

## The Narrative of Social Order in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga*\*

But the most frequent reason why men desire to hurt each other, ariseth hence, that many men at the same time have an Appetite to the same thing; which yet very often they can neither enjoy in common, nor yet divide it; whence it follows that the strongest must have it, and who is strongest must be decided by the Sword.

— Thomas Hobbes, *De cive* ([1651] 1983, 46)

### Social Perspectives on *Íslendinga saga*

The final decades of the Icelandic Commonwealth, as portrayed in Sturla Þórðarson's masterpiece, provide a rich field of speculation for students of social order. For today's readers, the saga seems to offer a classic Hobbesian tale of escalating violence, as a stable but fragile public order degenerates into nasty, brutish competition among powerful chieftains. From the perspective of modern nationalist movements, it provides an early, medieval warning of the high price paid by polities that are too weak to control the conflicting ambitions of strong individuals.

Given the historical distance of these events, however, is it reasonable to connect this thirteenth-century perspective on contemporary events with the social dilemmas of our own century? For one thing, the problem of social order inhabits a distinctive modern context, shaped by historically competing visions of human nature and of mankind's capacity for peaceful cooperation. Whatever their internal differences, these modern views are all deeply concerned with powers exerted by the secular state — an institution conspicuously absent in medieval Iceland. How, then, can we apply our interpretive categories to Sturla's text, when the twentieth-century problems of social structure are so far removed from the living substance of *Íslendinga saga*?

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It should be remembered as well that Sturla's world reaches us through the interpretive filters of saga narration, whose peculiar refractions remain the subject of heated scholarly debate. As one of the "contemporary sagas" (*samtíðarsögur*) in the *Sturlunga* compilation, *Íslendinga saga* tells of many events that entered into their narrator's own life experience, adding yet more complexity to the function of sagas as social history. Whatever else it may be, *Íslendinga saga* is not an ethnographic study; it cannot be reduced to a set of neutral observation statements, ready to test experimentally the hypotheses of modern social theory.

In my view, we can still connect the saga text and social theory, but not via the usual relationship of evidence to hypothesis. A closer comparison lies in the rhetorical affinities between saga narrative and certain basic presumptions of social theory, both rooted in fundamental visions of human nature. The medieval text offers a completely autonomous source of humanistic insights, including important notions of agency, volition, and interaction, which can be used indirectly to probe modern assumptions about social order. My purpose here is to outline a comparative strategy, in which the saga yields certain visions or norms for weighing the basic assumptions of modern theory: assumptions about the elusive forces that hold societies together. In methodological terms, the saga can deepen our understanding of the final principles behind today's theories.

The potential significance of Sturla's vision derives from several interests specific to the late twentieth century. With the collapse of political institutions and resurgence of ethnic violence in Eastern Europe, social scientists have become increasingly interested in sources of *social* conflict among groups, not just *political* conflicts among states. Indeed, modern theorists should find special significance in thirteenth-century chronicles of social instability. Sturla's age marks the beginning of a centuries-long era, ending perhaps only in our own day, when political authority rose to absolute strength to quell the perceived disorder among tribes and clans. Centralization of power in the medieval Scandinavian kingdoms can thus be understood as an early example of how sovereign authority fills a vacuum left by major shifts in customary social relations. In the twentieth century, as fresh assessments of power become unavoidable, we are newly inclined to see political authority as yet another arena of human conflict, not an automatic cure for anomic societies.

For such reasons, among others, Western social scientists have recently returned to fundamental questions about the roots of social order (see, for example, Wrong 1994). In the absence of overwhelming political force, what are the underlying social and cultural factors that breed disorder? Are they inherent in human nature? Are they tied to contingent social and economic conditions? Is there any hope that self-governing communities can achieve a stable order while still leaving room for broader human ideals: social independence, personal honor, and cultural accomplishment? It is on this fundamental level of inquiry that Sturla Þórðarson's great saga can be brought to bear on twentieth-century debates.

## Conflict or Consensus?

Current social science recognizes no single theory of social order. It is instead divided into two distinct streams, for which conflict and consensus become the respective foundations of human sociability. This difference turns on a conceptual dichotomy and cannot be fully mediated by empirical data. Conflict theorists see strife and disorder as basic human conditions, not to be displaced by the simple appearance of social harmony. For them, an orderly regime must rest on tension and repression, regulated by either direct force or by false ideologies. Consensus theorists, for their part, are not blind to social strife. Their approach consists of interpreting all such conflicts in functional terms, as ways of testing and strengthening the society's normative frameworks.

What is now referred to as “social conflict theory” gained increasing academic attention during the 1960s as a conscious attempt by liberal and neo-Marxist thinkers to challenge what was seen as a conservative bias in social science.<sup>1</sup> Adherents of this approach tended to advance their position in negative terms, in opposition to what they perceived as core assumptions of mainstream social analysis. In essence, they questioned whether every social order enjoys a basic *presumption of stability*, one that would prevail in the absence of destabilizing forces.

The partisans of stability have had numerous champions, none greater than the sociologist Talcott Parsons.<sup>2</sup> For Parsons, the postulate of an underlying normative consensus was itself a response to classic theorists who held to an opposing *presumption of instability* — a diverse group of thinkers including the disciples of Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. According to Hobbes and Freud, at least, conflict is built into the natural psychology of human action. For Hobbes, it is the inevitable result of human selfishness in the face of environmental scarcity; for Freud, it is the product of a psychodynamic struggle between ego and superego. Along with other twentieth-century sociologists, Parsons wanted an alternative to the implied determinism and mechanism behind the leading conflict theories. Rather than accept conflict as the natural state of human affairs, consensus theorists emphasized the human potential for treating conflict instrumentally, for letting it be guided by implicit rules and rituals, and potentially redeemed in terms of explicit social values.

The following three sections review central themes from Hobbes, Freud, and Parsons, representing the classic modern visions of social order, in comparison with some perspectives gleaned from Sturla Þórðarson.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The *fons et origo* of this movement was Lewis A. Coser (1956).

2. See especially *The Structure of Social Action* (1937; 2d ed. 1949).

3. My selection is influenced by Dennis Wrong's analysis in *The Problem of Order*, which includes Rousseau and Marx, among others. I am grateful to Ted Andersson for suggesting the importance of Rousseau's vision in this kind of study, and I hope to address it on another occasion.

## The Hobbesian Vision

The conflict-centered Hobbesian vision begins from the premise that individuals relate to one another through mutual fear. They embrace stability imposed by public authority as the only alternative to a violent war of all against all; but their surrender of personal autonomy must be absolute.<sup>4</sup> Some commentators approach Hobbes through his mechanistic psychology, which describes the transformation of personal fear into an overpowering desire for security, rooted in self-protection. But there is a prior element in Hobbes's theory that brings it closer to objective conditions of the saga age: a concern with environmental scarcity, according to which personal fear is the natural product of social, economic, or cultural competition.

On its surface, the disorder portrayed in *Íslendinga saga* reveals little of either Hobbes's psychological or environmental analysis. Indeed, the initial impressions of social harmony that open this and other sagas point directly counter to Hobbes's vision. Rather than moving from a fractious state of nature to authoritarian stability, the saga shows the disintegration of an established, organic social system. It suggests a more complex psychological theory than Hobbes allows, one in which the implied human "state of nature" is spontaneously cooperative. But the question remains, exactly what is the mechanism of accelerating disorder? Sturla provides no direct or simple answers, although his dramatic plot frequently reflects sharper competition over scarce environmental conditions, including limited economic wealth and positions of social status.<sup>5</sup>

On balance, the events portrayed in *Íslendinga saga* point to a psychological model in which individuals might reasonably subordinate their personal security to a body of cultural norms, rather than to an authoritarian state. My surmise here is not about the factual interpretation of historical events, but rather about the humanistic insights of a literary work, built on broad conceptions of human nature. Whatever modern historians tell us about the *Sturlunga öld* (most of which, of course, would have to be based on this and other sagas), Sturla's construction of that period implies that any persistent order would have to rest on preexisting social norms — a presumed layer of social order that was notoriously missing from Hobbes's theory. In turn, Hobbes's insights may well supplement Sturla's vision by underscoring the intensely competitive environment in which the social drama unfolds.

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4. Hobbes's statements in *Leviathan* are often quoted (part 1, chap. 13): "during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man . . . no Arts; no Letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" ([1651] 1968, 185–86).

5. On scarce resources in the saga age, see, among other discussions, Byock 1988.

## The Freudian Vision

Freud's provocative writings on social order extend Hobbes's conflict-ridden vision in ways that help close the gap with Sturla's construction. In Freud, Hobbes's inherently contentious state of nature is transferred to a subconscious world modeled on biological rather than social images. The Freudian scheme lends itself well to explaining the genesis of social norms like those that support Sturla's cultural universe. In brief, Freud's view suggests that individuals in each successive generation face internal conflicts between their autonomous desires and the authority of broader social values, enforced by the superego. The remarkable assertiveness of historical figures arises when this psychological representative of the collectivized social conscience is temporarily overpowered by its natural, instinctive opposition.<sup>6</sup>

Sturla's narrative shares certain elements of Freud's broad theory. Saga authors tend to focus on distinctive individuals, often described in heroic dimensions, whose strong-willed actions violate the prevailing social order. Notwithstanding the "objective" style of saga description (arguably the antithesis of psychoanalytic reflection), the drama can rather easily be transposed into Freud's conflictual terms. Freud remedies certain omissions in Hobbes's political model by making the organic social order the underlying source of interpersonal conflict, prior to all questions of political authority.<sup>7</sup> The reader of *Íslendinga saga* will find rich examples of rebellious spirits, from the anarchic outbursts of Órækja Snorrason to the oedipal rage of Sturla Sighvatsson.

Still, the Freudian vision fails to capture important elements of Sturla's creation. Freud satisfies the modern taste for interpreting social conflict in terms that allow for individual spontaneity — even when personal agency is known to be steeped in repression or doomed to burn itself out. But Sturla's saga points to less fashionable possibilities, including conflicts endemic to the prevailing social structure, and the gradual decay of social forces powerful enough to check deviant personal ambitions. The saga thus invites a harder look at the Hobbesian theme of environmental constraints, even though the dramatic surface of saga narrative seems much closer to Freud. Sturla's vision encompasses elements of both, and pushes us toward more complex models that subordinate conflict to an organic system, at once social and normative in nature.

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6. Freud's leading work on social order is *Civilization and Its Discontents* ([1930] 1961).

7. For applications of Freud's theory to literary analysis, see the classic work by Morse Peckham (1965).

## The Parsonian Vision

Except among professional social scientists, Talcott Parsons is not as widely read today as Hobbes or Freud. Yet his works sum up several decades of sociological theory about the enigma of public order, and it is appropriate to grant him the status of a classic figure. His description of social systems is highly eclectic, incorporating significant elements of Hobbes and Freud, as well as other conflict-centered traditions. For our purposes, his major contribution was an emphasis on social values as the foundation of order. Parsons sums up a critical tradition that was willing to treat cultural and legal norms as autonomous social forces, reducible to neither individual self-interest nor psychodynamic repression. Above all, Parsons perfected a functional style of reasoning, derived in part from Durkheim, which assigns to social conflict the broader human purpose of conserving a closed set of higher norms. Whether implied in behavior or made explicit in legal rules, these norms define the core of a particular society or culture.

In my view, this Parsonian vision comes closest to the humanistic insights of saga literature, provided one is ready to assume that the saga narrator's voice speaks from a unified body of social values. (I shall return to this assumption in the next section.) These values need not be formally articulated, nor even approved of, by historical saga authors or compilers. They are rather an interpretive postulate inferred by modern readers, based on our expectation that each saga defines a coherent normative universe — one we would typically associate with the *Zeitgeist* of its author. In the case of *samtíðarsögur*, the time frames of author and events happen to converge.

A Parsonian orientation to preserving and restoring value coherence appears to unify the dramatic action within many sagas, given their common emphasis on informal dispute settlement, legal proceedings, rule-guided feuding, and reciprocal obligations.<sup>8</sup> Although Parsons meant to apply his theory of social systems to either existing or historically documented societies, his approach seems better matched to literary reconstructions of social conditions. Empirically analyzed societies have potentially fuzzier boundaries than the worlds described in saga narrative, and Parsons's critics faulted his method for imputing too much coherence and permanence to historically dynamic systems. Marxist social theorists, for example, found no place in Parsons's theory for the emergence of fundamental changes in class relationships, which they assumed to be the fate of all hitherto existing societies.

The particular type of social order represented in saga texts may restore some balance to the Parsonian vision, which has probably been stretched too far in discussions of highly pluralistic modern societies. At least as we read them today,

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8. This point has been made by William Ian Miller (1990), among many others. See also Byock 1982.

the sagas portray the institutions of feuding and dispute resolution from the lofty Parsonian standpoint of social equilibrium. Sturla's chronicle of almost catastrophic events, in which he and his wider family appear as protagonists, is much admired for its elevated tone of balance and impartiality. Our own appreciation is doubtless shaped by the modern appeal of consensus theories and their underlying presumptions of stability, so close in spirit to the crafted symmetries and impersonal rhetoric of the sagas.

A word of caution may be needed, however, to keep this interpretation in proper perspective. It is one thing to note some affinities between Sturla's vision and the presumptions of consensus-based social theory. But it is overstating the point, if not downright circular, to treat *Íslendinga saga* as empirical evidence for the historical existence of self-correcting forces within Icelandic institutions. No one can deny, for example, the historical fact that something drastic happened to the early Icelandic polity near the end of Sturla's chronicle, in the period 1262–64. That was the time Icelandic chieftains finally swore allegiance to the Norwegian crown. In retrospect, and in light of intervening centuries of Iceland's political dependency on Norway and later Denmark, the early Commonwealth sustained a major rupture, after the prolonged period of civil strife described so graphically by Sturla Þórðarson. There is a sense of deep tragedy that marks the critical reception of *Íslendinga saga* in recent times, created surely by our present belief that a political deathblow was delivered suddenly to a society that was struggling valiantly, if in vain, to maintain its Parsonian value structure.

Perhaps this judgment needs some rethinking, based on more careful distinctions between the facts and the presumptions surrounding social order. Sturla's own text, interestingly, betrays little sense that he viewed 1262–64 as a catastrophic time; the narrative deals directly with individual persons and does not personify the broad social forces that would be required to give such historical significance to discrete actions taken at local assemblies of chieftains. The narrative fades away around 1264, but events up to that moment are related without any perceptible shift in its noble Parsonian vision. At least some current Icelandic critics have raised the startling but entirely appropriate question of whether the real story of *Íslendinga saga* is not one of cultural continuity, rather than the Hobbesian political tale of tragic decline and disintegration.<sup>9</sup>

A modern Parsonian should be prepared to develop this suggestion further, as some recent commentators have done who are attracted to social science methods for exploring the sagas. Keeping in mind the Parsonian presumptions behind this brand of social science, a revisionist perspective on *Íslendinga saga* is not difficult to sketch out. Despite its familiar reception by Spenglerian critics, the central values represented by the saga narrative remain those of consensus:

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9. See, for example, Ólason 1994. This point was especially emphasized in the oral presentation.

consensus-despite-conflict, or even consensus-because-of-conflict. Along with progressively heavy strife, *Íslendinga saga* thus expresses the recurrent hope and need for the resolution of disorderly events. These values — expressly conserved by Icelanders in the Sturlung age, and reflected in the steadiness and balance of Sturla's rhetoric — are inseparable from the inventive social procedures devised by Icelanders for their collective self-preservation. In Parsonian terms, the Icelandic social order was itself the process of the continual rectification of violence and disorder.

## Social Order and the Rhetoric of Saga Narrative

Sturla's vision of social order does not appear as a philosophical statement. It can be found rather as an inseparable element of his narrative approach, which in broadest outlines follows rhetorical patterns found more or less in other saga groups. Up to now I have used Sturla's thirteenth-century perspective to illuminate modern assumptions about social order, especially the complex interplay between conflict and consensus theories. But the comparison can also work in reverse, such that modern approaches to social theory may be used to clarify interpretive problems in reading the older texts. In particular, the dichotomy of conflict and consensus theories may be applied, by analogy, to several classic problems of saga narrative. Three aspects of Sturla's rhetoric seem responsive to this comparison.

The first problem emerges from the structure of any story that has a beginning and a development. As Edward Said has pointed out (1975), such stories inevitably posit certain conceptions about antecedent conditions, thus setting the stage for the unfolding historical or literary drama. Sturla's text presumes there was a world already in place as his narrated events begin: a presumptive realm of apparent harmony, very unlike the brutish world in the equally presumptive Hobbesian state of nature. It is a narratively imposed social equilibrium, a residue of preconceived social stability prior to the dramatic unfolding of the saga's complex tale of disarray.

But do we really know how this or any other saga begins? These beginnings turn out to be somewhat elusive, subject to the same dichotomies seen in the clash between the rival presumptions of conflict and consensus in modern social theory.<sup>10</sup> Complicating the issue in Sturla Þórðarson's case is a special textual question about the location of *Íslendinga saga* within the entire *Sturlunga* compilation. In the editions of Kristian Kálund (1906–11) and Örnólfur Thorsson et al. (1988), following the arrangement of the oldest manuscripts, *Íslendinga saga* appears only after several other sagas have established a context of recurring conflict, retribution, and reconciliation. The opening section of *Íslendinga saga*

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10. For a structural analysis of saga beginnings, see Hume 1973.



reflects this historical prologue by referring to Hvamm-Sturla's death and relating the outcome of a dispute carried over from *Sturlu saga*.

A conflict-centered reading of *Íslendinga saga* might seize on this distinctive beginning, which varies from the more usual saga fare of elaborate genealogies, Norwegian prologues, and mythic histories. Is Sturla Þórðarson trying to tell us something about conflict as primordial? Not likely: the context seems far too modest, and the tone is rather one of "business-as-usual," with minor residual conflicts held over from the life of Hvamm-Sturla. These allusions furnish the same aids to later plot development that arise quickly enough in other sagas, where horse fights, sexual irregularities, or inheritance struggles launch the invariable cycle of escalating conflicts.

More suggestive of conflict-centered readings, however, are those saga prologues that locate social order in a distant, prenarrative past: in a mythologized Norway or in the remote genealogies of mythic ancestors. Such counterfactual postulates of social harmony can suggest that disputes within the actual saga narratives were significant departures from any stable value system, with no guarantees that a natural social equilibrium could ever reassert itself. Hobbesian and Parsonian interpreters will obviously differ in applying their respective preconceptions to understanding this important question of saga beginnings.

A second relevant feature of saga narrative is the dramatic emphasis on personal agency, rather than broad social conditions, as the instigator of social change. It is here that conflict-centered interpretations might gain their primary strength, especially if saga characters are taken to symbolize subtextual conflicts among economic classes, conflicts between men and women, or conflicts between any privileged group and a variety of disfavored "others." Although Freudian theory is always prepared to assign these conflicts a naturalistic basis, modern interpreters are not restricted to psychological theories to support a presumptive state of social conflict.

Over against the assertive qualities of distinct individuals, the Parsonian reader identifies with the sense of destiny that seems to guide the choices and behavior of main saga characters. The notion of a higher fate, emanating from a source beyond the social order and resisting individual human control, is amply reflected in the poetry, dreams, and casual remarks of major players within the drama of *Íslendinga saga*, as they are throughout the family sagas and other *samtíðarsögur*. A consensus-based reading of these sagas postulates a coherent set of values as the guiding force, only parts of which enter into the motivations of particular saga characters. But precisely whose values are they? Do they belong to the entire age (the *Sturlunga öld*), to the saga author's clan perspective (to the mighty but defeated Sturlungs as a group), or even to that author's own creative, intellectual side?<sup>11</sup>

11. See the similar questions about Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* raised by Sverre Bagge in his excellent study (1991), especially chap. 2, "The Conflicts."

This question leads naturally to yet a third rhetorical problem, for which the competing perspectives of conflict and consensus reach their highest importance. This feature is perhaps the most remarkable quality of saga narrative: the elusive “voice” of the anonymous, retreating author. Indeed, the more elusive the persona of the saga author in narrative terms, the more likely we are to project an overarching coherence to the value system that informs the saga itself. Even as the events described convey a sense of escalating violence and disorder, the narration remains stable, sure-footed, and constant in its largely implied commentary. The motivations and behavior of saga characters may change over the course of the narrative; but the whole saga, taken as a humanistic project, is a contrasting source of conceptual stability.

In the case of *Íslendinga saga*, the name of this self-effacing author is confidently known to modern scholars. Identifying the historical author throws some confusion into the Parsonian method, which would prefer not to historicize the normative order of the saga, nor to see it reduced to the ideology of a single individual or clan. For the Parsonian interpreter, fortunately, there arises the higher-level problem of the elusive compiler for the entire *Sturlunga* collection of sagas.<sup>12</sup> The very notion of a compiler, while expressed in terms of a possible historical figure, reflects an interpretive tendency to project normative coherence onto expanding levels of meaning — the very essence of consensus models in social science.

In contrast, the conflict-centered theorist would seek out contradictory currents within a group of works, within anonymously authored sagas, and even within the works attributed to known individuals. This approach assumes that values are deeply separated by faction within any society, that values are always in a state of flux. Any authorial perspective that presumes to stand above the fray is just as suspect as the Parsonian social scientist, for whom all differences are reconciled in a synoptic normative system. An intriguing middle ground between the two approaches is the postulation of “mentalities,” which are historicized versions of Parsonian normative schemes: broad, coherent value systems, but plural in number, subject to inexplicable historical shifts, and scarcely recognized by the historical figures who inhabit them.

## Conclusion

Several points emerge from this comparison between problems of *narrative* authority in the sagas and problems of *normative* authority that stand behind much of today’s social science. In both cases, the authority in question rests on

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12. See, for example, Tranter 1987. Many issues involving the poetic shape of *Sturlunga* have been raised by Úlfar Bragason; see the summary in his 1992 article.

a postulate or presumption, not on simple empirical facts. Interpreters face a dilemma in treating such postulates as part of the natural world, a dilemma summed up in the division between conflict and consensus approaches. Investigating changes in value systems — whether in saga texts or in social systems — is different from describing changes in the climate, or changes in population.

More specifically, there are inherent problems in interpreting periods of social change as driven by the disintegration of value systems. Armies disintegrate, family systems fall apart, social institutions slip into decline — these are all possible events to portray in either saga narrative or social science. But the decline of values as such presents great difficulties; there is always a broader, functional viewpoint from which the decline of certain values ensures the preservation or restoration of others. One can always project a higher level of coherence that rises above the dynamic theories of social science, or the narrative events in a saga.

Is *Íslendinga saga* a chronicle of disintegration or one of restoration? Possibly both at once. Like other saga writers, Sturla Þórðarson balances contrasting views in a way that the modern social theorist must envy. It doesn't help to say that it is *only* a story, because such stories find a peculiar way of reaching the deeper assumptions upon which our descriptions of reality are built.

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