

## **CHILDREN OF THE EARTH**

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HAMLET: My excellent good friends! How dost thou, Guildenstern? Ah,  
Rosencrantz! Good lads, how do you both?  
ROSENCRANTZ: As the indifferent children of the earth.

—*Hamlet*

**For Hanna and Jacob**

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## PREFACE

*Children of the Earth* bears on the apparently genial motto “All men are brothers” (or “All human beings are siblings”). For millennia this dictum has had enough staying power and influence to warrant investigation into what its collapse of species with family might actually mean in the political realm: a recurring and multifarious transformation of its ideal of the familial unity of humankind into an effective politics where “only my ‘brothers’ are men, all ‘others’ are animals.” Why this turn comes about and what, if anything, we might do about it are ancient, still urgent questions.

The motto “All men are brothers” has had political significance for national unity and religious universalism. But however profound its cultural origin or ineradicable its linguistic presence, it is often prematurely dismissed as merely metaphorical, as if simply to say that “brother” does not mean “brother.” Throughout *Children of the Earth*, in varying historical and philosophical contexts, I explore politically symptomatic differentiations between “literal” and “metaphorical” in the realm of kinship terminology and politics. Here the differentiation of biology from sociology—and of culture from nature—is elucidated in terms of the linguistic distinctiveness of kinship words or names and in terms of a poetics, or metaphysics, of the classification of kin and kind (“a little more than kin, and less than kind”). The figural aspects of language help us to explain the often sociologically needful prejudice that familial consanguinity or its counterpart is the primary kind of kinship or identity, and that other kinds—adoption, friendship, and national belonging—are merely secondary.

For nomads and settlers alike, political analysis begins with knowing home. I introduce the problem at hand in a context at once North American and Judaeo-Christian. Chapter 1 is intentionally an American introduction to the study of kinship and nations. In focusing on the indeterminacy or deniability of blood or race (as illustrated, for example, by Mark Twain), I observe an unallayable anxiety about who’s in or out of a particular kinship group and the resulting allure of a universal kinship that renders knowledge of particular kin or nation beside the point (as illustrated, for example, by Herman Melville). In American history a guiding principle

is that all men are, in one way or another, equal; the concomitant struggle has often proved to be one of brother against brother, as in the War of Independence and the War Between the States.

In European history, the principal historical examples of toleration—or putting up with what we don't like—generally involve particularist societies which hold that “some men are brothers, and some are others.” Why this should be the case is the subject of chapter 2. Here I examine the celebrated coexistence in Muslim Spain of the three so-called peoples of the Book—Christians, Muslims, and Jews—and discuss the political significance of universalist and particularist definitions of what a “people” is. Under Christian rule Spain experienced a politically consequential confusion of the extraordinary, universalist view (“All men are brothers”) with the ordinary, particularist view (“Some men are brothers, and some men are not brothers”), a confusion that provided the impetus for such diverse institutions as bullfights, religious inquisitions and, more specifically, race slavery. By the same token, as we shall see, the modern notion of toleration, with its characteristically wavering defense of particular siblinghoods, for centuries defined itself against the universalist experience of Spanish Christendom.

The mosaic of peoples in multilingual Spain in medieval times resembles that in bilingual Québec in the present century. In that part of North America, free of “melting pot” ideologies, divisive language differences are conflated with distinctions of nation and blood. Québec is of special interest to me. My concern with the transformation from universal brotherhood to tribal otherhood was shaped as much by growing up in Québec—with its constitutionally separate linguistic and religious groups—as by my translocation in 1965 to the United States—with its insistence on the ideal of single siblinghood. Once an English colony and now a partner in the Canadian confederation, Québec still exists between poles of unity and schism that are comparable to those in the United States and Spain. Likewise, its popular struggles arise partly from ideas of nationhood brought over from the mother countries of Québec's two official national groups, France and England.

England and, more specifically, its purportedly bastard and virgin queen, Elizabeth, is the subject of chapter 4, which examines the relationship between the deformation—even collapse—of Elizabeth's family in the 1530s and the subsequent formation of the English nation. By reviving in this chapter the ancient notion that “where all human beings are siblings, all acts of sexual intercourse are incestuous,” I clarify the ideal Renaissance transformation of the fear of physical incest into a desire for spiritual incest, thereby illuminating the political role of Elizabeth as mother, wife, and sister of all Englishmen. This role, as we shall see, helped in defining politics as a liberal estate and provided an early impetus for modern liberalism and other forms of liberation. Even at age eleven, Elizabeth Tudor, bereft of a mother and abandoned by her father, theorized about familial and tribal relations. Later she actualized her thinking in such a way that it still influences “the indifferent children of the earth” (*Hamlet*) and their politics of liberal nationalism.

*Hamlet*, the subject of chapter 5, is a canonical play about kin, kind, and king.

But its links with the Western religious and political traditions have generally been misunderstood—as have these “traditions” themselves—thanks to a pervasive predilection to ignore the extraordinary quality of the siblinghood that *Hamlet* hypothesizes. This is a Greek stoic, imperial Roman, or Roman Christian universal siblinghood where all men are alike—or may as well be alike—as if every human being were a tragic player in some politically fateful game of blindman’s buff that is both desired and feared. This chapter considers the tragic implications of any such national kin or kind and also clarifies the predisposition to pass over in silence a generally insupportable tug-of-war between celibacy and incest.

The universalist aspect of imperial Rome and of Roman Christianity in France is the subject of chapter 6. Here I focus on the life and thought of Jean Racine, a “child of adoption” to a French universalist religious order. Just as Elizabeth grew up in a family of successive stepmothers, wrote a book where one being is fourfold kin to another (as parent, sibling, child, and spouse), and then became the mother, wife, and sister of a newly constituted English nation, so the young orphan Racine, bereft of father and mother, grew up in the spiritual family of Port-Royal and wrote plays about families and empires gone awry. Racine links a loss of particularized kin to Roman religious and imperial universalism; and in *Britannicus* he delineates the Western archetype of unkind monstrous cruelty that is Nero. His work and its interpretations help us understand the significance of such widespread romantic revisions of universalism as the French national slogan “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” and illuminate the political implications of such demographic experiments as contemporary China’s regulation requiring families to have no more than one child.

Family pets are not exactly monsters, but in Western societies the institution of the family pet likewise demarcates the shifting boundaries that separate familial kin from species kind. The way we think about and treat these family members says much about how we are likely to treat other humanoid creatures—and why. Here the evidence ranges from folktales to religious rules concerning what humanlike creatures we may eat or have sexual intercourse with. Chapter 7 considers how the doctrine “All men are brothers”—insofar as it turns into the dogma “Only my brothers are human beings”—and lacks effective rules for treating specifically non-human beings with special kindness—tends toward a loving bestiality and a Neronian cruelty that is inhumane and, hopefully, also essentially nonhuman.

For the universalist, the creature called “the family pet” is somehow human (kin is kind). In the vertiginous no-man’s-land of the world, however, we cannot say for sure who is kin (hence, for the universalist, also who is humankind) except *ex machina*, as when some social doctrine or literary fiction tells us credibly that the creature we thought was nonhuman is really human, or vice versa. Abraham thought the three potentially hostile strangers he hosted in his desert tent in Hebron were human, but they turned out to be angels.

In the final chapter I recall diverse characteristics adduced for restricting or extending group membership—religion, gender, language group, skin color, planetary origin, and the like. Examining whether we must have enemies, I rehearse

commonplace multifaceted justifications for behaving inhumanely toward nonkin as well as kin. As we shall see, the universalist transformation of brother into other suggests that it is better to be an outsider in a particularist kinship system where there are human kin and human aliens than to be an outsider in a universalist kinship system where there are only humankind and animals.

*Children of the Earth* is a literary study in politics, religion, and sociology. Questioning the usual distinction between figural and literal kinship, it revives and examines anew problems of national identity and difference that gave rise to such fields as comparative literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In Germany Moses Mendelssohn had already warned (in *Jerusalem*) against the intolerant tendency of a well-intentioned, purportedly secular universalism. Likewise, in France Chamfort had paraphrased the national motto of the French Revolution as "Be my brother, or I will kill you." Since variations in the way we demarcate essential familial and species boundaries amount to life-and-death differences, understanding the ideal of universal siblinghood and its tenacity is important if we are to learn whether and how human beings might coexist in a condition of enduring toleration or live together without killing one another.

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