Institutions and identities
Dorry’s response to Ted and Rawi

I am amazed and grateful to receive this kind of commentary on my work. Most of what Ted and Rawi say so eloquently I’ll simply agree with; I will try to answer some of their questions and to draw some connections between Jennifer’s interests and my own so that we can have a more global discussion. I must give you the interdisciplinary disclaimer once again: I’m not just rushed but well out of my depth here.

Vernacular theory, vernacular institutions

A word first about method and the constitution of disciplinary objects. In starting to read Jennifer’s chapter, I made a marginal note about her project of “establishing deductive foundations for incorporating subsystemic variables into neorealist theorizing”—that social scientists must truly be from Mars and humanists from Venus. Until I saw how elegantly she did it it was hard to imagine why anyone would waste time on shoring up the integrity and purchase of a single theory when a whole world is lying out there, in all its entrancing incoherence, awaiting description. But I realized that what I in fact do is not so dissimilar, although it starts at the other end. The theory I attempt to extend and develop is folk theory. My first task as an ethnographer is to locate it on the ground of practice and to translate it (an impossible task that kills what it touches, as Bourdieu explains) into explicit propositions that can be subjected to assessment, comparison, elaboration, etc. You’re all familiar with the idea of interpreting cultural texts à la Geertz; it may be more useful here to call on Bakhtin’s notion of “sensuous thought.” Folk theory takes shape in material practices, including but not limited to discourse. It is concentrated in collective representations, but these are better thought of as matrices than as self-contained texts. That is, the theorizing does not stop at the border; rather there is continuous feedback and exchange between less formalized interactions and these more fully framed and self-reflexive performances. I extend it into another kind of performance, scholarship; and the point is that the arguments I make now might be very different if I were working off a different ethnographic base. Here I am trying to think like a Berguedan as Jennifer is thinking like a neoclassical realist.

We need to attend particularly to collective performances in public space because they constitute the public sphere for the vast majority of people (socially, historically, globally) for whom there is no Habermasian alternative, and because the Habermasian public sphere is not exhaustive even for those who have one and use it habitually. Part of what my book tries to show, treating the Patum as a case of a more general phenomenon, is that European collective performance has served as a constant site—indeed the primary site—of exchange between groups, and that, more specifically, the prevalence of organic metaphors in European political thought since the Middle Ages is shared between elite and vernacular theories, continually reinforced by the fact that the dialogue of these takes place with and through the “natural symbol” of the body in performance.
So part of what vernacular institutions such as collective performances do is to serve as sites of collective debate and self-definition, and the “weak agency” to which Rawi refers is central to their efficacy for this purpose. Even the most top-down imposed performances—as in, say, Stalinism—depend on the bodies of the multitudes to incarnate them, and this creates opportunities for modifications, undermining, etc. (James Scott is good on how this works). Most political orders, certainly the Spanish state, have not possessed either the repressive or the Foucauldian resources to impose this level of control, so that the dialogic character of collective performance is apparent to all concerned. (I won’t get into the society-of-the-spectacle arguments here, as this gets very complicated.) With increasing openness, wealth, and/or diversity, there comes to be a competition of performances as well as contestation within any given performance.

Of course collective performances are not pure argument, but are used for a variety of instrumental ends: they allot social recognition, redistribute wealth, get people married to appropriate partners, start or fend off revolutions, etc. One challenge in studying vernacular institutions is that they are holistic rather than domain-specific: their semiotic overload is matched by the near-infinity of social purposes they are made to support. (Not until you’re in well over your head do you realize that you have to deal not just with language, dance, music, architecture, but also economics, religion, politics in making sense of a festival). A festival like the Patum has done almost everything, and even more minor cultural performances are radically overdetermined by multiple uses. In large part this is a matter of economy (of material resources, personnel, time, attention, creativity): the folk cannot support multiple ministries, as it were, to address each of their needs individually. The resultant malleability, while problematic in creating the kinds of indeterminacy Rawi asks about, allows collective performance to be endlessly recycled. At the same time, it assists stability at a higher level: “as long as we have the Patum, we’ll have Berga.” Rawi’s right: Berguedans agree on nothing but the tautology of being Berguedan, indeed not even that: the only explicit proposition to which all self-identified Berguedans will agree is “Berguedans do the Patum,” while all other criteria of belonging are debatable. Being incorporated into the Patum is the best chance of survival within Berga for ideas, institutions, and individuals—I can say this as someone who herself was naturalized in all senses of the word. (More later about why anyone should need or want to survive in Berga.) The Patum confers reality, and it also serves as an archive for old forms and habits that might someday come in handy, though what it foregrounds shifts with the times and the relative weight of the actors.

OK—I have been throwing these terms around; here is what I think I mean by them. Custom is sedimented practice. It receives formal (=aesthetic) elaboration over time, becoming more and more performative in all senses of the word, and is increasingly self-consciously recognized as “tradition”: let’s equate this with vernacular institutions. Elite institutions add the level of codification, making explicit and fixing in text what has been implicit and fixed in practice. There’s hybridity, of course: today the Patum is a strong vernacular institution with a dependent elite institution built on top of it, but in the seventeenth century it was a vernacular critique of a powerful elite institution, the Corpus Christi procession, and it’s been pulled back and forth ever since. And of course all these degrees of fixity are degrees, and at all levels they are subject to reinterpretation,
subversion, etc. Now please help me: what do you mean by an institution? Ted, you seem to emphasize the flexibility of institutions in your commentary—do you have some more reified Other to which you are contrasting institutions?

Something that didn’t arise in the comments but is a large part of the reason I am interested in learning how to talk to people like you is the relationship of vernacular institutions to those of the state, and the ways in which the former can influence the latter. In the chapter I gave you, you see a little of how the Patum’s techniques of the body informed political mobilization at the national level during the Transition. A chapter you didn’t get suggests that the semiotics of pluralism in the festival (and local tradition more generally) shaped the Catalan approach to the Spanish constitutional process. The argument is very much smoke and mirrors, driven by gut feeling and relying heavily on analogy, a newspaper cartoon, and a false etymology. I didn’t make the case effectively in the book because, as Jennifer says, I didn’t realize that I needed to until the tenure clock had become the overriding concern. (There is our universal environment, cutting across both our better selves and the narcissism of minor disciplinary differences: the fear of tenure death.) In trying to figure out what this argument might look like, I have discovered you people working on the problem from the other end, trying to find the grounding of high politics in vernacular identities. Ted, maybe anarchy really does explain everything, for this is all about disciplinary survival: as a folklorist I have a strong interest in finding popular agency; moreover, folklorists, with our fragile foothold in the academy, are the most fervent interdisciplinary cooperators I know.

A few starting points for such a discussion: Ted’s hypothesis that “lived daily social practice trumps imagined community”—and its corollary, that imagined communities succeed in imposing themselves insofar as they can piggyback on primary socialization and/or ongoing everyday interaction—on, in short, the vernacular. The vernacular is a level shared by elites and lower classes, but largely incarnated and shaped by the latter, and can provide a powerful counterweight to the dynamic of imitating the powerful that takes place at higher levels. Apart from primary socialization and local tradition, there is the further stylization of the vernacular in popular culture (thank you, Jutta), in which the style leaders are by definition not elites; and popular culture is nothing new.

Another: I am really interested in the role of provincial elites as translator/mediators in both directions, and give this a good deal of attention in the book. It seems to me that provincial intellectuals are the great unsung heroes of the nation-state, as they will be of globalization, and that we have not studied them nearly enough (though Gramsci gets us started). (In the international environment, as I suggested in my methods comments, the analogy might be to focus on countries like Mexico or Turkey rather than on the great powers.) I’ve already suggested we need to look at their adoption of vernacular resources. In the other direction, they are Jennifer’s imitators, so their analysis of what goes on above them is also crucial to understanding large-scale change.
Ted notes that Jennifer and I have a common concern with environments, and I would add—is it a coincidence?—that anarchy and autonomy are notions as integral to Catalan as to realist identity. My Berguedan informants would evaluate her account of autonomy as the world they would like to inhabit rather than the one that they do; Jennifer and her commentators have said enough on this matter. But they would be absolutely convinced by her account of anarchy as the origin of cooperation: it echoes precisely their own explanation of both cooperation and why it has so often failed them.

(For the sake of economy, I will use Jennifer’s original term as well as disregarding the different historical conditions from which the Berguedans derive it: there is at present a considerable convergence. And when I say Berguedans I mean especially Berguedan integristes—several of whom identify explicitly with anarchism—but the integrista discourse is one in which almost everybody participates at some level.)

Jennifer’s neoclassical realism, if I get her right, deals with the problem of the realist wall between domestic and international environments by showing that domestic institutions filter the understandings, interests, and possible responses of actors in international contexts. My understanding is that the more usual approach of IR constructivists is to try to break down this wall altogether by showing that domestic-style logics hold at the higher level as well. Berguedans would argue that it works both ways. In fact—with apologies to Ted—they would say that anarchy as well as constructivism go all the way down.

Berguedans are very conscious of their constructions as such, and in particular of the limits of what the Patum can accomplish: like the mysticism Rawi mentions, the Patum is today largely an end in itself, its energies not translatable into more instrumental achievements. “If we put half the energy into serious things that we put into the Patum, we’d have full employment and Catalonia would be independent by now.” Like mysticism, the Patum can be understood as creating a compensatory alternative ontology, and when they are not busy insisting that it is the only thing in the world, they recognize its relationship to the world they have failed to master, e.g.: “For the Patum, we’re all equal. The next day everyone goes back to what he is.” Not surprisingly, Berguedans find it less easy to deceive themselves about the power of their discourse to contain the world than do many people in Washington: as Nietzsche says, Macht verdummt.

Now anarchy. It’s a major theme of Mediterranean anthropology (though one must be wary of exoticizing here) that the intensity of social interaction in Mediterranean communities is directly correlated to the intensity of social mistrust and envy in a scarce-resource economy. Architectural and personal façades are constructed to give form to public interactions and protection to vulnerable selfhood. The performances that mediate between façades and bodies both recognize and deconstruct those boundaries of self. The Patum does this at two levels, the source of its unusual efficacy (and the source of Ted’s
confusion about whether the Patum preserves or destroys identity: it does both, but you only got the latter part of the story). At the semiotic level, it represents all the key sources of conflict in Berguedan society: class, ideology, gender, migration, etc., showing social differences that are irreconciliable but also interdependent, each too weak in itself to triumph unequivocally (Durkheim’s organic solidarity without the wishful thinking). They battle it out in the Patum, but everyone is still there at the end. At the interactional level, difference is undone: repetition, strong rhythms, sleep deprivation, drinking, crowding, smoke and fire at close range all work to impede the critical faculties and destroy distinctions. The mutual incorporation of individuals, the festival, and one another accords with Durkheim’s mechanical solidarity, and has the perilous malleability recognized by the crowd psychologists. In the Patum these two levels achieve a precarious balance, varying from period to period. It’s the “thinner” level of bodily techniques that has been more easily appropriated; the representation of pluralism is something that has taken shape over a long history and bears a heavy particular content, thus does not lend itself to copying. Nonetheless, this local knowledge also contributed to the Transition. The Spanish constitution was shaped out of a similar recognition of irreconciliable differences that had to be acknowledged and lived with: the famous convivència, a slogan-word of the Transition, has nothing to do with consensus at more than the shallowest pragmatic level. At the top this cooperation was managed through the institutionalization of multiple positions; at the bottom, it was energized by the con/sensus, the feeling together, of the mass demonstrations.

In short: institutions, whether international treaties, national constitutions, or local festivals, exist to regulate conflict as much or more than to facilitate cooperation. (Forgive me—this may be obvious and simplistic to political scientists, but to those of us trying to get out of culture jail it comes as news.) They aren’t perfect instruments: the Patum is both a fire that warms and a fire that burns, and has to be carefully monitored by all participants. In part, as you’ve all said, it’s the nation-state and national narratives of unity that have blinded us to the obviousness of this. Rawi notes that the performative identity of the Patum (or of the Spanish constitution, which makes much of collective process in the absence of collective content) seems thin and unstable compared to the usual national narrative. He’s perfectly right. But it’s the best they can do: the lowest common denominator of the body, with its needs and responses, is all they’ve got as an argument for cooperation. Or rather, they have 1. the bodies they share, 2. the historically existing institutions in which such bodies have interacted (the Patum—which is losing its indexical moorings in everyday life—and the state), and 3. the historical identities with which they have been labelled (Berga, Catalonia, Spain).

So—back to Rawi’s question—why bother to maintain Berga at all, now that this seems like the only purpose served by the Patum? (I leave aside for the moment attempts at commodification through tourism, etc., but remind me to tell you later about Clinton’s speech in Barcelona.) Individuals have better opportunities elsewhere, on which many of them are acting, and it’s also now theoretically possible to be a resident of Berga without any engagement in collective life. But both “networkers” and “integristes” work very hard to make Berga a passionately engaging place: networkers out of a sense that they need to have some local capital to participate in global exchanges, integristes out of a
desire to keep other Berguedans from being seduced by alternative identifications. In Jennifer’s terms, these are competing strategies for dealing with the environment. Networkers are more optimistic about the payoff of cooperation with external forces, and perhaps more fearful of Berga’s viability if it tries to go it alone at even the cultural level. Integristes are not optimistic about Berga’s viability either—the celebration of the Patum among this group is pretty elegiac in tone—but they have no faith in any of the labels offered on the wider identity market. They’ve been there: Berguedans have invested in—to name just the most recent—Carlism, liberalism, anarchosyndicalism, socialism, Catalanism, the universal church and the Spanish imperio, Europe, globalization. The results have been at best neglect and dependence, at worst—not just in the 1930s but about twice a century since the Middle Ages—civil war. There’s no assurance that the traveling identity salesman will remember your name the morning after (see Zulaika’s brilliant account of the Bilbao Guggenheim for globalization as seduction). Better the face-to-face community, as limited as its resources are, and better personal rather than formal institutional relationships: persons with faces and bodies in shared space can more easily be held to account. Better the devil you know.

Time has run out, so I’ll stop here, with apologies to Ted and Rawi; I’ll try to deal with more questions in the live discussion.