Sitting in a Bar

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This paper describes a bar in the small Polish border-town of Slubice. The bar is presented as a social space between and between everything. It belongs neither to the past, nor to the present, but belongs neither to here, nor to there, and is most certainly belongs neither to "us" nor to "them". The bar is described as a social space and time in transformation, where inherited frames of orientation are remade.

Three different perspectives will be developed and contrasted. Firstly, the author will try to make sense of what he can see. He provides commentary on the bar guests, who come from many walks of life. They will be presented as being engaged in a playful contest of established classifications, and even in a playful contest of establishing classifications. Secondly, there are German intellectual commentators— the author, of course, being one of them—who have a certain admiration for what they perceive to be an emancipatory fluidisation of classifications. Thirdly, there are Polish intellectual commentators, for whom the social space of the bar demonstrates less of a condition of fluidisation than of greater alterity.

Introduction

Between 1995 and 1997, I have frequently been a guest at a bar in a small Polish town. What initially astounded me on my first visit in mid-1995 continued to puzzle me until my last visit in June 1997, which was that my frameworks of orientation were more or less useless for interpreting all that I observed in this bar. In addition to this quite typical experience of initial...

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disorientation in a foreign place, I gained the impression that a playful destabilisation of classification systems was being staged by those frequenting this bar.\footnote{The term "frame" is used in the sense of Goffman (1974/1993). The term "classificatory systems" is used in the sense of Durkheim and Mauss (1901) and in their tradition, Douglas (1966). At the same time the focus is shifted away from the functioning towards the "making" of classification. The practice of un-doing and re-doing classifications and frames of interpretation is understood as boundary work and as a way of producing locality in the sense of Arjun Appadurai (1995).}

In presenting my argument I will return to an old anthropological virtue of telling my story "about the world", not telling a story about other peoples' stories about the same world. My emphasis is on the materiality of the social world, as well as on visible symbolic action as perceived and interpreted by myself from an external point of view. The intention here is not to contradict the basic understanding that there can only be representations of representations since there is no direct access to reality. However, it should be pointed out that one can nevertheless distinguish between stories that try to make sense of the world "out there", and those that try to deconstruct sense-making. I do believe that a bias toward either side is indeed unavoidable though not a sign of imperfection, rather a necessary and perhaps even beneficial division of labour.

This, therefore, explains the bias of this article toward sensemaking. It is, in fact, my intention, and this is what I meant by returning to the old anthropological virtue. Interestingly, this virtue has been applied more successfully outside anthropology, with Walter Benjamin's (1940/1991) thick descriptions of urban landscapes being perhaps the most famous examples. The same point can be made using a strictly anthropological vocabulary.\footnote{Victor Turner (1967/1974) made a distinction between (1) the interpretations provided by local experts and other users of certain symbols, (2) the meaning of a given symbol to be deduced from the actual use to which it is put, and (3) the meaning of a symbol to be deduced from its relationship to other symbols from the same semantic field. My analysis is restricted to levels two and three. However, even though my own interpretation will not be confronted with the level one analysis, it will be exposed by a self-reflexive turn of the perspective: Towards the end of the text the reader will observe that my interpretation is rooted in the intellectual climate of Berlin after the Fall of the Wall in 1989.}

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One final preliminary remark is necessary. I do not agree with the pessimistic concept of the "moral vacuum" that is supposed to have been left behind by the collapsed regime. I also consider to be equally wrong the
optimistic inversion of the same argument, by which the vacuum is supposed to have been transformed into a social stage free of all restricting certainties, where everything is in flux, a social stage upon which consequently, everything is possible.

Though microcosmic, my argumentation tries at least to address the greater topic to which it might be linked, or to which it might make a marginal contribution. The transformation of the societies of the former Eastern Bloc, encompassing whatever else that might distinguish it from other forms of social change, can be seen as a special historic event due to the following peculiarity: As is the case with any radical revolution, this transformation simultaneously affects every sphere and dimension of both the social order and daily life. Yet unlike revolution, this transformation lacks any future-oriented ideology. It lacks the image of a Utopia. People are not experiencing the novel situation with the benefit of any inspiring blueprint for a promising, better world, a rough outline of which could have at least helped answer the question, “how shall we live?” Rather, it is being experienced as a sober, pragmatic amalgamation of conditions stemming partly from the West and partly from the pre-Communist past, which in principle are already familiar, in all their banality and contradiction. The kind of radical change which is relatively unburdened by utopian ideology seems to make unimaginable freedom possible in the reconfiguration of social space. This means, in other words, that the practical possibilities go beyond the available interpretative frameworks of the people involved. Some might experience this as an opportunity, while others might feel it to be threat.

However, I do not want to present a general paper on transformation. I also do not intend to give any final answer to the specific question relating to one of the more fascinating cultural aspects of transformation: Is the classification system with its boundaries, working within the social space-time which I will try to describe, presently undergoing a change from one stable form, through a period of liminal crisis, to another relatively stable form, or is the classification system rather becoming more fluid? Instead of answering this, I prefer to remain on a more modest and preliminary ethnographic level, and illuminate only a small facet by turning to the phenomenology of a dance floor.

A Wee Bit of Context

The above-mentioned bar is called Lubusz, and is situated in the small town of Slubice (approx. 17,000 inhabitants), which had originally been part of Frankfurt an der Oder (approx. 80,000) up until 1945. After 1945, the Oder bridge linking the two parts of the dual city had been used as a border crossing, separating Germany and Poland. Since 1991, German and Polish citizens have been able to cross the border without a visa. Poles are allowed to reside in Germany for up to three months without a visa. In line with the regulations in the 1995 Schengen agreement, all other citizens from non-EU countries need a visa to enter the EU country of Germany. By contrast, Polish visa regulations allow citizens from former Eastern Bloc countries free entry and a three-month tourist residence in Poland, or at least a procedure that can easily be manipulated in this direction.

As a result of its location on this European border with its specific regulations which classify people into European, Non-European, Polish and Eastern-Block, Slubice has become a special town. The topographical importance of the bridge has been transformed from a point of restriction to a lively avenue of interchange for people, vehicles and goods. Those like myself who cross this bridge regularly are somehow growing accustomed to what initially caused strong feelings of astonishment and uncertainty. Yet, growing accustomed to and becoming clear about the causes of uncertainty are two different things. What is particularly striking is the small groups of men who have taken to standing around during the day, occasionally including a woman in their midst, all of whom are recognisably doing nothing more than waiting, yet seem to have resigned themselves to a very long wait. Only rarely do they make a movement or gesture that might give you some clue as to what they are doing. In the final analysis, however, any observer is at a loss.

Interpretations here will certainly differ to some extent, depending on the beholder. People in Berlin behave differently on the street than those in Warsaw, in London differently than in Cairo, in Copenhagen differently than in Bombay, and so on. In all public spaces, however, you will usually expect to find people either leisurely strolling, pursuing some other recognisable, respectable goal, or interrupting their goal oriented activity for a chat with some friends. As soon as you come across people you cannot easily classify accordingly, they attract your attention.

Returning to the bridge, if I look a second time at those groups of unclassifiable people, I find that they attract my attention because on the one hand it seems that they must be living in and/or working on the street, while on the other hand they definitely do not look like homeless people or beggars.
This classificatory inconsistancy leads me to the conclusion that they must be smugglers of various kinds. This conclusion is prepared and supported by most narratives one can hear about the bridge on both sides. But then, if they are smugglers, why do they not even try to conceal this fact since the border police, the customs officers and the bypassers can and do observe them? So here I am with yet another classificatory inconsistency. This leads me to the conclusion that the bridge is indeed a no man’s land, where the rules of the game are invalid.

The bridge between Germany and Poland has thus become additionally inscribed as a transitory space, by the non-classifiability of these extraterritorial bystanders. As a result, the activity of crossing the border is experienced as going through liminal space-time. For some the crossing of the liminal sphere, especially after dark, causes a disconcerting feeling of insecurity. A Polish colleague recently told me that he always breathes a sigh of relief once he has crossed the bridge. He added that he must admit, to his shame as a Pole, that he is only truly relieved when he has gone from Slubice to Frankfurt, and not vice versa. Certainly, for many users of the bridge, feelings of security will be different.

Directly in the vicinity of the bridge, there is a small, triangular square a few hundred metres away, which the people of Slubice call the “Bermuda Triangle”, thus giving a name to its exterritoriality. The northern side of the triangle is marked by a 1970s-style two-storey building. On the ground floor, there are two food shops, one household goods shop, a bureau de change, a chemists and a café. The owner of the building is the PSS, formerly a nation-wide agricultural co-operative from the prewar period which was decentralised after the collapse of communism in Poland, and privatised in a way that I have never managed to fully understand. The first floor has been leased to a businessman who operates a casino with gambling machines, and the Lubuski bar which was mentioned at the beginning. Its sign reads “Cafe – Restaurant – Discotheque”. My theory is that the landlord of the bar is an entrepreneur who is doing business in an auspicious liminal space.

**The Bar**

As is the case with most Polish restaurants above a certain standard, there is a cloakroom at the entrance where you can, or rather must leave your coat. In front of the wooden hut-like structure installed for this purpose, there usually sit two elderly, cigarette-smoking, tea-drinking ladies, who it seems must have been sitting there for ever. It would certainly be impossible to judge from their outward appearance whether the year is 1997, 1987 or perhaps
even 1977. One of them takes the money for usage of the toilets, the other guards the cloakroom. A young man of enormous proportions joins them from time to time; it is easier to see which age he lives in. As we learn later, he is the ticket-seller and doorman for the discotheque, and seems to be generally in charge of maintaining the peace.

With few strategic exceptions, the interior of the Lubusz has remained true to the aesthetic programme of the lost regime, and thus effects me like a quotation from the past. It has something of the charm that obsolete articles attain when, instead of being placed into a museum or simply disposed of, they are given a new, ironic use, like Russian army coats being worn by fashionable young women in Paris, Berlin, or perhaps even St. Petersburg. Yet this, I am quite certain, is unlikely to be the perception of the majority of guests in the Lubusz.

The aesthetic design of the room has certainly undergone a series of changes and accretions in the last few years. Yet it is not easy to identify exactly which element of the collage stems from which period. In general, what is indeed striking about the Lubusz is that it has not been radically redesigned since the collapse of communism. The dance floor is equipped with ultra-powerful loudspeakers, a revolving light-reflecting globe, stroboscope, light show, fog machine and continuous mirrors on two sides. The disk jockey is enthroned at the head end of the dance floor and plays fashionable dance music for lowbrow listeners, which is essentially the same kind of music you can hear in popular discotheques all over the world. The fourth side opens out to the area where guests sit at tables. The only real change in design is in the use to which the room is put.

The Guests

On many occasions when I entered this somewhat dingy, musty establishment during the afternoon, I meet people, including respectable looking families, consuming coffee, tea and cakes. In one case I imagined that a particular generous-looking grandmother had invited her daughter's family from another town to coffee and cake during their visit to Slubice. At another table sat a conventional looking middle-aged couple, appearing as though they were going through a ritual that for years has been a regular part of their relationship. A younger couple, she being much more fashionable and boldly dressed, were holding hands across the table. In a corner sat five young girls in jeans, platform shoes and T-shirts, drinking Coca Cola and enjoying themselves immensely. The waiters, dressed in strikingly formal, conservative clothes, behaved in a very correct manner, serving the guests
in a friendly but firm way. At some of the tables, preferring those by the covered windows where the square can be seen through gaps in the blinds, were small groups of men who frequent the cafe, speaking into mobile phones every now and then.

Each guest, on their own, would usually be pretty inconspicuous. Yet the mixture of guests in the Labusz, as well as the relationship between the guests and the ambiance of the establishment, generated for me a peculiar feeling of classificatory uncertainty. Who are these people? Why are they sitting here of all places, and in this combination? What is happening here?

Later in the evening, the cafe gradually changed into a restaurant with food of rather modest quality, although you won't find a much better restaurant in Slubice. I saw individual couples alone, several couples together at long tables, groups of men and groups of women. Many were eating their evening meal together, while others just drank, mostly beer, although every now and then a group of people ordered a bottle of vodka with a jug of tomato or orange juice. From my perspective, some of these groups frequently looked to be on a typical “office outing”. The men were often extremely casually dressed, some even wearing track-suits. By contrast, many women really dressed up, some in line with fashions found in relevant magazines. In other cases, certain gentlemen appeared as if they might work at a bank, buying their suits from a boutique in Warsaw or Berlin. The gentlemen, who earlier had been at the window seats, were also still here. The group of young girls in the corner had grown larger in the meantime, but were still drinking Coca Cola and smoking cigarettes.

Dance music started at eleven o’clock, turned up so loud you could no longer hold a proper conversation. By that time, other tables had also filled up with new guests. Various people came in for a short time and left soon afterwards, behaving as though they were looking for someone or something.

Some of those milling around apparently aimlessly eventually joined others at tables after all. Often, the people at whose tables they sat down would then suddenly appear in a different light from the way I had tried to see them before. The young girls in the corner were now joined by others dressed in an excessively provocative way, so that the already uncertain classification of “adventurous high-school girls” was further watered down. The gentlemen at the window were then joined by women, some dressed as prostitutes—or at least what would be considered the dress of prostitutes in many places around the world. Others simply dressed like girls from the country. Two oriental-looking men then joined a table with four lively, blonde, middle-aged women, so that the classification “female colleagues celebrating a birthday” no longer quite seemed fit. There were also now lonely figures at the bar, such men seemingly waiting for something.
There were three couples sitting at a table close to mine, which had been empty up till now. My first impression was that they belonged to my make-shift category, "elegant couples". After a while, I noticed that the gentlemen were dressed expensively, but relatively tastelessly, wearing heavy gold chains on their wrists and ostentatiously laying their mobile phones on the table between the vodka glasses. Then I noticed that one of the three women was dressed very much like a model that you would not expect to see outside the pages of fashion magazines. Once I realised that the people were speaking Russian amongst themselves, I felt how they were moving in my head into my relatively new "Mafia" category. A glimpse at the other table with the two elegant couples convinced me that the two categories were threatening to cancel each other out. So I was back to square one.

It would be to misunderstand the transformation of the cafe-restaurant into a discotheque if we were to simply re-classify the place as part of the red-light district after 11 o'clock in the evening. The point is rather that a process of hybridisation continues here during the evening and night, which dissolves or at least massively calls into question any existing classification schemes. This fluidisation is, according to my interpretation, what attracts people to the Lubusz. Despite the fact that there are few alternatives in Slubice, I assert that some of the guests would no longer come if this fluidisation only irritated them and made them feel uncertain. Let us therefore continue with what happened as the evening developed.

**The Dance Floor**

One by one the people began to dance. The first to break the ice were individual couples from the company outing. Then came the elegant couples, followed later by the lively young girls and the women from the women's table – alone and in groups. I did initially notice that the couples knew how to dance, and indeed danced well together. They evidently gained a lot of pleasure from rhythmic, co-ordinated movement, and were certainly not too shy to use theatrics. I felt reminded more of film scenes from Buenos Aires than of dance cafes in Germany. The elegant couples gave me the impression that they had become lost in the Lubusz on their way to a noble dance cafe I know in the Polish city of Poznan, where the upper classes, strictly among themselves, like to dance to nostalgic live music after a genteel dinner for two.

In amongst the couples, several women and girls danced alone. As the evening progressed, those with the greatest stamina danced with increasing enthusiasm, many of them simply with their own reflected images in the
mirrors. Their challenging erotic movements, apparently addressed only to themselves via the mirrors, somehow excluded them from the public space of the dance floor. They created the impression that they were occupied with something that one should not be watching, yet they were still able to check out the dance floor quite well via the mirrors, even if they did seem to be far removed. For their adorers, the girls' play in the mirrors resulted in a voluptuous duplication of their images. Observers did not simply watch dancing girls, but watched themselves gazing in mirrors reflecting dancing girls who only viewed themselves, never meeting the eyes of their adorers. Dancing as a very direct face-to-face encounter between two individuals of the opposite sex was turned into an indirect game that shifted attention to the observation of the observer, thus desubstantializing the identities of the players. The mirrors translated the question "who is s/he" into "who am I".

Against the background of this erotic game playing with gender norms and lustfully melting narcissism, exhibitionism and voyeurism, as well as the incredibly loud music, smoke machine and flickering light, the elegant and more conventional couples for me looked totally out of place. Yet during the course of the night, some of the men proved to have less stamina, and some of the elegant ladies stared dancing more wildly, just like the young girls. Interestingly, through their particular movements and visual contact with those watching, especially their partners who were now sitting at the tables, they did not isolate themselves as the young girls did, but instead used almost identical movements to stage a quite different gender relationship and identity construction.

Certain women present could possibly have been classified as prostitutes, not so much by their clothing but by their open strategy of sitting down at tables with men. These women now began to dance. Paradoxically, their dancing style, along with their clothing and aura, made some of them look more like shy girls from the country who landed in the wrong cafe.

So, what do I believe I was seeing on this dance floor? A woman dressed as a bridesmaid, wearing a white bride's head-dress in her hair, as is the custom for prostitutes in the Balkans and Turkey, and dancing quite chastely in the expectation that she might find male company. Was she a prostitute? And just what exactly is "a prostitute"? Next to her, a young woman sank to her knees in the ecstasy of her dance making unmistakable hip movements, and fondled her own body with her eyes via the mirror. Was she a high-school girl? Perhaps the young woman from Bulgaria too was a high-school girl back home from where she came only two weeks ago. In the same picture, a woman was dancing with her husband in a close embrace of stylish harmony. Was she a married, bourgeois woman dancing with her husband? And what about the male dancers? Dancing with the young woman from his
home village, was the Bulgarian car dealer her pimp, her relative or both? And, since Slubice does not seem to have any businesses, or anything else for that matter that would normally attract elegant people, then one might ask what business the posh gentleman was in, over there with his three piece suit. There was also the elderly, slightly drunken man dancing in his white and sweaty undershirt with amazing drive and elegant skill. Did he perceive himself to be a drop-out?

It is a fact that most visitors of either gender do not seem to fit smoothly into any of these classifications, which is the mystery of Lubusz. I would go even further, stating that existing classifications should be disputed, and that even the basic cultural practice of classifying should be contested to some extent regarding this particular dance floor. This playful contest is what turned the dance floor into a liminal space-time, which was the reason visitors came back to Lubusz. For post-modern anthropologists, it is like water for fish.

The Companions

During the course of my visits to Lubusz since 1995, I have been accompanied by a variety of male and female companions. On those few occasions when they did not broach this subject themselves, I questioned them on how they would interpret and classify the people and their behaviour. With few exceptions, they had the feeling that the frames of interpretation they had brought with them were more or less useless in Lubusz. Yet there were two different tendencies.

Visitors from Germany, all students, colleagues and other academics, tended to become fascinated by the disorientation. Most of them experienced the uncertainty and weakness of the categories as a stimulating intellectual, perhaps ironic game with emancipatory potential. The ability of my guests to have fun with each other in this liminal space, not despite but apparently specifically because it was impossible to have even a remote feeling of belonging to any fixed milieu, seemed to my guests like an outlook on future, better times. Lubusz, and Slubice itself, were like a cosmopolitan place with a tolerant form of urbanity, which clearly overshadowed small-time Frankfurt. The anthropologists among my companions recognised in Lubusz certain phenomena they had seen previously in other transient space-times of cultural hybridisation and low classificatory grid, as Mary Douglas (1978) has put it.

Most of my Polish companions, again all students and colleagues, felt somewhat uneasy, or perhaps out of place in Lubusz. We all more or less
agreed on the observation that established categories do not easily work in Lubusz. But, what for me and most of my German guests was a playful context, pointing out to how the world may deal in the future with old and perhaps too rigid, narrow categories, was for most of my Polish companions simply something irritatingly tasteless. Some of them explicitly pointed out a difference between “us” and “them”. From this point of view, the regular visitors to Lubusz represented a kind of alterity, and their symbolic practices would not stand for classificatory fluidisation or any kind of creative boundary work. My Polish companions did not feel at home at Lubusz because they felt they did not belong to the same interpretative community, and thus were simply ignorant of the frames at work in this bar for the lower and less educated classes.

If there were a discothque like Lubusz in Berlin, it would probably become a secret, known especially among students, particularly students of anthropology. By contrast, Viadrina students from Frankfurt/Oder do not go to Lubusz. Not even – or rather especially not – the Polish students, even though virtually all of them live in Slubice. One of my female students wanted to make an ethnographic study of the red-light milieu in Slubice. For her, the opportunity that Lubusz offered, by making it possible to be present without being noticed as an outsider, was more of a hindrance or even a threat. She apparently needed to start with a clear and undisputed distinction between her and the field to be observed.

A Polish doctoral student once told me that people in the town of Slubice believe Lubusz is a café for “blacks”, meaning a place one does not go to. In Poland, and I believe in Russia as well, the term “blacks” refers to people from the East or South-East, including Bulgaria, Romania, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and so on. Since most regular patrons at Lubusz speak Polish, however, this is just another attempt to find some kind of orientation with the help of an apparently clear-cut classification.

Put simply, most of my companions realised that their interpretative frameworks did not work in Lubusz. Some of these companions (mostly academics from Berlin) made sense out of this experience by classifying it as a process of fluidisation of classification systems. They assumed this fluidisation to be part of a huge transformation of Middle-Eastern European societies. Other companions of mine (mostly academics from Poland) made sense of the very same experience by classifying it as an experience of alterity. The anthropological clue to this interpretation lies in the fact that most Polish commentators assumed that their own lack of familiarity with the observed symbolic order at the bar was an indication of alterity. They also insisted on the validity of their interpretative authority. The source of this authority, however, was merely their Polishness.
At this point in my argument, there is perhaps a certain temptation to
move over to an explicit theoretical and methodological reflection on the
intricacies, contradictions and self-contradictions evolving between the dif-
ferent observers and their interpretations. However, as promised in the intro-
duction to this paper, I shall resist this temptation. Instead I will simply
continue with my story. In doing so, I will try to provide an implicit and
self-reflective answer to the aporia given by the contradiction between the
impossibility of true classifications and the unavoidability of classifying.

Making and Living with Classifications

While I was writing this paper in June 1997, the citizens of Slubice seemed
to have enforced one solid classification involving a particular situation.
Basically, the story is that certain people have complained to PSS manage-
ment (the owners of the building) about prostitutes frequented Lubusz and
damaging the civic atmosphere of the public space in front of the building.
PSS management and the Slubice police have therefore asked the landlord
of Lubusz to close his doors to prostitutes. Since mid-June 1997, the story
goes, there are no more prostitutes at Lubusz. In this case, the classification
"prostitute" was assigned a specific definition, which was a "black woman"
that sold her body for money in Slubice. All other persons that might fall
under this classification, provided the definition was slightly different, were
not to be affected. The dance floor at Lubusz has thus been deprived of one
category of customers, at least for the time being.

Do these developments prove wrong my classification of the dance
floor as a liminal space? I do not think so. Do they prove correct the classi-
fication of the bar as a different interpretative field? I do not think so either.
They do shed an interesting light on the two alternative interpretations,
liminality and alterity. The tendency to translate the incomprehensible into
liminality tells a lot about Berlin, the West and post-structuralist anthropo-
logical discourse celebrating hybridisation and displacement. It explains a
little bit about Lubusz too. The tendency to translate the incomprehensible
into lower class alterity explains a lot about the reconfiguration of social
space in post-communist Poland. It of course says a little bit about Lubusz
as well.

That the game of classification does have an ambiguous function was
brought home to me on one occasion by a group of young men in front of
Lubusz, in the Slubice Bermuda Triangle, so to speak. I was coming out of
Lubusz onto the street with one of those colleagues who shared my fascina-
tion with the opportunities presented by this liminal space. A young man with a bundle of German banknotes in his hand asked me in German, though with a foreign accent, if I could give him some larger notes in exchange. Before doing so, he obviously must have classified me as "naïve", "harmless", "German" and "having money" on me. I must have instinctively classified him as a con-man, because I said "no" before I could think and continued on my way as inconspicuously as I could. He then asked my colleague the same question, who was a few metres behind me. Before I could send a signal, my unsuspecting colleague pulled out his wallet and checked his notes in order to be able to answer the question correctly and helpfully. I now returned back to my colleague, at which point we were joined by two other men with their hands in deep coat pockets. With a speed that words cannot describe, the notes changed hands so many times, along with commentaries in Turkish, that in the end my colleague no longer knew how much money he had in his hand. From his face I could see that he had meanwhile radically changed his classification of the situation from "helping a citizen" to "about to be robbed by three men with long knives in their pockets". Seconds after the young man walked away, expressing thanks in German with a satisfied voice, my colleague swore at him in Turkish, a language he happened to speak fluently. This, now seemed to put the young man in mind of another fixed classification, at which point he asked: "Are you a Moslem?" When my colleague answered "yes", the young Turkish speaking man returned and gave him back the missing notes with an embarrassed smile. The appeal of solidarity via the "Moslem" category was concluded with a friendly slap on the shoulder, and the two separated peacefully.

Classifying was at the root of this unfriendly encounter, but it was also the solution to it. The fact that my colleague in reality does not consider himself to be a Moslem does not weaken the explanatory power of this example. Quite to the contrary. The reason classifications work is not simply because they actually correspond to reality. Rather, they are considered valid by their users because, as long as they provide the necessary framework for dealing with life situations, they work. Of course, experience may change classifications. But there is no direct experience of naked reality independent of classifications. Of the two, reality and classifications, one does not come before the other.

References