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THE DECEPTIVENESS OF MORALITY:
ON THE DISCOURSE OF LIBERTY AND REPRESSION

We are asked by our conveners to theorize about «the relationship between utility and morality». While these terms are initially labelled, in neutral terminology, as «two dimensions of society», they are actually described in an asymmetrical, ideological way. I quote here from the prospectus:

Utility expresses the individual goal, the singularity, the capacity, the assertion of the social actor; morality expresses the needs of the community, the guarantees of collective, the common restraints on action, the tacit agreements without which it is impossible to build and maintain a relationship of interaction. The quest for utility and the adherence to the moral norm are two frequently contradictory pressures in terms of which the social actor is called on to find adequate solutions... The evolution of modern culture and the processes of modernization have produced a significant imbalance between utility and morality.

This statement virtually demands its own deconstruction. It should be seen not merely, or even primarily, as a denotative sign, with a largely referential status, but as a connotative sign, a statement connected to others in a complex set of intertextual evaluations. As soon as one reads the text from this decentered position, it becomes immediately clear that the statement is informed by two codes. Morality is the sign that stands for the discourse of the sacred, the good; utility is the sign that represents the discourse of the profane, the bad. The rhetoric of the prospectus suggests, moreover, that the sacred is being increasingly endangered. There is a growing imbalance. Utility is pushing out morality. We are called upon, as sociologists, to redress this danger by theorizing the relation between utility and morality once again.

I will try to do so here. I can proceed, however, only by extricating myself from the framework that has been proposed, a framework, I hasten to add, which is hardly idiosyncratic to the organizers of this confe-

rence. Indeed, on the antinomy between (supposedly individualistic) utility and (supposedly collectivistic) morality even conservatives and radicals can find common ground. The prospectus could, indeed, just as well have been written either by Daniel Bell or by Jurgen Habermas, by Robert Bellah or by Robert Nisbet.

I am not recommending here that theory should become some kind of abstracted empiricism; it is impossible for theory to step outside of a priori commitments altogether. The problem with the framework proposed here is more specific: it merely reproduces, in high intellectual theory, the common sense understandings of social actors. It does not penetrate it with the code of rational self-reflection, which is, or should be, the metacode of social theory itself.

Against this conflation of ideology and theoretical analysis, I will argue that morality cannot be identified with the collectivity, with life-affirming outcomes, with the maintenance of community and the integrity of the whole. Morality is, of course, social, whereas the «individual», in the sense of the unsocialized actor, is not. But this is a tautology true by definition. Once we have gone beyond the neophyte and begun the socializing process, it is not only pointless but actually downright misleading to speak in this way. In the argument that follows, I will make these counterclaims:

1. Morality is a socially generated system of symbolically-defined ethics. This symbolic, extra-individual system of beliefs stipulates the nature and occasion of selfish, egoistic, antisocial behavior every bit as much as it defines other behavior as altruistic and responsible, in short as «moral» in common sense terms.
2. The division between moral and utilitarian behavior in any structured society is not, therefore, a «real» difference; there is not, any altruistic behavior or selfish behavior as such.
3. The characterization of an action as merely utilitarian or egoistical must be considered, therefore, not as a generalization about the actual nature of that behavior but rather as a form of «moral projection». It is a way of seeing and criticizing, of negating, the behavior of negatively evaluated members of a particular social order. It is always «others» who are considered hostile, selfish, and immoral. We — the upstanding members of the sociological community from within which we speak — are always moral and community-minded, whatever it is that we actually do.
4. This kind of moral projection is more or less continually engaged in by virtually every individual and social group, by economic, ethnic, religious, territorial, and national collectivities who seek to defend their

boundaries in discursive terms. It is also engaged in by social theorists, whose discourse too often can be viewed merely as crystallizing the projections of the groups to which they belong.

5. These projects, these modes of characterizing and marginalizing people and things, are not primarily psychological in their origin, although they certainly draw upon structured psychological strains. In the first instance they are cultural codes, which provide a «vocabulary of motives» deeply rooted in modern societies.

In the remainder of this essay, I will turn from critical-interpretive to «positive» theory, suggesting how the points I have made can be articulated in a systematic way. I will begin with the notion that the communities in which projections of good and evil are enmeshed can be thought of as «civil societies». Intellectuals and common people alike write, think, and act from within a civil society. They identify themselves and other groups in terms of their position within civil society's complex architecture and archeology.

Civil society, of course, has been a topic of enormous discussion and dispute throughout the history of social thought. Suffice it to say here that I using the concept to theorize a kind of community, despite the fact that Marx and critical theory have come to use the concept to theorizing the very lack of it, that is, a world of egoistic, self-regulating individuals. I am relying for my understanding of the term on a different tradition, on the line of democratic, liberal thought that extended from the 17th to the early 19th centuries and which constituted an age of democratic theory that was supplanted by industrial capitalism and its concern with «the social question».

Following certain elements of Parsons, I will define civil society as a sphere or subsystem of society, which is analytically and to various degrees empirically separated from the other spheres, or subsystems, which can be understood as characterizing political, economic, and religious life. Civil society is a sphere of solidarity in which abstract universalism and particularistic versions of community are intertwined. It is both a normative and a real concept. It allows the relationship between universal individual rights and particularistic restrictions on these rights to be studied empirically, as the conditions that determine the status of civil society itself.

Civil society depends on resources, or inputs, from these others spheres, from political life, from broad cultural discussion, from territorial organization, and from primordality. In a causal sense, civil society is dependent upon these spheres, but only by what Parsons called a «combinatorial logic». Civil society — and the groups, individuals, and actors who

represent their interests in this system's terms — pulls together these inputs according to the logic and demands of its particular situation. This is to say that the solidary sphere which we call civil society has relative autonomy and can be studied in its own right.

There is indeed a «society» that can be defined in moral terms. The stipulations of this moral community articulate with (not determine) organizations and the exercise of power via two institutions: constitutions and legal codes, on the one hand, and «offices», on the other. Civil society also has organizations or institutions of its own: the courts, organizations of mass communication, and public opinion polls are all significant examples. Civil society is also constituted by its own distinctive structure of elites, not only by oligarchies that control the legal and communication systems but by those who exercise power and identity through voluntary organizations («dignitaries» or «public servants») and social movements («movement intellectuals»). But civil society is not merely an institutional realm. It is also a realm of structured, socially established consciousness, tissues of understanding that operate beneath and above explicit institutions and the self-conscious interests of elites.

Sociologists have written much about the social forces that create conflict and polarize society, about interests and structures of political, economic, racial, ethnic, religious, and gender groups. But sociologists have said very little about the construction, destruction, and deconstruction of civic solidarity itself. They are generally silent about the sphere of feeling that makes society into society and about the processes that fragment it. In order to do so, we must recognize and focus upon the distinctive symbolic codes that are critically important in constituting the sense of civil society for those who are within and without it. These codes are so sociologically important, I would argue, that every study of social/sectional/subsystem conflict must be complemented by a systematic study of this 'civil symbolic sphere. It is because social conflict involves core values in civil society that arguments about the morality or selfishness of actors and their opponents become central to political conflicts and eventually to social theory itself. For the morality/utility debate labels people into the categories of socially worthy and unworthy, and this is exactly what conflicts in civil society attempt to do.

Just as there is no developed religion that does not divide the world into the saved and the damned, there is no civil discourse that does not conceptualize the world into those who deserve inclusion and those who do not. Members of national communities firmly believe that «the world», and this notably includes their own nation, is filled with people who

either do not deserve freedom and communal support or are not capable of sustaining them (in part because they are immoral egoists). Members of national communities do not want to «save» such persons. They do not wish to include them, protect them, or offer them rights, because, they conceive them as being unworthy and amoral, as in some sense «uncivilized».

But this distinction is not «real» — actors are not intrinsically either worthy and moral, or antisocial and egoistical. They are determined to be so by being placed in certain positions on the grid of civil culture. When citizens make judgments about who should be included in civil society and who should not, about who is a friend and who is an enemy, they draw upon a systematic, highly elaborated symbolic code. This symbolic structure was already clearly implied in the very first philosophical thinking about democratic societies that emerged in ancient Greece. Since the Renaissance it has permeated popular thinking and behavior, even while its centrality in philosophical thinking has continued to be sustained. The symbolic structure takes different forms in different nations, and it is the historical residue of diverse movements in social, intellectual, and religious life — of classical ideas, republicanism and Protestantism, Enlightenment and liberal thought, of the revolutionary and common law traditions. The cultural implications of these variegated movements, however, have been drawn into a highly generalized symbolic system that divides civic virtue from civic vice in a remarkably stable and consistent way. It is for this reason that, despite divergent historical roots and variations in national elaborations, the language that forms the cultural core of civil society can be isolated as a general structure and studied as a relatively autonomous symbolic form.

The basic elements of this structure can be understood semiotically — they are sets of homologies, which create likenesses between various terms of social description and prescription, and antipathies, which establish antagonisms between these terms and other sets of symbols. Those who consider themselves worthy members of a national community (as most persons do, of course) define themselves in terms of the positive side of this symbolic set; they define those who are not deemed worthy in terms of the bad.

The binary discourse occurs at three levels: motives, relations, and institutions. The motives of political actors are clearly conceptualized (what kind of people are they?) along with social relations and institutions they are capable of sustaining.

Let us first discuss motives. Code and countercode posit human nature in diametrically opposed ways. Because democracy depends upon self-

control and individual initiatives, the people who compose it are described as being capable of activism and autonomy rather than as being passive and dependent. They are seen as rational and reasonable rather than as irrational and hysterical, as calm rather than excited, as controlled rather than passionate, as sane and realistic, not as given to fantasy or as mad. Democratic discourse, then, posits the following qualities as axiomatic: activism, autonomy, rationality, reasonableness, calm, control, realism, and sanity. The nature of the counter-code, the discourse that justifies the restriction of civil society, is already clearly implied. If actors are passive and dependent, irrational and hysterical, excitable, passionate, unrealistic or mad, they cannot be allowed the freedom that democracy allows. To the contrary, these persons deserve to be repressed, not only for the sake of civil society but for their own sakes as well.

The Discursive Structure of Social Motives

Democratic Code *Counter-democratic Code*

activism	passivity
autonomy	dependence
rationality	irrationality
reasonableness	hysteria
calm	excitable
self-control	passionate
realistic	unrealistic
sane	mad

Upon the basis of such contradictory codes about human motives, distinctive representations of social relationships can be built. Democratically motivated persons — persons who are active, autonomous, rational, reasonable, calm and realistic — will be capable of forming open social relationships rather than secretive ones; they will be trusting rather than suspicious, straight-forward rather than calculating, truthful rather than deceitful; their decisions will be based on open deliberation rather than conspiracy and their attitude toward authority will be critical rather than deferential; in their behavior toward other community members they will be bound by conscience and honor rather than by greed and selfinterest, and they will treat their fellows as friends rather than enemies.

If actors are irrational, dependent, passive, passionate, and unrealistic, on the other hand, the social relationships they form will be characteri-

zed by the second side of these fateful dichotomies. Rather than open and trusting relationships they will form secret societies that are premised on their suspicion of other human beings. To the authority within these secret societies they will be deferential, but to those outside their tiny group they will behave in a greedy and self-interested way. They will be conspiratorial, deceitful toward others and calculating in their behavior, conceiving of those outside their group as enemies. If the positive side of this second discourse set describes the symbolic qualities necessary to sustain civil society, the negative side describes a solitary structure in which mutual respect and expansive social integration has been broken down.

The Discursive Structure of Social Relationships

Democratic Code *Counter-democratic Code*

open	secret
trusting	suspicious
critical	deferential
honorable	self-interested
conscience	greed
truthful	deceitful
straightforward	calculating
deliberative	conspiratorial
friend	enemy

Given the discursive structure of motives and civic relationships, it should not be surprising that this set of homologies and antipathies extends to the social understanding of political and legal institutions themselves. If members of a national community are irrational in motive and distrusting in social relationship, they will naturally create institutions that are arbitrary rather than rule-regulated; that emphasize brute power rather than law and hierarchy rather than equality; that are exclusive rather than inclusive and promote personal loyalty over impersonal and contractual obligation; that are regulated by personalities rather than by office obligations and that are organized by faction rather than by groups which are responsible to the needs of the community as a whole.

Democratic Code

rule regulated
law
equality
inclusive
impersonal
contractual
social groups
office

Counter-democratic Code

arbitrary
power
hierarchy
exclusive
personal
ascriptive loyalty
factions
personality

These three sets of discursive structures are tied together. Indeed, every element in any one of the sets can be linked in metonymic relationships — homologous relations of likeness — to any element in another set on the same side. «Rule-regulated», for example, a key element in the symbolic understanding of democratic social institutions, is considered homologous — synonymous or mutually reinforcing in a cultural sense — with «truthful» and «open», terms that define social relationships, and with «reasonable» and «autonomous», elements from the symbolic set that stipulates democratic motives. In the same manner, any element from any set on one side is taken to be antithetical to any element from any set on the other. According to the rules of this broader cultural formation, for example, «hierarchy» is thought to be inimical to «critical» and «open», and also to «activist» and «self-controlled».

The positive sets so coded motives, relations, and institutions form what I call the discourse of liberty. The discourse of liberty is taken to sum up «the best» in a civil community. It is a source not only on purity but of purification and its tenets are considered to be sacred. The objects that the discourse creates seem to possess an awesome power for good that an awesome power for good that places them at the «center» of society, a location — sometimes geographical, often stratificational, always symbolic — that compels their defense at almost any cost. If a social group is constituted under the discourse of liberty, it must eventually be given social rights, because the members of this group are conceived of as possessing the capacity for voluntary altruistic, communal action. Political struggles over the status of lower class groups, racial and ethnic minorities, women, children, criminals, and the mentally, emotionally, and physically handicapped have always involved sym-

holic struggles over whether the discourse of liberty can be extended

applied
The negative side of this symbolic formation is viewed as profane. Involving the «worst» in the national community, it embodies evil. The objects it identifies threaten the core community from somewhere outside of it. From this marginal position, they present a powerful source of pollution. To be close to these polluted objects — the actors, structures, and processes, which are constituted by this repressive discourse — is dangerous. Not only can one's reputation be sullied and one's status endangered but one's very security as well. To have one's self or movement be identified in terms of these objects causes anguish, disgust, and alarm. This code is taken to be a threat to the very center of civil society itself.

I call this negative code the discourse of repression because it supplies the rationale for suppressing actors who are constituted by it, indeed, often it seems to demand their suppression.

Identification in terms of these negative categories is essential if venting combat is to be pursued. Once this polluting discourse is applied, it becomes impossible for good people to treat and reason with those on the other side. If one's opponents are beyond reason, deceived by leaders who operate in secret, the only option is to read them out of the human race. When great wars are successful, they provide powerful narratives that dominate the nation's postwar life. Hitler and Nazism formed the backbone of a huge array of Western myths and stories, providing master metaphors for everything from profound discussions about the Final Solution to the good guy/bad guy plots of television dramas and situation comedies.

Public figures and social movements, institutions, and everyday events must be categorized in terms of one side of this discursive formation or the other. Not surprisingly, this discursive identity is contested. Political fights are, in part, about how to distribute actors across the structure of discourse, for there is no *determined* relationship between any event or group and either side of the cultural scheme. Actors struggle to taint one another with the repressive brush of repression and to wrap themselves in the rhetoric of liberty. In periods of tension and crisis, political struggle becomes a matter of how far and to whom the discourses of liberty and repression apply. The effective cause of victory and defeat, imprisonment and freedom, and sometimes even of life and death, is often discursive domination, which depends upon just how popular narratives about good and evil are extended. Is it protesting students who are anti-

social, aggressors, and therefore «like Nazis», or the conservatives who are pursuing them? Are members of the Communist Party to be understood as dangerous totalitarians, or the members of the witch-hunting, redbaiting, committees who interrogate them? When the American crisis called «Watergate» began in 1972, only the actual burglars were called conspirators and polluted by the discourse of repression. The Democratic presidential candidate, George McGovern, and his fellow Democrats, were unsuccessful in their efforts to apply this discourse to the White House, executive staff, and Republican Party, elements of civil society that succeeded in maintaining their identity in liberal terms. At a later point in the two-year crisis, such a reassuring relationship to the culture structure non longer held: Nixon became the very embodiment of the anti-democratic code.

The general discursive structure, in other words, in used to legitimate friends and legitimate opponents in the course of real historical time. If an independent civil society were to be fully maintained, the discourse of repression would be applied only in highly circumscribed ways, to groups like children and criminals who are not usually taken to be in sufficient possession of their rational or moral faculties. It is often the case, indeed, that individuals and groups within civil society will be able to sustain the discourse of liberty over a significant period of time. They will be able to understand their opponents as other rational individuals without indulging in moral annihilation. Over an extended historical period, however, it is impossible for the discourse of repression not to be brought into significant play and for opponents to be understood as enemies of the most threatening kind.

Devant les nombreuses et inquiétants indices de l'intolérance multi-forme qui de toutes parts, et en tous pays, ne manquent pas de surgir, il est important pour un esprit libre, et qui surtout entend le rester, de s'interroger sur la raison interne d'une telle situation. En effet, à la haine manifeste ou au ressentiment sournois, il est inutile d'opposer l'indignation des belles âmes. Pratiquant une roborative lucidité il vaut mieux s'enquérir, au risque de déplaire, des sources même de ce retour en force du fanatisme ou, à tout le moins, de cela même qui lui sert de soutien.

On se souvient de Renan: on attendait le Christ et c'est l'Eglise qui est venue. A la jouissance d'un éternel présent succède la gestion du futur. Machine à assurer, l'église récompte sur le Paradis. C'est de là qu'elle tient son pouvoir. Il y a dans toute cléricature ce souci de gérer le futur et, pour ce faire, de brider le présent. Alors que celui-ci est polysémique, essentiellement pluriel et multidimensionnel, l'attitude cléricale s'emploie à le dichotomiser en oppositions tranchées, blanc-noir, bien-mal, Dieu-Satan. Et c'est à partir de là que l'on trouve ces multiples couples antithétiques qui ponctuent l'histoire et génèrent les inquisitions et les exclusions que l'on sait.

Il ne faut pas oublier que le dénominateur commun d'un tel catholicisme est bien le *devoir être*. En fonction de ce lointain paradis posé en modèle désirable, l'individu «doit» être ceci, la société doit être cela. C'est dans cette logique du devoir être que l'on trouve, in nuce, la racine de tout fanatisme, de tout fantasme de l'Un, qui d'une manière récurrente, et sous des formes diverses, fait régulièrement surface dans nos sociétés.

Il se trouve que le futurisme religieux, pour lequel la vie ici bas n'est que la préparation d'une vie meilleure, s'est progressivement convertit en futurisme moral-politique: demain vaura mieux qu'aujourd'hui. Toute la modernité repose là-dessus. Son effort constant fut celui de l'unification. Le jacobinisme français est à cet égard éclairant. Le code napoléonien en donne une description juridique. Les grands systèmes idéologiques du XIX^e siècle lui fournissent une justification scientifique. Dans une telle

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INDICE

Presentazione di Carlo Mongarelli Pag. 7

PARTE I
L'UTILE E LA MORALE

Joachim Israel, <i>Remarks on the Concept of Utility in Ethics and Economics</i>	»	15
Franco Crespi, <i>Oltre la morale e l'utile: l'esperienza etica e il rapporto con le cose</i>	»	27
Jeffrey C. Alexander, <i>The Deceptiveness of Mortality: On the Discourse of Liberty and Repression</i>	»	41
Michel Maffesoli, <i>Les dessous du moralisme</i>	»	51

COMMENTI AL TEMA:

Francesco Alberoni, <i>Morale e società</i>	»	59
Serge Moscovici, <i>L'utile et la morale</i>	»	63

PARTE II
ETICA DI GRUPPO E PROFITTO

Peter Atteslander, <i>Group Ethics and Profit</i>	»	71
Harry Pross, <i>The TV-Sports-Connection</i>	»	75

PARTE III
RAGIONE STRUMENTALE E SOCIOLOGIA CONTEMPORANEA

Laura Bovone, <i>Etica come etichetta</i>	»	85
Pierpaolo Donati, <i>Utilità e moralità nella società contemporanea: serve una bussola AGIL?</i>	»	91

5

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