

# The Politics of Morales

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This article investigates the complexity of ethnicity in modern society. It is based on an ethnological field work at car industries in Europe and explores the way ethnic groups are sorted on a growing cultural labour market, representing a varying set of profitable morales. Earlier, anthropologists were mainly interested in the general features of ethnic groups, i.e. formal construction of communication, language, rituals and religious confession, instead of their internal dynamics. The general tendency became focusing on the deviation from a national majority. The impact of geography was profound in anthropologists' thinking. This paper suggests other interpretations, based on re-establishing of the ideas of classes. A departure from ethnicity will make it easier to give a voice to the minorities and to unveil the technologies of representation.

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A 35-day conflict at FIAT in Turin in 1980, involving 114,000 unskilled workers on the factory floor, gave rise to several sociological studies. The strike was an event that occurred for no ostensible reason in the middle of a process of humanization and socio-technology. In keeping with the special workers' culture at FIAT, 70–85 per cent of the workers were members of the Italian Communist Party, PCI. During the strike, however, the party went against its militant members and forced them to surrender, in a spirit of agreement with the foremen and their union organization. Under the surface one could see a pattern emerging. The foremen and white-collar workers were out to gain respect as stable Italian citizens and wanted to prevent the social and economic ruin of the factory, a value which the Communist Party also seized on. Conversely, the ethnically mixed workforce on the factory floor was considered a downright danger to society (Bonazzi 1984). This might be noticed as confirming the strength of a non changing structure in the industrialized countries of Europe – ethnicity as a threat. The situation at FIAT contains elements which have changed dramatically over some few years. Many signs from today's work life realities give rise to questions about culture as the primary tool of organizing differences.

## Loyalty to the company

In the autumn of 1990 I began to form ideas about a research project on European motor companies which would study expectations about good morale, about the willingness to *show loyalty* to the company; these expectations directed at the employees had become increasingly common in large-scale industry. Later on I have done fieldworks at e.g. Ford in Dagenham, East London, Škoda in Miadá Bole-slav and Volvo in Gothenburg.

At this time the effects of the industrial recession began to appear clearly. Both capital and production were exported to foreign countries, which increased the uncertainty.

In that situation a debate flared in the media about the Swedish wage-earners concerning work morales. The wages and social benefits of the growth period during the 1950s and 60s could no longer be justified, especially not in a phase of economic decline. The strong society showed up its weak inhabitants, relying on full employment and functioning social security systems. The debate about sickness absence in the companies concentrated on dishonest claims of sickness benefit and turned into a campaign to get employees to show *loyalty*. If the country was to survive as an industrial nation, every-

one had to stand up and be counted, even immigrants.

## Ethnicity

Many years earlier during the early 1970s while Europe still suffered from armament and a balance of power I carried out field studies of the traditional building culture among the peasants in northeastern Poland. There was a pronounced separation of ethnic groups and closed boundaries between the villages. It was also a multicultural combination of different languages and religions, stretching from the catholic church to old-confessional Russians and the Arabic used by Muslims in their wooden mosques. The landscape with its ethnic villages worked as an open textbook for those who were interested in cultural differentiation. Many of those villages showed the evidence of a folk-society concept, coined by Robert Redfield in 1940, they were “small, isolated, non-literate, and homogeneous, with a strong sense of group solidarity” (Redfield 1940, 1947, Hultkrantz 1960: 142). Their technology was simple and with a shared production activity, aiming for economic independence.

Things were very different later when I investigated the multicultural body of immigrant labour at Volvo Motor Company in Gothenburg. Folk societies still worked in the shop and structured social life, specially when some Greek and Turkish workers reorganized a “village” structure for their own satisfaction and defence. Members were ranked according to seniority principles and the informal leadership was commonly held by an “old-man”. A shared past was the ruling principle behind their performance of cultural Otherness, which occasionally provided them with exaggerated means when there was a threat coming from the outside. Their hidden cottages and provisional living rooms behind the assembly lines, decorated with ethnic symbols and signs, were prohibited by the officials, still designed as home territories. They served the goal of preservation and functioned as ethnic domains in the shop.

Origins, and those promised lands invented during breaks, represented a significant demand for historic territories. You were identified by

your origin. Sometimes the decisive steps to the plant put an end to *real life*. Like a frozen film sequence, your personal self in the factory was neither moving nor being updated anymore. Somewhere you were still a farmer in northern Finland and the daily talking produced a compound body of imaginary homes. The life-as-a-journey formula served a structure when trying to operate in a universe of opportunities; the impact of travelling between past and present was highly imaginative. The plant was a waiting time for transfer to another destination.

Imagined homes might be seen as the cultural consequence of the labour policies during the post war period. A sudden turning-point in European immigration policy came in 1973/74 when West Germany and France imposed restrictions on immigration (Castles & Kosack 1973). There was already a tradition of political *Überfremdung* rooted in several Western European countries. A contributory factor was the oil crisis of 1973–75 and the stagnation period which reduced the demand for labour. Meanwhile, it was important to find possibilities to get rid of the manpower that was no longer needed, and varying strategies were discussed for exporting unemployment back to the immigrants’ home countries. The 70s meant that xenophobia took on a new legitimacy. There were national offensives against minorities as second-class citizens, slum-dwellers, and social outcasts. A common opinion was that the decay of the cities was due to foreign groups having taken over whole areas; by prohibiting them from settling there it would be possible to start reconstructing those areas (Castles 1984). After the UN General Assembly adopted a declaration “on the rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities” in 1978, there was a balanced political interest of human rights for the ethnic minorities. The European countries now completed a basic political view which involved using the immigrants as an economic buffer during fluctuations in the trade cycle, and exporting unemployment.

Xenophobia took on a more civilized face during the 80s. In several European motor companies the job descriptions were redefined. Several unskilled job positions became “qualified”

without any technical reason in the sense that only members of the national culture could hold them. The socio-technical programmes which began at the Volvo plant in Kalmar in 1974 (Agurén 1976) had already become an important experience, and now self-governing groups and job rotation were fundamental principles in all personnel policy. These ideas of "Lean Production", originally compiled from Japanese sources with Toyota in the frontline, were implemented in a spirit of consensus. The union organizations in Sweden were not as antagonistic as they had been at Renault or British Leyland; they collaborated in a corporate-controlled humanization of production. The new interest in people encouraged the social design of corporate cultures, following a stereotype view on the Japanese example (Dassbach 1993/94).

A recurrent pattern was the new social planning. It was accompanied by an increasing interest in forms of work which corresponded to people's need for stimulation and creativity. At this time during the 1980s the effects of the recession began to appear clearly. They were followed by unrest on the labour market, with reduced investments and higher unemployment.

There was a common return to standards going on in society with attacks on the liberals in the European countries who worked for social rights for minorities. "Ethnic conflicts" boiling all over the Balkans, Central Europe and the former Soviet Union contributed to a predominantly negative view on minority issues in news media: "Indeed, the Yugoslav tragedy provides excellent arguments for anyone seeking to bury the whole issue of minority rights" (Mortimer 1992). The New Rights movement in the USA criticized the radicals for their proposals to teach the literatures of racial and ethnic minorities. Such efforts were undermining the patriotic agenda (Denzin 1991:6). Hard work and family once again became central cultural values. The house wife was defined as the moral centre in most European societies, abortion was a crime against nature. The social security system was attacked, it undermined self-confidence among the working poor people. The duties of the ordinary man who worked hard to support his family was contrasted to the rising unemployment figures among ethnic groups who did not want

to work and make plans for their lives.

An aggravating circumstance was uncertainty about the place of work in the social construction of the family and the home. When seen in that light, it was obvious that some groups were hit harder than others. They included the immigrants; the conception of immigrants was that they did not share a national work morale, defined by the majority. Since they did not belong to the national myth, no one could praise them for their concern for the core activities. Naturally, they became the target of other political forces, and the xenophobia that lurked under the surface; this was not always visible but it was all the more effective outside the official programmes. There was a desire to expose groups who sponged on welfare.

In the leading industrial nations a variety of conservative movements arose during the 1980s, all with the common feature that they were searching for historical models, which gave rise to ideas in which the very sense of affiliation was a cornerstone. Now it was possible for a top manager to tell the reporter from *The Financial Times*: "I am a German in the ethnic sense".<sup>1</sup> In the new situation ethnicity became a moral issue, a problem of showing loyalty to one's origin. Emerging from the flavour of "being ethnic" there was a boundary created between the social use of "ethnicity" among the people in charge, mostly industrial leaders, politicians or officials at high levels, and the traditional Otherness of lower class migrants, reflecting a compound citizenship mystique in society.<sup>2</sup>

A strong movement of cultural nostalgia developed in the industrialized countries and worked the same way as we earlier understood ethnicity, as a search for cultural authenticity. Ethnicity did not mean the same thing any longer, specially when the "aura" of progress turned into nostalgia in the 1980s. There was a widespread searching for authenticity and roots, representing dreams of being that was opposed to technology and the production of dead matters. This is what Jean Baudrillard (1983, 1988: 16, Denzin 1991:31) suggests when he is looking for the concept of hyper-reality – reality is that which is already reproduced. Even minor changes contributed to a common pattern of restoration of fundamental values, customs,

beliefs and the traditional legitimacy that they carried with them.

These were the features of a postmodern culture. They were all representations of the real, comprising profound imaginations of society combined with a nostalgic, conservative longing for the past coupled with an erasure of the boundaries between past and present; an intense preoccupation with the real and its representations; a pornography of the visible; the commodification of sexuality and desire; a consumer culture which objectifies a set of masculine culture ideals; intense emotional experiences shaped by anxiety, alienation, and detachment from others (Denzin 1991).

### “Lost Working Days” in the international imagination

Ethnicity – and cultural nationalism – might be conceived as an identity mystique which has become increasingly attractive for modern people. It represents a false historical conscience and ethnic stereotypes, which become an unverifiable experience originating from an imagined history (Niedermüller 1994). It has acquired importance in the political discussion about economic flows which dominates today’s discourse and which is frequent in the debate about the European Union. Most company leaders in Sweden are convinced that Germans are hard-working and that they keep their agreements. The conception of their national character thus has an economic value. To put it bluntly, you can rely on them and you can be sure that invested capital will bring returns. We must seriously begin to study the economic factors which have acquired such an enormous significance in the shaping of the new Europe and the relations between states. Economic problems have increasingly become objects of cultural judgement, and vice versa. Ethnicity and multiculturalism have extended to more important issues of foreign policy formation than only some decades ago. Roland Robertson, Professor of Sociology in Pittsburgh says, that “it is becoming more and more apparent that no matter how much the issue of ‘naked’ self-interest may enter into the interactions of nations there are still crucial issues of basically cultural nature

which structure and shape most relations, from the hostile to the friendly, between nationally organized societies” (1984:4).

These issues are empirically intertwined with central themes in modernity and postmodernity. It is obvious that national self-interests created an atmosphere in which cultural differences determined the tone of the dialogue. The tone invoked national moods; modernity exposed itself through religious-like confessions of facts where economy and culture combined, and the aura of matter-of-factness was inviolable.<sup>3</sup>

What we now see emerging are world wide cultural, ethnic, and political patterns based on mapping of “the Other”. Comprehensive statistics on living conditions which we now have from Europe, illustrate the differences rather than the similarities between nationalities. Statistics on lost working time because of industrial conflicts in different national settings reveal great differences. The data can of course be used for many different purposes. The most obvious is for long-term industrial planning intended to avoid the worst labour. Stoppages and wildcat strikes were much more common in Greece and Spain in the early 1990s, while in Britain they showed a noticeable reduction (EC Rapid Reports: *Population and Social Conditions* 1993:2). Statistics on stoppages are a way of organizing differences based on the *loyalty* to the company which varying nationalities display.

### Towards a cultural labour market

Peoples and nations nowadays are increasingly being valued in a cultural investment strategy. Some views suggest that certain groups have a higher work morale than others and that they are better at doing certain jobs because they have a more stable kinship system, a better religion, and more favourable ideas about the value of work. These notions are not particularly new in our society. In Sweden in the past we had the falling scale from Walloons, Germans, and Poles, to Galicians, and similar ideas are still used to evaluate cultural minorities with regard to their capability in working life. What is new is the scope and capacity of the cultural labour market of the 1990s.

A typical out-fit of today’s working condi-

tions at large scale industrial plants is that employees are not primarily valued for their ability to carry out particular tasks, but for their willingness to accept a corporate-controlled ideology. As Weber presumably more than anyone else emphasized, the Industrial revolution embodied and reinforced certain distinctive values relating to work. Since the early phases of industrialism there has been ideas of workers' willingness to show loyalty and the employers were implanting an appropriate work ethic and the acceptance of these values. Work was given meanings by dominant groups in the society which served the interests of the powerful (Brown 1984:133). The new element during 1990s is rather the way these expectations concerning work ethics have grown stronger in pace with the deepening of the industrial crisis. "Showing loyalty" to one's company and leaders has taken on an increased importance in the motor industry in Europe. This might be the result of the influence of the Japanese – where loyalty to company and fellow workers is seen as equivalent to loyalty to the family (Dassbach 1993/94:19). We see how the cultural design of loyalty follows the nostalgic picture of the restoration of national values, core activities, and post-industrialism. In many versions of post-industrial theory there is much greater emphasis placed on the control and expansion of *knowledge* than on the control and expansion of *production* for an understanding of future developments (Brown 1984:132). As a consequence, there are reasons to consider more radical forms of industrial management based on controlled experiences, and demands for unwavering loyalty on the part of the employees.

In this new situation, a spectre from European history is being reawakened. Those who are not considered to belong to the industrial tradition and who do not share the social rights of the majority population tend to be placed in a special labour market for the most vulnerable and hazardous jobs. There thus arises a social order based on elitism, which means that people are valued differently, not just materially and economically, but also in purely physical terms. If cultural differences of the work force will function as the sorting principle behind the recruitment of workers on a free European labour

market in the future, cultural stereotypes and expected moral qualities will divide the applicants into new categories. In a recently published study on ethnic differentiation of labour at Volvo, Carl-Ulrik Schierup says, that the ongoing efforts of sorting people into ethnic categories is a threat towards harmony in society (1994:10). My fieldwork has given me some insight into conceivable future scenarios which point unambiguously towards totalitarian forms of industrialism. In comparison with the conviction of the social sciences in the 1960s, that the democratization of working life was the ultimate goal of the massive research efforts, the tasks of today's researchers are more serious: it is a matter of defending human dignity.

### Cultural melancholia

World cultures today are highly complex. Intrinsic order is directed against what is called depravation among the workers. On the other hand a new kind of ethnic style – emerging from modern symbols and mass culture, interwoven and mediated by media – is often used by labour groups in order to visualize their Otherness. We may learn from the strike at FIAT in 1980 that the ethnic compound of unskilled workers was considered a danger to the nation and implicated social instability. The ideology of progress fused with ethnicity as a negative premise. Customs, traditions, beliefs which constituted ethnic behaviour challenged the modern, impersonal functions of industrial corporate workplaces.

Ethnicity has been conceived as a reproduction of moral communities in exile, related to a dislocation of profound values (Ringer & Lawless 1989). The members of such a group feel themselves, or are thought to be, bound together by common ties of race, or nationality, or culture. Some culturalist interpretations suggest that ethnicity may be used for a number of purposes, sometimes as an overt political instrument (Cashmore 1984, Guideri & Pellizzi 1988:23). A common view is that "ethnic boundaries provide a standard for viewing the self as a member of a moral community" (O'Sullivan See & Wilson 1988:227). A profound idea of territorial dislocation made it easier to under-

estimate ethnic identity at earlier phases of industrialization and overlook the emergence of cultural self-awareness. Anthropologists' writings also confirmed that cultural deflexion must be located and measured and that the impact of time and space in their analysis generally positioned these groups to certain slum areas in the cities or the outskirts of the industrially developed centres in Europe. A close look at the ideas behind will challenge that view. The reason is that cultural reproduction of the past has become one of the most widespread ideas of the 1990s. A departure from the concept will make it easier to find other modes of interpretation which would give a voice to the "silenced" minorities and unmask the technologies of representation.

The society of the 1990s contains desires of origins and uniqueness that national majorities share with ethnic minorities, possessed with similar cultural extractions of the past. Challenge and desire are not only deeply rooted in today's world, they are also fundamenting principles behind the formation of "New Ethnicities" (Hall 1991), like cultural nationalism. Seeking one's identity through seductive journeys in the imagined landscapes of the past is a challenge one can avoid, or respond to, but desire takes the individuals beyond all contracts, beyond the ideas of cultural harmony and social equality (Baudrillard 1988:58). The connection of lived experiences with cultural texts that organize and represent their lives in them is a common trait – based on the voycur's dangers and benefits. Desires are nomadic. They can be frozen like a film sequence, territorialized and invested in cultural meaning. They can be coded in an infinite number of ways, but in practice they are always coded in some way (McLaren 1992:27).

## A departure from ethnicity

Ethnicity has more to say about lived experiences than places. In a guiding study for the understanding of modern ethnic processes, Beatriz Lindqvist claims that it is consequently the individual's understanding of the situation which is essential. There is always a conflict between collective consciousness and individual experience, cultural change is not only the

result of outer influences, it also depends on an ongoing process within the culture (Lindqvist 1991:27). This may serve as a reminder of cultural forces in the modern society where the politics of morales are put forward in both collective and individual terms, which partly reflects the classical division between objective and individual ethics made by Emile Durkheim as early as 1894–95 in his courses on Ethics (Alpert 1939:67). The classical approach, however, was categorically loaded with historical and geographical notes on deviation. Now the most frequently used elements could be examined in other settings – they have names such as imagined homes and moral communities, dislocation of feelings, absent friends and a compelling sensation of exile. Even if we let these elements separate because they are not representative for ethnic behaviour only, there will be a core of morales left. Postindustrial society reduced ethnicity to culturally defined team spirits. That might be one of many reasons behind a sudden input at Volvo Motor Company. Traditional religiosity had virtually disappeared when the company recently appointed a Lutheran company priest on a trial basis, representing the Church of Sweden.

The information of the postmodern society has shifted from print to video, from texts to pictures. Communications and information technologies participate in a major representation of society and a collapse of spatial distances. The essential postmodern scene can be found in the images and meanings that flow from media, film and TV where man enters a landscape of dreams. The concept of *Designed Ethnicity* might be useful here when attempting to deconstruct Otherness and understand the emergence of singular cultural movements (Arvastson 1992). A designed ethnicity mirrors both challenge and desire, it might be regarded as a form of constructed Otherness which introduces a new genre of discourse, a personal mystery compiled from the media-flow of cultural imaginations. For the reason that ethnicities always are constructed in some way, it is possible to use the concept in order to apprehend a common life-construct among car workers; the human body passes through inner landscapes of past and future, where the present, the "world of work"

(Dassbach 93/94) has nothing to add more than an accidental stop along the road.

## Developing cultural studies

Some comments on the objectives for further investigations will finalise the discussion; there must be something behind the sparkling differences between people in the street, their faces, clothes and signs. During my field work at Ford Motor Company in East London something essential had changed. The owner of *Shahi Halal take away restaurant* in Bethnal Green told me he was poor, he would never make the trip to Pakistan any more. In the old days his take away restaurant was running fairly well.

The relatively stable British working class in Bethnal Green described in the writings of Michael Young and Peter Willmott (1959) during the 50s had disappeared. Almost fifty per cent of the settlers were non-white inhabitants. Rapidly the borough had changed, from a traditional working-class area to a multicultural compound of West Indians, Africans, Indians, Pakistani, Chinese and Asians. According to 1991 Census Bangladeshi held the majority.<sup>1</sup> Class and culture were melting together, the outlook of bodies, playing with origins, competed with cultural boredom and melancholy.

Multiculture itself need not imply harmony or absence of repression. The real challenge is to find the invisible connections between now and then – and not to be trapped by limitless communication of symbols, or the exhibitionism of Otherness. Culture might override the impact of class only because of anthropologists' assumptions of univalent communication. There are, however, strategies under the surface of "ethnic realities" to be detected, and layers of political resistance embedded. The strategies are bent on class actions, searching for a greater autonomy and control of one's own destiny, rather than the endless communication of Otherness in an imagined landscape of cultural equivalence. Ethnic strategies are defensive against the repressive features of industrial society, primarily against the forces of suppression and cultural disfranchisement. In many cases, these strategies are transforming cultural singularity into political aspirations.

For the moment anthropologists have lost their course. There is a need to turn away from the main streams of communicative interpretations of cultural deviation, while developing languages for new forms of representations based on Otherness as a dimension of human thought, as a move for human freedom and dignity.

## Notes

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1. The interview in *The Financial Times* (12 Dec. 1992), *Private View: Patriotism by another name – Sir Ronald Grierson is a European and a sceptic, but not a Eurosceptic*, conducted by Christian Tyler, continues: "Is there such a thing as national character? Sir Ronald would not be drawn. 'It is a term I have always been chary of using because it is an oversimplification. Very often, when one talks of national characteristics, one is really thinking of caricatures'. But there are certain things which are quite peculiarly British, such as the anxiety which I think is bred into people at their public schools never to cause embarrassment. It is a very nice characteristic, but of course it can sometimes make you avoid important decisions'. He has described the establishment, by which he means the civil service mandarins, as an 'intimidating mafia'. Yet it is difficult to see him as the outsider he describes in his recent short book of memoirs, *A Truant Disposition*. Tall, elegant, courteous – he addresses you as 'Mr' – Grierson has a mandarin fondness for the qualifying phrase which clarifies his views but hides his feelings".
2. The interest at higher levels of society of creating a personal integrity with ethnic means may reflect the affection of a new "citizenship mystique" which was commonly held by the media during the early 1990s. Judy Dempsey wrote in *The Financial Times* (3 Dec. 1992), *Germany's citizenship challenge: The hurdles placed in the way of those seeking naturalisation* where she criticized the article 5.7 of the 1913 Reichs- und Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz: "Undercurrent regulations, there are some opportunities to obtain German citizenship. For instance, if a Russian marries an ethnic German, and both decide to live in Germany, the ethnic German, or Aussiedler has by law the automatic right to German citizenship, and the Rus-

sian can be naturalised almost immediately. However, if a Russian (or any other nationality) marries a German in Germany, remains married for two years, and lives without interruption for five years in the country, only then can he or she apply for citizenship". A citizenship mystique with uncovered elements of racism was debated in the USA in the late 1994 following the thesis made by Richard J. Herrnstein & Charles Murray in *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press c 1994). The authors suggested that the cultural differences of peoples have a basis in genetics. In an article in *The Wall Street Journal* (1 Nov. 1994), *The 'Bell Curve' Sells Genetic Science Short*, George Melloan concludes: "Black people feel they have more than enough crosses to bear without wisecrack sociologists coming out with books saying they are genetically inferior".

3. "Euroscepticism" has distinct nostalgic overtones. It means that other nationalities are supposed to lack the work morale which we have – regardless of who *we* are. This coincide with a specific national rethoric style. The cultures of economic actors on the market, and the personal progress story held by top managers, are incidentally the subject of a research project being conducted by one of my colleagues, Mats Lindqvist.
4. The Census of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a survey of the entire population, held every ten years. The last Census was held on April 21st, 1991.

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