Refugees: a confusion of tongues

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A sharp contrast

In 1956, seven thousand Hungarian refugees were welcomed to Belgian families and found work in the coming months (DS, 2016). This is a sharp contrast with the attitude towards the thousand of Syrian refugees that came to Belgium recently. This is a small number compared to Turkey, which has millions of refugees. When arriving in the harbour, the belongings of some of them were dumped as garbage after a horrible trip of thousands of kilometres, having survived the desert, the sea, and the long walk in hunger and pain. A Belgian governor even doubted whether it was wise for the local citizens to give them food, because in his mind they could find our country too attractive. Alongside the active welcoming by a group of dedicated citizens, there was a public protest by others. The contrast with 1956 is amazing, given that the Hungarians were a mixed group, which included homeless people, people with criminal records. Three of the refugees committed a robbery and murder in a small Belgian village. The Syrians refugees by contrast are middle class people who could afford to pay for their miserable passage to Europe. How can we explain this different attitude?

Anxiety

The difference between the Hungarian refugee problem in the 1950s and the contemporary Syrian problem is that in 1956 there was a common enemy: communism. People could identify with the refugees and saw them as heroes. Moreover there was a possibility of creating jobs. Now we are under the strain of the bomb attacks and the killings in Madrid, Paris, Brussels, Istanbul, Nice with a permanent uncertainty about the next attack. For the first time we get used to soldiers and army trucks in the streets and rigorous controls in public spaces.

Anxiety brings splitting as a primary defence mechanism (Menzies-Lyth 1988). Large groups are especially prone to this phenomenon. The Syrian migrants are the victim of the disappearance of a more sophisticated differentiation. Splitting made fundamentalism grew in recent years. On the other side the splitting fuels a front of ultra right (Trump, Erdogan, Le Pen, Netanyao, Poetin). It was politicians who give simple and strong messages, that seemingly create a diminishing of anxiety.

This strategy works, at least for a short term, and at a phantasy level. An illusion is created that brings a feeling of safety for some and for a while. They give the impression of a strong leader who knows what he wants and who protects. This happens not only for populist leaders but also for people promoting ISIS, for example. What do they succeed in realizing in turning rather adapted youth into a jihadi.

Three common important factors are that these Muslim adolescents are looking for an identity, and are marked by a feeling of frustration and anger. Religion seems not to be a causal factor, rather a triggering factor. The Internet and new social media are a strong influencing factor.

Imaginary identity.

What is shown on the Internet are often erotised video clips idealising killing and power, with men on horses and medieval weapons, pictured as martyrs who are promised virgins for their ‘self-sacrifice’. They show a heroic way to deal with anger and frustration and offer an identity. The effect of the
media on identity is strong because it is based on a group effect and because identity itself is a volatile phenomenon. Terrorist attacks also aim to provoke this amplifying effect by the Internet and social media and the resulting panic. Moreover, the times when the role of the media was primarily objective and interpretive is long gone.

Not only terrorists but also the new populist leaders are depending on and playing the media, many of them presenting a kind of masculine power and sexism. We may wonder whether this not a projection of repressed feelings in many middle class men who seem to feel threatened in their identity. Poetin, Erdogan, Trump all have a great deal of phallic show off. They seem to represent unconscious repressed imago’s and dreamlike figures. The spreading of internet and social media messages of this kind is a price we pay for a total freedom of expression.

The herd animal

It is particular and peculiar that the effects of the Internet are largely based on group dynamics. Bion (1961) described how in a group the will of the group to survive overrules individual dynamics and needs. He identified three basic assumptions that rule a group in order to survive, with always one expressed. The current expressed basic assumption is undoubtedly fight-flight, going together with splitting and with the identification of an enemy and a leader who is ready to fight and defend strong ideas. Hatred is the reigning force. This is different from the other two basic assumptions which are in the background: pairing, with love sexuality and new ideas (a bit like how the atmosphere shifted from fight-flight when Bush was elected to pairing when Obama was elected some 9 years ago and now again the fight-flight basic assumption with the election of Trump) and dependency, the warm trust in a leader of which one feels dependent.

According to Bion it is not so much the leader who determines a group, but a leader is chosen who is most in line with the reigning basic assumption. Common sense and individual needs are overruled by the basic assumptions originating in the unconscious drive of the group to survive. Change comes mostly by the changing of reigning basic assumptions, rather than by voluntary acts. We do not know how the manifest basic assumptions will change. Trump, Poetin, Erdogan evoke so many reactions and mass movement that it is surely possible that other basic assumptions will come to the fore.

Globalisation

Indeed, the unrealistic, near-psychotic reaction towards migration cannot go on. First of all, it happened many times in history. Second, the current migration happens within a globalised economy. Companies manufacture their products in low cost countries. Digital processing happens by the Internet in countries like India, without consumers are aware of it. The low cost air companies make travelling cheap and masses of people fly around the world. We see in real time what happens everywhere in the world. People order their products directly from all over the world. It is logical that when threatened by hunger of aggression, people tend to move to countries that they know already.

It is strange then that the only way to react to it is by medieval practices, building walls or fences with barbed wire and with killing. Within the fortresses there are richer societies but with a reversed population pyramid in terms of age. These situations really need and call for younger and active people, the very ones that are kept out.

Migration will increase. Think of the weather changes, for instance. In many countries even
the US, but also China and the USSR, the difference between poor and rich has never been wider. The money-driven society with free markets tends to have this effect of polarising means. The world looks like a runaway train. Never before have there been more means to cope with poverty, and yet it is so present. Another philosophy of life and ways to deal with desire and consumption than the overheated publicity, is already living amongst a younger generation.

**Infinity**

Confronted with this failing system, it is probably more than time to be humble and realise that so much is unknown. Bion (1967) makes a difference between a sane and an insane psychotic, a sane psychotic takes the infinite into consideration and has awe for the unknown. An insane psychotic is imprisoned in his delusion and cannot put it a much larger, infinite, unknowable perspective of ‘Sein, Being’. The consequence is a kind of knowledge that is limited with no place for the unknown. Economists like Keynes were fully aware of this irreducible unpredictability. Unfortunately and especially in the current internet era, truth is what many people believe or can make believe and no longer what is. This so called post-truth is a kind of delusional world in psychoanalytic terms. A wise leader leaves no traces. An omnipotent one wants to be omnipresent and remembered forever, influencing and controlling the perception as much as possible. There is a kind of perversion of democracy: populist leaders make believe that they do what the people want. Popularity counts instead of statesmanship. But democracy is still protected by law. This gives hope and is the difference between democracy and a totalitarian regime. Counter-movements are tolerated and come to the fore.

**The refugee in ourselves**

Coming from a more global point of view to a very concrete confrontation with the human misery of refugees and homeless people, the pain and sympathy of the identification is so huge and intolerable that it can result in an immediate splitting (Menzies-Lyth, 1992). The separation anxiety that gets transmitted by these people who left family and home is huge. It is easier to see them as strangers. But even this offers no excuse: actually we are all strangers to ourselves as Kristeva (1991) pointed out. Indeed, 95% of our psychic functioning is unconscious and unknown and strange.

Yet there is a difference. When loved ones are hurt, we feel this pain ourselves (which is shown on fMRI for instance). Attachment is a powerful drive. To others who are strangers, we do not have this spontaneous uncontrolled reaction. This is probably an evolutionary matter. But it may explain maybe why war criminals for instance, can be loving fathers and spouses and at the same time kill masses of people. Maybe a deep rooted survival instinct is at the base of dehumanisation.

Yet, it is in the meeting with the stranger, the Other—that we can experience what we are and what is human, as Levinas showed us. The strangeness disrupts the veil of comfort and throws us at who we are, at a less differentiated but very essential incommunicado level.

**A confusion of tongues**

Yet, however benevolent these thoughts are, being a refugee is different. Most of them suffered trauma. Trauma brings other states of mind: dissociation, numbness. Trauma is in the body, and attacks the ability to think. Ferenczi (1949) rightly called these two levels, a confusion of tongues.

What drives me to write this is totally different than the traumatic and post-traumatic world of the
refugees. Moreover, the refugees coming here with an expectation of a free country and hope, are confronted with exclusion and negative projections. The denial of the mass trauma of the refugees is frightening. It will need generations to recover from it. Again, the base of this denial is anxiety.

**What has psychoanalysis to do with it?**

The role of psychoanalysis is sobering. Apart from political, sociological, economical and theological studies, psychoanalysis can offer modest help in trying to understand underlying dynamics and help to contain the anxiety. Its major role is probably in showing the denial and splitting. It begs the question whether playing a role in the media as psychoanalysts is important. Another way is in helping the traumatised refugees, but few will have psychoanalytic treatment and our method is too long, too intensive and probably too verbal and not enough body oriented to help in acute phases.

We can be of help maybe in mentally containing the workers in the field, offering a mental space that may help them to go on. We should not forget that the experience with different cultures than our western society is important to psychoanalysis. It is necessary to limiting and dismantling that categorising and authoritarian thinking that needs a constant challenge to keep psychoanalysis alive.

References
DS (De Standaard) 16th of November 2016.