

# Chaos and Splendor

# Chaos and Splendor

“There is no unit, no  
center, no point around which  
the wheel revolves.”

Herman Hesse, *Trip to the East*, 1932

As long as it lasts, that which we call chaos evokes the idea not only of confusion and the disorder of elements, but also of a kind of incapacity of the spirit to comprehend and, much less, to dominate, a state of affairs, of the world, of society, of history, where one does not glimpse even the shadow of order. It is obvious that if chaos were effectively the original state of the world, the emergence of order that gave one the ability to reflect about it, and, in this manner, to overcome it, such a process would be a miracle of miracles. Still, Greek mythology, contrary to the Bible, imagined that in the beginning, there was chaos. According to Plato, even the image of the Demiurge presupposes a state of initial confusion, one that once given order will be transformed into the cosmos. In reality, only a people that has a natural love of order and harmony — although sensitive to anything that might harm it — could have conceived of the idea of “chaos,” not only as a threat to the heart of the cosmos, with its regularity and its laws, but also, so to speak, to the condition of all order. In sum, chaos as exorcism.

Other cultures (Aztec Mexico and the ancient Germans), without ascribing this paradoxically “creative” role to chaos, supposed that the life of the universe was processed by cycles and that when the time of each cycle was exhausted, the world would return to a kind of chaos from which a new world would emerge. Return of the gods or twilight of the gods, the chaotic phase of the universal process did not affect the universe’s intrinsic need for permanence. Even if it is not the origin of everything, chaos is a moment that is at the same time one of the exhaustion of

that which exists and one of regeneration. In his most explicit interpretation of this idea, Nietzsche popularized this death and restarting of time within time in his well-known vision of the “eternal return.”

Only in the Biblical conception of creation does chaos not have, in a strict sense, a status different from that of “metaphor.” It is the Greek vision incorporated into the Biblical vision — at once both Jewish and Christian — that chaos structures Western thought. The idea of creation is compatible with the idea of a god that creates out of nothingness. To call this nothing “nothingness” is only our manner of not being able to imagine the plentitude of the creative act. As has always been thought, from Scholasticism to Bergson, the concept of nothingness is one with negative content. Attributing it with “anguished” content, Heidegger did not remove it from his polemical and dialectical idea of negativity. It is solely the non-light of a light without beginning or end, what, since Plotinus, we have metaphorically called the One and, using another less abstract image, what we have called the supreme Being, God. Creator, pure act, the one responsible for and guarantor of order in the universe by definition, this God excludes the idea of chaos and of any preexisting reality waiting to be organized and, therefore, the possibility of permanently threatening the foundations of what we call creation.

We can imagine when the Biblical idea of creation ceased to condition, not only in the teleological or metaphysical sense, the cosmological vision of the West, and with it any notion of ideas and values, when we observe, without any form of fright, much less intellectual panic, the success and glorification of the concept of chaos, not only on a gnoseological plane, but also on the most sensitive and overwhelming plane of Western imagination.

In the epoch of Heisenberg, the idea that God could “play dice,” that is to say, that the very concept of “law,” in the thought of Galileo and Newton, was already indefensible, perturbed Albert Einstein. His youngest heirs — North Americans, above all — conceded that this idea of playing dice was most compatible with any description of the universe that limits its truth to the empirical *impossibility* of integrating the images (discourses) considered to be the most adapted to reality as we know it. Here again the hypothesis of a “global narrative” would be set aside, and in the only field which resisted the theoretical radicalism that pushed aside or demolished the ideas of God, the State, ideology, belief, art and culture. Such is the conviction of Paul Feyerabend, even if one discounts his provocateur persona. Although he protects himself in a disarming manner from establishing an epistemology of chaos with its *démarche*, it is difficult to distinguish his unrestrained,

non-methodological or hyper-methodological "dadaism" from the most vulgar and histrionic celebration of "chaotic-ness."

It is not difficult to distinguish the motives for this apology of intrinsically American chaos and, in particular, those of the same Feyerabend who was a typical product of the sumptuousness of certain American universities and a gullible devotee of the suras of Lenin in the period in which Lenin both was the law and the prophets. It would not be right, however, to employ against Feyerabend the process of intention that he promotes against the universalizing pretension of scientific knowledge of a classical type. The sociology of knowledge does not survive his intention to institute a discourse capable of allowing for the validity or non-validity of a scientific proposition. We could, nevertheless, return his strategy of suspicion back to its sender and venture the hypothesis that the age of chaos, which is considered to be one of the most revolutionary components of contemporary scientific practice, does nothing more than reflect the cultural chaotic-ness intrinsic in a given culture. In particular, it reflects the culture of the United States as it comes to terms with the unconscious necessity to invent a code without a past, a sort of "Indigenism" of its imagination freed from the European utopia of reason. This is not the result of the imperatives resulting from the failure of rational discourse or the attempt to detect that failure.

Clearly, this is not the philosophy that guides the American Saturn probe, but it is the one that helped Galileo to imagine the first (and the only one that deserves this name) theory of relativity of movement. The knowledge and power on which the current American scientific hegemony is legitimately based are not the result of any cult of chaotic-ness. This hegemony deserves to be included in a culture of chaos only because of the way it is lived and discussed from a symbolic, imaginative perspective. What for centuries was the nightmare of Western European thought was transfigured into a culture of anti-hierarchical plurality definitively decentered from "truths," hypotheses and performances, with no other sanction than the success achieved by its outcomes or the attempts to accomplish them. As a kind of contradiction or dysfunction of the chaotic view of the world, one still hears about "truth," "value," "virtue," "justice," and "law," but without attributing to these concepts any ontological capacity. They are paradoxical survivals that induce "meaning" in a long-abandoned discourse, now replaced by a proliferation of systems governed and self-ruled by a kind of feedback effect that comes from its own statements or randomly exchangeable valuations.

On the level of pure knowledge, the gnoseology and the apology of chaos have no more justification than the impossibility of conceiving a rational order worthy of its name. And, as this order is real — above all if it is compared with the belief that has maintained it in the Modern Age — the fascination with the chaotic figure is positive and can be beneficial. It is more debatable whether this fascination exists in a world of order that would confer meaning, even a polemical one, to the value judgments in areas as diverse as human action (singular or collective), ethics, aesthetics, justice and, in a loose sense, good and evil, that is to say, the aspects of human life that we consider acceptable and unacceptable. The code and the positive law can contain the fascination with chaos within acceptable limits, at least, apparently so. In truth, when chaos emerges in the figure of a person, such as the Devil did in the diverse societies of the “Middle Ages,” imposing his presence and irresistible destructive power, there is no order that can survive without realizing, to the point of self-destruction, the principle that sustains it and the world in which it has been inserted.

Is this the nature of the apparently irresistible drive that ruins all equilibriums and the implicit rules that would confer on the world economy a kind of order symbolized or formalized through international agreements, not to mention those that after World War II rationalized the hypothesis of a universal or regional conflict? The end of the bipolar world, the triumph of the market economy, and the ubiquity of communication did not establish, so to speak, a disorder in these areas that could fit within the concept of a diabolical chaos. Instead, they undid, with a dispatch and an intensity heretofore unseen, the norms and results of a world based on a system of conflict and antagonism in such a way that, all of sudden, we had (and still have) the sensation of being, for the first time, lost in a desert paradoxically converted into a paradise of universal nomadism. There is no center, no signpost on the horizon leading to a straightforward path, an overcoming of this state of perplexity that cannot be solved by any return to the past.

It was the West — used to following, on behalf of all humanity, the “path” without which we would passively experience time and would cease to have history — that resented this state of affairs with a singular acuity. And the West, because it is no longer the center of history, has a tendency to experience it within the category of chaotic-ness.

From our point of view, as the legatees of three centuries of human history conceived as an irresistible march towards a more and more comfortable and comprehensible world, one in which everything that is considered to be an obstacle or negation of what we regard as “evil,” oppression, and

injustice seemed to be disappearing, our quest, or this inability to know where we are now and where we are going, can only evoke other times in which order was overturned. It is no accident that our mythological space recreates these epochs, halfway between the historical barbaric ages and the fantasy of new middle ages of the future, of which we are already the harbingers. Through *Conan the Barbarian* and *Star Trek*, we exorcise as much as we can this feeling of inhabiting a world in which the very idea of order is recognizable only in the form of those "orders" with which the totalitarian imaginary of the twentieth century became frighteningly fascinated.

Under these circumstances, the experience of chaotic-ness is not only neutralized, it is transformed into the opposite experience, the very splendor of a plurality of "orders," which appear to correspond to as many other worlds, each as legitimate as the next, as if humanity had come shining out of its archaic caverns to live with the indefinite possibility of "amusing" itself by the mere fact of being capable of converting the disorder of its desire, the conflicts of its will, into another kind of order, one that has less to do with the old way of making and being history than with the possibility of seeing history as a pretext for its ever more virtual existence.

Our world is less and less analogous to the one that for millennia rested upon work, conflict and suffering; we are the orphans of the splendor of that virtual existence that it is illogical to call chaotic-ness except for its effects, precisely because it is the offspring of the maximum amount of order that we can integrate into a system that tends to be self-referential. Those creatures that the insiders will scornfully consider to be "human" are the only ones that are going to exist outside this world. Even when it was ephemeral, the spectacle of loss and absence of some sort of order in the world brought about humanity's inability to discern its own image, resulting instead in the most gloomy perspective on life: that which all of the Dantes, known and unknown, described in the form of an infernal topology. We incorporated hell into the daily life of the most fascinating and atrocious of centuries. It is sufficient to review the collective imaginary of the end of this century — from fiction to music, from cinema to theatre, from biology to technology — to have an idea of the point at which the world has arrived, where the horror has turned invisible, consumed by pure virtuality, to have an idea of the metamorphosis of human culture. One could argue whether the disorder into which we have sunk — from economic to legal to ethical — itself derives from the concept of chaos. There is, however, no doubt that we inhabit chaos as if it were splendor itself.