

MAKING AND UNMAKING OF STRANGERS

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All societies produce strangers; but each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way. If strangers are the people who do not fit the cognitive, moral, or aesthetic map of the world—one of these maps, two or all three; if they, therefore, by their sheer presence, make obscure what ought to be transparent, confuse what ought to be a straightforward recipe for action, and/or prevent the satisfaction from being fully satisfying, pollute the joy with anxiety while making the forbidden fruit alluring; if, in other words, they befog and eclipse the boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen; if, having done all this, they gestate uncertainty, which in its turn breeds discomfort of feeling lost—then each society produces such strangers, while drawing its borders and charting its cognitive, aesthetic and moral map. It cannot but gestate people who conceal borderlines deemed crucial to its orderly and/or meaningful life and are thus charged with causing the discomfort experienced as the most painful and least bearable.

The most oppressive of nightmares that haunted our century notorious for its fears, gory deeds and dreary premonitions, was best captured in George Orwell's memorable image of a jackboot trampling the human face. No face was secure—as everyone was prone to be charged with the crime of trespassing or transgressing. And since humanity bears ill all confinement while the humans who transgress the boundaries turn into strangers—everyone had reasons to fear the jackboot made to trample the strangers in the dust, squeeze the strange out of the human and keep those not-yet trampled-but-about-to-be-trampled away from the mischief of boundary ignoring.

Jackboots are parts of uniforms. Elias Canetti wrote of “murderous uniforms”. At some point in our century it became common knowledge that men in uniforms are to be feared most. Uniforms were the insignia of the servants of the state, that source of all power, and, above all, coercive power. Wearing uniforms, men become that power in action; wearing jackboots they trample, and trample on the behest and in name of the state. The state which dressed men in uniforms so that they be allowed and instructed to trample was also the state which saw itself as the fount, the guardian and the sole guarantee of orderly life, a dam protecting order from chaos. It was the state that knew what the order should look like, and that had enough strength and arrogance not only to proclaim all other states of affairs to be disorder and chaos, but also force them to

live down to such a condition. This was, in other words, the modern state—that which legislated order into existence and defined order as the clarity of binding divisions, classifications, allocations and boundaries.

The typical modern strangers were the waste of the state's ordering zeal. What the modern strangers did not fit was the vision of order. When you draw dividing lines and set apart the so divided, everything that blurs the lines and spans the divisions undermines the work and mangles its products. The semantic under- and/or over-determination of the strangers corrupted neat divisions and marred the signposts. Their mere being around interfered with the work which the state swore to accomplish, and undid its efforts to accomplish it. The strangers exhaled uncertainty where certainty and clarity should have ruled. In the harmonious, rational order about to be built there was no room—there could be no room—for neither-nors, for the sitting astride, for the cognitively ambivalent. The order-building was a war of attrition waged against the strangers and the strange.

In this war (to borrow Levi-Strauss's concepts) two alternative, but also complementary strategies were intermittently deployed. One was *anthropophagic*: annihilating the strangers by *devouring* them and then metabolically transforming them into a tissue indistinguishable from one's own. This was the strategy of assimilation—making the different similar: the smothering of cultural or linguistic distinctions, forbidding all traditions and loyalties except those meant to feed the conformity of the new and all embracing order, promoting and enforcing one and only measure of conformity. The other strategy was *antthropoemic*: *vomiting* the strangers, banishing them from the limits of the orderly world and barring them from all communication with those inside. This was the strategy of exclusion—confining the strangers within the visible walls of the ghettos or behind the invisible, yet no less tangible prohibitions of *commensality*, *connubium*, and *commercium*, expelling the strangers beyond the frontiers of the managed and manageable territory; or, when neither of the two measures was feasible—destroying the strangers physically.

The most common expression of the two strategies was the notorious clash between the liberal and the nationalist/racist versions of the modern project. People are different, implied the liberal project, but they are different because of the diversity of local, particularistic traditions in which they grew and matured. They are products of education, creatures of culture, and hence pliable and amenable to re-shaping. The progressive universalization of the human condition—which means nothing else but the uprooting of all parochiality and the powers bent on preserving it, and consequently setting human development free of the stultifying impact of the accident of birth—meant that it was believed pre-determined, stronger-than-human-choice, diversity would fade away. Not so, objected the nationalist/racist project. Cultural remaking has limits which no human effort could transcend. Certain people will be never converted into something other than they are. They are, so to speak, beyond repair.

One cannot rid them of their faults; one can only get rid of them, complete with their oddities and evils.

Cultural and/or physical annihilation of strangers and of the strange was therefore, in modern society and under the aegis of the modern state, a *creative* destruction; demolishing, but building at the same time; mutilating, but also straightening up. It was part and parcel of the on going order building effort, its indispensable condition and accompaniment. And obversely whenever building-order-by-design is on the agenda, certain inhabitants of the territory to be made orderly in the new way turn into strangers that need to be eliminated. Under the pressure of the modern order-building urge, the strangers lived, so to speak, in a state of suspended extinction. The strangers were, by definition, an anomaly to be rectified. Their presence was defined a priori as temporary, much as the current stage in the prehistory of the order yet to come. A permanent coexistence with the stranger and the strange, and the pragmatics of living with strangers, did not need to be faced point blank as a serious prospect. And it would not need to be as long as modern life remained a life-towards-a-project, as long as that project remained collectivized into a vision of a new and comprehensive order, and as long as the construction of such an order remained in the hands of a state ambitious and resourceful enough to pursue the task. None of these conditions seem to be holding today, though—a time which Anthony Giddens calls “late modernity”, Ulrich Beck “reflexive modernity”, George Balandier “surmodernity”, and I, together with many others, have chosen to call postmodern: the time we live in now, in our part of the world.

DISEMBEDDING INTO SETTING AFLOAT

In its order-building pursuits, the modern state set about discrediting, disavowing and uprooting the intermediary powers of communities and traditions. If accomplished, the task would “disembed” (Giddens) or “disencumber” (MacIntyre) the individuals, give them the benefit of an absolute beginning, set them free to choose the kind of life they wish to live and to monitor and manage its living in the framework of legal rules spelled out by the sole legitimate legislating powers—those of the state. The modern project promised to free the individual from inherited identity. Yet it did not take a stand against identity as such, against having identity, against having a solid, resilient and immutable identity. It only transformed the identity from the matter of ascription into achievement, thus making it an individual task and the individual’s responsibility.

Much like that global order which collectively underwrote individual life-efforts, the orderly (comprehensive, cohesive, consistent, and continuous) identity of the individual was cast as a *project, the life project* (as Jean-Paul Sartre, with already retrospective wisdom, articulated it). Identity was to be erected systematically, floor by floor and brick by brick, following a blueprint completed before the work started. The construction called for a clear vision of

the final shape, for careful calculation of the steps leading towards it, for long-term planning and seeing through the consequences of every move. Thus there was a tight and irrevocable bond between social order as a project and individual life as a project; the latter was unthinkable without the first. Were it not for the collective efforts to secure a reliable setting for individual actions and choices, constructing a lasting and stable identity and living one's life towards such an identity would be all but impossible.

Settings appear reliable (1) if their life-expectancy is by and large commensurate with the duration of the individual identity-building process; and (2) if their shape seems immune to the vagaries of fads and foibles promoted singly or severally (in sociological jargon—if the “macro-level” is relatively independent of what goes on at the “micro-level”), so that individual projects can be sensibly inscribed in a trustworthy, unyielding eternal frame. This was the case, by and large, through most of modern history, the notorious modern acceleration of change notwithstanding. “Structures” (from physical neighborhoods to currencies) appeared to be endowed with enough resilience and solidity to withstand all inroads of individual endeavours and survive all individual choice, so that the individual could measure itself up against the tough and finite set of opportunities, convinced that choices can be, in principle, rationally calculated and objectively evaluated. When compared to the biologically limited span of individual life, the institutions embodying collective life (and the nation-state first of all) appeared truly immortal. Professions, occupations and related skills did not age faster than their carriers. Neither did the principles of success; delaying gratifications paid up in the long run, and the saving book epitomized the rationality of long-term planning. In modern society which engaged its members primarily in the role of producers/soldiers,¹ adjustment and adaptation pointed one way only: it was fickle individual choice which needed to take stock as well as notice of the “functional” prerequisites of the whole, in more than one sense, to use Durkheim's apt phrase, “greater than itself”.

If these are indeed the conditions of the reliability of settings, or of the appearance of the settings as reliable, the context of postmodern life does not pass the test. Individual life-projects find no stable ground to cast the anchor, and individual identity-building efforts cannot rectify the consequences of “disembedding” and arrest the floating and drifting self. Some authors (notably Giddens) point to the widely fashionable efforts of “re-embedding”; being however postulated, rather than pre-given, and sustained solely by the notoriously erratic supplies of emotional energy, the sites of the sought “re-embedment” are plagued with the same unsteadiness and eccentricity which prompts the disembedded selves to seek them in the first place. The image of the world generated by life concerns is now devoid of genuine or assumed solidity and continuity which used to be the trade-mark of modern structures. The dominant sentiment is the feeling of uncertainty—as to the future shape of the world, as to the right way of living in it, and of the criteria by which to judge the rights

and wrongs of the way of living. Uncertainty is not exactly a newcomer in a world with the modern past. What is new, though, is that it is no longer seen as a mere temporary nuisance, which with due effort may be either mollified or altogether overcome. The postmodern world is bracing itself for life under a condition of uncertainty which is permanent and irreducible.

DIMENSIONS OF THE PRESENT UNCERTAINTY

Many a feature of contemporary living contributes to the overwhelming feeling of uncertainty: to the view of the future as essentially un-decidable, uncontrollable and hence frightening, and of the gnawing doubt whether the present contextual constants of action will remain constant long enough to enable reasonable calculation of its effects. We live today, to borrow the felicitous expression coined by Marcus Doel and David Clarke in the atmosphere of *ambient fear*.² Let me name just a few of the factors responsible.

1. The new world disorder. After half a century of clear-cut divisions, obvious stakes and evident political purposes and strategies, came the new world devoid of visible structure, and any—however sinister—logic. The power-bloc politics dominated a world frightened by the awesomeness of its possibilities; and whatever came to replace it was frightened by its lack of consistency and direction— and so by the boundlessness of possibilities it forebodes. Hans Magnus Enzensberger fears the impending era of the Civil War (he has counted about forty such wars being waged today from Bosnia through Afghanistan to Bougainville). In France, Alain Minc writes of the coming of New Dark Ages. In Britain, Norman Stone asks whether we are not back in the mediaeval world of beggars, plagues, conflagrations and superstitions. Whether this is or is not the tendency of our time remains, of course, an open question which only the future will answer—but what truly matters now is that auguries like these can be publicly made from the most prestigious sites of contemporary intellectual life, listened to, pondered and debated.

The “Second World” is no more; its former member countries woke up, to use Claus Offe’s felicitous phrase, to the “tunnel at the end of the light”. But with the demise of the Second World, the “Third World”, constituting itself in opposition to power blocks, as the third force in the Bandung era and proving to be such a force through playing up the fears and inanities of the two power-greedy world empires, quit the world political stage. Today twenty or so wealthy, but anxious and unself-assured countries confront the rest of the world which is no longer inclined to look up to their definitions of progress and happiness yet grows by the day ever more dependent on them in preserving whatever happiness or “secondary barbarization” best sums up the overall impact of the modern metropolis on the world periphery.

2. Universal deregulation, the unquestionable and unqualified priority awarded to the irrationality and moral blindness of the competitive market, the

unbounded freedom granted to capital and finance at the expense of all other freedoms, the tearing up of the socially woven and societally maintained safety nets, and the disavowal of all but economic reasons gave a new push to the relentless process of polarization, once halted by the legal frameworks of the welfare state, trade union bargaining rights, labour legislation, and—on a global scale, though in this case much less convincingly—by the initial effects of world agencies charged with redistribution of capital. Inequality, inter-continental, inter-state, and inner-societal (regardless of the level of the GNP boasted or bewailed by the particular country) reaches once again proportions which the world once confident of its ability to self-regulate and self-correct seemed to have left behind once for all. By cautious and, if anything, conservative calculations, rich Europe counts among its citizens about three million homeless, twenty million evicted from the labour market, thirty million living below the poverty line. The switch from the project of community, as the guardian of the universal right to a decent and dignified life, to the promotion of the market, as the sufficient guarantee of the universal chance of self-improvement, adds further to the suffering of the new poor, glossing poverty with humiliation and with denial of consumer freedom, now identified with humanity.

The psychological effects, though, reach far beyond the swelling ranks of the dispossessed and the redundant. Only the few powerful enough to blackmail the other powerfals into the obligation of a golden handshake can be sure that their home, however prosperous and imposing it may seem today, is not haunted by the spectre of tomorrow's downfall. No jobs are guaranteed, no positions are foolproof, no skills are of lasting utility, experience and know-how turn into liability as soon as they become assets, seductive careers all-too-often prove to be suicide tracks. In their present rendering, human rights do not entail the acquisition of the right to jobs however well performed, or—more generally—the right to care and consideration for the sake of the past merits. Livelihood, social position, acknowledgment of usefulness and the entitlement to self-dignity may all vanish together, overnight and without notice.

3. The other safety nets, self-woven and self-maintained, second lines of trenches, once offered by the neighborhood or the family where one could withdraw to heal the bruises acquired in the marketplace, if now not fallen apart, then at least have been considerably weakened. The changing pragmatics of interpersonal relations (the new style of "life politics" described with great conviction by Giddens) are now permeated by the ruling spirit of consumerism and thus cast the other as the potential source of pleasurable experience, and partly to blame: whatever else it is good at, it cannot generate lasting bonds, and most certainly not the bonds which are presumed as lasting and treated as such. The bonds which it does generate have an in-built until-further-notice and withdrawal-at-will clauses and promise neither the granting nor the acquisition of rights and obligations. The slow yet relentless dissipation and induced forgetting of social skills bears another part of the blame. What used to be put together and kept together by personal skills and with the use of indigenous

resources, tends to be mediated now by technologically produced tools purchasable at the market. In the absence of such tools partnerships and groups disintegrate, if they emerge in the first place. Not only the satisfaction of individual needs, but the presence and resilience of collectivities as well, become market-dependent, and so duly reflect the capriciousness and erraticism of the marketplace.

4. As David Bennett recently observed “radical uncertainty about the material and social worlds we inhabit and our modes of political agency within them ... is what the image-industry offers us”.³ Indeed, the message conveyed today with great power of persuasion by the most ubiquitously effective cultural media (and, let us add, easily read by the recipients against the background of their own experience, aided and abetted by the logic of consumer freedom) is a message of the essential indeterminacy and malleability of the world: in this world, everything may happen and everything can be done, once and for all—and whatever happens, comes unannounced and goes away without notice. In this world, bonds are dissembled into successive encounters, identities into successively worn masks, life-history into series of episodes whose sole lasting importance is their equally ephemeral memory. Nothing can be known for sure, and anything which is known can be known in a different way—one way of knowing being as good, or as bad (and certainly as volatile and precarious) as any other. Betting is now the rule where certainty was once sought and taking risks replaces the stubborn pursuit of goals. Thus there is little in the world which one could consider solid and reliable, nothing reminiscent of a tough canvas in which one could weave one’s own life itinerary. Like everything else, the self-image splits into a collection of snapshots, each one having to conjure up, carry and express its own meaning, more often than not without reference to other snapshots. Instead of constructing one’s identity, gradually and patiently, like one builds a house, through the slow accretion of floors, rooms, connecting passages, we encounter a series of “new beginnings”, experimenting with instantly assembled yet easily dismantled shapes, painted one over the other; a *palimpsest identity*. This is the kind of identity which fits the world in which the art of forgetting is an asset, no less if no more important than the art of memorizing, in which forgetting rather than learning is the condition of continuous fitness, in which ever new things and people enter and exit the field of vision of the stationary camera of attention, without rhyme or reason and where memory itself is like video-tape, always ready to be wiped clean in order to admit new images, and boasting a life-long guarantee thanks to the wondrous ability of endless self-effacing.

These are some, certainly not all, of the dimensions of postmodern uncertainty. Living under conditions of overwhelming and self-perpetuating uncertainty is an experience altogether different from life subordinated to the task of identity-building and lived in a world bent on the construction of order. The oppositions, which in that other experience underlay and endorsed the meaning of the world and of the life lived in it, lose much of their meaning and most of their

heuristic and pragmatic potency in the new experience. Baudrillard has written profusely about this implosion of the sense-giving oppositions. Yet alongside the collapse of the opposition between reality and its simulation, truth and its representation, comes the blurring and the watering down of the difference between the normal and the abnormal, the expected and the unexpected, the ordinary and the bizarre, the domesticated and the wild—the familiar and the strange, us and the stranger. The strangers are no more authoritatively pre-selected, defined and set apart, as they used to be in times of the state-managed, consistent and durable programmes of order-building. They are now as unsteady and protean as one's own identity; as poorly founded, as erratic and volatile. *L'ipséité*, that difference which sets the self apart from the non-self, and “us” apart from “them”, is no more given by the pre-ordained shape of the world nor by command from on high. It needs to be constructed, and re-constructed, and constructed once more, and re-constructed again, on both sides at the same time, neither of the sides boasting more durability, or just “givenness”, than the other. Today's strangers are by-products, but also the means of production, in the incessant, never conclusive, process of identity building.

FREEDOM, UNCERTAINTY, AND FREEDOM FROM UNCERTAINTY

What makes certain people “strangers” and therefore vexing, unnerving, off-putting and otherwise a “problem”, is their capacity to befog and eclipse the boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen. At different times and in different social situations, different boundaries ought to be seen more clearly than others. In our postmodern times, for reasons spelled out above, the boundaries which tend to be simultaneously most strongly desired and most acutely missed are those of *identity*: of a rightful and secure position in the society, of a space unquestionably one's own, where one can plan one's life with the minimum of interference, play one's role in a game in which the rules do not change overnight and without notice, act reasonably and hope for the better. As we have seen, it is the characteristic of contemporary men and women in our society that they live perpetually with the “identity problem” unresolved. They suffer, one might say, from a chronic absence of resources with which they could build a truly solid and lasting identity, anchor it and stop it from drifting. Or one can go still further and point out a still more incapacitating feature of their life situation, a genuine double-bind which defies most ardent efforts to make identity clear-cut and reliable: while *making* oneself an identity is a strongly felt need and an activity eloquently encouraged by all authoritative cultural media, *having* an identity solidly founded and resistant to cross-waves, having it “for life”, proves for many who do not sufficiently control the circumstances of their life, a handicap, rather than an asset; a burden that constrains the movement, a ballast which they must throw out in order to stay afloat. This, we can say, is a universal feature of our times. Hence the anxiety related to the problems of

identity and the disposition to be concerned with everything “strange”, on which anxiety may be focused and by being focused made sense of, is potentially universal. But the specific gravity of that feature is not the same for everybody; the feature affects different people to a different degree and brings consequences with varying importance to their life-pursuits.

In her illuminating study *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas taught us that what we perceive as uncleanness or dirt and busy ourselves scrubbing and wiping out is that anomaly or ambiguity “which must not be included if the pattern is to be maintained”.⁴ She added a sociological perspective to Jean Paul Sartre’s brilliant and memorable analysis of *le visqueux*, “the slimy” in *Being and Nothingness*. The slimy, says Sartre, is docile—or so it seems to be.

Only at the very moment when I believe that I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me ... If an object which I hold in my hands is solid, I can let go when I please; its inertia symbolizes for me my total power ... Yet here is the slimy reversing the terms: [my self] is suddenly *compromised*, I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me ... I am no longer the master ... The slime is like a liquid seen in a nightmare, where all its properties are animated by a sort of life and turn back against me ... If I dive into the water, if I plunge into it, if I let myself sink in it, I experience no discomfort, for I do not have any fear whatsoever that I may dissolve in it, I remain a solid in its liquidity. If I sink in the slimy, I feel that I am going to be lost in it ... To touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved in sliminess.⁵

Feeling the difference of the water in which I swim (if I know how to swim, that is, and if the current is not too strong for my skills and muscles) is not only free of fear, it is pleasurable. The joy obtained from an uncommon or rare sensuous experience is unclouded by apprehension that something important to me and more lasting than pleasure may result. If anything, immersing myself in the lake or the sea reasserts my power to keep my shape intact, my control over my body, my freedom and mastery: at any time I may come back if I wish, dry myself, not for a moment dreading the compromise, the discreditation of my being myself, being what I think/want myself to be. But imagine taking a bath in a barrelful of resin, tar, honey or treacle. Unlike water, the substance sticks, holds to my skin, will not let go. Rather than invading unpunished a foreign, novel element, I feel invaded and conquered by an element from which there is no escape. I am no longer in control, no more a master of myself. I have lost my freedom.

Thus the slimy stands for the loss of freedom, or for the fear that freedom is under threat and may be lost. But, let us note, freedom is a *relation*—a power relation. I am free if I can act according to my will and reach the results I intend to reach; this means, though, that some other people will be inevitably restricted in their choices by the actions I have taken, and that they will fail to reach the results they wished. In fact, I cannot measure my own freedom in ab-

solute terms, I can measure it only *relatively*, comparing with other people's ability to obtain it. Thus, ultimately, freedom depends on who is stronger—on the distribution of the skills and material resources which the effective action requires. What follows is that the “sliminess” (stickiness, stubbornness, resilience, compromising potency, transforming possession into being possessed, mastery into dependency) of another substance (and this includes, more than anything else, other people) is a function of my own skills and resources. What seems slimy to some, may be fresh, pleasant, exhilarating to others. And the purest of waters may act in the “slimy style” against a person ignorant of the art of swimming, but also a person too weak to defy the powerful element, to withstand the torrent, to steer safely through the rapids, to stay on course among the eddies and the tidal waves. One is tempted to say that much as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the sliminess of the slimy is in the strength (or in the wallet) of the actor.

The stranger is hateful and feared as is the slimy, and for the same reasons (not everywhere, to be sure, and not at all times). As Max Frisch caustically observed in his essay *Foreignization*, dedicated to our feelings about foreigners coming to stay in our cities: “there are just too many of them—not at the construction sites and not in the factories and not in the stable and not in the kitchen, but during after-hours. Especially on Sunday there are suddenly too many of them”. If this is so, then the same relativity principle which rules the constitution of sliminess regulates the constitution of resented strangers, strangers as people to be resented: the acuity of strangerhood, and the intensity of its resentment, grow up with relative powerlessness and diminish with the growth of relative freedom. One can expect that the less people control and can control their lives and their life-founding identities, the more they will be perceived by others as slimy, and the more frantically they will try to disentangle and detach themselves from the strangers they experience as an enveloping, suffocating, sucking in, formless substance. In the postmodern city, the strangers mean one thing to those for whom “no go areas” (the “mean streets”, the “rough district”) means “no go in”, and those to whom “no go” means “no go out”.

For some residents of the modern city, secure in their burglar-proof homes in the leafy suburbs, fortified offices in the heavily policed business centres, and cars bespattered with security gadgets to take them from homes to offices and back, the “stranger” is as pleasurable as the surfing beach, and not at all slimy. The strangers run restaurants promising unusual, exciting experience to the taste buds, sell curious and mysterious objects fit to be talking points at the next party, offer services other people would not stoop or deign to offer, dangle morsels of wisdom refreshingly different from the routine and boring. The strangers are people whom you pay for their offers and for the right to terminate their services once they no longer bring pleasure. At no point do the strangers compromise the freedom of the consumer of their services. As the tourist, the patron, the client, the consumer of services is always in charge: s/he

demands, sets the rules, and above all decides when the encounter starts and when it ends. Unambiguously, the strangers are purveyors of pleasures. Their presence is a break in the tedium. One should thank God that they are here. So what is all that uproar and outcry for?

The uproar and the outcry comes, let there be no mistake, from other areas of the city, which the pleasure-seeking consumers never visit, let alone live. Those areas are populated by people not able to choose whom they meet and for how long and to pay for having their choices respected; powerless people, experiencing the world as a trap, not an adventure park, incarcerated in a territory from which there is no exit for them, but which the others may enter at will. Since the only tokens for securing freedom of choice which are legal tender in the consumer society are in short supply or are denied them altogether, they need to resort to the only resources they possess in a quantity large enough to make an impression; they defend the territory under siege, to use Dick Hebdidge's pithy description in *Hiding in the Light*, through "rituals, dressing strangely, striking bizarre attitudes, breaking rules, breaking bottles, windows, heads, issuing rhetorical challenges to the law".⁶ They react in a wild, rabid, distraught and flustered fashion, as one reacts to the incapacitating pulling/dissolving power of the slimy. The sliminess of strangers, let us repeat, is the reflection of their own powerlessness. It is their own lack of power that crystallizes in their eyes as the awesome might of the strangers. The weak meets and confronts the weak; but both feel like Davids fighting Goliaths. They are both "slimy" to each other, but each fights the sliminess of the other in the name of the purity of one's own.

Ideas, as well as the words that convey them, change their meaning the further they travel, and travelling between the homes of the satisfied consumers and the dwellings of the powerless is a long-distance voyage. If the contented and the secure wax lyrical about the beauty of nationhood, New Jerusalem, glorify the heritage and dignity of tradition, the insecure and hounded bewail the defilement and humiliation of the race. If the first rejoice in a variety of guests and pride themselves on open minds and open doors, the second gnash their teeth at the thought of lost purity. The benign patriotism of the first rebounds as the racism of the second.

Nothing spurs into action as frenzied, licentious and disorderly as the fear of the disassembly of order, embodied in the figure of the slimy. But there is much energy boiling in this chaos; with a degree of skill and cunning it can be gathered and re-deployed to give the unruliness a direction. The fear of the slimy, precipitated by powerlessness, is always a tempting weapon to be added to the armory of the power-greedy. Some of the latter come from the ranks of the frightened. They may try to use the accumulated fear and anger to climb out of the besieged ghetto; or, as Ervin Goffman wittily suggested, to make the crutch into a golf club. They may try to condense the diffuse resentment of the weak into an assault against equally weak strangers, thus kneading it into the

foundation of their own power, as tyrannical and intolerant as power can be, while all the time claiming to defend the weak against their oppressors. But many other power-seekers are attracted. One needs, after all, only to take a bus to refill the empty tank of nationalism with racist fuel. Not much navigating skill is needed to make the nationalist sails gather the wind blowing from racist hatred; to enlist, by the same token, the powerless in the service of the power-greedy. What one needs is but a reminder of the sliminess of strangers.

THEORIZING THE DIFFERENCE: OR THE TWISTED ROAD TO SHARED HUMANITY

The essential difference between the socially-produced modality of modern and postmodern strangers is that while modern strangers were earmarked for annihilation and served as bordermarks for the advancing boundary of the order-under-construction, the postmodern ones are by common consent or resignation, whether joyful or grudging, here to stay. To paraphrase Voltaire's comment on God: if they did not exist, they would have to be invented. And they are indeed invented, zealously and with gusto, patched together with salient or minute and unobtrusive distinction marks. They are useful precisely in their capacity of stranger; their strangerhood is to be protected and caringly preserved. They are indispensable signposts in the life itinerary without plan and direction. They must be as many and as protean as the successive and parallel incarnations of identity in the never ending search for itself.

In an important respect, and with important reasons, ours is a *beterophilic* age. For the sensation-gatherers or experience-collectors that we are, concerned (or, forced to be concerned) with flexibility and openness, rather than with fixity and self-closure, difference comes at a premium. There is a resonance and a harmony between the way we go about our identity problems and the plurality and differentiation of the world in which the identity problems are dealt with, or which we conjure up in the process of that dealing. It is not just that we need the strangers around because, due to the way we are culturally shaped, we would miss precious life-enhancing values in a uniform, monotonous and homogenous world; more than that—such a world without difference could not, by any stretch of imagination, evolve out of the way in which our lives are shaped and carried on. In our postmodern part of the world the age of *anthropophagic* and *anthropoemic* strategies is over. The question is no longer how to get rid of the strangers and the strange, but how to live with them, daily and permanently. Whatever realistic strategy of coping with the unknown, the uncertain and the confusing can be thought of, it needs to start from recognizing this fact.

And indeed, all intellectually conceived strategies still in competition today seem to accept this. One may say: a new theoretical/ideological consensus is emerging, to replace another, more than a century old. If the left and right, the

progressivists and the reactionaries of the modern period agreed that strangerhood is abnormal and regrettable, and that the superior (because homogenous) order of the future would have no room for the strangers, postmodern times are marked by an almost universal agreement that difference is not merely unavoidable, but good, precious, and in need of protection and cultivation. In the words of that towering figure of the postmodern intellectual right, Alain de Benoist, “we see reasons for hope only in the affirmation of collective singularities, the spiritual reappropriation of heritages, the clear awareness of roots and specific cultures”.⁷ The spiritual guide of the Italian neo-fascist movement, Julius Evola, is even more blunt: “The racists recognize difference and want difference”.⁸ Pierre-André Taguieff sums up the process of the postmodern re-articulation of racist discourse, coining the term of “differentialist racism”.

Note that these self-admittedly right-wing, even fascist, professions of faith no longer propose unlike their precursors, that differences between people are immune to cultural interference and that it is beyond human power to make someone into somebody else. Yes, they say, the differences—our differences as much as the differences of the others—are all human products, culturally produced. But, they say, different cultures make their members in different shapes and colours—and *this is good*. Though shalt not tie together what culture, in its wisdom, has set apart. Let us, rather, help culture, any culture, to go its own separate, and better still inimitable way. The world will be so much richer then. The striking thing, of course, is that a reader unaware that the author of the first quotation was Benoist, could be forgiven for mistaking it for a left programmatic statement; and that Evola’s sentence would lose none of its conviction were the word racist replaced by “progressive”, “liberal”, or for that matter, socialist. Are we not all *bona fide* differentialists today? Multiculturalists? Pluralists?

So it happens that both right and left agree today that the preferable mode of living with strangers is to keep apart. Though perhaps for different reasons, both resent and publicly denigrate the universalist/imperialist/assimilationist ambitions of the modern state, now debunked as innately proto-totalitarian. Disenchanted or repelled by the idea of legislated uniformity, the left, which—being left—cannot live without hope, turns its eyes towards “community”, hailed and eulogized as the long lost now rediscovered home of humanity. To be a born again communitarian is widely considered today as a sign of critical standpoint, leftism and progress. Come back community, from the exile to which the modern state confined you; all is forgiven and forgotten—the oppressiveness of parochiality, the genocidal propensity of collective narcissism, the tyranny of communal pressures and the pugnacity and despotism of communal discipline. It is, of course, a nuisance, that one finds some unwelcome and thoroughly repulsive fellows in this bed. How to keep the bed to oneself, how to prove that the unwelcome fellows have no right to be in it—this seems to be the question.

I propose that the racist bedfellows in the bed of communitarianism are perhaps a nuisance for its new occupants, but not at all a surprise. They were

there first, and it is their birthright. Both occupants, the old ones and the new, have been lured into that bed by the same promise and the same desire—of “re-embedding”, what has been “disembedded”, of the release from the formidable task of individual self-construction, and from overwhelming individual responsibility for its results.

The old racism turned its back on the emancipatory chance entailed in the modern project. I propose that, true to its nature, it now turns its back on the emancipatory chance which the changed postmodern context of life holds. Only now, for the reason of curious amnesia or myopia, it is not alone in doing so. It sings in chorus with the lyrical voices of a growing number of social scientists and moral philosophers who extol the warmth of communal homes and bewail the trials and tribulations of the unencumbered, homeless self.

This is a type of critique of the emancipatory failure of modernity which itself does not hold hope for emancipation: this is a misdirected, and, I would say, retrograde critique of the modern project, as it only proposed to shift the site of disablement and subordination from the universalist state to the particularistic tribe. It only replaced one “essentialism” already discredited, by another, not yet fully unmasked in all its disempowering potential. True, communal self-determination may assist the initial stages of the long process of re-empowerment of human subjects—their resolve to resist the disciplinary pressure presently experienced as the most obnoxious and overwhelming. But there is a dangerous, and often overlooked point. This is where re-empowerment turns into a new disempowerment and emancipation into a new oppression. Once on this road, it is difficult to sense where to stop, and, as a rule, it is too late to stop once the point has been recognized after the fact. We would be all well advised to heed to the recent reminder by Richard Stevers in *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline*:

Martin Luther King Jr understood perfectly well that racial and ethnic relations would deteriorate markedly if the cultural value of integration declined. Indeed, this is precisely what has happened in the United States. The various gender, racial and ethnic groups have almost come to occupy mutually exclusive social spaces ... The struggle for equality becomes a struggle for power—but power left to itself does not recognize equality.⁹

But there is a genuine emancipatory chance in postmodernity, the chance of laying down arms, suspending border skirmishes waged to keep the stranger away, taking apart the daily erected mini-Berlin walls meant to keep distance and to separate. This chance does not lie in the celebration of born-again ethnicity and in genuine or invented tribal tradition, but in bringing to its conclusion the “disembedding” work of modernity, through laying bare the intricate process of subject self-formation, through revealing the conditions of individual freedom which (rather than the right to consumer satisfaction) constitutes the hard core of citizenship, which in its turn transcends both national

and tribal limitations through focusing on the right to choose one's identity as the sole universality of the citizen/human, on the ultimate, inalienable individual responsibility for the choice, and through laying bare the complex state—or tribe—managed mechanisms aimed at depriving the individual of that freedom of choice and that responsibility. The chance of human togetherness depends on the rights of the stranger and not on the answer to the question who is entitled—the state or the tribe—to decide who the strangers are.

Jacques Derrida, when interviewed by Robert Maggiori for *Liberation* (24 November 1994), appealed for rethinking rather than abandoning the modern idea of humanism. The “human right”, as we begin to see it today, but above all as we may and ought to see it, is not the product of legislation, but precisely the opposite: it is what sets the limit “to force, declared laws, political discourses” and the “founded” rights (regardless who has, or demands, or usurps the prerogative to “found” authoritatively). “The human” of the traditional humanist philosophy, including the Kantian subject, is, Derrida suggests, “still too ‘fraternal’, subliminally virile, familial, ethnic, national etc”. What, I suggest, follows from this, is that modern theorizing of human essence and human rights erred on the side of leaving too much, rather than too little, of the “encumbered” or “embedded” element in its idea of the human—and it is for this fault, rather than for siding too uncritically with the homogenising ambitions of the modern state and hence placing the “encumbering” or “embedding” authority on the wrong site, that it ought to be subjected to critical scrutiny and re-assessment.

That re-assessment is a philosophical task. But saving the possibility of emancipation from being stillborn, sets, besides the philosophical, a political task. We have noted that the odious “sliminess” of the stranger progresses as the freedom of the individuals faced with the duty of self-assertion declines. We have also noted that the postmodern setting does not so much increase the total volume of individual freedom, as re-distribute it in an increasingly polarised fashion: intensifies it among the joyfully and willingly seduced, while tapering it almost beyond existence among the deprived and panoptically regulated, with this polarization uncurbed, one can expect the present duality of the socially produced status of strangers to continue unabated. On one pole, strangerhood (and difference in general) will go on being constructed as the source of pleasurable experience and aesthetic satisfaction; on the other, as the terrifying incarnation of the unstoppable rising sliminess of the human condition, as the effigy for all future ritual burning of its horrors. And power politics will offer its usual share of opportunities for short-circuiting the poles: to protect their own emancipation-through-seduction, those close to the first pole would seek domination-through-fear over those close to the second pole, and so would aid and abet their cottage industry of horrors. Sliminess of strangers and the politics of exclusion stem from the logic of polarization—from the increasingly two nations, mark two condition indicated in my *Legislators and Interpreters*, and this is the case because the polarization arrests the process of individualization, or

genuine and radical “disembedding” for the “other nation”, for the oppressed who have been denied the resources for identity-building and so also (for all practical intents and purposes) the tools of citizenship. It is not merely income and wealth, life expectation and life conditions, but also—and perhaps most seminally—the right to individuality that is being increasingly polarised. And as long as it stays this way, there is little chance for the de-sliming of strangers.

Notes

1. See the chapter “A Catalogue of Postmodern Fears” in my *Life in Fragments* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1995).
2. *Street Wars: Space, Politics and the City*, G. Crysler and C. Hamilton (eds), (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995).
3. David Bennett, “Hollywood's Indeterminacy Machine”, *Arena*, no. 3, (1994), p. 30.
4. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), p. 53.
5. J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. H.E. Barres, (London, Methuen, 1969), pp. 608–610.
6. Dick Hebdidge, *Hiding in the Light* (London, Routledge, 1988), p. 18.
7. *Dix ans de combat culturel pour une Renaissance*, (Paris, Greece, 1977), p. 19.
8. *Éléments pour éducation raciale* Puiseaux, (Paris, 1985), p. 29.
9. Richard Stevers, *The Culture of Cynicism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994), p. 119.