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Rubbish, the Remnant, Etcetera

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The Differential Machine

Every system of classification works on the basis of rules of inclusion and exclusion. Whether these be pragmatic, e.g. the classification of snow by the Inuit, or theoretical, e.g. the periodic table, they operate on and constitute differences, they establish boundaries, and ground judgement and action. Yet although the process of inclusion necessarily implicates rules of exclusion, hardly any system of classification is founded on an explicit theory of difference. Differences proliferate from already existing processes of differentiation (say, in phylogenesis) and of the ordering of the objects of the world. Their redistribution and grouping in taxonomies is correlated to a scale of importance and visibility, say, human beings according to a notion of superior and inferior 'races', so that the need to categorize inscribes a normalizing thrust and a system of value. Of course, in the course of this ordering of the world, even more objects are simply consigned to the heap of the unimportant or irrelevant; they fill up the category marked 'the rest', in short, they become rubbish.

As a concept, rubbish trails in its wake a number of other categories that metonymically resonate with it, namely, those of the remnant, the remainder, the marginal, noise, etcetera. The common ground linking this metonymic chain is the implication that the norms of the normal, and the criteria that determine the canonical, function to consign all objects that do not fit these norms to the domain of the abnormal, the untypical, the pathological, the surplus. These resemblances allow us to glimpse only the semblance of rubbish for, as movement, rubbish is dissembled in the trace where it endures. Rubbish, as one knows, is difficult to get rid of, it accumulates, even if kept out of sight: in attics, dumps, silos, the seabed, camps. This happens not just with 'spent' nuclear

material, or the cast out detritus of consumer culture, or carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere; it happens with weeds invading the ecological artifice of the modern garden and with the multiplication of germs dissipated through points of their accumulation like hospitals. The process of producing rubbish is endemic, and its accumulation awaits the 'accident'. At some point it becomes excessive, and it then emerges as a challenge to the whole system, the disavowed trace that erupts to put into perspective the calculations that have ordered its dissimulation.

Today rubbish has taken a new dimension, for, the production of obsolescence that Benjamin thought characteristic of the consumer culture has become intensified because of the accelerated speed at which the must-have objects of desire must be discarded as the signifiers of yesterday's fashion, and the degree to which identity and worth have become locked into this machinery for constituting the signs of desirable identities. Consumer goods carry news of difference that we have become attuned to hear, sensitized by the language of advertising that assigns value to these objects according to the arbitrary scales of fashion and the self-referential process of creating the distinctions of taste. An economy of abjection drives this consumerist apparatus for recognition whereby those who have must display their wealth through the obsessive acquisition of the (sometimes admittedly exquisite) trinkets that confer provisional prestige and worth, while the have-nots can only window-shop and fantasize ownership of what would bring them into visibility, at least from the point of view of the gaze constituted by the operation of teletechnologies. A new imaginary is being created, grounded in the hyperreal world of teletechnologies and the mass that they constitute, mediating the affective relation between the subjective and the social and public, and so correlating that relationship with the process of recognition. This imaginary functions as relay for the new machinery of desire that produces objects for it and for consumption. This is of course far from the little that most people need: 'all we want is to

be able to live in dignity', as a supporter of Subcommandante Marcos once put it. The tragedy of corporate capitalism is that untold misery is inflicted on millions globally as an integral part of a system for producing consumers with large disposable incomes who can then pig out on disposable goods to feed the existential need for recognition, generating even more rubbish. The problem, then, is to theorize rubbish in a way that enables one to rethink the fact of difference – of class, gender, race, culture – alongside the fact of co-dependence and thus to bring into visibility the constitutive relation between the visible and the invisible.

The Point of View of Error

This relation reappears in a different form in the case of the constitution of knowledge. Every category, we know, involves a process of abstraction whereby variations that do not alter a function or that contravene the rules of belonging are discounted. For instance, in deciding what is or is not a chair, one may apply a simple rule, for example, that of objects that have been made for one to sit on, though one may then have to add other conditions for the sake of precision, say, to distinguish between chairs and beds. What seems particularly challenging is not this kind of problem about categories and classification, but the fact that what escapes categorization and taxonomies often betrays one's ignorance and challenges existing theories. Thus, the Genome project has revealed that there are far fewer genes for explaining the characteristics and behaviour of humans than expected by positive science and its assumption of univocal causality. It was thought that each biological characteristic and every personality trait would have 'its' gene, a neat correspondence that would have satisfied the demands of discrete functions prescribed by positivism. The discovery cuts the ground under the advocates of simple explanatory models of life and adds weight to the theories that emphasize complexity, compossibility and a 'flat ontology'. An interesting aspect of the new knowledge is the fact that there seems to be a lot of surplus genetic material – 95 percent of the genomic material – seemingly serving no purpose, and thus conforming to what existing models of life understand as noise. This 'non-coding' or 'conserved' DNA, symptomatically called junk DNA, now appears to contain a wealth of information and functions essential for the working of the coding DNA (that codes for amino acids, and thus for protein production), for example, it seems to regulate the process of development and differentiation by switching on and off particular genetic activity.

Explanations that simply invoke lack of information and the provisionality of scientific knowledge miss the deeper level of the epistemological issue. For instance, if instead of the assumption of the individualism of the gene in genetics, an assumption in solidarity with a whole world view sustaining an egocentric ontology and an instrumentalist idea of nature, theory proceeded from the standpoint of the inseparability of 'individual' entities from the 'surrounding', that is, if it assumed the primacy of the relational character of being and life, theory would recognize the imbrication of human beings, and the knowing mind, in the world, implying also the impossibility of an omniscient knowledge (Prigogine and Stengers, 1979). A similar point can be made about what is called dark matter, namely, matter that calculations determined by astro-physical theories tell us must exist in the universe, yet that no theory can explain and no instrument can detect so far. What was supposed to be empty space is now thought to be filled by this recalcitrant stuff; is it rubbish or is it the signifier of the insufficiency of current theories, or indeed the evidence that the whole conceptual framing of science so far needs to be recast? It may well be that, given appropriate transformation in the bigger epistemological picture, junk DNA will turn out to be the equivalent of dark matter concerning the process of formation of life and world. The problem is not only that the dominant model of knowledge assumes that the way existing theories cut up the world reveals an underlying essential reality, it also implicates an ontological difference between what a particular knowledge makes visible and what it casts into the shadow, granting ontological priority to the former.

The point is that when one pays attention to the reality of the process whereby knowledge is produced, one finds that a history of errors is far more enlightening than the narrative of an untroubled rationality motivating the machinery of the progressive accumulation of knowledge. As Bachelard and Canguilhem have demonstrated, the history of errors, that is to say the history of the failures, the wrong hunches, the theories that did not convince, the obstacles that provoked new thinking, the paradigms that have become limiting rather than innovative, reveals much more about the indeterminate, collective, constructed, ludic character of the process than the authorized history of knowledge that deliberately casts them into the oubliette of errors, to be forgotten in the clutter of neglected archives. Error in science is not rubbish, it is productive, both as a necessary aspect of the process of constituting new knowledge as well as from the point of view of an epistemological history of the sciences. Error is

democratic: it opens towards heterogeneity; it allows newness to come into the world.

The Standpoint of the Relation to the Other

Another set of issues, this time relating ontology to ethics, appears when one considers other terms in the metonymic chain. Agamben (1999), in *The Remnants of Auschwitz*, examines the ontological and discursive status of the human subject reduced to bare life in the concentration camps. The prisoners, already denied a name and any kind of dignity, were so systematically dehumanized and brutalized by the Nazi regime of terror that the weakest had become the living dead, the *müselmann*, the speechless and thoughtless non-men, who no longer cared what happened to them. For the SS men these barely alive beings had become 'garbage', while for other prisoners they had become the figure of abjection, for they embodied both the disposable subhumans of fascist biopolitics, as well as the dread of the death beyond death of what possibly awaited every Jew in the camp. No one could bear to gaze upon them. Agamben discusses the paradox of this existence to which no one can properly bear witness yet that must remain as testimony. The *müselmann*, he says (1999: 48), is the 'complete witness', occupying the non-place and threshold between man and non-man; she/he/it is 'an indefinite being in whom not only humanity and non-humanity, but also vegetative existence and relation, physiology and ethics, medicine and politics, and life and death continuously pass through each other'. It can be argued that this being functions as the exception, the point where the question of ethics begins, that is, the point at which one is obliged to ask what it means to be human at all. But this is not an abstract philosophical question, for it is triggered by the shame that the witness has for retaining any dignity at the sight of those who have been stripped of all dignity, 'the shame of the survivors in the face of the drowned', as Agamben's (1999: 63) reference to Primo Levi's testimony shows. And now, Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib have become the latest in a long series of instances of what Arendt has called the 'banality of evil'; they oblige us to decide whether the culture and the calculations that are capable of inflicting this

suffering can still qualify as human – bearing in mind that the inhuman, as Lyotard (1991) has shown, inhabits the human. I will argue that ethics begins here for two reasons, first, because it intensifies the question of what living with dignity means, and second, because it insists that one must respond to the plight of the drowned, by bearing witness to the suffering of the other, that is, it challenges us as to the question of our responsibility for our fellows, particularly when one poses the question from the point of view of the constitutive relationality of being.

The principle of security that drives the current militarization of the social in the name of a 'war on terrorism' is producing its own regimes of terror, invested in a biopolitics that has allocated to itself the right to give life and to give death, that is, to produce new remnants. This strategy dispenses with frontiers and international laws in its post-Clauswitzian militarist logic of a total war on whoever and whatever does not conform to the norms of socialities founded on fundamentalist certitudes. The watchword seems to be: assimilation or extermination. Today, the names of the drowned and the remnant have multiplied and spread across the globe: the stranger, the refugee, the asylum-seeker, the deportee, the ethnic other, the destitute thrown out of her land or deprived of a livelihood by the advances of neoliberal privatization and marketization. It is another army of the human surplus or 'rubbish' which global governance plans to discipline and regulate, or else disperse into the invisibility of non-places like camps, bidonvilles, favelas.

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