THE END(S) OF HUMANITY: VULNERABILITY AND THE METAPHORS OF MEMBERSHIP

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MY ARGUMENT DEVELOPS A GENERAL SOCIOLOGICAL theory that connects our embodiment to the building of social institutions and social interdependency. There are three components to this argument: we are ontologically frail and vulnerable; the institutions that we create to compensate for frailty are also precarious; but frailty and precariousness produce an interconnected and interdependent social world. This perspective is neo-Hobbesian because it provides a way of rethinking social contract theory. Social life is always a contingent balance between scarcity and solidarity. The Hobbesian struggle over scarce resources constantly threatens the institutional framework, but the precariousness of institutions is constantly repaired by the solidarity that arises from the shared experiences of embodiment. These notions about embodiment provide a powerful theory and defense of human rights as a universalized system of protection against our ontological frailty and sociological precariousness. Finally, I attempt to

reflect on the erosion of bodily metaphors in contemporary society as an index of the alienation of our embodiment in technological society, where social life is disrupted by risk and regulation. In the archaic world, embodiment is a source of binding metaphors of sociality, but these have been progressively undermined by technological change. The exhaustion of metaphors provides no opportunity for adequately grasping the dialectic of risk and regulation within a common language of responsibility.

My proposal is that the concept of embodiment must be placed at the core of any adequate picture of social life. A renewal of critical sociology depends on a theoretical integration of the connections between the vulnerability of human embodiment and the precarious nature of social institutions. The richness of metaphors of embodiment is never very far from an effective conceptualization of institutions. The fact that the body is important to the metaphors we use to think with has been commonly recognized in social anthropology.

Consider religious mythology. Because the body is traditionally always the nearest-to-hand source of metaphors for understanding society, it is hardly surprising that the Abrahamic faiths are constructed around body metaphors. In the Christian faith, for example, these metaphors include: virgin births, charisma as blood, Adam's Rib, Mary's milk of sustenance, the Sacred Heart, and the Eucharistic Feast. It is also the case that basic social theories have also been corporeal. Feasts provided an elementary model of society, and the Church was conceptualized as a body. From the idea of the Church as the Body of Christ came early models of trading groups as corporations. The body is, however, more than a rich source of metaphor. It is constitutive of our being-in-the-world, but in contemporary societies the dominance of biotechnology has brought about an erosion of a sense of common ontology.

My attempt to renew sociological theory is based on three assumptions: the vulnerability of embodiment, the precariousness of institutions, and the interconnectedness of social life. There is a dialectical relationship between these three components that becomes obvious when one thinks about the process of modernization. It is within this dialectical balance between frailty, precariousness, and interconnectedness that

modern medical technologies are powerful and far-reaching. If our embodiment is the real source of common sociability, then changes to our embodiment must have implications for vulnerability and interconnectedness.

The new micro-biological revolution is Cartesian (in reinforcing the separation of mind and body); it is driven by a powerful commercial logic, and has (largely unrecognized) military and policing uses and implications that are problematic for human rights and political democracy. Contemporary medicine has promoted a "mirage of health,"[1] but cloning, reproductive technology, and organ transplants both express and enhance social inequalities, especially between societies, and they have the potential to transform our human identity in ways that are negative and destructive. The point of this paper is to raise once more the ambiguity of the questions: what are the proper goals (ends) of a political community, and do our current problems anticipate the termination (end) of the human? Is this crisis the end of humanity (as an empirical community of beings) or the end of the human (as the possibility of a conceptual category)? [2]

Let us reconsider religious mythology. *Religio* is that which binds and disciplines a community whose humanity is a function of a shared set of experiences of birth, maturation, procreation, and death. It is difficult to see how this *communitas* could survive the medical rationalization of our world or how anything could replace or stand in for this *religio*. This loss is one sense in which we can speak of "the end of the human." The twentieth-century philosopher who perhaps saw this crisis of being most clearly was Martin Heidegger, who believed that modern technology, as an exploitative framework of natural resources, would interpose itself between being and the world.[3]

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1 René Dubois, *The Mirage of Health: Utopias, Progress, and Biological Change* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960).

2 This paper grows, in part, out of reflections on the erasure of man at "the edge of the sea" in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970) 387.

3 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

Embodiment, Vulnerability, and Frailty

Human beings are ontologically frail and their natural environment uncertain. In order to protect themselves from vagaries and afflictions, they must build social institutions (especially political, familial, and ecclesiastical institutions) that come to constitute what we call "society." We need the companionship of society that, through the sharing of bread (pan), provides us with means of mutual support. We need the creative force of ritual and the emotional effervescence of common festivals to renew social life and to build effective institutions, and we need the comforts of social institutions as means of fortifying our existence. These institutions are, however, themselves precarious and cannot provide an adequate and reliable social environment. Rituals often go awry, as René Girard has argued in *Violence and the Sacred.*[4] Fortunately, these afflictions and uncertainties generate inter-societal patterns of dependency and connectedness that in their more psychological manifestations result in sympathy and empathy without which society would not be possible. We can summarize this argument by saying that all social existence is characterized by the contradictory relationships between scarcity and solidarity. This picture of society is neo-Hobbesian. Its premise is that life is nasty, brutish, and short, but, instead of the individualistic notion of a social contract, human and social rights are juridical expressions of basic patterns of solidarity whose foundations are in the common experience of frailty and precariousness, on the one hand, and social interconnectedness, on the other.

My argument clearly has some connections with Alasdair MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals*, in which he criticizes Western philosophy for its neglect of two central facts about human beings—their vulnerability and their afflictions.[5] He goes on to argue that vulnerability explains our dependence on others for protection and sustenance.

4 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Athlone, 1988).

5 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

Vulnerability is derived intellectually from the legacy of Aristotle's view of animality. Although MacIntyre's notion of vulnerability is compatible with my project, there are some important differences between the two arguments. My own approach is part of a legacy of sociological analysis that includes admittedly very diverse and divergent figures: Marx, Lowith, Gehlen, Berger and Luckmann, rather than Aristotle and Aquinas. While MacIntyre quotes Maurice Merleau-Ponty with some approval to suggest that "I am my body,"[6] my approach is concerned to explore "embodiment" as a process rather than "body" as a fixed phenomenon. The vulnerability of embodiment is connected in my account with a view of the precarious nature of institutions and the interconnected nature of the social world. A sociological understanding of the social world needs to grasp two processes: embodiment and institutionalization. The point is to develop a general sociology of everyday life based on embodiment, institutions, and social networks that in turn lays the foundation for a justification of human rights that are institutional manifestations of our (global) dependency. This discussion of vulnerability and rights has to be located within a global social system, where the hybridity and fragmentation of culture brings into question our ability to sustain solidarity.

The concept of vulnerability is derived from the Latin *vulnus* or "wound." It is instructive from my perspective that "vulnerability" should have such an obviously corporeal origin. In the seventeenth century, vulnerability had both a passive and active significance, namely to be wounded and to wound. In mediaeval religious practice, veneration of the Passion was associated with meditation on the Seven Wounds of Christ. These wounds were evidence of the humanity and suffering of Christ, and these human attributes came to emphasize his vulnerability.[7] These themes of Christ's suffering evolved eventually into the cult of the Sacred Heart. In its active sense, to vulnerate is to wound, but in

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6 MacIntyre 6.

7 Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 221.

its modern usage it has come to signify the human capacity to be open to wounds. Vulnerability has become, in one sense, more abstract: it refers to the human capacity to be exposed to psychological or moral damage. It refers increasingly to our ability to suffer (morally and spiritually) rather than to a physical capacity for pain from our exposure or openness to the world. This openness to wounding is part of what Peter Berger has called our "world openness," namely that we do not live in a biologically determined or species-specific environment.[8] To be vulnerable as a human being is to possess a structure of sentiments, feelings, and emotions by which we can steer a passage through the social order.

Our vulnerability is also part of our capacity to draw sensual pleasures from our openness to experiences. Therefore, Marx rather than Aristotle offers a more promising starting point for a study of our wounding, because he points to the sensual, practical, and active components of the structure of social action. In one sense we need to be vulnerable in order to be open to threats and dangers so that we may take evasive action. MacIntyre's position, which has a one-dimensional emphasis on disability and affliction, is ultimately limited because it presents a somewhat passive view of vulnerability. It is important to avoid a melancholic social science,[9] but it is equally important to recognize the social worlds that human beings fashion collectively are inherently and alarmingly precarious.

In order to provide some conceptual depth to this model of frailty and precariousness, it is necessary to develop a sociology of the body, and in particular a notion of embodiment as a framework for a theory of social action. Adopting the notion of the social as process, it is important not to reify "the body," but to treat embodiment as a process, namely the social processes of embodying. First, embodiment is the effect or consequence of ongoing practices of corporalization. In this respect,

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[8] Peter L. Berger, *Man in the Age of Technology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

[9] Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

embodiment is a life process that requires the learning of body techniques—walking, sitting, dancing, and eating. Embodiment is the ensemble of corporeal practices that produces and gives "a body" its place in everyday life. Embodiment places particular bodies within a social habitus.

Secondly, embodiment requires the production of a sensuous and practical presence in the life world. Embodiment is the lived experience of the sensual or subjective body and it is, in this sense, consistent with Marx's discussion of practice in the Paris Manuscripts and with Pierre Bourdieu's notions of practice and habitus.[10] Practice involves the sensual, live body and its effects on social relations. It is the active shaping of the lived world by embodied practices.

Thirdly, embodiment is a collective project because it takes place in a life world that is already social. Embodiment is not an isolated project of the individual; it is located within a social world of interconnected social actors.

Finally, while it is the process of making and becoming a body, it is also the project of making a self. Embodiment and enselfment are mutually dependent and reinforcing processes. The self involves a corporeal project within a specific social nexus where the continuous self depends on successful embodiment, a social habitus, and memory. Following both Marx and Bourdieu, embodiment and enselfment always take place in specific spatial contexts, and habitus must be a set of practices in a particular location; it must, we might say, secure emplacement. Thus, the sociological notion of a "body" involves three related processes: embodiment, enselfment, and emplacement.

Because embodiment has in fact many dimensions, one can talk about having a body in which the body has the characteristics of a thing, being a body in which we are subjectively engaged with our body as a

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[10] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

project, and doing a body in the sense of producing a body through time.[11] These distinctions are more felicitously expressed in German where there is a ready-made distinction between the body as an object (*Koerper*) and the body as lived experience (*Leib*). The body is simultaneously an object that I can observe and a mode of being that makes that observation possible. The relationship of individuals to their own bodies is never an external, objective, or neutral relationship, because identity is inextricably bound up with subjective being in the material world.

This intimacy between our bodies, our everyday experiences, and our psychology was clearly expressed in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.[12] His basic question was about how we experience reality; to experience the world, we have to perceive it and to perceive it we have to possess language. The embodiment of the human being is fundamental to these processes of the apprehension and perception of immediate reality. The psychology of perception had ignored the fact that the individual's perception of external reality involved bodily experiences of the physical world, and a capacity to manipulate the everyday world through the motor activities of the body. These capacities can be manifest verbally, auditorily, or visually. Language is necessarily embodied in these material forms of the body's potentiality. As a result, he rejected Cartesian mind/body dualism to argue that thinking, doing, and feeling are practical activities that require our embodied presence.

Ontological frailty includes the notion that human beings of necessity have a propensity to disease and sickness. They are beings unto death, and their aging bodies create a tension between the body as lived experience and the objective body, which, through the life cycle, involves us in existential discomfort. As a result of these conditions, human beings through the life process are involved in various relationships of depen-

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[11] Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society* (London: Sage, 1996).

[12] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

dency. We are, in the language of Nietzsche, the unfinished animal. The notion of the incompleteness of human beings and their frailty was explored in the philosophical anthropology of Gehlen.[13] A theory of institutions lay at the core of his work. Human beings need to build rites (institutions), including a system of protective rights. Human beings are characterized by their "instinctual deprivation," and therefore humans do not have a stable structure within which to operate. Humans are defined by their "world openness," because they are not equipped instinctively for a specific environment, and as a result they have to build or construct their own environment, a construction that requires the building of institutions. Social institutions are the bridges between humans and their physical environment, and it is through these institutions that human life becomes coherent, meaningful, and continuous.[14] In filling the gap created by instinctual deprivation, institutions provide humans with relief from the tensions generated by undirected instinctual drives.

Over time, these institutions are taken for granted and become part of the background of social action. The foreground is occupied by reflexive, practical, and conscious activities. With modernization, there is a process of de-institutionalization with the result that the background becomes less reliable, more open to negotiation, culturally thinner, and increasingly an object of reflection. Accordingly the foreground expands, and life is seen to be risky and reflexive. The objective and sacred institutions of the past recede, and modern life becomes subjective, contingent, and uncertain. In fact we live in a world of secondary or quasi-institutions. There are profound psychological consequences associated with these changes. Human beings in archaic societies had character, that is, a firm and definite psychological structure that corresponded with reliable background institutions. In modern societies, the

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[13] Arnold Gehlen, *Man, His Nature and Place in the World,* trans. Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

[14] Peter L. Berger, and H. Kellner, "Arnold Gehlen and the Theory of Institutions," *Social Research* 32.1 (1965): 110-15.

individual as personality is in a "lonely crowd"[15] and thus people have personalities that are fluid and flexible, like the institutions in which they live. We can argue in these terms that the modernization of cultures involves a "foregrounding" of cultural practices and institutions that can no longer be taken for granted. In recent years, the medical revolution, which has been an effect of the transformation of the biological sciences, involves a foregrounding of institutions. In fact, this de-institutionalization of social life has nowhere been more significant than in sexual and reproductive relationships.

The notion of social and political precariousness includes the inability of political institutions to protect and serve the interests of individuals, the failure of social institutions to cope with social change, the inability of social institutions to reconcile the conflict of collective and individual interests, and finally the problems for society in terms of equity to cope with generational exchanges. Institutions have to be built up over time and often fail to respond quickly to social change. The process of institutionalization tends to be conservative and cannot address the changing aspirations of new generations. The transformations of charisma by routinization are a familiar aspect of traditional societies. In the modern economy, organizational failures, take-overs, mergers, corporate corruption, downsizing, organizational stress, inflation, currency instability, and restructuring are permanent features of the globalization of the business world. On a larger canvas, the collapse of the Communist regime as a consequence of the inability of a rigid bureaucratic system and a privileged elite to respond to economic and social strain has produced the global instability of modern politics. Illustrations of institutional precariousness are relatively abundant: the instability of global financial markets, the exposure of human populations to global disease through such conditions as HIV and AIDS, the instability of the natural environment through industrialization and pollution, and the instability of orderly society through the globaliza-

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[15] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd. A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

tion of crime and narcotics. Contemporary complexity theory suggests that modern social systems cannot effectively resolve the complexities and contingencies of their environment, and hence precariousness is a function of modernization.

Turning to the notion of interconnectedness and interdependence, this neo-Hobbesian world is not one of rampant individualism. While the argument from ontological frailty might suggest an individualist or even utilitarian paradigm, the notion of interconnectedness indicates that human beings are always and already social. They are deeply involved socially through language and socialization. The argument is that regardless of the cultural hybridity of urban life, we are still held together by a common ontology. However, this interconnectedness is threatened by technological and medical change. The growth of cyborgs and other technologies may transform the nature of embodiment and remove this interconnectedness of human life. This issue is the real importance of the question: Can there be a social world after the body where technology has transformed the ethics of embodiment?

The point of this formulation of ontology is to provide a foundation for a sociological and normative defense of human rights as protective institutions. First there is the argument that the biological nature of human frailty requires human rights as a protective canopy, and secondly there is the argument that social institutions are necessary but precarious. Given frailty and precariousness, human beings need a universalistic legal framework in which to seek legal protection. Both of these arguments (frailty and precariousness) are an attempt to develop a contemporary version of Hobbes's theory of the state without the limitations of a utilitarian notion of social contract. Hobbes argued in *Leviathan* that rational human beings with conflicting interests in a state of nature would be in a condition of perpetual war. In order to protect themselves from mutual, endless slaughter, they create a state through a social contract, which organizes social space in the collective interests of rational but antagonistic human beings. Furthermore, the institutions, which humans create as protective or defensive mechanisms, have to be sufficiently powerful to regulate social space and as a consequence come unintentionally to present a threat to the human beings that institute the state through a social contract. For example,

the state, which holds a monopoly over legalized violence, is both a guarantor of social security but also an instrument necessarily of violence.

Human beings are rational, but they are also embodied and they have a capacity for sympathy towards their fellow human beings. The capacity for suffering (another feature of vulnerability) is an important feature of membership of a moral community. The notion that sympathy is the social glue of a society characterized by precariousness can also be seen as a contemporary restatement of the theory of sentiments in classical political economy, especially a restatement of Humean social theory.[16] The point of this sociological theory of rights is to provide a theoretical structure that will connect individual human rights as protective arrangements, the organization of the state as an institution that both guarantees rights but also threatens them, and the notion that sympathy is a major requirement of all social relations along with more traditional categories such as trust.

Human Rights: Frailty, Precariousness, and Interconnectedness

I have proposed the sociology of the body as a basis for defending a universalistic theory of human rights.[17] A full justification of this argument is beyond the scope of this paper, and therefore my aim is to indicate what such a defense might entail. There are clearly powerful arguments in favor of a relativist stand on rights discourse and thus a defense of rights against a relativist consensus will need to be muscular. The notion of universal rights immediately runs into at least two formidable obstacles. First, notions about universalism have been radically attacked by a variety of traditions in social philosophy with the result that there is a broad consensus that universalistic arguments are likely to be sociologically and anthropologically naive. For example, Max

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[16] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[17] Bryan S. Turner, ed, *Citizenship and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 1993).

Weber's sociology of law was an overt criticism of the idea that natural law could provide an authoritative and convincing basis for rights. The second obstacle is that the body in sociological theory is typically seen to be socially constructed and as such could not act as a general foundation for human rights. For example, Michel Foucault's analysis of the human body was an attempt to show that the "body" was a contingent effect of power. In his *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault writes: "All of my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions."[18] In order to clear the ground for a discussion of human rights as an adjunct of the argument about embodiment, a detour is required to consider cultural relativism and social constructionism.

Arguments about cultural relativism have been manipulated and abused by authoritarian governments to justify various forms of state violence under the banner of cultural authenticity and difference. It is all too easy to justify abuses against children and women, on the one hand, or devastation of the natural environment, on the other, by an appeal to local custom and traditions. Philosophical and sociological arguments against relativism are therefore an important part of the political program to protect and defend human rights traditions in the public arena. The frailty of the human body and the precariousness of social life provide at least one possibility for starting an account of a foundation for human rights discourse. Because of this frailty and the precarious nature of social reality, human beings require the protective security of general human rights. Not all rights assume this form of protective security but a large element of the human rights tradition is to provide some juridical security for human beings.

Talk about human rights is often difficult in sociological and anthropological theory because of the prior commitment to the notion of cultural relativism. Because cultures differ fundamentally in their values,

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[18] Michel Foucault, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault," *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock, 1988) 11.

the notion of universal standards is difficult to defend intellectually. In order to question this conventional view, I start my discussion by considering postmodern versions of anthropological relativism. My aim ultimately is to employ the sociology of the body as a strategy for exploring the moral basis of a universalistic doctrine of human rights, but I fully recognize that universalism is an unpopular approach to social theory; it is often associated with claims about the privileged status of Western thought, or it is associated with patriarchal fantasies of dominance. Universalistic claims about truth or justice have been challenged by various forms of postmodernism and pragmatism, and the general mood of social science and the humanities has been more sympathetic to relativism and to the notion that "grand narratives" cannot be easily sustained. If the tone of universalism suggests a triumphalist attitude, contemporary thought has been generally anxious about bold claims to general, let alone universal, relevance and validity.

It does not follow, however, that postmodernism has not been concerned with ethics. On the contrary, postmodernism, which has been influenced by Heidegger, has been specifically interested in the idea of "care" as an ethic that does not involve grand claims about universalism. Following Heidegger on forgetfulness versus concern for otherness, we can detect a postmodern ethical stance in the idea of care for marginal or powerless groups, and concern for difference and otherness. Similarly, cruelty is, for Richard Rorty, the most serious crime, and cruelty in the form of torture is a denial of humanity, involving a forgetfulness about the human status of victims. These authors seek a grounding for concern, not in the universal characteristics of human nature, but in the practical requirements for active care and affective sympathy. While such an approach has considerable merit, human frailty provides the basis for a universalistic ethic of concern that goes beyond the apparent complacency of contemporary relativism.

The notion that the frailty of the body provides a foundation for rights is compatible with Heidegger's account of the vulnerability of humans as beings that are bound to death through the inexorable passage of time. Heidegger's views on the "throwness" of being as a state which is permanently precarious provide an account of human frailty which is highly compatible with an emphasis on human frailty as a starting point

for an analysis of rights.[19] The problem with relativism in political theory is, however, that it cannot simultaneously develop an ethic of care and satisfy questions about justice. The recognition of difference does not easily feed into a theory that can give a good account of the conditions of justice. There is therefore an ongoing question about justice, namely the universality of the treatment of human beings as human beings.

One of the perennial issues of modern social theory has been to identify a basis, however minimalist, for some universalistic criterion of justice in relation to separate and particular social groups and communities. The core of this issue is to reconcile the aspiration for political equality with the stubborn fact of social differences (in terms of class, ethnicity, and gender). Traditional accounts of the principle of equality of opportunity have been appropriately challenged for example by postmodern feminism for their blindness to difference. However, if we regard justice as an issue about fairness, then there has to be some foundation of a universalistic character in order for such discussions about justice to take place. Some implicit commitment to universalism, typically as a residual category, is embraced by theorists who want overtly to adopt a resolutely antifoundationalist or contextualist position. Postmodern relativist epistemologies are often combined with the implicit search for a common vocabulary with which to talk about politics and ethics.[20]

The conviction that embodiment is a fruitful platform for an argument in favor of the universalism of human rights via the notions of frailty and vulnerability is partly grounded in the notion of the ubiquity of human misery. It is self-evidently true that, as Barrington Moore argues in *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery:*

> suffering is not a value in its own right. In this sense any form of suffering becomes a cost, and unnecessary suffering

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[19] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962).

[20] Stephen K White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

> an odious cost. Similarly, a general opposition to human suffering constitutes a stand-point that both transcends and unites different cultures and historical epochs.[21]

A critic might object that suffering is too variable in its manifestations to provide such a common standpoint. What constitutes suffering in practice might turn out to be culturally specific. Similar arguments have been made against disability as a common standard.[22] One could accept this argument on the grounds that suffering involves essentially the devaluation of a person as a consequence of accident, affliction, or torture, but pain is less variable. Whereas bankruptcy could involve some degree of psychological suffering, a toothache is a toothache. If we claim that disability is a social condition (the loss of social rights) and thus relative, we might argue that impairment is the underlying condition about which there is less political dispute. In short, some conditions or states of affairs are less socially constructed than others.

There is a strong argument then in favor of the existence of a community of sentiment determined by the negative perception of suffering/pain. Suffering and pain are clearly indicators of vulnerability. This notion that there can be a cross-cultural understanding of the bond of suffering was perfectly expressed in *The Merchant of Venice* where the figure of Shylock appears to challenge the conventions of Elizabethan anti-Semitism:

> …hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?[23]

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[21] Barrington Moore, *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery and upon Certain Proposals to Eliminate Them* (London: Allen Lane, 1970) 11.

[22] Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds Whyte, eds., *Disability and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[23] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.

The characteristic of vulnerability has provided a constant standard for the assertion of a human bond across generations and cultures, and this characteristic of vulnerability presupposes the embodiment of the human agent. We need to understand this vulnerability, however, against a background of global risks that in turn draw attention to the precarious nature of human institutions.

Dialectic of Risk and Regulation

In contemporary sociology, there is a peculiar dialectic between an increasing level of risk and an expanding range of techniques of surveillance. The first process is illustrated tragically by the case of thalidomide victims and CJD, food production crises such as BSE and public health crises such as AIDS and HIV. The second process is illustrated by the growing importance of the audit in the regulation of public life and public finance. These processes are also clearly illustrated by two influential texts in modern sociology: *Risk Society* and *The McDonaldization of Society*.[24] I compare both theories, illustrate them by reference to medical issues, and then attempt to integrate the two theories around the notion of a "dialectic of risk and regulation."

Risk is seen as an inevitable outcome of the very process of modernization, which has given a centrality to science in everyday relationships. Risk society is in fact the radicalization of modernity itself, leading to a new stage of reflexive modernization. If primary modernization involves the rationalization of tradition, reflexive modernization means "the rationalization of rationalization."[25] Risk has, however, changed significantly over time. In traditional societies, risk was individual, palpable, localized, and hierarchical. Individuals were obviously concerned to

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[24] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity,* trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992); George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge, 1993).

[25] Beck 183.

control risk through various patterns of individual security and insurance. In an advanced industrial civilization, risk is now collective, invisible, ubiquitous, democratic, and uninsurable. With the growth of reflexive modernization, risk becomes systemic and involves the distribution of "bads"; conventional economics by contrast is concerned with the distribution of goods through market exchange. For Beck, the most useful illustration of this modernization of risk is the growth of environmental pollution and hazard. Environmental pollution is democratic, because it influences all social groups regardless of their class of origin. These risks are collective and invisible, because they influence all aspects of modern life, but they are not necessarily observable or palpable. These risks create a new type of community in which solidarity is based upon insecurity and anxiety rather than confidence and mutual dependency. Our anxiety about the environment brings us into new sets of social relations that are structured around these individual patterns of anxiety.

Beck constructs his argument through a variety of specific examples, but his commentary on medical science is central to his general thesis.[26] Medical practice is protected from public scrutiny by the development of the clinic, and this clinical institution provides an organizational roof where medical research, training, and practice can be securely interrelated. It is within this professional context that medicine operates in what Beck calls an arena of sub-politics, that is, medicine can bypass the formal political institutions (partisan parliaments) to develop its own professional power base. Medicine within the experimental laboratory operates beyond the regulation of law and the state. Furthermore, given the speed of medical innovation and invention, the general public is typically presented with the results of the problems of medical innovation long after they are relatively well established within the experimental setting. Beck refers to this "as a policy of fait accompli."[27]

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[26] Beck 205-14.

[27] Beck 210.

Beck's concept of modern risk is based upon the notion that modernization brings with it a multiplication of the difficulties, problems, and contradictions that engulf modern institutions. As a result, social institutions become reflexive in the sense that the complexity of the problems which they face compels them to enter into a process of collective or institutional self evaluation and legitimization. Modernization involves the multiplication of the contradictions within which institutions are forced to operate. These systemic processes of contradiction are analyzed by Beck as forms of detraditionalization, which involves the foregrounding of erstwhile taken-for-granted institutions and increases the sense of contingency and precariousness.

An alternative theory of modern society, based on Weber's rationalization thesis, is presented in George Ritzer's analysis of the McDonaldization of society. Weber's rationalization thesis, that society is standardized and normalized by the processes of scientific reasoning and their application to all spheres of life, provides a valid interpretation of the general culture and structure of modern society. As an operational definition, McDonaldization produces a society in which there are no surprises, that is, there are no cultural or type-two risks, or at least these risks are contained by processes of quality control to insure standard outcomes. The fast food industry is a prime example of the application of Taylorism and Fordism to modern society and the everyday world. The fast food industry produces food that is cheap, reliable, standardized, and global in a social environment that is wholly predictable. The Big M around the world confirms the belief that one is about to enter a well-known, predictable, riskless eating experience. McDonaldization involves a focus on detail in order to produce a simple and predictable eating context where all forms of uncertainty (surprises) have been eliminated by bureaucratization. Of course the principles of McDonaldization have been extended to many areas of social life, including the McDonaldization of the body.

A number of medical developments illustrate the main thrust of the argument about risk society and individualization, and the tensions between risk and regulation. The basic processes in the medicalization of reproduction have been to reduce the "surprises" in reproduction, namely to reduce uncertainty and risk. For example, the invention of

contraceptive devices for the general population in the nineteenth century gave greater control over "unwanted pregnancies" and provided an effective alternative to abortion. A range of developments in the twentieth century can be seen as methods for providing greater control over reproduction. One obvious illustration is the use of amniocentesis for screening women who are thought to be at risk of having a Down's syndrome child. But these apparently benign medical innovations have also taken place in a context where midwifery as a profession has been marginalized and where women are as a result more likely to be "managed" by a drug rather than a human regime. The rise in caesarian section as a method of delivery is partly driven by anxieties of expensive litigation and by a dependence on mechanical intervention. The result of the medicalization of birth is that pregnancy is treated as an illness that can be cured or managed by scientific intervention. The risks of pregnancy are an effect of scientific interventions. Given these risks, there is a medical logic to requiring higher levels of intervention prior to conception and delivery, including genetic counseling and fetal surgery. These policies and practices amount to a major program of eugenics in the interests of normal reproduction and normal parenting.

Contemporary societies are continuously exposed to both environmental hazard and culture risk, and governments respond by creating ever more complex circuits of regulation, surveillance, and audit. The political response to risk is to create more effective patterns of "governmentality."[28] Medical and health risks have been especially problematic in contemporary society and have produced increasing levels of distrust with respect to government and expert accounts of these crises. It is for this reason that modern societies are, in experiential terms, simultaneously perfectly free and completely regulated. De-regulation of public utilities automatically gives rise to further regulation, audit, and transparency. The current difficulties of the British government to convince

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[28] Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1991) 87-104.

the public of the safety of genetically modified food and beef sold on the bone is a particularly good illustration. There is a constant dialectic therefore between the multiplication of risk and the need to impose political control. In turn, medical science itself, through genetic testing, offers new and effective means of surveillance and policing. The results include a serious threat to basic rights and privacy.[29] While there has been much debate about the dangers of cloning, there has been too little attention given to the use of genetics by insurance companies, the police, and the military.

There is thus a double problem. First, our embodiment is confronted by a range of Beck-like risks that increase our vulnerability through the unintended consequences of the applications of biological sciences. Secondly, there is the problem of the precarious nature of institutions that are transformed by new regimes of surveillance and regulation, whereby civil rights are eroded by the application of genetics. Thus, the quest of scientific medicine to reduce human vulnerability often has the unintended consequence of increasing risks that make institutions precarious.

Conclusion: The Metaphors of Sociability

Although embodiment is a social project that is routinely accomplished, it also has its own specificity. My embodiment is uniquely accomplished within the everyday world that is routine and predictable. We can express this paradox of particularity and uniformity in terms of the relationship between sociology and ontology in a formulation taken from Heidegger's *The Question of Being*.[30] On the social or horizontal plane, an individual is routinely defined by a set of social roles that specify a position in the world of the economy and society. This hori-

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[29] Amitai Etzioni, *The Limits of Privacy* (New York: Basic, 1999).

[30] Martin Heidegger, *The Question of Being* (New York: Twayne, 1958).

zontal plane is what sociologists call the ensemble of status and roles occupied by an individual. There is also an ontological plane that forms a vertical axis that is defined by the finite and unique embodiment of a person. The horizontal social plane is the precarious world of the social system; the vertical plane is the world of embodied frailty. In this sense, we might argue that sociological (horizontal) analysis is concerned to understand the contingent and arbitrary characteristics of social being, while ontological (vertical) analysis attempts to grasp the necessities of our human being. This formulation can be adopted as a further perspective on Foucault's notion of the arbitrariness of institutions. Social relations are indeed arbitrary; they are also precarious. For example, the institutions of disability and rehabilitation were radically transformed in the late twentieth century, and the traditional systems of rehabilitation now no longer hold sway. However, on the vertical plane of human existence there are certain necessities, which are concerned with aging, disability, and dependency.

In the everyday world we are confronted constantly by the problem of "disrupted lives"[31] in which the relationships between these vertical and horizontal dimensions are dislocated. What is the relationship between the body, metaphor, and personal identity? The notion of "disruption" leads us towards a reflexive uncovering of the frailty of our lives and the precarious character of the institutions that underpin them. Both sociology and anthropology have demonstrated that identity is fundamentally embodied, because subjective and objective identity cannot be easily separated from embodiment. It follows that "self" is not an enduring or stable fact, but changes with aging, the life-course, and the disruptions of illness. Hence, radical disruptions to self occur as a result of traumatic illness, which often breaks our relationship with significant others, reorganizes our life-world, and threatens to destroy the comfortable relationship between self, body, and others. In North America, where there is an important emphasis on youthfulness,

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[31] Gaylene Becker, *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

activism, and independence, disruptions to everyday life from accident, chronic illness, and aging represent a profound challenge to the sense of identity. Sickness is in this sense a form of deviance.[32]

Metaphors of illness and impairment play an important part in helping people to make sense of these unwanted discontinuities. Metaphors help us to understand, but they also have therapeutic qualities and as a result narratives of disruption constitute moral accounts of people's lives. Metaphors are the cultural vehicles that express the values that make life meaningful and coherent. Thus, narratives of healing are part of the process of healing. Given the importance of activism and individualism in American culture, healing narratives are typically structured around themes of disruption and the assumption of personal responsibility.

The stability of everyday life requires the presumption of a continuous and reliable self, and hence we assume that disruptions are exceptional interventions within this normality. For interaction to take place at all, one must be able to make assumptions about the continuity of an embodied self through time and space. There must be a set of effective "plausibility structures" giving the everyday world a legitimate sense of stability.[33] Perhaps the continuity of personal identity is merely an illusion, because disruption to life is a constant human experience. The only definite continuity is the continuity of embodiment, but even that is vulnerable. Hence, the everyday world involves a constant struggle to sustain the illusions of order and continuity, against a backdrop of persistent but unpredictable disorder. Metaphors, which mediate between the self and chaos, provide the building blocks of cultural meaning. The social world has to be constantly constructed against the disruptions that threaten the continuities of the identities of social actors. The detraditionalization of society through individualization and reflexivity

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[32] Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951).

[33] Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969).

has undermined the vitality of the metaphoricality of social life. Indeed, we suffer from an eclipse of metaphor.

The technological development of modern society has achieved three negative consequences: it has undermined the comfortableness of our relationship to the natural environment; it has multiplied the environmental and social risks, especially associated with globalization; and it has started the process of the transformation of embodiment through biotechnology and the use of cyborgs. In short, technological modernization has raised significant problems for enselfment, emplacement, and embodiment. In this conclusion, I argue that the exhaustion of metaphors in modern society is an index of the erosion of our natural comfort, and it is also a measure of secularization.

The body has been crucial to the development of religious metaphors of sociability. These corporeal metaphors were fundamental to the evolution of the theologies and rituals of the world religions. Central to these cosmologies was the notion of the transfer of charisma (or grace) between beings through the conduit of body fluids: blood, water, sweat, milk, and sperm. The New Testament account of God's action in history involved the sacrifice of the body of Christ for the sake of human salvation. Once human beings had been turned out of the Garden, early metaphors of property employed the notion of an investment of sweat or labor in the earth. But these corporeal metaphors of the sacred are increasingly irrelevant in a postmodern cultural environment. The intimacy between self, body, and cosmos has been shattered by the globalization of electronic information and by the dis-emplacement of the self. We have lost the comforts of effective metaphor.

These metaphors were obviously set within a specific culture and mode of production. The metaphors of Christian cosmology were orchestrated around a theme of pastoral relationships: Agnus Dei, the Great Shepherd, the Flock, and the Pastor. These metaphors with pastoral and agrarian societies were able to tap into a set of common experiences and a common language of responsibility, stewardship, care, and dependency, namely a common language of vulnerability. The wounds of Christ became a fundamental symbol of human suffering and frailty, but in Christ's blood a paradoxical means to salvation. These symbolic

wounds of suffering came to express the power of vulnerability. The paradoxes of vulnerability were captured, for example, by Bernini's sculpture of the ecstatic vision of St. Teresa, where the saint is wounded by a spear of religious possession. Bernini, the master of Baroque "effects," perfectly displays the sexual character of this wounding in the supine figure of the saint, who is consumed and elated. Such figures are dead to the modern imagination, because they have lost their metaphorical force.

The endless cycle of agrarian activity, of sowing and harvesting, produced another set of metaphors of dependence and obligation that expressed social responsibility and dependency. The gathering of the harvest became a basic metaphor of human salvation With the passage of time, these metaphors became fossilized within theology and as a result there is a fundamental gap between the life-world of an industrial civilization and religious language. With industrialization, there has been no significant evolution of a set of shared metaphors to express the human condition and the communal links that are important for the renewal of sociability. As a result "the religious sense of urban populations is gravely impoverished. The cosmic liturgy, the mystery of nature's participation in the Christological drama, have become inaccessible to Christians living in a modern city."[34] I would go further to argue that there is an exhaustion of the fountain of metaphoricality necessary to a shared language of community. Religion in modern society has been privatized and has no necessary connection with public culture; it is an aesthetic choice relating to lifestyle. As a result, the metaphors of late modernity express the trivialization of culture and the McDonaldization of meaning. The metaphors of the global village attempt to express thin and fragile networks (webs) or individualized journeys through virtual reality (surfing), but they are not collective metaphors of community that connect body, self, and society. Attempts to express the world of electronic exchange in the language of the Wild

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[34] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959) 179.

West such as, in the subtitle of Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community*,[35] "homesteading on the electronic frontier," are either ironic or phony.

The biological and electronic technologies of late modernity promise to make us safe and less vulnerable, but they have intensified the global risks of modernization. They have also exacerbated the precariousness of our institutional structures, particularly through surveillance and the erosion of privacy. The irony of the argument is that to be human is to be vulnerable. If the promise of modernity were ever to prove successful, it would reduce our vulnerability, and thus bring about the end of humanity.

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[35] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993).