

Order and disorder: Poetics of exception

“While working, the mind proceeds from disorder to order. It is important that it maintain resources of disorder until the end, and that the order it has begun to impose on itself does not bind it so completely, does not become such a rigid master, that it cannot change it and make use of its initial liberty” (Paul Valéry 1960, 714).

We live at a time when nothing is conquered with absolute security, neither knowledge nor skills. Newness, the ephemeral, the rapid turn-over of information, of products, of behavioral models, the need for frequent adaptations, the demand for flexibility, all give the impression that we live only in the present in a way that hinders stabilization. Imprinting something onto the long term seems less important than valuing the instant and the event. That being said, thought has always been connected to the task of organizing and classifying, with the goal of conferring stability on the disorganized multiplicity of the manifestations of reality. In order to continue making sense, this articulation of the disparate must understand the paradoxes of order and organization. That is what has been going on recently: there has been a greater awareness of disorder and irregularity at the level of concepts and models for action and in everything from science to the theory of organizations. This difficulty is as theoretical as it is practical; it demands that we reconsider disorder in all its manifestations, as disorganization, turbulence, chaos, complexity, or entropy.

These new trains of thought are meant to tackle non-linear dynamics, dissipative structures, fluctuation-induced order, habitual imbalance, complex and open systems, the emergence of new ideas, and relative stabilizations. Considering these matters requires the realization that

order is hidden within disorder, randomness is perpetual, and the consideration of movement and its fluctuations is more meaningful than structures and constants. That is why, against a maximalist conception of order and against a definitive taxonomy according to which things find stable positions as part of a harmonic whole, we must elaborate something like a poetic epistemology of exception, based on the experience that order is often disadvantageous for life, that disorder and exceptions are cognitively rich, and that all classification is limited.

1. Disorganized Knowledge

The most famous statement about the disorder of knowledge springs from Borges's imagination. There is, on the one hand, the oft-quoted text that cites the strange classification of animals in a particular Chinese encyclopedia; this text became the springboard for Foucault's *The Order of Things* (2012). The animals were divided into "(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies" (Borges 1964, 103). Borges has other stories about the impossible nature of libraries understood as exact memories of humanity or faithful representations of what is known. In "The Congress," for example, we are told of the unsuccessful efforts of a group of Latin Americans who decide to create a Congress of the World and attached library but cannot come to an agreement about its composition. Enormous packages of uncatalogued books pile up in a cellar. They finally decide to set fire to them and abandon the project after realizing that

it embraced the entire universe (Borges 1977). Reality and the representation of reality become estranged in the face of an insurmountable divide.

It is possible that Borges's insight is the source for many other stories that have made the classification of knowledge into a paradoxical, absurd, and impossible task. Among all the fanciful classifications that have been suggested to librarians in the postmodern era, Paul Braffort's *Les Bibliothèques invisibles* [Invisible Libraries] deserves mention. He proposes organizing books based on their literal titles, according to criteria such as colors (allowing the classification of books such as Simenon's *The Yellow Dog* or Queneau's *The Blue Flowers*), the calendar (which would unite titles like Bossuet's *Maundy Thursday*, Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and Huizinga's *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*), or relatives (where we would find, for example, Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Bernhard's *Wittgenstein's Nephew*). Another criterion, more precise, but equally unsuitable for classifying and organizing knowledge, is found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, where a prison librarian maintained a catalog that classified books according to their number of pages. These and other similar stories arise from the same cultural experience: when we emphasize the way useless or ridiculous aspects of order lead to arbitrariness, knowledge is seen as something that cannot be meaningfully organized, as something monstrous.

In this way, literature registers a problem that reveals some of the properties of knowledge in the contemporary world; it shows the humor of the situation inhabited by people in so-called knowledge societies. These stories would barely make sense in a more limited universe, without the quantity of knowledge we are forced to manage and the enormous difficulties that entails. Libraries and archives are clearly not merely places that store books and documents; more than

anything, they are systems of classification and ordering based on a logic that evolves with the passing of time but that always tries to make knowledge available. These systems of order constitute classifications of the representation of knowledge, such as the Porphyrian tree, for example, which had a long life until Diderot, while it was capable of reflecting the complexity of knowledge and its articulation. There are new models now like the net, the mind map, or the rhizome that seem to have surpassed the previous model, which was rendered unusable by excessive hierarchy and simplicity. These models try to respond to the problem of how to think about the order and articulation of knowledge within a more complex scenario that cannot be handled with traditional library systematics. No internet search engine needs a hierarquization of concepts. The articulation of themes and content avoids any metastructure of logic without thus being reduced to chaos or complete uncontainability. Knowledge seems to float freely, beyond titles and rubrics. Its growing accessibility seems connected to the loss of meaning of all possible structurations.

These and similar difficulties encourage us to rethink the ordering of knowledge without comfortably ignoring the paradoxes engendered by any classificatory system. We will probably be forced to abandon the idea of a cultural order in which every thing has its place, a transcendental and unquestioned order. Knowledge, like the social order, is always unstable, unprotected, and threatened; it is anything but an imperturbable conquest, protected in the face of all instability. Tranquility is also always deceitful in the ordering of knowledge, a truce with a limited lifespan. Stability has long deserved disconfidence and suspicion, even declarations of impossibility. At the same time, we seem to need a certain amount of order so we can come to an agreement with reality, and it is impossible to act without presuming that the conditions of the world will persevere, even if only

to a small extent. With these conflicting demands and in the face of the growing complexity that a knowledge society poses, is it still possible to talk about regularity, order, and classification, and under what circumstances can we do so?

2. The Inaccuracy of Rules

The whole question of order, and its complexity and possibility, plays out in the clarification of what it means to follow a rule. There is already a longstanding debate about this question of rule following that, in more recent philosophy, has generated a series of concepts that, to some extent, attempt to problematize the simple distinction between order and disorder, between following a rule and breaking it, between the prohibited and the required. Thinkers like Luhmann (1964), Waldenfels (1987), Elster (1989), and Bourdieu (1987) coincide in talking about an ambiguous zone, a threshold, a space for play and maneuvering, for in-difference regarding the dichotomy of rule vs. exception.

This question originated with Kant, who may have been the first to recognize the inevitable inaccuracy of the rules guiding human actions. His formulation centers on the problem of moving from theory to practice, which seems to symbolize the nucleus containing more general inaccuracies about human life. Kant understood that the idea of prescribing the application of the rule within the rule itself would lead to an infinite regress. In "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice" (1996, 280), he rejects the presumption that the step from theory to practice can be regulated with complete precision; there are no rules to determine if the rules apply in any given case. It is impossible to create an unambiguous rule about when and how to apply the rules.

Answering that question requires a specific ability to make judgments; the application of rules always demands interpretation, creativity, and decision making, which implies a certain amount of inaccuracy similar to artistic intuition, creativity, or subtlety that Kant addresses in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (2006) as an ability regarding concrete matters. It is something that cannot truly be taught since teaching always depends on rules.

The other milestone on the topic is Wittgenstein's well-known analysis of rule-following. Wittgenstein claims that there are sometimes rules about applying rules (1958, 90; Arregui 1988); in other words, although there are times when we can use a second-order rule to regulate the application of first-order rules, the process of justifying an action with reference to rules has its limits. In this process of justification, there comes a time when subsequent rules can no longer be invoked and only action remains. The chain of reasons we can invoke to justify the way we are following a rule has a limit. At the end of the series of reasons or the end of the chain of rules that regulate how the rules must be applied, there is spontaneity in the action. A rule, no matter how many times it has been applied in the past, does not determine a particular way of acting in the present.

On the most fundamental level, this inaccuracy of rules is caused by their minimal ability to understand context. Rules can specify contexts, but that determination is always incomplete because, in the first place, contexts overlap and intertwine and, secondly, the contexts for the application of rules cannot be defined completely. Many of the errors we commit depend on a mistaken identification of context (Bateson 1983, 374). If, for example, an audience member decided to call the police or a doctor after hearing Hamlet talk to Ophelia about suicide, that would be a confusion of contexts. A librarian who catalogues *El santo al cielo* [The Saint to Heaven],

Sánchez Ostiz's poetry collection, alongside religious books is making the typical mistake of paying attention to the literal meaning of words without observing the context surrounding them. Machine translation is of limited utility for a similar reason. Understanding context requires intelligence, which cannot be replaced by machinery or a specific rule.

The truth we desire, as with goodness or justice, is not a matter of mathematical precision; instead, it is inscribed within a vital context without which it is unintelligible. Context gives human affairs a meaning that is richer and more complex than anything that will be achieved by the exactitude of automatic processes. There are things that are true, but inconvenient; others that used to be true, but are no longer; some are true, yet no one knows it; and in addition to what is true, there are things that are relevant, meaningful, interesting, and so on. The partiality and inevitability of contexts stems from locating things within areas of meaning that do not have exact rules. It is the same imprecision as we find in life, which makes us continually have to choose, interpret, and apply norms to any given situation. But the relationship between the rule and its application is subject to some paradoxes —noted in the philosophical tradition bookmarked by Kant and Derrida— according to which the application of rules not only fulfills the rules, but also complements, modifies, and suspends them. There is something like a self-deconstruction of the rules that corresponds with what Derrida called *différance*: the infringement of norms is a condition of possibility for their application, which also allows for the freedom to find something new. Following a rule always implies choosing between a selection of rules and, therefore, deciding which of them is the most relevant. The correct decision is not guaranteed by the rules themselves, and following one rule often means breaking others.

Any application of rules includes some breaking of those rules. There are traditional beliefs about the exception proving the rule; the end justifying the means; the rudeness of excessive punctuality and agreed-upon delays, *cum tempore*; *epikeia* in moral theology; allowing discretion in the application of norms and rules; etc. Why does the exception confirm the rule by breaking it? Because rules are not meant to be valid without exception; because the exception is not found outside the rule, but within it. In some ways, rules must foresee their own exceptions in order to maintain their elasticity and strength.

The idea of an infinite regress comes up again, in practice, when a system has to do something to regulate exceptions; many institutions have instructions in this regard. In these cases, the idea is to learn to handle events that are unusual, in other words, to extract the last hint of regularity out of irregular cases, creating something like a routine for the exceptional. It is a question of determining, for example, what we should do when faced with a catastrophe or how to regulate extraordinary circumstances. Regulating what needs to be done in extraordinary circumstances is, however, somewhat paradoxical since it tends to make the exception into a normal situation, to normalize it: providing a rule for all exceptions, which would no longer be an exception for that rule. But any rule generates exceptions. And the exception cannot be regulated because an exception, to the extent it is unforeseen, is not fully anticipatable. In spite of that, in practice, we can create some explicit rules for extraordinary circumstances. This is the goal of “patterned evasions”: establishing norms that regulate the breaking of norms. Its inevitable paradox becomes apparent in the special case of false alarms. When alarms become too frequent, they end up being ignored on a regular basis. They become routine, which can be fatal when the alarm ends up not being false. The sinking of the Titanic is

one of the most notorious cases of this routine lack of concern in spite of the insistence of the alarm. Determining when we are faced with “extraordinary circumstances” is something that must necessarily remain somewhat unspecified, requiring the judgment discussed by Kant or, to say it with Gadamer, *sensus communis* (1989, 22).

If the application of rules is so imprecise, it makes sense to define creativity as a poetics of exception. The application of rules is an aesthetic activity to the extent that no rule contains the method of its application within itself. If a law contained the method of its application, then there would be no free play between the action and the law, and following a norm would be pure mechanical automatism that would leave no room for freedom in any relevant sense. In reality, we find it quite natural and obvious that rules are broken. Language is one example; its abilities cannot be reduced to a series of rules or procedures, as poetry or metaphoric processes remind us. Similarly, lawyers talk about “constructive interpretations,” which attests to the fact that interpretation is always creative. The heuristic moment of reason indicates that there is a certain amount of knowledge involved in any application of a law, rule, or order, and that rule following is mediated by the interpretation of the norm and presumes a specific ability that derives precisely from knowing how to use it. The fact that no rule contains its method of application within itself means that following a rule always implies a certain type of knowledge, an inventive ability that can be explained by analogy with the procedures of the poetic imagination. In the end, we will see that without imagination there is no good behavior or reasonable order, that goodness and truth have more to do with aesthetics than we thought.

3. Impossible Repetition

A rule is a general procedure that implies a certain amount of repetition. The pursuit or application of rules is part of everyone's daily experience, from the tasks of a librarian to the decisions of a judge. Repetition plays a very important role for societies and groups in the organization of knowledge, the formation of conscience, and learning. Schütz discussed the anthropological usefulness of the "etcetera," without which we would be incapable of any action (1971, 153). Rules and norms are a must for institutional stability because we need to know what to pay attention to in life, the expectation of repetition. "Doing the same thing under the same circumstances" means repeating; institutions and organizations establish repetition; rules are repeatable procedures.

This principle of repetition is still aporetic. Following a rule means acting in the same way under the same circumstances. "The use of the word 'rule' and the use of the word 'same' are interwoven" (Wittgenstein 2009, § 225). But neither the circumstances nor the way of acting can ever be exactly the same. So we need to add: "the same from a relevant point of view" or "the same in the essential," without being able to indicate what "relevant" or "essential" means here. This leads to areas of indeterminacy: criteria of similarity, proportion, relevance can only be obtained in a practical context and cannot be articulated as a definitive set of rules. Practice overcomes, exceeds, and deconstructs prescriptions. Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, and Derrida have shown this in the context of play. Peter Winch (1990), striving to make parts of Wittgenstein's philosophy relevant for the social sciences, affirmed that we can only know if two things should be treated in the same way if we are told the context in which that question is raised.

This paradox makes repetition impossible. Kierkegaard, Deleuze, and Derrida have called attention to this fact by stating that repetition,

action that is submitted to rules, is false: institutional assurance always implies fragility, the application of rules or imitation always presumes a singular creation, legislation always comes later. Kierkegaard declared: "The dialectic of repetition is easy, because that which is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated; but precisely this, that it has been, makes repetition something new" (2009). Freud said something similar: repetition makes fixed something that cannot be fixed (2011). The pleasure children get from listening to the same story or repeating the same game stems from not having experienced cessation or the irretrievable; repetitions are still pure for them. Maturity seems to be a type of consciousness of the unrepeatable and, to use one of Lacan's expressions, repetition is a meeting that falls through, something like a missed encounter.

If all repetition—all regularity—is inevitably flawed, no matter how small this anomaly might seem, this would mean that something similar can be discovered in all apparent repetition. In cybernetics and systems theory, there is a concept used to explain this type of thing: recursivity. Conditions are set, then applied, but the application itself is reintroduced in the process of definition. There is an insistence on the particular, on the individual case, an idiosyncratic resistance that converts all science and all practice into an interpretive task. There is an interpretative moment that limits subsumption and relativizes generalizations; it recontextualizes. Referring specifically to the law, Derrida says that every case is other; each case needs a completely different interpretation; it cannot and should not be substituted by any existing, registered, or codified rule (Derrida 1992). Otherwise, we would be confronting a mechanical operation. There has been, since at least the time of Heraclitus, some agreement about what repetition cannot, strictly speaking, be: identical reproduction. Repetition is never pure; it

carries within it the mark of a constituent difference. There must be an increase, something additional, posterior, given that the application of rules is never a repetition in the sense of a guaranteed replica, or a mere reproduction.

4. Managing Exceptions

The fundamental experience produced by the aforementioned themes is the consciousness of the finiteness of order and a radicalization of the idea of contingency. The most radical form of contingency refers to the very idea of order; not only is the place that something occupies within the established order contingent, but that very order could be different. The crisis of large mechanisms, the totalities according to which everything could be ordered, demands that we think about order and disorder differently. The discovery of complexity situates us before a panorama in which things are less and less describable and action becomes more conscious of its limits. Knowledge no longer constitutes a system of interpretation or a system of unifying action: it is fragmented and becomes more complex and more abstract. There is also a greater consciousness of the lability of constructions and orderings, which is expressed in experiences like: fragility, loss of meaning, ambiguity, contingency, paradoxes, indetermination, zones where one cannot distinguish between the rule and its exception, between the rule and its violation, between normality and chaos.

Even though we do not possess common denominators, hierarchical principles, or stable foundations that would allow us to unify the world in an orderly fashion, we can be sure that the time of simple organizational systems has already passed. Those who conceive of order only as a triumph over disorder and of disorder as a fault or a

lack, as something essentially negative, display their unsuitability for managing complex matters adequately. People and institutions are divided between those who cannot stand order and those who cannot stand disorder. But intelligent behavior always moves between the two extremes, even beyond the opposition itself. There are many experiences that are not explained by this simplifying dichotomy. This is neither a question of ignoring the distinction between order and disorder or of hypostatizing it, but of treating it as a distinction that one must learn to negotiate. It is essential to think and act beyond a simple opposition between order and disorder, which attempts to force us to choose between rigidity and anarchy, as if there were no space for regulated anarchy or the articulation of independent elements between the two poles.

It is possible to conceive of disorder as something that allows handling in high contingency situations, in the midst of complicated and contradictory groupings. Dynamic contexts do not accept too much order; it ends up being punished as stagnation, perplexity, and a lack of creativity. "Order, if it wants to be considered a complex order, must be enriched with elements of disorder, with the strength of anarchy, with the resources of chaos" (Willke 2003, 9). Complex systems are precisely those that have "acquired the ability to bring order and chaos into a special kind of balance" (Waldrop 1994, 12). In the midst of that complexity, there is no choice but to risk being disorganized in order to articulate an architecture of order within complex systems. Because the fact is that a disorder within which one can still maintain control is already a type of order. There are established disorders; they become consolidated and give some direction. Following the Hegelian idea that identity comes from articulating identity and non-identity (Hegel 1986, 96), Luhmann has proposed defining order as the combination of order and disorder;

systems are accidental places and routines (2002, 109) where heterogeneous coherences are established.

For that reason, order implies a partial domestication of disorder, which demands a certain amount of tolerance toward exception. This is why all management today is understood as "management by exception," and this ability is more and more in demand. There is a tacit breaking of the rules that is necessary for thought, action, and social organization. Not all rule breaking is an expression of arbitrariness or selfishness on the part of the actors, just as following the rules does not necessarily imply their correct assimilation (we can see this with outdated laws whose very fulfillment contradicts the spirit of the law, labor strikes that consist of fulfilling work obligations to the extreme, or appealing to the fact of obeying orders to escape responsibility for one's decisions; in addition, rules and procedures can allow one to apologize). There are deviations from the rules that help accomplish exactly what the rules are meant to achieve, in the same way that a literal application of the rules leads to a falsification of the logic of those very rules. Breaking the rules is part of order in the same way holes make up fabric, like the net that, according to the definition found in Flaubert's *Parrot* by Julian Barnes, is a combination of intertwined holes. What if order was nothing other than the management of disorder and rules a collection of exceptions?

Everything seems to indicate that thought, action, society have no choice but to support a certain breaking of the rules, a transgression of the norm. The paradox could be softened if we added that the breaking of the rules can take place within certain limits, with the goal of assuring the flexibility of the whole. In that case, we could define some means for exceptions that, as is often said, would prove the rule: occasional carnivals that subvert order and hierarchies, introducing chaos into the territory of order and, by this means,

affording it stability. Or localized and harmless deviations, rebellious spaces that do not create excessive pressure on the whole, etc. But exceptions specifically resist functionalization. This type of strategy does not constitute a definitive solution, since it demands that the exception be regulated, as if it were possible to escape from the threat that that particular regulation would be broken in turn. The marginal existence of areas of deviation, abnormality, and discrepancy are part of the nature of any cultural order regarding the officially regulated, and those marginal areas must necessarily remain fuzzy.

But absolutizing exceptions does not constitute a solution in the face of these imprecisions. The extrapolation of the idea that repetition is impossible leads to the hypostatization of difference, which returns us to the starting point. As Nietzsche already warned, the value of the exception would be lost if it were to become a rule (1980, 76). We cannot even console ourselves by believing, with Benjamin (1977, 697), that the exception is the true rule, because in that case, one would simply replace the other, and the way of thinking would remain the same. Converting the exception into a rule implies perpetuating the problem and abandoning the attempt to be less rigid in our articulation of the difference between order and individual cases. If disorder were absolute and everything an exception, there would be no exceptions, strictly speaking, because exceptions presume something anomalous from the established order. As with false alarms, an exception that becomes a norm ends up destroying its exceptional nature.

The peculiarities of order reveal the fundamentally heuristic nature of knowledge. If every individual case of a rule is always an individual case, in other words, a "special" case because it never stops being a singular example of a general rule, then every case is unique and contains something exceptional. In all knowledge, there is a practical

exercising that is not practical training with specific routines and skills, but the acquisition of judgment about what is implied. In the end, it is nothing but what has, since Aristotle, been called prudence, and it could be interpreted as the management of the unexpected, the capacity for organization and improvisation, for articulating the general and the particular, creativity. The tradition ranging from Kant to Gadamer refers to this ability to conceive of judgment as an activity that contains a level of precision, of enhancement, constructive, creative, or brilliant. "At issue is always something more than the correct application of general principles" (Gadamer 1989, 34). The question about order ends up always referring to personal creativity and organizational inventiveness.

How, then, do we manage the unexpected? How do we prepare ourselves for the unexpected? How do we give order to the exceptions? We do so in a quite limited fashion, because it is a fact of life and life's very flexibility that the use of norms, orders, and rules is open to the novelty and singularity of every situation. That is why the integration of organizations cannot be absolutely guaranteed through rules, institutional design, normative intentions, but does in fact end up being largely contingent, on that concurrence of emergency and self-organization to which modern theories of complexity allude. Complex, adaptive, dynamic systems realize order through fluctuation (Prigogine), with extremely unstable material (Luhmann). The difficulties of order also represent a possibility: better understanding the fluidity of the present, recognizing the ways in which order and disorder are intertwined, and giving way to new types of order that are more flexible. That type of order is not something that is conserved by protecting it from change. The management of disorder is not a defensive action or a restorative operation, but a conquest, a constant creation. Order represents the continuity of chaos by other means.

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