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Competition, Antagonism, and Enmity

‘You may tell a lady by the company she keeps.’¹
‘Tell me who your enemy is and I’ll tell you who you are.’²

Theories of enmity

The ruler of the island of San Lorenzo in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Cat’s Cradle* conspires with his colleague, the founder of a new religion, to formally persecute, but never actually destroy, the sect and its leader, and by so doing to legitimate his own power. He is ‘sane enough to realise that without the holy man to war against, he himself would become meaningless.’³ The suggestion that enmity narratives play a more than peripheral or disruptive role in government and politics may have been most graphically presented in fiction. But it has not been neglected in work employing other kinds of imagination, in the explanation and justification of government, and in the study of the circumstances in which government operates and in which the societies which it rules cohere or disintegrate. Questions about the role of expressions of enmity in politics have many and varied resources on which to draw, and a range of existing answers with which to work. Although accounts of the role of enmity have lain at the periphery of political explanation and theory, they have been a powerful minor theme, in particular within two traditions of political enquiry: the examination of the character, cultivation, and conditions of collective and public political identity, and the consideration and justification of the powers of government. In each, considerations of enmity have played a minor but powerful role. And whilst for most political speculation, expressions of enmity are treated as either an interruption of or a threat to desirable social life, in some at least of the work that specifically addresses the character and role of enmity, its articulation is seen as being beneficial and stabilising.

Political identity is social and public, and necessarily involves some form of interaction with others, both individually and collectively. In the formation and narration of identity, the ‘other’, whether or not it is presented as
actively hostile, has a significant role, in which it has to be distinct, different, oppositional. Peter Campbell, writing of the account given of themselves and their ambitions by the French revolutionaries of 1789, comments on their complementary construction of a narrative about their predecessors: ‘the revolution was in some way responsible for creating the ancien régime as an antithesis to its own projected politics and society, and the image of the ancien régime played a part in the political culture of the revolution.’ But this distinct, oppositional character has frequently been depicted as providing not simply an alternative identity, but a hostile one. That which is not us is not only different from us, but an enemy. The threat of enmity can be depicted by reference to the mere fact of difference, and without any evident hostile actions by the depicted other. It is this threat which has been seen as the second function of enmity narratives, the provision of meaning and rationale for government. Government has been both explained and justified by the presence of threats, and these threats have been seen as most dangerously manifested in the shape of human enemies. So both theories of identification and theories of government have provided accounts of enmity and of enemies.

The function of this enmity has been described in four principal ways, and I shall propose a fifth, additional way, which draws on the strengths of each of the preceding four concepts and is, to that extent, not so much an alternative to them, as a synthesis of their various strengths. The first conception of enmity sees it as desirable for the stability and vitality of societies, the second as inherent in political life, the third as peripheral and transcendable, as sometimes beneficial but not as the only way to achieve social benefits, and the fourth as contingent and not necessary either as a function or an occurrence. In discussing each of the four themes, I will draw on and discuss the work of particular thinkers, but in so doing I am not attempting to give a rounded account of the thought of any individual, but rather to make use of aspects of those thinkers’ work to illustrate or develop a number of ideal types. It may well be that, were my account taken to be about one of the thinkers concerned, he or she would be thought to be misrepresented. But my intention in drawing on their work is not to recover what they may or may not have been doing, but to use their work for my own purposes. Their work serves as a resource and a catalyst, not as an authority.

**Enmity as desirable**

To those who see enmity as desirable, conflicts within societies and threats from outside them serve to stimulate and sustain social life and human creativity. This is the view expressed by Harry Lime in the film *The Third Man*, when he observes that ‘In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed – but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had 500 years of democracy and peace,