

The Logic of the Stranger

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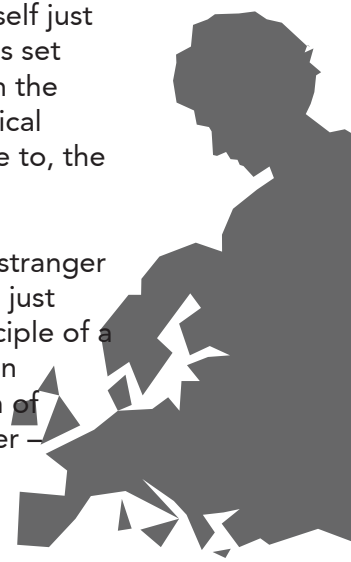
Am I a stranger only to those who are foreign to me? The question about the structure of the reciprocities that would be required by a society of mutual recognition is worth asking. The answer depends – without doubt – more on the question of where one is (*donde uno está*) rather than on the question of where one is from (*es*). I'm a stranger for the other when I am (*estoy*) outside my country – but what is my country? The other is a stranger to me when he leaves his country to live in (*estar*) mine – but what, in fact, is his country? These reciprocities immediately reveal some dissonances: if the other is (*está*) in a country other than his own that is also not mine, then I would not consider him a stranger, especially if I am (*estoy*) not in the country where he is (*está*). If I stay (*estoy*) in a country that is not the country that the other is from, then I will not be considered so foreign by him. The level of extraneousness depends more on the place where I stay (*donde estoy*) than on the place where I come from (*de donde soy*) and am. It is not certain, therefore, that I am always a stranger in the same way for those who are foreign to me. It depends on the place where we (the other and I) stay. Necessarily, being (*ser*) evaporates into staying (*estar*), showing itself as an empty identity, as a lack of being (*falta de ser*), to use a typical Lacanian term. Could one of the names of this empty identity be 'the stranger'?

On the other hand, it is interesting to observe that when two people recognise themselves as being (*estando*) foreign in a country that is not theirs, they are no longer so foreign to each other. If it's the case that they are (*sean*) from the same country, this trait of extraneousness will make them more familiar in a strange way, in a kind of secret solidarity. It is in this strange familiarity that we meet the dimension Freud called the *Unheimlich* – the sinister, the foreign, even if it is familiar. This happens to me – for example – when I encounter traces of the story of my country in a different country. Above all, it was there, in the place of the other, that I recognised that country as mine. On the other hand, what is my country when I recognise it above all in the location of the other – that is, in another country? In this place that is always foreign, I can meet what is more familiar to me. This is where I get to feel a stranger to myself.

At this point, I can be also a stranger to someone who is not a stranger to me. And someone can be a stranger to me without my being a stranger to him. This is the untold, the not mutually recognised extraneousness. It is only when this extraneousness appears as evident that something becomes radically extraneous to me, and I ask myself: when I stay (*estoy*) in the place of the other, in his country, what am I to him?

Firstly, the relation of extraneousness seemed to be, for us, one to one: I'm the stranger only for someone who is a stranger to me. But this appearance conceals in its foundations a deeper reflexive relation, the relation of each element to itself: Am I a stranger to myself? Yes, in the place where I meet, in myself, this other that lives me – in his words and in the way in which he enjoys himself – this other that twitches in me and which, at the same time, we call "unconscious". This is the best term that Freud found to designate what of myself is most foreign to me. It's about a very singular relation in the building of a set of membership because, when applied as a reflexive relation of each element to itself, it excludes this element at the same time that it includes it in the set, suspending the principle of identity: if I am a stranger to myself just as I am a stranger to the other, then I'm not a part of the set of membership because this set defines itself through the trait of "being a stranger to myself". It is in the extent to which the other makes present in me this alterity, the alterity of extraneousness, that the more radical feeling of the stranger appears: a feeling that is both the opposite of, and the correlative to, the identity between being (*ser*) from a place and staying (*estar*) in a place.

On the contrary, if we separate the being (*ser*) from the staying (*estar*), each person is a stranger to himself without necessarily being (*estar*) a stranger to the other – or each one is (*está*) just that to the stranger without necessarily being a stranger for others. It would be the principle of a mutual and generalised recognition, based on the recognition of the stranger that lives in everyone. Without doubt, it is an ideal. But it's a better ideal, no doubt, than any relation of segregation inherent in the social bond based on the identification – more ideal, however – between being (*ser*) and being (*estar*).



At the end of this strange logic of the stranger, it is possible to deduce a trait of our own analytic experience. It's about a way of knowing how to stay (estar) there where I am (soy) not, but also a way of knowing how to be (ser) there where I don't stay (estoy). And this is possible without producing disasters and knowing how to recognise ourselves in every place as strangers to ourselves.

Note on Strangeness between Languages

The precise difference in Castilian between being (ser) and staying (estar) is not the same in other languages. This is why it is hard to translate this short text into French: ser and estar are both translated as être.

The same thing happens in English with the verb to be, although the verb to stay seems to be – according to an etymological point of view – closer to estar. In Italian, as in Castilian, there is the difference between being and staying, but it doesn't concern the same semantic fields. For this reason, as is often shown, the use of the verbs ser and estar is always confusing for foreign students, although it depends, in a different way and at different levels, on the place where they come from and are (sean). A good way to feel the stranger in ourselves is to question where someone comes from (es) considering where he is (esté).

Ultimately, it is through the difference of languages that we can craft a deeper experience of the stranger. Originally, the term 'barbarian' was a way to nominate the other who spoke in a way that couldn't be understood: bar, bar, bar...

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