

Stranger neighbours

Helen Douglas [*]

1.

The writing of this paper has been animated by three small stories of resistance and madness from the South African liberation struggle. Ghost stories, I suppose. They've haunted me for years.

The first is set in a farmhouse in the north of the country in the late 1980s. It had been rented by four or five young white South Africans, members of a small sabotage unit of Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC). One morning, one of the men left the house, walked to the local police station and turned himself in, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of himself and his comrades. Years later, the unit's commander wrote in his own memoirs that this fellow had become "increasingly paranoid", that he had "apparently disintegrated as a personality". As if that was enough to say, as if it was simply a psychological flaw, and nothing to do with him.

The second is a conversation I overheard a few years ago while waiting for an ANC meeting to begin. One man asked another if he had seen "Johnny" lately. The second man said, "No. I hear he just sits in his garage all day. Drinking." The first man shook his head. "Man, they must really have fucked him up." The second man replied softly, "Ja, they really did." They paused, a moment of helplessness and regret, and then began to speak of other things. As if there was something that prevented them from going to that broken comrade, something that made it impossible to offer him comfort.

The third is the story of a woman who, with her husband, kept a safe house in Johannesburg for more than three years. The whole time she lived on edge, afraid of being caught, but even more afraid of not being equal to the task. Finally, she slipped off the edge, fell to pieces. When democracy finally was won, she found herself unable to attend the election celebrations. As if her lack of confidence had marked her as unworthy.

Three stories, unable to rest, struggling towards meaning. A meaning that strangely begins to surface in a discourse on "Madness, citizenship and social justice", the odd constellation that brought 250 people together in Vancouver in 2008. What is it that these three concepts share? What is at stake and what is at their root? I think it might be identity, the identity of persons; more exactly, about who we are with others.

And so, the first question for me is not about madness or social justice. It's citizenship, which deploys identity as a force to be reckoned with, as if force and reckoning were called for.

2.

As citizens, we are democrats, inheritors of a lineage of Western political thought that embraces both the rationality of the Enlightenment and the republican ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. Autonomous, we have no kings or masters over us. Bearing rights, under the figure of Justice with her balance and her blindfold, we are each, regardless of the conditions of our birth, warranted equal access to the public goods of the commonwealth. In fellowship, we acknowledge our obligations to respect and to protect our sisters and brothers. From the first, citizenship is concerned with justice in human community, with sociality, with how you and I are to get on together.

Citizenship signifies as inclusion: being counted in and being held accountable. The City (the democratic state and its bureaucracy) needs to keep tabs on us citizens. This isn't necessarily sinister, or even a bad thing. Our official ID documents our political and personal rights and freedoms. For the City is always also a gated community, its boundaries necessary both to administer its own population and to defend against outsiders. Often this amounts to the same thing: the original Greek city-states are generally understood as self-defence units. The laager of South African apartheid, a defensive circling of wagons in dangerous and alien surrounds, tells the same story. Inside is us, recognisably; out there is them, not-us, strange and unfamiliar, of whom we may be wary. We love our neighbours as we love ourselves -- although, in this view, that's a tautology: our neighbours are ourselves.

3.

One thing I know for sure, though: there is more to me than what the City takes me for. Who I am in the world is a constant negotiation. I may identify as or with something, such as citizenship, but I am not identical with it. I might even assume a false identity, but only at the risk of lessening myself. And if I am mis-identified and mis-taken by others, I could be lost entirely.

Which is to say that there is a correspondence or an affinity between me and my identity -- between who and what I am -- that is not simply contingent. That is, it's not only contingent, and it's not simple. It has something to do with sincerity, in claiming and proclaiming my experience of worldly things, but also something to do with others and their claims on me. The stories they tell of me.

4.

And who are you, my neighbour? We both hope for, at least, a nicely symmetrical neighbourly relationship in which each will each look out for the other without interfering in each other's privacy, without asking too much. Good neighbours calling across our good fences. Accommodating each other.

This is the usual (Western liberal) story about community: individuals -- rational

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agents maximising their interests -- who voluntarily join together, identify with each other as a group. The many become one. Neighbours in a neighbourhood, with national variations: the American "melting pot", the Canadian "mosaic", South African "unity in diversity".

As all of us neighbours give up, for better or for worse, a portion of our autonomy to conform to the idea of our common citizenship, the community assumes a more or less recognisable and stable identity "of its own". We then identify ourselves with our community and our City, opening the possibility that the idea of it could take on a life of its own, like a monster or a golem.

The formation of community around identity always threatens to either harden into totalitarianism or to fragment and disintegrate. There is an immeasurable potential for violence here. One strategy to minimise this, if it worries us, is to unlatch the gate, allowing greater inclusions into our "us". Or, more accurately, to engage with groups of the non-enfranchised when they stake their own claims to citizenship, citing their exclusion as injustice. Fighting precisely for the totality in the name of justice. You cut us, they say. Are we not bleeding? And because they are, after all, the same as us, they too should be loved as ourselves. That we might become a more perfect union.

5.

There is a dialectical logic here of identity, of sameness and difference, inclusion and exclusion. But, equally clearly, this is not the complete creation story of a community that advances citizenship.

The Western liberal account of identity-based community is a naturalist one, and as such, provides for the equality of citizens. This is a good thing. But when faced with ethical issues, it falls victim to the old philosophical dilemma that naturalist descriptions don't justify ethical norms, or that you can't get from an "is" to an "ought". This is not so good.

And so, alongside the rational political story, we may also remember the ancient ones that speak of the Good of creation and the shame of the Fall, about loving our neighbours and our enemies, and about the hospitality that is due to strangers. Morality plays whose lessons grow faint when the pure logic of identity beats in our blood.

6.

To look for another origin of community and its reason, we can return to the question of who (rather than what) we are to each other: I, at home in the world, both unique and a player of various parts, and you, my neighbour. As a citizen, you are my equal, my counterpart. And you also overflow that identity, as someone strange and incomprehensible to me -- and yet, remarkably, not as an

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enemy, but someone who requires peace from me. This is the strange (maybe strangely familiar) philosophical territory of Emmanuel Levinas, he who has said:

With the appearance of the human -- and this is my entire philosophy -- there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable animal. ([Levinas, 1988](#), p. 172)

The Other, for Levinas, is the stranger, the widow, the orphan; the one to whom I am obliged not because of our commonality, but because her alterity and vulnerability command me to responsibility. As alterity, her difference is my non-indifference. It is her uniqueness that I care for. And this revelation of the Other immediately and simultaneously also opens all humanity to me, all the other others for and before whom I am also responsible and for whom justice is necessary.

Levinas calls this relatedness “ethics”, and it is this ethical imperative for justice for others that gives rise to consciousness, knowing, language and all the arts and sciences of human being -- including, of course, the foundation of community and the political conditions of citizenship. The Other is my neighbour.

As Levinas describes it, this origin -- the appeal of the Other -- is ethical before it is ontological. One comes to identity through responsibility rather than discovering one's responsibility in identity. Prior to consciousness, anachronistic to memory and intention, the appeal of the other person appears senseless and irrational to the logic of being and identity. Thus consciousness can go on to discover itself as the centre of its world in self-consciousness, in a natural order of things. Then, rather than welcoming, I close the door against these others who may pose a threat to my continued being.

What interrupts this, again, is ethics -- not as a moral code designed to curtail the excesses of ego, but being moved by direct sensible contact with the Face of the other, which puts my egoic self in question, which breaks open the heart again, and again introduces all humanity and the exigency for justice, and calls for consciousness. Which again may begin to take itself too seriously, forgetting its immemorial obligation to all these strangers, my neighbours.

7.

None of this makes a difference to what we have observed about identity, but it does change what it means and helps us to think both personal and communal identities differently, and otherwise. When citizenship is understood to be founded in ethics prior to identity, it still espouses the ideals of reason and democracy in community, still draws a line around “us”, but, aware that its justification is elsewhere or yet-to-come, aware that it is not as good as the good that inspires it, it is not quite so self-righteous and not quite so confident in its logic.

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Clearly, this will make a happier home for mad people. For the identity-based community, the mad one is both a neighbour -- one of us, for and with whom we are concerned -- and a stranger, one who is hard to recognise, and who may be dangerous. The mad ones are rendered homeless, alienated both by their inability to be easily at home in the world, and by the gulf between their own reason and experience and that of the community's "common sense".

The stricter this common sense, the more isolated the mad neighbour, and the more necessary it becomes for the identity-based community to either formally remove these stranger neighbours from our midst, or, with the best of intentions, to deny their otherness (both difference and alterity) -- perhaps by diagnosing them as sick or bad.

More than a regular stranger, who can either move on or be assimilated, these mad neighbours are -- at least, in the intransigence of their madness -- impossible to accommodate.

8.

Levinas's analysis of subjectivity as being-for-the-other, or the psyche as "the other in the same, without alienating the same" ([Levinas, 1981](#), p. 112), brings into one frame the ethical necessity for community, the potential for violence that is inherent within the formation of its bureaucracy, and the way its logic of identity and interest may be interrupted and the City again be brought to justice.

As a citizen, in this view, I am both a legal and an ethical subject. Legal, because I am included in the order of the City as a neighbour among neighbours. Ethical, because I can never sign over to the City my infinite responsibility for each neighbour who concerns me.

Representing us, acting in our name to create public policy and infrastructure, the City's bureaucrats deal in demographic terms. This is, again, not a bad thing. We can't individually provide for the wellbeing of all our neighbours, for their education and healthcare, or for the production and distribution of goods in the economy. But it is only oneself -- I -- who can attend to the unique situation of another:

There are, if you like, tears which a civil servant cannot see: the tears of the Other... In such a situation [a socio-political order], individual consciences are necessary, for they alone are capable of seeing the violence which proceeds from the proper functioning of Reason itself. ([Levinas, 1996](#), p. 23)

This ethical origin of citizenship is the condition for a community of respect, what Levinas ([1998](#), p. 20) calls a true society: "a configuration of wills which concern each other through their works, but who look one another in the face". The realm

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of identity alone cannot make sense of, cannot account for, the signification in which peace for the Other, for these stranger neighbours, is our business. No doubt, this concern can easily be discounted in the “national interest” -- where we look out for our own, and the charity that begins at home doesn’t ever quite make it past the front door. Identity becomes both destiny and fate, and then, again quoting Levinas ([2004/1934](#), p. 19), “If race does not exist, it must be invented!”

Following Levinas -- and against the liberal account in which rational individual agents yield a degree of their autonomy to create community -- one’s freedom is already due to an older heteronomy, to the ethical force that is revealed in the face of a neighbour, and the turn to community is already part of one’s being and one’s presence in the world. Unlike the liberal experience, to be part of a community does not diminish me. It is not a compromise; it is the fulfilment of a promise.

In both cases, however, the community as a totality is merely a structure. Apart from the persons who inhabit it, it is not supple. It has no life of its own. More stick than branch, it may become weak and brittle over time or even turn to stone. The petrified City is a totalitarian and tyrannical one. Desperate to stabilise its pseudo-identity -- and still in the name of justice and righteousness -- it must dictate and enforce conformity to its norms. Inevitably, it deals out oppression and madness.

9.

Whatever its socio-economic form, the suffering of oppression always includes the imposition of an implacable and inescapable force of identification upon the subject, by which the oppressor rationalises and justifies his behaviour.

This identification has nothing to do with the subjectivity of its object, with me and who I am, but one is nonetheless caught up in its logic. This is the sensibility in which the anti-Semite creates the Jew, the misogynist creates the woman, and the industrialist creates the proletarian. One is identified as other than and as less than human. This is not Levinas’s Other. But there is logic to it. Evil has its reason. In the totalitarian City, it is merely common sense, the natural order. One would have to be mad to resist or refuse it -- and a terrible threat, both to those who prosper in the City, and to those who have successfully been incorporated or assimilated within it.

But oppressed subjects are obliged to object. Resistance is necessary, just to be able to stand and to breathe, to bear witness to your own human dignity and that of the others with you. And if resistance is futile, if the City can’t soften up to take you in, then revolution is called for. For social justice, and even for the City’s own good.

10.

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And then, in their own turn, revolutionaries risk falling again into the dialectic of identity. There is great pressure to idealise or essentialise a new redemptive collective identity, to make a new monolith of solidarity. It is important to wonder how the violence and inhumanity of totalitarianism can be resisted, without this very struggle becoming the basis for further violence.

But a different reason is possible, and is in fact already present when we take up a struggle for liberation. This is not simply a war of conflicting interests and opposing forces. Let me say, as Che Guevara did -- “at the risk of seeming ridiculous” -- that “a true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.” True revolutionary solidarity expresses an ethical relatedness that is based in one’s responsibility for the freedom and the dignity of others. To know the uniqueness and the irreplaceability of the beloved is the condition of love. Revolutionary solidarity is based in this alterity first of all, before it takes account of any identity we may share.

Identity -- national, racial, gendered, etc. -- matters, but it is still a reduction of the human, and must signify primarily both as the site of oppression and the key to its overthrow. According to Steve Biko, who inspired the black consciousness movement in apartheid South Africa:

It becomes more necessary to see the truth as it is if you realise that the only vehicle for change are these people who have lost their personality. The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. ([Biko, 1978](#), p. 29)

In a movement towards liberation, oppressed subjects realise that the identity that has been issued to them is false and unjust. Both “categorically” and personally. One might first of all “come back to” oneself as, in this case, a black man, but to stop there fails to overthrow the very reduction to typology that offends human dignity and sovereignty.

The task of liberation is also an individual one, to come back also to oneself as this one who, speaking, says I, and stands by his word ([Lingis, 2007](#)). This one who stands in relationship with others. It is the task for each one of us, but who can do it alone? In Levinas’s term, oppression denies and disregards the Face of those who are oppressed. It is others -- allies and comrades -- who can infuse us with pride and dignity by naming our suffering unjust and by calling us to account as ethical subjects. And perhaps it is this work, this commitment of one for another, that is the true vehicle for change.

A liberation movement is revolutionary when ethics (who we each are to each other) remains higher than identity (what we are) in our thinking, and politics -- the strategies and tactics necessary to create a more just society -- is placed

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higher than, and places limits on, the violence that will be wielded to achieve it. And if the revolution does not create the conditions by which we can live well with each other as citizens and neighbours, then none of the rest of it matters.

Levinas's analysis of ethical subjectivity also lets us understand that, for instance, the international brigades who fought side by side with the Spanish republicans, or men who take up feminist struggle, are not necessarily dupes and useful idiots. Nor are they saints. In a revolutionary liberation movement, one's capacity to contribute to the cause always surpasses (if it is even a function of) one's identity as a member of one or another group. True revolutionaries, when they struggle for their own liberation are always fighting as well for the liberation of others.

From the perspective of bourgeois individualism and the reason of self-interest, this is certainly difficult to fathom, but there is nothing new here. It was formulated by Nelson Mandela as Your freedom and mine cannot be separated. By John Donne as Any man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. In the bible as Peace, peace unto the neighbour and the one far off.

11.

If resistance is the necessary remedy to oppression, then a failed or betrayed resistance is a disaster. Indeed, Slavoj Žižek (as cited in [Santner, 2005](#), p. 89) claims that psychological symptoms are the signs of failed revolutionary attempts. Santner continues:

I am suggesting that symptoms register not only past failed revolutionary attempts but also, more modestly, past failures to respond to calls for action or even for empathy on behalf of those whose suffering belongs to the form of life of which one is a part.

Which brings us back to the three small disasters I have been trying to understand. To be clear, I am not interested in the historical facts of the matter, or the "true story" of these people, most of whom I don't know of at all beyond these simple narratives. As a counselling philosopher, I am trying to get a sense of what they can tell us about love and revolution, and how it all can go wrong.

The recruit who turned himself in. He would have known that the lifespan of a covert unit was limited. Maybe it was just the suspense of waiting to be caught that tore him up. Or maybe this is a story about how difficult it is to take up a struggle against one's own people, in service of their declared enemies. Black South Africans taking up arms against apartheid made all kinds of sense. But white people who signed on were more or less leaving home, knowing full well they would be seen as traitors. It took a different kind of courage, and it demanded a certain kind of comradeship and support. One that cannot be secured by tales of self- and group-interest, but calls for a different understanding, such as I have attempted to sketch here.

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I wonder what this man's comrades did for him as he began to unravel. I wonder why it wasn't enough. I am horrified by what he did. Still, his "paranoia" and "disintegration" were not just his business. Whatever led him out that morning, his commander was wrong to write out the context, to reduce it to individual pathology. The account in the book -- and perhaps he did not write all that he felt -- is as dry as a report of broken equipment. The whole unit, and not just the designated madman, had a problem. The unit was the commander's responsibility; those people were his responsibility.

The man who was fucked up. This time, a coloured man arranges his own incarceration. In the logic of apartheid, race was the key determinant of identity and destiny. His liberation would entail escaping the cage of being "coloured" in the gaze of a racist state. In political-historical terms, the task would be to overturn the regime and build a democratic non-racial South Africa. On a personal level, to refuse what the system had in store for black people, to eradicate the self-hatred it tried to implant, to create another meaning for his life. Above all, to begin to act as a free man. Perhaps by joining his personal and political responsibilities as an activist in the struggle.

Armed struggle demands a particular discipline. It can take the form of a heroic, romantic, cowboys-don't-cry kind of code, a matter of virility, pride and honour. This is what it is to be a comrade. This is what it is to be a man. But it is at the personal level that we find and lose ourselves, and to assume a personal identity defined by the political is as risky as assuming any other defined identity as oneself.

And then he was captured. Maybe for him, this meant he was no longer a comrade -- and if he was not a comrade, then he must be, after all, what the regime tried to create him as. Except that could not be true either. His honour remains tied up with being a comrade. He is, and is not. He thinks himself to a standstill.

Except he's wrong. His friends were still concerned about him. Yet he clings to his shame as the last remnant of the pride that has given his life and his sacrifice meaning, drinking toasts all day to the man he wanted to become, drowning his shameful drunken self. There is a tight circle of reasoning in this, and perhaps his comrades don't know how to break through it to find him and bring him back to himself.

Or maybe he was devastated by torture, by direct experience of the profound hatred with which one person can brutalise another. After that catastrophe, only particular acts of particular care and creation -- only love, I think -- can restore one's world and faith. Maybe his comrades weren't up for it. Maybe they had demons of their own. Maybe whoever was helping to keep him safe and alive in his garage was doing the best they could.

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The freedom of a man can't be seen to depend only upon a result. It's already in the struggle, which is in this sense messianic. Freedom is the condition for the struggle for freedom. We live our freedom daily when we are not bound by the orders of our various memberships, when we are responsible for ourselves and each other. When we live in dignity, when we have faces. When we each say I, and present ourselves. Comrades get this wrong when brokenness is an embarrassment or a shame instead of tenderness, when the idea of being a comrade gets in the way of comradely solidarity.

The third story, of the safehouse-keeper who lost her edge, is also about assuming identity, in various senses. Those who keep a secret refuge for the resistance within the City must maintain a double identity, each a mask for the other. The teacher is secretly a revolutionary. The revolutionary is really a teacher. It demands a constantly self-monitoring consciousness that is at best stressful and at worst divisive or paralytic. But in this case, she also believed that she was somehow insufficient. Acting as if she was strong enough so that she might become strong enough added another twist to the masquerade, tracing the lines along which she eventually fell apart.

It seems to be another story of confusing the what-ness and the who-ness of identity. What we are, our qualities, attributes and occupations -- any variable that completes the statement "I am x" -- is more or less multiple and adaptable. Our uniqueness and singularity, our confidence and truth, is in who we are: the living I of experience, contact and desire. Personal identity, carrying both of these, is also interpersonal. We are who we are for others; we are what others make of us. We need basic recognition. And mistakes can be made, innocently or with malice. We can certainly, as was this woman, be mistaken about ourselves.

12.

Again, these are not meant to be "case studies". No doubt there were many factors that contributed to the madness of these comrades and their fractured revolutionary attempts.

But the narratives still indicate an interplay of citizenship, madness and social justice. The identity-based City, which relies and insists upon the conformity of its citizens, calls for resistance in order to reduce its violence and to open a more hospitable space. If the City is too tyrannical, too petrified, too split from its own roots, then revolution may be in order. A risky business, both because of its own tendency to reification and violence and because of how devastating failure can be. And we all know that history is full of revolutions that have eaten their own.

But these failures are neither certain nor complete. What seems to me more interesting is that sometimes comrades and revolutionaries get it right, coming together with everything that that they (that we) are, in true society, with true discipline, bearing and depending upon each other in difficult times, each

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realising a responsibility for the liberation of all the others, of each other, of oneself. Small events, perhaps, that nevertheless indicate an origin for our solidarity and our community that is prior to identity and the calculus of interest.

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Note

[1] The late 1980s were marked by increasingly violent repression and resistance in South Africa. The ANC, as the leading organisation of the liberation movement, had been outlawed by the apartheid regime in 1960 and took up armed struggle the following year. It has been the ruling party in South Africa since the democratic transition of 1994.

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