

# Another Face – Another Fate

Dominic Kirkham looks at how we treat the stranger in our midst and suggests we can learn from the absorbent qualities of that ‘glorious concoction’, the English language.

There are not many words in the English language that begin with an ‘X’, but you can hardly open a newspaper these days before one springs out at you. I refer, of course, to ‘xenophobia’ – it’s all over the place and all around us in public discourse with various foreign ministries accusing Britain of becoming more and more x.....! Linked to the furore over Romanians and Bulgarians ‘flooding the country’ it’s not just our European neighbours who are noticing the rhetoric either. Recently, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* carried a piece on our current sulky national sentiments with the comment, ‘These xenophobic attitudes are harming Britain’s economy.’

So it seems the ‘nasty party’ is mutating into the ‘nasty country’. But let’s be fair – it’s not just Britain. Immigration, and its consequent tensions, is high on the agenda of concerns in many European countries, notably France and Italy, who just think they’ve had enough of it. Even that most open of countries, the USA, has some very nasty politics going on around Mexican migrants and the usurping of the traditional WASP status by Hispanic influence. So much so that in March the Republican National Committee felt compelled to come clean about why it lost the 2012 presidential election and the need to distance itself from extreme right wing Tea Party influence by admitting, ‘We have become expert in how to provide ideological reinforcement to like-minded people, but we have lost the ability to be persuasive with, or welcoming to, those who do not agree with us on every issue.’ In other words, a closed mind and

closed borders are not winning them any friends.

In the Jewish state of Israel there have been protests by African migrant workers over draconian new open-ended detention laws, which allow migrants without visas to be detained indefinitely. This clear violation of basic human rights is all the more surprising in a country born of the need to escape such arbitrary oppression and of a people who have for centuries had themselves to endure pariah status as persecuted aliens.

So what’s going on and what’s gone wrong? Of



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course there are all sorts of issues involved: pressure on public services, over-population, economic uncertainty, quality of life etc., all of which have some significance and truth. But underlying them is a dominant global feature of modern society: the migration of

people in vast numbers never before seen or imagined. Homogenous societies which have congealed, often over millennia, now find themselves challenged by ‘outsiders’, the stranger, in what is now a radically different milieu. Politicians, as Vince Cable recently opined, are largely helpless in the face of this human flood and it is futile to pretend otherwise.

One response to this reality is xenophobia. You may think this to be one of those old Greek words, dredged up from less enlightened times – and you’d be wrong. When I went to look up this word in the old Chambers’ family dictionary from

the turn of last century I was surprised to find it wasn't there. That is because it wasn't coined until 1903 – the nearest before that was 'xenomorphia', strange shape. The appearance of a new word is indicative of a new reality and the new reality of the late nineteenth century was the mass movement of peoples from the poorer areas of southern and Eastern Europe to find new and better lives in the New World of the West. The shadow side of this movement was the growing fear of strangers, such as the Jewish refugees from the Russian pogroms, who appeared in their tens of thousands in London's East End, prompting riots and the introduction of passport control.

But this is only part of the story. If we can learn anything from the history of the twentieth century it must surely be that civilisation of even the most advanced and sophisticated kind is neither as secure nor as nice as nineteenth century liberalism imagined it to be. After all, in this centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, who would have thought such a ferocious conflict would be possible amongst the sophisticated nations of Europe? But it was. Or who would have thought the Weimar Republic could have given way to the neo-barbarism of Nazism? But it did. Or who would have thought that in the late twentieth century Europe could again teeter on the brink of civil war, as tourist resorts like Dubrovnik and Olympic sites like Sarajevo were being shelled to oblivion? But it happened. Like grinding tectonic plates, times of stress reveal deep seated forces at work in the larval social subconscious which suddenly break through a seemingly calm surface of our constructed worlds with unexpected ferocity.

In fact the root of the problem lies deeper than the mercurial tides of history. It is an aspect of the sort of creatures we are and the social worlds we construct. As the distinguished anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote, reflecting on the way humans distinguish themselves, 'In each constructed world of nature the contrast between man and not-man provides an analogy for the contrast between the member of the human society and the outsider.' We find solace in the homogeneity of the society in which we live and security in the social cohesion it offers and which defines itself in contrast to the outsider, the foreigner who is despised not only for being 'non-us' but even for being less than human, talking in animal-like sounds. The ancient Greeks gave us

the concept of 'barbarism' for the herd-like speech and behaviour of foreigners: we still don't seem to have made much progress.

## new scientific understandings of human origins totally discredit the concept of race

This polarity of thought is common to humans and the way in which they construct their worlds: inside and outside, home and abroad, good and evil, right and wrong, enemies and friends, male and female, light and dark, dead and alive, etc. There is a symmetry here which is reassuring: it is when under threat from enemies that we really know our friends, and it is no accident that social cohesion and mental stability have often been observed to improve in times of war, when under threat from 'outside'. But such symmetry is a highly contrived artifice; it is an illusion which seeks to disguise the reality of ambivalence, those indeterminate 'twilight' states when it is neither one nor the other, neither light nor dark, dead or alive – when contrasting forces hang in uncertain balance. In ancient cultures, such as that of the Celts, these transient states and times of ambivalence were held in fear and trepidation, restrained by the strictest of taboos and rituals. We may like to think we are different but the evidence is otherwise.

In his study of *Modernity and Ambivalence* the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman makes clear why such deeply ingrained phobias survive. He takes his analysis a step further in saying, 'There are friends and enemies. And there are strangers.' Whilst foreigners are 'out there', strangers are in our midst. Boundaries are not only crossed but confused; our ordered world is threatened. As Bauman writes, 'The stranger is, indeed, someone who refuses to remain confined to the "far away" ... The stranger comes into (our) life-world and settles here, and so – unlike the case of mere "unfamiliar" – it becomes relevant whether he is a friend or a foe. He made his way into (our) life world uninvited, thereby casting me on the receiving side of his initiative ... all this is a notorious mark of the enemy.'

The enemy within! How often have we heard

this denunciation in the twentieth century as ideologically driven states sought to consolidate their grip in the face of ‘spies’, ‘wreckers’, ‘aliens’, ‘fifth columnists’, ‘subversists’. All of which assumes a fluidity of peoples and porous borders, which come with trade, migration, interaction and communication – such are the hallmarks of modern global society. It takes all the oddity of a hermit state like North Korea to show how crushingly impossible the alternative is for human life – just as it was in those fossilised states of the old Soviet Block such as Albania and Romania. Recently, a former British ambassador to Bulgaria wrote (in *The Independent*) of his experience at the time of the collapse when his instructions were changed to become ‘a proselytiser for all things Western’, including freedom of movement, ‘to help Bulgaria start rejoining the civilised world.’ What a contrast to his present shame at the changing attitude of hostility now coming from the government ‘to demonise Bulgaria, as though it was some evil, hostile power, intent on overwhelming our fragile state.’ This is precisely the transition from awareness of foreigners ‘out there’ to the fear of strangers ‘over here’, in our midst, of which Bauman wrote.

## humans are amongst the most genetically uniform of mammal species

Bauman saw such intolerance as a natural consequence of the search for the construction of order in the modern state with strict limits to incorporation and admission. This he saw as the outcome of ‘the dream of legislative reason’, which had been the goal of Enlightenment philosophers, a dream he rather prosaically called a ‘gardening ambition’. Just as the gardener subdues the wilderness and brings order by rooting out unwanted growths and species, so the social purist or ‘monist’, such as a Robespierre or Goebbels, would purify society. And new sciences – for this was a scientific age – such as eugenics would make this possible; as the distinguished naturalist and evolutionist Ernest Hackel wrote, ‘By the indiscriminate destruction of all incorrigible criminals, not only would the struggle for life among the better portions of mankind be made easier, but also an advantageous artificial process of selection would be set in practice, since the possibility of transmitting the

injurious qualities would be taken from those degenerate outcasts.’

The same philosophy could be applied to any other ‘degenerate outcasts’, such as Jews or Gypsies, who did not quite fit into the perfectly cultivated society. Other new ‘sciences’ such as cephalology or craniology could enable the detailing and grading of just who these various people were. By the end of the eighteenth century such ideas were becoming well established. For example, in 1799 a Manchester surgeon Charles White, drawing on the work of a Dutch anatomist Peter Camper, helpfully analysed the ‘regular gradation from the white European down through the human species to the brute creation, from which it appears that in those particulars wherein mankind excels brutes, the European excels the African.’ By the twentieth century Nazis were sending out scientific expeditions across the world in furtherance of this exercise in racial gradation.

Underlying such ‘scientific’ exercises some anthropologists have seen a much older and more deeply ingrained authoritarian attitude, which goes right back to the Neolithic domestication of animals. As historian Keith Thomas notes in his study of *Man and the Natural World*, ‘Human rule over the lower creatures provided the mental analogue on which many political and social arrangements were based.’ This was a view reinforced by many centuries of Christianity, where learned clerics would harangue ‘inferior’ humans such as ‘the poor silly naked Indians, just one degree (if they be so much) removed from a monkey’, or the poor brutes who inhabited the Essex marshes in the 1700s, ‘people of so abject and sordid temper that they seem to have...been conversing continually with the beasts to have learned their manners.’ It was a ‘learned’ view that nomadic people, such as hunter-gathering Indians, who did not colonise the land, were not only inferior but less than human. This categorisation could also be extended to include migrant and ‘feckless’ people such as Gypsies and the Irish.

With the expansion of European colonisation these attitudes became inseparable from the civilising mission of imperialism. An example was the German colonisation of South West Africa. Though Germany came late to the great African land grab, they did so with a sense of absolute right to what the Kaiser called ‘a place in the sun’ and *Lebensraum* (living space). The fact that the

land was already occupied by native Herero people was irrelevant: they were regarded merely as a lower form of primate, the men were massacred and the rest rounded up into concentration death camps. Overseeing this first genocide of the twentieth century was Reichskommissar Heinrich Göring, whose son, Hermann, would become Reichsmarschall of the Third Reich. This was not a coincidence: many Nazi functionaries who had learnt their trade in the German colonies, later, in the words of Viktor Bottcher (governor of Posen in 1939 and former civil servant in the Cameroons), sought 'to perform in the East of the Reich the constructive work they had once carried out in Africa.'

## **the English language has such global reach because of its inclusivity...**

The novelty of Nazism lay in its colonial attitude to other European nations: Europeans were now to experience the treatment previously reserved for other more distant peoples and nations. For the first time practices used by modern European colonisers to people outside Europe were applied to people within Europe. As the historian, Niall Ferguson, wrote in his study of Western Civilisation, death camps like Auschwitz 'marked the culmination of state violence against racially defined alien populations.' In fact, what Western Civilisation encountered in the second quarter of the twentieth century was its most dangerous foe: not Nazism, but itself.

It is this unsavory truth that we are still trying to come to terms with. Resurgent xenophobia may be an indication that we are not doing very well. But there is hope, and, in contrast to the pseudo-science that underpinned so much racial hatred in the past, it comes from new scientific understandings of human origins which totally discredit the concept of race. In fact the most remarkable thing about our human population, vast as it is, is that humans are amongst the most genetically uniform of mammal species: there is more genetic diversity in a random sample of about fifty chimpanzees from west Africa than there is in all seven billion of us! This is no doubt due to the near brush with extinction the human population underwent some seventy thousand years ago, caused by the Toba volcanic eruption,

but which now ensures we are all fundamentally the same.

This human unanimity was recently underlined by the work of Australian ecologist and explorer, Tim Flannery. In biological surveys he carried out in remote parts of New Guinea he occasionally met people who had not only never met an 'outsider' before, but whose ancestors left Africa at least fifty thousand years ago, 'Yet,' he writes, 'when we met, after fifty millennia of separation, I understood instantly the meaning of the shy smile on the face of a young boy looking at me... There was much natural magic to those unforgettable meetings.' Despite this commonality in expressions, emotions and gestures – something that had previously fascinated Darwin over a century ago – Flannery comments, 'We've been very good at living as if our family, our clan or our nation is the only truly civilised and 'proper' group of people on Earth, and believing this has enabled us to kill and rob and maim each other without seeing that we are damaging ourselves.' Nothing is so challenging to such a belief as meeting 'the other', the stranger in our midst. One might add, nothing will perhaps do us more good.

## **this is also true of England and the English – they just keep on absorbing strangers from everywhere**

Which leads to a final thought on that word xenophobia. And that is that it's not even an English word at all! It is a mongrel concoction. In fact the whole of the English language is a glorious concoction of foreign words from around the world, set in a seminal grammatical matrix from northern Europe, which in the nineteenth century would no doubt have been construed as 'Germanic'. The reason English has such a global reach is precisely because of its inclusivity – it just keeps on absorbing and reconfiguring strange words from just about anywhere. And this is also true of England and the English – they just keep on absorbing strangers from everywhere. It has become the very nature and distinguishing feature of the English: paradoxically, but thankfully, xenophobia is but a small part of this strange story.