

# Ambivalence and Inbetweenness

BERNHARD GIESEN

## Abstract

In the following remarks, we present new developments in social theory and cultural analysis that converge in a particular focus on a third perspective beyond the distinction between inside and outside. This focus on “thirdness” transcends the classical structuralist paradigm of binary classification. It is especially sensitive for the analysis of sudden surprises, paradoxical twists, and disturbing events in history and social life and, thus, contrasts to the assumption of progress and orderly linear development. We outline this new paradigm with respect to three different domains: garbage, monsters, and victims.

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During its first century of academic existence, sociology thrust for being accepted as a scientific discipline—preferably on a par with the respected natural sciences, at least, however, on an equal footing with economics and psychology. Issues of methodology took center stage and the attempt to find objective knowledge about social reality on empirical facts was of paramount salience. The emerging science of sociology was to cover a realm of action above the individual persons who were influenced by and had to respond to these “external” social facts.

A first challenge to this “positivistic” paradigm of social science emerged at the turn of the century when—influenced by neo-Kantianism—some European theorists considered that every empirical observation presupposes conceptual distinctions in order to describe the empirical facts.

Conceptual distinctions frequently have an oppositional structure: one side of the distinction hinted at its opposite, the other side. This mutual reference

to the opposite fitted nicely into the human imagination of boundaries. In contrast to physical systems such as stones, human beings can hardly think of boundaries without imagining the outside, the realm beyond the boundary. This imagination of the respective outside generates the classificatory grid by which we map our life world. Furthermore, the turn toward categorical presuppositions allowed for the flexible relation between signs and its references: what we have to deal with in reading social life is just signs, stories, and nothing else. There is no such thing as raw, unmediated reality. Reality itself provides no firm ground for neat classification and distinction. In addition, the urge to get access to the presence of things will inevitably fail (Heidegger).

This focus on categorical presuppositions drives a more refined sociological analysis ranging from the late Durkheimian sociology and the Weberian epistemology of ideal types to Parsonian systems theory and structuralism. Although originally elaborated in the domain of linguistic studies structuralism quickly took over ethnology and finally sociology to become the most influential paradigm in the 1950s and 1960s (R. Barthes). Structuralism remained not without critical objections: it was charged with a lack of historical sensitivity and for failing to grasp the dynamics of actions. Nevertheless structural analysis dominated not only literary studies but it led to a domain beyond itself: deconstructivism took over at the end of the seventies (Derrida, Foucault). Now it was less the investigation of the structure itself than the discovery of the possibilities excluded by this structure that ascended to the position of a master trophy driving research in the humanities and post-structuralist sociology. This focus on the excluded reference outside mated well with the rising interest in minority studies, gender studies, and so on.

Deconstructivism, thus prepared the way for the second breakthrough that led to a paradigm beyond the confines of structuralism. It questioned the neo-Durkheimian assumption that social reality can be dissolved into neat binary classifications. There is always a third possibility, a disregarded idea, a rest or remainder that—despite all our efforts—cannot be assimilated to a binary distinction. Something in the world escapes all our attempts to cage the manifolds of reality into a classificatory grid. This gives salience to the many attempts to pay attention to figures of inbetweenness and ambivalence such as strangers and migrants, translators and parasites, folds, and monsters (Serres, Deleuze, Homi Bhabha, etc.). Today, respected theorists such as Neil Smelser question the conventional paradigm of rationality and try to replace it by the notion of ambivalence—thus drawing on the Freudian heritage. Zygmunt Bauman suggests that ambivalence and fluidity are to be the core notions to describe the modern condition. Furthermore the very concept of rule guided behavior is meanwhile extended from a dichotomic to a trichotomic structure: there is not just the distinction between conformity and

deviance, but there is also the practical decision to treat certain phenomena as an exception to which the distinction does not apply (G. Ortmann).

While this reconstruction of the excluded other of an opposition has been widely accepted, the space in between the opposites, the third possibility, the transition between inside and outside, the “neither ... nor” or the “as well as ...,” the space of hybridity have only been marginally theorized by mainstream cultural sociology, but centered by nonsociologist authors such as Homi Bhabha, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Serres, or Yuri Lotman.

The sociology of ambivalence reverses this position. It claims that ambivalences, disturbances, paradoxes, misunderstandings, and exceptions are not just critical risks for social order. However, instead, that they are indispensable and powerful elements of this order. Stability of social order relies not only on neat oppositions but also on the acceptance of the unclassifiable, of surprises and coincidences, ambiguity, and fuzziness.

These phenomena of ambivalence do not just simply exist—a position that can hardly be denied by traditional sociology, but they drive the process of social communication.

We will, in the following, outline three cases of inbetweenness and ambivalence that in an exemplary way can tell us something about our cultural response to these phenomena: garbage, monsters, and victims.

Garbage is less a matter of hygienics than a scandal for the cultural order. It cannot be classified neither as sacred nor as profane and thus its scandalous inbetweenness disrupts our basic cultural distinctions. Garbage is “dirt” in the sense of Mary Douglas: stuff in the wrong place. Hence disgusting garbage has to be removed into a space beyond our perception. Would it be sacred than it would have to be protected for ordinary use and gaze. The unveiled sight of the sacred is dangerous. It would blind us like the ancient truth-teller Theiresias who watched the goddess Athena bathing. But neither is garbage a profane object that could be used, consumed, dissected and transformed. To the contrary: garbage represents the death of things and this death has to be hidden from our eyes because it may remind us about our own mortality. Garbage is uncanny like the living deads, its pure and absurd materiality urges us to keep a distance, to remove it in order not to be contaminated by its decay and formlessness. If garbage cannot be removed immediately its undeniable existence has to be concealed from our eyes and sealed from our noses. As long as garbage can be sensually perceived it remains scandalous and dangerous, an indissoluble remainder that resists any attempt at unambiguous classification.

However, occasionally garbage can even be turned into something sacred, that has to be prevented from further decay: if we consider ruins and relics as objects of memory that mediate between present and past or—in a more general phrasing—as aesthetical objects, we change the meaningless stuff

into something sacred that, being eternal, should be exempted from temporal decay. However, garbage can also be transformed into profane usable materials: this “recycling,” however, requires a certain elementarization and reassembling of the raw materials. Before it can be adapted to new functions it has to be dissolved into its elementary parts. Nothing should remind us of its previous purpose.

Garbage is a special case of monstrous phenomena that cannot be assimilated to the cultural order of our everyday life. When we are unable to ignore these phenomena or to classify them, then we are facing a “monster.”

Monsters emerge when we encounter anormal, enigmatic, and irregular phenomena and our attempts to assimilate these weird phenomena to normality fail. This encounter with monsters is threatening and dangerous because it disrupts the fragile reality of our cultural order. We feel pressed to reconstruct the boundary behind which we could ban the monstrous phenomena or, if this endeavor fails, we try to escape.

In simple cultures, the demonic and monstrous is interpreted as an autonomous source of agency. In this respect it is similar to the sacred, but, in contrast to the sacred, it has evil or unclear intentions. Its true identity and intentions are hidden behind a facade that cannot be trusted. Demons introduce the possibility of deception into the world. Behind the surface there is a reality that is stronger than the treacherous appearance. From now on the world is under suspicion. It is driven by vampires and body snatchers, seducers and tricksters, and we are well advised to distrust the surface (Douglas, 1966).

As soon as they are visible, demons and monsters can be kept at a distance, they can be expelled and ostracized, banned and stigmatized. This holds true also for bodies that, by their physical features, evidently deviate from the regular and normal scheme. In many ancient cultures disabled or disfigured children were killed immediately after birth or they were banned to stay out of sight.

A new mode of coping with monstrous defigurations emerged at the princely courts of early modern Europe. Here monsters were increasingly treated as curiosities, as miracles of nature, as rare objects of the princely collection. The extraordinary monster loses its dreadful and shocking impact; it is turned into a harmless sensation presented in a frame that is devoid of all practical considerations: pure extraordinariness. The original “demonological” gaze was replaced by the museological one. Dwarfs and giants, defigured persons or monstreous animals were watched from a close distance, but the thrill of facing the monsters did no longer engender anxiety or fear, but just a pleasing frisson—there was no real danger and no risk of contagion. The bar, the cage or the chains tame the monster—we can watch it from a close distance, but we should not touch it.

The logic of collecting and exhibiting curiosities, of course, was not confined to princely courts. Wandering circuses and ethnic shows, anatomical museums and zoological gardens continued this museological gaze at monsters on a more popular level.

While the museological gaze continued to exist in popular arenas the twentieth century generated also a new way to frame monsters. The monster was again regarded in terms of inferiority, but this inferiority was based on pity, condescending charity and emphatic compassion. The originally dreadful monster was turned into an innocent victim who could claim our support and ask for our aid. Victims are embodiments of a special ambivalence between human beings and profane things. They partake in the sacred nature of humans, but they have been treated as cattle, the killing of which will not engender blood revenge or be seen as a sin by the perpetrators. The imagination of victimhood mirrors this special inbetweenness (Agamben, 1998; Giesen, 2004). Victims are neither enemies nor cocitizens. According to this imagination victims have no face and name, they are denied a proper place within the community, they are expelled and displaced in camps in the outlands at the fringe of human communities, their bodies are submitted to mortal violence; their story is besilenced, their remainders are burnt to ashes, nothing should remind of their existence. This state of exception from regular civil rights clashes against our conviction that they are human beings like us. Consequently, we try to reverse this expulsion from the civil community by remembering their name and their story, by compensating their handicaps and by supporting their ways of life. Thus, the former expulsion of demonic monsters is turned into an emphatic identification and approach: the disabled are like us and we are in a certain respect disabled, too.

The public compassion conceals, however, a paternalistic condescendence. The victims are not on equal footing with those who advocate and voice their cause. Today, a new class of professionals mediate between the common citizens and their uncommon counter images: social workers and physicians, welfare officers, and nurses take the place that, in the demonological gaze, has been occupied by witchcraft doctors and prison guardians.

This seemingly inclusive turn does not stop at the boundaries of the human race. Today, not only disabled and disfigured humans, but also animals are discovered as to be "victims." What was a dangerous wild beast before is now an endangered species that should not be put behind bars, but live in its natural habitat and have its natural diet: the dragon is transformed into a pet dinosaur.

Thus, the demonological gaze is turned into its opposite. This victimological perspective centers a discrepancy between obvious appearance and hidden essence, but the evaluation is reversed: whereas the demonological

gaze suspected the hidden evil core behind a harmless façade, the victimological perspective sees a sacred core behind a seemingly abnormal façade. Here, too, the ambivalent inconsistency between surface and essence thrusts for overcoming, but the evil of the façade does no longer frighten or shock us. This attenuation of emotions is generated by media reports about distant victims that avoid, too, abhorrent images showing the monstrous deformation of victims. Instead we watch faces that do not differ from our own faces. We listen to the voices of reporters and see pictures showing the traces of the evil. Hence on our sofas we can surrender to a mild concernedness: we do not face the horror of victims and we cannot change it.

The victimological gaze can be unfolded only from a far distance (Boltanski, 1999). Only from a distance can we opt for compassion, only from a distance can we compensate for the impossibility of intervening. If really faced to the dying victims we would respond by crying, mutedness and desperate attempts to aid. Represented and civilized by the media, however, the victims stay at a distance that precludes shock. The horror is, thus, banned by the image.

This inbetweenness of monstrous phenomena is, however, essential and unavoidable for the operation of classifying, ordering and coding the world. However, it is disregarded, invisibilized and besilenced in the order that is generated by classification. In the natural attitude of everyday life the world presents itself as neatly ordered. Cultural classification, however, is somehow weirdly aware of this elementary but excluded inbetweenness. It responds to this weirdness by producing order even in the realm that seems to escape from it. It classifies the unclassifiable, it describes different kinds of ambiguity, and it delineates inbetweenness by symbolic figures: it classifies garbage, imagines monsters, and tells the story of the uncanny behind the boundary.

Studies in the cultural history of ambivalent phenomena are usually bridging the disciplinary divides between history and sociology, literary studies and ethnography. Although their theoretical commitment may vary they converge in a skeptical attitude toward the paradigm of rationalization as the prime mover of modern society. Instead, they focus on rituals and theatricality, images and emblems, ceremonial representations and symbolic dislocations, hybridity and crossbreeding, fuzziness and ambiguity. Thus, the limitations of structuralism—its lack of historicity and its strong focus on stability is overcome. However, this does not engender a return to traditional causal analysis. The search for causes is largely suspended and replaced by deep hermeneutic interpretation: Clifford Geertz rules instead of Jim Coleman.

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#### BERNHARD GIESEN SHORT BIOGRAPHY

**Bernhard Giesen**, professor emeritus, Universität Konstanz, MA 1972 University of Heidelberg, 1974 Dr. Rer.pol. University of Augsburg, 1980 State doctorate for Sociology at the Wilhelm University of Münster, 2006–2010 Cluster of Excellence “Cultural Foundations of Integration” University of Konstanz, 2001 and 2003 visiting professorship at Yale University, 1998–1999 Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California, previously various visiting faculty positions at UCLA, University of Gießen, University of Münster, University of Chicago, University of Bielefeld, European Institute of University Florence, NYU.

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