

Making Enemies

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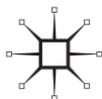
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Making Enemies

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For Helen

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Preface

You may tell a lady by the company she keeps. But you may tell a political leader by the company he or she doesn't keep, and by the enemies that they describe. Writing in the 1720s, John Macky observed of London that 'a Whig will no more go to the Cocoa Tree or Osinda's, than a Tory will be seen at the coffeehouse of St. Jame's'.¹ Three hundred years has changed little, and whom a prime minister or president will not shake hands with is still more noticed than with whom they will. Public identity can afford to be ambiguous about friends, but not about enemies.

There is nothing uniquely political about this, and defining who one is by saying whom you would not be seen dead talking to is a feature of the cultivation of human identity in all its aspects: political, religious, and cultural. It has consequently been written about from within psychology and sociology, history and political science. But the cultivation of identity by the description of enemies has particular consequences in politics. Narratives or descriptions of enemies, enmity narratives or, more broadly, narratives of contention, are a recurring feature of the way in which political leaders, parties, and nations give accounts of who they are themselves. It is not possible automatically to read of other aspects of political action from these narratives, but they nonetheless serve to give meaning and justification to tolerance and negotiation just as much as to oppression and orthodoxy. It is important to pay them attention.

In so doing, the creative arts give valuable insights. Paolo Uccello's picture of St George and the Dragon looks at first sight like another heroic encounter between a brave and resolute knight and a fearsome monster menacing a distressed damsel. But there are oddities. St George looks imposing and martial enough, fully armoured and on a solid and prancing horse. But the damsel looks exceptionally composed, and the dragon rather surprised. Close inspection shows that the dragon is on a leash which the damsel is holding with calm insouciance. It is a set up, and though the dragon is real enough, it is not at all aggressive. What matters is the public presentation. There is a dragon, and a knight who must therefore by definition, given his antagonist, be virtuous and brave. But the dragon is not really an enemy, though it is made to appear like one. Just so in politics, what counts is not any objective dragons, but the story that is told about dragons. Enemies may be real, but they are also made.

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