

Dignity and Hope versus Humiliation and Despair

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In Europe there is a war on immigration. It is a war fuelled by the territorial imagination and carried out by extremely vulnerable sovereign nations. 11,000 Africans have lost their lives since 1982 in attempting to reach the borders of Europe; in 2000, 58 Chinese men and women were found suffocated to death in a container lorry on arrival at Dover; in 2004, 23 Chinese men and women were drowned in Morecambe Bay, Lancashire, while searching for cockles at night. Harassed, bullied and humiliated by their fellow, white workers, this was the only time they felt safe to work. In Malaysia in 1995, a young migrant work from Bangladesh, Sarjahan Babu, died in a detention camp along with 33 of his compatriots. Many hundreds of other instances could be added to these, but the point that I am making is that each one was killed by the territorial imagination.

The territorial imagination is produced by ideologies of nation or, more precisely, the quartet of birth, territoriality, nation, state upon which concepts of national sovereignty and citizenship are constructed. On this basis, citizenship and identity become categories of and for inclusion/belonging. For example, in September of this year, the new British Prime Minister made his first speech to the labour Party conference as its leader. In that speech, he used the term 'British' 88 times and referred more than once to our 'island story'. The island is only notionally territorial in this usage; it is more cultural and ideological: it is a code for heritage and a 'white' heritage at that. 'British jobs for British people' is a phrase he also used earlier in the year, in July I think. At a time when the 'British' narrative is ceasing to make sense, cohere, motivate, or hold people together at the economic, social, or political level, it is being re-assembled symbolically/discursively on a negative construction of immigration. The immigrant is mapped against an already existing, fixed, and (so the story goes) *socially cohesive* national culture. 'Refugees become irritants to the rigid orders of the self' (Gunter Grass's wonderful formulation). As Soguk claims, 'In this way, refugees help remake the languages in which the narratives of the citizenry, national community, and territorial state are told.'

What is the significance of this and what has it got to do with either dignity or humiliation? It strikes at the heart of the ambivalence in the war on immigration. European society cannot function without

immigrants – the hospitality industry, catering, food processing, construction, health services and agriculture would all collapse without a regular flow of immigrants. Part of the demand for immigrant labour has been met by the supply of thousands of workers from within the expanded EU in 2004 and 2007. However, there are still nowhere near enough to fill the low-paid, undesirable jobs in the sectors mentioned. So, the government has a policy of 'managed migration' (aimed particularly at the high skills sector) and a 'flexible labour strategy' which tacitly acknowledges the economy's dependence on migration, legal or otherwise.

However, a very significant section of the British public is now at the mercy of this flexible labour market which means an increasing amount of casualised and temporary work, a seriously weakened trade union movement, privatisation and downsizing, redundancy of skills and people, and relatively low wages. This is combined with a growth in the informal economy, unemployment and reduced expectations in many traditional (white) working class areas, high rents and mortgages, increased costs of living, and the highest level of personal indebtedness in Europe. Insecurity and anxiety are the consequences of this. As Joseph Stiglitz has demonstrated, the impact of IMF failures across the world has led to 'a devastated middle class' and, globally, very limited economic growth, with the consequence that 'Even those countries that have experienced some limited growth have seen the benefits accrue to the well-off, especially the very well-off – the top 10 percent [the 'have mores' as Bush called them] – while poverty has remained high, and in some cases the income of those at the bottom has even fallen.' (quoted in Mark Engler).

Hence the frequent reference to borders and border security. Borders here mean literally the limits of a nation's sovereignty but they also refer to those borders which help to construct the cultural, social and national imaginary. Immigration control has come to occupy a central position in discourse about the identity of the country, as well as other issues relating to security, citizenship, Britain's place in the world, and its relationship with other countries.

If, as Todorov has claimed, dignity is a form of social recognition, and if society is the arbiter of individual value and worth, then it is clear, if the above sketch has any salience, that dignity is in relatively short supply. How does a government, wedded to a globalised economy and at the service of a global wealth elite, confer recognition on its citizens if identity through meaningful work and conspicuous consumption is increasingly at a premium? It talks up the nation and the national through a rhetoric of 'core British values' but also, and more importantly, it uses the concept of

sovereignty to re-seal and control its borders while, at the same time, exercising its prerogative of determining who to exempt and who to include in its territory. This prerogative also enables the state to determine value and is converse non-value. As Bauman has argued, determining value draws the limits of the normal, the ordinary, the orderly, the 'us'. Value confers recognition, recognition produces dignity. Thus, the included British are invested with value, something confirmed and amplified by the popular media which focuses attention on non-value seen as an exception which marks the boundary of meaning and being. As Carl Schmitt said, 'the exception does not only confirm the rule; the rule as such lives off the exception alone'.

What I am arguing is that that 'Britishness' which excludes and humiliates the 'irregular', the 'illegal', the 'undocumented', lives off these exceptions. Of course, I am speaking of ideological effects and not some kind of government conspiracy or even conscious design. As Dalal has shown, 'Differences between groups of people turn into ethnic boundaries only when *heated into significance* by the identity investment of the other side. Identity investment, I shall argue, is at the root of the need to humiliate.

Dalal goes on to define the issue in this fashion:

The fact that there is the constant danger of the imaginary "us" dissolving into the "them" resulting in another kind of "us" and "them", sets off two interlinked anxieties. The first is a profound existential anxiety that comes about as one starts to feel the sense of self dissolving, and so is resisted. The second anxiety is evoked by the potential loss, dilution or disruption of access to the vortices of power and status. (Dalal)

For many people, it has to be remarked, the only power and status they have is achieved through their affiliation to the superordinate cultural imaginary mentioned earlier. They are granted meaning by being part of the so-called prior community of territory, language and culture. This is the sole repository of agency and identity for millions of people in contemporary society - the primary means of managing and defending against the anxieties outlined by Dalal.

So, not only does Britain/Europe need immigrants, who can be brought within the rule and the regular, it also, paradoxically, needs irregular, illegal and undocumented (the *sans papiers*) migrants, including refused asylum seekers, many of whom experience the daily humiliation of destitution: they are represented as the symbolic repertoire located at borders, margins and edges. In other words, the irregular confirm and validate the meaning and value of

legitimacy, regularity and documentation. Without access to work, benefits, social housing or medical care, the irregular is 'taken outside', prepared for banishment and rendered extraterritorial. Those (1500 in the UK) actually in detention centres suffer the indignities of imprisonment, arrested and 'out of time', and detained 'out of space' – suspended temporally and spatially. They are subject to the humiliation of, what Agamben calls, bare human life, *homo sacer*, the person who can be killed (or detained) with impunity. Although they are not killed, their status strips them down to virtual nothingness and renders them vulnerable to all kinds of indignity. They symbolise chaos, non-value, the outside and confirm by their non-existence the sovereignty of the state, buttressed by its right (one among a dwindling number it retains) to carry out deportations (government ministers proudly trumpet the fact that one person was removed from the UK every nine minutes last year).

What I am arguing, in admittedly simplified and elliptical fashion, is that the mutually assured vulnerabilities of the European sovereign nations are using immigration culturally as part of a belated attempt, in the face of globalization, at legitimacy-building and ideological mobilization. By irregularising large numbers of people (approximately 600,000 in the UK) deemed to be 'life that does not deserve to live', by implication the nation empowers its relatively powerless by creating a zone of 'deep powerlessness' and saying to its 'regular' inhabitants 'your life is worth living'. This process has been described by Agamben as the 'fundamental biopolitical structure of modernity' – the decision on the value (or non-value) of life as such. We know also how crucial biopolitics has become to the governance of states. Limits and boundaries consecrate the belonging-lives of the included, however demeaning their actual lives may be. Ideological homogeneity masks actual diversity and change because *all* immigrants, legal or otherwise, are seen in popular discourse and through the territorial imagination as 'strangers', to be humiliated and despised with impunity, encouragement even from the tabloid press, beyond the frontier/fortress of dignity and recognition. This has recently been called xeno-racism and 'those parties that most appeal to the interests and fears of the "losers" of globalization are the driving force of the Western European Party System'. (Policy Network publication).

As the nine million billionaires of the world move freely around the globe, spending, investing, buying properties and dwelling where they choose, their spectral shadow is the millions of refugees and so-called economic migrants whose every movement is seen as

transgressive and threatening. Most, of course, never make it to the developed world.

Islands of territoriality are finding it increasingly difficult to sustain the national fictions hastily being cobbled together in the face of challenging and deeply contradictory globalizing narratives which are extraterritorial. What if the migrant is the rule not the exception, how long can biopolitical sovereignty be maintained by narratives of humiliation which prop up the nation by creating out-of-time and out-of-space people? How long can governments keep up the humiliation of denial guaranteed/licensed by a vestigial sovereignty? When will British people realise that their anxiety comes from an absence of real recognition and value, and that their sense of incompleteness and frustration cannot be met by celebrity and nationalist rhetorics? Will a culture of elimination – the very essence of capitalism and, incidentally, humiliation – in its mediated forms (*Big Brother*, *Pop Idol* – humiliation as entertainment) satisfy for ever?

In other words, what I am saying is that the humiliation of the excluded is only a short-term palliative, as 'palliatives reduce the symptoms of an illness without attacking the cause'. Immigration is a symptom of national insecurity and anxiety, not a cause. Similarly, celebrity idolatry is the other side on non-entity vilification, a form of substitute recognition or transference. As the celebrity embodies plenitude and accumulation, success and 'winners' (actually it is wealth which is being worshipped), the immigrant symbolises barrenness and destitution (what is being despised is *failure*), necessarily distanced from the included lest they should be contaminated by 'losers'. Both ways of seeing encourage political inertia. As nation-states fantasise omnipotence, unlimited power, they transfer to their citizens a similar feeling of omnipotence (island story, the flag etc.) and unlimited licence to confirm their exclusive/inclusive existence by vilifying those who are *unlicensed* to belong, those others who are different, not us.

How can we respond to all this?

'The rights of foreigners and aliens, whether they be refugees or guest workers, asylum seekers or adventurers, indicate that threshold, that boundary, at the site of which the identity of "we, the people" is defined and renegotiated, bounded and unravelled, circumscribed or rendered fluid' (Seyla Benhabib)

'The virtues of liberal democracies do not consist in their capacities to close their borders but in their capacities to hear the claims of

those who, for whatever reason, knock at our doors.' (Seyla Benhabib)

'Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility, or not, of being an other. It is not simply – humanistically – a matter of being able to accept the other but of being in his [sic] place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself.' (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 1991).

Locally, we need to offer amnesty – 'all those who are here are from here' – access to work, housing rights, benefits, and primary and secondary healthcare. Dialogue and a culture of mutuality would help, as would the development of a new global civil society; enabling international laws; another kind of border politics altogether; an ethics of hospitality; humanitarian commitment beyond the interests of the nation-states; a global imagination; a cosmopolitan imaginary/identity; collective self-identification and self-government; an international trade union movement; a global minimum standard of living for all. As George Monbiot has argued:

Globalization is not the problem. The problem is in fact the release from globalization which both economic agents and nations states have been able to negotiate. They have been able to operate so freely because the people of the world have no global means of restraining them. Our task is surely not to overthrow globalizing, but to capture it, and to use it as a vehicle for humanity's first global democratic revolution (Monbiot, 2003, p. 23, italics in original).

Humiliated people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self – they lose trust in themselves and in other people. Self-esteem is shattered and they experience contradictory feelings of need and fear. The identity they had formed prior to humiliation is irrevocably destroyed. The refused asylum seeker, the undocumented migrant, the irregular worker is subject to what I call systemic humiliation – denial and abandonment, without rights or autonomy, de-humanised: 'refused asylum seekers eat out of bins and sleep in parks, public toilets, and phone boxes because of government policy'. ('The Destitution Trap', November 2006)

In conclusion, I should like to reiterate something Zygmunt Bauman says, '...At no other time has the keen search for common humanity, and the practice that follows such an assumption, been as urgent and imperative as it is now. In the era of globalization, the cause and politics of shared humanity face the most fateful steps they have made in their long history.'