

Aristotle's 'Law of contradiction' may be considered a paramount achievement of Western thought. A thing can not be both itself and another at the same time. A hat is a hat, it can never be a 'non-hat'. Unfortunately, logic courses are being dropped out of most curriculums in Western universities, but, it is safe to say that, any academic, whatever his/her field, must have a minimum knowledge of logic, in order to pursue a successful career.

There is no doubt Alan Macfarlane is a successful scholar. He has written over a dozen books on various topics, focusing on two main areas: history and anthropology. One would expect Macfarlane to be a rigorous logician, or at most, to have a minimum of common sense in order not to violate Aristotle's 'Law of Contradiction'. Yet, a single look at the index of his latest book, *Japan Through the Looking Glass*, reveals how illogical Macfarlane has come to be. His chapter titles are full of oxymorons, clear violations of Aristotle's most elementary laws. The reader may delight him/herself with phrases such as "absolute relativity", "growing young", "flexible rigidities", "ordered anarchy", to name only a few. One must not expect a consolidated scholar to make such 'illogical mistakes'. They are clearly rhetoric figures in order to represent the nature of a world which remains quite mysterious to Western readers: far-away Japan.

The XX Century witnessed the rise of a serious challenge to binary logic which, for the most part, is derived from Aristotlean thought. Post-modern philosophers, such as Jacques Derrida, highlighted the vulnerability of western philosophy when facing elements that did not fit the usual thought categories employed in the West. In Derrida's philosophy, these elements have come to be called 'undecidables' and, so the Derridean argument goes, Western thought has exercised an intellectual violence upon those elements that threaten standard binary categories.

One must not expect Macfarlane, who has written a very readable book for wide audiences, to make any reference to such an obscure and difficult thinker as Derrida. But, in a sense, Macfarlane's goal in this book is very Derridean: to challenge the traditional thought categories employed by Western social sciences, focusing on the case of Japanese civilization. If we were to follow Derridean terms, Macfarlane's description of that civilization represents it as a great 'undecidable' of Western anthropological thought.

Through a wide intellectual tour of Japan's fundamental institutions, from kinship, marriage and religion to education art, economics and politics, Macfarlane tries to come to term with the difficulty of labelling Japan as either a 'traditional' or

‘modern’ civilization. Macfarlane, himself an anthropologist who has done extensive ethnographic work among the Gurungs of Nepal, employs similar methods in order to get a grasp of Japanese life. He admits he ignores the language, but he is no ‘arm-chair’ anthropologist; unlike other scholars such as Ruth Benedict, Macfarlane has spent enough time in Japan to understand the dynamics of that civilization. To complement his own ethnographic experiences, Macfarlane continuously quotes reports from Western travellers of past centuries, in order to incorporate a historical dimension to his anthropological study.

The list of Japanese institutions studied by Macfarlane is too long to be referenced here. Suffice to say that, nearly all of them defy classification by Western anthropological thought. Modern western social sciences have come to split societies into different categories that, even if they are abstractions (Weber’s ‘ideal-types’), attempt to approximate a comparative understanding of societies. Thus, when describing both Western and non-Western societies, it is not unusual to find binary oppositions among the work of Western scholars: status/contract (Maier), individualism/collectivism (Dumont), capitalism/communism (Lenin, Althusser), mechanical/organic (Durkheim), to name only a few. Perhaps the most famous opposition has been that put forward by Weber and all of those influenced by him, namely, traditional/modern, which, in a sense, encapsulates all other oppositions. Macfarlane goes at lengths to try to prove that Japan does not follow such Western dichotomies; instead, a ‘both-and’ description is much more appropriate. We Westerners know well that a hat is a hat, and nothing else, but Macfarlane tries to prove that Japan is both capitalist and communist, both individualistic and collectivistic, pacific and violent, and so forth.

According to Macfarlane’s argument, part of this ‘both-and’ situation comes from Japan’s unique history. As a big island off the mainland, Japan was always open to foreign influences (first China, later Western imperial powers), but not too much. Thus, it incorporated the best of foreign elements, but retained much of its own. In part, that is how it has become a ‘both-and’ civilization: retaining its own culture, it remained tribal, but incorporating the useful inventions and elements from China and the West, somehow it also became urban, without completely abandoning its tribal past.

Macfarlane’s study is embedded in the relativistic spirit that has been so characteristic of the anthropological discipline since the second half of the XX Century. Macfarlane warns against committing the ethnocentric sin of projecting our Western

thought categories to Japanese reality. Furthermore, he concedes that it is very difficult to express Japanese realities in our Western languages. It all seems that, like Evans-Pritchard before him, for Macfarlane, one of anthropology's major concern, is that of 'translation', understood in its wide sense; namely, the process of remaining loyal to native institutions when describing them in Western terms. To avoid such ethnocentrism, Macfarlane proposes a 'methodological holism' that studies Japanese institutions not in isolation, but as a whole.

So far, no problem. But, here and there, Macfarlane's relativism is taken to an extreme, especially when it comes to moral issues. It is my conviction that anthropology has not fully overcome the romanticizing of the 'noble savage', and a few times, Macfarlane, objective for the most part, prefers to ignore some obscure aspects of Japanese society, or, at most, refrains from making any moral judgements when it is obviously necessary to do so. He presents Japan as the great alternative model to Western depravation, highlights its sublimity, its great technological achievements (although he claims the bulk of Japanese population is uninterested in technology), its high educational standards, and so on. That is undeniable. But, it seems to me there is a dark side to Japanese civilization which Macfarlane speaks of only briefly. He does dedicate some pages to war atrocities, pornography, suicide, infanticide in the past, but it is all too short. It is my hope that, someday, Macfarlane himself, a very objective historian and anthropologist, comes to write a book on the eerie aspects of Japanese society. I have never been to Japan, so perhaps the terrible things I see on T.V. is nothing but media distortion. But, as usual, behind distortions there is always a reality. Aztec cannibalism may have been an imperialist motif for the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, but its historical existence is undeniable. The same goes for Japan. Macfarlane never denies the dark side of Japan; but in his overall appreciation, the balance inclines towards the great things achieved by the Japanese. I have no reason to disbelief this eminent anthropologist, but for fairness' sake, I'd like to see more on the side-effects of the marvels of this civilization.

Perhaps what scandalizes me the most about Macfarlane's descriptions of Japan is the emphasis that civilization places upon harmony and social relationships. So concerned are the Japanese about social harmony, that little intellectual discussion goes on, out of fear of upsetting others because of potential disagreements. In other words, freedom of speech, and therefore, of thought, is somewhat limited. In past books, Macfarlane has proven to be a loyal heir of Enlightenment ideals. In this book, he never

fully endorses nor condemns Japan's preference for social harmony over intellectual discussions, but let it be said that, as heir to the Enlightenment, one can not avoid condemning such Japanese values. Could we imagine Voltaire moderating his words or preferring not to express his point of views out of fear of making someone uncomfortable? Japan shares with the Western *Ancient Regime* at least one trait: its stress on social conservatism at the expense of limiting freedom of thought. Macfarlane recurrently employs the metaphor of the mirror to understand Japan: as in *Alice in Wonderland*, everything is backwards to Western eyes. We shall further use Japan as a mirror of the West: ever more, Western intellectual life is becoming embedded in the 'political correctness' that is so deeply seeded in Japan. Perhaps, as Macfarlane seems to argue, such 'political correctness' works well in Japan. But, it is greatly damaging in a civilization whose prime philosopher, Aristotle, once said in a famous phrase: "piety requires us to honor truth above our friends" (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1906 a 16).

At any rate, Macfarlane's relativism is more acceptable when it comes to valuing the different paths that a civilization may take in order to reach 'modernity'. He acknowledges that, although Japan could not have reached its current prosperity had it not been in contact with the West, the Japanese case proves that modernization is not necessarily westernization. Macfarlane constantly compares the Japanese case with English history, and concludes that, even if the two modernizing paths were very different, structurally they had some similarities. This is a theme that Macfarlane has developed in a previous book, *The Savage Wars of Peace*. Both countries are large islands off a continent, both countries managed to keep low mortality rates, to restrain population growth, to adapt to foreign influences. The result: both countries have been the leading nations in modernizing at the two extremes of Eurasia: England in the West, Japan in the East.

Before reading the book, I wondered: why would a Latin-American who has never been to Japan, and who is not committed to Japanese studies, may be interested on a book about Japanese civilization? As I finished reading the book, it proved to be worthwhile. For, this book will not only be of interest to specialists in Japan, but to all of those interested in understanding the dynamics of the contacts between the West and the rest. Perhaps due to its Axial nature, Western civilization inevitably expands, hence globalization. What is the Third World to do about it?

Aztec and Inca civilizations, despite their great technological advances and considerable military strength, made it easy for Western imperialists. Neither the Aztecs nor the Incas were interested to learn about the cultural *Other*, something the Europeans did know how to do. Rejecting most elements foreign to their civilization, and enchanted with their inner world, the Aztecs and the Incas were not prepared for such a confrontation. Ever since, Latin America has become compulsively Westernized, first by the Spanish and Portuguese, now by the Americans. But, we have not learned the Aztec and Inca lesson: we still reject foreign elements in a fruitless and resentful nationalism. The more we reject the West, the more it leaves its mark upon us.

The same could be said of Islam, the other major civilization in which I am interested. Partly due to religious doctrinal reasons, Islam rejected Western innovations in the centuries prior to the era of Western imperialist expansion. When the time came, Islam's refusal to adopt some Western elements made it terribly weak, and then it was forced to Westernize compulsively. The dynamics of the contacts between the West and the rest can be thought of in medical metaphors: non-Western civilizations can avoid the great Western virus by taking a small a dose of that virus as a vaccine.

Macfarlane's book is a good account of how Japan has been the only non-Western civilization to take such a vaccine. Certainly, Japan is a model for the peoples of the Third World, especially for us, Latin Americans. But, my impression is that it is not a model strictly for the reasons Macfarlane has mentioned, but for its great ability to overcome resentments and understand that something good could be taken out of foreign nations, but not too much. Today, Islam is a crossfire between two currents of attitudes towards the West: those who, like Ataturk,, believed the ultimate solution to the problems of Islam was to become Westernize in nearly every sense; and those who, like Bin Laden, believe the ultimate solution to the problems of Islam is to reject the West in every sense (although *Al-Qaeda's* war technology is certainly far from it). Both are doomed to failure. We may very well compare reformers such as Ataturk and Bin Laden with Yugichi Fukuzawa, the great XIX Cent. Japanese reformer to whom Macfarlane pays tribute: the former went to extremes (full acceptance and full rejection of the West), the latter advocated for a moderate solution. As usual, moderation has proven to be the most successful path.

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