

The Stranger on the Border^{*}

Marianna Bolko^{**}

Abstract. The author discusses the problem of racism and fear of the stranger from different perspectives. First of all, she employs classic psychoanalytic concepts (such as projection, identification with the aggressor, etc.), together with concepts derived from ethno-psychoanalysis and sociology. Her reflections follow the methodology of so-called “ego-history”, namely, she gives a detailed account of her personal experience and of the experience of her family during World War Two in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, occupied by Italy and later by Germany, and as a member of the Slovene minority in Trieste in 1947. The author’s father was an Italian antifascist who had to immigrate to Yugoslavia, and her mother was from Slovenia. She describes her childhood and adolescence, in reference to the experiences of minorities and different ethnic groups. This past history triggers socio-psychological and political reflections on the current phenomenon of racism in Italy as witnessed by the growing fear of and aversion to immigrants. It is hypothesized that this fear and aversion towards immigrants could be consequences of the fact that social groups reinforce their identity by exercising the human tendency to create an enemy. The author does not accept the psychoanalytic notion that this aversion is part of human nature, but rather seeks an explanation in the fact that the other becomes an enemy due to psychological processes such as “cognitive delusion” and “typological illusion”. These processes, ones promoted by totalitarian regimes, make the other invisible both as other and as human being, and thus serve to immunize one against anything that is perceived as new. A better knowledge of these processes may prevent the loss and obfuscation of memory that can generate a resurgence of mass racism or of racism of entire communities. In conclusion, this may be the path we should take in order to counteract the invisible racism possibly lurking within each of us. (This paper, with the original title “Accepting or rejecting the other: Border psychopathologies”, was presented on March 14, 2011, at a series of seminars entitled “On the road”, organized by Stefano Benni and Alessandro Castellari at the *Pluriversità dell’Immaginazione “Grazia Cherchi”* of Bologna, Italy).

Key words: racism, Nazism, projection, ethnic conflict, fear of the stranger.

Introduction

When the poet and writer Stefano Benni¹ invited me to give this lecture at a cycle of seminars entitled “*Sulla strada*” [“On the road”], the civil war in Libya was in full swing, with the Mediterranean in flames beneath the gaze of the “civilized” powers, unmindful of the blood being spilled, but watchful of the markets. Italy was conspicuous because of the special relationship between the then head of government, Silvio Berlusconi, and the Libyan President, Muammar Gaddafi, and for the non-opening of the Refugees Reception Centre on the island of Lampedusa. This was a decision made by the Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni (of the xenophobic party “Northern League”), hastily forced to do an about-face, because of the violence of the ensuing

^{*} Original edition: L’estraneo sul confine. *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane*, 2012, 46 (2): 225-240 (DOI: 10.3280/PU2012-002004). We are grateful for the permission. Translated by Joyce Myerson. This paper was originally a lecture, from the original title “Aprirsi e chiudersi agli altri: patologie di confine” [“Accepting and rejecting the other: Border psychopathologies”], held at the *Sala della Scuderia*, Piazza Verdi 2, Bologna, Italy, on March 14, 2011, within a series of seminars coordinated by Stefano Benni and Alessandro Castellari entitled “*Sulla strada*” [“On the road”], organized by *Pluriversità dell’Immaginazione “Grazia Cherchi”* in collaboration with the *Università Primo Levi* and the *Associazione Culturale Italo Calvino* in Bologna, Italy. These seminars bring together a large public on sensitive and politically relevant themes.

^{**} Psychoanalyst, co-editor of the journal *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane* (www.psicoterapiaescienzeumane.it). Address: Via Garibaldi 3, 40124 Bologna, Italy, Tel. +(39) 051-0338617, E-Mail <bolko@libero.it>.

¹ Stefano Benni is well known also for several books, some of them translated into English, for example *Terra* of 1983 (New York: Pantheon, 1985), *Timeskipper* of 2001 (Rome: Europa Editions, 2008), and *Margherita Dolce Vita* of 2005 (Rome: Europa Editions, 2006).

events. It represented a harsh awakening that compelled one to raise one's gaze from the local "village", and to look around and face international issues. The fantasy of driving back the rubber life rafts, by firing cannon shots, all of a sudden lost its aura of propaganda in the harsh light of reality.

I offer you an association: In the "Heidelberg manifesto" of 1982 (signed moreover only by men) one reads: «With great concern, we observe the infiltration of the German *Volk* [people] through an influx of millions of foreigners and their families, the infiltration of our language, our culture, and our national traditions by foreign influences.» Many Germans became "foreigners in their own land".

This is, in great measure, the socio-political context in which I accepted to talk to a non-specialist audience. My lecture contains, along with well-known key psychoanalytical and psychological concepts, my personal experience, in an attempt at assembling my recollections at the crossroads of memory and history, with the aim of discussing certain psychological mechanisms identifiable at the origins of racism, mainly invisible racism and that myth of "Italians – such a wonderful people".

Accepting and Rejecting the other: Border Psychopathologies

1. The enemy

How could this "northern" wind of change, as it has come to be called, be possible after the Liberation, after the push to a renewal of Italian society, so longed for by all the political forces associated with the Resistance, and developed for the most part in Northern Italy? How is it possible that, since 1992, this game of shooting at rubber life rafts could have been conceived in the courtyards of the Po Valley? And why are we forced to regularly endure those scornful smiles of the victors, so adept at taking advantage of that atavistic fear of the black man?

What Karstic phenomenon has suddenly emerged, taking by surprise a Left-wing made lazy by the certainty of an advantageous position? "Having good screen presence" has become the watchword of the new propaganda, skillful at lowering our level of vigilance, and depriving us of the use of those mental functions that shield us from hypnosis and suggestion. The comparison with modern propaganda has almost caught Italy unawares, especially the Left-wing, making us conscious of the fact that it is not just about a method of marketing cheese. Thus has begun the almost pathetic spectacle of so many politicians of all stripes, used to the seriousness of the institution of politics, going to school to learn how to look good on television.

Good. Today something has all of a sudden changed. Having popped the cork on friendly governments, on the "good dictatorships" – the "democratures" of which the ex-minister Gianni De Michelis has spoken – that guaranteed a well-regulated public exploitation of the new slaves, the game of ramming rubber life rafts has been rudely interrupted. Even the leader of the gunmen who wanted to descend on Rome, with a few machine guns from Lombardy, has solemnly declared, in reference to Gheddafi, that he who fires on a crowd ends up badly. We now have a new context in which the seriousness of this epoch-making affair is beginning to cause reflection. But here, in the last month, indignation has reached its apex. These are no longer games played in the Po Valley to disgrace us in front of Europe and beyond. It is no longer a merely national affair with its daily rituals. It is in fact shame for a Europe that is looking on, in the Coliseum of the Mediterranean, at the struggle between gladiators and *retiarii* (Roman net-fighters), watching who survives and who perishes, in order to determine when to give the thumbs-up. It was so in the Balkan massacres - so much diplomacy. And now we wait to see who wins and who loses to decide on future alliances. The feeling of horror, one to which we eventually become inured, as scientific research has

informed us, is not for what happens, but for the way in which one stands and watches. Here, too, it is a question of colour.

With this preamble and in a different context from the one of the autumn of 2010, I will attempt to provide some tools with which to answer a first question, that of “looking inside oneself” posed by Alessandro Castellari in his introduction to the seminars.

After six years, I again find myself as a speaker at Benni’s seminars. At the end of the talk that I held at the previous seminar cycle, on “The Adventure”, I invited the listeners to get a dog and allow themselves to be guided by him through the streets in search of adventure. Today I find myself “on the road”, title of this seminar cycle, with a specific dog that will guide me through the places and symbols of racism - a dog that comes from way up North, from a Siberia inhabited by the nomadic Sami people. A dog that does not attack strangers but joyfully welcomes them, just as the stranger was welcomed by the nomads into their tents so that he might survive the frost; this dog was also used as a covering to keep the newcomer warm. It is not a legend, and his descendants offer welcome to anyone who crosses the threshold of their territory. Hence we have dogs that are accepting of others.

Having said this, let us look at the imagination at work in the construction of the image of the enemy on the part of someone different, from a classic example taken from science fiction literature: *Sentry* by Fredric Brown (1954):

«He was wet and muddy and hungry and cold, and the day was raw with a high wind that hurt his eyes. (...). He stayed alert, gun ready. Fifty thousand light-years from home (...). And then he saw one of them crawling toward him. He drew a bead and fired. The alien made that strange horrible sound they all make, then lay still. He shuddered at the sound and sight of the alien lying there. One ought to be able to get used to them after a while, but he’d never been able to. Such repulsive creatures they were, with only two arms and two legs, ghastly white skins and no scales.»

And Dino Buzzati (1940), in *Il deserto dei Tartari* [*The Tartar Steppe*], describes the daily, militarily perfect life of the garrison, which awaits the enemy that will emerge from the desert. It is pointless to give an account of the scouting party dispatched to find the enemy but cannot: the principle of reality cannot prevail over fantasy, and the illusion keeps the fortress alive. How much need of an “enemy” lies inside us, sheltered within to nourish our hidden paranoia that often waits only for those conditions, which will be favourable to the manifestation of its scope and size?

Normal personalities: today we speak of “normotic personalities” to describe a normality that is offspring to a sense that the certainties of daily life are being threatened by anyone different, by “deviants”. A shared normality that produces individual and collective fortresses, defended with violence and tough to vanquish.

Violence – that of the explicitly violent and that of the ordinary man. In 1963 Hannah Arendt thought that Eichmann’s violence was that of the ordinary man. For her, Eichmann was neither mad nor a monster, but an ordinary man, a scrupulous and quite capable bureaucrat. Thus she shows how easy it is to become an Eichmann and, as a result, demonstrates the individual and collective necessity of questioning ourselves. An example: the brutal vendetta of the “average little man” in Alberto Sordi’s masterpiece, *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* [*A Very Small Petit Bourgeois*].

A second question is the one that Gad Lerner put to the audience, commenting on the video of Marco Paolini *Ausmerzen* broadcast on La7 TV channel the 26th of January, 2011: “What would you have done?”²

² As stated by Marco Paolini (2012) in the text *Ausmerzen. Vite indegne di essere vissute*, published by Einaudi: «Racism is always the rediscovery of something that has already been; it is an old idea but at the end of the Nineteenth century it gets strengthened. It finds a rational confirmation in science.» (p. 16).

Fear thy neighbour as thyself (Parin, Morgenthaler & Parin-Matthey, 1971) is the title of an account of an ethno-psychoanalytical inquiry, undertaken by three of my colleagues from Zurich, on the warrior tribe of the Agni of Central Africa. In this place, one is brought up from early childhood, with the idea of the omnipresent enemy. Your neighbour can also be your enemy. It is not necessary however to go that far; just attend a condominium meeting to have such an experience, without however falling into the logic of “we are all killers” evading individual and collective responsibilities. Primo Levi (1986) writes in *I sommersi e i salvati* [*The Drowned and the Saved*]: «The distinction (...) good faith / bad faith is optimistic and smacks of the Enlightenment. (...) Initial bad faith has become good faith. The silent transition from falsehood to self-deception is useful.» (pp. 26-27). Speaking however of the enormous pressure that a totalitarian state can exercise over the individual by means of propaganda, the shutting down of the pluralism of information, and the use of terror, Levi asserts that it is inadmissible to suppose that this pressure is irresistible.

Social psychologists have conducted many experiments on the study of the power of suggestion and group pressure. Such as the one demonstrating that Jewish children saw as larger the coin with the swastika, even though it was of the same size as the coin compared to it. Or the experiment of the fixed point of light in a dark room. The group was privy to the information that it was about a single fixed point of light, however the experiment's subject was not. At the beginning everyone said that the light was fixed. Then the number of those stating that it was moving began to grow. Few were able to resist the group pressure. A fraction persisted in maintaining that the point of light remained fixed. The experiment was organized for the purpose of studying the tendency towards conformity.

I will give a milder example of the traces of invisible racism that unexpectedly surface. A little boy in the nineteen thirties who had a tendency to devour *Perugina* chocolates, kept the tin foil because, with every kilogram ball sent off to the *Missions*, a black infant got baptized. With so many children baptized, he considered himself extremely good. One day, as an adult, he confessed to me an old terror that these baptized children might come back to him and reclaim the chocolate. O the good woman, great benefactress, so bountiful with long-distance adoptions, who conscientiously inquires into the certainty of anonymity. And what if they then come after me?

2. *The stranger*

Anxiety towards strangers has been observed in eight-month-old children. This phenomenon has been interpreted as the child's reaction to the perception that the stranger's face does not correspond to the memory of his mother and therefore causes fear. It has become a universal category and today many psychoanalysts still consider it to be an intrinsic part of human nature. From this point of view, the anxiety of the eighth-month-old towards strangers would be the prototype for the fear of strangers, which in adulthood manifests itself as xenophobia: hence all individuals would be prone to racism.

Other theories consider that only children who have been mistreated and abused will later on develop xenophobic attitudes through the identification with the aggressor (Ferenczi, 1932; A. Freud, 1936, cap. 9), theories that lead to the assumption that only specific people can become racist.

The idea that anxiety towards strangers is inherent to the human species has been disproved both on the basis of observation and from clinical studies. And vice versa, it has been theorized that this is associated with the basic trust the child feels in his relationship with the mother: the more solid the base, the less fearful the person. In fact certain behaviours have been observed in little children: interest and curiosity in the stranger's face, which they look at, smell, and try to touch. It has been discovered that even the father has his role. From having been defined as the prototype of future hatred towards strangers, he, on the contrary, has come to be considered as a temporary and

important vehicle towards the stranger. Thus only a child with an insecure relationship with the mother and with a generally absent father will develop anxiety towards a stranger, a mental state that will lead to racism.

The German psychoanalyst Horst-Eberhard Richter (1962, 1992), has underlined not only the primary phenomenon linked to fear and aggressivity towards the newcomer, but also the phenomenon of emotional attraction. In man's development, this would be a specific human urge, in contrast to the primary phenomenon of aggressivity, and consequently of xenophobia. It has been observed, moreover, that the child easily imitates the fears and aversions of the adult who raises him, even through subliminal communicative channels.

An ethno-psychoanalyst considers the encounter with the stranger an important vehicle towards socialization. With this in mind, it becomes clear how complex may be the child's encounter with the figure of the stranger: whether he is seen in a positive or negative light, and how much this depends on the child's experience, on those who raise him, and upon the culture in which he lives.

Certainly anxiety towards strangers is neither a universal nor a natural phenomenon, as suggested by many psychoanalysts.

3. An autobiographical memory

To this purpose, I would like to quote an excerpt from the address I gave on the 22nd of March, 2005, at the previous seminar cycle on "The Adventure", where I relate a personal experience:

«At the beginning of the war, the face of the stranger had for me the appearance of the cruelty and violence of the Gestapo. My memory is devoid of specific recollections: the stories have been recounted to me by my parents. My memory without memories has become a recent area of study in neuro-psychology. For me, it is part of my family narrative.

In April 1941, I was little more than six-months-old and in the middle of a war. In those days, the Germans were occupying the Northwest zone of Slovenia. We were living in Ljutomer. The city was on the limits between the zone occupied by the Germans and the one occupied by the Hungarians. We were among the first to be expelled: an example of a preventive operation with regard to anglophiles (my father, an anti-fascist, was born in Italy and in the first years of the thirties emigrated from Italy for political reasons). Everything took place at night. The Germans of the SS entered our home. They divided us: my father with my three-year-old brother in a truck, my mother with me in another. We met up on a train. It was a convoy of unknown destination. It was the first convoy full of people like us to be interned, isolated, eliminated. As far as the Germans were concerned, the Slovenians were meant to disappear according to a genocidal policy of ethnic cleansing that can be briefly summed up in this sentence of Goebbels: «they are not to be killed, they must do forced labour until they die of exhaustion». Besides my brother and me, there was another ten-month-old. The train was moving in a South-easterly direction, towards the Balkans. We were under the control of German soldiers. After a few hours the train stopped and remained at a standstill in the city of Sisak for a long period of time.

No one knew why. The German machine guns prevented any attempt at escape. There was nothing to do but wait. There were those who pondered the possibilities, those who tried to invent the future, those who went and found a cup of chamomile tea for me, those who tried to contact friends and relatives, those who recounted the horrifying events that took place in Poland.

Everyone was trying to find a way not to be engulfed by fear. No one reacted with resignation. No one panicked. These were just people, many of whom would some day make important contributions to the struggle for Liberation.

After a few hours the train began to move again – in the opposite direction, no longer towards the South-east but towards the South-west. We were going back. The mysterious fog of destination and destiny was getting thicker. The train arrived at Zagreb station and stopped on an old unused track. Croatia was a German ally and the train was now under the control of Croatian soldiers. They made us get down. One of their officers said: «They aren't Serbs. They're Slovenians. They have to disappear within twenty-four hours from Croatia: let them go. »

I don't know why the story took this turn. Given that secretly fleeing Croatia with two children was quite a risky enterprise, my father asked a Croatian officer to take me with him in order to save my life. He explained to him that they (my father, my mother, and my brother who was already walking well) would be trying to get help from some relatives that were living in an area a few kilometres from the station. He added as well that these close relatives of my mother were in contact with the *ustascia*, the Croatian Fascists of Ante Pavelic, and that he doubted whether they would want to come to our aid. The officer did not know what to do with me. Perhaps something in his heart still contained a modicum of compassion, or else a part of his brain saw it as strategically auspicious, but whichever it was, he was moved to help us. He himself got in touch with our notoriously pro-German uncle. Someone came to pick us up in a car with Zagreb license plates and took us to the basement of this uncle's house, urging us to be as quiet as possible and to disappear as soon as possible. In the luxurious home above us, they were toasting the successful German occupation. My parents held my mouth closed so that I wouldn't cry: any and every noise could betray our presence and put our lives in jeopardy. In the meantime our Slovenian relatives had been informed of what was happening. In a rented car with an experienced driver, an uncle of mine, already associated with the Slovenian resistance, came to Zagreb during the night, after twenty-four hours had passed, and took us on an incredible ride back to Ljubljana, already occupied by Italy on the 9th of April. Forty minutes later, they closed the border between Croatia and Slovenia. In Ljubljana we were welcomed by my maternal grandmother. That is where I spent the entire war.

They told me other stories, stories that gradually became memories. One of the first: someone taught me to distinguish the good planes (those of the Allies) from the bad (those that dropped the bombs). Another was running from the sound of the sirens to get to the shelters. I knew the names of Auschwitz and Dachau. And another: I remember about my father in prison among those condemned to death and then he was freed. He was subjected to a fake execution. He remarked about his imprisonment in Gonars (Italy): «*Cossa te vol, rispetto i campi tedeschi... da noi solo calci in cul e un po' de olio de ricino!*». (trans.: "Whaddya want? Compared to the German camps.... here only kicks in the ass and a little castor oil!") But, above all, I remember my unquestioning expectation of the end of the war, of liberation, of the victory over Nazism, which united everyone and of which we all were confident. Like everyone born during the war, I found it difficult to imagine this end of the war, given that the beginning had only been described to me. And then, I knew nothing except the precariousness of life during war. One day, what I had been expecting and trying to imagine for a long time finally happened. It was morning. All was silent. We children had been told that it was dangerous to show oneself at the window because there were still some retreating German soldiers around. We heard no noise. And then came the sound of horses' hooves from the street where we lived. Someone shouted: «The first partisan is here! The Germans are gone! ». The other children and I started to hang little flags with a red star from the windows. We had been preparing them for quite a while, hidden in the cellar. I remember that something had changed inside of me. I felt strong, as strong as a lion, even if I was only four years old, and of delicate constitution.» (Bolko, 2005, pp. 182-183).

4. The creation of race³

A stranger knocks at the door. Who is it? A young man of colour, an old white man, a child...? Who opens the door? Where is the house? A stranger in the abstract does not exist, insofar as he always has a specific body, situated in a particular context. Diversity does not naturally provoke a response of fear. The variations are linked to the meanings attributed to or associated with these differences. We are not ever only strangers to each other. We are simultaneously familiar to each other as well. For example, at this moment do you consider me similar or different from you? On the basis of what? Race, culture, ethnicity, gender or other categories? If I am similar, where did you put the differences? And if you consider me different, where did you put the similarities? In other words, when we include, we also have to exclude at the same time. The impression of total difference or otherness between us is an illusion. Why do we experience one encounter on the basis of similarities and another on the basis of differences?

³ Farhad Dalal (2002), author of a book published in England on the process of "racization" from the perspective of radical group analysis, in 2006 published an interesting article in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*. I herein explain a few of her key ideas with my own interpolations.

We have to remember that differences are brought into play in order to differentiate between those that have and those that must not have. All societies and cultures are not homogeneous but are structures built upon relationships of power, in which different groupings, each with their own beliefs, compete with each other. Because of the fluidity of borders, there is the risk of one species disintegrating our psychosocial identities; so constant work is necessary to maintain and protect “us”.

How? Sociologists have shown that when the mind uses a particular characteristic to create groupings, it engages in a form of hallucination, in which the members of a group appear more similar and more different than they really are. This cognitive hallucination is necessary to form categories. This however is not enough to maintain the solidity of “us”. Thus the emotions intervene to maintain the distance between us and the variety of other human types. This added mechanism is one in which “they” are denigrated while “we” are idealized (this mechanism is based on defense processes well-known to psychoanalysis, which uses for example the concepts of “partial objects” and “split objects”). The good are only good, the bad only bad. This gives an impression of a dichotomy between us and others - a dichotomy with an abyss in between. This process has created the illusion of human types. The most prodigious typological illusion is that which we call racism.

White and black are adjectives long used to define races, cultures, ethnicities. We discover that these words were at first relatively neutral. During the last millennium, the two terms developed new associations and meanings – a positive one for white and a negative one for black. This took place in two periods: in the Middle Ages (at the time of the Crusades) and from the Sixteenth century on, with the coming of imperialism. As Farhad Dalal (2002) has noted, the association of black with dirty begins in the Fourteenth century, with death in the Fifteenth, with immorality in 1552, and with the devil in 1581. Even the negative emotions (such as depression) come to be defined as black from the Sixteenth century on. The addition of black to something gives it a negative value, compelling us to reject it; on the other hand, that which is permeated with negativity is perceived as naturally containing something black. These terms are used in order to include and to exclude. The falseness of the race category had to appeal to something more substantial and visible to sustain itself. So naming people as black or white is not so much descriptive, as it is a process of “alterization” and “racization”. Voltaire (1756) has written that «nature» has made it so that « Negroes are the slaves of other men » (p. 1082, *Essai sur les mœurs...*) because of their mental inferiority, of which the colour of their skin would be the unmistakable sign. The name Negro was given by white men, but there have been many discussions about whether, for example, the Irish and the people of Southern Europe could all belong to the category of whites. We ourselves – Italians – have long been considered people “of colour”. A court sentence in the United States in 1992 absolved a black man accused of rape because the victim of violence was Italian, therefore non – white.

As Farhad Dalal argues (2002), we live in a “racized” world. This means that in the process of developing, each one of us becomes imbued with this social order, so that even our psyche is racized. By definition the other is not truly the other but a part of oneself. One recognizes in the other the Self and the Self in the other. Racism transforms the other into an alien-other. The racized other is ejected from the human universe by means of the removal of similarities and the projection of the unacceptable parts of the Self.

Jaspers (1946) accuses his fellow countrymen in this way: «The fact that we Germans are still alive, this is our guilt, inasmuch as this guilt shatters the principle of solidarity, from the moment that it is based upon the recognition of oneself in the other. » (p. 26).

5. Fear and Hatred

Xenophobia means fear, rejection, hatred of the stranger. There are two types of xenophobia: the first is based on *fear* of the stranger, the second on *hatred* of the stranger. In both, projection plays a significant role (Freud, 1910).

Fear. In phobic xenophobia, the unaccepted elements of the self, especially the aggressive ones, get removed, projected and attributed to the stranger. They are completely excluded from one's experience. They are external. In order to feel relatively free of fear, the phobic person only needs to avoid the outsider (as in the warning: "stay away from immigrants from outside the EU"). This can be classified as *invisible racism*.

Hatred. This is xenophobia linked to a narcissistic personality disorder. The central anxiety of xenophobes is the fantasy of being dominated, abused, tortured, and destroyed by the other (often this type of personality is found among the battered and abused). In these people the projection of one's own hatred doesn't work. Their aggressive impulses are not totally eliminated and the projection towards the other stranger represents only partial relief. This causes a growing need to constantly control the other, towards whom the aggressive impulses have been projected. The enemy is sought out with aggressive and persecutory intent. The enemy must be punished or absolutely destroyed insofar as the xenophobic residue remains identified with the aggressive impulses, even though they have been projected. The total demonization of the other, of the adversary, becomes the justification for a hatred that is rationalized as mere counter-aggression. Out of this comes a feverish transformation of reality. The concept of the enemy assumes paranoid components, becoming a fixed idea or an ideology fanatically defended against all doubt. The other, the outsider, is totally invisible, in that he has been cloaked in projections and stereotypes.

So, too, the *Invisible Man* of Ralph Ellison's novel (1952): «I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations – indeed, everything and anything except me. » (p. 3).

6. Nazi crimes

In order to understand the motives that cause certain individuals to take part in slaughters, it is necessary to analyze the psychological and social factors that determine their transformation into assassins. Browning (1992) singles out the following factors:

- The habit of killing, prompted by the initial horror.
- Careerism.
- Conformity to the group.
- Deference for authority.

According to Bohleber (1997), who effectively summarizes the literature on the subject, the image of the Jew under National Socialism was absolutely devoid of individual characteristics. The Jew had become a categorical figure representing "Evil" from which the German nation had to free itself and Hitler represented the saviour.

Biographical testimony has shown the powerful influence that ideology and indoctrination have exerted over criminals brought up in a fictitious world. Anti-Semitic stereotypes are ever-present to shape perception. The stereotype of the parasite transformed the Jew into the parasite, in a place where metaphor and the symbolism of the word had lost all meaning. Thus the Jew had to be killed for the dangerous animal that he was.

What is unique about this killing on the grand scale? It was the search for the last Jew to be killed. Each murder in the concentration camps brought them that much closer to the last one. In order to comprehend this slaughter we must reference the psychological process of split personality and the denial of reality.

The national ideology of renewal and purification, the blind faith of the German community, the anti-Semitic *ethos*, and the logic of extermination were the components of a total ideology that was imprinted onto the criminals. They created an “omnipotent Self of Auschwitz” that exorcised all forms of compassion (identification with the victims) and that, combined with their own sadism, managed to protect them from pain and their own vulnerability and susceptibility to suffering and death.

Bollas (1992) describes the “Fascist mental state”, and maintains that the creation of an artificial Self, by means of the elimination of vital and sensitive elements, is developed through a total ideology that is no longer open to experience, that does not allow for new learning, but instead immunizes the person against anything new. Brain functions stop being complex and are sustained by ideological clichés, political slogans, catchphrases, and other symbols. This twisted person is a willing object, in which all humanity is negated and comes one step closer to being annihilated altogether. The outcome is a sense of grandiosity and a frenzied narcissism. By killing the Jew, the Nazi criminal convinces himself that he is a person of value. All guilt has been denied and in its place we have this declaration: «What you do for your people and your nation is always *well done*»⁴.

But the consciousness of having committed crimes did not disappear and later took the form of persecution. At the end of the war, the voices that feared the revenge of the murdered began to multiply. In a letter of a German non-commissioned officer of August 1944, we read that if the war were to be lost «The Jews will hurl themselves against us and exterminate all that is German: it would be a horrible and dreadful massacre » (O.D., cit. in: Manoschek, 1995, p. 74).

Carl Schneider – a psychiatrist – was director of the Heidelberg University Clinic during the Nazi period from 1933 to 1946. In his treatise, entitled *Clinical Psychopathology*, written in 1946, he wrote of the necessity for patients of mental hospitals to work so as not to weigh on the economy of the state. He scorned the debate on art and madness in vogue in Germany in those years. He invented a cure: he asked the patients to draw something, and when they handed him the paper, he tore it up before their very eyes to show the absurdity of the product of their madness. With a red and a blue pencil, he signed the charts of patients that “were not fit to live” and of those, which were to be allowed to continue working. In 1946 Carl Schneider committed suicide in prison. His “life worth living” had evidently commanded him to die and join his victims.

7. Truth and Ideology

In Zanichelli’s most recent encyclopedia (Edigeo, 2007) we find these words in reference to race:

«(...) genetic research, recognizing a too scanty variability in the genetic patrimony of the different populations, has deprived the term *race* of any validity». Alberto Burgio (2010) has therefore observed that if the concept of race is devoid of any scientific basis, then racism, by the same token, is totally unfounded, and the anthropological hierarchies inherent in it are also total mystifications and mythologies. However the concept of race continues to this day to base itself on the concept of natural roots, so much so that the fundamental mechanism behind racism is the creation of inferiorized stereotypes on naturalistic grounds. Given that the theoretical principle is fallacious, one would expect that racism would fail and have no following. This has not happened. The reason lies in the relationship between truth and the effectiveness of an ideological thesis. The ideology doesn’t work because of its truthfulness – Burgio argues – it works because of its ability to respond to needs and to satisfy urges.

⁴ This motto decorated the office wall of a member of the *Einsatzgruppe* wing in Poland. He photographed the sign and attached the snapshot into a photo album beside reproductions of piles of corpses, executions, and hangings, in which he himself took part (Reinfarth & Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 1995, p. 484).

Freud (1921) has written that in crowds, men obey passions rather than interests or reason. Hannah Arendt (1951) writes: «Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction » (p. 470). And again: «The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience), and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist » (*ibid.*, p. 474).

8. *Another autobiographical memory*

As I have already said, my family lived out the war in Ljubljana, which was first occupied by the Italian army, and subsequently by the Germans. My father returned to Italy at the end of the war, and we – my mother, my brother, and I – joined him two years later. The communist government expropriated all of my family's property. I, on the other hand, danced the *Kolo* around the bonfires in the streets. It was the Yugoslavian national dance, extolling Tito. In 1947 with a legitimate passport in hand, we joined my father in Trieste. We were part of the leftist Slovenian minority (specifically the group known as the “*titini*”- “little followers of Tito”) and there I spent my childhood and adolescence. Even if during the war, I did not understand what racism was, I learned about it in Trieste. We spoke our language softly. On our mailbox we often found a decal with a skull. We were racized, considered inferior. Anti-Slavic racism labelled such people: «devoid of any moral value» and «incapable of original actions», in the words of Attilio Tamaro, and «elements without civility, without culture, without history», as written by Timeus, *alias* Ruggero Fauro (see Collotti, 1999).

The daughter of an Italian father and a Slovenian mother, I was successful both at school and in my piano studies. However, since I felt that stamp of my dissimilarity to others, I doubted my abilities, and continually compared myself to my fellow students. I have a vivid memory of the Fascists of Trieste shouting: “down with the slaves!” (however pronouncing the word “*sciavi*” and not “*schlavi*”) beneath the windows of the Slovenian high school where we had written an essay on peace and solidarity among all peoples. When we came out of school, we were harassed in the streets. When I finished high school, I decided to study medicine in Bologna. Here, to my complete and utter surprise, I found myself respected. I was part of the off-campus student group. We were appreciated by the landlords because we were from the North, meaning well-brought up and polite. I was also well-received by my fellow students, because, at the time, being left-wing was held in high esteem. It was the Southerners that paid the price of racism. However there was a difference between male and female, because the boys who studied medicine were considered a good catch for the landlords' daughters. Even so, those same Italians, who in Trieste demeaned non-Italians, in Bologna could be discriminated against by the locals.

After graduation, I went to Switzerland to do my psychiatric and psychoanalytical specialization. I was still an Italian citizen and as such I became an assistant at the Burghölzli Psychiatric Clinic of Zurich, with a multicultural group of colleagues hailing from Australia, the Philippines, Germany, Yugoslavia, the United States, etc. In Zurich, in those years, there was discrimination against the poor Italian, Greek, and Turkish immigrants who worked as labourers. I, however, represented the face of power, being a doctor and an assistant at one of the most prestigious psychiatric clinics in Europe. I was entrusted with Italian and Yugoslavian patients, given that I knew both languages well. I did learn, on the other hand, what it means to be considered inferior, and how extensively contempt can trigger mental disturbances. A Bosnian was hospitalized because, having got off the train, for the first time, in the new country, he had repeatedly kicked and spit at the door of the tram, losing his temper and shouting incomprehensible things. Based on the hypothesis that he was suffering from a psychotic delirium, he was given drugs, after the police had brought him to the psychiatric hospital. That weekend I was not on duty. No one understood his language and the administering of anti-psychotics was kept up for two days. On the Monday of my return, during the interview, the issue got clarified: he did not know that in Zurich, you had to push a button to open the tram doors. When they wouldn't open for him, he thought that he was being denied entry. The following day he was discharged.

A few months ago I was in Trieste to meet my old high school friends. I spied on the street a poster with the photo of Boris Pahor, the Slovenian writer, and famous author of the novel *Necropolis* (1967). A swastika was sketched on his face. Dismayed, I asked my friend with whom I was walking: “But how is this possible?” And she answered: “Don't you remember that we're slaves (*sciavi*)?” Some things have changed but others have not. I have had the experience of playing the parts of both the weak and the strong.

For years I have been working as a psychoanalyst in Bologna and I find myself being “racized” by my patients in those moments of so-called “negative transference”. These patients employ a multiplicity of fantasies concerning my origins, given that my surname contains a K. If I am fantasized as Swiss, I am considered rich, with money in Swiss banks; if German, rigid and racist; if Jewish, shrewd and small-minded; if Slav, they are amazed that I am a psychiatrist at all.

With my history, I can easily respond to Alessandro Castellari’s call to “look inside oneself” in order to “find the racism within us” and to Gad Lerner’s question “what would you have done?”

In 1947, newly-arrived in Trieste, a territory still divided into zone A and zone B, I was allowed, being a child, to meet my aunt Carla in the no-man’s land between the borders. My aunt met me with a basket of strawberries from her garden. They were the first in what seemed an eternity. They were grown two steps from where her daughter Sonia, a fifteen-year-old had been killed while running to the square to celebrate the Liberation in 1945. Just as in the concentration camps where the last Jew was killed in a war already over and lost, a German, perhaps the last one attempting escape, killed her with his only remaining bullet. Then he threw away the gun, which was found empty next to the girl’s body. A nursery school in Nova Gorica, the Slovenian part of Gorizia, has been dedicated in her name. And in the square there is a monument to my cousin Boris, her older brother, a national hero, another victim of Nazism. I know them only through stories and they are a part of my memory. Even if I assert that I am not a racist and I claim to know what I would have done, I continue to pose those questions to myself time and again, out of the fear that my conscience has fallen asleep.

The title of this cycle of seminars is “On the road”. On these roads we have met each other, invited to gather by Stefano Benni, Alessandro Castellari and others who have quietly brought together many wayfarers whose values include the dignity of the individual and the struggle against prejudice, embracing history and memory, in the hope of mutual affinity. A group in which one can take part without belonging, in which black is a colour/non-colour, the base mixture that cherishes the entire colour palate. Perhaps, thanks to them, we will all know a little better what to do at our next encounter. Thank-you Stefano, Alessandro, and all of you.

Riassunto: L’Autrice riflette sul problema del razzismo e della paura dell’estraneo lungo diverse prospettive di analisi. Adopera innanzitutto concetti classici dell’ambito psicoanalitico (proiezione, identificazione con l’aggressore, ecc.), accanto a concezioni etnopsicoanalitiche e sociologiche. Prosegue la riflessione, secondo la metodologia dell’egostoria, col racconto della esperienza personale e della propria famiglia, durante la seconda guerra mondiale, nei territori della ex-Jugoslavia durante l’occupazione italiana e successivamente tedesca, e, dopo il 1947, quale appartenente alla minoranza slovena a Trieste. Di padre italiano, antifascista fuoruscito in Jugoslavia, e di madre slovena, le vicende raccontate si riferiscono all’infanzia e all’adolescenza, nel confronto con l’esperienza della diversità. La storia del passato permette considerazioni sociopsicologiche e politiche sul fenomeno attuale del razzismo che si ripropone in Italia nelle forme della paura e dell’avversione nei confronti dei migranti. Viene tentata una spiegazione di quella paura e di quella avversione come conseguenza del fatto che i gruppi sociali si confermano nella propria identità sfruttando la disposizione dell’essere umano a crearsi un nemico. L’Autrice non accetta la tesi di matrice psicoanalitica della naturalità di questa avversione e cerca una spiegazione nel fatto che l’altro sia costruito come nemico grazie a processi psicologici quali "allucinazione cognitiva" e "illusione tipologica" che, promossi e favoriti da sistemi totalitari, rendono l’altro invisibile sia come altro che come essere umano e immunizzano nei confronti del nuovo. L’approfondimento della conoscenza di questi processi è l’antidoto contro la perdita e l’offuscamento della memoria che permette il riemergere del razzismo di massa o comunque di ampie collettività, nonché la strada da seguire per l’immunità dal razzismo invisibile che può albergare in ciascuno di noi. (Questo testo è una relazione dal titolo “Aprirsi e chiudersi agli altri: patologie di confine”, tenuta il 14 marzo 2011 all’interno del ciclo di seminari “Sulla strada”, coordinato da Stefano Benni e Alessandro Castellari presso la *Pluriversità dell’Immaginazione “Grazia Cherchi”* di Bologna).

Parole chiave: razzismo, nazismo, proiezione, conflitto etnico, paura del diverso

References

- Arendt H. (1951). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books (Italian translation: *Le origini del totalitarismo*. Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1967).
- Arendt H. (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press (Italian translation: *La banalità del male. Eichmann a Gerusalemme*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964).
- Bohleber W. (1997). La costruzione di comunità immaginarie e l’immagine degli Ebrei. Fattori inconsci dell’antisemitismo in Germania. *Psyche*, 1997, 6. In: Bertani M. & Ranchetti M., editors, *La psicoanalisi e l’antisemitismo*. Turin: Einaudi, 1999, pp. 133-171.

- Bolko M. (2005). Fine dell'avventura? (Paper read on March 22, 2005, at the series of seminars titled "L'avventura" [The Adventure] directed by Stefano Benni and sponsored by the *Associazione Culturale Italo Calvino* of Bologna). In: Napolitano A. (Servizi culturali del Quartiere Porto del Comune di Bologna), editor, *Pagine per la Riforma. Forme & Figure della Riforma*, 2007, IV, 10/11 (February-September), no. 2: 180-188.
- Bollas C. (1992). *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis & Self Experience*. New York: Hill & Wang (Italian translation: *Essere un carattere: psicoanalisi ed esperienza del Sé*. Rome: Borla, 1995).
- Brown F. (1954). *The Sentinel* (Italian translation: *La sentinella*. In: Various Authors, *Le meraviglie del possibile*. Torino: Einaudi, 1959; Also in: *La sentinella e altri racconti*. Turin: Einaudi, 2004).
- Browning C.R. (1992). *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York: HarperCollins (Italian translation: *Uomini comuni: polizia tedesca e soluzione finale in Polonia*. Turin: Einaudi, 1995).
- Burgio A. (2010). *Nonostante Auschwitz. Il "ritorno" del razzismo in Europa*. Rome: DeriveApprodi.
- Buzzati D. (1940). *Il deserto dei tartari*. Milan: Rizzoli.
- Collotti E. (1999). Sul razzismo antislavo. In: Burgio A., editor, *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia dal 1870 al 1945*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999, pp. 33-61.
- Dalal F. (2002). *Race, Colour and the Processes of Racialization: New Perspectives from Group Analysis, Psychoanalysis and Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Dalal F. (2006). Racism: Processes of Detachment, Dehumanization, and Hatred. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 75: 131-161.
- Edigeo, a cura di (2007). *La Zanichelli. Grande Enciclopedia di Arti, Scienze, Tecniche, Lettere, Storia, Filosofia, Geografia, Musica, Diritto, Economia, Sport e Spettacolo*. Milan: Zanichelli.
- Ellison R. (1952). *Invisible Man*. New York: Random House (Italian translation: *Uomo invisibile*. Turin: Einaudi, 1956).
- Ferenczi S. (1932). *Diario clinico. Gennaio-Ottobre 1932* (edited by Dupont J. & Carloni G.). Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 1988 (ed. or.: *The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi* [Dupont J., editor]. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- Freud A. (1936). *Das Ich und die Abwehrmechanismen*. Wien: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag (trad. ingl.: *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*. New York: International Universities Press, 1946; Italian translation: *L'Io e i meccanismi di difesa*. Florence: Martinelli, 1967. Also in: *Scritti, Vol 1: 1922-1943*. Turin: Boringhieri, 1978).
- Freud S. (1910 [1911]). Psychoanalytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (*dementia paranoides*). *S.E.*, 12: 3-84 (Italian translation: Osservazioni psicoanalitiche su un caso di paranoia (*dementia paranoides*) descritto autobiograficamente [Caso clinico del presidente Schreber]. *Opere*, 6: 335-406. Turin: Boringhieri, 1974).
- Freud S. (1921). Group psychology and the analysis of the ego. *S.E.*, 18: 69-145 (Italian translation: Psicologia delle masse e analisi dell'Io. *Opere*, 9: 259-330. Turin: Boringhieri, 1977).
- Jaspers K. (1946). *Die Schuldfrage*. Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider (Italian translation: *La colpa della Germania*. Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1947; *La questione della colpa. Sulla responsabilità politica della Germania*. Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 1996).
- Levi P. (1986). *I sommersi e i salvati*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Manoschek W., editor (1995). *"Es gibt nur eines für das Judentum: Vernichtung": Das Judenbild in deutschen Soldatenbriefen 1939-1944*. Hamburg: Hamburger.
- Monicelli M., director (1977). *Un borghese piccolo piccolo*. A movie produced by Luigi and Aurelio De Laurentiis, with Alberto Sordi.
- Pahor B. (1967). *Nekropola*. Maribor (Trieste): Obzorja (Italian translation: *Necropoli*. San Canzian d'Isonzo [Gorizia]: Consorzio Culturale del Monfalconese, 1997).
- Paolini M. (2012). *Ausmerzen. Vite indegne di essere vissute*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Parin P., Morgenthaler F. & Parin-Matthèy G. (1971). *Furchte deinen Nächsten wie dich selbst*. Frankfurt a.M.: Surkamp Verlag (Italian translation: *Temi il prossimo tuo come te stesso. Psicoanalisi e società: il modello degli Agni nell'Africa occidentale*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982).
- Perozziello F. (2011). A Carl Schneider e ai suoi solerti colleghi. *Psichiatri Oggi*, 1: 12-13.
- Reinfarth D. & Schmidt-Linsenhoff V. (1995). Die Kamera der Täter. In: Herr H. & Naumann K., editors, *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-44*. Hamburg: Hamburger, 1995, pp. 479-502.
- Richter H.-E. (1962). *Eltern, Kind und Neurose. Die Rolle des Kindes in der Familie/Psychoanalyse der kindlichen Rolle*. Hamburg: Rowohlt (Italian translation: *Genitori, figli e nevrosi*. Milan: Il Formichiere, 1975).
- Richter H.-E. (1992). *Umgang mit Angst*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe (Italian translation: *Convivere con l'ansia*. Milan: Rusconi, 1993).
- Schneider K. (1946). *Klinische Psychopathologie*. Stuttgart: Thieme, 1971, 9th edition (Italian translation: *Psicopatologia clinica*. Rome: Città Nuova, 1983).
- Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet] (1756). *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*. Internet: <http://www.voltaire-integral.com/Html/00Table/11.html> (Italian translation: *Saggio sui costumi e sullo spirito delle nazioni e sui principali fatti della storia da Carlomagno sino a Luigi 13*. Milan: Edizioni per il Club del Libro, 1966).