

SMOOTHING

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There is nothing regular, planned, symmetrical or consistent about culture; it has no geometry. Cultural processes of change are equally messy and unpredictable. Even in retrospect we rarely find trends over time which fit straight lines or simple logarithmic curves, and simple repetitive cycles are equally rare. From a contemporary standpoint, directions and trends are even more chaotic and difficult to discern. Every rule seems to have exceptions, no boundary is completely fixed, and culture seems to constantly burst out of whatever category we use to contain and describe it.

Cultural smoothing describes a variety of ways people simplify, regularize, paper over, and flatten experience, knowledge, history and social life, making culture and cultural processes easier to see, describe, and codify. The idea of smoothing invites us to think about the gap between experience and description, events and memory, nature and the naturalized. Smoothing is a process of interpretation and representation which finds order in chaos, direction in a random walk, and geometry in a messy tangle. Often we perform various kinds of smoothing entirely unconsciously, because finding patterns in nature was for so long an essential survival skill. The ability to see the trail of a running rabbit across loose sand covered with other tracks can become an automatic and unconsciously-applied skill.

But a great deal of smoothing is intentional and even strategic, a tactic of persuasion, a method of manipulating information, and a means of solving social problems. The term “smoothing over” is used in Eng-

lish to describe situations where everyone has been persuaded to agree to ignore a social rift, a quarrel or dispute, to act as if something never happened. In this case social smoothing requires two steps – forging agreement on a common definition of what has happened, and getting everyone to agree to act as if they have forgotten that the disorder was ever there.

Building a roadbed through rough terrain is a good analogy for the two movements of smoothing. Road-building requires two basic operations; cutting and filling. The hills in the way are removed, and the waste is dumped into valleys and low spots. The ideal path has an even balance between cutting and filling so there is no excess or shortfall in material and the road grade is constant. Similarly, the cultural process of smoothing involves removing obtrusive, unexpected, unusual or anomalous events, and filling in gaps in memory, records, groups, with symmetrical arrangements and surfaces.

While smoothing is an ethnographic reality-something which can be observed in every social setting, it is also one of the primary activities of social scientists. Even the most basic levels of ethnographic work involve a great deal of smoothing. We choose to ask questions which flow logically one into another, smoothing the path of speech and story-telling instead of constantly changing courses and topics. We filter out the “noise” from our field recordings, choose particularly uncluttered or clear views for our photographs, and keep our attention carefully focused when recording direct observations, pushing events into a smooth linear sequence. Often we



enlist the people we work with as our collaborators in creating a smooth ethnographic record which has direction, flow and order. At other times we may not even know about the cracks and crevasses in the stories they tell us, their recollections and explanations, for they are carefully hidden and concealed.

The technology of reporting and recounting historical narratives and ethnographic detail has its own role in creating smooth flows in text. The process of crafting a book or article requires constant choices about what to include and what to leave out, which actors to bring on stage and which to leave hidden in our field notes. Like a gardener creating topiary from an unruly bush, we chop and trim until a coherent narrative emerges. We smooth months of unruly notes, piles of scribbled reminders and hasty drafts, boxes of reprints and lumpy quotes, and end up with a coherent sequence of paragraphs, pages and chapters which moves smoothly from introduction to conclusion.

In the process of writing and teaching, academics sort theoretical perspectives neatly into opposing camps, collaborators, and distinct schools of thought; whole groups of scholars have specialized in the work of *theoretical smoothing*. They survey an unruly gaggle of working scholars, and nominate a few whose thoughts are “central,” representative and influential. They choose the particular parts of the whole messy production of an academic career which will stand as the intellectual motif for a theorist’s life’s work. They tell and retell the founding myths of a discipline and trace the descent of ideas through time as a continuous and coherent sequence – very little of which was actually visible to the people who lived through those times and played major parts in the story. Smooth stories exist in retrospect and prospect, but rarely in the present.

Smoothing is such a pervasive process that examples can be found almost anywhere. To smooth out this unruly abundance, I have chosen some arbitrary categories which encompass most of the kinds of smoothing that ethnographers and ethnologists generally encounter.

Realignment is a kind of cultural chiropractic, which seeks to connect events into a seamless chain leading from a founding event to the present. Think

of Winston Smith, the hapless hero of Orwell’s *1984* (1949), rewriting history daily in order to better explain the changing alliances and wars of the fictional superstate of Oceania.

One of the most famous ethnographic cases was recorded by ethnographer Paul Bohannon, when he worked with the Tiv people of northern Nigeria. The Tiv are patrilineal, and their lineage organization is extremely important in politics and jurisprudence. Alliances and coalitions are often based on how patrilineages are related to one another, and those relationships are reckoned based on birth order and descent many generations back into the past. The right to settle and use land is also grounded in ancestral relations. During one fieldwork session Bohannon recorded these genealogies, because they explained existing alliances and the distribution of offices. Returning a few years later, he wanted to verify his earlier genealogies, but found that many had changed. When alliances broke up, the genealogies were adjusted accordingly, and new allies were discovered to be relatives by previously unknown ancestors. A newcomer to the area, if accepted, could become a long-lost relative. Another might fall from power or be expelled from a settlement, and people might remember that there was a dispute over whether the person ever belonged to the lineage at all.

The smoothing of history to accommodate political change is common in modern states as well. As recounted in *The Commissar Vanishes* (King 1997), Soviet photo retouchers were busy after every purge or rehabilitation to remove or restore faces in historical photographs. The present Bush administration in the USA has refined this art of political smoothing into a policy of state; never admit errors, rename disasters as victories, call every bad judgment an instance of “strong leadership,” and ignore or silence alternative interpretations. Two major methods many governments use in their smoothing enterprises are “throwing money,” and the appropriately named “cover up.” The former consists of giving the appearance of fixing cracks or filling gaps by appropriating and spending money. Then a government can assert that it has taken care of a problem. The cover up just hides irregularities under a blanket of secrecy. While the in-

ternet has made some kinds of secrecy and cover-up more difficult, computer technology has also brought the tools of retouching onto every desktop. No form of published photographic evidence can be assumed to be in its original unsmoothed state.

While these smoothing strategies deal with eliminating or concealing special or anomalous events which break the “alignment” of a regime’s narrative and performance, other kinds of smoothing are so thoroughly institutionalized that they are part of the normal routine of governance. This variety of realignment, which could be called *Textbooking*, selects one from all possible accounts of events and officializes it, authorizing a public version which will be told to outsiders and taught to the next generation. This very public form of communal remembering requires an equal measure of forgetting, once again demonstrating that smoothing requires cutting and filling in equal measure.

As I have already implied, smoothing takes place at many social levels, from the family that develops a single communal narrative of holidays, meals, and key events, up to the global functions of organizations like UNESCO which authorize a single narrative of the direction the world is moving. As individuals we maintain our own ongoing smoothing efforts. Cognitive scientists have recently demonstrated that people have a tremendous power to unconsciously smooth their own visual field. Told to concentrate to catch the appearance of one character in a video, most subjects manage to screen out unexpected objects. A man in a gorilla suit enters the scene, but most subjects do not consciously register it, or recall it after the film.

Individual memory is itself a wonderful instrument for smoothing, allowing us to forget particular events and elaborate others. Narrative therapists argue that personality develops through a life-long process of telling and retelling events and stories in an internal monologue, by telling stories about ourselves and our past, thereby creating a biographical narrative. A process like this presents many opportunities for selective cutting, pasting, and trimming to build a smoothed and coherent identity, from what would otherwise be a chaotic jumble of memories.

Retrodiction could be seen as a variety of historical smoothing which creates a directional narrative to make the present seem like an inevitable consequence of natural forces or past events. Many myths retrodict the present, explaining that some particular aspect of the world is a direct result of supernatural events; “earth woman was given fire by the creator, which is why women cook today.” Mythological retrodiction like this has a theological counterpart in teleological stories which interpret events as the consequence of past sins or good deeds. Fundamentalist Christians in the USA have honed retrodiction into a political art form. Pat Robertson, for example, said that New Orleans was destroyed by hurricane Katrina because of its sinful history and bacchanalian Mardi Gras celebrations. A fundamentalist church recently held a demonstration at a military funeral in a town in Indiana. The man had died fighting in Iraq; the demonstrators carried signs saying that his death was punishment for the country’s toleration of gay people. They “reasoned” that open homosexuality in the USA was bringing God’s wrath on the country.

The logic of retrodiction is also familiar territory in many of the sciences and social sciences. Evolutionary psychology, a rapidly growing interdisciplinary field of research, explains all kinds of modern human behavior by reference to human evolutionary events in the far distant past. So for example, people today like to gamble in casinos because three million years ago when australopithecines were learning to hunt big game, young males could improve their “reproductive success” by taking risks to outhunt their peers (Gray 2004). Other evolutionary psychologists have hatched scenarios which purport to explain monogamy, male dominance, the invention of money, various kinds of political systems, and even standards of female beauty and fashion trends by retrodicting back to primordial evolutionary events or pressures. I have a retrodiction of my own about the origins of evolutionary psychology. I trace its intellectual ancestry back to the “Scientific Racism” of the nineteenth century and the social evolutionism of Herbert Spencer, and connect it forward along a smooth historical trajectory through the eugenics movement and Robert Ardry’s (now discredited)

“Territorial Imperative” arguments of the 1960s, when he explained the war in Vietnam as a consequence of Australopithecine cannibalism (1966).

Retrodiction can function in the other direction, where instead of explaining the present by using past events, we refigure and reorder current events in order to fit them to prophecies and predictions. We could call this *Nostradaming*. Again the religious right in the USA provides many examples, as they use the Book of Revelations as a template for interpreting all events in the Palestinian Intifada as a foretold prologue to the “rapture” followed by apocalypse. They have even become powerful enough to try to force current events along into the pattern foretold by prophecy, supporting the invasion of Iraq because it will hasten the second coming.

My paternal grandmother was an expert at genealogical nostradaming, especially when aimed at my mother. When I was a rebellious misbehaving teenager, my grandmother constantly reminded my mother about all the times she had warned my mother that this would happen. Grandma had prophesied that because mother was too indulgent, or too strict, or fed me the wrong food, or let me run around without proper clothing, I would end up badly. And look what happened! There is a certain aesthetic pleasure to tying up causes and effects, predictions and actual events, into a neat and ordered package, at least when the predictions are your own.

I have played with many other smoothing metaphors. Some of them seem to lead in creative directions, for example *Stretching* and *Compression* can be used to describe the manipulation of time sequences to make them longer or shorter. The spatial metaphors of *Coiling* or *Winding* apply to methods of turning a linear sequence of events into a series of cycles or repeated patterns. We can also think about the way people *Fold up* narratives and stories into smaller packages, or *Wrap* one process, concealing it inside another. All of these have the effect of smoothing and *Untangling* the complex and unruly knots of events, personalities and institutions into neat elementary geometrical forms of lines, circles, boxes, and trees.

Specialized areas of study can require their own

metaphorical toolbox for particular kinds of smoothing which are topically specific. I have used *Blending* and *Stewing*, for example, to describe ways that different cuisines are combined to create new local hybrids and mixtures which are then smoothly formalized in cookbooks (Wilk 2001). I have also thought about *Veneering* as a useful metaphor for smoothing in tourism studies. It describes the thin coating of regularity and simplicity which is presented to the outside world. In Belize, for example, complex multiethnic politics are concealed from touristic vision by a veneer of multicultural “harmony among all the ethnic groups.” The theme of unity in diversity is regularly performed in public when each culture is represented through the safe formats of an ethnic musical style, a form of dance, a typical dress, or a unique food.

If smoothing belongs to a larger category of processes, that superordinate group might be called “cultural cosmetology.” This could be the basis for a much larger taxonomy of cultural processes which regularize and conceal disorder and chaos. My only worry is that the gentle and superficial connotations of all the metaphors I have used in this essay could themselves conceal the violent and destructive nature of smoothing. It may be necessary to develop a more active set of metaphors to describe the armaments and methods of smoothers, like shaving, hacking, smashing, bulldozing, blasting, disappearing, atomizing, and even murdering.

References

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