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Why do we hate? Why do we help? Asylum seekers and ambivalence in contemporary Britain

Transcript

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Good evening. I would like to begin by thanking Gresham College and the Museum of London for allowing the Refugee Council the opportunity to hold this event and say that I am particularly honoured to have been given the opportunity to speak on behalf of the charity. The RC will be at least 60 years old next year (no-one's entirely sure). This and the enormous contribution refugees have made to the social, economic and cultural development of London over the centuries makes it entirely appropriate that we are here speaking in this place this evening.

In this lecture, I wish to step back from the immediacy of current debates on asylum and consider what might lie behind the deep divisions on this issue within our society: my own view, is that we need to look no further than humanitarian arguments and our commitments under international human rights law to justify providing sanctuary to those in need of protection, but I am aware not everyone in the country agrees with me. Attitudes towards asylum seekers have hardened over the past twenty years, a change reflected in a series of punitive laws including the Immigration Acts of 1996 and 1999 especially, but there are also hundreds of thousands of people in the country who genuinely welcome asylum seekers and refugees. Many people devote their lives to helping asylum seekers in voluntary or professional capacities. Views on both sides are passionately held and often polarised and extreme: our society contains both those who would end all immigration (the British National Party) and those who would remove all immigration controls (the 'No Borders' movement for instance). With many other groups and persuasions in between.

Migration furthermore, is a natural part of human culture, which has existed for millennia. For centuries societies have expelled dissidents and oppressed the 'outsider'. The history of the British Isles is of repeated migrations and invasions: Celts, Romans, Angles, Saxons, Normans, Vikings, not to mention the Picts, Scots and Jutes) have all come here from another place and settled, leaving their mark on our language, landscape and culture. People *from* these islands have conquered and migrated to vast areas of the rest of world as the continued existence of the Commonwealth attests. The presence of refugees in the country should not surprise us yet the issue of the relationship of our society to those who arrive here seeking protection, is highly contentious. Mainstream political and media discourse on asylum is littered with words such as 'flooded', 'overrun', 'waves'. The impression is that the country will be overwhelmed and *invaded* by menacing hordes. But what is the reality? Who are refugees?

The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, defines a refugee as: (PP)

A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it?

The term *asylum seeker* in UK domestic law refers to a person who has applied to be recognised as a refugee and is awaiting a final decision.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were, at the end of 2009, 36,460,306 people in the category of 'populations of concern', in the world, which includes refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs, returnees (both refugees and IDPs), stateless persons and others of concern. 36 million people. And where are these people? (PP2)

Africa	10,475,567
Asia	18,567,061
Europe	3,069,248
Latin America / Carib.	3,240,389
North America	569,868

Oceania 38,148

Various 25

Two percent of these people are in the UK and on the table of 'number of asylum seekers per head of population' for member states of the European Union, we rank 13th.

The UKBA (United Kingdom Border Agency), recorded 24,485 applications for asylum in 2009, down 8% on the previous year and massively down on the peak of 84,130 applications in 2002.

The public perception is that we take far more than our 'fare share' of refugees (a recent YOUNGOV poll indicates that the average percentage of the worlds refugees UK citizens *think* we take in is 23%, not 2). The UK is the fourth largest economy in the world. We can absorb 24,000 asylum seekers a year without our island sinking.

These people have come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Eritrea, from situations of conflict, persecution and torture, seeking protection and safety, as refugees have come here for hundreds of years:

Much that is remembered of the Jews, Huguenots, and others who sought sanctuary here in earlier centuries and what they have left us is contained within this museum: A leaflet I picked up here explains that Jews first came to England in the realm of William I (a Frenchman, note) in the years after 1066. In 1096, they were joined by Jews from Rouen, escaping a massacre by Crusader knights of all Jewish people in the town who refused to convert to Christianity. Nearly a thousand years ago.

England has at various times in the past also *produced* refugees - in Elizabethan England Catholicism was illegal and Catholic priests and laity fled to the continent to escape persecution, including torture and execution. John Gerrard, a Jesuit, gives, in his autobiography 'The Hunted Priest', an account of his imprisonment and torture in the Tower of London and later escape (one of only two men ever to achieve this apparently).

But I wish to go further back to think about the *idea* of exile in a deeper context. This is by necessity a highly selective survey, but one which I hope, will illuminate our understanding of the current meaning of exile in our society.

Herodotus, the Greek writer who chronicled the complex events leading up to the war between the Greeks and the Persians in the 5th Century BC, makes several references to the 'exile' in his work, a figure of subterfuge and betrayal who will assist their people's enemies to attack their home city to remove a rival faction.

But he also tells the shocking story of Scyles, son of the king of Scythia, who travelled widely and became interested in the culture of the Greeks, adopting their habits and dress while abroad. He even 'performed the rites of Bacchus', of which the Scythians disapproved as they 'drove people out of their minds'. Scyles returned to Scythia from one trip abroad to discover his own brother, Octamasades, had been chosen to lead a revolt against him. Scyles fled to Thrace for his own safety but Octamasades and an army of Scythians marched against Thrace to punish its people for sheltering his brother. However, the commander of the Thracian army sent out to engage the Scythians discovered that *his* brother, who had gone into exile some years before after falling foul of the authorities, was with the Scythians. Octamasades and the Thracian commander agreed to each give back the other's brother to avoid a battle. As soon as Scyles was returned to his own people, he was beheaded on the spot.

In contemporary language, Scyles was returned by his state of asylum to a state where he had a well-founded fear of persecution, for reasons of political expediency and was killed. How many times since has this happened?

Thucydides, another great historian of the ancient world, also writes about refugees in his 'History of the Peloponnesian War?', the war between Athens and Sparta which followed the Greco-Persian war. He describes for instance, how, early on in the conflict, Pericles, the son of Xanthippus, advised the Athenians to prepare for war and bring in their property from the country, to which they agreed:

'But the move was a difficult experience for them since most of them had always been used to living in the country' For a long time, the Athenians had lived in independent communities throughout Attica-most Athenians being born and bred in the country. So they were far from pleased at having to move with their entire households, especially as they had only recently re-established themselves after the Persian wars. It was sadly and reluctantly they now abandoned their homes and temples time-honoured from their patriotic past, that they prepared to change their whole way of life, leaving behind them what each man

regarded as his own city.

When they arrived at Athens, a few had houses of their own to go to and a few were able to find shelter with friends and relatives, but most of them had to settle down in those parts of the city that had not been built over and in the temples and in the shrines of the heroes. A number of people also took up their quarters in the towers along the walls and, in fact, wherever they could find space to live in. For, when they all came into the city together, there was not enough room.'

These descriptions of where the Athenian refugees settled, on the edges of the city, wherever they can find somewhere to stay: this still happens today in London - asylum seekers will always end up on the edges, on the run down estates, where no one else wants to live.

Thucydides, much more than Herodotus, explores the *feelings* of the refugee about their displacement and predicament, a theme we find repeated in another place, some 1200 years later: you may remember the words of Psalm 137: 'By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and *wep't*'; but consider this from the Book of Exodus:

PP

'You must not molest the stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers once, in the land of Egypt'

Exodus 22/21 (1290 BC)

This injunction was given to the Israelites following their escape from slavery in Egypt. For our purposes, the significance of these words lies not in whether they are the word of God. To feel their resonance, one does not have to be Jewish, Christian or indeed of any religion. What matters is that *someone* wrote the words and I think it is reasonable to speculate that perhaps they had observed something about the way their community responded to outsiders which troubled them, given their own history of forced exile and slavery.

Moving ahead again, we come to Dante, the great Thirteenth Century Italian poet. Dante, was born in Florence in 1265 and grew up in a time of civil strife between two rival political factions, the Guelphs and Ghibellines. Dante rose through the political ranks and was eventually elected 'Chief of Priors' in 1300, the supreme authority in the city. While on an embassy to Rome, there was a change of regime in Florence, Dante received an 'order of banishment', his property was confiscated and he never returned to his city of birth.

Dante wandered through Italy seeking refuge with one city state or prince after another for the rest of his life, never quite feeling at home again and finally dying in Ravenna in 1321. He explores and alludes to this experience in Canto 17 of *Paradise*, the third part of his epic poem, The Divine Comedy. The poem describes Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory and finally Paradise, escorted by Virgil and in Canto 17, Dante meets the spirit of Cacciaguida, a friend of his in life, who predicts his exile:

PP

".....**Thou shalt leave each thing**

Beloved most dearly: this is the first shaft,

Shot from the bow of exile. Thou shalt prove

How salt the savour is of other's bread:

How hard the passage, to descend and climb

By other's stairs"

Dante was able to write so powerfully about Exile because he understood it, had lived its bitterness. But his story again resonates in our time - he did not choose exile, he was prevented from returning to Florence by a rival political faction who presumably would have threatened his life had he gone back.

Tolstoy, in *War & Peace*, describes the Aristocratic Rostov family preparing to leave Moscow, in anticipation of the arrival of Napoleon's army after the battle of Borodino in 1812. The family 'spend the night packing' - furniture, china, rugs worth '100,000 roubles' into 30 wagons brought in by serfs from their country estate, to where they are preparing to leave-then reality

arrives: wounded and disfigured Russian soldiers seeking lodging and treatment after the battle - the Rostovs first offer them shelter in their abandoned house then empty their wagons of furniture and take the wounded soldiers with them. Tolstoy notes that the departure of the aristocratic families caused some controversy in Moscow at the time:

'As soon as the enemy drew near, the well-to-do elements of the population departed, abandoning their possessions while the poorer classes remained and burnt and destroyed what was left...' Such actions led to criticism in the 'broadsheets' - 'it is disgraceful to run away from danger, only cowards are deserting Moscow...'

Another contemporary theme: in any movement of refugees, not everyone leaves, either because they choose not to, or there wasn't enough money for everyone to leave, they were too ill or weak for the journey. Perhaps a son or daughter was in prison when the family left or parents had to leave their children with relatives in order to escape. Tolstoy alludes to this as the Rostovs pass a family friend on the road on the way out of Moscow, though does not explore the horror which enforced separation within a family can produce. He does however mention the resentment felt by those left behind and alludes to the guilt felt by those who leave. But this passage also reminds us that anyone can become a refugee - media stereotypes of asylum seekers as predominantly poor, uneducated and with nothing to offer society economically do not begin to describe the enormous talent and potential offered to us by the education and professional experience of many thousands of asylum seekers who are in the country and not allowed to work. For many, the loss of status, place in society, professional role is devastating: 'I was a diplomat before the war and now I queue for my lunch every day in your day centre' a client once told me, bitterly.

In the 1930s, within living memory, Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany began to arrive in Britain, among them Sigmund Freud and his daughter Anna, and the children of the *kindertransport*, assisted to escape by groups of private citizens, appalled by the growing and obvious threat of fascism and their own government's failure to act. The British government's response, egged on, by all accounts by sections of the media, was to intern all residents of German origin, (except the Royal Family) on the grounds they were a threat to national security - this included, inevitably, many of the Jewish refugees who had come here to escape persecution. Even more shamefully, the then government eventually decided to deport some of the internees to Australia and Canada by ship - the second ship to sail, the *Arandora Star*, with 1,571 German and Italian internees on board was sunk off the west coast of Ireland by a German torpedo boat with the loss of 682 lives.

One of the most important messages from these passages is that exile is a *relational activity*. By this I mean that the act of going into exile, of fleeing your own country because you are terrified of what will happen to you if you stay, is never a private act. It is often of necessity a hidden, secret act, but it is never *private*: the refugee always leaves someone behind - family, loved ones, their party, school friends and their leaving has an impact on these people. Some refugees, (though not all as hundreds if not thousands are killed undertaking the increasingly hazardous journey to 'safety'), will arrive finally in London or other parts of the UK and their arrival will have an impact on the people they encounter here, directly and indirectly: the Home Office officials, solicitors, Refugee agency staff, advice workers, counsellors, campaigners, their neighbours, accommodation providers, but also politicians, journalists, readers of newspapers, people who watch the news, all will be affected and have an opinion. And the experience of these members of the host community will in turn impact on the asylum seekers arriving in the country.

As *exile* is a relational activity, psychoanalysis, in as much as it is the study of the relationship between the self and the *other* is a helpful framework for thinking about this encounter between the asylum seeker and the host community.

Much has already been discussed regarding the functioning of defence mechanisms such as projection and denial at the societal level to explain host communities' response to refugees (society splits off its own inadequacies, projects them onto the refugees as a group and blames refugees for their own problems, for instance).

Stanley Cohen, in *States of Denial - knowing about atrocities and suffering* explores the use of this elementary defence by individuals, communities, states, the international community to protect themselves from the reality of the atrocities taking place in front of their eyes and to excuse inaction - Armenia, the Holocaust, Rwanda, Bosnia, East Timor, the Kurds, the Palestinians, the Tamils, the list is endless.

We hear denial in right-wing media and political discourse on the refugee: 'economic migrant' 'bogus asylum seeker' 'illegal' - the subtext is always 'the story you are telling is not true'.

Cohen also discusses 'Compassion fatigue' a feeling of not being able to hear any more stories of suffering, a concept from the 1990s which I think is perhaps linked to the contemporary idea of vicarious traumatising, or *burnout* - the impact on the psychological health of the helper of long periods working with the traumatised or even reading traumatic material. This can affect anyone involved in the asylum process, whether UKBA case owners who decide on the outcome of asylum claims, or

those of us who work directly in supportive roles with asylum seekers and can lead to a turning away from the needs of the client, a distancing from the horror of their experience.

But I wish here to consider another psychoanalytic concept, or more accurately, a concept of analytic psychology, the work of Carl Jung and his followers: the *archetype*.

Samuels et al in their '*Critical dictionary of Jungian Analysis*' define (or attempt to define) the Archetype as 'the inherited part of the psyche'. Jung believed in the *collective unconscious*; the individual's unconscious contains not only repressed material from one's own, individual experience, but also material that has been handed down to us from previous generations: an unconscious which is *inherited*. Lying dormant within the collective unconscious are *archetypes*, patterns, forms, constellations of emotions, which wait for opportunities to express themselves. Archetypes are unknowable directly but can be observed in outer behaviours, especially, as Samuels puts it, 'those that cluster around the basic and universal experiences of life, such as birth, marriage, motherhood, death and separation' and are most evident at times of crisis. Once triggered, an archetype can 'arouse affect, blind one to realities and take possession of will...'

Jung claimed archetypes appeared 'throughout history and across cultures': Mercurius in Greek mythology, Medieval festivals and Tom Thumb and other characters from Grimms' Fairy Tales are all examples of the *trickster* archetype, in that our response to these characters and events are *archetypal*, informed by pre-existing patterns.

A difficult concept to employ in a discussion about refugees, given the controversies which rage around whether Jung was anti-semitic and racist in general. But I wish to propose that much of our response on a societal and individual level to refugees is *archetypal*, (as perhaps was Jung's own response) and that often our response to the refugee is influenced by a refugee or exile archetype, buried deep within our collective unconscious. We fall under the spell of this archetype when we encounter the *stranger in our midst*. It can take possession of our will.

What do I mean by this?

In the archetypal pattern, refugees are messengers. They bring us news, news of distant catastrophe, of impending disaster. They speak to us of war and rumours of war. They tell us we live in a hostile, dangerous world where nightmares come true. They carry the message in the wounds and scars of their bodies and the wounds and scars of their minds. And the message terrifies us.

Refugees have carried this message since war began, since human communities became intolerant to the dissident, the thinker, the rebel and began to expel rather than tolerate. Remember Scyles the Scythian.

But the precise meaning and interpretation given to the message varies across time and from culture to culture: refugees arriving in the West after escaping Soviet Russia were perhaps greeted more enthusiastically than is currently the case as their message was of the inferiority of the Soviet system - they told Western governments what they wanted to hear. The messages brought by the Iraqi National Congress to Bush's America prior to the invasion of Iraq were similarly well received. Compare this to Bush senior's response to the Iraqi Kurds in 1991, left to freeze in the mountains or face the wrath of an Iraqi army desperate to take revenge for defeat in Kuwait. Remember Scyles the Scythian.

The message refugees bring to contemporary Britain is of our weakness in the face of a threatening and hostile world: within living memory, Britain had an empire covering a fifth of the world's surface, upon which the sun never set:

Our influence in the world is shrinking: despite our protestations, Britain was powerless to stop the bombing of Lebanon in 2006, the assault of the Sri Lankan army on the Tamils in 2009. Mugabe is in his eighties, the Zimbabwean economy is in pieces and yet he has seen off Blair and Brown and shows no sign of retiring. We can't even stop refugees coming here by invading their countries of origin: the Ministry of Defence reports 300 forces personnel and MOD civilians have been killed in Afghanistan due to hostile enemy action since the invasion and yet still Afghani refugees come to the UK. Afghanistan is not safe for our soldiers in armoured personnel carriers, encased in Kevlar and yet the Government thinks it is safe to deport young Afghan asylum seekers, some in their teens, back to Kabul.

179 British soldiers and MOD civilians were killed by hostile enemy action in Iraq during the invasion and subsequent occupation in an attempt to make the country safe and democratic and yet refugees continued to come to the UK and towards the end of the decade, the UKBA began attempting to return 'failed' asylum seekers to Iraq, despite obvious signs that the country was completely unsafe. One incident in December 2009 summed up Britain's impotence - a flight chartered by UKBA to return

asylum seekers arrived at Baghdad airport but the Iraqi authorities refused permission for the group to get off the plane. Owen Bowcott, writing in the Guardian on December 19th explained what happened next:

'The commander of Baghdad airport was reportedly so infuriated by the unexpected arrival of the chartered plane that he threatened to set fire to the aircraft if it did not leave within two hours. Details of the operation, involving 100 private guards and about 40 failed Iraqi asylum seekers - suggest the secret expulsions degenerated into a humiliating retreat.'

According to the reports of Iraqis on the plane, the security guards verbally and physically abused them on the way home, although Lin Homer, Chief Executive of UKBA denied the allegations. Enraged at our own weakness, we beat those who are even weaker.

While it is true that the number of asylum seekers arriving from Afghanistan has gone down from the peak of 8,920 in 2001 (the year of the allied invasion), since 2004 when applications reached a low of 1,395, the number of Afghani nationals applying for asylum in the UK has risen each year, reaching 3,505 in 2008, the highest number since 2004. 3,330 Afghans applied for asylum in the UK in 2009 (all these figures are from the UKBA website.) Many of these were separated children who endured unimaginable hardship and terrors in Afghanistan and en route to the UK. This happens because Afghanistan is still a dangerous place, in spite of the presence of so many NATO soldiers.

The world is a dangerous place and we have little control over it. This message unsettles us, creating massive anxiety. One response is to shoot the messenger: to silence the refugee: detention, refusal of claim, criminalisation, deportation: the message is of danger, the messenger is dangerous and must be locked up, punished, expelled. The message is too dangerous to hear.

But despite detaining the asylum seeker, expelling him, closing the Jungle Camp in Calais, the asylum seeker and their fear of return, still exists. The world is still a dangerous place. Removing benefits from asylum seekers, removing funding from refugee agencies, none of this will make the problem go away. The world will still be a dangerous place and the message will still make us anxious.

Alternatively, we attempt to block out the anxiety by caring for the refugee: if I can make my client safe, I can make myself feel safe. All of us, to an extent, project vulnerable aspects of ourselves into our clients and attempt to heal ourselves by healing the client.

Both responses can be *archetypal* in that we can find ourselves gripped by powerful unconscious forces which drive our responses, moving between these two extremes: I have been phoned by UKBA staff, in desperate states of anxiety about particular asylum seekers they have come into contact with, pleading with me almost to help them and I have noticed a tendency in myself and highly professional colleagues to wish to push certain clients away and have had to create methods of guarding against this (through clinical supervision and open reflective practise). Although broadly speaking, people working in agencies like the RC would tend towards the helping response and UKBA might attract individuals with a tendency to expel the source of their anxiety, I do not wish to encourage an us / them, good / bad split as we can all fall under the spell.

Archetypes form over millennia as aeons of human experience leave deposits, traces in the archaeological layers of the collective unconscious, traces which are passed on to successive generations. Robert Winder, in his book 'Bloody Foreigners: the story of Immigration to Britain' tells us the first *homo sapiens* migrant arrived here 25,000 years ago and that Britain was *physically* part of Europe until only 8,500 years ago. His main point is that the first Britons, ('whoever they were'), came from 'elsewhere'. We are *all* foreigners.

The experiences which led eventually to the contemporary version of the 'exile' archetype would have begun in this prehistoric era when any encounter with a stranger could have been genuinely life threatening, but also an opportunity to develop, to learn something vital for survival as the stranger might have been from a more advanced group: killing them ran the risk of a lost opportunity (they might know how to make fire, fashion tools from stones). But *not* attacking them was to risk being killed oneself. Dichotomy and confusion in our dealings with the stranger, were present from the very beginning and our current encounter with the refugee can be overwhelmed by the weight

Another factor is that we are *all* exiles: exiles from the womb. Every human being, no matter what their ultimate journey, shares the primal experience of expulsion from the womb, of separation from the mother (although in many varied forms). Even in a stable, democratic and prosperous state, the individual's story is one of a journey from a safe, containing condition of oneness at least with the biological mother, out into an unpredictable world where we must take responsibility and the quality of these

early experiences will stay in our unconscious to influence later relationships perhaps for our entire lives. The refugee makes this journey too but in the process meets with the genuine, concrete and physical *horror* of torture, rape, mutilation, loss, witnessing the murder of loved ones. I am not saying that the non-refugees' journey of separation from the womb is in anyway comparable to the refugee's journey through a living nightmare, but the fact of this experience contributes to the overwhelming anxiety which the encounter with the refugee can generate: the refugee tells us that the world we fear venturing into as we leave the womb behind, is even more terrifying than we had imagined.

Escaping the grip of the archetype requires, on the personal level, a willingness to reflect upon our motives for working with refugees, to think about what it is of ourselves we are seeking to heal. Only then will we be able to engage fully with the refugee as an individual and understand and meet *their* needs. We need to be more aware of our motives for helping, to meet with the refugee as a complete, human subject, not an object. As a society, we need to consider what it is about our own problems we are seeking to avoid by demonising the refugee and to act internationally in a manner befitting our true position in the world. To shoulder our fair share of the responsibility for assisting the world's displaced, but also to do what we can to reduce and finally end torture, repression and war, so that the 36 million can return home in dignity, at a time of their choosing and live their lives in peace.

We need to *hear* the message: there is real danger in the world, politically and indeed environmentally so that we can act to reduce this danger, but the arrival of the latest refugees might just provide an opportunity - one might just have some answers.

Thank you.

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