

The Hatred of Asylum Seekers

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Abstract:

The paper considers the question of why there is so much animosity towards asylum seekers. Psychoanalytic explanations are critically engaged with and found wanting as they are couched within an individualistic and internalist framework. Next, a radical group analytic model of identity as a multiple and relational entity is put forward in which it is argued that the field of power relations one inhabits is integral to the psyche and sense of Self. This model relies heavily on the work of the group analyst S.H.Foulkes and the sociologist Norbert Elias. It is argued that the experience of belonging is identical to the sense of 'I', and both are always fluctuating as they are predicated on the kinds of 'we-s' one finds oneself inhabiting. It is argued that in part it is in this insecurity that one finds some of the sources of the antipathies towards asylum seekers.

Introduction

Contempt, disgust, hate, fear, rage, dread, anxiety and panic.

These are some of the common reactions to the creatures we call 'asylum seekers'. I say 'creatures' because to some they are hardly human, inhabiting as they do the dark and dirty places – tunnels, crates, containers and the like. They continually test and probe our boundaries to exploit the slightest of weaknesses and slip into our land under the cover of night. Once in, then like parasites they leech off the state and bring havoc to our civilized way of life with their large families, foul smells and their work-shy and violent ways. Then, to add salt to the wound, the authorities actually appear to pander to them by favouring them over the indigenous population. It is said that they jump housing queues and get showered with new fridges, TVs and washing machines.

To some, this rendition of events need never be questioned as the description is self evidently the truth – as asylum seekers *are* the unsavoury and the undeserving, and so it is no wonder that they arouse such antipathies.

And true enough evidence is indeed found and trumpeted in the tabloids: some Nigerians discovered running a benefits scam; Turks in Hackney murdering each other over political differences rooted in a distant land; West Indian Yardies and Chinese Triads engaged in drug wars; Indian industrialists corrupting our virtuous government. Facts are facts, after all.

But now, let us look a little more closely not only at the nature of these 'facts', but how is it that they arise and what their work is.

The first thing to be noticed about these 'facts' is that they are not peculiar to Britain nor are they particular to the current socio-political context. For example in the pages of Paulo Friere (writing about the Brazilian context), Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi

(both writing about colonial contexts) one finds precise replicas of these self same sentiments. These sentiments were also a common place during my childhood in metropolitan middle-class India. The assertions there were directed in the main at servants, those occupying the squalid ghettos, and the poorer classes in general. It was said that they were dirty germ carriers; that they were lazy and untrustworthy and so needed to be watched all the time; they were also stupid, and so on and so forth. These sentiments are to be found in almost every time and context. The nobility inhabiting the court societies during the Middle Ages, be they in Asia or Europe, would have had no difficulty in recognizing these sentiments as their own experiences of the commoner. Similar things are being said *today* in France, Germany, Russia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Americas and elsewhere.

The thing to note, then, is that although the objects and recipients of this vitriol vary from context to context, at least two themes remain the same. The first is the remarkable consistency of the *contents* of these assertions across continents and epochs. The second theme concerns the *structure*: these sentiments are always levelled by the 'haves' against the 'must-not-haves'. Clearly something very powerful is taking place; how then are we to account for this apparently universal pattern? The first possibility is that the lower orders everywhere *are* like this. In fact some socio Darwinists would say that the social levels that people inhabit reflect their natural capacities and abilities. In other words they are said to be occupying their natural place in the scheme of things. This is the 'facts are facts' argument. According to this sort of theory then, perceptions are similar because the actual *external* situation is similar everywhere.

The Psychological Sciences

In contrast the psychological sciences set about accounting for the similarity by locating its source in the *internal* world, in the psyche itself. Each psychological school has its particular explanation, born out of the kind of metapsychology and philosophy that it adheres to.

For example, the Jungians would locate the source of the similarity in the mythic region they call the collective unconscious. According to Jung there is a pool of genetic knowledge that all humans are said to possess but are unconscious of. Thus the similarity of sentiments expressed by a people in different ages and places is explained by the idea that the sentiments of all are drawn from the same territory – the collective unconscious. There are many difficulties with the Jungian schema, not only at the level of theory, but more worryingly, its explicit racism. Jung asserts that the European is more evolved than the African, and so the European's collective unconscious is said to have more knowledge than the Africans. The European collective unconscious has 'collected' much more than the African such that the African collective unconscious is a subset of the European one. In effect the collective unconscious is not a collective at all; it is part of the ideology and rationale for colonialism and is but another name for the nonsense called racial memory.¹

Moving on: the discourses that can broadly be grouped together as psychoanalysis fare better, but in my opinion they too are limited in what they can achieve. Primarily this is because its basis has predominantly been that of methodological individualism and so its ethos is individualistic and internalist to such a degree that, in some psychoanalytic theories, the social world has no reality apart from what has been projected into it.

The essence of most psychoanalytic explanations can be boiled down to the following formula: difficulties arising in the internal world of an individual (say aggressive impulses), are split off from consciousness, repressed and projected into some object or person in the external world. The individual now comes to experience the object/person as difficult in itself (in this instance, aggressive).

So according to this sort of theory, asylum seekers engender antipathies because of the problematic emotions that are projected into them. It follows that the way for the situation to be resolved is for the individual to somehow re-own what he or she has projected, and so render the situation neutral and more objective. This theory does work, but in a limited way, and then only at the level of the particular individual. This theory would explain why it is that this or that particular individual has hateful feelings towards asylum seekers, but it does not explain *how* and *why* it is that a whole group of people should simultaneously come to hold hateful feelings towards asylum seekers.

In addition a further question arises, which is why (say) asylum seekers rather than (say) nurses should come to be used as containers for these unwanted and problematic aspects of the self. And why is it in one context black people come to be these receptacles, and in another context Protestants, and so on. One sort of answer that is put forward in psychoanalytic writings is that these groupings have previously been 'socially sanctioned' as deserving of these projections and so are already denigrated. This answer actually avoids the central issue which is: how do these groupings come to be socially sanctioned in the first place? In sum, what this sort of theory does is to say that the psychological mechanisms of individuals exploit pre-existing social conditions to manage internal psychological difficulties. One cannot get round this difficulty by suggesting that the groups become socially sanctioned as bad by virtue of the negativity projected into them. This is so for two reasons; first, as we have seen this is a mechanism that works at the level of the individual; so even if one individual projects bad things into this grouping, how does this translate into a phenomenon at a societal level? The second difficulty with this answer is that when it is put with the other, it just creates a chicken and egg tautology and fails as an explanation: The first strand of the tautology says that groupings are suitable for denigratory projections because they are already socially sanctioned as such; but the second strand says that groupings become socially sanctioned as suitable repositories of the denigrated *because* of the bad things projected into them.

I am not arguing that groups don't come to be socially sanctioned as deserving of hatreds, rather, I am disputing the mainstream psychoanalytic version of how this comes about (projection from the internal worlds of individuals). I would say that the reasons for one group rather than another being thought of as hateful are to be found in the specifics of the history of power relations which actually generate groupings and types of 'us' and 'them'. As I will argue a little later in this paper, the negative emotions are mobilised in order to manufacture and sustain these differentiations – thus the emotions are not 'causes' but tools.

It is also the case that this sort of theory does not address what happens to the unwanted aspects of the individuals who constitute these denigrated groups – where are they to project the problematic aspects of their psyches? In fact in much of the psychoanalytic engagement with the subject one finds that the objects of racism and denigrated and marginalized groups in general, tend to feature not as themselves but

primarily as serving the function of containers and screens for the projections of the subjects who are at the centre of society.²

A great many of the ‘common sense’ explanations for the hostile feelings experienced towards asylum seekers circulating today have their roots in Freud – explanations that have become familiar in an everyday sense and part of the common currency. But perhaps it is the other way round: perhaps Freud took the ‘common sense’ explanations of his day and gave them a theoretical basis. Which ever is the case, it is certainly true that during the twentieth century, psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular has come to occupy a central place in a great many discourses. So I will turn now to Freud and give an indication of some of the sorts of explanations that can be gleaned from his work as to why asylum seekers might be so despised.

I will begin with his first instinct theory which featured the self preservative and sexual instincts. The nature of the self preservative instinct was such that on meeting a person who was ‘different’ to the self, it experiences the very presence of something different to the self as a criticism of the self. And because of feeling criticised the instinct feels aggressive and hostile in turn to the persons who are experienced as being ‘different’.

This theory gets elaborated into the theory of the ‘Narcissism of Minor differences’.³ Here Freud proposed that when differences between people were very small, then this triggered off a hostility between them. The relation between hostility and difference was an *inverse* one, so that the smaller the difference the greater the hostility between them. ‘Of two neighbouring towns each is the others most jealous rival...[c]losely related races keep one another at arms length; the South German cannot endure the North German, the Englishman casts every kind of aspersion upon the Scot, the Spaniard despises the Portuguese’.⁴ The rationale behind this theorization was that the hostility is needed to sustain the differentiation. But then having set up the theory of minor differences, Freud segues into a theory of major differences, a theory that directly contradicts the previous one. In this theory hostility is *directly* proportional to the amount of difference, so now, the bigger the difference, the greater the hostility. He now says: ‘[w]e are no longer astonished that greater differences should lead to an almost insuperable repugnance, such as the Gallic people feel for the German, the Aryan for the Semite, and the white races for the coloured’.⁵

So sometimes – perhaps most times – it is said that we feels such hostility towards asylum seekers because they are *too* different to us. The more liberal account goes the other way to say that we are all human and so *hardly* different. In any case whether ‘very’ or ‘hardly’ different, we are enjoined to *tolerate* difference. The implication being that it is the difference itself that is the source of the problem. Thus the recent riots in Bradford are said to be caused by the presence of ‘racial’ or cultural difference and little to do with the social conditions there.

The contradiction shows us that one cannot just use an abstract idea of ‘difference’ *per se* to explain anything. The contradiction has forced us to ask: are asylum seekers very different to us, or hardly different to us? And to answer this we are obliged to ask in turn: different in what sense, or to be more precise: different in what senses? The very fact that we have to ask this shows us two things: first that difference is always particular and so the question can only be meaningfully answered through the naming of specific differences. This in turn prompts the realization that things are never different or similar in any absolute sense, although one might well have an experience

of absoluteness. The point was made powerfully recently by a student in a seminar who described her experience whilst travelling on the underground during a visit to London. She became aware that she was the only white person in the carriage and this made her feel frightened and completely alone. This was a remarkable experience because patently she was not alone, she was in a carriage full of people! What appeared to have taken place is that one difference somehow slipped to become completely different. In that moment the many shared attributes counted for nothing.

We can see that not only has a very powerful experience of absolute differentiation taken place: so has a very powerful homogenization, in which 'they' have all become the same as each other. The fact that she is frightened is critically significant to the whole scenario, a fear born out of the expectation of attack. Given that no one was behaving in a threatening manner to her, where did this expectation come from? As we have seen the standard psychoanalytic explanation would be that the hostility is really hers; she splits this feeling off from her consciousness, represses it (i.e. becomes unaware of it), and then projects it into the others in the carriage, and this in turn results in her experiencing them as hostile.

Whilst I would agree that this hostility is indeed hers, I would disagree with the usual psychoanalytic speculations as to the sources of this hostility. Broadly speaking, the explanations offered by psychoanalysis fall into two camps each situated across the nature/nurture fault line. Vastly oversimplifying the situation, there are those that think that there is an endogenous hatred and envy in the newborn, the sources of which are to be found in a primeval force called the death instinct. In the main, it is some Freudians and the Kleinians who follow this Hobbesian view to say that there is a pre-existing hatred and destructivity in all human beings which needs to be contained and moderated by civilizing forces. In contrast, there are those who think that we are 'born good and made bad' by the events that happen to us as we grow up. In the main it is the relational and attachment theories of Winnicott, Fairbairn and Bowlby that would follow this line. And although it is a vast oversimplification, the differences between the two positions can be described as a dispute about what is the infant's first gesture: a gesture of hate, or of love?

This dichotomy does not capture the range of psychoanalytic explanations regarding the origins of violence. For example Freud gave credence to the belief that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny' to say that the developmental history of each individual repeats a version of the history of the species. According to this view the genesis of the forms of love and hate is to be found in certain mythic dramas (for example between the despotic father and the primal horde) that are said to have taken place at the dawn of humanity. These themes and dramas are said to get replayed between parent, child and siblings, and then reproduced in adult life. I will speak briefly to just one of these - stranger anxiety - as it is particularly helpful in shedding light on what is being obscured.

At about the age of six months all infants go through a short phase in which they react with distress and perhaps fear on meeting strangers. According to some, this fear is a primeval fear of strangers programmed into the genetic makeup of all human beings. But whatever its sources, the theory proposes that the feelings of hostility and fear expressed towards 'strangers' in adult life has its sources in that infantile reaction which is being reactivated by the presence of strangers in adult life. What this does not take into account is that there is no such thing as a 'stranger' in the abstract and not all strangers evoke fear and hostility. The reaction will depend not only on who

the stranger is, but also on who the subject is and where the encounter is taking place. In one context it might well be that fear and hostility is set off by a black face and in another by a white face. The fact that there is this variation suggests immediately that the key here is not 'strangeness' *per se* and instead throws us back to the earlier question. How does it arise that some forms of strangeness elicit hostility and others a generosity?

As I have already said, these sorts of explanations can only go so far as to say why it is that this or that individual experiences this sort of hostility towards certain sorts of Others for this or that reason. The problem that is unaccounted for is how is it that whole groups of people come to feel the same sort of thing to the same sort of Others at the same sort of time? How is it that the psyches of great numbers of distinct and separate individuals come to be so precisely synchronized? Why is there such fear and hostility towards asylum seekers in the general population today?

It is here that the idea of 'contagion' makes its entry, in which the mind of an individual is said to be influenced and even taken over by the mind of the group. Le Bon, a royalist writing at the time of the French Revolution, thought that the impetus for revolution was an unnatural madness that needed explaining, which he did with the idea of contagion. In *Group Psychology* Freud suggested that the mechanism of contagion could be explained with his theory of libido. He suggested that people tended to lose their individuality when in a group because their individual superegos were replaced by something compelling – a leader or belief – which they then blindly followed.

But the notion of contagion itself needs deconstructing. In itself it is not an explanation, rather it is an analogy drawn from the science of diseases. Something – a thought, belief or impression – gets spread like a virus from one to another. The fact that the analogy itself is hardly a neutral one (we would all rather not be contaminated by a disease, by something alien to our integrity) shows us that the analogy is in fact an expression of an ideology – the ideology of individualism. We can also see here the beginnings of internalism in the sense that the 'cause' for the unrest is put 'inside' weak minds that allow themselves to be taken over, rather than 'outside' in the conditions of life for large swathes of the population at the time. In this world view the individual is made paramount and portrayed as embattled and needing to resist dilution of their true selves by the social. Rudyard Kipling's much admired poem 'If' captures the aspirations of this ideology very succinctly. In sum, the notion of contagion is the expression of an ideology masquerading as an explanation. As a range of theorists from Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and others have said, the work of ideology is to take contingent social and historical relations and disguise them so that they end up having the appearance of something natural, inevitable and eternal.

The notion of a group mind is deeply problematic for other reasons too. Like the idea of the 'collective unconscious', it is evoked in the first place to explain how it is that the minds of a great many distinct and differentiated individuals come to hold similar thoughts and views to each other. This time individuals are said to be thinking similarly because each is part of something bigger than them – the group mind – and is expressing the themes that are embedded there. The primary difference between the collective unconscious and the group mind is one of location – the former is somehow 'below' us and the latter somehow 'above' us. The problem with both these notions is that they espouse a view in which the influencing entity is something beyond and

prior to individuals. In fact it is the same set of problems that bedevils the individual/society dichotomy which sets up a whole series of false problems not only in sociology but also psychology.

‘Finding’ and ‘Making’

The fact that not all ‘different’ people evoke hostility, and the fact that the groups that are designated to be recipients of this hostility change from place to place and from time to time, suggests that these groups are not ‘found’ but ‘made’ in order to serve certain functions. The group under consideration here is that called ‘asylum seekers’.

So do we have a need to create ‘out-groups’ in order to hate them? Freud certainly thought so when he said ‘[t]he advantage which a comparatively small cultural group [of outsiders] offers of allowing ... [the death instinct] instinct an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness’.⁶

I would agree with Freud that there is such a need but not for the instinctivist reasons that he suggests. The Freudian explanation, like the majority of contemporary psychoanalytic explanations, says that ‘external’ social dynamics emerge as a consequence of, or in order to manage, the predicaments of the ‘internal’ psychological world. I would put it the other way round to say that the forms of social engagement recruit the workings of psyches to sustain themselves. In order to understand how and why this takes place we need to turn our attention to the notion of identity.

Identity

There are two versions of identity that come out of conventional individualistic ways of thinking; in the one version it is supposed that as a person’s identity is unique to them (i.e. not the same as everyone else’s), then it must be something prior to, and ‘outside’ the social and so the property of the individual. In the second version the notion of the ‘Self’ is contrasted with that of ‘Identity’. The Self is said to be unique to each individual, endogenous, deeply personal, and so also asocial. This Self then sets about making identifications with various external others which then constitutes the Identity of that individual. To this way of thinking identity is a surface phenomenon (external and social) and of less importance precisely because it is something changeable, whilst the idea of the Self is taken to be something, immutable, deep within and so the essence of the person.

In contrast, Radical Group Analytic theory (following out of the work of the group analyst S.H. Foulkes and the sociologist Norbert Elias)⁷ proposes that identity is constituted by and through relationships with innumerable others and so is not fixed but shifts and changes with the vagaries of the social contexts one finds oneself inhabiting and participating in. And the fact that one inhabits a number of social contexts simultaneously – each with their own demands and claims on the individual – means that one’s identity is always being contested. Radical group analysis reverses the individualistic thesis to say that the ‘I’ is constituted by the varieties of ‘we’ that one is born into. And because the relationships between the varieties of ‘we’ are of necessity power relationships, then we can say that the ‘I’, the ‘me’, is constituted at

the deepest of levels by and through the power relationships that are part of the social fabric that one is born into.⁸

It is necessary here to add to the previous statement by inverting it in order to get closer to the whole picture: the inversion being the assertion that the varieties of 'we' (and therefore the varieties of 'us' and 'them') are in themselves generated by power relations. One could equally say that the kind of 'we' that is generated, finds itself taking that particular form because that form is particularly suited in that context to exploit the field of power relations to its advantage.

I need to introduce one other element from Foulkesian group analytic theory – which is the notion of belonging. Foulkes asserts that there is a fundamental need in all human beings to belong – to be part of an 'us' – and that this is a *necessary* condition for an experience of psychological well being. But if belonging groups don't simply and naturally exist in a self evident way (although it might appear to be the case), then we have a problem.

Let me make the discussion a little more concrete.

It is the case that it is impossible to say just what is the essence of a particular 'us', say Britishness. When we look directly at the British 'us', we find not homogeneity but heterogeneity – multiple groupings, overlapping and conflictual: vegetarians, landlords, Scots, accountants, miners, Christians, Moslems, fascists, liberals, and so on. And if one turns one's attention to each of these sub-groupings, they too dissolve into an array of diversity. It is precisely because of the impossibility to find and name the essence of the 'us' that one looks to the margins to the 'not-us'. However, the idea of the 'not-us' is beset by the same set of problems as the 'us' in that there is no unity to be found there either. Nevertheless, our minds somehow manage this feat of registering, in any particular moment, an experience of an 'us' that is contrasted with a 'them': a difference not of degree, but of type. Recall the experience of the student in the railway carriage described earlier. Like her, we often manage somehow the cognitive feat of amplifying one attribute of alleged difference to such a degree that all other similarities between the 'us' and the 'them' are annihilated from the emotional/perceptual field. In the same moment we also amplify an attribute of alleged similarity within each of the generated groupings to such a degree that all the diversity within is rendered meaningless, if not actually made invisible. In sum, the impression of difference and Otherness between the 'us' and 'them' is as illusory as is the impression of solidity and cohesion within the 'us' and 'them'. However, the illusions are powerful nonetheless. They allow Melanie Phillips to state quite emphatically and with no shadow of a doubt on *The Moral Maze* (Radio Four February 25, 2004) that until recently Britain was a homogenous society that had pretty much no immigration over the last thousand years, and that this homogeneity has only recently been disturbed by the new immigrants. Phillips then asserted that the basis of this homogenous society and also of *Western Civilization (sic)* was equality (derived from Protestantism) and liberty (derived from the liberal contract based on the rule of law going back to the Enlightenment). She went on to say that immigrants coming into this country had to be *taught* these moral principles – because presumably she thinks that in the place they come from (somewhere called the East) the notions of equality and liberty are unknown.

She might not know it, but the single attribute she is using to imagine the existence of a cohesive culture is that of skin colour. Given that the history of Britain of the last thousand years has been one of internal violence and tension on any number of counts

(nobility/commoner, church/state, men/women, master/slave, Tories/Liberals, Protestant/Catholic etc), to say nothing of court, church and commoner speaking different languages (and therefore embodying different and conflicting cultures) until seven hundred years or so ago, one wonders what in her mind this homogeneity actually consisted of. The point is that all societies, all cultures, are not homogeneities but structures of power relations in which different groupings – each with their own agendas and beliefs – contest each other. Now, it is precisely because of the fluidity of the boundaries there is the ever present danger of one sort of ‘us’ dissolving and reorganizing into another sort of ‘us’; and so continual work is required to shore up and bolster the ‘us’. This work takes several forms. One bit of the work is done for us silently and automatically by our cognitive mechanisms: social scientists have demonstrated that when the mind uses an attribute to make groupings out of continuities, there follows a kind of hallucination in which it seems to us that those within each of the groupings appear to be more similar than they actually are, and that the gap between the groupings appears to be greater than it actually is. This cognitive hallucination is necessary for the formation and experience of categories.

But this is not nearly enough and so the emotions are called into play to help maintain the distance between the ‘us’ and varieties of ‘them’. The primary mechanism is one where the ‘them’ are denigrated and the ‘us’ are idealized. These emotional states are absolutes (we are good and they are bad) and therefore fictions – and so they too need to be defended and bolstered vigorously. Elias and Scotson put it like this: ‘The self-image of the established was modelled on the *minority of the best*, and inclined towards idealisation; whilst the image allocated to the outsiders was modelled on the *minority of the worst*, and inclined towards denigration’.⁹ The notions of denigration and idealization, being absolute (good and only good, bad and only bad), create the impression of a antithetical dichotomy between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ – a dichotomy with a chasm between them. In other words it has created the illusion of types.

Individuality

There is the constant danger that when one talks of ‘social forces’ and universal mechanisms one gives the impression that uniqueness and individuality are being discounted and that it being suggested that (say) *all* white people would respond in precisely the same way as the woman on the tube. There are two caveats that need to be restated to counter this impression. First, any one individual is cut through by a multiplicity of claims on his or her identity, each of which is being continually contested by the others, and being modified in the process. So not only is it the case that another ‘white’ will respond differently, it is also the case that the same woman might well have a different sort of experience and response at another time. But having said this we are now faced with the opposite danger that everything becomes so individualized that the group disappears from view. There are indeed individual variations, but they are constrained by the patterns found in the discourses we inhabit and reproduce (the fact that each of our faces is made up of the same biological and chemical material does not prevent them being recognisably unique). The other caveat concerns power relations. Elias insists that power is not a ‘state’ nor is it a possession, rather it is a relational attribute. Thus no one is completely powerful and no one powerless. It follows that it is not simply the case that one person *does*, and another is *done unto*. Another way of putting it is to say that there are any number of multiple ‘othering’ processes going on simultaneously (race, class and gender to name but

three), cutting through, negating, enhancing and transforming each other. Shifting allegiances driven by the pragmatics of the psycho-social context are such that in one moment one is led to feel a commonality and belonging over here, and in another moment, over there. However it is also the case that although in one moment one may 'feel' oneself to belong *here*, one finds oneself nevertheless being positioned over *there* by more powerful others. It is the fact that the boundaries between the varieties of 'us' and 'them' are being continually tested and blurred that then requires them to be policed in a variety of ways – one of which is gossip.

Gossip

Instances which show 'them' in a good light and 'us' in a bad light are problematic because they show up the dichotomy for the fiction it is and so they threaten to undermine the status quo. This is where *gossip* comes in. Elias and Scotson describe the existence of 'gossip mills' whose function is to edit out such stories in which 'we' feature in a poor light and to amplify stories which are examples of the 'we' being good; and of course the reverse service is performed for the 'them'. Gossip mills come in many shapes and forms from parochial interactions across the garden fence, to the more global possibilities available to the media, to the rhetoric of politicians, religious fundamentalists from pulpits in church, mosque and temple, to say nothing of academic experts, all of whom have privileges and agendas to defend.

Examples from the first of these, individuals in local interactions, are easily dismissed as they appear to be no more than a collection of anecdotes, and so a series of one-offs. But it is precisely their seeming irrelevance and triviality – a brief exchange at a shop counter, photocopy machine or bus stop – that renders the mechanism so potent. Its potency lies in its ubiquity. It is a work that is continually being done by all, by you and me. These are not 'whispers in the dark' because that suggests conscious conspiracy, rather it is something that one finds oneself spontaneously producing in all sorts of circumstances. Some random examples come to mind.

At Heathrow airport in the late 1970s I overheard in a crowded cafeteria something along the lines of: 'These Indians come here just to sit in the airport – they spend all day here'. This bit of gossip serves the function of reinforcing the idea that large Indian families are in places they should not be and are taking over our tables (country) leaving us no space to sit (taking our jobs etc).

On my periodic visits to India I am often regaled with stories of varieties of others drinking, stealing, raping and murdering of members of 'us' groups. Something comparable occurred on visiting New Zealand where I was presented with similar stories regarding the Maori and the 'Islanders'. It is curious why so many decent people (no irony intended) find themselves spontaneously reproducing stories of bad 'thems'. One possibility is that as I am no doubt revealing sympathies for the 'them' groups in ordinary conversations, I am unintentionally undermining the division of good-us and bad-them, and so they are led to reinforce the boundary through these narratives. Another possibility is that this kind of 'local gossip' is a counter to the reams of statistical evidence presented to us by government and academic research bodies over the last thirty years (and more) which tell the opposite story. They detail with considerable evidence the ways in which various 'them' groups end up residing at the margins, disenfranchised and hard done by. As this research puts the central 'us' in a *bad* light, this kind of gossip can be understood as a defensive counter

through assertions that ‘they’, being really bad, are not deserving of sympathy and redress, therefore the ‘we’ are not bad for treating them so. At the psychological level the strategy is a means of countering guilt and shame.

The third example occurred more recently in a conversation with a very liberal, intelligent university (white) student in Birmingham. In response to my remark that Birmingham had a substantial Asian population, I was surprised to hear him say that in certain areas of the city ‘they’ had driven the whites out. He gave an account of an Asian who piped sewage into his white neighbour’s garden until he was driven out. This bit of gossip beautifully illustrates the Eliasian idea that ‘they’ are all tarnished by the attributes of the minority of the worst of them. So even if this scenario were true, it is being used to say that one bad Asian equals all Asians are bad. There is also the implication that ‘they’ are all part of a malicious conspiracy to drive out the white ‘us’.

But it is not just those at the ‘centre’ that perpetuate gossip, we all do. I find myself, on occasion experiencing animosity towards out-groups, despite being a member of one of them myself. The following complaint about the degeneration of Canadian society was voiced by an Indian, who has been living there for about forty years. He said that the problems all started with the ‘damn Chinese who brought their gangs. Then came the damn Somalis. They are not violent but they know how to play the system. Then came the damn Tamils. They are the worst of the lot. They brought gangs, guns and violence onto the streets. They give the whole community a bad name’.

An illustration of how the media perpetuates gossip in the Eliasian sense can be found in the headlines of three newspapers on February 6, 2004 in relation to the tragic death of a boy. *The Daily Mail* headline shouted in very large text filling the entire front page: ‘INTOLERABLE: Judges fury over failed asylum seeker who evaded deportation then killed boy in hit and run’. *The Daily Telegraph* headline at the top of page six was more muted: ‘Family fury as hit-and-run asylum seeker gets eight months for killing boy, 9’. The fact that the killer is an asylum seeker and a failed one to boot is key to both these articles, and it seems to me inflammatory for exactly that reason. *The Guardian* headline (page eight) on the same story reads: ‘Anger over hit and run sentence’. As the perpetrator’s asylum status is not mentioned until the third paragraph of the story, it would seem that *The Guardian* story does not give the person’s asylum status a causal role in the tragedy. In contrast the focus of the stories in *The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph* is almost entirely on the perpetrator rather than on the boy. In effect the tragedy is being exploited in order to fuel animosity and hatred towards not only this asylum seeker, but asylum seekers in general. In addition, it seems to me that in setting another refugee story directly below that of the tragedy, *The Telegraph* page further fuels the flames of discontent with the following headline: ‘Refugees granted residence can choose where to live’. *The Mail* and *Telegraph* articles evoke a mixture of disturbing feelings: rage (because they are bad), helplessness (because they are out of our control – free to choose), and fear (because they are insinuating themselves everywhere in our land).

In the reporting of crimes committed by (say) a white English person from Saffron Walden, little or no mention is made of national, cultural or colour categories. On those occasions it is only a particular *individual* that is said to have acted in these heinous ways, and so no aspersion need be made on the types of general population he belongs to. It is interesting to speculate what the reportage would have been like if the

murderous Doctor Shipman had been from the Indian sub-continent. My guess is that his 'Indian-ness' would have featured very highly in the *descriptions*, and so by implication would act as part of the *explanation* for his actions.

Conclusion

So at the end of these discussions, how are we to understand what is going on?

The individualistic thesis is that there is only one 'me' that participates in many sorts of 'we'. The radical group analytic view is that the forms of 'we' are prior to, and so integral to the 'me', and so as the sense of 'we' shifts so does the sense of 'me'. This shifting in the sense of 'me' is unnerving and so precipitates a series of existential anxieties which are defended against by reinforcing a particular sort of 'we' in order to hold onto a known version of the 'me'. As we have seen, one of the functions the process of denigrating the Other serves is to enhance a version of 'us' by contrast to the 'them'. (The process is recursive in that the 'them' have in part been *created* by the process of denigration). It is at this moment that the list of affects cited at the start of this paper are mobilised in the service of the same aim – the manufacture and sustaining of a particular version of 'us'.

Let me come back to the notion of belonging. It is the case that belonging groups are always (amongst other things) *interest* groups. Thus amongst the multiple possible claims on my identity, I will be drawn to think of myself as belonging to the grouping that serves my interests better in some way, and more importantly, I would *feel* myself to be part of that grouping. It is the fact that I 'feel' it to be so that gives my experience of belonging the illusory sense of naturalness. But now power relations complicate what is taking place. It is the case that some appear to have the liberty to say where they belong, whilst others are *told* where they belong. To be sure this process is not an uncontested one, nevertheless the issue is that some have the power to name and others are named. In the English language, black people were first called black by those that designated themselves as white. When a doctor born and trained in Africa or Asia comes to work in Britain – he might well initially feel and think of himself as belonging to the prestigious professional classes, but is surprised that often he is thought of and treated not as a doctor but as a 'darky'. In sum, belonging is only meaningful because of two uncomfortable existential truths: first, in order to belong to one place one needs another not to belong to; and second, belonging can only work if some others are said to be unable to belong. Without these two logical conditions belonging would become infinitely large and so without meaning. What this shows is that although belonging and identity are represented as primarily having to do with commonality (cf Melanie Phillips earlier), its principle mechanism is that of exclusion. Recall the earlier discussion on national identity. It is because of the impossibility of giving a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for delineating British or any other identity, that one is impelled to give names to those that cannot not belong – the coloured, Islam and now Gypsy being some of them. And even when they are let in, they are not really let in. For example, black people are not quite allowed to be British, they are obliged to remain in the ante-chamber and inhabit the auxiliary space called Black British.

The entry of asylum seekers sets off an anxiety to do with the depletion of resources and this is intimately tied up with an anxiety to do with the dilution or contamination of (as it is imagined and experienced) eternal identity. The key point is that one

cannot divide psychological processes from sociological ones and (depending on one's allegiance) privilege one over the other. All the elements that I have discussed, the emotions, the senses of me and us, the problematic of belonging, identity, ideology and power relations are all part of the same process; all are necessary and integral to each other. It is the fact that the private sense of self is so intimately dependent on these other processes that appear to have nothing to do with it as they are going on 'out there' in the world, that makes it so difficult to grasp what is going on. So even whilst I might intellectually be able to countenance the interconnectivity of it all, my subjective experience remains nonetheless of *homo clausus* (the experience of an autonomous inner life cut off from the external social world) as Elias named it.

What solutions, if any, are there? Neither the liberal injunction to 'respect cultural difference', nor the multiculturalist declaration that we are 'different but equal' help resolve the situation in regard to asylum seekers, as both of them actually buy into the idea that difference *per se* is the problem and so people need to learn tolerance. The fact that one has to 'tolerate' means that something untoward has already entered the scenario. Thus I would say that one needs to shift one's attention to the moment *before* tolerance is required, to inquire why it is that one feels such antipathy in the first place. The answer that is usually given to do with the *numbers* of immigrants (by Enoch Powell, Margaret Thatcher and now the current Labour government), is not convincing and in my opinion is being used to a) pander to the right wing and b) frighten the general population into toeing the line. As George Orwell showed in *1984*, the invitation to worry about the enemy at the gate serves the function of distracting one's mind from thinking about what is going on *inside* the gate.

The multiculturalist ethos 'different but equal' covers over something much more problematic, which is its reverse: the ways in which we are 'similar but *made* unequal'. If we agree that cultures are not monoliths but systems of power relations, then it will be the case that some of the groupings in *all* cultural systems are subjugated by other groupings. So to blandly and blindly 'respect cultural difference' would on occasion be to give succour and respect to a system of oppression. It is no coincidence that the loudest voices speaking up for the sanctity of this or that cultural system are more often than not those that benefit most from that particular cultural arrangement. This applies to the defenders of 'their' culture as much as to those that defend 'ours'.

Thus answers as to why asylum seekers arouse such antipathies are not to be found in ideas of cultural difference and the resulting fears of the dilution of authentic indigenous cultural identity. What is happening instead is that the focus on the outsider is being used to generate a sense of an 'us' culture that in a very real sense does not actually exist.

This argument is not an invitation to discount and ride rough shod over other cultural systems, nor is it a plea for us to get 'beyond' differences in a lovey-dovey fashion. The reality we are faced with is that as individuals we cannot not divide. Further, we are born into a world already divided and which is continually being re-divided in novel ways. There is no natural homogenous on-going hermetic identity, and although Melanie Phillips and the like are prone to looking back to the hallowed good old days, it was not so even then. There is no point of total rest, although we would dearly love it so.

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¹ See Dalal, F., 'The Racism of Jung' *Race and Class* 1988

² I take the issues arising around asylum seekers to be a subset of a more general theory of power, belonging and difference as elaborated in Dalal, F., *Race, Colour and the Processes of Racialization: New perspectives from group analysis, psychoanalysis and sociology* Brunner Routledge 2002.

³ Freud, S., 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego', (1921) *Standard Edition XVIII*, Hogarth Press 1991, pp69-144.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Freud, S., 'Civilization and it's Discontents ' (1930) *Standard Edition XXI*, Hogarth Press 1991, pp.59-145.

⁷ Elias, N., *What is Sociology?*, Columbia University Press 1978; Elias, N., *The Civilizing Process*, Blackwell 1994; Foulkes, S.H. *Introduction to Group Analytic Psychotherapy* Karnac Books 1983; . Foulkes, S.H., *Selected Papers* Karnac Books 1990.

⁸ Dalal, F., *Taking the Group Seriously – Towards a Post Foulkesian Group Analytic Theory* Jessica Kingsley Publishers 1998.

⁹ Elias, N. and Scotson, J., *The Established and the Outsiders*, Sage 1994.