Winking at the State: Social Drama and Multicultural Claustrophobia

Peter Murphy

The 1950s and 1960s saw the beginning of the end of the European nation state.[1] The European Community, later the European Union, began to eat away at national sovereignty. Immigration programmes started to erode cultural sovereignty. The motive for immigration in some cases was the playing out of the final chapter of European empires. In other cases, immigration marked the beginning of Europe's demographic decline. As local European fertility rates fell below replacement numbers, immigrants made up the difference.

National sovereignty supposed cultural sovereignty. That at least had been the romantic belief that underlay nationalism at its height. A good nation was a pure nation, one free of cultural mixing. Assimilation of migrants to the national norm was the standard policy of nation states. As nationalism declined as a force, multiculturalism replaced assimilation policies. Cultural diversity overtook national homogeneity in official policy. The problem with this in Europe was that diversity in practice often clashed with Enlightenment norms of universal freedom and procedural law. Multiculturalism, which prevailed in official thinking between 1975 and 2000, permitted cultural separatism. Under these auspices, many migrant communities developed in Europe with strong attachments to patriarchal and patrimonial norms. The result, as the Council of Europe (2008, p. 16) conceded in unusually frank language, was the development of segregated and mutually exclusive communities hostile to individual autonomy and the unimpeded exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Europe created an unintended double bind.[2] Communities with strong traditional views were hot-housed in a world of natural rights. Those who could not manage the double bind were susceptible to ideologies of extremism or terrorism. For others caught between the external world of freedom and adventure and their internal world of loyalty and obedience, the result was stifling conformism. This, ironically, was the obverse of what European politicians, who had championed multiculturalism in the first place, had expected. They wanted openness and toleration. They got closure and cultures of deference and submission instead. By 2000, the gap between intention and consequence had become gaping—so large, in fact, that the European Union began to backtrack from previous policy commitments. It embraced a policy of intercultural dialogue in place of multiculturalism. Interculturalism represented an attempt to reconcile Enlightenment universalism and cultural diversity. The new policy began with an explicit commitment to shared fundamental values, universal

norms, and a common heritage—in short a commitment to Enlightenment norms of human rights, democracy and the rule of law (Council of Europe, 2008, pp. 4, 5). Like assimilation and multiculturalism before it, the new policy of intercultural dialogue was ripe with tensions. These tensions did not have so much to do with the practice of interculturalism. After all, for centuries and millennia, cultures have been in contact with each other. They have routinely traded, interacted and fused. The problem of Europe's new policy was rather with the concept of dialogue.

Dialogue is a warm and fuzzy concept that hides a multitude of problems. What the European Union supposed is that communities in conflict can use the medium of dialogue to achieve cooperation, respect and harmonious interaction. The difficulty with this is that dialogue is not well suited to such ends at all. In order to engage in a dialogue, the partners in the dialogue must first share a common set of presuppositions. The paradox of dialogue is that the end point of any dialogue must be assumed by the dialogue partners at the outset. As the teachers of rhetoric in antiquity already knew, to convince someone in argument, you must share certain common assumptions with the person you are trying to convince. European Union policy is forthright on this point. The presupposition of its intercultural policy is Enlightenment norms. Anyone who is to engage in intercultural dialogue first has to suppose human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Or, as the Council of Europe (p. 21) puts it, the equality of rights of men and women is not negotiable. Likewise, young people are not to grow up in a state of perpetual tutelage.

Now, there is nothing wrong with spelling out the presuppositions of a dialogue. But at the same time if the condition of the possibility of mutual understanding is mutual understanding, one should not expect too much of dialogue. A dialogue can work to convince a doubting party of some minor premise—assuming the other party already accepts the major premise of the argument. Once interlocutors accept Enlightenment norms as their major premise, it is possible for them then to expand agreement on the application of those norms. Thus, if all persons are born free, and voting is an act of freedom, then all persons should vote. But if the parties do not agree that all persons are born free, the dialogue will not work.

Europe's problem today is that a significant portion of its immigrant population does not agree that all persons are born free. It does not matter whether such a view is held tacitly or explicitly. All that matters is that this is the operative view of a sizeable number of European citizens. The policy thinking of Europe, however, assumes otherwise. Thus the European Union can assert that the democratic values underpinning Council of Europe policies are universal. But they are not—at least they are not universal in an empirical sense. Much of the world either does not accept or else does not practice the norms of democracy, let alone the major Enlightenment premise underlying democracy, that all persons are born free. Many notional democracies are in reality neo-patrimonies. Democracy may be a universally applicable norm but that does not make it a universally agreed or adhered-to value. From Max Weber (1946) and Hans Kelsen (1973) through to Cornelius Castoriadis (1991) and Jean-Francois Lyotard (1989), European social theorists in the twentieth century repeatedly pointed

out that there is no agreement on fundamental values. This does not imply a state of relativism, but rather one of competing absolute values. This means that while democracy may be a non-negotiable principle for some of the world's population, patrimony is just as deeply held by large numbers of others. While a part of the world's population cherishes equality of rights as a value, another part is deeply wedded to the patriarchal values of hierarchy, loyalty, and obedience. So while Enlightenment norms may be universal in their self-declared applicability, they are far from universal in their empirical distribution. Many of the immigrants who came to Europe during the second half of the twentieth century did not have any attachment to democracy or equality, but did have deep affiliations to patrimony and patriarchy. Theirs was a connection to a deeply felt world of honour, family, and ritual obligation. The European Union might assert that "gender rights" are non-negotiable, but there are large numbers of European citizens who believe, on the contrary, that patriarchy is non-negotiable. No dialogue can bridge such an ontological difference. The impasse between tradition and natural rights is the deepest kind of cultural division imaginable. There is no way to talk through it.

The Council of Europe (2008, p. 17) acknowledges this in a roundabout fashion when it admits that dialogue with those who refuse to dialogue is impossible. Yet the really difficult issue is not the refusal of dialogue, but the very possibility of dialogue in the first instance. No person or community can dialogue with another unless the parties to the dialogue share basic values and norms. The Council supposes that dialogue with those who are ready to take part in dialogue but do not share common values with those with whom they are to dialogue may be the starting point of a longer process of interaction, at the end of which an agreement on the significance and practical implementation of the values of human rights and the rule of law may very well be reached (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 17).

This is a bureaucratic delusion. Readiness to dialogue comes from common values. Without common values, there can be no agreement on the significance of those values, and thus no major premise for a dialogue. Getting parties to the point where they share common values cannot be a dialogical process as dialogue presupposes those shared values. So is there some other process of interaction that might lead to that end point?

What would inspire a person to give up patrimony and patriarchy? What would induce a person to internalize the countervailing values of democracy and equality? No person can be convinced by debate or any other discursive means to internalize a new set of fundamental norms and values. The state can legally require a person to follow rules that flow from a set of basic norms, but such legal requirements have no necessary effect on the basic convictions, motivations or views that a person holds. All the policy documents in the world can assert that democracy and the rule of law are universal values but that does not make them universally internalised values. Words, including dialogue, are an ineffectual and often counterproductive medium for creating fundamental value commitments. Historically speaking, there has only been one really successful medium for effecting the transition from patriarchy to equality, or from feudal patrimony to democratic norms. This is the

city, and more specifically large cities filled with strangers that operate on the basis of anonymity.[3] This is the force that engineered the shift from patrimony to democracy in classical Greek antiquity. Cities assumed this function in each of the great moments of European civilization—from the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire to the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment.[4]

Cities filled with strangers act on people in a way that words cannot. The medium of the city is non-discursive. It is mute. It is mutely potent even when words are spoken. Cities shape behaviours and mentalities without relying on discursive rationalities. Such rationalities always rest on a root reason—for instance that all persons are born equal. If that root reason has no traction over attitude or behaviour, then rationality is rendered null and void. One cannot appeal to reason, in this case the reason of equality, if equality is not recognized by the other party as a fundamental premise of reasoning. The appeal to reason falls on deaf ears. In the world today, the value of traditional hierarchy remains more persuasive on the whole than the Enlightenment value of the equality of rights. While there are countries where the Enlightenment value that we are all created equal does trump the pre-Enlightenment values of rank order and deferential authority, there are many societies where the reverse is true. In those societies, personal authority, rank and deference are paramount. Europe's dilemma is that a visible segment of its contemporary migrant population sides with tradition against Enlightenment.

When the rationality of hierarchy and the rationality of equality confront each other, any acts of discursive communication that occur are incommensurable. That is to say, they cannot be compared in a way that would convince one party adhering to one value to accept the contrary value. There is no common value that subsumes the antithetical values of personal hierarchy and personal equality. In this circumstance, neither party can be rationally convinced of the other's view, even in principle. In such cases, we end up with a standoff, and the makings of a cultural war. This is not the end of the matter, though, as human beings do not only communicate discursively. There are many tacit and mute forms of communication that shape behaviours and mentalities independently of the appeal to discursive rationalities. The city as a medium is the most deep going and complex of these.

City life is the great historic dissolvent of patriarchies and patrimonies. As social forms, patriarchy and patrimony are intimately and inextricably interwoven with the world of the household. Inflexible duties, claustrophobic intimacy, rigid moralities and insular and clannish behaviours—all of these characterise the traditional institution of the household. The city in contrast is a much more complex entity. Abstract norms and impersonal values consequently are much more suited to it. Freedom and democracy flourish in the city. There is a mutual affinity between the two. Where cities tacitly, through their anonymous structures and forms, encourage the interaction of strangers, the power of deference and personal hierarchy is thereby diminished. It is from this perspective that we need to understand the importance of the commitment of the Council of Europe (2008, p. 33) to stop the segregation of immigrant communities on housing estates by trying to encourage the interaction of these estates—note the subtle feudal connotation of this term—with city life. Only when cities—in the

strong sense of that word—function properly do neo-patrimonial behaviours and mentalities diminish. The signs of this diminishing are that ritual formality is replaced by democratic informality, status and honour by open competition, and compulsory sociality by existential privacy. When this happens, the civilization of strangers begins to tacitly and practically replace the closed cultures of patrimonial communities.

Stranger cities are built around the anonymous media of publics and markets. These media have a powerful dissolving effect on traditional cultures. Millions participate—as strangers—in publics and markets. In doing so, they both create and are subject to impersonal patterns and forms. The personalised hierarchies of pre-Enlightenment societies have little resonance with the world of strangers. Entry into the environment of the stranger requires that social actors relinquish pre-Enlightenment norms of behaviour. More precisely in this process persons become social *actors*. In the first instance, they remove themselves from communal pressures and smothering intimacy by escaping into the time and space of privacy. Paradoxically, the realm of privacy, of intimate freedom, is an essential condition of the existence of the public sphere. The social actor puts on make-up in private as a prelude to going into the public realm. Communal cultures police lipstick not just because it promises unregulated sex but because it is one of the many kinds of mask that actors put on when entering the world of the stranger. They put on a face. Whereas names—the name of the family, kin, king and God—dominate pre-Enlightenment cultures, the face is crucial in stranger societies.[5] The actors who fill these dramaturgical societies face the consequences of what they do, face their accusers in courtroom dramas, and face each other in public. Among the marks of pre-Enlightenment cultures are the veiled face and the prohibition on appearing in public. Even those who are not subject to prohibitions to stay within the household do not really appear in public, but rather engage in non-public rituals and bargaining linking household to household. To appear in public—to walk among strangers—the social actor wears a costume or make-up or appears in some kind of aesthetic guise or else with some kind of prop or exaggerated facial or vocal tic or bodily mannerism. Fashion and cosmetics are essential to the appearing of social actors in dramaturgical societies.[6] In these societies, an actor appears in a role in costume on some kind of public stage, no matter how metaphorical the stage may be. Roles, even familiar ones, differ from rituals. Roles are plastic, and always partially invented, or rather more precisely each social actor plays even familiar roles differently, and for better or worse. Acting brings knowing, self-reflexive distance, and, at its peak, subtle irony and self-aware paradox to roles. These qualities are mostly absent from traditional cultures, and indeed to the eye of the traditionalist, the role-player in playing a part is simply a person who lacks all authenticity and mocks all belief. This is both true and untrue in ways that defy explanation across the divide that separates traditional and Enlightenment cultures, but at the very least this perception of the social actor is quite understandable.

Social beings regularly make the difficult and painful transition from the traditional community to the public world of the stranger. They manage this not as a result of dialogue or because anyone can

demonstrate discursively that democracy is better than hierarchy, but rather because the dramaturgical society of dressing up and inhabiting characters is more interesting than the world of social ritual. It is not that social rituals are uninteresting; it is just that dramaturgical enactments are more interesting. They are more interesting because they involve a doubling of the self. The young woman who puts on lipstick is learning to be someone who she is not. There are risks involved in this, but it is also exciting. It draws on the human imagination. The imagination is the faculty that allows us to think of anything and anyone as something else, including our own selves. Sometimes we make fools of ourselves when we do this, but other times we do things and achieve things that otherwise would not have been possible. We extend ourselves. We extend ourselves when we enter the world of strangers. We do this by assuming roles and personae that are outside our normal ways of behaving. In order, functionally, to interact with strangers and enjoy the myriad emotional and material benefits of the stranger city, actors have to relinquish personalised and ritualised ways of behaving expressive of rank-order and household hierarchy. In markets and publics, impersonal forms and patterns, many of a quasi-aesthetic kind, dominate.

The point of intersection of traditional and Enlightenment cultures is the civilization of the city. This civilization is anonymous. It tends to dissolve cultures that have a high degree of face-to-face social control represented by shame regulation and hierarchies of personal dependence. Yet cities that function as civilizations are also very paradoxical places. Part of what makes them paradoxical is that they not only transcend cultures of all kinds, they also nest them. They accommodate to a high degree antithetical forms of life and rationalities. They do so in part by indifference to them. Tolerance is a kind of indifference, and city life at its most potent is tolerant to the point of indifference. The true power of cities comes from the paradoxical nature of civilization rather than from the potentially eristic cultures that coexist within them. While culture wars have been a periodic blight on cities, the most celebrated metropolises mobilise forms of enigmatic communication—such as those of irony, paradox and antinomy—that resist the monomania of rationalities of all kinds, including the Enlightenment kind. Let us not forget how quickly the universal freedoms of the Enlightenment get translated by the legislation of the state into the implacable rationality of bureaucratic rules and policies. Great cities function differently. They are a union of opposites of commerce and art, ethnicity and anonymity, time and eternity, the godless and the godly. They are used to creating strange unions, even those of hierarchy and democracy. Humour, satire and wit allow city dwellers to live with incongruent forms of life. They wryly smile or raise an eyebrow at the passing parade of social types. Rationalities are turned into characters in an encompassing comic social drama.[7] Cities cope with pre-Enlightenment forms of life in their midst by subjecting them to the rule of metaphor. They gradually turn these cultures into something other than what they are. They draw the denizens of pre-Enlightenment cultures into publics and markets. Food is translated into restaurant service, clothes become fashion, and rituals become exercise routines, and so on. The metaphoric power of translation is very effective.

Great cities treat cultures dramaturgically. One sees this in the history plays of Shakespeare. These provided a drama of feudal norms and modern values for the audience of the great city. Such playacting is dialogical in a way that no "rational dialogue of cultures" could ever be. Notably, Shakespeare makes no value judgements about his characters. He has no "point of view". He loves all his characters, traditional and modern, equally. This is, in part, because many of the actions of these characters are ambivalent, and often they have the contrary effect to what they intend. Also in part it is because the public sphere of Shakespeare's theatre subsumed and transcended both the feudal partisans and the state reformers who paraded brilliantly across his stage.[8] Publics like markets are broader and more interesting, more absorptive, than either segregated cultures or the universal law of the state. The art of Aeschylus' tragedy, Aristophanes' comedy, Bach's polyphony or Cervantes' picaresque novel have the same effect as the city that produces them. They transcend both the culture of the household and the universal law of the state in the direction of the delightful powers of dramaturgy, metaphor and polyphony.

Art and pedagogy share in these powers. But a note of scepticism is also in order. Artists and intellectuals are very tempted to proselytize either on behalf of the Enlightenment state or pre-Enlightenment cultures. They readily become enlisted in the cause of universal legal rights or militant particularistic hierarchies. In doing so, they set aside art's essential powers of dramaturgy, metaphor and polyphony. They are easily seduced—whether it is by the romance of the alien other or the power of universal law. In either case, they lose their sense of humour and irony—and their distance from society. They become engaged, with a "point of view". They parrot all kinds of earnest strictures. They come out fighting, some of them on behalf of tradition's claustrophobic moralities and others in aid of the Enlightenment state's mildly despotic regulations. What this results in is a palpable loss because neither enlightened state regulation nor multicultural romance can do what the anonymous power of the city can. This is to make it possible for some very unlikely forces to cohabitate. This does not happen without tension. Nonetheless the cohabitation of opposites is possible because the civilization of the city adapts well to antinomy. It does this principally through physical, material, and dramaturgical—in a word, through non-discursive—forms. These adapt well to the city's oscillating motions and its perpetual need to blend innumerable forces. Great cities are what they are because they are able to effectively meld the universal and the particular, the recurrent and the accidental. In the city, the new and the old, the finished and the incomplete, the permanent and the temporary, the supernatural and the natural coexist in a conflicting, interwoven, dramaturgical and yet very practical harmony. The public theatre of the great city of strangers is able to mediate this in a way that neither law, nor reason nor language can.

Often the media of reason—documents and declarations—are really covert assertions of the law. There is nothing wrong in asserting the law insofar as it is understood that this is what is being done. Thus in appealing for intercultural dialogue what the Council of Europe is in fact asserting is the universal law of the Enlightenment: "All persons are born equal." It is perfectly reasonable then, in

light of the law of the Enlightenment, that the European Union bans extreme practices of patriarchal cultures—such as infibulations or the obligation of women to ask their father's permission to marry. Here, at the pointy end of cultural difference, there can be no room for dialogue. Modern Europe—long ago—decided these matters in favour of the Enlightenment. To do otherwise now would necessitate Europe to stop being Europe. It is nonetheless striking that the political struggle of feudal tradition and state-sponsored modernity—which Shakespeare at the end of the sixteenth century could in some measure treat in retrospect as the subject matter of his history plays—should re-emerge as a matter of keen political contention again at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This serves to underline the fact that while universal law and its bureaucratic regulations have a part to play, law can only meaningfully outlaw the fiercest aspects of patrimonial and patriarchal cultures. It cannot induce belief in the abstract norms of the Enlightenment on the part of the denizens of those cultures. Immanuel Kant long ago noted the difference between external and internal motivations for obeying the law.

Law thus cannot effect the transition from patrimonial culture to dramaturgical society. The mechanisms for doing this are instead woven into the fabric of cities, markets and publics. It is in these settings that the role-playing and theatrical-style dialogue of the society of strangers are learnt. In these milieus, identities are ironized. Cultural beings are transformed into social actors who play parts, invest in roles, create metaphors of themselves, and learn to negotiate the paradoxical ways of the city. These actors learn to move in and out of codes, cultures, ethnicities, histories and religions. They come to inhabit these skins as masks, always with a sense of double coding and a wink of the eye. They wink also at the state whose universal law they like in abstraction but whose regulation in practice they find petty, vacuous and absurd. They learn what the Irish did, painfully, in the course of the twentieth century. This was to transform themselves from a kind of Irishness that was typical of a morbidly patriarchal culture to an Irishness that was modern in a procedural way but also that was much more Joycean in nature than the gloomy world it replaced. In the course of this, the Irish learnt to talk the talk of the Enlightenment, complete with its many rational presuppositions and innumerable bureaucratic consequences. But perhaps more importantly, they acquired something of the charm of the actor in a play put on by the society of strangers who believe that the entire world is a stage. We can expect this dialectic—of tradition and natural right, law and comedy, insipidness and charm—to be repeated many times, in many different societies, in coming centuries just as it has already been repeated many times over since the age of Shakespeare and Cervantes.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter appeared as "The Paradox of Dialogue" in *Policy Futures in Education*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2011.

2. On the double bind between natural rights and the traditional conception of what is natural, see Heller (2002, Ch. 1).
3. On the distinctive nature of societies based on the interaction of strangers, see Simmel (1950), Scruton (2006), and Murphy (2010).
4. This historical series is discussed in (Murphy, 2001a, b).
5. Heller (2002, pp. 43–44) draws the distinction between the role of names in traditional societies and faces in non-traditional societies.
6. On the metaphor of society as a drama and social action as public performance, see Arendt (1958), Burke (1989) and Sennett (1992).
7. Heller (2005) assays comedy's sceptical view of rationality.
8. On the subsuming of multiple points of view and rationalities in Shakespeare's history plays, see Murphy (2009).

References

Arendt, A. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Burke, K. (1989). *On symbols and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Castoriadis, C. (1991). Individual, society, rationality, history. In *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy* (pp. 47–80). New York: Oxford University Press.

Council of Europe. (2008). *White paper on intercultural dialogue: "Living together as equals in dignity"*. Strasbourg: Author. Retrieved from http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf

Heller, A. (2002). *The time is out of joint: Shakespeare as philosopher of history*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Heller, A. (2005). *Immortal comedy: The comic phenomenon in art, literature and life*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kelsen, H. (1973). *Essays in legal and moral philosophy*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.

Lyotard, J.-F. (1989). *Differend: Phrases in dispute*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Murphy, P. (2001a). Architectonics. In P. Murphy & J. Arnason (Eds), *Agon, logos, polis* (pp. 207–232). Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Murphy, P. (2001b). *Civic justice: From Ancient Greece to the modern world*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.

Murphy, P. (2009). The power and the imagination: The enigmatic state in Shakespeare's English history plays. *Revue Internationale de Philosophie, 63*(1), 41–65.

Murphy, P. (2010). The enigma of distance. In S. Marginson, P. Murphy, & M. A. Peters, *Global creation: Space, mobility and synchrony in the age of the knowledge economy* (pp. 18–50). New York: Peter Lang.

Scruton, R. (2006). *England: An elegy*. London: Continuum. (Original work published 2000)

Sennett, R. (1992). *The fall of public man*. New York: Norton. (Original work published 1977)

Simmel, G. (1950). The stranger. In K. H. Wolff (Ed.), *The sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press.

Weber, M. (1946). Politics as a vocation. In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.