Assignment #2 — Coping with Injustice

A · Context

Over the years, numerous organizations, institutions, and associations have developed formal classification systems to aid in the organization and management of large bodies of entities, information, phenomena, ideas, etc. These frameworks are often "cleaner," or more rigid, than what it is they are used to classify. The aim of this assignment is to give you a chance to explore, in some depth, why this might be so, what the merits and demerits are of such practices, and to start thinking about how one takes responsibility for the inevitable consequences of all acts of classification: that they play a role of "neatening up" an inexorably rather messy world.

B · Assignment

1. Choose a classification scheme—call it **Q**—that:
   a. Has been developed by an organization, institution, or association in order to classify some realm of entities, ideas, information, phenomena, etc.;
   b. Has been discussed in peer-reviewed literature; and
   c. You believe in, in the sense of feeling that, in its current form or something close to its current form, does a good job with respect to the purposes for which it was developed.

2. Do some research to find out why **Q** was developed in the way that it was—what purposes it was developed for, what goals were set for it, how it came to be structured as it is, etc. In addition, discuss what you feel to be the merits of its being so organized.

3. In his book *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*, Zerubavel talks about rigid *minds*, not rigid *schemes*, but it does not take much a stretch to imagine what a rigid scheme would be. Do you think it would be fair to call **Q** rigid? Defend your answer.

4. As we have discussed extensively in class, any classification scheme, and especially a formal one, will inevitably "do violence"[1] to its subject matter, since there will always be cases that do not fit the categories or classes, or fit more than one of them, or challenge the solidity or merit of any imposed or presumed boundaries, or fail to be properly accounted for in some other ways.

   With reference to specific examples, describe some ways in which **Q** does violence to the realms it is used to classify (be specific about the way in which **Q** fails to do justice to that realm— e.g., by arbitrarily keeping some things in and some things out, or by imposing unwarranted boundaries, or by force-fitting items that could fit into several categories into one, or by making clearer distinctions in the scheme than can legitimately be claimed to be true in the world, etc.
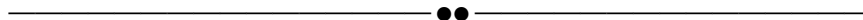
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[1]In using this phrase we clearly do not mean physical violence. Rather, as will be more fully explored in Part III of the course, organizing or classifying a domain in any one way inevitably privileges or brings into more prominence some items or issues, and "disappears" or moves out of view some other items or issues. In this sense, any act of classification—including our ordinary use of words and concepts in day-to-day-life—inexorably fails to do justice to at least some dimensions of that which is classified. It is because that inevitable failure to do everything justice can have serious ethical, economic, political, and other consequences that we speak in terms of classification schemes "doing violence."

5. Over the course of the history of **Q**'s use, have mitigating strategies for dealing with the cases you identified in #4 been proposed or developed? Would other mitigating strategies be possible, which would still preserve what you take to be the merits of **Q**, and/or that would preserve what matters about **Q** to the institution or organization or association that developed it? How successful have these mitigating efforts been, or would they be? And what kinds of violence to the subject matter would still be done, or would be added, by adopting them?

6. Given that you believe in it (see #1.c), justify what underwrites your continued allegiance to **Q**, in spite of the issues brought up in points #4 and #5. In particular, address:

   a. What strategies, recommendations, or guidelines you would recommend for dealing with the cases identified in points #4 and #5 that **Q** is not able to deal with properly?

   b. How do you believe responsibility should be taken, and dealt with, for these inevitable cases of **Q**'s failure to do full justice to the world?

Note that this series of issues and questions leads inexorably towards issues of ethics, responsibility, and politics—subjects we will explore in detail in Part III of the course.

C · Details

1. Length: 2,000–3,000 words.
2. Due: Tuesday Mar 13, 2012.
3. To be submitted in accord with the submission requirements[2] specified in the online INF1002 syllabus.
4. You are welcome to discuss your thoughts and arguments with your classmates or other interlocutors, but your submitted paper should be written in your own words.
5. Papers will be graded in line with the Faculty of Information's Grade Interpretation Guidelines.[3]

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[2]See http://individual.utoronto.ca/jemai/1002-2012/syllabus.html#assignments
[3]Available at http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/grade-interpretation