Vindaloo

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In the summer of 1990, in an effort to improve my barely extant German-language skills before spending a year in Berlin as a guest of the Wissenschaftskolleg, I hit on the idea of finding work on a farm rather than attending daily classes with pimply teenagers at a Goethe-Institut center. Since the Wall had come down only a year earlier, I wondered whether I might be able to find a six-week summer job on a collective farm (Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft, or LPG), recently restyled "cooperative," in eastern Germany. A friend at the Wissenschaftskolleg, it turned out, had a close relative whose brother-in-law was the head of a collective farm in the tiny village of Pletz. Though wary, the brother-in-law was willing to provide room and board in return for work and a handsome weekly rent.

As a plan for improving my German, it was perfect; as a plan for a pleasant and edifying farm visit, it was a nightmare. The villagers and, above all, my host were suspicious of my aims. Was I hoping to pore over the accounts of the collective farm and uncover "irregularities"? Was I an advance party for Dutch farmers, who

were scouting the area for land to rent in the aftermath of the socialist bloc's collapse?

The collective farm in Pletz was a spectacular example of that collapse. It specialized in growing "starch potatoes." They were no good for pommes frites, though pigs might eat them in a pinch; their intended use, after refinement, was to provide the starch base for Eastern European cosmetics. Never had a market flatlined as quickly as the market for socialist-bloc cosmetics the day after the Wall was breached. Mountain after mountain of starch potatoes lay rotting beside the rail sidings in the summer sun.

Besides wondering whether utter penury lay ahead and what role I might have in it, my hosts also worried about my frail comprehension of German and the danger it posed to their small farm. Would I let the pigs out the wrong gate and into a neighbor's field? Would I give the geese the feed intended for the bulls? Would I remember always to lock the door when I was working in the barn, in case the Gypsies came? I had, it is true, given them more than ample cause for alarm in the first week, and they had taken to shouting at me in the vain hope we all seem to share that yelling will somehow overcome any language barrier. They managed to maintain a veneer of politeness, but the glances they exchanged at supper told me their patience was thin. The aura of suspicion under which I labored, not to mention my manifest incompetence and incomprehension, was in turn getting on my nerves.

I decided, for my sanity as well as for theirs, to spend one day a week in the nearby town of Neubrandenburg. Getting there was not simple. The train didn't stop at Pletz unless you put up a flag

along the tracks to indicate that a passenger was waiting and, on the way back, told the conductor that you wanted to get off at Pletz, in which case he would stop specially in the middle of the fields to let you out. Once in the town I wandered the streets, visited cafés and bars, pretended to read German newspapers (surreptitiously consulting my little dictionary), and tried not to stick out.

The once-a-day train back from Neubrandenburg to Pletz left at around ten at night. Lest I miss it and have to spend the night as a vagrant in this strange city, I always made sure I was at the station at least half an hour early. Every week for six or seven weeks the same intriguing scene was played out in front of the railroad station, giving me ample opportunity to ponder it both as observer and as participant.

Outside the station was a major—for Neubrandenburg, at any rate—intersection. During the day there was a fairly brisk traffic of pedestrians, cars, and trucks, and a set of traffic lights to regulate it. Later in the evening, however, the vehicle traffic virtually ceased, while the pedestrian traffic, if anything, swelled to take advantage of the cooler evening breeze. Regularly between nine and ten o'clock there would be fifty or sixty pedestrians, not a few of them tipsy, who would cross the intersection. The lights were timed, I suppose, for vehicle traffic at midday and were not adjusted for the heavy evening foot traffic. Again and again, fifty or sixty people would wait patiently at the corner for the light to change: four minutes, five minutes, perhaps longer. It seemed an eternity across the flat landscape of Neubrandenburg, on the Mecklenburg plain. Peering in each direction from the intersection, one could see a mile or so of

roadway with, typically, no traffic at all. Very occasionally a single small Trabant made its slow, smoky way to the intersection.

Twice, perhaps, in the course of roughly five hours of my observing this scene, did a pedestrian cross against the light, and then always to a chorus of scolding tongues and fingers wagging in disapproval. I, too, became part of the scene. If I had mangled my last exchange in German, sapping my confidence, I stood there with the rest for as long as it took for the light to change, afraid to brave the glares that awaited me if I crossed. If, more rarely, my last exchange in German had gone well and my confidence was high, I would cross against the light, thinking, to buck up my courage, that it was stupid to obey a minor law that, in this case, was so contrary to reason.

It surprised me how much I had to screw up my courage merely to cross a street against general disapproval. How little my rational convictions seemed to weigh beside their scolding. Striding out boldly into the intersection made a more striking impression, perhaps, but it required more courage than I could normally muster.

As a way of justifying my conduct to myself, I began to rehearse a little discourse that I imagined delivering in perfect German. It went something like this: "You know, you and especially your grandparents could have used more of a spirit of lawbreaking. One day you will be called on to break a big law in the name of justice and rationality. Everything will depend on it. You have to be ready. How are you going to prepare for that day when it really matters? You have to stay 'in shape' so that when the big day comes you will be ready. What you need is anarchist calisthenics. Every day or so break some trivial law that makes no sense, even if it's only jaywalking. Use your own

head to judge whether a law is just or reasonable. That way, you'll keep trim—and when the big day comes, you'll be ready."

Judging when it makes sense to break a law requires careful thought, even in the relatively innocuous case of jaywalking. I was reminded of this when I visited a retired Dutch scholar whose work I had long admired. When I went to see him, he was an avowed Maoist and defender of the Cultural Revolution, and something of an incendiary in Dutch academic politics. He invited me to lunch at a Chinese restaurant near his apartment in the small town of Wageningen. We came to an intersection, and the light was against us. Now, Wageningen, like Neubrandenburg, is perfectly flat, and one can see for miles in all directions. There was absolutely nothing coming. Without thinking, I stepped into the street, and as I did so, Dr. Wertheim said, "James, you must wait." I protested weakly while regaining the curb. "But Dr. Wertheim, nothing is coming." "James," he replied, "it would be a bad example for the children." I was both chastened and instructed. Here was a Maoist incendiary with a fine-tuned, dare I say Dutch, sense of civic responsibility, while I was the Yankee cowboy heedless of the effects of my action on my fellow citizens.

Now when I jaywalk I look around to see that there are no children who might be endangered by my bad example.

The regulation of daily life is so ubiquitous and so embedded in our routines and expectations as to pass virtually unnoticed. Introduced in the United States after World War I, the traffic light substituted the judgment of the traffic engineer for the give-and-take that had prevailed historically between pedestrians, carts, motor vehicles,

and bicycles. Its purpose was to prevent accidents by imposing a coordination scheme. More than occasionally, the result has been the scene in Neubrandenburg: scores of people waiting patiently for the light to change when it is perfectly apparent there is no traffic whatsoever, suspending their independent judgment out of habit or perhaps out of a civic fear of the ultimate consequences of exercising it against an electronic legal order.

What would happen if there were no electronic order at the intersection, and motorists and pedestrians had to exercise their independent judgment? Since 1999, this question has been put to the test with stunning results, leading to a wave of "red-light removal" plans across Europe and in the United States. Both the reasoning behind this small policy initiative and its results are, I believe, relevant to other, more far-reaching efforts to craft institutions that enlarge the scope for independent judgment.

Hans Monderman, the traffic engineer who suggested the counterintuitive removal in 2003 of a red light in Drachten, the Netherlands, went on to promote the concept of "shared space," which quickly took hold in Europe. He began with the observation that, when an electrical failure incapacitated traffic lights, the result was improved flow rather than congestion. As an experiment, he replaced the busiest traffic-light intersection in Drachten, handling 22,000 cars a day, with a traffic circle, an extended bicycle path, and a pedestrian area. In the two years following the removal of the traffic light, the number of accidents plummeted to only two, compared with thirty-six crashes in the four years prior to the redesign. Traffic moves more briskly through the rotary, since all drivers know they

must be alert and use their common sense, while backups and the road rage associated with them have virtually disappeared. Monderman likened it to skaters on a crowded ice rink, who manage successfully to tailor their movements to those of the other skaters. He also believed that an excess of signage led drivers to take their eyes off the road and actually contributed to making junctions less safe.

Red-light removal can, I believe, be seen as a modest training exercise in responsible driving and civic courtesy. Monderman was not against traffic lights in principle; he simply did not find any in Drachten that were truly useful in terms of safety, improving traffic flow, and lessening pollution. The traffic circle seems dangerous—and that is the point. He argued that when drivers are made more wary, they behave more carefully, and the statistics on "post–traffic light" accidents bear him out. Having no imperative coordination imposed by traffic lights virtually requires alertness—an alertness abetted by the law, which, in the case of an accident where blame is hard to determine, presumptively blames the "strongest" (i.e., the driver rather than the bicyclist, the bicyclist rather than the pedestrian).

The shared-space concept of traffic management relies on the intelligence, good sense, and attentive observation of drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians. At the same time, it may actually expand, in its small way, the capacity of drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians to negotiate traffic without being treated like automata by thickets of signs (Germany alone has a repertoire of 648 distinct traffic symbols, which accumulate as one approaches a town) and signals.

The word *vindaloo* enters the English language already on fire. Its origin is Portuguese—*carne de vinha d'alhos*, meat in wine and garlic—a preparation that arrived in Goa with the colonizers and was promptly, in one of history's great reversals, colonized back. The Indians received this mild, wine-soaked European recipe and subjected it to an act of culinary insurrection so total that no Portuguese person alive could eat what their own dish became. They removed the wine. They added chili. They added mustard seed, fenugreek, tamarind, black pepper, and everything else that five thousand years of subcontinental cuisine had been developing while Europe was boiling things. The dish that emerged bore the same name and shared no other property with its ancestor. The word survived the crossing. The food did not. What is called vindaloo in the twenty-first century has no wine in it at all and is, in its canonical modern form, simply the hottest thing on the menu—the terminal station on the spice scale, the last stop, the end of the line, the place where Indian cuisine goes when it wants to say: we are finished being polite.

On a night whose date is immaterial but whose facts are not, a man entered an Indian restaurant in Germany—a restaurant vouched for by a trusted friend,

a friend who said *this is a good place to get Indian food* with the confidence of a person who has not yet been made to testify against her own recommendation—and ordered chicken vindaloo. The man did not simply order it. The man delivered a preliminary address to the server concerning the nature of vindaloo, its position in the hierarchy of Indian cuisine, its canonical relationship to the concept of spice, and his personal desire that the kitchen deploy that concept to the fullest extent of its capabilities. He requested extra spice. He then requested extra extra spice. He then repeated the word *extra* approximately twelve additional times, so that the full modifier stack, transcribed faithfully, read: extra extra extra extra extra extra extra extra extra extra extra extra spicy.

He asked the server to define the word *spicy*. He asked the server if the kitchen had access to chili peppers. He asked if the kitchen understood that vindaloo was, by construction, the spiciest dish on any Indian menu and that a request for extra spicy vindaloo was therefore a request for the spiciest possible version of the spiciest possible thing—a request that should, if executed faithfully, produce food capable of rendering the man unable to walk out of the restaurant under his own power. He said he wanted the food to kill him. He said

all of this in front of twelve witnesses, at a company dinner, with the deliberate theatricality of a man who was not merely ordering food but entering evidence into a record.

The witnesses were invited to taste the exhibit. Of the twelve present, eleven reported that the dish was not spicy. The twelfth, operating under what this essay will characterize as either diplomatic pressure or a clinically deficient palate, said: "technically I would say it's spicy." The word *technically* is the entire case. *Technically* means: by a standard so generous that it has ceased to function as a standard. *Technically* means: if you define spicy as any measurable deviation from absolute zero on the Scoville scale, then yes, this food, which contains atoms that were once in proximity to a pepper, qualifies. *Technically* is the word the defense uses when the defense has no case and knows it and would like the record to reflect that it tried.

The man rested his case. He stood up. He addressed the table. He said: this is not spicy. This is not vindaloo. This is not hot. This is chicken with tomato sauce. And then he said the thing that he had come to say, the thing the entire evening had been organized to demonstrate, the thesis he had been testing against the null hypothesis of German cuisine.

The accusation requires examination, because it is more precise than it sounds. The racism of Germany toward the cuisine of the Indian subcontinent is not a racism of hostility. Germany does not reject Indian food. Germany loves Indian food. Germany has Indian restaurants on every commercial street in every city of any size in the entire federation. The racism is worse than rejection, because rejection at least preserves the rejected thing intact—to refuse an encounter leaves both parties whole. What Germany does is not refusal. It is absorption. It takes the cuisine in. It opens its mouth and receives the food and then, somewhere in the dark interior of the German digestive system, every molecule of spice, every particle of heat, every trace element of the thing that made the food itself, is quietly and efficiently neutralized, and what emerges on the other side is German food in an Indian costume. The decoration is retained. The menu is printed in a font that gestures at the Devanagari script without going so far as to actually be it. There is a small elephant on the wall. The word *vindaloo* appears, correctly spelled, on page three, beside a small icon of a chili pepper, sometimes two, sometimes three, each pepper a tiny herald of a fire that does not exist and has never existed and will never exist in any kitchen attached to this menu.

The chili pepper icons are the cruelest detail. One pepper means mild. Two means medium. Three means: this is as far as we go, and as far as we go is nowhere. The scale has no referent. It is a thermometer in a room where the temperature does not change. The one-pepper dish and the three-pepper dish are the same dish. The only variable is the number of icons on the menu, which is a variable in the semiotic system and not in the food, and the semiotic system is the only system operating here, because the other system—the one involving actual capsaicin interacting with actual nerve endings in an actual human mouth—has been decommissioned.

There is a function that takes as input a request for food at a certain spice level and produces as output food at a certain spice level. In a functioning restaurant, this function is monotonically increasing: more spice requested, more spice delivered. The gradient may be imperfect, the mapping lossy, but the direction is preserved. Ask for mild, get mild. Ask for hot, get hot. The function works. The input determines the output. The universe is sane.

In Germany, this function is a constant. It maps every input to the same output. Mild, medium, hot, extra hot, the entire twelve-word modifier stack delivered with

theatrical desperation by a man who is essentially begging the kitchen to acknowledge that spice exists as a physical phenomenon—all of it, every possible input, maps to the same plate of chicken in warm tomato sauce. The function is not broken. The function is operating as designed. The design is the problem. The design is that the German palate has been installed as a universal ceiling, and no request, however elaborate, however pathological in its specificity, can push the output above that ceiling, because the ceiling is not a limit of the kitchen's capability but a limit of the kitchen's imagination. They have the peppers. The peppers are in the building. The peppers are not the bottleneck. The bottleneck is that no one in the kitchen believes a human being would actually want what a human being is actually asking for, and this disbelief is so total, so immovable, so structurally embedded in the German relationship to other people's food, that it has become invisible to the people inside it, the way a fish cannot see water, the way a German cannot taste the absence of taste.

There is a word for what Germany does to other people's cuisine, and the word is *Gleichschaltung*. The coordination. The process by which all systems are brought into alignment with a single central standard, so that nothing operates outside the approved param-

eters, so that every output is legible to the same apparatus. The *Gleichschaltung* of German cuisine is the process by which every immigrant food culture that enters the country is coordinated—not destroyed, not rejected, but quietly brought into alignment with the German palate, so that vindaloo and korma and tikka masala and dal and biryani all converge, asymptotically, toward the same plate of protein in mild sauce, the way all rivers flow to the sea, except the sea is beige and lukewarm and someone has put a laminated menu next to it with pepper icons that lie.

The Thai food is coordinated. It arrives without lemongrass, without galangal, without the fish sauce that is the backbone of the entire cuisine—or with fish sauce in quantities so homeopathic that the sauce itself would fail to detect its own presence in the dish. The Thai restaurant in Germany is a Thai restaurant in the way that a photograph of a fire is a fire: all the visual information, none of the heat.

The Mexican food is coordinated. The jalapeños have been replaced by bell peppers. The bell peppers have been replaced by a memory of bell peppers. The salsa is ketchup. The ketchup is the frontier. The ketchup is the farthest point the German palate is willing to travel from home, and having reached that frontier—having

touched the absolute outer boundary of what Germany considers adventurous—the palate turns around, satisfied, and reports to its owner that it has been to Mexico and back and the whole trip was very mild.

In Sweden, a Thai restaurant is a Thai restaurant. You order extra spicy and the server says: are you sure? This is not a rhetorical question. This is a warning issued in good faith by a person who knows what is about to happen to your mouth and wants informed consent. And when you confirm, the food arrives, and it is spicy. Not technically spicy. Not ketchup spicy. Not semiotically spicy. Spicy in the physical, capsaicin-on-nerve-endings, sweat-on-forehead, tears-in-eyes sense of the word that the word was invented to describe. The input produced a corresponding output. The function works. You asked for a thing and received the thing. This is not a miracle. This is a restaurant.

Sweden took the same cuisines that Germany took and, instead of coordinating them, believed them. The Swedish approach to foreign food differs from the German approach in exactly one respect, and the respect is this: Sweden takes the recipe at its word. When an Indian recipe says add chili until your eyes water, Sweden adds chili until its eyes water. When a Thai recipe calls for fish sauce, Sweden measures out the fish sauce. Swe-

den does not edit. Sweden does not intervene. Sweden does not insert itself between the food and the person eating it to say: I know what you meant better than you do. Sweden puts the food on the table and gets out of the way, and getting out of the way is, in the final analysis, the highest possible respect one cuisine can pay another, and Germany has never paid it, not once, to anyone.

But this essay has been avoiding the real charge, the one that the man at the table was building toward through his theatrical ordering and his prosecutorial summation and his twelve assembled witnesses. The charge is not that Germany makes bad Indian food. Bad food is a misdemeanor. The charge is that Germany has murdered the word *spicy*.

If the spiciest possible version of the spiciest possible dish is not spicy, then the word does not mean anything. It has been killed. It has been hollowed out and filled with something else—filled with mild, filled with warm, filled with the vague memory of a pepper that was once in the room—and the shell of the word continues to circulate on German menus, beside German chili-pepper icons, meaning nothing, referring to nothing, promising an experience that no kitchen in the country has any intention of delivering and that no diner has

any expectation of receiving, because both parties have silently agreed that the word is decorative. *Spicy* in a German restaurant is like the English on a Japanese t-shirt: it is there for aesthetic reasons and no one involved expects it to function.

This is what the man meant when he said *racism*. Not hatred. Erasure. The specific operation by which a culture takes another culture's word—a word that refers to a real, physical, measurable, Scoville-quantifiable phenomenon—and keeps the word and discards the phenomenon, so that the word becomes a souvenir of itself, a postcard from a place that no longer exists.

