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“We have nothing to fear but fear itself”: A Comment on M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Village*

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In Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), the foundation of the state, or political society, emerges as a direct result of the fear of violence and death in a "state of nature." This hypothetical situation, also termed "war," and famously characterised as one in which life is "nasty, brutish and short," leads egotistical individuals, concerned above all for their security, to make a compact or contract between themselves to renounce much of their individual liberty, and invest power, or the means of legitimately exercising violence, in a sovereign. Political society, for Hobbes, is thus the direct result of fear.

Fear is the crucial impulse, too, in the creating of the "village," the utopian or dystopian community which is the subject of M. Night Shyamalan's film of the same name. This community, it is slowly revealed in the film, is not in fact the nineteenth-century "utopian" community it appears to be, but instead an attempt, on the part of a group of people who had experienced different sorts of violence in 1970s America, to flee from that violent (anarchic) society and set up a safer community, a more hopeful one, with the help of the family money of its main proponent, Edward Walker. As such, it is in some ways an illustration of Hobbes's view of the origin of political society: a gut-felt impulse, fear, leads to the decision to combat the lawless anarchy and violence of the state of nature (or 1970s America in this case) by reconstituting a social order in different terms.

But if fear is crucial to the constitution of Shyamalan's village, it is also crucial to its daily maintenance. The villagers fear the woods, and in particular the fearsome red creatures ("Those We Don't Speak Of" as the villagers call them) who inhabit them. The inhabitants are kept within the bounds of the village and separated from the towns by their fear of the consequences of entering Covington Woods, where Those We Do Not Speak Of live. It is only late in the film, when the real nature of the utopian community becomes clear to the viewer, that it also emerges that the fearsome red creatures are the inventions of the very founders and leaders of the village, the Elders, who dress up as the creatures to frighten the other inhabitants of the village.

There are thus two levels of fear, or, better, two groups which feel different fears and feel them differently. One group is that of the Elders, who constituted the community as a result of their fear of violence and anarchy in the America they fled from. We may say also that their desire to maintain the society they have set up is likewise governed by their memory of this fear – preserved in the photographs of their previous lives which they have stored away in locked boxes. The other group is constituted by the other villagers, who, although this is never made explicit in the film, are presumably the second generation, the children of the Elders. Their fear is not of anarchic, violent society (of which they know nothing), but of the unknown, or hardly known, creatures of the woods, unspoken of and thus in some senses beyond knowledge or rational explanation.

There are, then, two major disparities in Shyamalan's village: regarding fear and knowledge. The Elders can hardly fear the monsters of their own creation; they have only the memory of their fear in the warlike, insecure America they came from. The fears of the others in the village, on the other hand, are the result of the threat of violence from the creatures in the woods, a threat deliberately created by the Elders as a mechanism to maintain the community. In other words, there has been a shift in the location of violence (and fear). Fear is no longer of egotistical and potentially violent neighbours, as in the anarchic society the Elders fled from, but instead of monsters created by society itself (or rather a small, governing section of society). The threat of violence in the new community, then, furthers the ultimate ends (peace and security) of the community as a whole. As a representation of the function of the monopoly of violence by the state, it closely parallels Hobbes's own account.

A further price for this security, clearly, is the parallel disparity in knowledge. The Elders have a "true" knowledge both of the origins of their society and of the means of its maintenance through fear, whereas the others have neither. They do not know where they have come from (except, in a very general sense, it is implied, from the "towns"), and their knowledge of Those We Don't Speak Of is based on deception.

The idea of a society based on a necessary fiction, it seems to me, points us in the direction of the notion of the constructivist nature of human society. Leaving aside our responses to the nature or quality of the fiction constructed (in particular its exploitation of fear), the idea that the institutions of human society can be shaped, or indeed created *ex novo*, in response to dysfunctions in existing society celebrates a sense of human agency, a sense of the possibility of articulating and realising projects. Again leaving aside the criticisms of the whole notion of utopian political projects (thinking, for example, of Edmund Burke or, more recently, Jacob Talmon), this is surely a hopeful and positive view of humanity and its capacity to regenerate itself, to lift itself out of history. Hope, as one of the Elders says in the film, was one of the founding impulses of the village. In this sense, at least, the film is a valid representation of the radical nature of the utopian project.

If the project itself, the way that the community was set up by means of a foundational compact and a desire to create a new and better society, has positive and, we may say, progressive elements, clearly the nature of the society itself is hierarchical and oppressive. If we accept the premise of fear, this patriarchal, ordered society is a legitimate, conservative-realist response to the anarchy of modernity. The Elders give up the hope of an open society based on an equal access to knowledge and truth in exchange for an ordered society based not on freedom but on security. Their society is thus based on what is perceived to be the lesser of two evils – a protective, hierarchical but safe society based on deceit, rather than a free, democratic but unsafe one in which knowledge is available to all. It would seem, in this reading, that the film embraces a sense of the need for limits to freedom, democracy and knowledge, as well as for deceit on the part of the sovereign, in the interests of general security. As such, the film embodies a political vision fully appropriate to certain perceptions of the world in the early twenty-first century, perhaps as Hobbes's own vision mirrored the fears and uncertainties of seventeenth-century Europe.

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