

has a firsthand experience of what it is to be a minority. This is because the minority is produced through a process of *interior* exclusion, and thus, as we have seen, exclusion involves not only the other but one's own self or group as other. Thus if no one is predisposed by nature or by culture to embrace an open, tolerant transnationalism, neither is anyone predisposed by nature or by culture to be a nationalist, let alone a nationalist of the most xenophobic type.

Civility, then, is not an attribute of nationality, of ethnicity, or of a "native" ability to speak a language, whether it is the language of a "majority" or a "minority." Instead, civility lies in the ambivalence of identification and the ambiguity of repression to the extent that they are viewed or lived not as limitations to be overcome but rather as conditions of sociability and freedom. This means that civility cannot be identified with national culture—but, equally important, it cannot be simply identified with minority or immigrant culture either. It is rather a matter and a manner of addressing the minor or the transnational in culture and in the self; it is interior inclusion of, as opposed to purely positive or purely negative identification with, the minor other. Through his analyses of interior inclusion, transindividuality and other closely related concepts that I have touched on more briefly, Balibar testifies to his engagement with the liberal tradition as well as with the critical thrust of contemporary cultural theory. But he also testifies to his engagement with psychoanalytic thought, by suggesting that the problem of the inclusion of minorities needs to be thought in terms of a transnationality and a transindividuality that cannot be identified with any collective or individual subject but that lie rather "within" each nation, each culture, each ethnicity, each majority, and each minority.

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Rational and Irrational Choices

Form, Affect, and Ethics

I often teach the work of Chinua Achebe, and each time I do, I have the class watch an interview Bill Moyers taped with the author in 1989. Two topics covered during the interview inform the core of this essay. First, Achebe mentions time and again the issue of the First World dumping its toxic waste in Third World countries, Nigeria being one of the primary dumping grounds. Second, he speaks of the need for Africa to tell its story. Achebe articulates again his well-known critique of *Heart of Darkness*, deploring its reduction of Africans to mere ghosts, phantoms, ciphers. Instead Achebe demands that the West "listen" to Africa's human voice. I ask the class to think about the connection between the two topics—how does a lack of voice, or its suppression under another narrative, allow for or even facilitate the poisoning of a continent?

To drive home this point, I distribute copies of Larry Summers's infamous World Bank memo of 1991 (see Vallette). During his tenure as chief economist for the World Bank, Summers issued a memo suggesting that there was indeed a problem with pollution—the First World had too much of it, and the Third World too little. He proffered a number of rational choice arguments, among them the rationale that since the life expectancy of those living in the Third World was so far below that of those living in the First World, the human cost of breathing toxic fumes and consuming toxic food and water would be much greater in the First World than in the Third. After all, those living in the Third World couldn't expect to live as long as "we" do, so what would be the matter with reducing their lifetimes by a minuscule amount, when, on the other hand, if we were to actually breathe in the by-products of our First World

lifestyle, it would decrease our lifetimes by a much greater proportion? This is the way Summers puts it:

“Dirty” Industries: Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [Less Developed Countries]? I can think of three reasons [here I cite only the third]: The demand for a clean environment for aesthetic and health reasons is likely to have very high income elasticity. The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostrate [sic] cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostrate [sic] cancer than in a country where under 5 mortality is 200 per thousand. Also, much of the concern over industrial atmosphere discharge is about visibility impairing particulates. These discharges may have very little direct health impact. Clearly trade in goods that embody aesthetic pollution concerns could be welfare enhancing. While production is mobile the consumption of pretty air is a non-tradable.

The response of Jose Lutzenberger, the Brazilian Minister of the Environment, upon reading this leaked memo seems to sum it up:

Your reasoning is perfectly logical but totally insane . . . Your thoughts [provide] a concrete example of the unbelievable alienation, reductionist thinking, social ruthlessness and the arrogant ignorance of many conventional “economists” concerning the nature of the world we live in . . . If the World Bank keeps you as vice president it will lose all credibility. To me it would confirm what I often said . . . the best thing that could happen would be for the Bank to disappear. (Vallette)

While one might applaud such a sentiment, it would appear Lutzenberger is offering a contradiction — aren’t logic and sanity deeply affiliated? What could be their possible point of separation? Glossing the terms helps the class tease out the “rational” from the sociopathic, the “impeccable” ethics of business based upon some utilitarian notion of “the greater good” (particularly construed, of course) from the notion of an ethical system based on some sense of global community and the goal of a more democratic, just, and equal modality of interdependence.

We then talk about the power of stories and disaggregate the different types of stories found here — Summers’s modest proposal and the stories Achebe believes might act as countervailing forces. We consider the case

in “real” terms — what were the respective fates of Summers and Lutzenberger? Lutzenberger was fired after sending that riposte; Summers became Clinton’s secretary of the treasury and then president of Harvard University. We then begin to wonder about the stories people hear, believe, and act upon; we wonder about this thing called “truth,” how it is construed, and what it matters. And we talk about the transnational and global aspects of this case.

All this has a great deal to do with the topic of “minor transnationalisms,” for if we expand the case outlined above to the most general level, then we can take the issues I have been writing about and repose the topic as such: if we allow ourselves a moment of Manicheism, and see the topoi of globalization as differentiated across a grid of rich/poor, north/south, First World/Third World binaries (not to mention the gendered and racialized facets of the real distributions of power and wealth), then we need to ask, In what forms, rhetorics, discursive formulations, poetics, can the “minor” effectively represent its case across those differentiated spaces and hope to produce some sort of affect that will move people to act in ethical manners? Or, to borrow from Lutzenberger, how can we tell stories that motivate people to act sanely and humanely, rather than only according to a chilling bureaucratic logic that deprives others of their humanity, rights, and dignity? In this essay, I use Ruth Ozeki’s novel *My Year of Meats* to explore these questions and add one more topic for our consideration: if, in the past, the modern novel was seen to be the instrument with which literature might instill a sense of cosmopolitan community, can it still do so when the very medium through which the new “global village” is linked is not literature, but information, advertising, and entertainment technologies? Furthermore, what do we do when “information” is rationalized and packaged in particular ways that seem to preclude precisely that sense of global community and shared obligation? That is, how can we “touch” our newly constituted community members when the terms of engagement seem to be radically different from those of the past? What different strategies of “reasoning” vie for the attention and commitments of the new global citizen? And what do modernist literary aesthetics have to do with such issues anymore? This essay is a preliminary attempt to address these questions.

Rational Choice, Literature, and the Sentimental

In this first section I want to set forth three key questions. First, how does rational choice theory attempt to account for how individuals act, and how does individual rational choice relate to social or “other-regarding” issues that may be either rational or intuitive? Second, how has the modern literary aesthetic been seen to enable and foster precisely that sense of relation to the other that goes beyond the rational/intuitive divide? And third, how is the ethical related to storytelling?

Peter Abell presents a useful sketch of rational choice theory in relation to sociology. As he describes it, rational choice theory (RCT) strives “to understand individual actors (which in specified circumstances may be collectivities of one sort or another) as acting, or more likely interacting, in a manner such that they can be deemed to be doing the best they can for themselves, given their objectives, resources, and circumstances, as they see them” (252). Here I want to draw out three aspects of rational choice theory as its discourse and assumptions about human action might relate to the issue of storytelling, affect, and ethics. I want to note that, first, rational choice theory tends to ignore or downplay the ways in which “other-regarding” interests might complicate or give a different significance to an individual’s rational choice. Likewise, it does not well tolerate intuition, irregularity, and affect, and this of course puts it into a particularly fraught relationship to literature. Second, rational choice hinges upon the idea of adequate information and well-formed beliefs. I will argue that the issue of the particular *mediation* of information is something that requires closer consideration, as it might well create preferences in certain ways. Finally, I note that on the other hand one of the most useful aspects of rational choice theory is its interest in working back from individual action to a description of systems and structures. If we apply the same critique to rational choice “behaviorism,” then we can look at the isolated example of the Summers memo and see at work a larger system of values, beliefs, and assumptions.

In seeking to arrive at an elegant, simple, “parsimonious” theory of human action, rational choice theory must discount certain kinds of behaviors that, on the contrary, literature focuses upon. Abell admits that “at times we act impulsively, which in retrospect we find distasteful, and we may also be possessed by our desires which then cloud our reason” (263). This, along with the ways that intersubjective influences might affect choice, simply falls beyond the scope of RCT’s interests (outside of game

theory approaches). As Abell puts it, strict RCT is “disinclined to accept the exogeneity of norms and values, rather seeking an explanation for their genesis and persistence from its own precepts” (254). He continues: “To my knowledge, there is no good theory of the genesis of and shaping of affects, though rational choice theorists are inclined to invoke some social contagion or learning model” (265).¹ That is to say, such social and intersubjective behavior as we are most interested in here tends to be understood by RCT within very specific and exclusive sociological regimes. “Quasi-exogeneous” explanations are often regarded with suspicion: “There are now many attempts to incorporate altruism, malice, and, more generally, relative utilities into a rational choice theory framework. Rational choice theorists remain, nevertheless, ever cautious about invoking such sentiments and are inclined to search for hidden self-regard when faced with apparent other-regard” (265).² This proclivity would seem to cut short any robust investigation into the relationship between individual preferences and notions of community, diverse values, preferences, and affects.

One critique of rational choice theory that is of particular relevance to the current essay is Michael Taylor’s “When Rationality Fails.” Taylor argues, “Rational choice studies of collective action, in particular, standardly ignore a range of motivations that can give rise to cooperation, or else treat them in a limited form in which they can be accommodated artificially within the rational choice framework . . . This is an aspect of a very general and very large failing of rational choice work, including economics: its programmatic blindness to the rich diversity of ways in which humans value things” (224–25). Counterposed to the available preferences of RCT, Taylor offers what he calls “commitments”: “We can say that commitment-driven behavior is *expressive* of a *self* constituted by commitments” (230, emphasis added). Here I consider this “self” within a framework of a culture of commitment that exceeds the limits of “rationality” read as self-interest in its narrowest and reductive sense. I will focus on the question of how a sense of commitment can be expressed through literary texts and other media, so as to have the effect of inculcating in others a similar and shared sense of commitment.

In this regard, again, the particular modalities of literary and media forms require special attention. It is not enough to rely solely upon the notion proffered by RCT about the need for “optimal belief formation,” that is, the optimization of information available to social actors so that they might have the widest range of “choices.” Abell explains:

Precisely what optimal belief formation implies is a complex matter but usually means something like this: given an actor's affects (wants), the information available/collected is sufficient to enable the actor to form beliefs about the possible courses of action available and their consequences so that a better alternative (given the actor's affects) will not be ignored. In fact a great deal of contemporary rational choice theory is devoted to the impact of incomplete information . . . upon social action. . . . All can agree that modeling both the nature and causes of the prevailing information conditions in which actors find themselves or create for themselves, and their attendant beliefs and reasoning, is often at the heart of the sociological enterprise. (264)

While not ignoring for a moment the validity of this point, our task here is to better understand how "information" is packaged in particular ways (the rhetoric of information) so that it can enhance or diminish the attractiveness (or "logic") of any particular choice.

To bring this back to our discussion of Summers and Achebe: whence does Summers derive his confidence that the information he provides to bolster his case for toxic dumping will be transparent and lead inevitably to the correct choice? And where do we get the sense that Achebe and Lutzenberger's arguments are more acceptable, more "sane"? And what do the kinds of choices presented and argued by either side have to do with larger, systemic beliefs and values? Following the goals of rational choice theory, Coleman notes, "the focus must be on the social system whose behavior is to be explained. This may be as small as dyad or as large as a society or even a world system, but the essential requirement is that the explanatory focus be on the system as a unit, not on the individuals or other components that make it up" (2), and here we might agree.

This also requires that, just as we have tried to understand the logic which informs "rational" choices, so we must devote attention also to the realm of the sentimental. Abell himself notes this (but not without caution):

There is an important message here. On the one hand, we should not ignore any independent evidence at our disposal concerning other-regarding sentiments. . . . Many rational choice theorists do run foul of this dictum in their zeal to promote an exclusive reliance upon self-regard and as a consequence construct overelaborate theories when there is no need and where the explanatory focus should shift

to the sources of the sentiments themselves. On the other hand, we should beware the cavalier invocation of "exotic sentiments." (266)

The use of the term "exotic" is doubly apt in terms of the present essay. First, it is of course cognate to "exogenous," and thus underscores the otherness of sentiment to rational choice. But it also points to the link outward, beyond the individual, to an intersubjective space that is located upon another sort of terrain. And it is on this terrain that literature finds itself.

To conclude this discussion of rational choice theory, I turn to a text that both directly addresses the relation of *root* and storytelling, and, in a fascinating way, ends up implicitly validating (albeit in a qualified manner) not only literature, but collectivities and shared values of justice. No one has written more about the relation of rational choice theory and the emotions than Jon Elster. For this discussion, I turn to one of his most elementary books, but one that describes emotions and literature as a basic issue. In *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*, Jon Elster's discussions of storytelling and literature provide an interesting set of observations regarding the goals of rational choice theory, as well as its limitations. He points to both the benefits and the dangers of literature (and the kind of thinking it engages) within the rational choice enterprise. In all cases, his remarks bear importantly upon the topic of this essay. Elster gives credit to storytelling for its ability to present the individual with a set of options and a particular imaginative space for weighing those choices (and the example he gives is itself enormously revealing): "Storytelling can suggest new, parsimonious explanations. Suppose that someone asserts that self-sacrificing or helping behavior is conclusive proof that not all action is rational. . . . Could it not be in one's self-interest to help others? Could it not be rational to be swayed by one's emotions? The first step toward finding a positive answer is telling a *plausible story* to show how these possibilities could be realized" (7–8). But in the same passage, Elster cautions: "Storytelling can be harmful if it is mistaken for the real thing." Furthermore, "with some ingenuity — and many scholars have a great deal — one can *always* tell a story in which things are turned upside down" (8). In sum, storytelling allows us to increase the body of information upon which we form our beliefs, but fiction also may be deployed to instantiate false or irrational beliefs. It contributes to a body of emotions Elster calls "countervailing emotions," "arising out of what could have happened but didn't" (63). In other words, the benefit that storytelling

might offer rational choice making in terms of its speculative and hypothetical power is offset by its illusory quality, its tendency to be confused for fact, for turning things “upside down.”

This cost-benefit analysis is carried over to his discussion of emotion, a discussion in which we can see the connection between the issue of storytelling with the topic of literature’s ability to allow us to imagine others, and to put ourselves in their place (we will address this issue in detail below). Elster describes a powerful set of emotions — “other-oriented emotions.” Such emotions are predicated on the belief “It could have been me” (64). We can see in these last two instances a connection that points directly at fiction and affect — storytelling allows the individual to speculate on a range of possible scenarios; “other-oriented emotions” predicate late on a range of possible scenarios; “other-oriented emotions” predicate stories in which the individual might feel the effect of actions upon a hypothetical stand-in for him- or herself. If we now have fiction and affect on the table for discussion, in his next paragraph, Elster completes the circle of this essay’s core concerns — he speaks of justice, and the correlate issue of ethics:

The related feeling of being unfairly treated deserves special mention. Sufficient conditions for the occurrence of this powerful emotion are the following. First, the situation is perceived as morally wrong; second, it has been brought about intentionally, not as the byproduct of natural causality or the invisible hand of social causality; third, it can be rectified by social intervention. Thus the feeling of injustice rests on the combination of “It ought to be otherwise,” “It is someone’s fault that it is not otherwise,” and “It could have been made otherwise,” in addition to the general counterfactual condition “It could have been otherwise.” (64)

Note that all the conditional elements here (“ought,” and “could”) take us back to a condition of narrative — the speaker is imagining not a single fact, but a set of interconnected circumstances in which others live justly. Within this set of discussions of storytelling, affect, and ethics, we are thus caught in a situation wherein storytelling, emotions, and the thoughts they make possible are all part of choice making, and yet their cost-benefit ratio is uncertain — how many possibilities can or should we entertain, on what basis can or should we rely on emotional data? Thus Elster writes, “Emotions matter because they move and disturb us, and because, through their links to social norms, they stabilize social life. They also interfere with our

thought processes, making them less rational than they would otherwise be” (70).

Up to this point we have been speaking about individual choices (as is the large insistence of rational choice theory). When moved from individual choice making to social planning and collectivities, things simply get worse: “We cannot predict how rational people behave under conditions of uncertainty of multiple equilibria, nor whether their behavior will be governed by rationality or social norms” (168). Under such conditions of unpredictability, social change is almost impossible to carry out successfully, and it is to this topic that I turn now to close off this discussion of Elster and rational choice theory. Instead of placing any faith in large, sweeping reforms (which mobilize too many different individual responses), Elster recommends small steps, measured discretely and judiciously as one goes along. Large structural change creates a heightened sense of expectation, and people grow impatient for the benefits of reform to become manifest.

Nevertheless, Elster ends his book by suggesting one sweeping reform. He asserts that among social models, “an all-cooperative economy could be superior, perhaps by a great deal, to an all-capitalist one, even if isolated cooperatives do worse than capitalist forms in a capitalist environment” (170). But what about the aforementioned issue of impatience? The final sentence of Elster’s book names the one thing that might motivate people to accept social change: “The only thing that could motivate people to suffer the transition costs would be perceiving the reform to be a matter of basic justice, not economic efficiency. In that case, however, we are not talking any longer about social planning, but about a movement for social reform” (170–171). We end thus with a belief that is stronger than any other — a belief that might provide the rationale for a preference or choice where no other will, the preference for “basic justice.” If rational choice can thus accommodate this social value, then the positive aspects of storytelling and “other-oriented emotion” are redeemable. In other words, it may be precisely literature that stands available as a vehicle for social change. Let me now couple this inferable conception of literature and its function to a more “classic” notion of literary narrative, affect, and ethics.

Recently there has been a flurry of articles and essays defending the idea of modernism and its role in progressive politics. The argument is made that, far from being outmoded, the modern novel form is the sole instrument with which one can fashion a narrative commensurate with