

The Changing Feelings of Otherness: Surprise, empathy, hostility as evidenced in Frank Westerman's *El negro and me*

We are in a time of changes. Climate change, population change, social change, political change, identity change (in many countries).

It is very likely that, in the past, people often had the sensation that they were living in a time of change. It is even possible that one of the things that never change in human history is the fact that people have the impression to live in a time of change. The Heraclitean way of looking at things existed and probably prevailed since a very long time. Nothing is new under the sun, including the impression that things are changing.

However, something is different this time because the change does exhibit certain specificities. First, the change is not restricted to a specific area: it is global. It is physical (warming) as well as demographic (population change) and it has diffuse and complex consequences on identities. For these reasons, it is not comparable to previous experiences of change. We are thus not only in a time of change but also in a time of a new kind of change.

And one could ask: Can we adapt to the changes that are going on? Can we absorb the changes that are coming? Or are these changes too massive to be bearable for many of us? If these changes are involving our identities, is the plasticity of human identities sufficiently elevated to render these changes possible? Indeed, the plasticity of identities is at the core of any change and specially of those that involve mixing people of various origins as it has been already noted by thinkers of identity (see, for instance, Taylor, 1989).

One of the ways to address these questions is to examine, not the change itself, but the feelings associated with that change. Indeed, although this change has new features, it involves also traditional forms of feelings that can be analyzed through many ways.

***El negro and me*: a book from Frank Westerman**

Among these ways, I chose to take a careful look to a book from Frank Westerman called *El negro and me* because it describes very vividly a large array of feelings that persons can experience from each other when a change in their vicinity occurs (Westerman, 2004).

Frank Westerman is a Dutch writer and a journalist. He published *El Negro and me* in 2004. The book tells the story of a stuffed man who was exposed for decades in a museum in Spain. But it is also a reflection on multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, Westerman argues, is

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not about cultures but about feelings. This idea can also be found in the work of Charles Taylor who published an important book on multiculturalism in 1992 that has, since then, become a classic: *Multiculturalism* (Taylor, 1992). More precisely: it is about feelings that arise when cultures are coming close to each other.

What are the feelings that are described in *El Negro and me*? At a first glance, the book seems to be full of political correctness. In other terms, it conveys or, at least, seems to convey, good feelings (an entity that is always suspicious in the debate on multiculturalism, although probably unavoidable) more than rigorous thoughts. When Westerman discovers «El Negro» for the first time, he would confess, he felt ashamed to see that people could have done this. He relates these feelings with his Christian education. But this is only, as one will see, a first impression. Indeed, the analysis of feelings that Westerman would be lead to conduct turned out to be very insightful.

History of « El Negro »

Let me describe briefly the content of the book. From its opening in 1916 to 2000, in the museum of the city of Banyoles, in the north of Spain (almost in the midst between Barcelona and the Perpignan), a stuffed black man could be seen. The book is the history of what happens to «El Negro», as he was called by the inhabitants of Banyoles.

The man called «El Negro» is a «bechuana» that comes from South Africa and that has been stuffed like an animal after its death, probably around 1830, by a Frenchman named Jules Verreaux, an animal stuffer and the son of an animal stuffer that was, at the time, commercializing many kinds of stuffed animals (lions, crocodiles, elephants, turtles and many species of birds) in Place des Vosges, in the very center of Paris.

Jules Verreaux did «dig out» a freshly buried man from Bechuana (now called Botswana) in South Africa. He had to proceed very carefully, because this is one of the thing that can lead to a deadly trial if people from Bechuana discovered it. He thus took important risks when he decided to do what he did. And he felt that these risks were giving him some rights on the cadaver.

Jules Verreaux took «El Negro» with him when he went back to France. He expected to have a great success with the exhibition of a specimen of humanity that was quiet unknown in

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Europe at that time (first part of the XIX th century).

People in France (or later in Spain where he was exhibited, as we will soon see: this point is not clear) probably found that the specimen was not black enough because someone decided to spread shoe polish on its skin in order to give him a brighter tincture. However, the success of the «piece» (as he was called) was not as great as expected and Jules Verreaux finally decided to sell «El Negro». It has been acquired by Francesc Darder, a doctor from Barcelona, presumably directly in Verreaux's shop in Paris.

The stuffed man was exposed in the anthropological museum created by Francesc Darder that opened in 1916 in Banyoles. At the beginning, the exhibition was not well accepted by the population of the city who found strange to have a black person exposed in a museum. But later, «El Negro» became a sort of attraction and the most remarkable piece of the museum. El Negro was thus «adopted» by the population of Banyoles who finally found that it was part of its identity. This change of feelings of the population of Banyoles regarding his calm and painted guest is very remarkable and is the focal point of the analysis that Westerman will develop on the case. Let me continue the story before turning back to that point.

Meanwhile in 1991 a man from Haïti named Alphonse Arcelin, physician in Cambrils (at about fifty kilometers in the south of Barcelona on the Mediterranean coast), who married a Spanish woman, heard about the presence of « El Negro » in the museum of Banyoles. He was immediately shocked and felt aggressed by the presence of such a piece in the museum. He was even shocked by this term of «piece» used to described the stuffed man. Indeed, the adequate word to describe it is not without rising problems: it is not a thing, it is not a person, it is not a statue, it is not a cadaver either, although it has been prepared from a cadaver. But the term «piece» that contributes to agglutinate El Negro with things like potteries and weapons that were making a large part of the things exposed in the museum was not a correct term, according to Arcelin.

In fact, Arcelin always refused to see «El Negro». He only *heard about* him. The *simple idea* of the presence of a man stuffed in a museum was repulsing enough for him. He felt that exposing dead people like animals was a kind of disrespect. Arcelin consequently began a struggle that would last for nine years and that were to result in the «restitution» of El Negro to South Africa where «El Negro» is now buried, invisible for anyone.

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Changing feelings

So let me turn back to the feelings described by Westerman. Very interesting are the changing feelings triggered by «El Negro». I said that Westerman was first ashamed when he saw the «piece». But it turned out that his feelings were much more complex as the inquiry he was conducting did goes on. This is partly due to the fact that Westerman adopts the feelings of the people he describes in his story. As a journalist, he was trying to describe the often-contradictory nature of these feelings.

These feelings involve religious values, as we have seen, but they also involve money and profit, as well as a notion of identity, a notion of national (or local) pride, political commitments, a kind of empathy, sometime, they involve a feeling of distance, sometimes, a kind of hostility, a sense of humanity, and so on.

In other terms, it is not a feeling but rather a bunch of contradictory feelings that Westerman had to describe when he was investigating on El Negro. Westerman shows that the encounter with the otherness involves feelings that cannot be subsumed under a single concept. In such a way that in the course of its inquiry, instead of finding answers, he found emerging questions which prevent him to formulate any definitive conclusion.

But the fact that the author cannot conclude is, in itself, an interesting conclusion. In the description of these feelings, Westerman was thinking to build a kind of multiculturalist theory of being with others. He did not achieve to build such a theory. But because it gives some clues to those who are seeking to do the same thing, it is interesting to look carefully at the points he did mentioned and to address these points as objections to the contemporary theory of multiculturalism.

«El Negro» integrates into the identity of the inhabitants of Banyoles

Westerman showed that «El Negro» progressively became a part of the identity of the city of Banyoles, in such a way that when Arcelin attempted to make its stuffed body go back to Africa, a large part of the population of the city of Banyoles did demonstrated under the cry of «Queda't»: «He stays».

Thus, we have a complete inversion of roles: Arcelin who presented himself as the one who was acting for the dignity of «El Negro» finally did contribute to make him disappear, while

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people from Banyoles were ready to fight for him and were seeing him as a symbol of what they are and of their openness to others. This is showing, at least, how versatile and changing the feelings of identity can be. What can appear as strange and curious at a given time can turn out to be a part of identity a few years later. The history of all populations and of all countries provides many examples of such «changing» identity.

Multiculturalism is sometimes criticized for diluting social cohesion or for creating cultural fragmentation, or even, for destroying national identity and for providing a ground for radicalism, for encouraging a restriction of freedom of expression, amongst other things (Prins and Saharso, 2013).

In a debate that grows since decades «multiculturalism» is opposed to «republican integration», the latter being supposedly a remedy for the bunch of feelings that Westerman has identified: all these feelings are indeed supposed to melt in a common «republican feeling».

The opposition of these two models, the republican model and the multiculturalist model, is the focusing point of a large discussion in which many aspects of the opposition has been evaluated. Canada, partly because of the structure of its population and partly for historical reasons (the country did develop a multiculturalist policy at the end of the 20th century), has been a case in point in the debate. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor did propose a thorough investigation of the notion of multiculturalism and was also appointed by the Canadian government to elaborate propositions for the policy of the country.* Taylor argues that «we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us» (Taylor, 1994).

The correct question to be addressed

The feelings generated by the encounter of the other depend, Westerman shows, on the changes of identity that are experienced in the encounter itself. When the changes are occurring rapidly, the feelings of hostility predominate. Examples in contemporary Europe could be found easily. However, identity being itself a highly changeable feeling, it is also very sensitive to time.

In other terms, the otherness of today is the identity of tomorrow but with an important «if»:

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If time is given for the new identity to be build. Thus, to go back to the initial question, the question is not «can we absorb the new changes that are coming?» but rather «do we have time to absorb the new changes that are coming?»

This is, in fact, a very different way to address the question of identity than the way from where we started. Identities need time to change. Taylor and Bouchard, in their report to Canadian government write: «Identities are thus shifting and assuredly constructed, even occasionally contradictory, but not artificial for all that» (Bouchard-Taylor, 2008). Thus, the question is not are identities changing but how fast does identity change? How long does it take to rebuild identity according to a new situation? And, above all: is the situation changing faster than identity can change or is the opposite true?

These are the questions to which the reading of Westerman can lead. Accordingly, the reading of *El negro and meis* presumably more helpful to displace questions than to answer questions. But precisely: displacing questions can be more important than answering questions. Therefore, it constitutes an important matter in the debate.

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* As the report states (G rard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, *Building the future, A time for reconciliation, report to the Gouvernement du Qu bec*, Legal deposit - Biblioth que et Archives nationales du Qu bec, 2008): «On February 8, 2007, Qu bec Premier Jean Charest announced the establishment of the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences in response to public discontent concerning reasonable accommodation. The Order in Council establishing the Commission stipulated that it had a mandate to: a) take stock of accommodation practices in Qu bec; b) analyse the attendant issues bearing in mind the experience of other societies; c) conduct an extensive consultation on this topic; and d) formulate recommendations to the government to ensure that accommodation practices conform to Qu bec's values as a pluralistic, democratic, egalitarian society». In 2013, G rard Bouchard published a book partly based on the work he made with Charles Taylor: G. Bouchard, *Interculturalism, a view from Quebec*, University of Toronto Press, 2015. On the difference between multiculturalism and interculturalism, see: C. Joppke, "War of words: interculturalism vs. multiculturalism", in *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6 (1): 11, 2018 ; see also: W. Kymlicka, "Defending Diversity in an Era of Populism: Multiculturalism and Interculturalism Compared", in N. Meer, T. Modood, & R. Zapata-Barrero (Eds.), *Multiculturalism and interculturalism: Debating the dividing lines*, (pp. 158-177), Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2016 ; see also: M. Barrett, *Interculturalism and multiculturalism: similarities and differences*, ed. M. Barrett, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 2013: «First, it is important to note that interculturalism shares a number of features with multiculturalism [...] However, over and above these similarities,

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interculturalism places a central emphasis on intercultural dialogue, interaction and exchange».

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