

THE EQUAL AND THE DIFFERENT

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INDIVIDUAL

There are two basic forms of conceiving of the relation between the individual and the group or society. They oppose one another, logically and sociologically, but they can coexist in a complex mode within the same culture. The first form is that in which the group/society is anterior to the individual; in which the social is understood as a totality that determines the individual; in which, strictly speaking, the individual and what is individual is of marginal value, a residue, a support that only emerges into full existence by virtue of the means by which it is incorporated, mediumistically, into collective signification. In this sense, all humans are mediums: they represent things other than themselves.

The second form is that in which the group is thought of as a more or less inevitable product of the gathering of individuals, in which the social is a contingency. Here the individual is a self-sufficient universe in itself (in the sense of possessing its own essence) and creates the social by means of an act of will—a contract—or, inversely, renounces the social by means of an act of liberty.

In fact, it is inevitable that in this second form of comprehending the individual, individualization is also a social production—a characteristic product of a certain type of society. This is the question, clearly,

of what one calls, rather vaguely, “Western” society. From Christianity to capitalism, a variety of historical conditions contributed to generate this typically Western product: the Individual as value, something very different from the individual as biological fact, a unit of the species.

But it is also true that there are Western cultures, or subuniverses within these cultures, or even given social moments, in which the first form of comprehending the individual/group relation—one that appears to be dominant in so-called “primitive” societies—emerges. Brazilian society would seem to be a limit case, for it has at its disposal a variety of contexts and ritual moments that elaborate this relation, in which variable proportions of both ideological forms are on display and coexist. Two good examples are *carnaval* (a moment) and religious trance and possession (a practice central for some segments of society). In both cases, we have forms of the ritual elaboration of the problem of the individual/society relation. The *fantasia* and the mask, the entity and its host, underscore the opposition between the actor and the character, between the individual and the role, between the biological and the cultural, between the human and the supernatural, and points forcefully toward the mediumistic character of all social existence.

But things are not so simple. *Carnaval*, for example. It condenses a (structural) multiplicity of concepts about prevailing individuality in Brazilian culture. All of these can be understood as actualizing a relation of transformation with regard to quotidian practice (and the conceptions embedded within it), the “nonritual,” the profane, the world of work. The behavioral changes instantiated by *carnaval* accompany changes in the actual experience of the self, in the conception of person, of individuality, and in the experience of group participation. These changes and condensations are complex. As Roberto da Matta has already noted, it is the experience of the *fantasia* (in the double sense) that defines *carnaval*, implying simultaneously the concealing and revelation of individuality. The mask puts the character on stage, and through it, permits the elaboration of that which our society conceives as antisocial, private, or individual: sexuality, “fantasies,” the dissolution of the individual within the species, and the emergence of each individual as “special”—different, exact, singular.

It is this dialectic of individualization and deindividualization, moreover, the notion of the character—the part (role)—that emerges from the breach opened by this game, that can be observed in some of the works presented here.

THE PASSION OF THE SAME

One variant, or limit case, of these forms of comprehending the individual activated by the Rio de Janeiro *carnaval* is the *bloco* Cacique de Ramos, which has approximately 7,000 members. The structure of the *bloco* is such that it presents some interesting peculiarities. Its structure forcefully underscores the equality of its participants; in place of hierarchy, the emphasis is on anarchy; the differentiation of roles is minimal, and its “society” (or collectivizing moment) is constructed horizontally. Actual incorporation or recruitment into the *bloco* is ad hoc—one need only buy a Cacique *fantasia* and join the *bloco* at the moment it parades. An organization (the only Brazilian one?) without bureaucracy? The basis of association is the free contract, but a paradoxical contract. It deindividualizes, reduces all to a common denominator: members of a species dissolved in a “*bloco*.” A curious third term between the spontaneous and the fabricated (the psychology of the crowd and the mise-en-scène of carnivalesque ritual). The basic emphasis of the group is on external frontiers: on the difference, as elaborated in the uniform *fantasia* (here the boundary between the *fantasia* and the uniform is delicate and revealing), between inside and outside, those limits that define the actual form of the group’s existence within the carnivalesque scenario. Internally, the borders are fluid.

The corporeal marks that identify and distinguish the components of the *bloco* are basic. As such, at the level of the *fantasia*, the sense is one of uniformity—of an adjustment of individuality to a model that privileges the simplicity of the graphic mark. Indeed, the Cacique uniform is based on simple binary oppositions: black/white, straight/curved, etc. Nevertheless, facial decoration permits individualized creativity departing from the combination of a limited repertory of signs (white adhesive tape, in the manner of “Indian” painting) on an equally limited surface—the face—whose lines of definition are “naturally” given: bilateral symmetry, axis of the nose, etc. This constructed opposition, between face and body, individual and group, different and equal, constitutes the driving structure of the *bloco*. It should be noted that the available repertory for individualization is socially given and limited. As such, what distinguishes the more than 7,000 members—the logical principle of individualization—is simply a combination of invariant elements with minimal separation. A process similar to the genetic code?

The operative underlying processes of Cacique de Ramos at *carna-*

val find their double in a metaphor: aggregative bicolor snails. The snails, whose dynamic of identification/singularization departs from mechanisms curiously similar to those culturally selected by the Caciques to define themselves (binary opposition in terms of color and line, topological variation in the decoration of the shell) illustrate the relation that unites/separates the members of the *bloco* within itself.

Men are not snails—clearly. But it is possible to extract symbolic recourses and forms of organization from the world that creatively metaphorize other spheres of nature.

It follows that the theoretical problem that sustains this work is precisely the relation between the individual and the group, understood as the conjunction of situations that exhibit individualization as a force at times subordinated within social life. More than subordinated: as the residual product of a single, combinatory throw of the dice. Dice given by the group that throws them, in which the socially produced elements of combination furnished by the group are articulated by means of minimal abstract differences that in turn generate individualization. Behind this is a passion for the same that we encounter by chance in Western society.

TRANSLATED BY IRENE V. SMALL