their interrelation in notions of identity, which makes his argument marginal to my own.

[11] The border between the usable and the unusable, of course, will always be a shifting one. And the mechanisms may be manifold. The Indian, for instance, has on the one hand become part of the American as an instrumentalized image of The Other as The One Incapable of Integration – or, more simply and bluntly put, as the Vanishing Indian – , and Indians today are struggling to achieve integration into the scheme of America without a total loss of difference. But on the other hand, the instrumentalized image can, in so far as, as part of the cultural repertoire, it is integrated into the culture, while its content is primarily otherness, also be read as fusing both aspects: integration as image, rejection as reality.

[12] The unitariness of this new class is guaranteed, then, less in terms of its inner coherence than (structurally) by its difference from the increasingly invisible and disenfranchised "others." That fewer and fewer people bother to vote is in this perspective not a problem; it can easily be rationalized as unavoidable, for instance as a symptom of their lack of fitness for survival that was to be suspected anyway.

differences –, race and gender, on the other hand, become multiple: cultural performances of differences that may (truly) enable a working-through and living-out of conflicts, but only in ways that (re-)define them as cultural and thereby relegate them to areas that lie at a safe distance from the core of unitariness.

Or, to put it differently: regulation is defined in terms of a political and economic (or a politico-economic or *class*) system that has become global; reciprocally, the notion of globalization is "designed," in the way that all ideology appears to be designed to serve certain interests, to privilege the politico-economic, or to privilege America as a politico-economic project that can safely harbor multiplicities of race and gender "inside."[13] *Culture* is not situated, in this pattern, at the level of unity. (In others it may be.) It is designed to defuse the potential divisiveness of gender and race – which could, of course, easily associate themselves with notions of class and territory –, by "culturalizing" them. Interestingly enough, in a more traditionally nationalist culture criticism – à la Bloom/Hirsch, for example –, for which there persists (quite realistically, in my eyes) a gap between America and the world, culture remains as political as it does for any type of identity politics.

Election, finally, has been redefined as political economy, or rather as *a* political economy. Its coupling with "real" or "empirically proven" globalization needs to be read as the final delegitimation of real dissent, which can only be delusion or bad will or Evil.

Implications for our own practice follow directly from the characterization of the trends I have offered. Critical paradigms carry the conditions of their own use and usefulness (at least partly) with themselves; critical axioms imply instructions for their own deployment and employment. A type of American Studies that has embedded in it the rhetoric of global election and pre-emption is incapable of dialogue and exchange. It would – to move closer to home – not be a useful or interesting partner for European Americanists; the American Americanist who speaks in the voice of Mrs Albright

[13] The problem remains even where the axiom is *not* being accepted, as the question how to write about historical dominance ("imperialism") without justifying as necessary and right what has come into existence and thereby writing it through the present on into the future remains. It may exist, for all I can tell after a brief glance, even in John Carlos Rowe's discussion of Henry Adams' ambivalence regarding the imperialist expansionism of turn-of-the-century America, which proceeds in terms clearly allusive of the globalization axiom: "Adams and Hay represent two 'aspects' of a new and complex figure of the American Imperial Self as the United States began to assume leadership of global politics in the twentieth century." (17) The question here is nothing less than how to write the history of the increasingly powerful role of the US in 20th c. world politics, and how to acknowledge that role, without writing it as the ongoing master narrative of our time from which there is *and should be* no escape.

will not be likely to find interesting and competent European partners. At worst, this would be an incentive to turn elsewhere for one's subject matter and networks of exchange. It is not impossible that the growth of Emergent Literatures as a discipline in Europe has taken place at the expense, largely, of American Studies, and that this has something to do with the dominance of the global election and pre-emption paradigm in American criticism.

At best, such an antagonistic encounter would be an incentive to develop further that independent European perspective in the discipline that we have off and on been talking about during the last few years. But it seems to me this very development would be much more interesting if it could take place in open dialogue with America.

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