

# The Urge to Define, Sort and Categorize

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## A WORLD OF DISTINCTIONS

Our focus is on human diversity and how in cities we live together with our differences with greater ease. We want to encourage inter-cultural exchange. Yet our starting point is a much broader frame that acknowledges how very difficult it is to turn this into reality: the deep-seated, cross-cultural, human urge to define, to distinguish, to sort, to categorize, to classify and label.

We create a world of distinctions that help define who we are and what we are not. We build an intellectual architecture so we can categorize things, ideas and people to help decide and specify: Who am I? Who am I not? Who is 'insider' and who is 'outsider'? What is 'in' and what is 'out'? What is significant and meaningful, as distinct from trivial and superficial? What is deemed to be right or wrong, good or bad? Where do 'the high' and 'the low' fit in? In particular we define ourselves relationally, in relation to who we are not, into 'Self' and 'Other'. This is the stuff around which identity itself is constructed.

Establishing distinctions is a fundamental process in identity creation and philosophy – the quest for perceiving clearly, understanding and knowing, as well as judging what is right and wrong. It involves the recognition of two or more things being distinct and

different, and building thought structures and value systems around these differences. This process is etched into all cultures and helps distinguish one culture from the next. Accepting differences without ascribing value is, it appears, difficult.

Distinction is not in itself necessarily an evil. Labelling, simplifying, generalizing and abstraction are central to understanding the world and being able to negotiate it at all. How else do we distinguish the raw and the cooked, the clean and dirty, safe and dangerous, and good and bad? Indeed languages are systems of distinction and difference. At its best, distinction reduces the clutter of information, helps lift general concepts out of observations by seeing common features and allows you to jump across themes and subjects and to discern universals and general principles.

But when focus on distinction becomes too sharp it can feed discrimination and prejudice – and these have caused disagreements, conflicts and wars throughout history.

We could imagine the acceptance of difference as a spectrum or continuum. At one extreme there is very active hatred, passing through aversion, which is more a default mechanism, to sufferance, benign indifference, coexistence, tolerance, to active interaction, cooperation and finally co-creation at the more positive end. In *The Intercultural City* we argue that if cities, whether through choice or ignorance, find themselves in the ‘aversion’ or ‘benign indifference’ sectors of the spectrum; they will ultimately lose out – in competitiveness or quality of life – to those that actively seek to position themselves in the zone of ‘active interaction’.

## SORTING AND CATEGORIZING

These categorizing and sorting processes simultaneously define and are shaped by geography, values and understandings of ‘blood’. The place focus reminds us how geography, topography, neighbourhoods, streets, cities and countries influence us. We schematize ‘blood’ and ‘belonging’ into understandings of families, clans, tribes, races, ethnic groups, cultures, nations and ultimately civilizational

realms. The wider the grouping, the more tenuous and unstable they become, except where, as in the case of nation, geography, history and government collude to reify them into actual existence.

Family seems self-evident: mother/father, brother/sister, uncle/aunt, grandparents, cousins, and so on. There is the sense of immediate relation – heritage, household, close lineage – though any anthropologist can tell you that cultures differ enormously with regard to understandings of kinship. State (inheritance, benefits) and medical ('next of kin') definitions and received cultural norms help stabilize our understandings of family, while marriage, divorce, adoption and friends blur the seemingly crisp distinctions. Family is central to our sense of belonging as it invokes feelings of love, of likeness in terms of shared blood and experiences, and of home – family is integral to living arrangements. And if you don't like the family you're born into, you can always find or start a new one. We need to belong, and so transfixed with belonging are we that many of us seek an extended family of dead relatives. Websites offering genealogies and family trees constitute a growth industry. TV programmes tracing family histories become ever more popular. The fashion for genealogy is a modern form of ancestor worship.

For some if not most people, further, wider affiliations like race and nation are needed. 'Race' describes groups of people and is used as a distinguishing concept though by differing criteria: sometimes by 'common ancestry' or biologically, sometimes geographically or nationally, sometimes by visual distinctions, sometimes by a mixture of all these. The categories black, white, Hispanic, the French, Creole, Asian, Chechen, for example, demonstrate a right royal collection of conflations and confusions. 'Ethnic group' is a similarly fraught concept.

'Nation' may seem a slightly less contentious notion for, as aforementioned, geography and government can make it a real entity. We are 'nationals' of one or more states. Most of us have passports that tell us so. But 'nation' can also conflate geography with a shared history and a common people, if not race. The rise of new nationalisms, and the success of some, demonstrate that nations can be fragile. Yet sometimes this very fragility coexists with vehement nationalism.

Finally, and most ambitious in terms of categorization, are civilizational realms. Understanding them is particularly pertinent in the context of a globalized media where sweeping conceptualizations function critically to represent a world frequently understood to be divided into a small number of camps. These realms are groupings of cultures and subcultures that we perceive to have a binding narrative or common way of explaining the world. They help us understand the big cultural differences, such as assumptions about existence and destiny or even time, as well as the seemingly smaller things that collectively make a culture. We may assume within a realm a loose coherence of values, beliefs, modes of thinking, ideas, prejudices, views of beauty and ugliness, faiths and religion. They are the widest geographical groupings of ideas of who you are, how to live, think and what to believe in that we perceive to be held in common. From a Western perspective we may, for instance, distinguish realms between Chinese, Indian, Islamic, Christian, Japanese and so on. The Western media's construction of the 'Arab street' is another example of such a grouping. A Chinese or Indian's perspective of how to separate the world into different realms will be different, however.

We assumed and believed for a long while that nations linked blood, geography and values. People tried to create a shared narrative of origin, destiny and initial myth. And nationhood has come back with a vengeance in Eastern Europe. So being French, an Arab, or someone from Benin, Croatia or China was key. With so much people movement through time these myths are difficult to sustain.

But TV programmes in Britain such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *100% English* have helped to explode the myth of clear-cut groupings of belonging and within that the case for racial 'purity', revealing surprising results. Many participants dropped their jaws as they found themselves with racial origins from Africa, Mongolia, Romany gypsies or the Middle East when they thought they were quintessentially English. This raises the question: When can I become English or an Italian, an Israeli, an Iranian? What are the criteria? Is it merely living there, accepting the customs or faith, or is it more?

The categorizations we use change over time. In one period it is tribe, nationhood or class that is in vogue, in another it is lifestyle categories. They all amount to the same thing – to distinguish one from another and to ascribe value and importance to distinctions. Trees of origin are created out of distinctions to describe how the complex or developed come from the simple. They are the genealogies, typologies and taxonomies that structure our biological world and much else.

This is how people order the world and justify their position in it and differentiate themselves from others, to feel *right*, even *chosen* in some instances. Within such taxonomies we can develop hierarchies and create boundaries. We do it even within institutions and professional associations and, in a capitalist economy, through consumption. Ultimately we build nations on these edifices as well as belief systems such as religion. Faith, what you look like and how you behave have always been great dividers between who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’, who you like and who you hate.

Distinction is a social fact that places different values on different individuals and things. And in spite of our democratic age, making distinctions continues. It drives fashion, from clothes and housing to who we meet and where we go on holiday. Distinction establishes our tastes or aesthetic codes. These may seem trivial but they are still part of the more profound identity creation process. The criteria on which we make such judgements about what is important have always been a matter of controversy. It is the negotiation of the significance of differences that drives and shapes a culture and its resulting rituals.

## VALUES AND HIERARCHIES

In biology, the study of taxonomy is one of the most conventionally hierarchical kinds of knowledge, placing all living beings in a nested structure of divisions related to their probable evolutionary descent. Most evolutionary biologists assert a hierarchy extending from the level of the specimen, to the species of which it is a member, to

further successive levels of genus, family, order, class, phylum and kingdom.

Given a set of distinctions and difference, the next step in identity creation is to ascribe value to any position, whether you are up or down – that is to rank according to perceived criteria – importance, sacredness, right/wrong, advanced/backward, expedient/foolish, and so on. This defines the parameters and status that circumscribe the relative position or standing of things. With living things – from plants to animals, including humans – it shapes the patterning of reciprocal behaviour. In human terms we recognize throughout history these ranking schemes, such as barbarian, slave, freeman, citizen, noble, ruler – systems of class, caste and status.

We separate physically too and classify areas according to attractiveness and whether they are for ‘people like me’. These are hierarchies of taste. At one time the city may have been segregated into quarters based on status, profession or religion. Now it might be housing estates and gated communities. Crossover is not encouraged and market price is the great divider. That world of distinctions is built on and creates bodies of apparent truth, knowledge systems and a canon. That canon is now under threat and radically so.

Hierarchies are powerful ordering devices that result from sorting. At first sight they feel compelling as they seem to be self-evidently true, practical and workable. In a computer, subcomponents or modules, which are themselves created out of smaller components (integrated circuits), which in turn are internally organized using hierarchical methods, fit into a larger structure that makes the computer. But human interaction is not a computer.

A hierarchy orders things or perceptions of people up and down and helps us understand, or rather, constitute our understanding of, the world. But not all hierarchies are necessary and some can hinder lateral, equitable and effective communication between people. So you might find two co-workers, neither of whom is the other’s boss, but both of whose chains of command will eventually meet through a complicated, inefficient loop or pathway. And this is why hierarchical structures are increasingly under threat and new more equality-based organizational forms, such as matrix management, are more popular

as they give individuals and teams more scope to perform. Hierarchy and respect for diversity are uncomfortable partners.

## SIMPLICITY AND COMPLEXITY

A world where ‘this is just so’, a world of single and simpler ‘truths’, is easier to deal with than one of multiple truths, varying values, and many interpretations and diversity, or a world where people look different, believe different things and behave not like me. It is easier to slot into the former life – it appears more manageable, simpler and efficient. At one level it is effective, of course. You do not need to think or to challenge yourself. You can get on with life more speedily; there is a structure to life and a pattern. This is etched into the mindset and beliefs and these become self-reinforcing over time. Most things then confirm what we already thought – this is the ‘confirmation bias’.

Sorting and categorizing is an attempt to reduce complexity by creating borders and boundaries between people, values and things. But sorting is also a precondition for creating prejudices. In our current period of dramatic change, mobility and information overload these tendencies are reinforced. There is little space for reflection and an urge to reduce every issue to a sound bite problem with a simple solution.

These in turn can themselves become barriers to further understanding as we block things off. Yet the urge to define is sensible. It is an attempt to increase predictability, to allow us to prejudge things by responding to default preferences so we can simplify the world. The key to reducing complexity is to reduce the number of events, variables, thoughts and distinctions you have to handle. This is a form of reductionism. It is embedded in our culture.

These default responses can provide apparent continuity and stability. They are then anchored by set ways of behaviour that become the prejudices.

Being less open has a flipside and a cost. Exploring and easy discovery get lost, stimulation is curtailed, knowledge possibilities are reduced and, ultimately, the potential for enrichment suffers. Ideas

and inventions require openness to flourish. This openness in turn needs the ability to live with ambiguity and a lack of certainty and predictability. This is a tall order for some.

## BREAKING THE UNIFIED CANON

But everywhere you look there is a breakdown of the simple canon that things are as they seem. Truth systems are collapsing. The natural sciences are one example. For centuries we worked within the sharp distinction of things being objective and sharply separate from the subjective. At the boundaries of physics, chemistry and biological research we now know that it all depends on how you look at things. For example, a conscious decision as to how to look at an electron will determine what it is and its properties. If we ask a particle question we get a particle answer, if I ask a wave question I will get a wave answer (Capra, 1982). The classic distinctions between mind and matter and the observer and observed no longer hold.

Postmodernism has challenged our perceptual and value landscapes. We see more clearly now the multiple truths as we wrench ourselves out of a singular Eurocentric or Western mindset. Suddenly there are many things to be known and perhaps they are better. Perhaps an Indian, Chinese or Islamic worldview or that of native peoples has something to teach the West. These are well beyond perceptions about how life should be lived, according to what values and what is deemed important. The more collectivist, group or socially oriented thinking suddenly comes into its own when we think of the challenges to address global warming, where individualism shows its limitations. Alternative medicines are gaining credence to the extent that you can receive such therapies free at special National Health Service clinics. You merely need an Internet connection to self-publish to a potentially global audience.

New thinking looks at interdependences, relationships and how assemblies of parts make a whole. It takes complexity as its starting point. It tends to value diversity in thought, ideas and the make-up of people. It sees things organically. You could say it reverses Occam's

Razor principle from 'All things being equal, the simplest solution tends to be the best one' to 'All things being equal, the most complex might open out the most possibilities'. As you switch from a world of more rigid patterns to a world of interrelationships, traditional structures do not work anymore.

## DIVERSITY: THE CENTRAL DILEMMA OF THE AGE

Dealing with and valuing diversity, difference and the desire for distinctiveness is the central dilemma of our age. Acknowledging and living at ease with the landscape of diversities is different from focusing on differences. The challenge is to create a coherent narrative for diversity and how it can answer the problems of our age. This is what we attempt to begin in this book.

The drive to prejudice can take on a visceral, sinister and potentially physically dangerous character. While we can pretend having prejudices about how people look or think does not matter or affect us, the reality is that such prejudices jeopardize our well-being and our ability to live comfortably. When we ascribe too much importance to ordering concepts like race or tribe or nationality, we admit the possibility of conflict given the context of the inevitable coexistence in towns and cities of people from different parts of the world. Worse, when faced with crisis, people tend to withdraw further into their self-categorizations to seek solace and stability. When food or fuel is hard to come by, faith, for example, may be the only reliable constant in a person's life to which to turn.

However, the notion of tribe is today being reconfigured beyond bloodlines and geography as groups of the young define their cultural interests as if they were a tribe. Professional associations can even be seen as tribal. So from a diversity perspective it becomes interesting to see what happens when, say, an Islamic planner meets a Western one...

Projecting ahead, say 50 years, will new markers of distinction emerge that cut across lines of colour, class and ethnicity or will one

issue like 'ethnicity', 'religion' or 'colour' trump all others? Instead, might attitudes to greenness and sustainability or other ideas suddenly become dominant ways of dividing the world as 'class' once did? Or, even, might completely different worldview contrasts develop such as flash, fast and the mobile versus staid, slow and sedentary?

A final issue. Has acceptance of diversity become a moral universalism and should we make normative judgements about this? Can this concept or doctrine apply to all persons and all things for all times in all situations? Moral universalism is the *meta-ethical* position that applies to all people, regardless of culture, race, sex, religion, nationality, sexuality or any other distinguishing feature. Its justification is only so that the human endeavour can survive given our shared vulnerability to suffering. If this is so, a universal reason applies that overrides all relative moral codes. Many people believe they have more important duties to family members, friends, compatriots and their ethnicity rather than to strangers, foreigners or the planet. The 'intercultural city' notion challenges us to re-engage with the strange and the different and the planet. Indeed, welcoming the stranger is part of the tradition of most cultures.