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Neighbourly relations as a resource for violence

Neighbourly borders are unique in that it is not *what* they delimit that is most important, but *that* they delimit. For this reason they are particularly conflict-prone. Good neighbourly relations, on the other hand, are cultivated by condoning border violations. Politics on the larger scale instrumentalizes conflicts within neighbourhoods. This can take the form of the culture of denunciation in totalitarian regimes, or ethnic and religious persecution in societies divided by civil war. Violence makes neighbourly border tensions tangible, sets off the spiral of retaliation, and creates solidarity between perpetrators. A micro-analysis of neighbourly border politics allows for an understanding of these processes.

People who have lived next to each other peacefully as neighbours strike out abruptly at one another. Neighbours suddenly define themselves as members of different ethnic groups, races, or political camps, rather than as inhabitants of the same street. Neighbours become enemies, at times even mortal enemies. How can this be? Those who have analyzed the history of a conflict sometimes tell us that conflicts that we think have developed before our very eyes are, in fact, longstanding. Peaceful neighbourly relations have merely concealed them. But does that really reframe the problem? Why were the conflict and its parties not pacified by peaceful coexistence? Or if peace was pure camouflage, how can peace camouflage — for years or even decades — what is in fact a state of war?

Neighbourhoods
Neighbourhoods was also the theme of the 18th European Meeting of Cultural Journals in Istanbul. [\[more\]](#)

Those who study the phenomenon of violence are confronted sooner or later with these and similar issues and perhaps fascinated by them. Usually, this preoccupation is fruitless. At times, human beings are just enigmatic creatures. It rarely occurs to us that there is a misunderstanding inherent in the question and that, as long as we seek to answer it, our thinking stops in a dead end. How can someone who is a loving father be responsible for the murder of women and children? Is there, behind this question, the assumption that an individual is either a mass murderer — and then he or she is always just that, in every waking hour, and is essentially prepared to murder every and any potential victim — or he or she is not, not at all, never ever? First, we know this is not the case; we know that people can integrate very different things into their lives. This insight is our historical-anthropological knowledge, and we should not pretend to be naive. Second, the conception of those who maintain that a mass murder is also a good father often becomes warped as a result of the contrast. A much more disturbing question is how the Israeli psychiatrists who attested that Eichmann was a good father could have arrived at such a conclusion, given what we know about him.

Let us return to neighbours. How can peaceful neighbours...? No, this question falls short of what we know from everyday experience about neighbours: neighbourly relations are highly conflict-ridden. Neighbourly relations are a resource for violence of the highest order. What we must ask is this: what tames neighbourly relations in normal situations and how are such relations organized to resemble civil wars?

But first:¹



What are neighbourly relations? Two territories, a border, the inhabitants on this side of the border view the other territory with suspicion, on their way into their own house.

This is an image from one of the many stories drawn by Carl Barks for Walt Disney Comics that centre on disagreements between neighbours. Because they concentrate on the essentials and because they are supposed to trigger in readers a feeling of "that's exactly how it is" (albeit, in an exaggerated form), these stories provide evidence of the structural patterns typical of neighbourhood conflicts. Border violations trigger such conflicts and regularly contribute to their escalation. This observation is not as self-evident as it sounds. People can have trouble with one another for all kinds of reasons, but neighbours have border trouble. We find this so obvious that we simply assume it is true. How do you define neighbours, anyway? By the fact that they share a border.



Two neighbours get along with one another. They get along across the border. It won't work. In this story, a ball accidentally gone astray sets off the disastrous chain of events.



The ball crosses one border and violates another; it smashes a window and penetrates the neighbour's house.



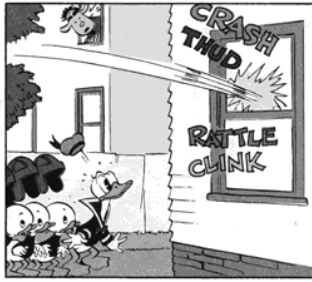
For the moment, everything is still all right.



Then, another misfortune occurs, with somewhat more serious consequences:



Still, everything should turn out all right, but the neighbour's reaction is dangerous; he oversteps a border,



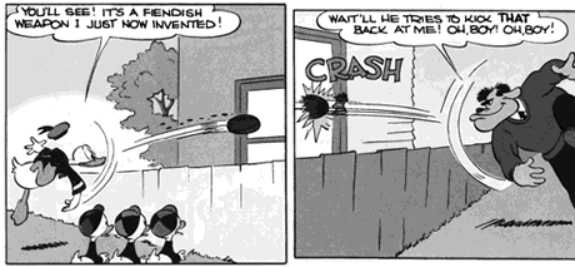
quite literally.



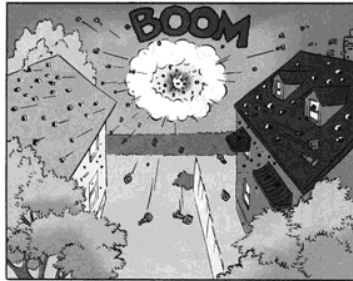
And now, whether he likes it or not, he is on enemy territory. Therefore, he interprets every occurrence as a hostile act:



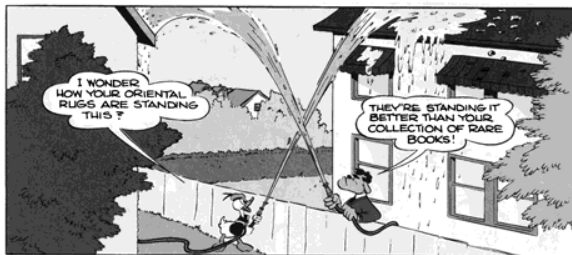
Now events are brought to a head intentionally, as the border separating the two becomes the front line and then the second border, the house, becomes a target:



Finally, the conflict escalates to a kind of Star Wars; the conflicting parties have filled their balls with dynamite:



The whole thing climaxes in the (successful) attempt by each party to flood the damaged home of the other and render it uninhabitable.



Another story deals with an attempt to begin communication; this is interpreted as a border violation:



Further border violations are repulsed and end in disaster, provoking manifest destruction:



In short, this is what remains as the normal state of neighbourly relations:

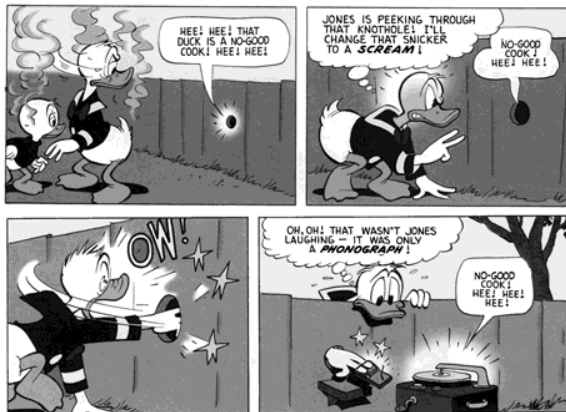


In order to understand how it comes to this, we must understand just what kind of border separates neighbours from one another. The borders of countries or states take many forms, from the imagined line through desert sands — which no one sees and which means nothing — to a fortified and guarded wall, dividing a street in the middle of a city; from a border relevant only for cartographers and public authorities, but not for people's dealings with each other, to a territory under surveillance, which might become an area for concentrating military forces for both sides and everything possible in between: coastlines, fishing zones, air space, and so on. Generally speaking, we might refer to two fundamental types of borders: mountain ranges and rivers. The mountain range (or the desert or the swamp) marks a territory lying between two regions, the claims to which are clear. No one lays claim to the territory in between; moreover, it impedes travel. This is a border because no one wants to enter the territory; at best, people want to pass through on their way to the other country. The river is, in a manner of speaking, the opposite case. As long as it primarily connects people rather than separating them, it is not a natural border. Although it is an obstruction to crossing in one direction, it promotes travel in the other direction, perpendicular to the first. And where a

ford or a bridge can be built, traffic junctions and centres of trade develop, and an interesting cultural landscape emerges around them. Rivers (or certain parts of them) represent spheres of interest that bring countries together. On the other hand, rivers lend themselves to becoming lines of defence. So, if possible, both should be valid: "*Wacht am Rhein*" (The watch on the Rhine²) and "*Deutschlands Strom, nicht Deutschlands Grenze*" (Germany's river, not Germany's border³). A third type of border is the ceasefire line, which can become an ordinary border in time. All of the concrete manifestations of these types are historically contingent, as are the problems linked to possible border transgressions.

Does the border between neighbours resemble any one of these types? No, it does not — not even the ceasefire line, for neighbourly relations are not battled out and such conflicts do not usually end with borders being redrawn. A border between neighbours is in a category of its own. This type of border is so difficult to describe because its mode of existence as a border plays the decisive role: *that*, not *what* it delimits. Objection: in conflicts between countries as well, petty border infractions can become symbolically exaggerated to serve as a rationale for war. True, but such symbolic amplifications of events always include an appeal: "Just imagine, if we allow *that* to happen, what will happen *then*?" In other words, one can already see the boots that ignore boundary markers and proceed to trample down native soil. That was the lesson provided by Romulus, who killed his brother. Without such extrapolatory emotionalizing, the borders of countries would not be sensitive. The border between Neighbours is *in and of itself* sensitive to contact.

Carl Barks illustrated this in his own way. There is a hole in the border fence.



In the case of borders between countries, there is a custom of leaving a strip of land unused, wherever possible, on both sides of the border; this custom is also observed in the case of highly guarded ceasefire lines. This strip of land serves as a security zone and helps prevent unintentional border violations. But this security zone has another special purpose: it prevents occurrences *in close proximity* to the border from happening directly *on* the border. As a fence, the border has two sides, mine and yours, but as a border the fence has only one: if I touch the limits of my terrain, I touch the limits of yours. Here, Hegel's assertion that discussing a border is tantamount to overstepping it coincides with a curious parallel in reality: if I "go to the limits" of my terrain, then I have gone beyond them.



Violating a border can offer a pretence for a war of conquest but, in itself, it does not call for a reciprocal border transgression. It is enough if the enemy is pushed back across the border and never dares set foot on our holy ground again. There is, however, another kind of border violation, which is more closely related to a neighbourhood border offence, as far as the emotions and the possible reactions it triggers are concerned, than to a violation of a country's border and it involves another person's body. Whoever lays hands on the surface of another person's body without permission encroaches upon the entire person. He or she makes the other person the object of his or her will — even if only for a moment — and forces the other person, if that person is unwilling to remain in such a state, to take action to re-establish the former status. This is the classic case of "an eye for an eye". By making the other person the object of *my* arbitrary will, I reassert my subjectivity and thus regain it. The injunction to turn the other cheek comes into play here; a cycle must be broken. The ethic of non-retaliation aims to find another way of asserting one's subjectivity; it promises a share in a higher moral order. Thus, someone who has been insulted by a member of the lower classes does not ask them for a duel, since a duel calls for an opponent of potentially equal status. A member of the lower classes cannot fulfil the demand for satisfaction and the insult is thus non-existent, the equivalent of being splashed by a passing carriage.

How might one prove, beyond the analogy, that the violation of a neighbourly border belongs to the same category as a violation of the bodily border? By pointing to the way the body's borders can be extended, to the fact that they are not limited to the body's physical surface. We know the gesture of "grabbing someone by their lapels"; it provokes physical defensiveness and anger. We know how people are perceived as aggressive if they regularly fail to keep the (culturally fixed) distance usually observed by people conversing with one another while standing in a given space. People have security zones — body

surfaces, clothing, distance, homes — around them and they place great value on preventing any violation of these zones. Again, the relation to the body is more than just an analogy. The home is not only quite literally capable of protecting me (my home is my castle), it is also perceived in a way similar to the body, as anyone who has ever had their home burgled knows. Reactions to burglaries are always the same: agitation, helplessness, shame, repulsion, and the perceived need to wash one's body, before doing anything else. All of these — clothing, distance, house — are representations of the body; in most cases, the property around one's house is also such a representation. That is why a violation of this sphere has such an immediate effect and elicits a seemingly irrational response.

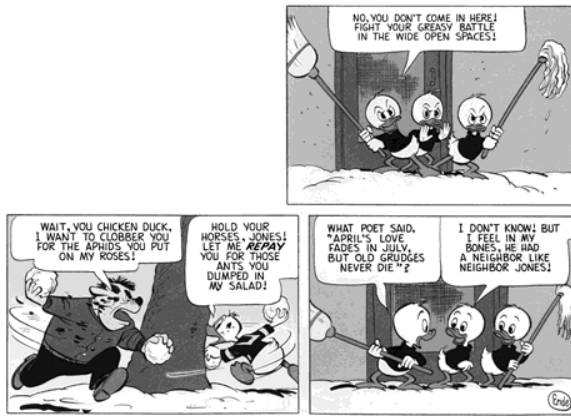


For the sake of completeness, I should note that there are two other representations of the body: the car and the dog. Laying hands on either of these is seen as an attack on one's own person and the response is decidedly aggressive. The same holds true for the cars and dogs of others. If we perceive the presence of a car or dog as an expression of unusual effrontery on the part of the owner, then this perception shares something of the sense of being threatened that is induced by the restriction of one's actual bodily space (the car blocks the way; the dog soils it; both violate one's sound insulation zone, just like the neighbour's lawn mower during a siesta).

No one is innocent of such responses to the outer world, but the role they play in each individual's psychological make-up differs. Being sensitive in this respect is not "neurotic" (if this word is to be used), but it would be, if the feeling dominated other emotions. That is not the issue here; the focus is solely on the fact that being a neighbour is a source of permanent psychological stress. When one lives on either side of a dividing wall, the activity on the other side always constitutes a possible infringement.



And yet, most of the time everything goes well, thanks to a variety of coping strategies. The first of these is "good neighbourly relations"; the second is the threat of social ostracism; the third is recourse to the law. I must first point out that conflicts between Neighbours that go beyond a certain level are undesirable.



They can — and the Barks Comics draw on this knowledge — release great destructive energies; for as in all conflicts, the issue that triggers them and the conflict profile that ultimately reveals itself to the observer differ. What makes things especially difficult in the case of neighbourly conflicts, however, is the fact that there is *always* an irreconcilable difference between the topic that triggers them and the emotional commitment of those involved. Thus, a neighbourly conflict can never be "resolved"; it can only be disarmed in its current manifestation. The advantage of this is that neighbourly conflicts do not foster the creation of parties; and if they do, because the topic that triggers them is appropriate, then the conflict changes, and at least one of the original participants is left frustrated. The belligerent neighbour becomes a problem for his party, which interprets his cause and the border violation in terms of regional politics. Faced with compatriots who represent his interests unsatisfactorily because they are unable to share his agitation, he becomes a griper. This is the advantage of a conflict between neighbours for the social environment. Such conflicts lack the potential to spread by themselves; they remain limited to those directly affected, and if the conflicting parties make too much of an uproar, they can be ridiculed.

Ridicule is one of the strategies for social pacification. Such strategies are employed every day and everywhere to minimize neighbourhood conflicts and their influence is also felt within the family. At the dinner table there are negotiations about whether the whole family will "stand their ground" behind the initiator of the conflict or some family members will instead support "the others" — the bystanders, who find the whole thing ridiculous. Will the whole family become a homogenous, cantankerous group or will an accelerated process of internal individualization begin ("The old man with his lawn mower hang-up" and "Let's go out for the day, then you won't hear it").

Recourse to the law is a means of objectifying a conflict. A third party is brought in to determine what the conflict is actually about and to decide who is "right" and has the law on his or her side. In the courtroom, the parties in conflict must present their case in proceedings that are not their own and in vocabulary that is not their own; both force them to maintain the greatest possible distance to their emotional concerns. Thus, a legal case is in effect a process that continuously focuses on this distance and puts pressure on the participants to act according to it (now as well as in the future). Before a case goes to court, one might say that one of the parties exaggerated ridiculously but was seeking justice; once the case is decided, that can no longer be said. Either that party was judged wrong, or her or she was right but insists on continuing the dispute. Then that individual becomes a griper and threatens to end up on the fatal, slippery slope of the notorious troublemaker, spending the

rest of his or her life seeking justice, although it is nowhere to be had.

Thus, there is social pressure to contain neighbourly conflicts, and it is effective, if for no other reason, then simply because neighbourly conflicts *can* only get out of hand at the price of changing their nature. Nonetheless, legal process puts an end to the conflicting parties' demonstrative claim to solidarity; it silences the adversaries. Legal process begins when and if this claim has not been effectively dealt with beforehand by ridiculing someone. "Conflict resolution" fails to describe either situation.

It would be better for those involved if the conflict never emerged in the first place. This is the purpose of establishing good neighbourly relations. Good neighbourly relations do not mean that border violations never occur (they always do, because — as noted above — activity on one's own border is already tantamount to, or might at least easily end in, overstepping the neighbour's border). Good neighbourly relations consist in *wanting* a border violation; in other words, they are the creation of intimacy.

Asking for a cup of sugar is not so much a request for a favour (and one which is indeed small) as it is a disclosure about one's own neediness. We uncover dimensions of our own instability in practical affairs: "See, I am incapable of taking care of myself properly." And we include an offer to act reciprocally. If the strategy works, sooner or later each family will no longer sit alone in front of their TV; the husband goes next door to watch sports, then both go to the local bar and harass the waitress together; the wife tells the woman next door embarrassing and derogatory things about her husband. Just like a term in prison together, this kind of thing creates communities of destiny. What drives people together is not a need for intimacy, but rather the desire to prevent unavoidable intimacy from undergoing catastrophic transformations. This is why vacation friendships ("On Mallorca we were a real clique!") cannot be continued elsewhere. When I don't have to keep myself from murdering someone, I don't have to make friends with him, either. But if people do become friends in such situations, the relationship proves to be extremely hard-wearing, at least as long as it is fed emotionally by mutual humiliation. In good neighbourly relations, people present themselves to one another in a manner that makes them even more disagreeable than they already are. In this respect, only family celebrations — which have humiliation built-in as an *a priori*, guiding perception — are capable of rivalling good neighbourly relations. The highest form of such community-building, mutual acts of humiliation is the neighbourhood barbecue, at which people expose themselves physically to the gaze of others in an especially humiliating form and drink so much that the usual, recurrent elements of conversation are finally revealed for what they are: the babbling of uninhibited idiots. "I am at the mercy of your will; not my worthiness, only your will sustains me" is what we signal to one another and "You can be whatever you want, I won't kill you". As mundane and unsightly as it is, this relates unmistakably to one of the deepest theological mysteries: mercy. Noah and the rainbow and "I give to whom I give". Among neighbours, however, granting mercy is an act of reciprocity.⁴

The kind of civil wars that take hold of entire nations (rather than remaining limited to marauding gangs) depend on good neighbourly relations as an indispensable resource for violence. Neighbourly relations produce two things: fear and hatred, on one side, and strained but hard-wearing communities, on the other. Now all that is left to do is sort things out. This sorting out does not occur from within the neighbourhood setting. Civil wars do not develop when the small, eternal flame of neighbourly conflict spreads to become a

large-scale fire. This is, as we know, impossible. To explain *how civil wars develop* calls for other forms of analysis. But to explain the *unabashed enthusiasm for civil wars* — enthusiasm on the part of people who "really" don't stand to gain by participating — we will have to resort to the thoughts about neighbours outlined here.

Those who take sides in a civil war don't "really" stand to gain anything. But sometimes they do. Perhaps something falls into the lap of a person who otherwise would have had no chance of obtaining it: a neighbour has been driven away or slain and the plot of land he leaves behind is a real bargain. This is like the promise of a farm in the Ukraine: an additional, imagined benefit. But since it's rare and generally still well out of reach, it is of little significance as an initial motivation. The gain is emotional: the neighbour's suffering and the perceived increase in one's own power that accompanies it. We are familiar with this phenomenon from totalitarian systems that rely on denunciation. Neighbours are hell-bent on denouncing one another, with no benefit to themselves, beyond the act of denunciation itself (and its awful consequences for those denounced): no bounty, no career, neither money nor goods, no prestige (on the contrary: no one should find out). If politics creates an opportunity to turn neighbourly relations into an arena for pure destruction for no other reason than to satisfy the desire to be destructive, the desire to do it, then this opportunity is used and used excessively.

As a resource for violence, neighbourly relations can be left to their own self-generated destructiveness; this suits the constellation of power in some regimes (one example was the Soviet Union). Other regimes allow the destruction of only specific groups by their neighbours, in other words, those who differ ethnically or politically. Here, denunciation triggers investigation, but the executors of the regime's will are left to decide whether or not they will act on the denunciatory categorization (as in National Socialism). In both cases, the neighbourly milieu as such remains diffuse and passive. Finally, part of the neighbourhood milieu can be structured politically as a party that sends a declaration of hostility to the other party (the rest). Then one becomes either Hutu or Tutsi, Serbian or Croatian, Catholic or Protestant. The border between friend and foe is no longer a real neighbourhood border; it must be constantly redrawn, based on the classification of a specific milieu's inhabitants. Just like the transformation of people I had never met before into "good neighbours", this is a mental operation based on a projection. Transforming a neighbourhood milieu into a patchwork of islands with good and bad neighbourly relations — which must be conceptualized as two neighbours separated by a border — is a difficult mental process that requires friend-foe feelings cut off from the sources of such emotions in everyday life. It is only in exceptional cases that I actually live door-to-door with my evil neighbour and there are no practices that build intimacy and forge a bond with my good neighbour. It is not easy to accept that this process can function, as we know it often does. Herein lies the problem so inadequately characterized by the question posed at the beginning of this essay. The answer is this: *what is important is to take the first step*. Resorting to violence means that the issue becomes tangible and abandons the abstract realm that fails to provide adequate motivation for further action. Once homes have been burned to ashes and people killed, two things become concrete. First, there is the threat: I have become the potential victim of retaliatory violence (which is why people like to claim that such an act has already occurred; retaliatory violence is more credible than initial violence). Second, a new dimension of the kind of intimacy that builds good neighbourly relations is revealed. This new dimension is violence: violence that is perpetrated collectively or violence that

is common knowledge, condoned, concealed, hushed up, or boasted about collectively, as the case may be. This is the identity–building realization that one belongs to a community of bastards who will only enjoy recognition and approval in the company of their peers. The barbecue is continued as a bivouac; each participant re–enters the state of grace again and again, by continuously committing unspeakably atrocious and cowardly acts of violence. But each is in a place where no one throws the first stone. Where else can one feel so secure?

All illustrations in this text © Disney.

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- ¹ All images in the text are used by permission and are extracts from the following four stories authored by Carl Barks and reprinted in the respective issues of *Carl Barks Library of Walt Disney's Comics and Stories in Color*: "Feud and Far Between", no. 49 (images 1, 18–20); "Good Neighbours", no. 2 (images 2–12); "The Purloined Putty", no. 4 (images 13–15); "Unfriendly Enemies", no. 50 (images 16–17).
- ² Patriotic song written by Max Schneckenburger in 1840, sung by Prussian troops during the defeat of the invading French armies and sung up to 1945 — trans.
- ³ Anti–French poem written in 1812 by Ernst Moritz Arndt demanding the handover of German speaking French territory in the Rhineland — trans.
- ⁴ An interesting question is whether this is, in fact, so unthinkable. What is the point of the Book of Job?

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