Globalisation and Imaginary Figures of the Foreigner Anthropological Perspectives

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Globalisation of the economy that is: of capitalist expansion – has not led to unification on other levels. Far from it: every day we see new areas fragmenting and crumbling, leaving fresh fractures on the maps. Claims to dissident identities and nationalities are multiplying everywhere, asserting differences of culture, religion and origin. Gaps widen, engendering and developing xenophobic partitions. Partition comes about on three different levels. On one level, States seek to legitimise and consolidate their domination by focusing shared frustrations on negative perceptions of the Other; sometimes they then set quotas of aliens to be expelled. As a corollary, on a second level xenophobic movements multiply exponentially, targeting foreigners, portrayed as intruders taking jobs and wealth away from the local population. In the global arena – the third level - the battle against terrorism puts final touches to the production of a radical Alien: the threat par excellence, the threat to be removed. No continent seems to be immune to this declension of the figures of Otherness, its guises articulated in various modes, external and internal, drawing their strength from these linkages. The three supports of a variable structure are today the internal stranger (i.e. of the same nationality), the external stranger (of a different nationality) and the extreme stranger (a globalised figure representing absolute risk, a role currently played by the political Islamist). The structure is a complex one, its categories overlapping and encompassing variations in State-sponsored xenophobia which are grafted on to more or less spontaneous distastes that have been encouraged in various ways and intensified to various degrees. Many dictatorships are able to maintain their power, and to eliminate political opposition without incurring international disapproval, simply by claiming to be part of the global hunt for the “internationalised alien “, currently in the guise of the Moslem terrorist. Seen in foreshortened historical perspective, this configuration shows that profound change has taken place in the images of otherness. The colonial empires oppressed Others who were considered biologically inferior. Repression, exploitation and forced labour, however, were tempered by the legitimising aim of educating and “civilising”. Admittedly, in putting down rebellions and doing away with political adversaries this hypothetical mission was often overlooked. A few earnest subjects succeeded in reaching top positions by carefully conforming to the model prescribed: that of the coloniser, who set himself as an example. Imitation was the force that drove the social, economic and political machinery. This also holds for the symbolic level: the cult of mediums and possession by spirits could set in motion ideological machinery of much the same sort 1. Decolonisation in its various forms attempted to dismantle these mechanisms ensuring reproduction and alienation. It reactivated forms of otherness that had previously been thwarted and denied. They were now presented as glorious Identities - but without being freed from symmetries and inversions that implied a continuation of subjection. Later, the 1970s saw a blossoming of otherness transformed into myth and exalted in proportion to its remoteness from Western society. Yet it had to be admitted that Western society, industrialised, developmental and consumerist, was also democratic… But then weren’t its elections merely lures thrown to the masses? With the help of a handful of anthropologists2, the lifestyles, styles of thinking and modes of political organisation of far-off places that had not been incorporated into the capitalist world – places where there was no State, no surplus, no obligation to work and no sexual frustration - inspired dreams of total alternatives. Here at last was otherness not in negative, but positive form! It came to be seen as the foretaste of a better world, a vanguard. But subsequently, as soon as capitalist growth began to falter, the dream collapsed like a house of cards. Within the space of a few years the splendour of the totally Different vanished into thin air.

I. XENOPHOBIC DERELICTION

In the mid-1970s an anthropologist applying the methods of ethnology to a study of housing estates on the northern outskirts of Paris discovered a landscape that was alarming. The people who had moved out of the Paris slums had initially been delighted with their spacious modern apartments. They were soon to lose their illusions, however. Service charges were high and transportation cost more. On top of this was soon to come fear (unfortunately justified) of losing their jobs. When they realised that as well they would have to share their living space with “foreigners”, it made it all even worse. They seemed to have been relegated to outer obscurity. Their hopes of a symbolic rise in society faded. The imaginary figure of “the foreigner” haunted everyone, regardless of nationality and country of origin. In this population group (at the time social scientists termed it “pluri-cultural”, “multiculturalism” still being regarded as something positive) any family could potentially be branded as “foreign”; but it was also always possible to find

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The concept of *ethnicsation* was at first used to take account of social relationships based not on social status but on the representation of otherness. Otherness was lodged in the terms “ethnic” and “ethnicité”. Ethnicsation focused attention on the transformational process undergone by basic social relationships, supposedly with a view to obtaining acceptance of the social construction of these terms in opposition to the traditional essentialist approach. Though widely used for several decades, the concept of ethnicsisation was nonetheless far from perfect. Part of its vogue can no doubt be attributed to its suggestion of concreteness and its conflation of the language of the social sciences with (inter alia) that of the inhabitants of the housing estate described above, who pointed to the “ethnics” who were “invading” their estate. In 2007, the journalists who filmed the estate spoke of “80 ethnic groups”. Some decades after its inception, however, the concept of ethnicsisation was dropped by many social scientists in favour of *racialisation*, once again in an attempt to get closer to the true nature of social phenomena. As a corollary, this evolution of the categories of social science aligned itself with the transformation that took place in ordinary usage. A set of terms proscribed after World War II and banished from science reappeared, sometimes with borrowings from colonial vocabularies (e.g. “native”), but invariably in an effort to come closer to a putatively spontaneous perception of otherness. One of these terms is “race”, now widely used in describing individuals and groups; others are “colour” (skin pigmentation), “ethnic group”, “religion” and “origin”. Social and political categories (such as class, status, education, profession and nationality) have been replaced by notions based primarily on unmediated “visibility” at the same time as postulated substantiality. These notions – both “primitivist” and “primordialist” – suppose (in an anti-Hegelian perspective) that the “real” is what is “visible” and that only that which is “visible” can be “real”. This links up with perceptions prevalent in Anglo-Saxon and Latin American cultures. At the same time it combines, harmoniously and effectively, the benefit of the visions and opinions reigning in the lower layers of society with the advantages of the new and purportedly “realistic” language adopted on the fringes of social science. This primacy of “visibility” tends to nullify logical mediation, intellectual distancing and critical reflection. It also helps to propagate ethnic and racist fixations, which can then be put forward as ideological attributes of globalisation. Thus, in the framework of an expanding market for global identities - claimed, negotiated and recognised on the basis of origins and membership, and handled in a prescriptive mode - social policy has morphed, in France and elsewhere, into racial policy. Let us now take a closer look at the issues surrounding the notions of race and pigmentation, which in discussion so often trap even people with the best intentions. Today it is ceaselessly being drummed into us that

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1 L’Humanité, 30/11/2007.

insistence on political equality has ended up masking discriminations based on “distinctive traits”. Motives are suspect on both sides of the debate. It is argued (the argument ends up as a sort of slogan), that race – black or white, to start with – obviously does exist, and that this should be acknowledged. France, having “lagged behind” in this respect, now has a duty to catch up and to apply the same categories as other countries. The final aim of the argument is to show that the notion of race makes it possible to recognise the wrongs perpetrated against the people who have suffered from racial discrimination. It thus opens the way to more enlightened policies aimed at rectifying matters and establishing de facto an equality that cannot be obtained de jure. The argument is implacable. Those who oppose it are labelled “reactionaries” - of a new and harmful species that refuses to look squarely in the face an undeniable reality: race is apodictic. We see adumbrated here an enormous dimension of the globalisation process, unifying by establishing a single grammar of categories that assigns to agents, whether individual or collective, precise listed identities; in many cases these identifying details also figure in their passports. This new generalisation of categories of membership is part of the ideological plan of globalisation. It seems to be congruent with the exponential multiplication of the breakaway identities currently spreading from the former USSR and affecting Asia and Africa. Furthermore, the adoption of this particular newspeak soon goes beyond race and pigmentation to include religion. As a result, when religion is registered at birth together with group membership, it is difficult for individuals to get rid of this additional tag. Social scientists make extensive use of these confused categories in their surveys, carrying the process to its conclusion and also establishing its corollary: the development of a plurality of imaginary figures of “the foreigner”.

III. PRISMS THAT CATEGORISE

It is hardly surprising in this perspective that incidentally in 2008 “cultural diversity” – a display of “visible minorities” – should become a major theme at scientific conferences. Debated by political elites, this issue irrigates the programmes of international organisations and - last but not least - provides the media circus with a novelty. The more the negatively indexed Foreigner is pushed on to the stage set of the great identity show, the more “cultural diversity” takes over its the hegemonic paradigm. Cultural identity has now become an objective, a reference. It is part of the same “pack” as Universality; inside the package we also find a Tribute to the Republic, Human Rights, Democracy, etc. – the “values” that have to be exported, exalted and consecrated by whatever means are necessary. Caught between these two referents in a plan of action that entails the unrestrained submission of “cultural diversity” to “universality”, specialists’ discourse, narratives and accounts – merging increasingly with one another – move towards the control of otherness, at best, and at worst towards its programmed abolition. The artifice involved in taking over this matrix as a bipolar referent becomes particularly clear when we examine recent struggles and the polemics that have arisen from them. The political project of recording ethnic statistics has brought two camps into the limelight. In one camp are people who feel that ethnic statistics could be used to protect “visible minorities” (they draw up a list of these); in the other are partisans of a critical rethinking of identity issues and the permanent danger of political, social and symbolical prescription that is implicit in them. This is why it is urgent to put the whole debate back into its context. Three features of the current political juncture would make this emblematic of freedom of thought. The fist of these features is the official promotion of national identity; the second is the mooting of DNA tests to check biological filiations of foreigners’ children – a measure that will no doubt be tested over the coming years before being put on the statute book; the third is the proposed pan-European pact to restrict immigration by harmonising the defences of member-countries and preparing them collectively for siege. In this context, the debate on ethnic statistics would seem to be the final element legitimising an overall configuration that would separate nationals from foreigners with a higher degree politico-scientific precision. The undesirable aspect of foreignness, however, would probably tend to put off foreigners who were considered “desirable”, i.e. profitable for the economy. Let us now look at the second issue, which was raised by the French law forbidding distinctive religious signs in State schools. It has given rise to a deep, and no doubt irreparable rift in the feminist community. The outcome, however, has been the opposite of that in the ethincal statistics issue. Far from being reviled, the myth of the egalitarian “Republic” is exalted by certain feminists who support the French Government - some of them coming from essentialist circles in which femininity is thought to consist in a set of indubitable qualities. The universalistic State feminism that is being adumbrated here has been used to blind its own partisans. It has also been used – shamelessly - by the political class to delineate a figure that had so far been more or less missing: that of the threatening foreign female in the form of the veiled girl, shamelessly wished up by the political class to delineate a figure that had so far been more or less missing: that of the threatening foreign female in the form of the veiled girl, potentially allied to political Islamism and therefore to terrorism. Thanks to the categorising prism, religion has thus been merged with race, pigmentation, ethnic origin, etc. These two issues show how the (often well-intentioned) build up of the process that elaborates negative images of the Foreigner – now to include foreign women - serves as a receptacle for bruised identities, both individual and collective. The globalisation of ideology seems to be based on a multitude of developments of this sort. They combine the deliberately xenophobic policies of governments with the spontaneous xenophobia of derelict population groups, and harmonise the two. Ideological alliances of this sort are more or less unconscious. They prompt us to move into investigation of the hidden springs of the struggle against xenophobia and discrimination. First of all we should note that this combat was raised by the French law forbidding distinctive religious signs in State schools. It has given rise to a deep, and no doubt irreparable rift in the feminist community. The outcome, however, has been the opposite of that in the ethincal statistics issue. Far from being reviled, the myth of the egalitarian “Republic” is exalted by certain feminists who support the French Government - some of them coming from essentialist circles in which femininity is thought to consist in a set of indubitable qualities. The universalistic State feminism that is being adumbrated here has been used to blind its own partisans. 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concentrates its attacks on official xenophobia, in the belief that malignant xenophobia has been created by the political apparatus of the State. The spontaneous xenophobia of a large part of the population is covered with a fig-leaf – sometimes cynically, but sometimes to avoid incriminating the working classes. Xenophobia, however, is also spontaneously secreted in a variety of social agents acting in accordance with their own particular logics. To ignore this is to go back to an obsolete concept of subjectivity; today we can no longer see the subject as a mere marionette of political and economic organisation. Despite its good intentions, this simplistic notion of domination weakens the struggle against xenophobia, by divorcing the struggle from the ways in which subjectivity is constituted. Seen in this context, the universalising moral perspectives with their vignettes of good and evil that impregnate the militancy of the anti-xenophobes are a potential menace, paralysing the ability to think and depriving action of its efficacy. The mode of production of anthropology is based on immersion in a tissue of inter-personal relationships, together with analysis of the mirror-function of the anthropologist. Thanks to this method, anthropology is able to decipher the sombre landscapes where hatred of the Other becomes the banner of identity. Configurations of social and political relationships that lead to imaginary expulsion of Others are many and various; no one unequivocal determinism can ever be singled out. At another level, in collective situations in which xenophobia is solidly implanted in the majority of a group, each of the internal connections that bring individuals to adhere to the ideology and to use it as a prop has its own particular logic and coherence. No transparent mechanism, completely decoded, can be detected here. Some observers point to forms of dissidence in which psychic mobilisations, once they have been deciphered, might eventually open up new political and epistemic pathways for dealing with the widespread desire to have the Other disappear.

Anthropology is by definition comparative. It can help us avoid a double trap: that of seeing differences and universalities as ontological, and that of overlooking the complexity of stances that fluctuate when addressing Otherness. Anthropology can revive political and subjective productions by dissolving cultural and “natural” effigies of the Other. It can enable people to understand that dislike of the Other is not wrought by the State and its ideological apparatus alone; it a co-production involving other agents. In the current globalising phase of history, the Other is being represented once again as biologically different - like women and the mentally ill. All these figures are being transformed into genetic avatars of Otherness. These reifications crystallise defence mechanisms. Resistance to the influx of the new populations and goods (material and immaterial) stemming from globalisation produces a cult of security. It is important to unmask and neutralise these lures, this eyewash that is flooding the markets for identity.

(Translation: D.P. Moerdijk)