

ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN SMILE:
~~SOME~~ IMPLICATIONS FOR US AGGRESSIVENESS

by Johan Galtung

Center of International Studies
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08544

May 1987

Keep smiling!

One of the first things that strikes a foreigner, maybe particularly a European, upon arrival in the United States-- not only the first time, but also returning after long or even after short visits abroad--is the American smile. I see it as gentle, sweet and contagious. There is something uplifting about it, an invitation to join, accompanied by "how are you today" (to which you are suppose to give some kind of response, not only "and how about you") or the more colloquial "how yea doin'". A little joke may be around the corner, at least a jocular remark. Nothing much subtle, but a ray of sunshine on a rainy day, thus intended, thus understood except by those deep frozen in their hearts and minds, with the average European sourness as a more permanent state of affairs, on a 24 hour basis, 365 days.

Given that average European sourness, with some ups and downs depending on the hour of the day, the day of the week, the month of the year and geographical latitude and longitude the interpretation of the American smile is quick and easily forthcoming: it is superficial. Only skin deep, nothing really human is expressed. Public relations only.

I disagree. I tend to see the American smile as an American gift to humanity, and try to learn to behave the same way, certainly not always successfully. I see the smile as genuine, but

on the other hand I would like to know what it expresses, what it stands for. And, guided by a general yin/yang approach to life I might also be interested in exploring darker sides of the smile, among which I would not count the possibility that it is simply fake. Just to the contrary: I would be more inclined to judge attempts towards lip-curling in the lower part of a French shopkeeper's wrinkled face as very far from genuine, as hypocritical to the extreme. It is sourness with other means. There may even in that grin be precisely that, a grin, a triumph over and above something.

But let me stick to the American smile: an invitation to the Other in our midst to join. There is a community into which one is invited, as a member, until further notice. More particularly, a community where there are rules of the game, also duties but if you are willing to accept them you shall know from the very beginning that admission is open regardless of who you are. If there nevertheless is discrimination, as against blacks, women, the old and the very young or what not the smile is not forthcoming. The right to "refuse admission" is exercised without a smile.

Thus, the first type of smile, smile I, is extended to foreigners, to anybody who comes along, in a bus, in an airport, with only the flimsiest of relationship (tertiary relation), lining up to buy a newspaper. "I try to be nice, and I assume ^{you} to be likewise" is communicated. Then there is the second smile, smile II, inside what sociologists refer to as a secondary relationship, shopkeeper/customer, professional/

client, and so on. Both parties know that their relationship is of short duration, superficial. But let us make the best of it, possibly even as an opening to something deeper. And at the very least let us symbolize through the joint smiling operation that we are going to play according to the rules. If you enter a shop as a burglar then at least do not smile; if doing so in addition to being a burglar you are lying with the shape of your mouth. If you do enter with the intention to buy then at least keep smiling; if you do not you are also lying with the expression of your face because you are not symbolizing your entry into a positive relation, even one of beauty: willing seller finding willing buyer.

Then there is the third type, smile III: it is the in-group smile, the primary relation smile, the perennial smile found inside any American organization, be that an institute, a company, a firm, a farm, a family (although there I often find that the smile breaks down, for other reasons). Characteristic of this smile is again membership of the community, communality, even to the point of symbolizing membership in a corpus mysticum, and, "we are in it together, you and I, we constitute a We, a team, my smile like yours is a signal that I understand not only my rights but also my duties. I accept them willingly, I am grateful to be here, even enthusiastic, and I expect you to be the same. This institute/company/firm/farm/family where you and I are together is the greatest of its kind, and even if that is not the case we shall at least behave as it is, in this highly competitive world of ours!"

Nice, good team player, enthusiastic, faith in the excellence of one's own institution. It is not so difficult to see the root of this phenomenon: competitiveness. There is a double competitiveness at work, both between groups such as the ones mentioned, and between individuals. The winning team bestows its excellence upon the members, the team-mates. Enlightened self-interest would dictate good team behavior, both in the sense of a certain subordination to the leader, and cooperative behavior with those at the same level. Excessive competitiveness, to the point of being nasty rather than nice inside a team, may reduce the competitiveness of the team. Competitiveness at individual level has to be kept within bounds. It is there all the time, but should not unnecessarily destroy the cooperative group atmosphere.

At this point, but only at the level of smile III, will the European critique that the smile is less than genuine have some bite. The smile may actually plaster over highly antagonistic relationships: "why was he promoted, and I not". But from this it does not follow that smile II and smile I are less than genuine. They flow easily from one person to the other in non-competitive situations, and cooperative situations, and make these relations smooth and productive. Moreover, even smile III may be completely genuine as between team-mates in a closed, cooperative relationship. The smile may be more forthcoming in a vertical relation than in the horizontal relation--in the latter there may always be the element of trying to show off in order to impress somebody higher up. And the vertical smile may, of course, be servile upwards and condescending downwards.

Keep smiling----this is the basic norm, even when you are crying inside. Keep your emotions to yourself, smile, I, II, III.

And then one day somebody oversteps the thin line between being nice/good team player, and being nasty/part of the problem rather than the solution. The body language was wrong. He did not find the way of voicing disagreement sufficiently softly. Without knowing it he is already on the other side, actually outside the group.

How does the group react? My point is that Americans are unable to handle basic disagreement in an open debate because the mask will fall off. Of course, there is always the possibility that the chief executive officer (CEO), either directly or through his personal assistant (PA), tries to sound out what the mood of the company is. But this is very different from a debate, as different as a public opinion survey* from a dialogue. Hence, what happens will rather be that the leadership, the power nucleus of the group withdraws into secret session to decide how to handle the problem. Instead of a debate the hiring-firing mechanism becomes operative, or more correctly in this connection: the firing-hiring mechanism. The contract is terminated, or not renewed. And there was no debate, and certainly no confrontation.

But imagine that the person for some reason, like having university tenure, cannot be fired. In that case some other mechanisms become operative. And the first one is, of course,

*Used for the same purpose by the elites; called a market survey when used for company purposes.

to stop smiling. The Outsider is no longer the Other; he is actually a non-entity. Nobody can smile to somebody who no longer exists. A process of ostracism sets in, in university circles known as the American gulag, operating against dissenters, whether that is in terms of principle or dissenters at the lower level, those who simply have doubts about the excellence of the company, or the lowest level: those who fail.

No promotion, no extra funding, no challenging opportunity, no mention--why should there be any of this if this person no longer exists? No commission, no mention, no invitation to parties. "Give him a rope long enough to hang himself"--more or less hoping that the person will turn to the bottle, to other comforts such as womanizing, and ultimately make a wreck of himself. Not the smile without the Cheshire cat, but vice versa: the Cheshire cat without the smile, becomes the rule of the day.

At this point the other primary group in which he is a member, his own family, becomes crucial. If he can no longer exercise his ideal nature, his smiling nature, by having nobody who smiles to him and to whom he can return the smile in the company, then the family is even more needed as a compensation. But imagine the family does not function very well either, and maybe exactly for the same reasons: inability to voice deeper concerns because the mask falls off. With the emphasis put on competition and career in US society the company may be seen as more important than the family, including by the other family members. The spouse may complain, "why can't you

behave like the others, why can't you play ball?". The reasons why may seem strange and unnecessarily pedantic or egocentric to the rest of the family. And if the person disappears into alcoholism they may even never know what those reasons were.

And that was the story of self-destructiveness, aggressive-ness turned inwards in a society where people live under excessive pressure to keep smiling. What about the corresponding story which would bring in aggressiveness without, towards the outside?

Basically the theory would simply be this: if you cannot handle a problem with somebody within the limits set by the shared smile--"let us sit down together, smile to each other, be nice, talk about the problem and we shall sooner or later arrive at a compromise"--then what do you do? You invite the other in as a stranger, using smile I. You add to that some kind of professional relationship, for instance as mediator in a conflict, smile II. You even invite him into intimacy, a primary relationship, smile III. But none of it works; regardless of what you do the smile is not forthcoming, the person looks pained or angry, with a grievance painted all over. His face looks like a fist; maybe it even is a fist. In that case would not the adequate relationship be one of hostility? If you cannot smile, what else is there to do? Is the absence of a smile not actually an indicator that this person is less than human, and if that is the case should he not be treated accordingly? Does he not place himself outside the community of nice, human beings?

At this point the outside world might wonder whether it isn't rather dangerous with this interpretation of the smile when hand guns are so generously distributed as in the American society. If the following is true:

- (1) American interaction is supposed to take place in a smiling atmosphere
- (2) to stop smiling, and worse, even to raise the voice, is a refusal of the invitation to join
- (3) deep disagreement can, by definition, not be voiced with a smile/without raising the voice without being a hypocrite
- (4) deep disagreement combined with honesty is tantamount to exiting from the primary, the secondary, and even the tertiary relation-- to status as inhuman/unAmerican.

then there are certainly limits to debate and open disagreement in general in America. And one might speculate: is it out of fear of such consequences that Americans in "debates" after a speech limit the participation to question and answer, thereby restricting the discourse? Making for excellent discussions when people basically agree, bad discussions when they don't?

Of course, this does not prevent Americans from having strong views and from articulating them. But this is done when the other is not present, physically an outsider. The smile is not tested. There is neither cat, nor smile to stick to Alice in Wonderland--the person attacked is not present.

Nor does it prevent Americans from being creative. To the contrary: instead of fighting it out inside an institute/company etc. they break out before they are fired, setting up their own shop, smilingly (from I via II to III), inviting others to join--continuing the carousel. Whoever has a new idea goes somewhere else if he feels strongly about it, or gives up, and continues the inside smile. A factor to take into account to explain the high level of breakdown of American families--why quarrel when you can leave? Rather have the family as a clearing house where the members exchange reports about what they are doing?--Keeping interaction to a smiling minimum?

But it does make it difficult for Americans to relate verbally over spaces of disagreement. The temptation would be to resort to other types of communication that do not assume a smiling relationship, such as fights (police/military approaches) or long distance economic exchange. Homocide. Suicide. *Market.*

In conclusion, some words comparing the European (continental) and American smile style.

The American advantage is a friendly, even seductive atmosphere that makes people feel at home, ready to yield their utmost. The negative side is the inability to handle basic dissent, and the disastrous consequences, in human terms, to the dissenters. Self-destruction, and destruction by others.

On the other hand, he who is frozen out might make it somewhere else. He may "resign", something Americans do very often (e.g. in Washington, D.C.). This may (or may not) be the end of the old group--and at the same time the birth of a new; in strong competition. However, nowhere in this is ability to understand, leaving alone to countenance, basic disagreements developed--only smiling ability to compromise, agreeing on how to brush real problems under the carpet.

The Europeans love these problems, and bring them up often. You can watch them leaving a high rise building in the morning, already putting on a non-smiling face, preparing for the arguments of the day. Problems are articulated. And people stay on. They move less. And there is less dynamism.

When a real problem comes up, however, it will touch a more responsive cord in Europe than in America. The reason is simple: people are used to articulation themselves not just to hear somebody else talk about them. There is less fear, less panic. Less over-reaction; possibly at the expense of cynical under-reaction.

To a European, America, from this smile angle, looks superficial. To an American, Europe looks sour, argumentative, non-productive. And to a third party both may have advantages and disadvantages. But he will be in little doubt as to who may be more aggressive and kill more. He who smiles most.