

Desire, Demand and Psychotherapy: On Large Groups and Neighbours

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ABSTRACT *Explanations of the disturbing effects of large groups are sought in the group analytic literature, where there is an emphasis on boundary disturbance, and in contemporary psychoanalytic and social theory, where the peculiar nature of the ‘neighbour’ has become a topic for investigation. It is argued that the human subject is an ‘interrupted’ subject, with the other/neighbour being a key figure in creating this interruption. In large groups, the alien nature of the neighbour who is both close and unknowable comes to the fore, disrupting attempts to cover over this ‘interruption’ and promoting confusion and dislocation. The large group is consequently expressive of specific forms of contemporary sociality, and also suggestive for an ethical practice of psychotherapy that does not reduce to consolation. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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DISTURBANCE

This paper is an attempt to think through some recent debates in psycho-political theory surrounding what might broadly be termed the ‘ethics of subjectivity’, centring on the question of the relationship of the subject to the other or, as it has been recently reconfigured, the ‘neighbour’. In doing this, a particular experience of ‘neighbourliness’ is examined – one that poses its own problems but also offers the kind of insights that are sometimes only available from extreme cases. This ‘case’ is in some ways not that exceptional, as it is part of the routine practice of group analysis and group relations, but at times it *feels* extreme. I have in mind the situation of being brought together with other people for the purpose of being in a large group but somehow left to one’s own devices, to work out what this might mean. People who have been through this experience will know that at times it is enough to drive one mad.

This disturbance generated by large groups is puzzling. It seems to relate to what sometimes happens in other kinds of large group, whether they are ‘masses’ in the psychoanalytic and sociological sense, unorganized but purposeful, perhaps frenzied in their pursuit of

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something, always wont to turn on their leaders, on outsiders, on themselves; or whether they are 'crowds', who just happen to be together in the same place, their individual members intruding on one another, getting in the way, obscuring the view. In each case, belonging to the large group, especially when it is 'headless' (which is a stronger way of saying 'apparently leaderless'), can produce the combined effect of a kind of exhilaration mixed with a frisson of terror, or at least of anxiety. One can get caught up in something that makes one feel part of something greater, perhaps as a welcome release from the work of maintaining the coherence of the self; but this can also pose as a potentially terrifying dissolution of identity, a loss of boundaries in the face of the impassioned mob.

The most common psychoanalytic way of explaining this is to argue that the dissolution of self-boundaries produced in large groups at times mimics psychosis. Freud (1921) provides the paradigm in describing the process of group or mass formation as one in which individuals renounce their autonomy by binding together their libidinal investments: 'a primary mass is a number of individuals who have set one and the same object in the place of their "I"-ideal and who have consequently identified with one another in terms of their "I"' (Freud, 1921, 69). The leader is crucial here, though as Jacqueline Rose (2004) points out, this is a fraught kind of significance – the leader might be adored, but can just as well be murdered and eaten, as Freud (1913) proposed in his primal horde theory. But most important is the way in which identification has spread laterally as well as vertically, to use Juliet Mitchell's (2000) terminology: in subduing their ego-ideal to the same object, each individual identifies with others who have done the same, and the barriers between subjects become porous, so what one feels the other feels: my love and yours entwine, and so, less fortunately, does our hate. It is no surprise that this libidinally invested disruption of boundaries should be so exciting and so worrying that, once caught up in it, we should become dislocated from ourselves and connected to others in erotically heightened but also dizzyingly discomfiting ways. Certain kinds of groups can make us more aware of ourselves, as we become open to the gaze of others; but these large groups can produce a non-self in each subject, something that is fractured and falling-away, a kind of inner abyss.

Some classical accounts in the group analytic literature emphasize this. Tom Main (1975), for example, describes how the regular projective processes that operate in all groups can run riot in large groups of 20 or more people, partly because of the difficulty of checking them against 'reality' and partly because of the common phenomenon of 'loss of personalisation of relations and the growth of anonymity' that operate in such situations (Main, 1975, 74). Earl Hopper (2003) notes the powerful regressive tendencies of the large group and their pull towards paranoid-schizoid modes of functioning: 'The larger the group, the deeper, stronger and more florid are regressive phenomena', he writes (Hopper, 2003, 100). Most extensively, Pierre Turquet (1975) provides an account of 'Threats to Identity in the Large Group', listing numerous ways in which the attempts of individuals ('singletons') to become members of such groups while retaining their sense of separateness, are undermined by the various pressures of the large group itself. These centre on the difficulty of retaining a balance between forces pushing towards fusion with the group (basically, an annihilation of individual identity) and those that promote a kind of autistic separateness in which the subject cannot feel any kind of link. 'The atmosphere of the large group carries with it a question,' writes Turquet (1975, 115), 'will the situation allow for differentiation as to degrees of engrossment in such a large and presumed totally absorbing situation, or

will its demands for surrender be total?' The 'apparent vastness' of the group 'seems to give substance to a fantasy of [the group member's] internal world as also vast, unencompassable, or boundless' (Turquet, 1975, 119), with the accompanying sense of becoming lost in an amorphousness that destroys one's sense of containment and integrity.

De Maré et al. (1991) focus on the central anxiety in the 'larger' group taking the form of panic, which is experienced at the level of the individual as a form of phobia: 'mass formation and packing (as in wolf pack) and the intense revenge motif of mob violence constitute the group's equivalent to counter-phobic measures' (De Maré et al., 1991, 18). This mass formation is a flight from the attempt to develop conscious lateralized thinking, throwing members back into a mindless leader-led dyad. They agree that the larger group itself tends to display features similar to the unconscious of psychoanalysis – features such as splitting, projecting, introjecting, displacing, contradiction, mythologizing, regressing, distorting, as well as behaving in a pleasure-seeking, dependent, timeless, mindless and illogical way. They emphasize, however, the important exception to the concordance between the large group and unconscious processes – that is, the enormous potential for dialogue in the large group, whereas there is no conversation in the unconscious.

In the larger group, therefore, in struggling with dialogue, we are not only responding to the pressures of the reality principle and to the gratification of the pleasure principle. We are involved at the same time in establishing a third principle as we learn to understand ourselves in terms of community and not merely as organisms. (De Maré et al., 1991, 20)

The 'loss of boundaries' explanation of the effect of large groups has much in its favour but the reference to 'community' in the work of de Maré et al. relates to the cultural shifts that have taken place since Freud – shifts that suggest something else might also be happening that is of consequence and for which the disturbance of groups might be an important litmus test. The terms of this shift are now routine and familiar: from Freud's concern with the survival of the individual in the face of the demands of the social and the maintenance of rationality in the light of the thrusts of unconscious life, we have switched focus to what others do, to 'objects' and their impact, to intersubjectivity and the like (Frosh, 1991). Interest has moved, that is, from mastery of desire to the management of subject-other relations, and in the course of this issues of 'otherness' and its meaning have come to the fore. This shift is not solely a redirection of theoretical concern from internal drives to social relationships, although this is the most obvious way in which it is manifested. It also produces a profound set of changes in how relationality is construed: it makes the individual dependent upon the social, as object relations theory has always recognized, but it also raises the question of the benevolence or otherwise of that social relationship. The individual, already deconstructed and decentred by the Freudian unconscious, has become ever more fractured, with claims for identity coherence now being taken as self-evidently false and with emphasis on the role of the other in constructing the subject. Not only is this visible in the post-second world war emergence of group thinking, but it is central to developments in psychoanalysis and (more recently) in social theory and its attendant philosophies (Frosh, 2008). The question is: what kind of social is at work here? Is it the reasonably benign 'good enough' figure of Winnicottian thought, which offers mirroring and support to the emergent subject in such a way that subjecthood can be born into a state of trust and relative coherence (see Giddens, 1991, for an example of a social theory based on this

thinking); or is it more the paranoia-inducing sociality that is conjured in different ways in Kleinian and Lacanian theory, in which the persecutory outside (for Kleinians already a projection of a destructive inner impulse) finds its way into every emergent subject, eating away at it from within, a final nail in the coffin of integration? Either way, the contemporary perception is that the quality of social relations gets inside the subject, and in a persecutory environment this is enough to create a pervasive sense of threat.

INTERRUPTIONS OF IDENTITY

This language of ‘inside-outside’ itself misses the point, however. What much contemporary thought has chewed away at is the idea that the classical divide between ‘individual and social’ blocks us from thinking about how each subject is a nodal point of interpenetration by forces that encompass both. Writing with unexpectedly Lacanian resonance, Judith Butler summarizes the main point here, which is that there is no essentially bounded subject that could be dissolved, but rather a fractured subject that is often shored up, but is always radically at odds with itself:

If the other is always there, from the start, in the place of where the ego will be, then a life is constituted through a fundamental interruption, is even *interrupted prior to the possibility of any continuity*. Accordingly, if narrative reconstruction is to constitute the life it means to convey, it must also be subject to interruption. (Butler, 2005, 52)

Everything is ‘subject to interruption’ if one accepts the general principle that each human subject is inhabited by a kind of interruption in its own continuity, an object from elsewhere, a sort of alien thing – ‘the thing from inner space’ in Slavoj Žižek’s (2006a, 148) evocative phrase. In which case, although the break in the coherence of the subject that is produced by the identificatory processes at work in the large group may exaggerate this interruptedness, or bring it into focus in unwontedly powerful ways, it is not in itself specific; we are fragmentary all the time, even when we are on our own. Butler herself links this with the work of Jean Laplanche, whose notion of the ‘enigmatic signifier’ (Laplanche, 1997) is seeping into psychoanalytic and social theory to index the way in which an outside other is constitutive of the formation of the subject and specifically of the emergence of the unconscious. As John Fletcher (2007) explains, one of the key elements in Laplanche’s rereading of Freud is to make the origins of the subject ‘extrinsic’, a matter of partial, mis-translation or failed translation of ‘messages’ from the adult other to whom the subject is exposed, or which are ‘implanted’ in the subject. Even in relation to what might seem most ‘inner’ or intrinsic to the individual, Laplanche constantly insists on the need to complete what he terms the ‘Copernican’ revolution in Freud:

he argues that the drives are the exogenous byproducts of implantations by the other, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, they are byproducts of the infant’s partially successful, partially failed attempts at translation and binding of those exciting implantations. It is the unbound, untranslated remainder of the enigmatic parental message that becomes the first repressed *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* constituted by primal repression, and so the first representative of the drive. (Fletcher, 2007, 1257)

Some elements of the parental message are successfully translated by the infant, and hence are ‘bound into’ the ego and its internal objects so that they can be used (Laplanche’s

version of sublimation) but other elements are untranslatable – they are a ‘remainder’ that cannot be integrated into the subject but rather inhabits the subject as something alien yet constitutive. Fletcher describes this untranslatable remainder as ‘a *psychical thing* that has become the source of the exciting, traumatizing drives pressing toward absolute discharge, drives that attack the homeostatic body-ego from within’ (Fletcher, 2007, 1257). In summary:

In Laplanche’s theory of the drives, the drive does not emerge naturally or spontaneously from the body as the transparent expression of its needs; rather, it is the byproduct of the desiring and signifying relations between the subject and the other. In particular, the drive is the byproduct of the *psychical work* of the infant, both opening up to and defending against the seductive ministrations of the adult. (Fletcher, 2007, 1258)

All this means that there is no paradise of integrity from which the subject falls as a consequence of a failed environment, which is the implication of the Winnicottian and often broader object-relational scheme of things; using Butler’s phrase, the subject is rather ‘*interrupted prior to the possibility of any continuity*’ – not just split, as the Kleinians might have it, but inhabited by something else from outside that prevents integrity, continuity, wholeness or individuality from proceeding. In contrast to the position that claims each one of us as separate from each other, having to reach out to the other from across an abyss and to negotiate difference as a way of surviving – having to modify our aims and drives, our desires and expectations – we have here an increasing focus on the already-present nature of the supposed other. The immediacy of the other is therefore not just an ethical demand, as in Emmanuel Levinas’ writings, which themselves have been crucial for the rethinking of the psychosocial domain (Levinas, 1991; Frosh and Baraitser, 2003) and which describe a mode of subjecthood that is called into being by the other, but which is still separate from it. It is, rather, an ontological claim: there is no subject without the other and even this is stating too much separation. The subject exists in the space of the other, inhabited by the other, disrupted and interrupted; our life stories are fragmented by the presence of the other ‘where the ego will be’, our boundaries are always diaphanous. If this is so, then the group might enact something that is always already there – a place of the other that speaks to the very being of the subject, rooted both in the ‘social unconscious’ recognized by some group analysts as a term for the ‘social, cultural and communicational arrangements of which people are unaware’ (Hopper, 2003, 127) and in a primary encounter with a figure that is external yet central to the constitution of the subject. There might also be a hint of the ‘other side’ of interruption in this, a kind of ‘truth’ spoken by interruption in which the fragmentary nature of identity is presented as a possibility for moving forwards. The quotation above from Butler ends, ‘if narrative reconstruction is to constitute the life it means to convey, it must also be subject to interruption’ (Butler, 2005, 52) and this notion that ‘constituting’ a life might involve seeing through the fantasy of integration and wholeness (what the Lacanians refer to as the Imaginary) links with the possibility of a more fragmentary kind of narrative research (Frosh, 2007) as well as a therapeutics of dissolution, in which what is offered is not a sense of holistic closure, but rather a set of provoking questions, something that might leave both therapist and patient ‘open to surprise’ (Nasio, 1992, 75).

INTERRUPTION AS POSSIBILITY

The idea of interruption is itself multifaceted. As Lisa Baraitser (2008) has described in relation to that most interrupting of experiences, motherhood, interruption is not just a way in which the ordinary continuity of life is blocked by something unnecessary and irritating. It also signifies something productive and new, at least potentially: it is a break in normality that can shift subjecthood, for better or worse, creating disturbance and a kind of deathly pause that makes one no longer the same as one was. Motherhood might do this through its exposure to the demanding liveness of the child, who punctures the space of maternal being; as in Clément's (1994) notion of 'syncope', what is being referenced here is the way an intrusion from outside can prevent routine going-on-being in such a way that the subject is transformed. This links to the Lacanians' critique of psychoanalytic interpretation and their tendency to replace it with what they too call 'interruption': something brought in to produce a new motion, a movement of signifiers freed by the analyst's response but not thereby made meaningful. 'When the "word" erupts in the analysand, we call it, among other things a symptom, a lapse, or a witticism, and when it erupts in the psychoanalyst, we call it an interpretation', writes Nasio (1992, 24); Evans (1996, 89) notes that Lacan argued that analytic interpretations 'should no longer aim at discovering a hidden meaning, but rather at disrupting meaning' and thereby facilitating the patient's speech. In each of these quotations, what is being described is the creative power of interruption, the way in which an intrusion into the continuity of the subject can produce a shift, a new engagement that frees the subject from the repetition involved in being at one with itself.

Laplanche's rather different perspective adds to this an appreciation of the fact that the subject is 'always-already' interrupted, with the disruption coming from 'outside' constantly blocking any attempt to impose a boundary around the subject – a castle around the classical 'self'. Interruption is undoubtedly painful, making it harder to live in a kind of imaginary state of mind in which integration of the personality and coherence of the world both survive – an 'as if' state that often feels like it is all that stands between the fragmented subject and psychotic dissolution. How is it possible to relate to oneself and to others without positing a ground of at least rudimentary wholeness and agentic integrity, on the basis of which some elements of commonality of purpose – and hence some comprehensible translation of one person's speech by another – can be assumed?

Nevertheless, without interruption there is stagnation and withdrawal, something recognized even by some enthusiastic integrationists such as the Kleinians, whose notion that the depressive position *has to be* broken up from time to time by paranoid-schizoid pulsations (Bion's (1963) notation of $PS \leftrightarrow D$ is the code for this) is an acknowledgement that too solidly depressed a psyche is no formula either for creativity or for ordinary development. Moreover, if interruption is taken to be a dramatization of the way in which the subject is always permeated by apparently extrinsic forces, rather than a new or occasional event that impinges on the otherwise whole subject from the outside, then the boundaries put up around the so-called self to hold things together can be seen as necessary tactical moves, rather than the ontological truths for which they are usually taken.

But this rather benign rendering of interruption and externality does not quite capture the experience of being impacted upon by the other, even if it does address the importance of decentredness in human subjectivity. In the group situation, the interruption to one's own

interior monologue produced by the impingement of others can of course be felt to be productive, not just because of the elements of support or sharing that are sometimes present – the somewhat ambivalent realization that others have similar experiences to oneself, that one is not alone with (or unique in) one's despair – but also sometimes because of the newness introduced by others' perspectives. The remarkable capacity of group members to go over and over the same old ground apparently interminably can be brought to an end by the commentary of others, and sometimes by their mere and mute presence – at some point something new must occur, and this can be a liberating moment. Whether this occurs more in the group situation than in the dialogic psychoanalytic one is open to debate – the absolute focus on the subject's defences that occurs in that latter encounter may actually produce *more* intersubjective interruption than the more easily deflected light shone on each subject by the group, and as Turquet (1975, 105) notes, the quality of response in a large group is often very poor, mere 'background noise, not communication'. Be that as it may, even when group disruption of the subject's fantasy of autonomy is productive, the idea that it is always experienced as liberating is clearly wrong. At times, there can be nothing worse than finding oneself in a group, surrounded by other people who seem persecutory, threatening, damaging to one's precarious health. In the dyadic encounter, the psychoanalyst can seem judgemental, harsh and abusive; the persecutory functions of the group, however, are another thing again, more than a turn of the screw: here it is not just the neglect or absolute hostility of the analyst that comes to the fore, but the gaze of a whole cast of others, who may be well known to the subject but can take on – individually or collectively – the façade of torturers. Perhaps this is exaggerated in the large group, especially one that has come together out of nothing – in a group relations event, for example, or some other occasion that draws together strangers. Here there is too much going on to discriminate clearly between people; instead, whilst there may be exuberance and excitement, there is also a characteristic sense of menace: the faces of the group are blank, ignoring one or staring into one too closely. Here something else of the nature of interruption emerges: the sense of being thrown against others who are seemingly benign but contain within them a deathly threat, a kind of blank thingness that means one only harm.

THE BLANK FACE OF THE NEIGHBOUR

Another way into this in the literature on the large group comes from an evocative passage in Turquet's (1975) paper, in which he notes how the individual member of a group needs to feel a sense of security in relation to the 'skin of the neighbour', a sense of connection with an other who is close but also separate, a connection that can make the subject feel real as well as reassuringly in touch with others. The 'external boundary' offered by the skin defends the subject against an ever-present 'threat of becoming other than himself, of being in some way altered, pressurised, even diminished' (Turquet, 1975, 97). In the large group, however, there are many forces arrayed against the stability of this 'skin', which Turquet lists using a vocabulary full of the sense of something being awry with the other – with the neighbour on whom the subject actually depends.

In the large group disruption of the skin-of-my-neighbour boundary is an ever-present threat from the action of the centrifugal forces... which both cause the I to withdraw, but also place him relationally in increasingly idiosyncratic and isolated positions. Continuity with his skin-of-my-neighbour is also

in jeopardy because the large group raises many more problems about these neighbours: ‘where, who, when, what are they?’ This experience of search and questioning is further aggravated by the almost daily changes in their spatial positioning, at first near, then far, now in front, now behind, now on the left, now on the right, and so on... These repeated and shifting changes of position in space give rise to additional questions: ‘Why these changes?’; ‘In what way has my neighbour changed?’; ‘Into what?’; ‘Where has he gone?’; and so forth. (Turquet, 1975, 101)

Dependence upon a neighbour who is in important ways unknowable, who slips out of one’s grasp and somehow through that becomes dangerous (Turquet lists *violence* as another major characteristic of the large group), suggests the preponderance of a sensation of persecution and anxiety, as regression occurs in the context of a lack of trust, and subjectivity comes to be premised on contact with someone who is not quite there. It emphasizes the mysterious nature of this neighbour and the questions this raises; once again, this produces an experience of interruption and disruption but this time explicitly annotated with the term ‘threat’.

This experience is in some ways mundane, and has been played on in many novels and films: it references the idea of the neighbour who the subject is placed next to and whose benevolence the subject wishes to trust in, but who gradually, in small ways perhaps, emerges as the strangest thing, able to get right inside one to disturb one’s whole sense of being. The doubling feeling that something is not quite right with the other is a common phenomenon. Žižek has often pointed this out in relation to the Lacanian *objet petit a*; for example, drawing on the 1950s film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Žižek (2006b) notes how the representation of the alien in popular culture is not always as something absolutely other and violent (though this is an important motif, as in Ridley Scott’s *Alien*) but can focus on the one who seems exactly the same as the subject, yet is disturbingly different in the tiniest of alienating ways. Žižek comments:

In contrast to Scott’s alien, which is totally different from humans, the difference here is minimal, barely perceptible. Are we not dealing with the same in our everyday racism? Although we are ready to accept the Jewish, Arab, Oriental other, there is some detail that bothers us in the West: the way they accentuate a certain word, the way they count money, the way they laugh. This tiny feature renders them alien, no matter how much they try to behave like us. (Žižek, 2006b, 67)

Freud (1919) writes about exactly this phenomenon in his paper on ‘the uncanny’: quoting Jentsch, who describes ‘“doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive, or conversely whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate”’; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata’ (Freud, 1919, 347). Freud focuses his explanation of the sensation of the uncanny on the return of something familiar as strange and threatening – a reminder or breaking through of what is repressed – which generates the sense of threat that so distinctively makes us shiver. But in addition to this it is in relation to the slight blip in reality that the sense of disturbance is so pronounced: there is something wrong, we are sure, but what exactly might it be?

This sensation has been picked up in recent social theory through a reinscription of the notion of ‘otherness’, in which the concern with what is ‘differently’ other and out there has become refined to what is other (alien, external) but also close by, often unnervingly

so. This interest in what impinges on the subject is familiar from postmodern theory as reflecting the impact of something claustrophobic and suffocating not because of its absence but because of its too-strong presence ('Postmodernism... is full of such an overwhelming presence, producing anxiety not out of lack, but out of being too close to the object, face to face with its horror' – Frosh, 2002, 87). Drawing on Freud again, this time on the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (Freud, 1895), some theorists have taken up this awareness of immanence to recast the other exactly as the neighbour, what Freud refers to as the *Nebenmensch*, here glossed by Kenneth Reinhard:

The *Nebenmensch* is the neighbour as 'the adjoining person' standing between the subject and its primary maternal object, the uncanny complex of perceptions through which subjective reality divides into the representable world of cognition and the 'unassimilable' element that Freud calls *das Ding*, 'the thing'. (Reinhard, 2005, 30)

This idea of the unassimilable 'thing' is key to much of the discussion, especially in its wilder shores in which what is being emphasized is the *horror* of the neighbour. Thus, disputing the currently popular Levinasian notion of 'the neighbour as the abyssal point from which the call of ethical responsibility emanates', Žižek presents the neighbour as the embodiment of threat and also of unknowability. He comments: 'What Levinas obfuscates is the monstrosity of the neighbour, a monstrosity on account of which Lacan applies to the neighbour the term Thing (*das Ding*) . . . One should hear in this term all the connotations of horror fiction: the neighbour is the (Evil) Thing that potentially lurks beneath every homely human face' (Žižek, 2006b, 43). Reinhard (2005) clarifies the nature of this supposedly 'evil' thingness in the neighbour in the context of a careful elaboration of Lacanian claims. He writes that Lacan

defines *das Ding* as the encounter with something in the other that is completely alien – an intrusive foreignness that goes beyond the compositions of self and other, and their politicizations as 'friend' and 'enemy'. The Thing materializes the constitutive ambiguity of the primal object, the trauma of its uncertain disposition between excessive presence and radical absence. . . the Thing is that part of the other that is 'mute', but the neighbour speaks and thus forms a template for the subject's emergence. (Reinhard, 2005, 30–1)

The neighbour contains the Thing – it is not the neighbour itself, but rather an area of unassimilable alienness within the other that both intrudes on the subject and allows it to gather something in, to refine itself, make distinctions, and form. Žižek (2005, 144) captures the mediating role of the neighbour and yet the essential nature of the Thing here, arguing that 'if there is no neighbour to whom I can relate as a human partner, the symbolic Order itself turns into the monstrous Thing which directly parasitizes upon me'; on the other hand, without the Thing, 'we find ourselves in a Habermasian "flat", aseptic universe in which subjects are deprived of their hubris of excessive passion, reduced to lifeless pawns in the regulated game of communication.' Liveliness, that is, depends on the Thing, however disturbing it is and however much mediation by human presence is required to make it tolerable. What is captured here, in the complexity of the path that it describes, is the sense of dependence on the neighbour in the process of social subjectification out of which the subject emerges, and the accompanying in-built feeling that there is always something else

at play, a little piece of the real that cannot be accommodated but still has its effect. Laplanche's (1997) 'enigmatic signifier' again comes to mind, despite the significant differences between his developmental approach and the stance taken by the Lacanians.

There is more to be said about the 'adjoining person' referenced in Reinhard's definition of the neighbour, the one who stands 'between the subject and the void left by the inevitable withdrawal of maternal succor' (Reinhard, 2005, 31) and who consequently is the one that is needed to stave off the 'void', yet is in the way, too present, perhaps an object of fascination, demand and even desire, certainly of rivalry, but also – because of its effect as *producing* 'das Ding' – a source of threat. Is this not the neighbour in the large group too, the one who is there and has to be there, or there would be no group, but is not the other that the subject longs to reach out to, but is rather the too-close, the one who intrudes? That is, might it be the case that the disturbance of the large group is due not only to the dissolution of boundaries, or the shame induced by the gaze of the other (after all, one can hide in precisely such a group), but to the claustrophobic presence of the neighbour who is close yet alien, who sits beside one yet is unknown and – again precisely because of the nature of the large group, in which something is always hidden – unknowable? And if so, if one imagines the presence in a room of, say, 80 people sitting in a spiral or in concentric circles, each subject anxiously wondering what will happen, watching their backs, as it were, can this be a model of subjectivity under conditions of social fragmentation, in which it is exactly the postmodern experience of being in a space filled to overflowing that is so troubling? We are no longer alone, however lonely we might be; we are too much crowded out by the *Nebenmensch*, the neighbour who we cannot understand, whose very presence seems to make demands on us, who embodies something that gets *right inside us*, yet is threateningly alien. The disturbance induced by the large group would consequently be a paradigmatic kind of disturbance for a social context in which the other is no longer other *enough*, or rather is the *other-too-near*, a paranoid state familiar from those who have been abused or suffered other forms of trauma (Hopper, 2003).

But maybe people are more creative than this. With all their disturbance, sometimes something gets resolved in large groups, or at least moved on; whilst the commonest outcome is that of frustration, they occasionally produce epiphanies of mutual recognition and linkage. Perhaps one can suggest that these epiphanies are not the result of insight, but rather of something else that can be thought of as a dipping into the elemental in which each member of the large group is embedded – a notion that derives from Levinas and is articulated particularly powerfully by Lingis (1994) in his examination of what it means to be in communication with one another in the sense of appealing 'to the others to help us be at home in the alien elements into which we stray' (Lingis, 1994, 122). Without its rather Jungian associations, what is being referred to here is the complex arrangement whereby each fractured subject, with its heritage of otherness that has produced unconscious life, is open precisely because it is constituted as inhabited by the other/neighbour as part of its condition of existence: 'the neighbour speaks and thus forms a template for the subject's emergence' (Reinhard, 2005, 31). The Thing within the neighbour is also the Thing within each subject, its implantation such that there is a carrying around of a disturbing alienness which troubles every subject but also links subjects together – put crudely, every one of us has to face the same Thing, the same excessive presence of the uncanny, the same destructive element. The large group does not, of course, create this situation, but it powerfully

dramatizes it. 'Loss of boundaries' is inevitable and can be exhilarating as well as frightening; the enjoyment of the subject as it spirals out of itself, like every other thrill, comes specifically from being on the edge, of doing something dangerous but also new (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008). More prosaically, according to de Maré et al. (1991), as the group struggles, and occasionally learns to dialogue, its oedipal structures can give way to 'post-oedipal lateral relations' leading to the development of an 'impersonal fellowship' (de Maré et al., 1991, 17) amongst members of the large group, which de Maré et al term 'Koinonia'. Koinonia describes a form of impersonal community in which people can speak, hear, see and think freely – capturing, that is, the Greek passion for the State, as distinct from love of the family. This, too, occurs in the large group: people are free to talk or not as they wish, but there is also an obligation to the group that sustains its being, and whilst this might be painful for everyone it might also allow something to be shared. However, the idea that each subject dips into the 'same elemental' is not a simple recipe for mutual understanding: the Thing still passes through everyone, disturbing social relations and keeping everything sharp with the sense of an imminent threat.

MORE IN HOPE THAN JUDGEMENT

There is no doubt that even given this optimistic rendering of the impact of being immersed in the Levinasian 'elemental', the reading both of large groups and of neighbours presented in this paper is rather austere. There is no humanistic resolution available in which the threat posed by the neighbour, in society or in its microcosmic dramatization in the large group, is ameliorated by openness, friendship or love. Nor is the usual spread of associations of the group as a maternal container, or of the paternal, super-ego driven structures of authority, what comes most fully to mind. Rather, the limit is given by Butler's (2005) argument for an ethics linked to a kind of recognition of the other based on appreciation of the necessary opacity of each subject – we have otherness within and are dependent on the other so must tolerate it when we find such otherness without; a responsibility to the unknowable other comes from recognition of the unknowability of each self. For Žižek (2005), however, even this is too tame: an ethics of otherness requires *justice*, holding the neighbour at a distance so that one does not choose a special *one* in preference to a third; his conception of 'ethical violence' is therefore that of the enunciation that comes from outside and insists on the primacy of the law over empathic understanding. This suggests that the 'cut' that produces a special relationship with an other is immediately a move away from the ethical principles upon which justice is based, in which no preference can be shown. The *facelessness* of the neighbour, the fact of interchangeability, is therefore primary. This in itself may be one of the sources of disturbance in the large group: the presence of the neighbour and the push towards facelessness in what appears to be a face-to-face situation, leaves the subject aching for a kind of contact that must always be interrupted, producing disappointment and confusion. In Lacanian terms, there is a breaking of the imaginary fantasy that a perfectly healing communication is possible, in favour of the crushing awareness that each subject is placed in a symbolic order which is regulated by its own structures. Hence, 'desire' and 'demand' are constantly called into play, the former as the irritation that appears as the latter is left unmet: the demand for love can never be salved, leaving an unfillable ache or gap between the hope and its realisation, one of the famous Lacanian moments of 'splitting' (Lacan, 1958, 81). The *impartiality* of the large

group is thus symptomatic of the obliterating tendency of a social structure that anonymizes subjects and leaves them grasping for some sense of connection with others.

This impartiality, however, also has a different kind of productivity, in that it makes the group not simply 'psychotherapeutic' in the sense of making people feel better, but instead gives it foundations that are perhaps genuinely *analytic* in mobilising acts, both intrapsychic and intersubjective, that take seriously the interrupted nature of the human subject. That is, maybe what we should be looking for is not the famous 'consolation' that Freud (1929) complained about, and that is – perhaps fortunately – usually lacking in large groups. Consolation is definitely a humane act, and it makes people feel better when they receive it; but it is not an ethical act in the sense of helping us face the truth. If, as has been argued here, it is the case that it is in the very nature of the human subject that we are fragmented, disrupted, interrupted beings, that each of us carries the 'Thing' inside in the sense of an untranslatable residue that both separates and links, then the analytic move is towards uncovering this. Large groups, precisely because of their disturbing, boundary-crashing, neighbour intrusiveness, both reflect the problems of being such interrupted subjects, and also dramatise the difficulties and potentials of such states. In these circumstances, hope is something we might turn away from as illusory but it does also reside in analytic judgement, in complex modes of identification with the other who may be both present and alien, and in recognition of the possibility that as we learn to look the Thing in the face, so we might begin to see what is there.

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