

The Stranger's Myth: anchoring and objectification of social memory

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*The epitome of difference is the foreigner.
Eco, U. (2012). Inventing the Enemy.*

Abstract

The present paper aims to explore how social representations occur in intercultural communication, analyzing the stranger's myth based on the processes of objectification and anchoring, both depending on personal and social memory. The stranger, seen as (*the alien, the other, the foreigner*) is not a traveler who comes and leaves, but rather a person who comes and stays forever.

We consider the subject from the viewpoint of *foreigner* perceived as *enemy, conqueror*, to depict the effects of the behavior on the social life. In the assumed topic we comprise *the self-identification* as a process of delimitation, taken into account that *we are what we are* comparing with *the other*. Of great relevance in our approach is the theological dimension which sends us to Alterity perceived as God.

The *hypostasis of Alien* is another coordinate of the proposed study, which generated a special literature, filmography and a unique public. The *pragmatic perspective* we also intend to focus is reflected in the evolution of migration in Europe, initiated by the need of workforce (A. Merkel's decision to receive immigrants from The Middle East) without seeing the pervert effects arisen on the demographic statistics.

Social groups operate with representations during the communication and cooperation processes; once created, they have their own life, generating new representations, while the old ones disappear.

Key words: social representation, anchoring, objectification, Alterity, identity, migration.

A representation is considered social insofar as it contributes to the formation of social behaviors and social discourse. Through a conventional symbol, added to a specific context, through peculiar feelings and beliefs, the social representations occur in a social sphere as undoubted realities. According to Serge Moscovici, (1961: 10) social representations are *influenced by norms and values, with cognitive and affective constituents that provide a code which simplifies communication. They are generated through two important pillars: (a) anchoring - classifying a new object in one's previous frame of knowledge; (b) objectification - filling a new concept with images, giving it a pragmatic form.* Considering the ideas expressed above, the social representations ensure the assimilation of the new elements into familiar frames recognizing and approving collective meanings. The social representations involve diverse ways of thinking about the realities people perceive, and the communication styles have as consequence *themata* of representation: a social identity must be compatible with social values, historically and politically determined, it defines what is acceptable in a social context, increases the efficiency of social message, a necessary condition for achieving it, upholds and reinforce the social position of a group, justifying social difference.

The social representation is a mechanism that helps the construction of reality and, at the same time the perception of the identity. It helps in understanding something [an object, a concept] or somebody [taking into account the identity markers: age, gender, class, ethnicity, race] in a specific, personal register. It is an indicator for knowing and managing interethnic groups, their social interaction and the meaning of behaviours and attitudes.

Any society represents a complex system of interconnected processes and relations; and a symbolic structure that continuously

shapes its identity based on myths. The mythology of a group is based on beliefs, social perceptions and attitudes common to a certain group of people, a community, a collective conscience. For a collective conscience the myth and the ritual creates as well the collective identity. They shape and codify the beliefs and moral principles as a result of an unified conscience. As in a play, the individual is able to depict the main character and its role according to his inner values and to his cultural background. From a philosophical perspective the identity (no matter individual or collective) represents: (a) being and belonging to...., to like the same things, to have a common conscience; (b) concentrically circles of social mirrors: from personal (through family, tribe, profession, region, nation, religion, race, gender) to cultural identity - *social constructs*. The collective identity and also the national identity are based on an act of imagination (Scheff, 1994: 122).

In our study we took into consideration a famous quote of Jean Paul Sartre from "No Exit" play: "*Hell Is the Other People*" in order to emphasize that the Strangers' views are peculiar cases of Others' perceptions. For example from a Freudian perspective the Stranger is The Brother or The Father who catch mother's attentions and time, in a familial context. A Stranger may be the one who speaks another language, the one that has another race, colour, and religion, political or social beliefs. According to George Herbert Mead - social interactionism theory, the Self is an interaction and social control constructed through language, rituals, gestures, all of them reflecting specific behaviors. The attitudes of Others influence the Self and it reacts to that type of attitude. A dialectic relation between society and individuals is represented by the relation "I and ME", who derives from the symbolic interactions of objectification: (a) Objectification of the Self; (b) Objectification of I as an awareness of the past, where "I" represented a social and historical character. Developing his theory, G. H. Mead analyzes consciousness as a sensitive process and a form of awareness that includes an "I". (Mead, 1934: 165, 174). The "Self-image" is an aspect of "Self" arising from the internalization of others representations. Another part of the Self is constituted by "Myself",

expressing an individual response to another representations undertaken through self-image.

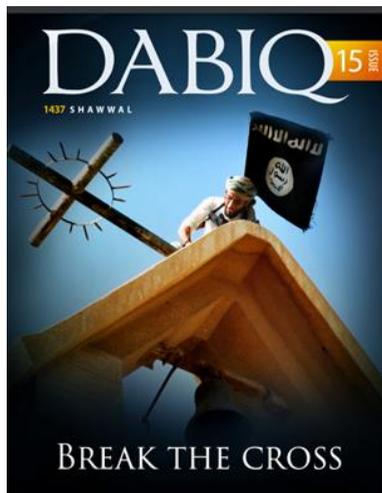


Another hypostasis of the Stranger is the Alien. He represents the lens that reveals the mankind, an instrument and an alternative. It often raises feelings of love, hate, fear and inspires a devoted literature, a special filmography, and has a peculiar audience. The entire scenario dominated by aliens reveals the utopian or dystopian societies.

The Relations between Me and Other or We and Others are expressed through a complex system of alterities (in a profound sense, the alterity is composed by a hole set of differences: contexts, beings, societies, spaces, customs). There are many points of view in cultural studies concerning the colonial discourse and the representation of Other/Otherness. A signifying example is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where the relation between "the colonizer" and "the colonized" in totalitarian society is deeply scrutinized. "Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* gave me the critical tools to reflect on, and understand, the process through which we come to know what it means to be at the periphery of the intimate yet fragile relationship between the colonizer and the colonized." (Freire, 2000: 11)

The emotional behavior of human being (*fear, pity, anger, compassion*) has as psychological consequences the social isolation and low esteem. Erving Goffman (1963: 9-15), states that the individual deals with an existential stigma and also with an achieved stigma.

These two attributes being some atavistic constant coordinates is no wonder that interested ideologies exploited the conflict space between people that are strangers ones to the others. The fear of the stranger of other ethnicity, the one that stays for good on a new land or country has ancestral roots developed along with the historic times when the strangers' proximity was perceived as invasion. There is no society without migration; this is a prehistoric phenomenon, imposed by life conditions, determined by workforce, which influenced the mental health of individual. Illegal immigration has always been related with the international terrorism; the moral panic theory (Cohen, 1972: xxii) emphasizes the human behavior stimulated by the presence of foreign residents. In this case, we may notice that "us" as a reflection of group consciousness defined as respectable, trustable persons comparing to "them" positioned at the opposed pole, are associated with *outsiders, enemies*. In a society always act forces that cultivate the fear, that induce hatred, and cut the proper communication between different ethnicities. He labels (some are terrorists, some are just enemies) and differentiates considering the natural features (skin and hair color; race and gender identity), the cultural codes (clothes, spiritual values) expressed in socialization. "*The otherness of the stranger and the otherness of the deviant are collapsed in the social portrayal of the criminal, even terrorist, immigrant*" (Saux, 2007: 57-72.).



Hatred is reached via a sequential depreciation of people from another community, a process that is based on real and artificial reasons maliciously produced (see the mixed feelings generated by the refugee crisis in Europe). To the objective resentments adds obviously the malicious action of forces interested in raising the conflicts between the European communities and the refugees' masses: it is obviously the action of a specific group of interests that stimulates the animosity. Before generating the hatred they induce it through cultural customs and devotion to certain organizations.

The Self-presentation techniques as part of impression management (Goffman, 1967: 12-13) aims to diminish any social negative impact. The author sends to the ability to maintain face, to gain a positive value in society. Another cause of fear of the Strangers is represented by the cultural differences. The individual tries to make good impressions according to his cultural background.

The dichotomy between interculturalism seen as cultural values exchange versus multiculturalism perceived as hierarchical structure of peoples' cultural assets creates a gap between individuals and as a consequence transforms the Other in Stranger. That is the way the stereotype and subjectification dominates him. In order to make the Other visible we must set a *pedagogy the Other* by a continuous process of inclusion (in culture, education, society). Analyzing the social relations George Herbert Mead states a model of consensus-conflict model: (a) Intra-Group Consensus – Extra-Group Conflict when united individuals oppose a common enemy; (b) Intra-Group Conflict – Extra-Group Consensus when the individual acts against his own group. The prejudice is evaluative-affective dimension of intergroup attitudes. They determine a cognitive activation of the stereotypes. A clear example is given by the xenophobic attitudes in contemporary media. For example, the real identity of the most Romanians working in the United Kingdom is of correct people who earn money from honest work, and often underpaid. Walter Lippman (1922: 119, 410) states that we deal with a prejudices language that shapes the social change. Here may be a source of hatred. Stereotypes are imaginary schematic representations of a

group, ideal weapons endowed with a strong aggressiveness, causing clear and deep reactions in us. Although they are defined as mental representations of individuals, their negative effects are caused mostly by the facts that are widespread among the members of a community. Stereotype aims social individuals, social classes, ethnic groups, professional communities or political parties, has an emotional often negative charge, is far from the reality and has a great resistance to change.



The conflict between Islamism and the secular Western societies has many contradictions such as the differences between Islam and the opposed Western values (human rights, customs, salaries decrease, and jobs losses). The secular terrorism has its origin and fundamental reasons in extremist ideologies (communists, fascists, Nazi) from the last two centuries. Resembling with the religious conflicts, these plead a noble purpose for their action: the humankind happiness, the radical solution of social, economic problems.

It is well known the activity of these organizations on all continents of the world, most of them claiming to be the extreme left (Maoist, Red Brigades in last decades in Italy or Baader Meinhof in Germany). Another widespread category is the terrorist organizations acting on behalf national liberation or ethnic cause (Spain Basques, Tamils in India). Another source of hatred and subjective extremism consists, at least in the opinion of Umberto Eco

The contradictions are not accidental, considering that attitudes pro multiculturalism are the opposed to the basic orientation of the Conservative Party that Angela Merkel still represents.

Closing remarks:

"For an age of unprecedented mass displacement, we need an unprecedented humanitarian response and a renewed global commitment to tolerance and protection for people fleeing conflict and persecution." (António Guterres UN High Commissioner for Refugees. UNHR, 18 June 2015,)

In any communication processes social groups operate with representations; once created, they have their own life, generating *new representations*, while the old ones change. *Ethnic prejudices* are conceptions based on *limited information* accompanied by *negative attitudes* and reactions.

The social and the cultural harmony can be radically disturbed by the Other's appearance/existence and a special adjustment process from both sides is needed to reestablish a *sui generis* equilibrium.

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