

Modernity in Question
Studies in Philosophy, Sociology and History of Ideas 4

Andrzej Waśkiewicz

Strangers by Choice

An Asocial Philosophy of Life

Introduction

Alien without Alienation

Yearning for the ‘true homeland’

The book before you is about a certain sense of strangeness. I adopt a sociological perspective to confront the feeling that one’s true homeland is not of this world. But even though the notion of unbelonging brings to mind the words of Jesus Christ, ‘my kingdom is not of this world’ (John 18: 36), this is not about religiosity. The strangeness I am concerned with derives from a person’s spirituality in the broadest possible sense. What’s more, rather than being located in the beyond, an individual’s true homeland often lies just outside their *Lebenswelt*, in a place that is within easy reach even though it somehow transcends the everyday. The key figures of this study tend to distance themselves from their communities and take on the role of strangers. But even while they share a keen sense of the vanity of earthly existence, they do not reject ‘this world’ for ‘that world’. They do not respond with *Weltschmerz* or frustration, even if they feel despised or misunderstood by their fellows. Thus their position of strangeness has nothing to do with eschatology, a concern with the last things, but is related to axiology – a preoccupation with values which their neighbours do not share. The strangers discussed in this book are *alien*, but not *alienated*. They are strangers by choice.

The sense that true living is really about something other than our everyday lives should be familiar to many of us – sailing enthusiasts, Harley riders or Harlequin readers, and perhaps even workaholics forced to take a holiday. Many of us feel we have a private or imaginary homeland where we can be ourselves. But this *private* homeland is different from what I call a *true* homeland in this book. A private homeland can be as tiny as the seat of a motorbike or as boundless as a passionate reader’s imagination. Tolkien’s Shire, the home of the hobbits, probably has more inhabitants than the author’s native Warwickshire, and to the millions of New Yorkers scattered all over the world, as viewers of the television series *Northern Exposure* will remember, the Big Apple is a state of mind rather than a geographical place in New York State. Private homelands are sometimes based on real memories. Emigrants who keep putting off their visit to the old country, even if they refuse to admit it to themselves, know full well that they can never return to the places of their childhood. While these homelands remain

frozen and unchanged in the memories of those who left a long time ago, they have long ceased to exist in the real world. Unlike true homelands, these private or imaginary homelands are rooted in nostalgia or escapism.

In all likelihood, the key figures in this book would protest if their true homelands were labelled ‘private’ or ‘imaginary’. True homelands may not be empirically verifiable, but they are public nonetheless. Besides, they are in a sense more real than earthly communities, as they rank higher in the metaphysical chain of being and will continue to exist even when uninhabited. That said, however, the true homeland cannot be experienced with the senses, and the handful of privileged individuals who have glimpsed this unfathomable reality have failed to express their vision in human language.

While it is possible to live in society and in a *private* homeland at the same time, *true* homelands have more exclusionary rules. This does not mean, however, that members are free to withdraw into some kind of comfortable indifference toward other people. Even the most a-social of strangers are required to fulfil their obligations towards the community. This question of social responsibility is best understood by comparing the demands of a true homeland to those of a religious community. Just like nations on earth, religious communities – let’s call them spiritual homelands – have policies that restrict belonging and regulate integration. Some spiritual homelands officially allow for dual citizenship, some tolerate it tacitly, some call for a formal renunciation of previous allegiances. True homelands resemble churches and sects in that members are required to meet certain conditions. These usually include some measure of proselytism (in some cases extending to armed struggle) and purity (an apparently modest requirement that can, however, go as far as martyrdom).

But while *spiritual* homelands of the kind presented by many sects can require its members to live like hermits or like revolutionaries, a *true* homeland in the sense of this book poses no such extreme demands, and privileges neither reclusion nor militant activity. It requires only a relative – not a radical – disengagement from the world. Members are encouraged to remain involved in worldly affairs, as long as they do not waste their energies on attempts to change the world. Only where a conflict arises between the laws of the true homeland and those of the physical world, will they be advised to withdraw from the public sphere and live a worthy life in private. Strangers have written stacks of books on how to maintain a proper balance between distance and responsibility, and these books, as we will see, can help reconstruct the ethos of this special kind of strangeness.

In this study I discuss a range of diverse source texts, including philosophical treatises, sermons and pastoral letters, academic lectures, works of fiction, diaries and correspondence. It is my hope that they will reflect the theory of strangeness as well as its practice, which in some cases is not grounded in theory but arises,

almost spontaneously, from the stranger's personality. Nearly all of these texts were written by strangers. Some were designed to guide the reader in the process of becoming a stranger, others aim to explain the condition or simply to bear testimony to the experience. While these texts focus on whatever was closest to their author's heart, for the purpose of this study their arguments have been brought to bear on the central idea of strangeness.

I have selected fictitious and real-life figures to cover the key domains of the mind and spirit: philosophy, religion, art and science. Georg Simmel, whose notion of strangeness I am about to discuss in this Introduction, stands as a sort of patron in this study, but each chapter forms an independent entity and can be read in separation from the theoretical framework. In the first two chapters I explore two older models of strangeness, namely the Roman Stoic philosopher and the Christian pilgrim as presented by Augustine of Hippo. The next two chapters discuss the lives of two strangers, the nineteenth-century writer Henry David Thoreau and the twentieth-century physicist Richard Feynman. The final chapter turns to the model of strangeness proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his novel *Emile*, where the titular character yearns for a state that is lost when the individual enters society, and whose notion of 'true human nature' has much in common with the concept of a true homeland. A great deal has been written about this type of stranger, but neither empirical nor critical social scientists have examined them as a social condition. I conclude this study by considering why this strangeness has been overlooked in the history of ideas.

For sociologists, strangers are simply people who do not fully belong to the dominant group, though they may belong to another. Colloquially, however, words like 'other', 'foreigner' or 'stranger' have decidedly negative connotations. Strangeness can be a tough position to maintain; no one, after all, wishes to experience rejection, or for their children and grandchildren to experience it. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that strangers tend to assimilate into the mainstream community over time, perhaps without consciously intending to do so. Empirical studies of the acceptance of strangers in private and public spheres, which are, needless to say, as revealing about the strangers as they are about their environment, usually focus on the distance between the strangers and members of the dominant group, as measured by studying the welcome given to foreign tourists, or the likelihood of accepting one's child's decision to marry a person of a different (ethnic) community. To study the concept of strangeness as defined in this book will not be as straightforward a process, and yet, ethnic others have something in common with our type of strangers: they all must find a *modus vivendi* in a community that is more or less hostile. That said, however, our strangers are far less concerned with belonging and assimilation than they are with preserving their special identity, their belonging to a community that is somehow not of this world.