

The Globalization of Strangeness

Also by Chris Rumford

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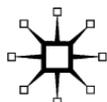
EUROPEAN COHESION? CONTRADICTIONS IN EU INTEGRATION

The Globalization of Strangeness

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For Füsün and Lara

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Preface

Strangeness is neither an overly familiar concept in the social sciences, nor a particularly well defined one. While it is certainly the case that strangeness is becoming increasingly popular with theorists who seek to understand societal transformations which elude more conventional interpretative frames it suffers, predictably perhaps, from a more than a little vagueness about the processes it is supposed to help conceptualize, and also from the 'curse of the commonplace', social scientists not always comfortable with their valued concepts being confused with common linguistic expressions. Strangeness also suffers – and I suspect that this is more of a problem in North America – from an association with the popular literature on alien abduction, 'high strangeness' being the term used to denote the bizarre range of phenomenon that are thought to accompany sightings of UFOs.¹

Nevertheless, the term strangeness is slowly becoming understood as a term which helps capture the unfamiliarity of everyday encounters, which can nowadays be conducted across huge distances, and which bring people into regular contact with distant others, while at the same time estranging them from those who would conventionally be considered as neighbours. Strangeness is not a synonym for globalization but it is closely associated with it. However, it is not the global as such that is deemed to be strange: it is the everyday, the local, the routine, in other words, the familiar. There is a degree of consensus that strangeness designates societal conditions in which neighbours are strangers and we are all a little bit strange to each other (and to ourselves). Strangeness thus denotes a situation where it is no longer meaningful to identify (a small number of) others as strangers: strangeness is a condition of the social and envelops us all. This book represents the first substantial attempt to discuss strangeness as a feature of contemporary society, and also the first to link the condition of strangeness to processes of globalization.

If a concern with elaborating upon 'the globalization of strangeness' (as promised by the title of the book) is my primary concern then understanding the sociological figure of the stranger is no less important. In my research for this book I was struck by how little the figure of the stranger has changed in the (mainly sociological) literature over a long period of time. The stranger is still usually portrayed as an out-

sider who is not wholly of society although s/he may be in it. In contrast, I would argue that the relationship between the stranger and society is no longer straightforward. It is increasingly difficult to talk of discrete societies comprising members (insiders) who can be contrasted to others that remain outside (and others who are within society but not part of it). In other words, the stranger might still be a key sociological figure but does not often resemble the outsider who 'comes today and stays tomorrow', as in Simmel's classic formulation. It is my contention that contemporary strangers are 'here today, and gone tomorrow', a very different state of affairs. It is clear to me that contemporary strangers do not fit the mould established by Simmel and others in an earlier phase of sociological thinking. The upshot is that our understanding of the figure of the stranger is in serious need of an overhaul.

The origins of strangeness

I was alerted to strangeness before I encountered the stranger, so to speak. I only became interested in the figure of the stranger following an engagement with strangeness, which in my work was one outcome of a prolonged exposure to literature on globalization. I became aware that much literature on the transformatory potential of global processes focused on the transformation of spatiality. The attention paid to flows and mobilities and the onset of a world of connectivity placed emphasis on new spaces created by globalization. What was missing from this account, I believed, was an understanding of the ways in which our familiarity with these new spaces is undermined and the strangeness and unpredictability – unknowability even – of the world has increased. If globalization makes and re-makes the world, it also makes the world increasingly strange.²

I thought that the apparent lack of interest in the strangeness engendered by new global spaces stemmed from a more general neglect of the possibility that globalization may result in a diversity of experiences not all of them following the same developmental logic. Of particular concern was an imbalance between the idea that globalization leads to the 'oneness of the world' and alternative accounts of globalization (and indeed cosmopolitanism) which have made it possible to view the world as a more uncertain and strange place. This is because at the heart of our understanding of globalization lies a paradox. At the same time as generating an awareness that the world is a single place and encouraging actors to rethink their place in relation to the world

as a whole (Robertson, 1992), globalization can also provoke a sense that the world is larger, more complex, and more threatening and dangerous than was hitherto the case. In other words, globalization both compresses the world, and, paradoxically, brings its enormity into focus. While we are increasingly conscious of the compactness of an increasingly interconnected world in ways that bring the globe within the grasp of all individuals, we can also recognize that the flows and mobilities constitutive of globalization constitute a threat to the integrity of our familiar (nationally-constituted) communities, and are disruptive of our attempts to maintain those communities. While globalization is generally associated with connectivity, the possibility of disconnectivity is never far away, and animated by the same processes.

My first encounter with the notion of strangeness linked to globalization was in the work of Robertson (2007a). His reading of strangeness according it the status of the 'flip-side of securitization' by means of which social cohesion can be sustained through the invocation of the threatening 'other'. Strangeness, on this account, equates to the threatening difference associated with the Other. It is exacerbated by processes of globalization which leave us unprotected from threats that come from beyond previously secure borders. Robertson's thesis is that globalization creates the sense that we are living in an open and networked world and, at the same time, increases our perceptions of the threats inherent in such an 'open' world. One response to this is to create at a local level what we no longer believe the nation-state of being capable of or committed to: our collective security. In short, the increasing securitization of our lives exacerbates our sense of alterity (the threat posed by the Other): the world is rendered unfamiliar and is full of strangeness.

However, Robertson's link between alterity and strangeness has been far less influential on my thinking than another valuable insight, which Robertson skims over in this particular publication, which is that a world of mobilities, flows and connectivities is ushering in a world of unfamiliar spaces, a world of strangeness in which the 'normal rules' of engagement do not necessarily apply. However, over time my interest in strangeness has settled on neither of these poles – the novel spatiality of globalization or an increasingly threatening alterity. Rather, strangeness has for me become of more general experience of globalization, one which is often ignored in thinking about globalization in terms of enhanced connectivity. Strangeness is encountered when there exists the realization that the social world is unrecognizable in many ways, and where familiar reference points no longer exist (or are far from

reliable). In more everyday terms we can say that strangeness occurs when we recognize that we have lost our collective bearings and our social compass is giving strange readings. In other words, strangeness is a type of social disorientation (resulting from an experience of globalization) as a result of which we are no longer sure who 'we' are, and we find it difficult to say who belongs to 'our' group and who comes from outside.

Strangeness is central to this book but has a way to go before it becomes a readily accepted and widely utilized social science concept. However, there are already signs that a range of thinkers are prepared to employ the notion of strangeness to designate a realm of unfamiliarity opened up by globalization. That a number of academics are employing the term, and tailoring it to their needs, while working independently of each other bodes well for its potential application across the social sciences, particularly so when amongst those employing the term are leading scholars such as Bryan Turner and Ulrich Beck. Strangeness may still mean different things to different people but at least a kernel of common understanding exists.

If the book aims to help constitute strangeness as a social science concept it is also concerned with rethinking the stranger as a sociological figure. In many ways this task is likely to be of more interest to a greater number of readers, at least initially. The book claims that it is not possible to understand the stranger outside of an understanding of strangeness and from this position makes substantial claims about the nature of the contemporary stranger, the most complete expression of which is the 'cosmopolitan stranger'.³ I would hope that for those readers looking for strangers (of any stripe) rather than strangeness there are treats in store, for this book represents the most comprehensive attempt yet to map the changing nature of the stranger. To cut a long story short, the book argues that conventional notion of the stranger – based on Simmel's classic figure no longer adequately captures the figure of the stranger in the Global Age. Today's stranger is 'here today and gone tomorrow', emerging from within our midst, briefly in many cases, before disappearing.

A very different stranger

The figure of the stranger on offer here is very different from usual representations. I have already hinted at why this might be the case. Firstly, the global context means that we need to address the stranger in a different way, based on a different set of assumptions. At the very basic level this means that the 'potential wanderer' can come from a

greater range of places, meaning that societies are both more diverse and less bounded. If globalization causes us to question the boundedness and cohesion of society it also leads us to look again at those who are travelling across borders. In a world of mobilities and connectivities the stranger has diverse origins and can take many forms. Secondly, introducing the idea of strangeness transforms further the ground upon which our understanding of the stranger rests. The argument here is that the figure of the stranger cannot be properly understood outside the context of strangeness. If we increasingly encounter our neighbours as strangers then a considerable social transformation is underway and we should no longer make facile assumptions about who 'we' are, let alone who the stranger might be.

The 'globalization of strangeness' transforms the stranger in many ways. But there are other reasons why the figure of the stranger on offer here is very different from usual representations, the most important of which is that many existing accounts are insufficiently ambitious and/or not prepared to deviate from the 'straight and narrow' of the Simmelian tradition. I would say that this book is less a contribution to a long tradition of thinking about the stranger and more a complete break with much of it. In my assessment of the existing literature I emphasize that there has been surprisingly little change in the way that the stranger is imagined in a wide range of literature over a considerable period of time. As a result, for all the reasons outlined above I have felt obliged to re-imagine the stranger from the bottom up, so to speak. Therefore, I see my task not as offering an updated account of the stranger or one which refigures the stranger based on certain 'real life' developments, but as one in which the stranger needs to be completely rethought. It is for this reason that the figure of the stranger, under conditions of strangeness, is so very removed from earlier incarnations.

When I began this project I wondered why there were relatively few full-length studies of the stranger. After six months of reading around the subject I believed this was because there has been too much consensus for too long. Around the same time I genuinely wondered if it would prove feasible to produce a book-length treatment of the subject. That it has been possible, and you have the evidence in front of you, is due to the intellectual potential that contrariness holds and a strongly held belief that strangeness is a very important notion, not only in helping to explicate the contemporary stranger but for understanding our experiences of globalization. If the quest to identify the stranger has proved slightly disappointing, the pursuit of strangeness has been revelatory and has opened up important new windows upon globalization.