

Images of Social Disorder in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*

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But the most frequent reason why men desire to hurt each other, ariseth hence, that many men at the same time have an appetite to the same thing; which yet very often they can neither enjoy in common, nor yet divide it; whence it follows that the strongest must have it, and who is strongest must be decided by the sword.

—Thomas Hobbes¹

I. Social-Theoretical Perspectives on *Íslendinga saga*.

The decline of the Icelandic Commonwealth, as portrayed in Sturla Þórðarson's masterpiece, provides a rich field of speculation for students of social disorder. In some respects, it is a Hobbesian tale of escalating violence, as a stable but fragile public order degenerates into nasty, brutish competition among powerful chieftains. From yet another perspective—that of modern nationalism—*Íslendinga saga* can be read as an early warning of the price paid by polities that are too weak to control the conflicting ambitions of strong individuals.

This paper represents a preliminary effort to connect Sturla's text with modern debates about the problem of social order.² That connection is at once inevitable but highly complex. The saga speaks to a growing scholarly interest among social scientists in pre-political sources of social instability; and yet we should never forget that it is a saga we are analyzing, and not a pure body of social facts. My purpose here is to confront this tension directly, and to consider ways the social theorist might appropriate the humanistic content of *Íslendinga saga*.

The potential significance of Sturla's text derives from several late twentieth-century

interests. With the collapse of political institutions and resurgence of ethnic violence in Eastern Europe, social scientists have become increasingly interested in sources of social conflict among groups, not just political conflicts among states.

Indeed, modern social theory should find special significance in thirteenth-century chronicles of social instability. For Sturla's age marks the beginning of a centuries-long era, ending perhaps only in our own day, when political authority rose to absolute strength to quell the chronic disorder among tribes and clans. The centralization of power in the medieval Scandinavian kingdoms can be seen as an early example of sovereign authority filling the vacuum left by the disintegration of social relations. In the twentieth century, as new assessments of power become unavoidable, we are inclined to see political authority as yet another extension of human conflict--and not a necessary remedy.

For these reasons, many social scientists have recently returned to fundamental questions about the roots of social order.³ In the absence of overwhelming political force, what are the underlying social and cultural factors that breed disorder? Are they inherent in human nature? Are they tied to contingent social and economic conditions? Is there any hope for self-governing communities to meet the demands of order while still leaving room for such larger human ideals as social independence, personal honor, and cultural accomplishment?

Sturla Þórðarson's great saga seems highly relevant to this kind of inquiry, but only with certain qualifications. First, our contemporary interest in social analysis should not be

thought to challenge the literary nature of this complex work. Indeed, I believe one must approach the saga as something more than an anthropologist's or historian's factbook—more than a collection of empirical facts. Second, however, this distinction between a literary text and sociological data is unexpectedly difficult to define. To a surprising degree, both fields call forth similar skills that point toward a convergence of interpretive methods.

Third, it is important to identify specific narrative features of the text that shape the reader's general impressions about social order. Foremost among these features is the notion that societies can move from a stable equilibrium, implied by the narrative onset of the saga, to that graphic disorder that constitutes the saga's dramatic action.⁴

Another feature of saga narrative is the episodic emphasis on personal agency, rather than diffuse contextual conditions, as the instigator of social change. Although it is widely recognized that Icelandic sagas present a strikingly understated picture of individual psychology, the action is nevertheless driven by individual behavior at a narrative level.

Lastly, there is that great enigma of saga style: the elusive, retreating perspective of the narrator. The powerful images of social disorder that emerge in Sturla's epic are surprisingly congruent with the modern theoretical outlook of social science, which uses its own impersonal authority to warrant compelling explanations of enduring social problems. In this respect, the standpoint implied in modern social theories shares important characteristics with Sturla's narrative persona.

II. The Problem of Social Disorder.

What is now referred to as "social conflict theory" gained increasing academic attention during the 1960's as a conscious attempt by liberal and neo-Marxist thinkers to challenge the allegedly conservative bias of mainstream social science.⁵ Beyond this ideological agenda, however, social conflict theory raised important questions about some core assumptions of social analysis. To reduce these assumptions to a single question, we might ask whether every social order enjoys a basic presumption of stability, one that would prevail in the absence of destabilizing forces?

Such a presumption has often been suggested as the tacit premise of modern sociological analysis, as exemplified in such seminal works as Talcott Parsons' *The Social System*. But contrasting presumptions are readily available among classic works of social theory, most notably in the seventeenth-century English thinker, Thomas Hobbes. Along with Hobbes's early vision that human social interaction leads inevitably to savage conflict, absent strong political authority, one should also consider the presumption of social conflict found in the later writings of Sigmund Freud.

For the sake of simplicity, I shall use these three classic theorists as reference points for various images of disorder found in the Icelandic *samtíðarsögur*.⁶ All three frameworks operate at the level of cognitive presumptions rather than empirical facts: they provide alternative ways to organize facts in the service of a fundamental perspective or human vision, which is never itself amenable to direct proof.

In this respect, each framework defines an outlook that can be used to illuminate narrative perspectives implicit in the saga text. Events in the saga are thus not taken as factual evidence for proving or disproving a social hypothesis or theory. Instead, the broad social images created by the saga narrator can be understood as reflecting one or more of these fundamental assumptions about human nature in a social order.

III. The Hobbesian Vision.

A brief summary of these alternative visions will introduce my long-term project of analyzing Sturla's imagery. The Hobbesian vision of disorder starts from the premise that individuals relate to one another through mutual fear. Their acceptance of public authority becomes the only alternative to a violent war of all against all, and their surrender of personal autonomy to the sovereign power must be absolute.⁷ Many commentators approach Hobbes through his mechanistic psychological model, which explains the transfer of personal fear into an overpowering desire for security, rooted in self-protection. But there is a prior element in Hobbes's theory that brings it closer to conditions of the saga age: a presumption of environmental scarcity, according to which personal fear is the natural product of social, economic, or cultural competition.

On its surface, the disorder portrayed in *Islendinga saga* reveals little of either Hobbes's psychological or environmental analysis. Indeed, the initial conditions of social harmony that open this and other sagas point directly counter to Hobbes's vision. Rather

than moving from a fractious state of nature to authoritarian stability, the saga shows the disintegration of an established, organic social system. It suggests a more complex psychological theory than Hobbes allows, in which the implied human "state of nature" is spontaneously cooperative. But then, exactly what is the mechanism of growing disorder? Sturla provides no direct or simple answers, although his dramatic imagery frequently reflects sharper competition over scarce environmental conditions, including limited economic wealth and positions of social status.

The events portrayed in *Íslendinga saga* suggest a psychological model in which it is reasonable for individuals to subordinate their personal security to a body of cultural norms. My point is not about the purely factual interpretation of historical events, but rather about the shared, humanistic perspective of great literary works and broad conceptions of human nature. Whatever modern historians tell us about the *Sturlunga Æld* (most of which, of course, would have to be based on this and other sagas), Sturla's construction of that period implies that fundamental visions of social order must assign some independent force to preexisting social norms, which are notoriously missing from Hobbes's theory. In turn, Hobbes's insights may well supplement Sturla's vision by emphasizing the competitive social conditions under which the drama unfolds.

IV. The Freudian Vision.

Freud's provocative writings on social order extend Hobbes's pessimistic vision in

ways that help close the gap with Sturla's construction. In Freud, Hobbes's contentious state of nature is transferred to a subconscious world modeled on biological rather than social metaphors, and it is then used to explain the kind of social norms that mark out Sturla's cultural universe. Freud's view suggests that individuals in each succeeding generation face internal conflicts between their own autonomous desires and the authority of social values enforced by the superego. The assertiveness of historical figures thus arises when this psychological representative of the "collective conscience" is temporarily overpowered by its natural, instinctive opposition.⁸

Sturla's narrative shares certain elements of Freud's broad theory. Saga narratives portray distinctive individuals, often described in heroic dimensions, whose strong-willed actions violate the prevailing social order. Notwithstanding the "objective" style of saga description, arguably the antithesis of psychoanalytic reflection, the drama can easily be transposed into Freud's conflictual terms. Freud remedies certain omissions in Hobbes's model by making the organic social order the underlying source of interpersonal conflict, prior to all questions of political authority.⁹ The reader of *Íslendinga saga* will find rich examples of rebellious spirits, from the anarchic outbursts of Óraskja Snorrason to the oedipal rage of Sturla Sighvatsson.

Still, the Freudian vision fails to capture important elements of Sturla's creation. Freud satisfies the modern taste for interpreting social conflict in terms that allow for individual spontaneity--even when personal agency is thought to be steeped in repression or

doomed to burn itself out. But Sturla's saga confronts us with less fashionable possibilities, including conflicts endemic to the social order itself, and the gradual decay of social forces powerful enough to check deviant personal ambitions. The saga pushes us toward another look at the Hobbesian theme of environmental constraints, even though the surface of saga narrative seems much closer to Freud. Sturla's vision encompasses elements of both, and leads us to search for yet additional models of human conflict.

V. The Parsonian Vision.

Except among professional social scientists, Talcott Parsons is not as widely read today as Hobbes or Freud. Yet his works sum up several decades of sociological theory about the problem of public order, and it is appropriate to grant him the status of a classic figure.¹⁰ His theory of social systems is highly pluralistic, seeking to incorporate the visions of Hobbes and Freud, as well as other traditions. For our purposes, his major contribution was to treat cultural and legal norms as autonomous social forces, reducible to neither individual self-interest nor psychodynamic repression. In addition, Parsons is identified with a functionalist style of reasoning, which interprets social action teleologically as preserving or restoring a closed set of norms that define a particular society or culture.

The Parsonian vision captures certain essential features of saga literature, to the extent one assumes that the narrator's voice speaks from a unified body of social values. These values need not be consciously expressed, nor even approved of, by historical saga authors

or compilers. They are rather an interpretive postulate, based on the assumption that each saga defines a coherent normative universe—one we would typically associate with the *Zeitgeist* of its author. In the case of *samtíðarsögur*, the time frames of author and events happen to converge.

This orientation to preserving and restoring value coherence can also be said to unify the dramatic action within sagas, given their common emphasis on informal dispute settlement, legal proceedings, rule-guided feuding, and reciprocal obligations.¹¹ Although Parsons developed his theory of social systems in order to analyze existing or historical societies, it is arguably even better applied to literary reconstructions of social conditions. Empirically documented societies have fuzzier boundaries than the worlds described in saga narrative, and Parsons' critics faulted his method for attributing too much coherence and permanence to a subset of dominant values. Marxist social theorists, for example, found no place in Parsons' theory for the emergence of fundamental social change, which they assumed to be the fate of all hitherto existing societies.

The particular social order found in various sagas restores some balance to the Parsonian vision, which is often stretched too far in discussions of highly pluralistic modern societies. The sagas typically portray the institutions of feuding and dispute resolution from a lofty Parsonian standpoint of social equilibrium. Sturla's chronicle of almost catastrophic events, in which he and his wider family appear as protagonists, is much admired for its elevated tone of balance and impartiality. But it is overstating the point, if not downright

circular, to treat *Íslendinga saga* as empirical evidence for a self-correcting force within Icelandic institutions. After all, the Commonwealth came to an end at about the time Sturla's chronicle runs out, although it remains an open question whether the acceptance of Norwegian political authority brought an end to the broader value structure.

Whatever later historians and Icelandic nationalists would make of these events, the values internal to the saga seem relatively clear. Along with progressively heavy conflict, *Íslendinga saga* emphasizes the need for continual resolution of disorder. The values preserved by Icelanders in the Sturlung age are inseparable from their elaborately described procedures for social self-preservation. In short, their social order is itself the continual rectification of violence and disorder. The possibility that consensus can still emerge out of sharp social conflict was perhaps the subtle theoretical vision that Talcott Parsons was trying to express.

VI. Conclusion: Recasting the Presumption of Order.

Images of social disorder in thirteenth-century *samtíðarsögur* can enrich the interpretive frameworks used by social theorists in the late twentieth-century. In recent debates, these frameworks have at times become polarized between partisans of "conflict" and "consensus" theories, with each side tracing its ultimate presumptions back to classic theorists such as Hobbes, Freud, and Parsons. There is an ideological flavor to this debate that does little justice to the depth of each original framework. In any case, Sturla

Pórðarson's chronicle of Icelandic social struggles injects new life into this discussion, with his subtle presentation of a social order in which conflict resolution appears as the central unifying value.

Many issues remain to be elaborated in a careful reading of Sturla's text, which I hope to work on in the future. Of course, the sagas provide no definitive answers to current social questions. And we must be careful not to impose our contemporary hopes and preoccupations on a world vastly different from our own. But saga visions open an important new perspective on certain perennial questions: Is social disorder inevitable? To what extent is human conflict compatible with a lasting social order? Whenever tendencies to disorder prevail, what are the underlying causes, and how are they preventable? Saga readers have long recognized these central issues, and their insights should play a larger role in current reflections on social disorder.

Notes

1. Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive* [1642] (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1949), p. 26.
2. I emphasize that this paper is preliminary in scope, focussing entirely on interpretive frameworks that will be used later to structure a close reading of the text.
3. See, for example, Dennis H. Wrong, *The Problem of Order: What Unites and Divides Society* (New York: Free Press, 1994).
4. The onset of *Íslendinga saga* is problematic in this regard, depending on how one sees it within the context of the entire compilation known as *Sturlunga saga*. Its chronological preface, *Sturlu saga*, starts from the familiar narrative presumption of social equilibrium, whereas the opening section of *Íslendinga saga* mentions two disputes involving Hvamm-

Sturla at the time of his death, one resolved and the other unresolved. Thus Sturla Þórðarson wastes little time getting the action started. For a discussion of the *Sturlunga* compilation, see Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1992), pp. 187-202.

5. The *fons et origo* of this movement was Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1956).

6. My selection is influenced by Dennis Wrong's analysis in *The Problem of Order*, which also includes Rousseau and Marx, among others. Taking these frameworks as "cognitive presumptions" is my own approach, however, with which Wrong would likely disagree.

7. Hobbes's statements in *Leviathan* [1651] are often quoted: "During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war, as is of every man, against every man...No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1968, p. 13).

8. Freud's leading work on social order is *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961) (translation of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 1930).

9. For applications of Freud's theory to literary analysis, see the classic work by Morse Peckham, *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1965).

10. See especially *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937; 2nd ed. 1949).

11. This point has been made by Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988), among many others.