

“We’re Not Far-right, Just Right So Far”: Uncanny Refugee-masks of Otherness

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1. From anxiety to method

Beware of reducing the unknown to what you know – warns my cross-cultural clinical training. Georges Devereux, often referred to as a pioneer of Ethnopsychiatry, put forward a hypothesis according to which when an ethnologist is confronted with phenomena that is considered transgressive in their culture, they experience a mixture of fascination and anxiety, as a result of reactivated unconscious desires. Facing this anxiety, writes Devereux (1980), one turns to a number of defences, which inevitably leads to deformations in the perception of the subjects they study, who they’ll perceive and interpret from the viewpoint of their own “model of self”.

Francoise Sironi¹ (2006) uses even stronger words than Devereux, when speaking of “theoretical abuse” (*maltraitance théorique*) carried out by certain clinicians, who confine the suffering of their patients in pre-established diagnostic categories, while negating and discrediting the political elements. Putting patients in the position of experts of these elements opens up the political dimension of the cure – creating the conditions for the emergence of our clinical objects, writes Sironi, and it is in this sense, that one could call the therapeutic process “democratic”. A dedicated clinician therefore must consider this clinical-political construction of the real. We are traversing a time in history when many European countries are adopting the so-called Migration Pact, to deal “rapidly and effectively” with the growing number of asylum-seekers. I am so grateful that speaking about migration, an incredibly complex topic, is happening today in a multidisciplinary context, which will hopefully help us to avoid what

¹ Françoise Sironi is a clinical psychologist. She was one of the founders of Centre Primo Levi in Paris. The Primo Levi centre is a nonprofit organization, dedicated to the care and support of survivors of torture and other political violence.

Derivois (2009) calls “*epistemological splitting*”, confusing the subject we study with their representation by their discipline, and by doing so, depriving them of their inherent complexity.

Refugees and asylum-seekers are the terms I am going to use for people affected by forced migration, as the now official term “international protection applicant” strikes me as a sanitized term, which erases the notion of asylum: an ancient concept of a sacred, inviolable place where those rejected or threatened were able to find shelter in (Crepeau, 1995).

With all these useful notions and approaches in mind I decide to sit with my anxiety for a little while longer than what I find comfortable. One of the papers quoted on a regular basis in the cross-cultural clinical practice is the Uncanny, and the approach used is that which Devereux recommended all those years ago: to engage with it, sit with it, try to name it – not just the theories, but above all, the malaise, the uncertainty, the feeling of losing one’s coordinates, encountering that object, which, as Lacan states, was not structured by “the grill of the cut” (1962-63). The uncanny is nothing new or alien – it is long familiar and established in our mind but became alienated from it through the process of repression (Freud, 1919). I could list several phenomena which produce an uncanny feeling, but as this paper illustrates, it is to a great extent subjective: what frightens one may not frighten the other. Face to face with an uncanny stranger, writes Kristeva (1998, p. 298) we lose our boundaries, along with the sense of being contained: everything becomes fuzzy and vague.

The encounter with the uncanny for me did not revolve around my work with asylum-seekers and refugees but expressed itself in my decision to avoid any possible exposure to the discourses expressed in the so-called far-right media and at anti-immigration protests. “There is a difficulty in situating, in structuring and even in accepting extimacy - writes Miller (2017, p. 30) [so] it would be preferable to eradicate it. Extimacy is not the contrary of intimacy but defines precisely what is most intimate: a central place, the excluded interior, becoming the most significant landmark around which the subject orients their way (Lacan, 1959-60, p. 139).

2. Not racist, just scared

Following the riots in Dublin last year, the then-Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar addressed the nation with the following discourse: “*As Taoiseach I want to say to a nation, that is unsettled and afraid: this is not who we are, this is not who we want to be, and this is not, who we’ll ever be. Those involved [in the riots] brought shame on Dublin, brought shame on Ireland and brought shame on their families and themselves.* Shaming and disowning the rioting-others from a

benign and hospitable nation was the harsh response. It is almost needless to say that nothing justifies the violence and the destruction: even if man is a wolf to man, or whatever fuels one's murderous fantasies, acting on them is not the answer. Nevertheless, this riot was probably just one of the many events in history, which provided an excuse for some to find satisfaction in the violence itself, the pure death-drive. And perhaps, for them, this did not imply any hatred of the Other, as an indicator of a strong social bond (Miller, 2017).

For us, psychoanalytic practitioners the shunning of the other-Irish, resonates deeply and disturbingly with the myth of Oedipus: it was by becoming a stranger to his own family, that Oedipus met and killed his father, and it was by being a stranger to his own mother that he met her and committed incest (Benslama, 1999). National identity – is it about something that we are or that we have? “Being American, it is the only thing that the most miserable have” – writes J-C Milner (2017). The rise of both Trump in the USA and the “make Europe great again” slogan inventor Orban in Hungary is linked to their cunning talent to fabricate and embody the “American” and the “Hungarian” respectively. Both succeeded at making many believe that by voting for politicians who resemble to them and speak like them, they are elevated to the level of the most powerful. During the refugee crisis of 2015 in Hungary, Orban successfully exploited a chronically fragile national identity, by constantly referring to “hordes of refugees” threatening to invade the Hungarian nation, a nation that had indeed lived in a persistent menace to its existence throughout history (Bibo, 1994). He coined one term that made no sense but became widely used (*illegal refugee*), and another one (*migrans*) which is a distorted version of the word “migrant”, and which, by virtue of sounding alien for a Hungarian speaker, further emphasized the strangeness of the foreigner.

Jumping into the rabbit hole of the right-wing website Gript.ie, I at times find myself back in Hungary, my country of origin, conducting a field study and research interviewing young refugees. The sudden and intense flow of uncanny others entered Hungary during the summer of 2015 and the government quickly labelled the situation a “crisis”. Global attention quickly turned towards Hungary, as Apostolova (2015) writes: “the world's attention was attracted towards the civilised West and the barbarian East (...) intellectuals both from Eastern and Western Europe reinvented the humanitarian deficit of the Eastern Europeans and in the meantime ignored the quick spread of solidarity in Hungary, Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria.” Indeed, describing the Hungarian society's reaction to the crisis as purely dismissive and barbaric would be far from accurate. It could rather be described as extreme, ranging from

humanitarian and altruistic to aggressive, and pitiless². The long-lasting indifference and lack of interventions on the government's side pushed civil groups, NGOs to act: most humanitarian action was carried out by newly joined, enthusiastic volunteers, often stretching their physical and psychological limits beyond exhaustion. The sudden appearance of volunteering groups wouldn't have been considered an unusual phenomenon in many countries, but such engagement in volunteering used to be completely uncommon in Hungary (Kende, 2017). According to a psychological survey, volunteering during this period expressed a political position declaring itself in opposition of the current government (Kende, 2017). This moral opinion mobilised those who weren't previously involved in politics and suggests that for Hungarians volunteering became a form of political activism for social changes.

On the other end of the scale is what could be described as the violent rejection of the other-refugee, labelled by some as "desert gypsies", an expression merging elements of Islamophobia and Romaphobia, making the uncanny other into a version of the rejected familiar-other, belonging to a minority group, which had never been recognized as part of the Hungarian nation. This – partly unconscious, partly conscious - confusion between Roma and Refugee was identifiable in the following concurrent prejudices: fear from the other as a source of danger and crime, a condemnation for the lack of motivation to integrate in the Hungarian society - taking advantage of social welfare - and a paranoid fear of being invaded by their "hordes". The idea that the Refugee is like the Roma can't only be considered as a mistake of the ignorant layperson, as the Hungarian state employed specialists of Romani studies for the care of separated minors seeking asylum. The fantasy of the Roma in the Hungarian society condenses the ideas of that of the "uncivilised wanderer", the "talented musician" as well as the "pure and innocent savage", who lived in perfect harmony with nature until society ruined them (Dupcsik, 2009). Here, I could perhaps add Lacan's comment on hatred in relation to the jouissance of the other as the most general form of modern racism and the root of fascism that we witness (Miller, 2017 p. 28-39). The other – the free creature of nature or the lazy work avoidant - enjoys more perfectly, more excessively than me, and does it at my expense (Laurent, 2014). The Roma and the Refugee as the "desert gypsie" draws attention to the powerful role images play in forming representations, and the media undoubtedly occupies a significant place in this: during the refugee crisis of 2015, these uncanny others were often represented by the

Hungarian media³ in big, faceless groups. In instances, where their faces were visible, their facial expressions looked menacing. Women, children and families were rarely shown, as if the uncanny other signified mainly groups of men. And it is here that we find resonance with the far-right of Ireland: those interviewed at anti-immigration protests do not see themselves as far-right sympathisers or racists. They are just scared. Scared of these unvetted, military aged single men arriving in big groups. Perhaps it is here that analysis could say something about the anxiety, or more precisely, the anguish provoked by the other. The reference to “military age” also conjures up ideas expressed during World War I, when it wasn’t war itself that was treated as problematic, but those neurotic soldiers who did not want to risk dying (Fassin, 2010).

Media representation having such a considerable effect on how we view forced migration underlines once more the crucial role images play in constructing our reality. Wright (2010) makes the proposal that many “standard” images of refugees show patterns that could be traced back to Christian iconography, ranging from the Old- to the New Testament. Those depicted in a state of degradation and the refugee as destitute go all the way back to Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden. We also find families depicted in the style of the holy family’s flight, and the story of “Exodus”, the mass movement of people. In addition to these, as part of the above images or as a strong stand-alone image, we find the Madonna and the Child: a woman – the universal mother - holding and breastfeeding a baby. The extensive influence of the Bible, and of what Wright calls “the iconography of predicament” (2010, p. 64), contributes to an objectification and alienation of the refugee, as an almost mythical creature.

Back to the humanitarian crisis of 2015 in Hungary, seeing refugees in overcrowded train stations triggered another image of the other: the Jewish population of Hungary who was facing deportation and was ultimately left abandoned by “the silent majority”, the bystanders, *that didn’t show solidarity with the Jews, the same way they lack solidarity with the Roma and the refugees (Librarius, 2015)*”. The former head of the Examining Medical Officers made an even stronger parallel between refugees and persecuted Hungarian Jews in relation to the idea of the former being subjected to health exams in closed quarantines: *“The discourse about the epidemic among the refugees makes us think of the controversies preceding the deportations. It would have to be believed that a group of people doesn’t deserve to be treated as whichever*

member of the Hungarian society and therefore we can hit them, beat them, shoot them or lock them up in wagons (Dano, 2015)”.

Instead of physical resemblance, the representation of the Other-Refugee as victim of collective indifference was rooted in their circumstances: their desperate attempt to arrive in a country which would welcome them, the narrative of epidemic, but above all, certain words reminiscent of deportation such as wagon, the Hungarian word “bevagonirozni” strongly elicits the image of kettle wagons that were used as overcrowded “Holocaust trains”, transporting people like animals to concentration camps. Volunteering for many was probably an attempt to avoid the repetition of the indifferent behaviour of the past, which led to a collective abandonment of the other.

3. To belong, own and protect: our national geographics

Let us now take a detour towards the notion of hospitality, which is supposedly legendary in Ireland. The etymology of the word “hospitality” hides in itself a very uncomfortable contradiction: since “hospes” (that who welcomes the stranger) is composed from the term “hostis”, meaning enemy. For Derrida (1997, 2000), the existential tension of this word is rooted in the following logic: hospitality requires that someone is in the position of the master in their house, country or nation and consequently, possesses effective control of it. Hospitality claims the right to ownership. The host should have a certain control over who are hosted, and these guests should never seize power over the propriety. For Derrida, this means that every single attempt at behaving in a hospitable manner goes hand in hand with the attempt to keep the guests under control. In Derrida’s logic, we could only speak of a “relative hospitality” in relation to the inherent notion of hospitality and that of the law. The notion of “relative hospitality” maintains its right to select, to establish limits and exercise a violence which is fundamental to power. This right to select and to control was at the forefront of how both the Hungarian and to a certain extent the Irish right-wing media addressed the refugee affair: a legal and political question rather than a humanitarian one, focusing on potential conflict and issues with refugees, necessitating strict legislation (Vicsek, Keszi and Markus, 2008). Throughout the often-lengthy international protection process this approach continues for the asylum-seeker: the court involved in international protection is a particular one, which, instead of judging the culpability of the defendant, judges the trustworthiness of the asylum-seeker (Fassin, 2012). Here, the presumed innocence of the defendant is replaced by suspicion towards the asylum-seeker: are they really telling the truth?

The rising misinformation and disinformation surrounding the international protection process in Ireland prompted several NGOs to provide accurate information on these themes. And while educating people is without a doubt an important part of the work, it may not considerably tame the uncanny, as according to Freud, “[s]omething has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny” (1919, p. 221). And perhaps there is also an important remark to add, which is to say that whereas the misinformation and disinformation coming from right-wing media is hardly surprising, the misuse of important terms, the blurring of distinct legal categories by representatives of the government is disconcerting. Following the riots in Coolock, Simon Harris repeatedly referred to asylum-seekers as migrants when speaking about a newly proposed accommodation centre, and this is just one example. So perhaps something could be said about the unconscious and politics.

Questioning the morality of those who are up-rooted, who are no longer “honest citizens” could be linked to our deeply territorializing concepts of identity, according to Lisa Malkki, cultural anthropologist. “Nations are fixed in space and recognizable on a map: the world of nations tend to be represented as discrete spatial partitioning of territory, it is territorialized in a segmentary fashion of the multicoloured school atlas (Malkki, 1992, p. 26). The people’s relationship to place is often defined in terms of plant metaphors, and this naturalized identity is expressed in non-discursive practices as well, such as the exile taking a handful of soil from their country, or the returning national hero or politician kissing the ground when setting foot on national soil. The ashes or bodies of the deceased are often transported back to their homeland, to rest in the soil, where “the genealogical tree of their ancestors grow”.

This assumption about real attachment to a place can lead one to define displacement not as a simple fact about socio-political context, but an inner and pathological condition of the displaced.” Malkki (1992) considers that refugees’ loss of corporeal connection to their homelands is associated with losing moral bearings. In the words of the once refugee Hannah Arendt: “*Mankind, for so long a time considered under the image of a family of nations, had reached a stage where whoever was thrown out of one of these tightly organized closed communities found himself thrown out of the family of nations altogether... the abstract nakedness of being nothing, but human was their greatest danger*” (1973:204, 300).

This fantasy of the refugee’s loss of moral bearings is not to be confused with the so called “moral injuries” that forced migration often entails, more precisely certain events that may violate a person’s moral or ethical code (Litz, Stein, Delaney et al., 2009). Things people wish they would have done, things they wish they never did or had to do, scenes they wish they

never ever had to witness, betrayal by systems, betrayal by the state and in some cases, betrayal by mankind. The horror, the rage, the shame, the guilt stemming from these moral injuries often challenge the therapist's ability to bear witness in an embodied way. One also finds echo with Freud's (1919) final comments in his text on the uncanny, stating that silence, solitude and darkness, which are all rooted in the infantile, remain to haunt us forever.

4. To save, to help, to witness

Hope dies last – as we say in Hungarian. So to end on a positive note, I hope I managed to convey the message that much of what frightens us, or that pushes us to want to save the refugee-other is – just to use another plant metaphor – deeply rooted in our representations. These form a strong basis for our *collective pre-attitudes* (Derivois, 2009) and take forms in singular ways. My wish is that by thinking these representations with a psychoanalytic framework, we can co-create a space for the refugee, that can, just like for any other analysand, function as a refuge from civilisation.

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