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Bracketing Beelzebub: Satanism studies and/as boundary-work

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In any emergent academic study, what determines the nature and extent of the object assumes primary importance. Arguing which phenomena can be said to be paradigmatic and so safely inside, and which are critical for determining the boundaries of the subject, is a recurrent scholarly activity – both to get on the same page internally and to legitimize the field externally. Paradoxically, the criteria for this activity are nevertheless frequently naturalized and implicit, hidden behind common sense assumptions, empirical darlings and pet theories. Thomas Gieryn has proposed the concept of "boundary-work" to capture this duplicity, defining it as the

attribution of selected characteristics to [an institution or a subject] (i.e., to its practitioners, methods, stock of knowledge, values and work organization) for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as [outside that boundary].
(Gieryn 1983)

The concept has been popular in social studies of science (and non-science) to elaborate on the demarcation principles set forth by e.g. Karl Popper and Robert Merton, but also in anthropological and ethnographic studies of in-group/out-group dynamics outside science. As such, boundary-work has a wide applicability in analyzing knowledge and

practice, or in a more Foucaultian mode, the technologies of power-knowledge in any social field.

So also with the study of Satanism. What Satanism is and is not occupies the time of both scholars and informants. What to include and exclude – here exemplified by a famous promotion picture of the Norwegian black metal project Nattefrost (Peter Beste) and the American Satanist and bon vivant Boyd Rice in his Hawaii period – is important because of the public understanding of Satanism, which neither scholars nor Satanists can avoid. This understanding goes from “ridiculous” at best to “violently criminal” at worst, frequently forcing scholars into simplifications and apologetics to get the basic point across that Satanism is more than one thing, and most Satanism-s are loud, but safe. In this case, a relevant question is: WHO GETS TO DRAW THE BOUNDARIES? Are scholars importing participants’ boundary work into academic analysis or making their own? And are they aware of the criteria behind the demarcations? Are they the result of empirical study and/or theoretical reflection, or implicit presuppositions?

In the original draft of my dissertation *Between Darwin and the Devil* (Petersen, 2011), the introductory essay included a discussion of the professionalization of Satanism studies along the lines found in subject areas such as new religious movements, and more recently, paganism and esotericism. From a historical perspective, I was interested in the precursors and antecedents of this emergent field; from a sociological angle, I was equally interested in the strategic boundaries defining valid methodologies and knowledge put forth by a collection of scholars to demarcate their field of expertise.

Unfortunately, this section had to be dropped to focus the discussion and make space for more relevant thoughts. It is the ambition of this paper to readdress the issue of scholarly boundary-work in and around Satanism studies, making it a both personal and

academic reflection of the field to understand the interrelations between the public, the media, the scholars and the Satanists themselves.

Boundary-work and professionalization

As a starting point, I will briefly discuss the development of the academic representation of Satanism. Through a series of reinterpretations of semi-cyclical nature, the scholarly understanding of Satanism has evolved in stages of **de-demonization, sanitization, and heterogenization**. Thus, in various periods, Satanism has been viewed as an inverted Christian sect, as occult witchcraft, as an atheist philosophy, and as a polyvocal field of discourses, all of which are intertwined with cultural stereotypes and insider claims. I am inspired by both Philip Jenkins' *Mystics and Messiahs*, a superb study of "eternal return" of cult emergence and anti-cult reaction, and Massimo Introvigne's *Enquête sur le satanisme*, which is proposing a basic development between societal reaction and cultic innovation (Introvigne, 1997; Jenkins, 2000).

This relates to the point made in my dissertation that Satanism can be seen as two things, as **Discourse on the satanic**: Cultural mythologies about the Other and the others, which is a broader view, and as **Satanic discourse**: Oppositional subcultures appropriating and reinterpreting the satanic, which is narrower and based in self-declared Satanists' articulations, the satanic milieu in which they are located and the identities and interpretations associated with it. These two are interrelated, but also distinct features in what we could call Satanism in modernity. Here it is important to interject that Satanism as an independent religious alternative often has more to do with

Romantic poets deconstructing the Christian narrative than Christianity itself, making it decidedly post-Christian.

The first stage of de-demonization occurred in the 1960s and was provoked by journalistic treatments on the bizarre and the occult explosion in cultic and popular culture (e.g. Freedland, 1972; Godwin, 1972; Logan, 1974; Lyons, 1970; Rachleff, 1971; Rhodes, 1954; Roberts, 1971; Seabrook, 1970 (1942)). The prevalent popular paradigm of the period was inverted Christianity and folk beliefs, that is a diluted Christian context (e.g. Satanism as «Christian heretical sect») – black masses, black magic, Child sacrifice, Devil worship, witches Sabbaths – Rosemary's Baby and Hammer Horror springs to mind.

The 1. reinterpretation: De-demonization, as exemplified by Marcello Truzzi or Randall Alfred – placed modern Satanism in the category of occult witchcraft, not «evil», often using Anton LaVey's Church of Satan as an example (e.g. Alfred, 1976; Truzzi, 1972, 1974). But older and other examples of Satanism existed, making it an ambiguous field. In any case, defining Satanism was straightforward, as Devil worship was black Witchcraft and sorcery, and both was resurfacing in modern times.

EXAMPLE: TRUZZI

[SHIFT 6] The second stage of sanitization has to be seen in light of the Satanic Panic, especially the secularized Christian beliefs which made it a truly damaging social force (see e.g. Jenkins, 2004; Richardson, Best, & Bromley, 1991; Victor, 1993). When evangelical imaginations turned into social caseworker reality, alerting law enforcement, media and the courts, anything could and did happen. Satanism was primarily envisioned as violent organized crime and the atrocity catalogues were taken

from the same seedbed as before - black masses, black magic, Child sacrifice, Devil worship, witches Sabbaths – but now combined with a massive conspiracy.

The 2. reinterpretation: sanitization, was a scholarly intervention in these matters in the 1980s and 1990s – atheistic and organized Satanism is established as modern Satanism tout court, hence marginalizing all other articulations of Satanism, emic or etic (e.g. Bromley & Ainsley, 1995; Harvey, 1995; Taub & Nelson, 1993). In some cases Michael Aquino's Temple of Set was included, but the dividing line was between proper Satanism (Church or Temple) and teenager's ostensive actions, mass murderer's appeals and evangelical fantasies. One thing was clear: Satanism had nothing to do with Devil worship. What was fundamental was that the internal understanding of Satanism in the Church of Satan was being accepted as boundary-work by scholars, amplified by simplifications offered to defuse a moral panic. Again, definitions seemed straightforward, based on COS' Satanism = us and pseudo-Satanism = everything else.

EXAMPLE: TIME MAGAZINE VS. RICHARDSON, BEST, BROMLEY, MOST ANTI-ANTI CULT LITERATURE

The third stage of heterogenization has developed from the mid-1990s and especially in the new millennium in the context of the internet, black metal and post-punk apocalypse culture, all of which complicated easy boundaries around Satanism, non-Satanism and pseudo-Satanism (e.g. Moynihan & Søderlind, 1998; Nocturnum, 2005; Parfrey, 1990 [1987]; Petros, 2007). In the period, a plurality is revealed, especially after unrest in CoS around 2000 and 2007, clearly visible online.

The 3. reinterpretation: heterogenization – is a growing understanding that what we thought was «inverse Christianity» or «pseudo-satanic» (because of dependence upon

the CoS as model) has to be recontextualized – Satanism as a late modern phenomenon is larger than the CoS, a crucial point for both ethnographers and historians (examples include Dyrendal, 2008; Lewis, 2001; Lowney, 1995; Petersen, 2005, forthcoming, 2009; Petersen & Faxneld, forthcoming). In the early period (say, in the late 1960s and 1970s), you could argue that Satanism and the CoS was congruent. But not today.

But this has its own problems. Defining Satanism and demarcating the field is less straightforward, and when combined with another shift, namely the one from WHAT or substance-oriented to HOW or discourse/practice-oriented research, makes it less obvious what should be inside and outside. **Now WE have to construct, not ADOPT criteria, necessitating more attention on making criteria explicit and analytical.**

EXAMPLE: GRANHOLM (post-satanic), ME (still satanic) (Granholm, 2009, forthcoming)

Thus, the research subject of modern Satanism is intertwined with both **cultural narratives of the satanic and self-ascribed satanic discourses** articulated by groups and actors in the satanic milieu. The field of Satanism studies is based upon the critical examination of the satanic in a variety of cultural contexts, stretching from the religious to the secular and from identities of alterity to imaginations of the other. Consequently we have to be attentive to expectations and tacit beliefs fed by popular culture and Christian mythology, but also to the struggles for hegemony between satanic actors who construct Satanism in specific ways.

Nevertheless, it is more difficult than it seems, as this double-edged boundary work tends to demarcate a scale of significance, where the gory imaginations of the public and hapless tourists in the milieu are on one end and the “mature” religious Satanists are on the other. In effect, the uneasy boundaries between these categories point to the

difficulty of establishing the external and internal boundaries of the satanic milieu and satanic discourse from both an insider and outsider perspective.

Borrowing boundaries or making our own? The case of reactive Satanism

Of course, neither of these stages are exclusive – they pinpoint dominant modes of representation which certainly co-exist in research today. However, I think they do represent a development in academic representation away from both cultural stereotypes and internal identity politics. But what does that mean for the initial conundrum of boundary work and professionalization?

Even though I had killed a major darling in the thesis, the issues of bracketing, professionalization and boundary-work returned in full force when I got the theme for my dissertation trial lecture: “Present an overview of the phenomenon of reactive Satanism, particularly in relation to other types of Satanism.” This theme poked at a sore spot in the thesis, the subject for many an agonizing night of painful rewriting and heavy metal “thinking breaks”: Whether reactive Satanism should be considered inside or outside modern Satanism when constructing a working definition. What were the consequences of adopting a narrow and a wide definition? Let me backtrack a bit.

In *Contemporary Religious Satanism* (Petersen, 2009), I proposed a heuristic categorization of modern Satanism consisting of three types: Rationalist, esoteric and reactive Satanism. Whereas the **rationalist** type pointed to the use of Satan as a symbol for non-conformity and material wisdom in a strive for indulgence and vital existence, as found in Anton LaVey’s decidedly this-worldly Church of Satan and descendants, **esoteric** Satanism honors Satan as a metaphysical force or a personified being aiming

for self-deification. It is thus aligned in a much more recognizable way with modern esoteric currents, especially what Nevill Drury has dubbed the ‘cthonian’ orientation towards the carnal, the transgressive, and the subconscious, blending with other identifiable clusters such as the ‘dark spirituality’ and ‘Left-Hand Path’ milieus (e.g. Drury, 2011; Granholm, 2005, 2009; Urban, 2006).

In contrast to the systematic discourse of these two types, **reactive** Satanism celebrates the Christian Devil found in demonology and folklore in an antinomian drive against the established order. This is done by appropriating the cultural narratives and stereotypes of Satanism mentioned earlier as a strategy of resistance-through-inversion, making it a category on the border between the satanic milieu and generalized rebellion. It is thus inherently oppositional, whether the goal is immediate earthly success, an affirmation of collective identity through shared cultural alterity, a more radical nihilism, or just maximizing shock value.

As such, ‘cthonian’ styles and ideas has had a lot of success in horror movies, avant-garde art, and ‘deviant’ subculture, befitting identity construction from a variety of perspectives. SO... to see modern Satanism, we have to ‘bracket’ faith-based and secular stereotypes of Satanism to see the diversity of the satanic milieu in its own right. This is of course a common methodological exercise in religious studies: to manage inside and outside points of view, frequently advocated through “emic” and “etic” approaches. The insider perspective, especially when dealing with controversial subjects, is seldom available without a thorough engagement with a representative sample of the participants themselves, necessitating a circumscription of received knowledge.

BUT... we also have to demarcate “religious” Satanism on the one hand and “reactive” Satanism on the other based on the relative “sophistication” of world-view and

discursive practice. This boundary is helpful when the religious aspect of self-ascribed Satanism is paramount as compared to adolescent identity work or public performance, or to counter-act the knee-jerk association between Satanism and violence. But In this sense, my categories are in danger of becoming completely worthless, as they tend to replicate either the expectations of the scholar regarding sophistication or the received wisdom of his or her informants, returning to a sanitized mode. Let me illustrate with an example.

In mid-September 2011 both the Daily Mail, the Morning Sentinel and Norwegian VG described this beautiful horned gentleman by the name of CAIUS VEIOVIS as a Satanist. Charged alongside two others of the murders of three Hells Angels in the United States, he surely looks and acts the part of a devil worshipper. What is interesting is that the media focus on his religious claims as the unstated cause of his antisocial behavior rather than the fact that he is also a prospect of the Hells Angels, acting on order from his chapter leader to prevent a key witness to give evidence in court. Nevertheless, in the case of Caius, the satanic belief IS self-declared and apparently taken seriously; at his first trial back in 2000 when he was called Roy Gutfinsky, Jr., he described himself as a "satanic worshipper" and vampire. So we have to acknowledge that the Satanism articulated here might go beyond mere surface and directly to legitimize extreme transgressive behavior.

This is the beatific visage of one of the most recognizable ex-members of the Church of Satan, Magister Diabolus Rex. The horned gentleman quit the Church in 2011 citing irreconcilable ideological differences. These centered on the reality of the Dark Lord and the reality of occult knowledge and practices – in my typology, he moved from the

rationalist to the esoteric category. Currently, he is involved with a group called the Chaos Imperium, building an enormous machine as documented on Facebook:

"(...) the Ragnarok Engine [is] a quantum Black Magickal device for generating daimonic entities entangled to the Sorcerer via a fractalized interlink. It is the Thurim of the Chaos Imperium, and an Eschatonic forge for technological black magickal research and experimentation. In operational mode this device utilizes toroidal mass and spin to generate energy augmented by electromagnetic charge to create a psychic singularity. The singularity is the chaos matrix that the magician uses to forge into any desired configuration utilizing the energized will to send outward or inward to multi-dimensional fields that in turn can be manipulated through the machine generated Being (...)"- FaceBook page

Aside from being the most awesome magico-scientific project EVER, the Ragnarok Engine definitely exhibit a seriousness which underscores his ideological and behavioral investment in self-declared Satanism.

But... take another look at the two gentlemen. I for one would not be surprised if one was mistaken for the other by the ignorant public – sporting forehead implants, a primitivist style, and a blatant disregard for public opinion. In other words, the two individuals, when included in a wide discussion of boundaries, illustrates the obvious point that reactive style, aesthetics, behavior – the antinomian mode so to speak – IS PREVALENT THROUGHOUT THE SATANIC MILIEU. LaVey even put a formula to it, saying that Satanism was nine parts social respectability to one part outrage, all the while donning his horned cap among voluptuous women or spouting social Darwinism and blatant anti-Christianity, upsetting both the establishment and the counterculture. Of course this is not to say that Caius and Diabolus should be treated equally: One is a murderous

criminal, the other an occult engineer, and to construct a Satanism where both reside would be going back to the worst excesses of evangelical panic. But their aesthetic likeness and self-declared Satanism, however genuine or feigned, point to a scholarly problem when engaging a subculture as keen to “play with gray” as the satanic milieu.

Caius Veiovis might be a critical and somewhat flippant case to make a point. A more paradigmatic example of what I am trying to say is the Danish metal musician King Diamond, which is both using excessive onstage theatrics mimicking all the classical stereotypes, AND an outspoken representative of the Church of Satan, providing at least two levels of articulated of Satanism. To state the problem in a different way: Why are King Diamond and Diabolus in, when Caius is judged out? Of course we could use criteria such as ideological ancestry, group adherence, and subcultural resonance; yet, the basic point of methodological complicity seems to remain, anchoring the basic constituency of our subject on scholarly judgment.

What is the solution?

As we saw above, similar imagery and practices of transgression and antinomianism are utilized by both reactive and religious Satanists, frequently by appropriating cultural stereotypes. In consequence, we as researchers might reproduce *emic* boundaries as academic blind spots. In effect, constructing a boundary with a reactive outside and a religious inside is also an exercise of power, as the scholar delimits the subject in several ways. On the one hand, the “inside” deems the “outside” or popular understanding lacking – this is obvious when the Church of Satan calls all other satanic groups “pseudo-satanic” or “devil worshipers”, questioning their sincerity, maturity or relevance, which

is then adopted uncritically by Satanism researchers. This is not necessarily unreasonable, but neither is it the whole story. On the other hand, the academic representation of “inside” knowledge is formed according to external academic criteria as well as insider information, which relies on a scholarly judgment of sophistication. This might also be reasonable, but there is a danger to the representability of the study.

Reactive Satanists are not religious Satanists, and when they are, as for example the anti-Semitic theistic Satanists in the *Joy of Satan*, or the spiritual Satanism of Diane Vera, Nagasiva Yronwode and Venus Satanas, or members of many occult-oriented black metal bands (Watain, Dissection) they belong in the *esoteric* category. What this does *not* mean, however, is that reactive satanic discourse is only found in reactive Satanism. Far from it.

As I have proposed in the dissertation, when engaging particular groups and the articulations “on the floor”, so to speak, the categories of rationalist, esoteric and reactive should rather be envisioned as modes of satanic discourse, used strategically to construct something both viable and distinctive (or mainstream and shocking).

In other words, reactive satanic discourse is exactly the oppositional element of *any* satanic discourse; it is only when it is the *dominant* aspect in a given position we can talk about reactive Satanism as a specific type. Further, if we include a certain amount of publicity and coherence as additional criteria, it is only after Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan and his *Satanic Bible* that reactive Satanism retroactively gains its contemporary meaning. Bear in mind that this is a Foucaultian point – it is not that reactive Satanism *did not exist* before the 1960s. But as a new understanding of what Satanism was, was proposed in *The Satanic Bible*, both esoteric and reactive Satanism was redefined as discrete categories in opposition to the rationalist Satanism of LaVey. This is what I have

called the “galvanization” of the satanic milieu *as* satanic, and a defining point in the redescription of reactive Satanism from a paradigmatic exemplar with a specific content, to one position among others with a distinct mode of discourse.

There is thus nothing wrong with excluding Caius, as long as we are conscious and explicit about how and why we make boundaries. This should be done on a case-by case basis when engaged in the empirical material, as there is no singular “Satanism” out there, but people and texts *calling themselves* satanic.

THANK YOU.

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