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Foundations: Dogville to Manderlay

*may their souls rest easy now that lynching is frowned upon
and we've moved on to the electric chair
Ani di Franco, Fuel*

Demiurgic troubles

In Plato's *Timaeus*, the Demiurge is referred to as he who has initially 'fashioned and shaped' the world. In doing so, the Demiurge is guided by the most benign intentions: he wants to build a world that is as good as possible. But, in spite of those best aims, the world remains imperfect because of the intrinsic flaws of brute matter (*hyle*). In the idealist philosophical view, the myth of the Demiurge is taken to stage the unsettled tension between immaterial ideas – deemed to be metaphysical and superior – and matter – deemed to be limited and inferior: the tension between models to imitate and the practical application of those models to reality. In the 19th and 20th century, such myth finds its translation into Simmel's 'conflict of modern culture': it is the conflict between life and forms, or, in current sociological terminology, between agency and structure. All the way through, the underlying question remains the same: can humans shape their own world as if they were Demiurges? Which humans can? What are the limitations intrinsic to the brute matter of the social?

Traditionally, philosophical anthropology used to provide one of the fora for this discussion. But, even in the 'secularized' social sciences, the question – officially rejected as irrelevant – is far from resolved and is ultimately always lurking. True as it may be that

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social life is made possible by shared language, concepts, stabilized expectations, norms, regulations, and so on, the fundamental problem is that all these forms must be projected onto, and applied to, what could be characterised as a basically muddy material, an intrinsically unstable and at times even reluctant ground. And of course the problem is inherently both moral and technical: on the one hand, what is the origin of social evils? On the other hand, what are the most suitable tools of social engineering and what are the limits of any engineer-like attempt to shape the social? Finally, it may also be difficult to tell the technical from the moral: is a good regulation a more effective one or one which is based on good principles?

Lars von Trier's *Dogville* and *Manderlay* – the first two parts of his up-to-date incomplete American trilogy – can be interpreted within a Demiurgic frame. In the following, we regard these two works of art as two sociological experiments. More precisely, we examine the films as expressing an albeit implicit thesis on the foundations of social order. Both experiments are consciously and deliberately carried out by Grace, the main character of the trilogy, in the community where she settles as a foreigner. Heart and reason, moral imperatives and technical social-engineering skills, are equally deployed in the course of the experiment. In Grace's view, or at least in Grace's intentions, both love and law must always be supported by a strong commitment to justice. Yet, in face of such best plans, we record in advance that both experiments miserably fail. They lead to social disasters, in terms of violence, self-destruction, and moral abasement. If the sleep of reason produces monsters, what about its wake? Two similar questions should be raised about love and law, too.

Of Law, Economy, Sex, and Violence

Dogville and *Manderlay* provide two different illustrations of the Demiurgic dilemma. In *Dogville*, Grace acts from below, through her own attitude of unconditional love. She arrives in town as a fugitive. She is in a precarious, liminal status. As a 'critical being' (Fitzpatrick and Tuitt eds. 2004) who finds herself in a structurally weak role, she enjoys no formal power or protection whatsoever. What she follows is rather Christ's example of unconditional dedication to others asking for nothing in return. At each moment, with her behaviour Grace rejects the logic of retaliation. In *Manderlay*, Grace acts from

above, through the type of unquestionable authority that is provided by the 'monopoly of legitimate violence' (Weber 1978[1922]). She arrives at the Manderlay plantation as a *nomothèt*, lawgiver and ruler at the same time. The ancient law, Mam's law of slavery, is overthrown and replaced with a new law, purported to be enlightened, democratic, and capitalist.

Whereas in *Dogville* the focus is on close interpersonal relationships and how control and exploitation tend to emerge in small scale interaction, in *Manderlay* the focus is on the explicit set of institutions and apparatuses that define the core of State power. Consequently, while *Dogville* raises issues concerning in particular inclusion and exclusion, status ranking, and the ethology of human behaviour (such territoriality and the relationship of insiders to foreigners), *Manderlay* draws attention the problématique of the relationship between implicit and explicit law, policing, custom, and 'instituent power' (Castoriadis 1987[1975]).

Foundations of social order is all about power. True, Foucault (1982) advised us to adopt a rigorously nominalistic view on power: power is not a substance, nor an essence, but rather a point of view from which to describe what happens in the social. But such nominalistic caution does not in fact change the type of questions that we must face in the attempt to grasp the problem of foundations: how does power spread through and across social fields? How does it circulate among actors? What is the relationship between the best known face of power, coercion, and its others more subtle forms, such as influence, seduction, persuasion, interpellation, and positioning? Not to speak of moral problems that are inherent to power distribution, as well as power itself. Given that power can be productive but also destructive, there must be a pedagogy of power. But what type of education is this? Is Grace undergoing some sort of pedagogy of power? Is the story all about training oneself to power?

Four main spheres of power can be observed as criss-crossing the social field in *Dogville* and *Manderlay*. These are *politics, economy, sex and violence*.

The legal and political basis at both *Dogville* and *Manderlay* is a type of social authority that is initially unquestioned. At *Dogville* in particular, the community defines itself through its own customs and mores, which it never ceases to praise. They may be poor and humble, but they have their way of living. In this context, Grace is an alien who

does not share the same old ways common people content themselves with. Despite her best efforts to avoid raising any political issue, Grace is the bearer of a revolutionary attitude. It is an attitude of unconditional love and rejection of the logic of retaliation: an apparently politically harmless but in practice deeply destabilising factor. At the Manderlay's plantation, on the other hand, it is not simply a matter of traditional mores coming into conflict with a personal attitude. On stage is rather the conflict between the Old Law, Mam's slave law, and the New Law, which Grace enforces in the name of democracy, but in fact in the shape of an enlightened dictatorship.

It may seem at first that economy is not a major issue in the two movies. But closer scrutiny reveals plenty of hints to the organisation of societal material reproduction and its consequences. More subtly, each system of production is presented as a constraining factor upon the narrated events. Both communities, as small 'worlds apart', are apparently isolated economic systems, although obviously there are signs of exchange with the world 'out there'. In both cases, change in the economic sphere is dramatic: *Dogville* faces us with the consequences of the unexpected generation of surplus within a survival economy (a surplus which is Grace herself, as an economic resource *en route* towards commodification). On the other hand, *Manderlay* pivots around a supposed transition from forced labour to economic liberalism. Here, Grace's action recalls rather neatly Marx's description of the genesis of capitalism in modern Europe, with its liberation of labour force from land bondage. From this point of view, economy is in fact seen as a 'ultimately determining' factor, in the sense that it determines the horizon of the events. But what counts most are people's reactions to those constraints.

Sex is another crucial force at stake. A small caveat should be introduced here. Lars von Trier has been sometimes charged of mysogyny. Regardless various ambiguous or provocative declarations on the topic by the director, that point is not quite important to our present analysis. To us, the director's personal opinion is far less relevant than the characters'. We are also interested in weighting the objective impact of such a force as sex upon the whole story. In both plots, sex represents a destabilising factor. In *Dogville*, Grace becomes the slave whore of the whole male part of the village, and the slave servant of the rest. It is a story that raises dramatically the issue of the relationship between between bondage and lust, as well as the contiguity between humans and animals. Lust is particularly appalling in *Dogville*, as it is observed from the victim's point of view. It raises a strong sense of indignation in viewers. In *Manderlay*, on the other hand,

the temptation of excessive eros and transgression is presented from Grace's point of view. Here, Grace's sexual attraction for Timothy plays havoc especially with her capacity to lead the plantation.

Finally, violence is an element that interweaves with all the others factors presented so far in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways. In *Dogville*, from the initial, seemingly peaceful situation, people's attitude towards Grace shifts scene after scene from tolerance and respect towards hatred and brutal exploitation. Dogvillians are pushed by their innermost instincts to do terrible things to Grace. The rape scene is the awful climax and the symbol of such deeds. Just like a silent tide does violence grows, until it is fatally stopped by the gangsters, who radically snatch it from the Dogvillians and direct it with far more efficiency and viciousness against the Dogvillians themselves. The *coup de théâtre* of the movie is the discovery that Grace is in fact a gangsters' associate rather than a prey. In *Manderlay*, legitimate violence officially remains in the hands of Grace until the end. Backed by the gangsters, who embody the primitive police apparatus, Grace now plays the Leviathan, who boils down diffused violence into that bundle of concentrated violence that is the State. Whereas interpersonal violence is horizontal and one-on-one, the State introduces a new monotheist type of violence, which is vertical and one-on-many. The State expropriate private violence by attempting, not to eliminate it, but rather to monopolize it to its own advantage. This is precisely why when the community is bloodthirsty, it is the State – i.e., Grace – that must execute: at least in Grace's own eyes, this is the necessary condition to have 'justice' rather than mere 'vengeance'.

But Grace falls into yet another, even more gigantic, contradiction. At the outset, she enters the plantation by taking the whip out of the slavemaster's hand. She boldly declares that slavery is over: henceforth, everyone will enjoy human dignity and none will be subjected to cruel and unusual punishments. But at the end of the movie it is the same Grace in an attack of rage and impotency whom we see whipping the same slave who was being whipped at the beginning. When she had to face the fact that she had become a public executioner, she had at least still the comfort that she was acting in the name of an albeit vague ideal of justice. Now, she has even lost that comfort: she is being violent just because of an emotional burst of hate, or lust, just like anybody else.

The outlook on violence is thus of a political-realist type. In parallel to Robert Michels' (1966 [1912]) 'iron law of oligarchy', we encounter an 'iron law of violence conservation', which reads: you can only change the violence's keeper, not its overall quantity. Grace reaches Dogville during her attempt to get rid of her former violent life, but all she finds in the peaceful village is a type of violence which is at least as abject as the one she was used to. At Manderley, she fights against the backwardness and cruelty of slavery, but in the end she is forced back to clasp that same abominable violence. Following René Girard (1978), the source of the violence that spreads into the social field lies in desire, insofar as desire is mimetic by nature. A desire is not a relationship between a subject and an object, but a relationship between two subjects, mediated by an object.

Desire, Incontinent Power, and the Sacred

As Girard (1972) argues, the management of violence in society is often a matter of finding a direction in which to drive it, rather than a matter of increasing or decreasing its overall quantity. Whenever violence has filled the hearts to the brim and people are ready to cut each other's throat, the only way to prevent it from wiping the whole community away is to find a scapegoat, which will be later turned into a ritualised sacrificial victim. Not only does Grace, by her arrival in the apathetic and sluggish rural community, fill the Dogvillians' hearts with a desire they were unaware of before. She is also a total outsider to the community, doomed to remain forever like that. As such, she embodies the perfect scapegoat. Girard (2004) remarks that "[i]n isolated and ignorant communities, cultural differences are disturbing. A visiting stranger may start a panic and be attacked simply because his speech and mannerisms differ slightly from the local standards". Truth be told, here we are dealing with a kind of vicious circle: for it is only Grace's aesthetic appeal and the desire she inspires – along with the appeal of the impunity in exercising violence against someone who is so thoroughly remissive – which prevents the Dogvillians from crushing her immediately. Thus, we are in the aural zone of a sacrificial crisis. The outcome is an ambiguous and, arguably, temporary balance between exploitation and sacrifice.

Dogville further confronts us with another Girardian insight: violence is contaminating. Its effects spread around and must be stocked carefully like nuclear wastes if one wants

to prevent violence going astray. The grim end of the movie shows what happens when calculations about the confinement of violence are not well done. In most cases, however, it is the election of a surrogate victim which generates unanimous accord among its prosecutors. This is not very different from what anthropologists called a *potlach*, a ritual destruction of one's goods. But at Dogville the ritual is still to come, it is still to be instituted. Grace's killing would be the instituting moment of a ritual, during which the victim could be turned into sacred. From this point of view, to have it with Girard again, violence and the sacred are inextricable from each other. Foundations is exactly about such inextricable linkage of violence and sacredness.

The origin of institutions is always enveloped in what Pascal called the 'mystical foundations of authority'. Not simply do we tend to forget that institutions are human creations. Such *méconnaissance*, such amnesia of the genesis, is a *precise necessity* for institutions to work. The instituting moment must be concealed because it would fatally expose its fundamental contingency, arbitrariness, and injustice. Besides, when observed from the point of view of the instituted institution, instituent power (Castoriadis 1987[1975]) is threatening because it is always radical. The crucial question thus concerns the role of the *nomothete* in the ritual-institutional complex. If the surge of violence can be channeled into a type of sacrificial violence, who has the real power to do so? In other words, whose will becomes institution? Who can use collective violence to one's own advantage without being torn apart? Ultimately, this amounts to ask: to which extent can one use violence rather than being used by it?

Morals of the lords, morals of the slaves

"A dog or wolf that offers its neck to its adversary in this way will never be seriously bitten. The other growls and grumbles, snaps with his teeth in the empty air and even carries out, without delivering so much as a bite, the movement of shaking something to death in the empty air. However, this strange inhibition from biting persists only as long as the defeated dog or wolf maintains his attitude of humility" (Lorenz, 1961: 188).

In the passage quoted above, German ethologist Konrad Lorenz compares the behaviour of two species of animals: the wolf, the symbol of cruelty and greed, and the dove, which has been so often taken to symbolise the peaceful heart. But, in fact, Lorenz ob-

serves, during a fight, the wolf does not finish his adversary off when the adversary assumes submission postures. Quite the contrary, in similar situations the dove kills mercilessly, despite the defeated's remissive signals.

There is little doubt, if any, that the Dogvillians subscribe to the second behavioural pattern when a humble, weak creature by name Grace ends up in the range of their beaks and talons. The fact that they are all sided against the weakest is what makes their violence so unbearable and disgusting. Not simply is it violence, it is violence of a cheap and mean kind. But what is the driving mechanism to violence? And who is led to resort to such type of violence? At this point, one cannot fail to observe that our ethological discussion of wolves and doves echoes rather closely Friedrich Nietzsche's distinction between morals of the slaves and morals of the masters. For Nietzsche, slave morality is the product of *ressentiment* and unsatisfied desire of vengeance. Since their initial defeat, their initial humiliation, slaves feed their hate towards masters, who are physically and morally superior and independent, but cannot give vent to it. Not simply this. In essence, what really characterizes slaves is the fact they are absolutely incapable of accepting their desires of vengeance as such. Rather, they dress them up as impersonal, universal justice: slaves are constantly taken in such self-justificatory exercise. Thus, the Nietzschean observer declares:

Now I'm hearing for the first time what they've been saying so often: 'We good men — *we are the righteous*' — what they demand they don't call repayment but 'the triumph of *righteousness*.' What they hate is not their enemy. No! They hate '*injustice*,' 'godlessness.' What they believe and hope is not a hope for revenge, the intoxication of sweet vengeance (something Homer has already called 'sweeter than honey'), but the victory of God, the *righteous* God, over the godless. What remains for them to love on earth is not their brothers in hatred but their 'brothers in love,' as they say, all the good and righteous people on the earth" (Nietzsche 1887: §I, 13)

In an attempt to put Nietzsche's vitalist idea at the service of social sciences, Max Weber analogously distinguished an ethic of heart or of conviction (*Gesinnungsethik*) from an ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*). Ethics of conviction is a principled ethics, in which action is presented as the application of some universal criterion of justice. As such, ethics of conviction does not know hesitation and knows no shame at all. On the contrary, ethics of responsibility is forward-looking and takes into account the concrete outcome of one's action. Because and insofar as slaves present themselves

as 'the righteous', they are clearly followers of an ethics of conviction. By representing themselves as poor good fellows, as humble people who simply stick to the old ways, by conceiving themselves as fundamentally 'righteous', Dogvillians and Manderleites of all kinds can perpetrate the worst acts without recognising the consequences of what they do as really their own fault.

Another effective cinematographic illustration of the slave vs master morality is provided by Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood* (1982). Apparently, there is little resemblance between *Dogville* and *First Blood*. Yet these two movies, so distant for many reasons, share several meaningful resemblances. When the Vietnam veteran John Rambo arrives to the little town on the Appalachians with no other plan but getting some food and rest, he very soon fatally bumps into the arrogant local Marshall Teasle. Teasle wants to get rid of Rambo as soon as possible. The marshall is in charge of a dull, boring town and he is paid to keep it like that, as he himself declares. In Teasle's eyes, the very presence of people like Rambo is a threat to social peace. Rambo would not pass unnoticed, and his figure is necessarily received as unsettling local laws and established order. When the first move to ship Rambo out of town proves unsuccessful, Teasle does not hesitate to put him under arrest for 'vagrancy and resistance against authority'.

At this point, Rambo has not committed any crime and he could not be reasonably charged of anything. Yet he is an outlaw simply because he is an intruder in Teasle's territory. He is dangerous by definition, and any claim to the contrary on his part is taken as a provocation. Just like Grace, Rambo can't belong in town. The little we get to know about Teasle's order makes us think of a customary, reactionary, and clientelistic type of power. In one way or the other, Rambo is a perfect scapegoat for the natives' xenophobia. Just like a *homo sacer*, who may be killed by anybody but may not be sacrificed in an official ceremony, everything is permitted against Rambo. He is chased like an animal in a sort of savage group hunting, in which everyone is eager to shoot him on sight as first.

Just like in *Dogville*, common people are shown as the perfect instantiation of the morals of the slaves. Whereas wolves recognise submission signals from their conspecifics, doves kill mercilessly. Common people are unanimous, especially in hate. All against one may not be elegant, but is usually taken to be effective, especially in cathartic terms: "The unanimous mimetic contagion transforms the disastrous violence of all

against all into the healing violence of all against one. The community is reconciled at the cost of one victim only” (Girard 2004). However, since Rambo is Rambo, the hunters ultimately turn into the hunted. Just like Grace, Rambo is a nemesis who ends up mashing large parts of town. If not all is burnt down, it is just because Rambo’s hand is withheld by the intervention of his former commander in army, the only one who still retains some moral authority upon him. What happens in the small Appalachian town where the movie is set is just a sample of the more general condition affecting Vietnam’s veterans in their relationship with mainstream American society.

What appears clear is that both *Dogville* and *First Blood* have at the core of their plot the result of a social experimentation. Both movies stage a situation in which a man or woman endowed with strong personality and strong will, who lives on a strong moral drive, is introduced into a community based on customary law. The outcome of the experiment unmistakably runs as follows: people who found their behaviour on custom gather together and hunt the foreigner to kill him or her. It is as though they instinctively sense that the foreigner and the type of morality he or her is the bearer of is utterly incompatible with their own. By doing so, in the very act of gathering together all against one, they resort to mob rule. Slave morality, as embodied by people at *Dogville* and those in the Appalachian community, is shown in all its depressing, dismal charme.

If that is what happens in those two communities, what should we say about the people at the Manderlay plantation? At Manderlay, Grace’s best reformist efforts clash against, not so much open hostility or malevolence, but rather the lack of will to change. It is not a simple matter of compliance, as it may seem at first. Grace is sure that people must be taught how to enjoy freedom, so she embarks on a pedagogy of freedom. But eventually we find out that Mam’s law, the old law of slavery – which Grace contemptuously defines as ‘the most abominable document ever written’ – is in fact written by the old slave Wilhelm. Moreover, Wilhelm claims to have written it literally for ‘the good of everyone’. Master morality, embodied here by the strong wind of change that blows from the Grace’s iron will, is defeated by the community’s conservatist, passive attitude. If *Dogville* already revealed Grace’s thrust toward change through unconditional love, now her attempt is institutionalised, and, consequently, her failure more visible. Grace is not defeated by a strength that could have been fought against on an equal ground, will against will, high ideals against high ideals. Such conflict would have had some epic flavour which slaves’ action will never know and will never be entitled to have.

The strange relationship between slave and master morality, which cannot be reduced to either conflict or cooperation, leads us to a further problem. Given that we have two markedly different sets of behaviour in place here, what is the more 'natural' one? The word 'natural' is of course quite tricky, unless, at a first stage, we adopt a strictly Durkheimian conception, according to which 'natural' – as well as 'pro-social' and 'normal' – have no transcendental moral dimension, but only a statistical one. In other words, to ask who is normal equates to raise the political ethical-question about majority and minorities. Trier suggests a pretty straightforward answer: Grace is a white fly – or, perhaps more appropriately, a black swan. She is the abnormal. Sad but true, slave morality is largely overrepresented throughout the world.

To raise the question about majority and minorities is not simply to raise a quantitative, numerical issue, though. Rather, the majoritarian and the minoritarian have a qualitative aspect to them. In order to qualify as a majority, one must not simply be the largest number. Rather, one must be capable of setting the model and the parameters of normality. Normality is the power of setting the sample. Thus, normality can be represented by shared morality (Durkheim's 'collective conscience') or by some 'external' landmark, such as law. But, contrary to what Durkheim thought, official law is not always the best mirror of collective conscience. If *Dogville* confronts us with a situation where the whole community unites in exploitation and hate without any formal legal recognition of that reality, *Manderlay* puts us in front of the fact living law is not simply official law, so that changing law does not per se change society.

Back to Grace: couldn't we just conclude that her idealism and naïveté are completely bad put and even solipsistic? That she is nothing but a poor alienated, a deviant? That she deserves the treatment she gets? Her father recurrently reproaches her 'arrogance'. Let us not forget that she is the only major source of change that comes across two essentially homeostatic communities. It always takes some clever, bright and, again, strongwilled intelligence to bring about change. Not simply that: for change to occur, people must – by the hook or by the crook – be brought to a stage where they are capable of leaving their own their easy preferences and their lower instincts behind. Here's why to embrace master morality is more difficult than to embrace slave morality: the former requires smartness.

Tradition and innovation

Normal people tend to live normally. Normal people ask no questions about how and why the world is like it actually is. They just follow the stream, falling back again and again on trusted and well-worn mores. Neither resistance nor creation have to do with or can be expected from this type of people. To put it in an even scarier way, unless constrained, normal people merrily follow whatever order, subscribe to whatever law fits with their routines. This same issue is implicit in the Weberian conception of 'legitimate power', too, in the sense that the test of legitimacy is always on the verge of justifying whatever instituted power is in force at the moment simply because of its existence.

The mainstream view, which comprises almost all modern populist authors, such as – to mention two very different examples – Manzoni and Tolkien, rejects the idea that it takes a strong personality to produce the good-at-heart person who can introduce change in the world. By doing so, the mainstream view holds that goodness belongs to the majority of common people and cruelty belongs to those few who 'walk this earth bereft of their heart and soul'. As classical anthropologists observed, all human groups represent themselves as inherently good – 'We are the righteous', echoes the Nietzschean observer.

It is precisely such attitude of self-confidence which hampers any possibility of real change. Normal people have not reached that degree of smartness that would enable them, at Manderley, to appreciate Grace's humanist ideals and, at Dogville, to treat Grace as a human being to take care of rather than one to enslave. Thus, the beast within is always ready to strike: torment the weaker and avoid direct confrontation with the stronger. To keep the greedy beast at bay entails not simply moral but also cognitive qualities. One needs first of all to understand the existence of the problem. It is only by gaining a degree of self-reflexivity that it becomes possible to become critical about the existent order. Normal people are 'normal' precisely because they have no such self-reflexivity. This is why they stick to custom. Implicitly or explicitly, custom is configured in such a way to produce outbreaks of violence against change – more specifically, a type of violence imbued with *ressentiment* and cruelty. Cruelty is the revealing mark of normal people, or, to put it the other way around, to be good at heart requires some clever-

ness. This also means that custom is like a seed that needs a specific soil to bloom and flourish. Even when the good message succeeds in fostering this kind of soil, the inbuilt flaw of human nature always threatens every potential good outcome.

So, who is the winner of the game: the one who pushes things to the extreme or the one who changes the rules of the game itself? In *Manderlay*, the old law, Mam's slave law is never really overcome. Its presence lurks through the whole story. Albeit reluctantly, Grace herself has to constantly go back to the book of the old law to learn things she did not know about the plantation. The old law is the dirty secret in every new order. Despite such persistent ghost, had people been good, or clever, one could have successfully fulfilled Grace's plan. The point is that, had people been good, or clever, there would have been no need for a Grace whatsoever.

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