

Telling Relations

A Sketch

[Dedicated to my grandmother, Bessie Irene Walters, who died when I was but five years old.]

At this point in the history of ethnology there is, in one sense, no idea with more power than that of relation. It seems all too clear in materialist social thought, especially under the sway of the demiurgic power of Ferdinand de Saussure and his structuralist following, that relations have in many areas become the one and only focus. Having said this, though, we must also observe that while social thinkers worry a great deal about the hows, whys, whens and what kinds of relation in various social and/or cultural contexts, they very rarely stop and interrogate the very notion of relation itself. Indeed, one may say, the question of what a relation is, exactly, is today almost unthinkable in ethnological discourse.

In spite of this I am here going to pursue this phantom notion, to ponder this null point, asking here just what relation is and wondering just where it comes from. I want us to become burdened with this notion, to make us less comfortable with it, and to bring us to reconsider our uses of it, however unlikely this may sound. It is my assertion that the great, self-evident and illuminative power of relation in explaining the social and/or cultural is based upon a secret nature of relation. Finally, while this secret nature of relation finds its greatest expression within structuralism, it must first be pointed out that it did not begin therein and, second, that it continues to play a strong role in a number of dialogic, discursive, performative and other so called "post-structuralist" or "post-modernist" approaches as well.

Legacy

If one of the greatest givens in ethnological research and theory is that the entity known as culture consists of various forms of relation, it is even a greater given that these various forms of relation, in so far as they help us define things or acts which are cultural, must in some way be continuous within the boundaries of (different) given times and places from which they stem. In addition, whether the stemming of these relations is seen as semiotic expression of myth, a situation of semantic categories, a negotiation between peoples, an interpretive act, as discourses within modernity, or what have you, this stemming has always remained secondary to and dependent on the fact, on the pre-condition (or, in the worst case, *assumption*) that these relations stem (or used to stem) *continuously*.

At the heart of one of the first great ur-ethnological studies dependent on such a stemming of relations Franz Boas, in describing certain reasons and myths for the performance of the Winter Ceremonial among the Kwakiutl, quotes one of the Kwakiutl chiefs as having said:

“We try to imitate what our ancestors were told to do by the creator.”

In considering this remark closely I at first thought it to be the result of some confusion. Did this chief not mean that they, the Kwakiutl, try to *do* (not “imitate”) what their ancestors were told to do by the creator, thus forming a continuous line from the practices of the ancestors to themselves?

If not, then how was I to make sense of this other than by blaming Boas for an oddly worded and ambiguous quote? How *could* one (even try to) imitate what someone else, in another time, was told to do?

Verhältnis

Upon examination and reflection it is not, though, the translation of Boas which is to blame here for a misunderstanding that in fact both pre-dated him and continues long after his death. To blame, rather, is our notion of relation and, in particular, the role it has played and *continues* to play in imagining and thinking the social and/or the cultural. Although hidden, like many hidden things the key to this notion can be found in a most obvious, and thereby overlooked place. That place remains, after all is said and done, in the work of Marx.

It is in chapter one of *Das Kapital* we locate this problem under our noses. The theoretical positioning of Marx in this chapter, especially of sections one on value and four on the secret of the fetish nature of commodities, remains to this day (believe it or not) in need of a great deal more comment and interpretation. Aside from "value," "use value," "exchange value," and the commodity itself, several other key notions are in need of scrutiny; the most important of which being the notion of relation.

At the center of these errors we may locate the German word "*Verhältnis*"; a key notion of Marx in *Das Kapital*, meaning: relationship, measure, dividend, and/or ratio. In *Verhältnis*

we see an idea of relation whose sense seems almost mathematical. In chapter one, section four of the popular International Publishers English edition of Capital¹ (entitled "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" and more accurately entitled "The Fetish Nature of Commodities and its Secret") Marx supposedly wrote:

A commodity is a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour because the relation [*Verhältnis*] of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation [*Verhältnis*], existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.²

In attempting to summarize what Marx is saying here we find that, first, a commodity is a mysterious thing because in it two relationships are being confused for one another and, secondly, because of this confusion of relationships, the social (cooperative) character of men's work appears to them as a social relation between things. The key here is the idea of reification; the social character of men's work becoming a social relation between things because of this confusion between relationships [*Verhältnis(se)*].

From this, it certainly seems to follow that Marxist activity would involve setting these two confused relationships straight, and thereby reinstating the essentially social (cooperative) character of men's work. The task at hand would be to present the workers with a social relation (*Verhältnis*) to the sum total of their work which would be between themselves and not between the things they make.

¹ Marx, Karl. 1967. Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol.1, International Publishers, New York.

In the translation above, these *Verhältnisse* - relationships, measures, ratios, are what always bothered me. When I read "relations" in this International Publishers passage I wanted to think of active goings-on, but knowing that "relation" was a translation of *Verhältnis* I began to feel that my inclination to think in this way was unfounded. Was Marx wrapped up in writing about static, abstract relations? It just didn't follow in my thinking. The problem I have here, if he was writing about relations in this sense, was imagining the immensity of such a deception or oversight on his part. How could Marx have spent so much time writing about reification, building an entire critique of political economy on such thought, with such a spirit, and have still so heavily relied upon one of the greatest reifications of all time, i.e. the reification of the relation and relationship itself? Just what is a relationship anyway outside of its objective aspect? *Verhältnis* seemed to be completely objective, and thus, if the International Publishers translation was accurate, *Das Kapital* would have, ironically, been based upon the reification of human relations through its somehow unnoticed reification of relations themselves.

It is this problem which led me to set about my own translation of this passage where *Verhältnis* is key. Note the differences in comparison between the previous and this translation:

The secrecy of the commodity form thus consists simply in the fact that it reflects the social nature of men's own labour back at them as an objective nature of the products of labour themselves, as socially natural qualities of these things. From this we also get the relationship [*Verhältnis*] of the producers to the collective labor as a social relationship

² The German translation here.

[*Verhältnis*] of objects existing outside of them.

Put this way, we can see that: (a) we are not talking about "a commodity" and a "thing" but rather the commodity form; it is the very "thingness" of the commodity which is in question throughout this chapter, (b) the secrecy of this form comes from the fact that it, in some odd way, reflects back at them the social nature not of the men's own work, but simply as products of work period (which are not co-extensive with commodities), (c) this reflection men get back from the social nature of their work is an objective reflection of the nature of made goods themselves, and (d) this reflection of the nature of made goods themselves is a reflection of "socially natural" qualities of these things.

Then comes the term "*Verhältnis*":

(e) "From this we also get the relationship of the producers to the collective labor as a relationship of socially natural qualities existing outside of them."

To summarize here, Marx is saying that, first, the commodity is a strange mirror which reflects an objective, thing-like nature back when a social nature is put before it and, secondly, that this mirror, while negating the social nature of work, in some strange way preserves it as well, creating a dialectically synthetic reflection of "socially natural" qualities.

The key point here, and that which saves Marx from engaging in any reification of relations, is that the relation, the *Verhältnis* itself, is, in essence, such a reflection of "socially

natural" qualities. It is a reflection of the non-objective, social nature of men's activity which comes back at them as an objective nature -the nature of a thing, a relationship, a ratio between this and that. In short, *Verhältnis* or relationship is a distortion, a reflection of "socially natural" qualities which are themselves, according to Marx, fictitious. These qualities are fictitious in that they pose as natural but are in essence the result of social goings on which, for Marx, spells class struggle. This is why they bear the contradictory designation of being "socially natural."

From this we can see that setting confused relationships straight is beside the point for Marx (and Marxist inspired³ praxis). What would be the point in setting relationships straight if all such relationships were reified social activity? The real point is to understand such reification and work with it. It is not the confusion between relationships which is the problem, but rather the existence of relationship itself. As long as labor exists as a thing, a relationship, a ratio and so on, political economy, the object of Marx's criticism in *Das Kapital*, will remain alive and well. The task at hand is to subvert this reification. As long as the commodity exists as a thing, made up of the reified expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, etc. (i.e. the thing called labor), the secrecy of its form and its strange powers of reflection will, through social theory, history, and popular culture, continue to reify any and all social action in its strange mirror. The problem before us is how to describe this mirror. While asking the key questions of how it works and what its limits are we must worry about the problem Marx himself faced, in "simply" pointing

³ And I use this word quite literally.

out its existence.⁴ This problem is, namely, how to resist reification while trying to describe it. A problem which is often voiced but seldom appreciated in its complexity.

A present, with all the talk of the performative and a new emphasis on performance as a way of approaching problems similar to the one just described, it is surprising how little has come of such insights. Confronting the problems involved in reification and language most feel content in invoking J.L. Austin on "performative utterances," Bahktin's "dialogism," or John Searle's "speech acts" as their theoretical legitimation. But none of these ideas nor, I dare say, the whole general idea of performance scholarship itself, as it stands today, will ever be able to find its way out of Ferdinand de Saussure's grand secret commodity form hall of mirrors, let alone the vicious relationality which is its secret sharer.

If, as I have tried to show, Marx demonized relation in the sense of *Verhältnis* - i.e. relation as relationship, ratio, measure, proportion, etc., then it should also be clear that Marx's thought would stand against any world-view based entirely upon this very notion of *Verhältnis*, whether positively in the sense of similarity⁵, proximity⁶ and so on, or negatively in the sense of difference and distance as we find in Saussurean semiotics and its followers. The problem which confronts us in appropriating Marx's insight and spirit into ethno-theory is that in *Das Kapital* Marx was not undertaking an analysis of relation in general but rather an analysis of the distortion caused by one form of relation, i.e. *Verhältnis*. He was not offering a positive critique

⁴ Questions which the work of Michael Taussig has relentlessly been pursuing.

⁵ So rigorously examined and critiqued by Walter Benjamin.

of relation, but rather a negative critique of political economy, the theology of *Verhältnis*, if you will. It would seem that Marx leaves us to figure out, maybe in the processes of class struggle and revolution themselves, just what notion of relation will describe a society beyond the bounds of political economy and *Verhältnis* . This task, which today remains a feat of the imagination, is what I will now try to perform.

Legacy

(my grandmother's clock)

In the center of a parlor a woman is sitting in a chair, her arm is moving up and down at her side accompanied by a metronome beat, at the rate of a grandfather clock and, as she moves her arm, watching her arm as it moves, she is saying “up-down, up-down, up-down...”

Watching her for a moment I cannot help but begin saying, in cadence with her and the metronome, “relation, relation, relation, relation...”

After a moment I stop, staring at her, bewildered and, shortly thereafter, after a few more “up-down, up-downs,” she stops.

There is a pause (tick, tick, tick) as she turns to me and says, in cadence, and somewhat matter of factly:

⁶ Addressed and appropriated by Martin Heidegger.

“Relation is telling and telling-relation.”

At which time, the metronome comes to a stop.

I say: "I can tell you don't like this."

She says: “Someone may observe.”

I say: "Tell me the story."

She says: “Someone may ask.

I say "Time will tell."

She says: “Someone may prophesize.”

I say: "Tell me about it!"

She says: Someone may exclaim.

But what's going on here?

She pauses, as if thinking... and says:

“Relation is telling and telling-relation.”

Late at night I'm wandering, lost in the labyrinthine maze of antique roman streets, and as I walk down a quiet, narrow alley I see soft blue light ahead, and I hear faint trickle, a sort of murmur. My pace slows to a crawl as I hear the sounds of flowing water, in her voice, in a man's voice, I hear:

relatio, relatio, relatio, relatio, tellings, tellings, tellings, tellings, similarities, similarities, similarities, similarities, analivia, analivia, analivia, analivia, plurabel, plurabel, plurabel,

plurabel,

(She is a *Murmeltier* ! I mutter to myself.)

And as I reach the end of the alley as it opens onto a square, (snout first, followed by curious eyes and ears) peering around the corner, I am bathed in the blue light of the Fontana di Trevi. I slowly move toward the fountain, alone in the small square, the frozen stone gods in the wall above me, water flowing around them, falling in Frazerian reminiscence. Then my back turning and with a ching! there they go, their metallic glim catching an instant of light, and into the stirring pool behind me, walking away now down another, small and lonely street. And she is with me again singing, softy as we go, paw to stone, shoulder by shoulder:

"Relation is telling and telling relation, relation is telling and telling relation"

"You are a *Murmeltier*," I say.

"Oh no," I say, she said, as I recall, "never, you never turn to look back at people from the water, you will die when you do this."

Her singing, now slowly rising:

"Relation is telling and telling-relation"

and ending in startling shout - (RELATION!)

I walk on in silence, as she scampers behind me, and I feel safe as we go.

Now in front of a wall I begin to chalk my name, one letter, then another, as we both stand watching. As I finish, my name, behind me I hear "Doug!" But as I turn, eyebrows raised, she simply says: (eyes of a marmot, string into mine) "Nothing."

Could it not be that all relation is some form of resemblance, and therefore that no relation is strictly arbitrary? When I say I am (or am called) Doug am I not giving evidence of a fundamentally natural relation between myself and my name in that I am called by it, in that you say it and I respond, in that you call me with it? If this is not the point in saying that I am Doug then what could be the point? Is it a point about "being" in some grand sense? What point is there in my standing before you and saying that I am Doug unless my name had previously meant something to you? If this is not the case, then it seems that names are used either to call a person nearby or to invoke a person when he or she is not present. Aside from this, is it not also true that we somehow think of persons resembling their names? Take, for example, the statement or observatin that "She doesn't *look* like an Irene."

I ask this question as to whether or not the relation between a person and his or her name is not "a fundamentally natural relation" because I want to introduce a concept of relation which resists the socially naturalizing powers of reification described by Marx. This form of relation would, I feel, need to be partially based on calling and resemblance in combination.

LATE

As the etymology goes, the word "late" has origins in the Old Norse where it meant let and

letting (as in blood letting), or to lose. In the plural it meant manners, or sounds.

In past English we find the word "late" written (for how else could we ever find it) as look, appearance, aspect, outward manner; we find it as actions, as goings-on at a certain time in life; and we also find it, again, as voice or sound.

Today "late" is no less mysterious. On one hand it has a sense of being after as in slow or tardy, as coming or occurring after the due or customary time, of being advanced in point of time as in "late in the day," or belonging to an advanced stage or period as in "late-modernism." On the other hand, however, "late" has a sense of being before, as in deceased, as in "former," or "recent."

To re-late, we could say then, is to re-lose, to re-let (as in blood), to make re-appear, to make re-spect. To relate is to make timely, make current, to make present and, in the case of being deceased, to make one deceased again. In essence relation is the repetition or reinstatement of loss, appearance, visibility, death, and of all things past.

Like-Envy

Now I'm walking through a shopping mall in some suburb and as I pass a fountain pool I look over my shoulder seeing hundreds of pennies, dimes, and nickels lying on the light blue bottom of the pool, and am pulled into its orbit.

As I round the pool he joins me, saying, over and over again, that relation is telling and telling relation.

I look upon him with knowing familiarity, and say: "I resemble that remark" and the words appear on the screen:

"I'm haunted *by things said, by remarks made*, in odd times, and places."

And behind me he begins slowly moving his arm, a paw, up-down, up-down, and I join in with a knowing smile, with: "Relation is telling and telling relation."

And I remember the time when I'm talking and joking with my old friend, when I playfully pointed out something "telling" about him.

"This job means a lot of hard work and thinking," he says to me.

"Well, I guess that leaves you out," I say to him.

[There is a pause and a smile]

"I resemble that remark!" my friend says, and we both begin to laugh.

As I turn to look over my shoulder I see her arm is down, and I say "down." Having done this she raises it, and then I say "up" But in my mind, in this moment, of laughter trailing off in my memory, I am haunted by something. What was happening there, in that other time with my friend, was a play on the similarity between the words resent and resemble. Instead of saying he resented my insult, he instead said he resembled it. On one level, at least, he was only

repeating a catch phrase he had heard from others, a sort of joke which had become popular around that time. But I am still intrigued and confounded as to what sense such a replacement could have. I do not think it was a simple matter of saying the wrong word to in a way perform and confirm the laziness and ignorance I was attributing to him. This *was* a part of it, but certainly it was more than just that. There was something in this joke that relied heavily on the idea that a person could in some way resemble a remark, could be like something said; not like the thing described, but like the description itself. The question this raises to me today is how, exactly, could we (and do we) think of words, phrases, statements and other things said, as being able to be resembled? But, then again, notice the inability of my question to escape from the reification it is questioning. In saying "things said" do I not actually affirm that words, phrases, statements and so on are "things?" Do I not further affirm that they are a special kind of things, i.e. things said? The relation between the thing and the thing said (the word) is arbitrary, Saussure tells us, but if the thing resembles a thing said (a word), then what? In this case it is no longer arbitrary is it? Part of the problem here is that when my friend said "I resemble that remark" he pointed out a non-arbitrary relation between himself and something said and, in doing so, called into question the very nature of arbitrary relation in general.

To take up a similar example, let us consider the notion of liking something. When I say I like this or that am I not saying that I want it or seek it, and that I resemble it? Take, for example, the idea of one person liking another. When I say I like him, I mean that I resemble him, that we relate to each other, that we are alike. But we should also note that liking is a verb here, and not a state of being. When I say that I like him I am saying that I do something called

liking. The action of liking is the action of resembling or relating which, it seems, can only be imagined as simulating, as telling and/or imitating, as action.

Going back to the example of my friend and I, could we not imagine how in some other time and place it would have made (or will make) sense to say that he liked (or likes) my remark. In fact it is quite often possible to speak sarcastically of liking something when one also means to convey that he or she dislikes it. Here, one could say, we are not running up against the antithetical sense of primary words (as discussed by Freud, Nietzsche, and others) as much as we are confronting the antithetical sense of primary verbs. But this too would be misleading, for it is not the words or verbs which concern us here, but rather human activity period. When one says that he or she likes something one is saying that he or she wants it, one is, in a sense, invoking it, calling for it. Do we not say: "I'd like to see you again," or "I'd like that one" meaning "Meet me again," and "Give me that one" or meaning, magically and poetically, "That I see you again!" or "That I had that one!" as if in a conjuring or spell-binding which had risen from envy. Along with this, in saying that we like something, are we not also saying that it is other than us, and that we want it to like us, to come to us and be like us? Again, if we think of liking as action, we can see that just as liking is imitating this or that, it is also altering it, othering it, changing it. Liking, we could say, is the (dual) action of mimesis and alterity.

With this, some greater sense can be made of my friend's response. When he said that he resembled my remark he was saying that he resented it. Beyond this, however, he was saying that he liked it but was also coming back with a response which topped my remark in a play of

well placed wit. In one-upping me he seemed to compliment my wit but, at the same time, rejected what I said and turned it back on me supposedly leaving me dumbfounded, thinking and wondering why he had said that he resembled my remark (which seems to be nonsense, but then again sensible) when he must have meant that he resented it. My friend had not only grasped the power of mimesis and alterity in tandem but had used it to playfully resist my jab. When he said that he resembled instead of resented my remark he did not mean that he liked it, nor did he mean that he disliked it; he did not affirm liking it or differing from it; he said neither. Aside from all discussions of meaning (for they lead nowhere here) what he did, one could say, was imitate and alter the situation at the same time. Paraphrasing Marx, we could say that he reflected the nature of my action back at me not as a relation between himself and what I said (i.e. my words or my remark as things), but rather made the reflection (and therefore reification) of any objective relations between himself and myself impossible. As we both laughed we looked into the mirror of the social and saw ourselves, for that moment, simply in relation and not in relation to anything. This, I have come to realize, is the something which haunts me in the memory of this moment, and which I have just now tried to relate.

Legacy

For our final telling relation let us return to the work of the Franz Boas on the Winter Ceremonial of the Kwakiutl with which we began.

Without going into a detailed analysis of Boas' depiction of Kwakiutl ritual, which is

certainly called for here, I feel that a few important points can be made *vis-à-vis* the idea of imitating what another was told to do and a certain notion of relation which it at least suggests. If we take the certain attempt at defining relation which I made earlier, i.e. relate as re-lose, re-let (as in blood), to make reappear, to make respect, to make current, to make present and to make one deceased again, and if we apply these notions to not only Boas' descriptions of Kwakiutl ritual, but to a great many other descriptions of ritual found in ethnology, we can see that the two do, in some way, reflect one another.⁷

“We try to imitate what our ancestors were told to do by the creator.”

One does not need to look long to again see the strange nature of such a thought. How could a group of people be thought of as trying to imitate not what their ancestors did, but rather what they were told to do by the creator? Why imitate what they were told to do instead of follow what they were told to do? How does one imitate something said, outside of miming the spoken words aloud in the *form of words*? In quoting someone as saying: "We try to imitate what our ancestors were told to do by the creator" Boas brings out the ever ambiguous notion of telling. Let us consider our final motion in relation to this.

Imagine, if you will, one last repetitive motion.

You raise your arm up, and your friend watching says “Up!”

Then you lower your arm down, and your friend watching says “Down!”

As you do this again and again you begin to ask yourself:

⁷ Space, however, does not allow the adequate treatment of this reflection here and now.

"Am I miming him/her or is he/she miming me? Am I miming him/her or is he/she miming me?"

In raising his arm was your friend telling you to say up, and in lowering it to say down? You were imitating him/her were you not? Inversely, if we can imagine your voice as an arm, raising, lowering and gesturing, *then we can also see how one could imitate what another told him or her to do.* We can talk all day about all the meaning and signification involved in the command "Raise your arm," but in direct human relation someone's arm raises or it does not, end of story. We can talk about the semiotic, symbolic, and practice relationships between the sign arm and his arm, "raise" and "the act of" raising and so on in order to further understand systems of power, influence, classification, consciousness and so on, but to what end? For those who are of the mind that it is only here, in understanding these forms of relation that we come closest to understanding the real world, let me point out a clichéd, but nevertheless important, notion that the task of social thought should not be to describe the (real) world, but to change it, which means, I have tried to argue: to alter it in the action of mimesis and alterity; to resist certain powerful modes of understanding and their secret sharer-in-stasis "relation." My friend's response did exactly that, as does the case put forward by a Kwakiutl chief and Franz Boas of imitating what one was told to do.

In summary let me outline the notion of relation which I have here tried to depict, and refer back to its importance. I argued that the notion of relation as *Verhältnis* was a major problem faced by Marx in volume one of *Das Kapital*, and that he rejected it outright as one of the key reifications supporting political economic thought. The most important task which Marx leaves us with is the subversion of this particular reification which, though it is presently hard to imagine, is coextensive with class struggle itself. With this in mind, I argued that relation would be much better thought of in terms which reflect a more active, mimetically-altering nature rather

than in terms of the static, ever reified and reifying nature in which relation is found in social studies today. Using examples from everyday life, briefly invoking the power of the primitive as found in Boas' work on the Kwakiutl and, with your cooperation, trying to actively depict the nature of relation I am arguing for here, I attempted to call into question the performative view as it stands, while offering another direction in which it may proceed beyond certain structuralist forms of reification. In roughly laying out the contrast which I have here tried to make apparent, let the following serve as a rough guide and the final stage of this presentation.

| <u>Verhältnis</u> | <u>Telling Relation</u> |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| relation | relation |
| relationship | relating |
| thing | calling |
| state | telling |
| ratio | miming |
| dividend | resembling |
| measure | altering |

