

## Strangers in World Society – Indifference and Minimal Sympathy

### Otherness and Strangeness

The social experience of strangeness must be distinguished from that of otherness. The otherness of another human being is an incontrovertible and hence a universal social experience. It is the absolute precondition for my experiencing myself as my Self in contradistinction to the otherness of another human being. It is only possible to speak of strangeness, in contrast, when the otherness of another human being is experienced as irritating or disturbing. Ambivalence (in the sense of the existence of contradictory judgments made about one and the same object) and uncertainty characteristically accompany the experience of strangeness. This experience frequently triggers a need to act. We simply cannot let the disturbance we have experienced be, and we feel an urge to act and somehow deal with or even eliminate it.

Two distinct conditions - social differences and factual differences – may underlie the experience of social or existential strangeness. In the first place, this experience may be associated with a social counterpart perceived as a stranger over and above the diversity in his ways of expressing himself and who is therefore regarded as a compact social object (compactness means here a legitimate overlooking of differences). Alternatively, the experience of existential strangeness may arise simply from factual differences and unfamiliarities associated with an object. We might find a certain area of knowledge (mathematics, information technology, the culture of the Hittites) strange or foreign. The moment of spatial and temporal distance plays a role in both forms of strangeness: distance can produce a sense of strangeness when thousands of years separate us from a foreign culture. However, this distance can also make that very same culture more acceptable because the spatial and temporal separation obviates any pressure to act.

Here we shall concentrate on the social aspect of strangeness, i.e. on the fact that someone living in a society, or on the margins of that society, may be perceived and classed as an outsider or foreigner. And although manifold individual factual differences may reinforce this label, they are of secondary importance in the compact conception of the other as a stranger. The ascription of strangeness raises the issue of membership and, hence, of strangership in the society within which it is made: Is the stranger in question a

member of this particular social system? What restrictions will he have to endure, and what privileges will he be granted if he is accepted as a member of society?

### Historical Semantics and Socio-structural Variations for Integrating Strangers

From the semantic point of view, talk of "strangers" is historically an almost universal phenomenon, and a wealth of examples may be drawn from different cultures and from literature. Almost every historical society is preoccupied with assigning roles and membership status to strangers. We are probably all familiar with passages revealing the prominence of the semantics of the stranger in such texts as the *Old Testament*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the *Old Testament*, for instance, the Hebrews are continually being admonished to treat strangers as guests and to show them friendship, because they themselves were once strangers and slaves in Egypt. These examples reveal widespread aspects of the semantics of the stranger: the uncertainties of our paths through life (a reference to man's pilgrimage on earth), which make each and every one of us a stranger at some time in our life. The generalized reciprocity among human beings that is produced by such uncertainties and the ambiguities in the way strangers are treated may derive in part from the suspicion that the stranger may always turn out to be a god in disguise.

As fascinating as they are, these historical questions will not be the subject of this essay because we are concerned here with analyzing contemporary world society. Instead of approaching our subject historically, we shall present a minimal reconstruction of the various patterns used by different societies to integrate strangers, as this takes us directly to our main theme: "strangers in world society".

I would like to distinguish five ways of regarding and treating strangers. First, there are societies which are incapable of even recognizing strangers as strangers. They experience no real irritation, nor any need to act. In the early 1930s, for example, some strangers (to begin with, Australian gold prospectors) were travelling through the New Guinea highlands, a region that they had believed to be unsettled, but which turned out in fact to be densely populated. Apparently, the tribes whom they unexpectedly encountered identified them unanimously, and without any hesitation, as returning members of their particular group (and even as deceased family members) who had finally come back. The reaction of these tribes involved no attribution of strangeness for the simple reason that this response was not provided for in their "world view".

A second type of society registers strangers in terms of their capacity to unsettle its members. The mechanisms this type of society possesses for dealing with strangeness are directed at immediately eliminating the experience of strangeness: they range from expelling and killing strangers to diverse patterns of societal acceptance such as cleansing rites and adopting strangers in kinship networks. Mechanisms of this type aim at divesting the stranger of all signs of strangeness.

A third pattern has been developed by stratified social systems, which have determined a greater part of our social history for the last few thousand years. These stratified societies were the first to offer strangers a plurality of possible statuses, corresponding with their diversified social structures. There were now inner and outer strangers; tolerated, privileged and subjugated strangers; occupations and enclaves that were reserved for strangers and simultaneously prohibited for local inhabitants; strangers were given positions where communication between social groups was disrupted, making them indispensable as mediators - to name but a few of the many possible variations.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity, whose origins coincide with, among other things, the invention of the nation state as a universal political form, radically simplified this complex pattern in one respect by creating a fourth manner of dealing with strangers. Instead of a plurality of statuses, binary classifications now appeared that aimed at distinguishing local inhabitants who were considered fully-fledged members of the nation-state from strangers who had no such claims to membership. Without the nation state and the complex sets of interconnected membership rights upon which it rests, the diversity of statuses predating modernity could never have been simplified in this way.

Parallel to the genesis of the nation state, a situation arose which is of paramount interest to us here, and which produced a fifth type of socially institutionalized strangeness, i.e. strangership. In the process of establishing a new form of political organization embodied in the nation state system, the nation state itself became embedded in an emergent international social system which considerably changed the way one person might experience another as a stranger. We might speak of the *universalization of the stranger* in this context. What this means is that in modern social life (urban environments, for example) social intercourse mostly involves interacting with people we might refer to as *strangers*. However, this implies that the strangeness of the other comes to be seen as a normal everyday occurrence, whereby it loses its irritating, disturbing character. An alternative interpretation speaks of the *disappearance of the stranger* or of his *invisibility*.

In other words, although we still talk of 'strangers' and still try, semantically, to assign them an unsettling quality, the fact is that we find it hard to name someone whom we would be prepared to identify as a stranger in this sense. Let us now take a closer look at this world of experience, which is specific to contemporary world society. When we talk of world society, we mean that communication between human beings is fundamentally possible across the globe, and that there is, thus, only one social system on earth.

### The Normalization of Strangeness: the Paradoxical Structure of Indifference

We can find diagnoses similar to the above as early as the late eighteenth century. Commenting in 1796 on the tendency towards universalization within the European world, Edmund Burke wrote: "No European can be a complete exile in any part of Europe." This comment reflects a fundamental change in social history which strikes me as far more radical in its consequences than the simultaneous emergence of the nation state. If, from this point in time on, no place can be experienced as 'complete exile', then we must assume a fundamental familiarity, with each and every potential human interactor and with every conceivable place, which leaves no room for extreme forms of strangeness in social interaction. This holds, at any rate, for the descriptions Europe has furnished about itself.

Other signs of these changes are easy to find. What is important here is the growing general acceptance of the *idea of humanity*. This idea implies, among other things, that the members of the human species share basic needs and characteristics which are not invalidated by any empirically observable examples of strangeness and hostility. Thus social theory could no longer be presented as a theory of friendship, because such an approach would assume that society had a social "outside" (i.e. other societies) in relation to which strangership and enmity were the prevailing attitudes. Instead of a social theory formulated as a theory of friendship, intermediate stages between friendship and enmity were now held to be characteristic of sociality. Benjamin Nelson, whose *The Idea of Usury* is interesting for any analysis of these structural changes, refers to the theory of natural rights, advanced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Alberico Gentili, Samuel Pufendorf). Nelson ascribes to this theory the basic notion of *calculated benevolence* as a desirable attitude not only towards other human beings but also towards other nations. The essential point in this argument is the tension between a *calculating* attitude, with which one encounters another person, and the *benevolence* shown to this person. It is within this tension that the paradoxical structure of indifference reveals itself.

The moral philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment (1730-90) constitutes a second important step in the historical semantics of indifference. Adam Smith deserves special consideration in this context. Smith is well known for his theory of the division of labor (as the theory of an exchange relationship between strangers in a commercial society) which was embedded in a theory of moral feelings regulating relationships between human beings. What Smith clearly shows is that these exchange relations between random strangers can no longer be based on the premise of personal or even friendly relations between the participants. That said, they do presuppose trust as well as a fundamental empathy for all others, making it possible to abstract from the personal qualities of the other so that one can, in turn, be indifferent towards this other. The paradox referred to above appears again here: a minimal degree of trust and a fundamental sense of empathy are, incidentally, the preconditions for ensuring that indifference does not become a problem.

What is the nature of the socio-cultural background of indifference? And what does the concept of *indifference* mean in fact? In modernity, the locally forged clusters of friends and enemies, natives and strangers, which were characteristic of most older social systems, were superseded by the phenomenon of a greatly extended system of social reference points for each and every individual. As a consequence, there remained no other alternative than to respond to most people with indifference. To understand the problem adequately, we should avoid the pejorative connotations of *indifference* or of the German equivalent *Gleichgültigkeit*. Linguistically, these connotations are easily avoidable since both words merely declare that no further consideration is being shown to certain differences that are basically inherent in a specific object. This becomes very clear in the German term *gleichgültig*. We treat things that are in themselves different as if we were assigning equal importance to them, although we might attribute to them very different values if our interests were directed differently. The decision to adopt a stance of *indifference* or *Gleichgültigkeit* is related to a surfeit of information that makes us refrain from using information that is, in principle, available to us.

When it comes to social structure, what we are dealing with here is the extension, across much of the globe, of a network of relationships in which each and every one of us is embedded. As a consequence, the others - with whom we are involved at the levels of interaction and communication - are not grasped primarily in terms of their dissimilarity, which remains to be clarified, but are treated as individuals. With regard to their factual individuality, however, they are all equal. Consequently, the differences and dissimilarities

must now be worked out in relation to this fundamental equality of all others, who are perceived as individuals. As a rule, nobody will be interested in these differences because they have no relevance in this or that situation; furthermore, they contain an unbearable load of information. This is the origin of the phenomenon of indifference to almost all forms of social difference. Niklas Luhmann uses an expression reminiscent of Norbert Elias when he talks of *disciplined individuality* as being the peculiar feature of modernity. This expression, which again contains a paradox, applies equally to our self-conception and to the expectations we place in others. The individuality we expect from each and every other person is no longer that of an outstanding individual or a hero. The same applies to the self-conception of an individual: we are supposed to burden neither interaction itself nor others by exhibiting extraordinary individuality. What is essential is the individualization of all participants in their interaction with one another and within society. Thus considered, the differences between them are secondary, or only come into play when a person displays them in certain situations or identifies them by observing others. In all other circumstances we are indifferent to them.

Similar accounts were offered in the early twentieth century by what is now termed classical sociology. Simmel speaks of the *reserve* of the city-dweller, which he traces back to the demands of psychological economy. Without this trait, "one would be completely atomized internally and come to an unimaginable psychic state". Simmel's diagnosis differs from the analysis presented here inasmuch as he feels he can identify an "overtone of hidden aversion" in this reserve. We feel that aversion thus endured would consume too much time and energy and thus be an unlikely response. Another interesting author is Nathaniel Shaler, a Harvard geologist whose name has fallen into obscurity. As a lay sociologist he published a *Natural History of Human Contacts* in 1904. Shaler identifies a tendency within civilization to create a third social category as the dominant form of categorizing others which supplants the distinction between friend and enemy, native and stranger. Shaler calls this third category the *commonplace-folk*. He describes our attitude towards the *commonplace-folk* as one in which we either try to deal with them without consciously registering their presence or (when social conditions are relatively peaceful) try to show a modicum of sympathy in our attitude towards them.

All these analyses proceed from the town (or city) as an explicit or implicit background to observed structural change. The town is the laboratory of modern modes of behavior and has now become the more-or-less universal context of life for all human beings on earth.

The distinction between *town* and *country*, one of the oldest resources in the vocabulary of sociology, is rarely instructive nowadays.

### Mechanisms of Difference

Modern sociology can be interpreted as a repertoire of mechanisms of indifference. This takes into account the fact that indifference, like other techniques employed within civilized societies, must be explicitly taught and learned, even if this process is not conscious.

Some items from this repertoire deserve mention here.

One of the best known conceptual inventions in this connection is Erving Goffman's term *civil inattention*. This term also reveals a paradoxical tension: civility and a bourgeois behavioral code, which initially assumes the peculiar form of *inattention* towards others. As Goffman never tires of pointing out, this is only possible because bourgeois codes of behavior in the form of a minimal benevolent intention are attributed to others. A related term for this attributing of such qualities to others is *trust*. As we know from Niklas Luhmann and others, the mechanism of trust is a risky 'down payment' on the future behavior of an alter ego, a risk whose unencumbering effects we need if we are to develop and pursue our own complex activities. Trust of this type is, in turn, based only to a limited degree on a conscious decision. Anthony Giddens aptly refers to trust as *background noise*.

Another expression, reminding us of the natural rights theories of the seventeenth century, is that of *routine benevolence* proposed by Allan Silver. This conception no longer regards benevolence as something that one person actively gives another on the basis of experience, but as one of the operative routines of social and personal systems.

Furthermore, routines, as we know from theories of socio-cultural evolution, are the more-or-less stable result of a fully evolved system. These routines both mark out and limit the scope for further change.

All of these paradoxical modes of orientation accomplish more or less the same thing.

They offer everyone operating with such an orientation pattern thousands upon thousands of negations (modes of ignoring others) which are neither registered as such in practice, nor do they give rise to conflict, since the negation of the other, being invisible, cannot be made into an issue. Thus all of these orientation patterns help make the 'No' invisible (one of modernity's most remarkable conflict-curbing inventions). But how do such negations work? And which aspects and modes of behavior deserve special emphasis? Initially, it is

a question of the amazing act of *filtering out thousands of others* who are there in principle - as cities, public squares and mass events, where one needs to be able not to relate to all these others, clearly illustrate. Psychological disturbances that arise from a failure to do precisely this and result in the Self being overwhelmed by outside influences demonstrate that this response is not to be considered a trivial achievement but they also suggest that social norms expect it.

In certain situations, the pretence of *non-presence* can be an important technique. It played an important role in the society of estates in old Europe, where people living in households behaved as if the personnel physically present and actively involved in performing services was not really there at all. Nowadays, this strategy is employed in situations in which differences and conflict potential are acute, and where the pretended absence of the other neutralizes considerable conflict potential. Such pretences are reinforced by the *art of avoidance*. One increases or slows one's pace, crosses to the other side of the street and avoids any eye contact. In telecommunicative encounters, anonymity, the use of *aliases* and a refusal to give one's name play a similar role. Many telephone conversations begin with the participants wrestling with the problem of who is to say his name first.

Yet another invention peculiar to modernity deserves mention here: *non-communication despite the indisputable reciprocity of perception*. There is no need to doubt the basic correctness of Watzlawick's dictum that people cannot *not* communicate. Even so, this represents another of the most incredible accomplishments of modernity: that people can look at one another in a train for hours on end without speaking to each other and without advertising this fact as communication.

On the positive side of this very same interaction we find *institutions of minimal acceptance* of the other. When people encounter and greet one another, even if they are complete strangers, one of them smiles without the other having to do anything to deserve it. This smile, however, seems to be a culturally specific and not a universal institution. In modern Greece, for example, instead of smiling, it is apparently still quite normal for a person to present a cold, questioning look that makes it clear to the other that he is a stranger and has to behave accordingly for the time being.

All of these acts are related to the differentiation of *impersonal relations* as part of the everyday reality each of us experiences. A person somehow withdraws behind the lines of interaction and is thus able to remain anonymous. In this way, we become accustomed to dealing with people we don't really know. Friendship and enmity, familiarity and

strangership no longer serve as suitable dichotomies for comprehending this situation.

They are superseded by that new social institution the *acquaintance*, which glosses over the difference between personal and impersonal relations. We can now approach and address acquaintances without any trouble and greatly extend our range of relationships beyond the realms of familiarity and strangership. In the last analysis, these transformations correspond to the emergence of that social structure known as the network, which liberates contact and even communities from their local conditions.

### Indifference and Morality

What are the moral bases of indifference? Is indifference conceivable as the moral basis of modern society? There evidently exists a minimal morality which calls for the basic acceptance of all others without their being obliged to do anything to gain or deserve such acceptance. And it remains important that others deserve no more than this minimal sympathy: they have no further-reaching claim to our attention or involvement. As a result, we are all distanced observers from whom one can, at best, demand *detached concern* - a paradoxical orientation which Renée Fox presents in her theory of professions as a way of dealing with expectations of care that are addressed to members of the caring professions. At the same time, there are signs that a minimal degree of solidarity does exist – beyond the level of interaction - among all human beings in the form of a worldwide solidarity of all members of the human species. We may assess the structural effects of indifference by systematically observing and comparing these phenomena at different levels of the constitution of society. Ultimately, this society is a world society. It no longer knows any social Outside, nor does anyone exist whom we could legitimately call a stranger to society.

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