

# COMMENTS

## ON CHARLES MACDONALD'S "ORDER AGAINST HARMONY"

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• KENNETH SILLANDER •

Charles Macdonald has presented a highly interesting and inspiring paper. Its greatest value is indicated by the title: "Order against Harmony". Its principal achievement is that he has presented a stimulating and widely relevant conceptual model of two basic types of societies: harmony- and order-oriented. Thereby he has created a very useful analytical scheme, one which may be used, among other things, for analyzing modernization in many contexts. For the small-scale harmony-oriented peoples that he discusses, modernity indeed usually involves increasing order-orientation. But order-orientation is of course not exclusively associated with modernity; it is an ancient invention almost inherently associated with the transformation of small-scale societies into large-scale societies, and there are also, as he indicates, small-scale, pre-modern order-oriented societies. One benefit of his model is precisely that it does not approach things from the viewpoint of modernity, and that it is particularly designed for understanding certain conditions associated with so-called simple societies, which, unlike theories of modernity, it takes as the starting point, rather than treating as inverse mirror-images of ourselves.

There are many merits in Macdonald's paper. In a creative and insightful way it draws attention to a number of important and interconnected qualities of social life in so-called simple societies—self-disparagement, non-confrontation, joking, teasing, individual autonomy and egalitarianism—which, rightly, as he says, are expressions of complexity rather than of simplicity, and of conscious choice or, at least, consistent inclination, rather than cultural ignorance or lack of sophistication in their cultural adaptation to the challenges of survival and social coexistence. What we are dealing with here are individuals equipped with a good portion of what Renato Rosaldo called "social grace", including a capacity, in Macdonald's formulation, to "frequently associate and dissociate from their conspecifics", while maintaining some degree of amity and concord. Macdonald shows how these characteristics enable a particular form of interpersonal integration and fulfill a function analogous with that played by social organization in a different type of society but with a quite different outcome, and thereby he reveals a lot about how these 'non-societies' function.

I particularly like how his analysis draws attention to the processual as opposed to structural features of social life. His paper is of special significance for me as I am currently engaged in investigating the sources of solidarity among the Bentian, a small group of swidden cultivators of Indonesian Borneo who in many ways resemble the small-scale, harmony-oriented societies that he discusses, but also in some important respects, possibly theoretically consequential, differ from them. Perhaps the Bentian may be observed to be slightly more order-oriented, but I assume it is not really the case that all the peoples that Macdonald discusses are unambiguously harmony-oriented either. The Bentian for example, belong to houses, they have small one-room longhouses in which a small number of related families temporarily gather, and they also have villages. Even in precolonial times when they lived dispersed, they belonged to village-sized communities, somewhat like the Ilongot *bertran*, which were named and had recognized boundaries between them. But like the

groups Macdonald describes, the Bentian are characterized by a high degree of interpersonal solidarity at the same time as they are weakly corporate and weakly integrated in structural terms; a puzzling, but perhaps only apparently paradoxical, condition, which has led me to investigate the constitution of solidarity primarily through social action, as opposed to social organization. What brings and binds these 'open-aggregated' communities together is, it seems to me, a variety of routines and social practices such as visiting, rituals, sharing, speeches, and collective work, but it is also, as Macdonald's paper suggests, a particular ethos and mode of sociality which they share with peoples like the Palawan and the Inuits, and a major merit of his paper is precisely his identification of the elements which make up this ethos and sociality.

Another important merit of Macdonald's paper is that it necessitates consideration of the meaning and application of a number of so-called fundamental terms constitutive of the received wisdom of social science, including 'society', 'social organization', 'group', 'hierarchy', 'reciprocity' and 'sharing'. This adds to the interest and far-reaching relevance of his paper, and there are clearly good reasons to criticize much classical ethnography for an ethnocentric order-obsession which often has severely distorted observations by reading too much order into them. He is correct, for example, that ethnic identities are a creation of the social order and have not always and everywhere existed, and that the expectation that simple societies "should fall into tightly-knit, permanently and fiercely bounded groups" is naive and contested by ethnographic facts. It is important to note that many peoples have, or at least had, no corporate or enduring groups beyond the domestic family. But, on the other hand, it is Macdonald's discussion of these concepts which in my impression represents the least convincing part of his analysis. Macdonald is, of course, essentially engaged in creating ideal-types, but in my view this discussion amounts to some extent to a construction of straw men, of easy enemies. It would not be necessary to define society, social organization, or sharing, for example, in quite as narrow terms as he does, and his definitions do not always unequivocally represent 'established and accepted truth'. On the other hand, this does not really disqualify his analysis or diminish its heuristic value.

I do not here have time to extensively comment on these concepts. Regarding 'social organization' and 'society' it will have to suffice to note that social organization can be about more than corporate and enduring groups, and that I am somewhat uneasy with conceptually degrading the peoples whom Macdonald discusses into non-societies. As he observes, these people are not "a mere 'collection of individuals', but communities of eagerly and intensively interacting, culture-producing, humans." Intensively interacting, culture-bearing communities are of course societies in some very fundamental respects.

One concept which I find especially interesting to discuss is sharing. Macdonald is correct that sharing, in principle, is a special form of distributing material objects, different from reciprocity. But does sharing really have to mean that one cannot own the object, say, a wild boar caught by a hunter? The Bentian that I study have a regional reputation for widely sharing (or distributing) food and resources, even including women. Among other things, they share (*meru*) game, but they also often 'give' (*ngokoi*) each other things, including rice, which is not widely distributed in the same sense as game, but provided to relatives in need (and sometimes even to strangers). As another example, they routinely contribute to the ritual expenditures of close people by giving them domestic animals, sometimes even water buffalos. Giving things, and asking for them, is indeed an important and salient

activity in Bentian society. This is generally done according to a principle of generalized reciprocity. But in some situations they also give things with expectations of carefully balanced returns, as in the case of agricultural labor. And then, in yet other contexts, such as in respect to game, they practice something resembling sharing, in at least one sense of the word.

The Bentian hunter is supposed, but not forced, to share. And it may be said that he 'gives' (*ngokoi*) a share of his catch. On the other hand, the Bentian do not make it clear who owns game, and there are no explicit rules about among whom it should be divided. The affinal and one's own parents, and other close relatives of one's own and one's wife are centrally important receivers, and probably no one would deny that they should be given something. However, close neighbors, whether or not closely related, should also receive some. Proximity is clearly an important factor, although kinship also plays a vital role. Possibly you could also say in this case that the hunter does not really own the animal which he shares. (Unfortunately, I did not directly ask about who *owns* the animal in this case.) But, he clearly is in some control of what will happen to it, and he can decide to keep or sell it, although that might make him the target of scolding by the elders, or even of so-called supernatural retribution. Usually he will not, however, and so game is quite extensively distributed among the Bentian. But does the fact that the hunter has some control over the animal caught mean that the Bentian do not practice sharing, and that what they do is essentially different from what the Palawan do? I do not think so, but it would be interesting to hear Macdonald's opinion on that. Does sharing really presuppose not-giving, or lack of control over giving? Does not sharing rather have two forms, between which there is a continuum rather than a clear break? One, according to which one owns or controls something which is widely distributed, and another, according to which some resource is collectively owned or controlled, and widely distributed.

Another related question is whether sharing is clearly distinct from generalized reciprocity, in terms of its effect and intrinsic association with harmony-orientation? Is not both sharing and generalized reciprocity typical of harmony-oriented peoples, and for the same rather than for contrary reasons? It seems to me that these forms of exchange, and to some extent even balanced reciprocity, share essentially the same function among the Bentian, that is, to integrate them into self-sufficient and solidary communities. Exchange here is expressive of a frequently invoked ideology of affirming one's relations and sharing one's material resources. It represents a form of solidarity.

This leads to me the important question of the sense in which harmony-orientation can be regarded as something non-social. Harmony-orientation means being non-social in the sense of non-corporate. But does harmony-orientation necessarily entail being non-social in the sense of preferring autonomy over collective attachment, or suggest that Man is anti-social by human nature in this respect? What Macdonald calls his "overall thesis" can be contested, I think, as can his stress on autonomy as the principal motivation of harmony-orientation. Even though he may be right that humans are not *necessarily* or *essentially* social beings, they do sometimes highly value their social relations and strive to maintain them at the expense of their autonomy, and this goes for harmony-oriented as much as for order-oriented people. Does not also sharing, as Macdonald defines it—a situation where nothing is owned, where nothing can be kept—counteract autonomy? Is defense of autonomy really the principal motive of harmony-orientation or may not a conceptually

contrary aspiration for association and collective attachment—for a particular form of sociality, and solidarity—be just as important, or even more so? And if so, how does this relate to Macdonald's so-called overall thesis, that "humans are not *necessarily* social beings", that "they want personal autonomy, but cannot live alone." I propose that the harmony-orientation no longer testifies to a non-social rather than to a pro-social human nature (in this sense), and that solidarity is at least as important as autonomy as a motivational force in harmony-oriented societies. Indeed, I think autonomy in the sense of equal standing may be more important as an ideal in the kind of competitive egalitarian societies that Macdonald presumably would not include in his harmony-type, namely, the New Guinea 'big man' and the African acephalous societies, which Thomas Gibson lumps together on the basis that they are organized upon the principle of balanced reciprocity (contrary to his own study object, the Buid of Mindoro, who are organized upon the principle of sharing).

A related question is whether restricted hierarchy and recognition of groups beyond the domestic family necessarily works against the ethos and goals of harmony-orientation. As it seems to me, the people I have studied are more solidary and engage in sharing to a greater extent because of belonging to groups beyond the domestic family (i.e., houses and communities), and because of the existence in their society of a relatively strongly developed elders' authority. Apparently, some basically harmony-oriented peoples sometimes use a portion of 'order', such as hierarchy, to achieve their ends of harmony. Macdonald, in a way, admits this for elders' authority, although he regards this as a case of "creating equality by using and at the same time subverting hierarchy." But cannot the same case sometimes be made for groups beyond the domestic family, and for reciprocity, as well? In my experience of the Bentian, all of these institutions primarily serve to promote solidarity and congenial social relations, although they may all also be put to different uses, and are perhaps, if anything, inherently ambiguous. In the final instance, it seems to me, it is not any intrinsic qualities of them but to the uses to which they are put which determines what functions they have in society.

Finally I am not sure about the extent to which it is meaningful to talk about an "internal human environment", or the extent to which adaptation to such an environment can be empirically distinguished from adaptation to an external or encompassing, larger environment? Thomas Gibson, who studied the Buid of Mindoro, and Janet Carsten, who studied the Malays of Langkawi, analyzed their respective egalitarian modes of social organization in terms of their articulations with the larger regional contexts to which they have long belonged. I do not want to say that I subscribe in all respects to their analyses or even clearly prefer them to Macdonald's. For instance, it is more typical in Southeast Asia for identities and cultures to be constructed in emulation than opposition to each other, and hence I am somewhat doubtful of Gibson's contention that egalitarian Buid values "have been elaborated in opposition to the surrounding lowland societies." But it would be interesting to know if Macdonald thinks that Gibson and Carsten are basically wrong, or if there are some ways in which he possibly agrees that it is necessary to take into account a larger inter-societal environment encompassing hierarchic order-oriented societies. In most cases, the two models of harmony and order-orientation have existed for centuries alongside each other, and harmony-oriented peoples have usually been not only theoretically aware of the alternatives but concretely affected by them. What are the consequences of this condition for Macdonald's theory?



COMMENTS

To sum up, I believe that Macdonald's harmony-order dichotomy is fruitful and reveals something essential about the way in which many societies are organized and function, especially the 'loosely structured', 'simple' societies at the harmony-pole of the dichotomy. But I am not fully convinced by how Macdonald interprets this form of adaptation in terms of evolutionary history and notions of human nature, and by how he explains it in respect to the categories of sharing, autonomy and social organization. Perhaps most importantly, I think that the cultural ethos of harmony-orientation, and the open-aggregated character of harmony-oriented communities serves not so much to promote the ideal of personal autonomy as a particular form of solidarity and sociality.

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