

Open Borders

Unconditional Hospitality

A talk by Manu Bazzano

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Welcome... If this were my home and if you were to come, invited or uninvited, I would say “welcome”. Or perhaps I would let you in without a word. You may not speak my language. If you were to stay the night I might say “I’ll show you your room for the night. Hope you’ll have a good rest. See you in the morning”. If you were then a foreigner and wanted to stay longer and maybe work here, you’d have to apply for citizenship. A friend was telling me how his partner, who is from Korea, applied for British citizenship and had to learn all sort of things such as “how many dogs are you allowed to take with you in the park?” The answer, in case you are interested, is three. Or you may be asked to learn English – the first fundamental act of violence, that a foreigner should become acculturated, or indoctrinate, into ‘our’ language. You may have to learn the colours and design of the Union Jack. Another friend sarcastically remarked that they’ll want to know what material it is made off, adding: “probably Richard Branson’s old socks, him being such a national hero”.

In trying to become a good host I could choose the conventional route: juridical, moral, and based on the understanding of an exchange: I’ll let you in, on condition that ... and I might add my conditions. This is conditional hospitality, the only hospitality we know. Born in the Greek *polis* and the Roman *forum*, developed further via the Judaeo-Christian tradition and Kantian/Hegelian philosophy, this type of hospitality is *juridical*: it is handled by codes, norms and regulations, and it is inscribed within the metaphysics of violence. Unconditional hospitality, on the other hand, may or may not abide by the rules and regulations of a particular country and time in history, but it is simply not based on a contractual exchange. When you think of it, hospitality is the very basis of every human interaction. In order to have a real conversation, I’d need to interrupt my concerns and allow time and space to listen to you. Hospitality may be seen as an interruption of the self. this is what contemporary ethics teaches us. This is very important because ethics without hospitality is no ethics at all. Hospitality is the very essence of ethics, the latter no longer depending on God’s injunction, on a Kantian moral imperative but on the very real presence

of another to whom I endeavour to respond. Hospitality is also the essence of culture: without leaning out of my own home, as it were in order to meet otherness, there is no real culture but, as we shall see, parochialism and tribalism.

Unconditional hospitality is very demanding. It is in fact impossible. But it is worth pursuing for that very reason. The self endeavours to be a good host to the other. The citizen endeavours to do the same with the non-citizen. In doing so, I become human. It is a paradoxical move, as I willingly strive to give up security, authority, and property. But I soon realize the difficulty this entails. Why is it so difficult? because our entire mode of thinking is based on the entrenched notion of identity, in relation to which otherness feels like a threat. How did we come to value identity or ipseity, that is the fixation with the self-same, the need to protect the sense of 'me' and 'mine'. My suggestion is that this notion is strongly embedded in the Bible. I trace the various steps in my book *Spectre of the Stranger*, partly inspired by writers such as Regina Schwartz. The influence of the Bible is by the way, pervasive also among individuals and societies who proudly called themselves 'secular'.

Let's have a closer look at each of these building blocks through which the notion of identity was created. There are five of them: covenant, territory, kinship, nation, and memory.

Covenant

Israel's covenant with its God establishes that only the elected people can enjoy the benevolence and generosity of the deity. Divine resources are scarce and it will be only the chosen, i.e. *us*, who will benefit, not *them*, the idolatrous, those who have been abandoned and cursed by God for having shamefully preferred to worship spurious deities. With exclusivity comes *monolatry* (choosing the God of Abraham within the entire gamut of available deities) a term which is more accurate than *monotheism* (adherence to the ontology of a single God) in describing what occurs here.

Incitement to monolatry in *Deuteronomy* goes hand in hand with incitement to monogamy. Polytheism is compared to the abjection of sexual infidelity and promiscuity: the land of Israel is chastised by the deity because she behaves like a whore with other Gods, and the invectives reach fetishist paroxysm in Jeremiah who accuses Israel of committing adultery with pieces of wood and stone (Jeremiah 3:9).

The exclusivist deity of the Bible creates such demarcation from the beginning, preferring the offering of Abel to Cain's: God seems unable to bless both, and the same scarcity principle dominates the tale of Jacob and Esau: Jacob steals the blessing destined to his brother and for this reason becomes an exile.

One could object that such a climate of violence belongs to the Old Testament, and that the New Testament has brought us instead glad tidings of love. But is that really so? If the Old Testament annihilated otherness, the New Testament colonized it, or, euphemistically stated, converted it – hardly an improvement. I agree with Schwartz's hypothesis that the distinction ought not to be made in terms of Old or New Testament but in the direction of an interpretation of the Bible underlining, where possible, the metaphors of *multiplicity* and *plenitude* over the dominant ones of *oneness* and *scarcity*.

The promise of fertility, wealth and happiness which is to follow obedience to the covenant with the God of Israel does not materialize, while in Deuteronomy the list of curses, tortures and threats awaiting those who transgress the pact exceeds the blessings. To those who do not observe the clauses of the covenant, the tyrannical God grants a disastrous future: they will become an object of horror, the subject of cautionary tales; they will become proverbial or, literally, *a proverb* (Deut. 28:37). The gravest transgression consists in spoiling -- by worshiping another deity and/or having sexual congress with a foreigner – the identity of the community and its alleged solidity. Unlike the more reassuring avowal which associates monolatry to a moral code of universalism and peace, in the sacred texts we find the very opposite, i.e. defence of tribal prejudices. If any universalism is present, it is the universalism of totality and absolute truth, sole guarantor of a peace that already pre-dates *Pax Romana* and later *Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana*: the universalism of empire, the moral law imposed by the colonizers.

Territory

How would we explain to an alien, Regina Schwartz asks, this peculiar habit of ours of building walls and fences, of planting banners and flags everywhere? How to explain that it is common practice for an invented, imaginary group (the nation) to obsessively want to possess a segment of the planet? How to justify that in the name of such an illusory notion millions of people have killed and have been killed? During the twentieth century two

generations have been decimated for the sole aim of modifying a map: hard to explain to an alien that for us Earthlings life seems to be less precious than the soil.

Can a human being (by definition mortal and transient) truly *own* a territory? The promise of a land is, in the Bible, the unifying element of a people, provided they obey their God. To be human, *'ādām* in Hebrew, means to be made of soil, *'ādāmā*. The myth of the soil coincides with periods of history in which the people of Israel found themselves in exile, both voluntary (with the Exodus) and imposed (by the Babylonians). In spite of the fact that ownership of territory and exile are interdependent themes in biblical narrative and in spite of the equally relevant role played by nomadism, it was the theme of territory that prevailed in the end. Nomadism came to be understood retrospectively as penance and preparation before acquiring land ownership. With possession becoming a desirable condition, there are two alternatives: homeland or exile. Individuals who represent otherness, who have betrayed the community, are punished with exile. But what is exactly lacking in the exiled condition? And what is the difference between the wanderer, the tenant, and the owner?

The curse of exile can hypothetically metamorphose into the blessing of nomadic life, into the refusal to feed the false obligation of inhabiting a territory. Demarcation between those who belong to the homeland and those who are exiled from it can turn into the more pliable notion of the human being as transient, a visitor who receives the gift of a brief sojourn on the planet's crust. This is a poetic but also pragmatic stance. In biblical narrative, as soon as the land is owned, it fails to deliver its promise; borders must be protected, wars erupt with neighbouring tribes and systematic violations of God's covenant follow. Proud of having attained ownership, people cease to be faithful to their God. In the Bible, ownership of the land coincides with the spreading of idolatry. Now that you had plenty to eat and have built beautiful dwellings, Moses admonishes, now that you possess gold and silver in abundance, do not become proud (Deut. 8:11-14). Could it be that the *promise* of a land is more important than its ownership?

Kinship

Once identity is defined in terms of possession, the history of a people becomes ensnared within the constrained narratives of invasion and exile, with the latter being background and justification for future conquest. This appears to be a recurring pattern, when we think of several configurations of oppression and conquest such as North-America, or of German

expansionism after the defeat in the First World War. In these cases the victim becomes perpetrator and creates new victims, a pattern sadly familiar to psychotherapists. The other interesting analogy is between the land and the female body, present everywhere in the Bible, founded on the idea of purity and contamination and on the intimate link between property of the woman's body in monogamy and possession of the elected people by their God in monotheism. Marrying a foreigner and creating an alliance with other tribes dirties the land, and the transgressor is evacuated and vomited out of it.

Condemnation of adultery is equally motivated by puritanical defence of the rigid confines of one's nation. *Zārā* is the excluded person, the foreign woman, archetype of the disorder of the senses and of social anarchy, a figure interestingly similar to Dionysus's female double, *Baubo*¹. From his pulpit the biblical preacher thunders against the harlot, the adulteress, as well as against the man who joins a foreigner; in his invective the prophet mixes sexuality and possessions; the transgressor and the adulteress must be exiled. *Gala* in Hebrew means both an uncovered (unprotected) woman as well as an exiled one, a term condemning which expresses a prejudice against women and reinforces exogamy as a taboo. It is difficult not to agree with Schwartz who sees in monotheism a doctrine of possession of a people by its God, of a land by its people, of women by men². Even before being a sin in the sense ascribed to the word by puritanical morality, adultery and union with the foreigner transgress the law of property. Here too we see a paradox: encouragement to marry within one's own community, to delimit and possess, does not engender peace and happiness but violence, as attested by many biblical tales. In short, we kill in order to possess *and* because we are not able to possess. Even God, disappointed by their infidelity and refusal to be possessed, ends up killing his own people.

Unlike covenant and territory, kinship holds a certain prominence because it appears to be 'natural', somewhat providing evidence that identity has genealogy on its side. The people of Israel are described in the Bible as a great family, a clan whose paternity goes back to Adam, via a lineage going from father to father (and ignoring mothers), the aim of which

seems to be deciding who belongs to whom. But is kinship really natural? According to anthropology, it is not, for it is nothing but a fiction.

There are no doubt *ideologies* of kinship, notions guiding the structural narrative of the Bible, but alongside them we find numerous examples of the arbitrariness of kinship. Inheritance is stolen or violently assumed; brothers defraud one another, as do uncles and nephews in a climate of suspicion and cajolery where craving for ownership rules. Of course the emphasis on kinship still holds, directly proportional to the hatred and suspicion of the foreigner, translated as prohibition against exogamy. Endogamy provides of course its own set of fears and anxiety, above all the terror of dissolving identity. Yet one could almost say that for the Bible incest is the ideal form of matrimony.

Who is the stranger, from whose dangerous influence the clan must protect itself? The stranger is the *other*, i.e. one who is different from the *subject*. A non-poetic, non-ethical response to the stranger implies a politically reactive response to the asymmetry of encounter, hence to the problem of power. Subjugation, segregation, diplomacy, or aspiration to live alongside: these are some of the modalities of a political response, to which we can add new variations, including humanitarian wars on terror, an absurdity worthy of Jarry and Ionesco.

The theme of the rejected and disinherited son, of the son his father neglects in favour of his brother, often recurs in patriarchal narratives: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. The story goes on in contemporary sagas, in the familial feuds recounted in the therapy room, where one can hear the echo of Esau's imploration: "Do you only have one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" (Genesis 27: 37-38), to which Isaac responds by confirming Esau's condition of exiled slavery and the chance of reprisal by means of rivalry and violence: "Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. "By your sword you shall live, and your brother you shall serve. But it shall come about when you become restless, that you will break his yoke from your neck." (Genesis 27: 39-40). Promises, blessings and preferential treatment of the chosen go hand in hand with curses, punishment, and exile for those who will not share paternal wealth and will be treated as foreigners and idolaters.

In the book of Ezra we find rabid xenophobia, inspired by the Leviticus notion of purity, by the fear of contamination by anyone who comes from elsewhere, whether Mesopotamia or

Egypt, or from non-specific faraway lands. Protection of kinship means here protection from the *uncleanness* of foreigners and “their detestable practices” (Ezra 9:11).

What is the alternative to xenophobia? Some will say universalism, of the kind we find in the prophet Isaiah, the rhetoric of “we are all brothers, sons of the same father”; provided, of course, that the foreigners convert to the God of Israel. The doctrine of “we are all brothers” (and sisters), central in Christianity, easily turns into a doctrine declaring that *only* my brothers are human beings, while all others are representatives of inferior civilizations and as such must be treated.

Whether we are dealing with tribalism or universalism, xenophobia or globalization, the common effort is towards the creation of an identity, an attempt marked from the beginning by violence and the exclusion of otherness. The *other*, whose features and characteristics (ethnic, social and of gender) change with the changing of prejudices, remains always outside the walls of the *Polis*, no matter how vast its territory, whether outside a rural or a global village. One could of course quote *The Book of Ruth* as an example in the Bible where we find a foreign woman charitably nourished and protected, and later married, by an Israelite. At the end of the story, however, we learn that Ruth was not, after all, a foreigner.

The metaphor of the body associated with the notion of community is dangerous: the one body of community, alongside kinship and race, is an image too often used to dominate those who are not among the elected and to persecute those who are too easily identified with a particular ‘race’. There are many examples in European history where both Jews and Catholics are conveniently labelled as ‘race’ and on that basis excluded from riches. The same goes for the ideology of colonialism which has with equal impunity fabricated notions of superiority and inferiority in order to justify slavery and barbarism. That the crimes of empire and colonialism have been perpetrated in the name of the Bible testifies both the cunning of delinquents in high places and that the Bible itself endorses violence perpetrated in the name of property and territorialism. In biblical tales and myths we find the very matrix of the division of humanity by global capitalism into the two distinct *loci* of consummation/deprivation, development/under-development. To such primary division belongs the dichotomy, crucial since the emergence of the nation-state, between belonging and exile, between having a homeland and being stateless, having a dwelling and being homeless.

Nation

The typical individual of the modern era clutches on to the idea of nation³. Modern nationalism arises in the eighteenth century on the wings of a longing that could have been better sublimated into art, folklore and culture, but which found instead an outlet in this mystifying creation. In his seminal study Benedict Anderson sees the invention of the nation-state substituting for three essential entities which have vanished at the dawn of the modern era: 1) a language linked to ontology; 2) a hierarchical political organization clustered around a monarch; 3) a notion of temporality providing a cosmological and historical foundation⁴. Such notions were indispensable to survival in pre-modern times because they represented a safeguard against the dread of groundlessness and the dreaded meaninglessness of existence. The idea of the nation arose from the ashes of the theocratic era – a new fiction generating new certainties. Judging from the countless massacres perpetrated in its name, we must deduce that it enjoyed, and continues to enjoy, immense popularity.

Nationalism is an *invention* and not, as the rhetoric of national anthems would have it, the awakening of a people to self-knowledge⁵. An invention is both falsification and creation – in this case of an imaginary, invisible multitude whose presence emerges, diaphanous and unreal, to individual consciousness. The essence of a nation is twofold: all individuals within it have something in common, and each of them has forgotten many things. Brotherly embraces all-too easily overlook inequality and injustice, the exploitation of the oppressed and the corruption of the rulers. Nationalism has inherited both the biblical notion of territory and the hatred of the stranger which derives from it; its emergence coincided with the Enlightenment and the weakening of religious faith, providing a surrogate to faith and a substitute to both religious communities and to dynasties such as the Hohenzollern, the Ottomans, and the Romanov, which all became extinct after 1922.

This imagined society emerges in the ritual reading of the daily papers, in novels or in films where we follow 'our hero' in his adventures abroad, or during the ninety minutes of a football game where eleven over-paid youths invoke *l'elmo di Scipio* or *nos jeunes héros*, *our gracious Queen* or the supremacy of their particular assemblage *über alles*

The nation-state requires adherence and loyalty in the name of a natural kinship that offers no other choice. *Heresy* literally means *choice* and against the danger of choice nationality is inculcated and 'naturalized' from birth alongside more obvious physical characteristics. In our allegedly natural ties we intuit participation in community and because not chosen these ties are endowed with a disinterested aura⁶ which alongside the assimilation of language gives us an indelible *imprint*.

In the Bible the idea of nation is of a dynastic network with geographical, political and religious delimitations which enters into a pact of allegiance with a specific deity. The very identity of Israel is built against Egypt – the true nation worshipping the true God versus the false nation venerating the false God. The birth of the modern nation-state faithfully mirrored this ancient model.

We often find within contemporary nationalist rhetoric a combination of ancient religious themes and modern positivist historicism bringing together the mythical patrimony of a people within the pseudo-concreteness of facts. As a result, an entire mytho-poetic and spiritual tradition is weighed upon a scale; this move is characteristic of fundamentalist thought, forever claiming to be able to fathom the unfathomable and quantify the unquantifiable, and is the expression of an *anti-aesthetic* mind, of a mind, that is, incapable of thinking the unconditioned and of suffering the conditioned.

The anti-aesthetic mind usually thinks of time in terms of linear development, with a focus on one imaginary goal⁷. A vision of time inspired by multiplicity would be made instead of fragmentary moments. We do find these in the Bible, but they have been systematized and made cohesively 'historical' by nineteenth century German historiography. For this tradition, from von Humboldt to Droysen, the task of the historian is to confer meaning and consistency to a formless and contradictory mass of events so as to trace the progress of the

German nation. Applied to biblical studies, this perspective blends the ancient nation of Israel with nineteenth century Germany. This predominant historical method is a traditional way of reading history – a history for historians which Foucault, inspired by Nietzsche, opposes to the effective (*wirkliche*) method of doing history. While the former establishes a fictitious continuity, providing a foundation outside time and pretending to judge everything according to a sort of ‘apocalyptic objectivity’, the latter observes discontinuities and contradictions presenting an (anti) epistemological perspective underlining rupture rather than synthesis.

Memory

Memory plays an important role in the creation of a nation state. What is memory? If we believe in the past as a solid entity, memory plays the part of a warden who from time to time opens the doors of the museum. Everything inside is made of ashes, but on our visits the warden reassembles the exhibit infusing life into the silhouettes and events which contributed to the creation of our identity. However, as soon as we stretch our hand to touch them, they turn again into ashes. Giving solidity to the past is not only futile; it also betrays the past. In individual biography, as in that of a people or a nation, defining a precise identity on the basis of the past is constructing a fiction on the basis of another fiction. To *delimit* the history of a people in the attempt to define its identity also delimits its cultural resources and their potential. Memory implies the opposite movement: re-membling is to rejoin creatively what has been dis-membered. It is an act of imagination –the province of the theatre more than the museum. The art of memory recreates what cannot be reconstructed or embalmed in the fixity of a past. In this way an individual and a people can re-interpret their past. It is possible to transform the past, by transforming our relation to it. Each new interpretation – whether myth, biography, or sacred text – modifies its narrative and structure; in the multiplicity of interpretations, one affirms what I call *contemporary atheism*, the primary confutation of the One via a salutary descent into a myriad of perspectives, each of them valid in taking the past out of the museum and into the theatre, out of the mausoleum and into the uncertain light of the day.

This is also true, of course, for the Bible, as Schwartz rightly points out: Luther interpreted the Bible through his own belief that faith is itself promise of redemption; Milton saw it as affirmation of individual moral victories; Blake read the Bible as the epic of oppressed

imagination trying to free itself from the clutches of creation; Freud as the attempt on behalf of a primitive tribe to overcome parricide instincts.

Nationalism marries fate to contingency, creating the Frankenstein of *historical destiny*. This makes of an arbitrary community a nation pre-destined to glory (and catastrophe). Owing to imperial and colonial demands, and later to mass tourism, even some of the poor can afford to play at being lords and ladies. The settlers baptize the new cities with the name of their hometowns, fabricating simultaneity between the old and the new. The new ousts the old yet lives alongside it. Memory loses its character of longing and nostalgia and becomes artificial reconstruction of the homeland. The exile does not accept her condition but recreates a duplicate in artificial synchrony. She renounces the pain of separation but also the transformative power inherent in the exiled condition, i.e. the possibility of exit, from *ex*, the suffix common to experience, existence, and ecstasy: of being thrown into the vast world, into the gift/given of life itself.

To the English we owe the creation of a nation with imperial ambitions, imitated by successive bourgeois societies which in turn created the truly modern doctrine of the abstract and impersonal state⁸. It is important to remember that we deal with inventions: by introducing the state, modern nationalism has inherited and remodelled two centuries of transformations. Revolutionaries seizing power inherit the switch board of state control and a devilish bureaucracy and administration which is far from easy to dismantle.

If the first nationalist movements were animated by revolutionary fervour, already the second generation of nationalism, during the European nineteenth century, grandly appropriates juridical rights of clairvoyance, with Michelet proclaiming that history is the supreme judge establishing justice even on behalf of the dead⁹. History would interpret (via the historians of revolution and nationalism) nothing less than the unexpressed desires of the millions of dead and miraculously speak in their place. Benedict Anderson wittily called it *inverted ventriloquism*. The idea of the nation is here linked to memory: one must remember or at least imagine the aspirations of past generations. Thus the colonialist who wiped out the indigenous traditions of oppressed and half-buried civilizations now exhorts others to

nostalgia and exoticism. The injunction of memory is crucial in the building of individual identity as in that of a people, a nation or an empire. Memory being often unreliable, there is a constant need to narrate our individual history and that of the people we identify with, and this attempt is perhaps similar to emptying with our bare hands the floor of a sinking boat. Autobiography is an impossible battle against biology: the cells of the human body die and are replaced every seven years. The history of a nation must similarly create and recreate an artificial linearity which does not truly reflect the complex interpenetration of events. A nation too, precisely because intrinsically it does not exist, bears a desperate need to narrate itself into being, to manufacture a coherent storyline whose dates of conception, birth and death are arbitrary.

Open Borders

It is precisely when faced with a difficult situation that we must be able to think the unthinkable. This is the task of ethics. Unconditional hospitality is not *realpolitik*, compromise with the powerful, defence of the privileges but unconditional solidarity towards the oppressed, since only by doing so can a human being be truly human, and the citizen can be a citizen. What is the unthinkable in the context of the nation-states and the refugees they engender? It can be expressed in two words: *open borders*.

There is a new activism at work, criticized by all politicians, yet responding in an engaged way to the mounting wave of racism and exclusion which has grown steadily in Europe and North-America since the end of the nineteen eighties and which demands the *abolition of border controls*. Programmes of deportation have everywhere grown in number; in countless centres of detention, migrants are kept in inhuman conditions, guilty only of not having the right papers: one more attestation of the fact that immigration control, racism and exclusion are inseparable. Is such a demand for open borders utopian? In the case of borders and migration, such a demand is a radical response to suffering and exploitation; it is a form of active defence of human rights targeting the arbitrary nature and the inherent violence of

the notions of territory and of nation-states. As in the anti-war movement, the movement for open borders questions the right to hate the other and affirms the crucial element of difference and of encounter between cultures as necessary to the advancement of human progress. As Marfleet points out, war mobilizes 'us' versus 'them', manipulating feelings against external enemies. The anti-war argument and the fight against poverty and epidemics have won much support over the years; it is now time to submit migration control to the very same scrutiny. This is even more urgent as European attitudes to immigration since the 1990s have taken a sharp turn towards intolerance, with host cultures feeling free to speak against migrants in a misguided attempt to protect European values against the perils of multiculturalism. EU's member states' escalating hatred of migrants no longer allows for their disdain of South Africa's xenophobia.¹⁰

The mythologies of fear and suspicion often portray the migrant as weak and ailing, even evil and deviant. Yet the lives of refugees and migrants continue to testify throughout history the courage, initiative and inner resources of human beings when faced with the adversities of fate and the cruelty of their fellows.

¹⁰ Jeremy Harding *Europe at Bay* London Review of Books 34 (3) 9 February 2012 pp. 3-11