The fear among us:
Constructing dangerous others

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Introduction

In *History of Violence*, the French writer Édouard Louis (2016) portrays a rape and its aftermath. The autobiographical novel tells a compelling and complex story about the interrelationship between self and other, and how both the self and other can become continuously renegotiated. On the way home from visiting two friends on Christmas Eve in 2012, Édouard is approached by a man. Édouard invites the man, called Reda in the book, back to his Parisian apartment and they have sex. Close to dawn, the intimate relationship changes and Reda turns violent and rapes Édouard at gunpoint. Through the following encounters with the police as well as with his friends and sister, Édouard becomes ambivalent towards his perpetrator. On the one hand, he tries to process what happened and how an intimate partner could turn into a violent other who injected fear in his body. On the other hand, he feels sympathy for Reda, a second-generation immigrant with Algerian background, and takes up his defence against societal racism, homophobia, and resentments directed to those living in impoverishment. The near-death experience makes Édouard an Other even to himself, as he starts othering and fearing men who resemble Reda, and he returns to his childhood village and working-class past that he had sworn to leave behind. In the book, Édouard weaves together a deeply personal story within a larger social context which today, both in France and elsewhere, is marked by fear, boundaries, difference, and the search for belonging and the self.

While fear – such as the fear of violence or fear of a particular group of people – is a deeply personal emotion, it is also a social and cultural experience (Lutz and White 1986). What or whom we fear and how such fear becomes generated, experienced, expressed, and dealt with, varies. Anthropologist Andrea Boscoboinik (2014: 9) writes that fear can be "individual or collective, spontaneous or thought-out, permanent or cyclic and undoubtedly features in disparate setups or circumstances." It is connected to processes of othering and caused by real or imagined threats, perceived risks, experiences of danger, and vulnerabilities.

Anthropology is particularly suited for understanding how certain groups of people and individuals are framed as dangerous within public discourse by looking at the forms such framing takes, its strategies, and its effects both on the particular groups of people involved and on society as a whole. These issues are situated within the larger context of the discipline's engagement with classification, boundary-making, modes of exclusion and inclusion, and their intersection with various forms of othering. At the current juncture,

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notions of danger and its related sentiments of fear can be mobilised in narratives and actions. Depicting someone or something as dangerous and fearful, is a powerful means for rationalising and justifying their exclusion, as well as certain forms of governance and exertions of power. Interrogating the highly diverse forms these discourses of dangerous others take – including among others, politico-religious discourses and nationalist rhetoric – this volume seeks to bring together diverse research concerns and open up conversations among scholars. This is particularly important today as much of our social and political relations and sentiments are based around fear and division, including territorial disputes, discourses on terrorism and crime, immigration, the spread of disease, and climate change.

This special issue grew out of a panel titled Fear among Us: Constructing Dangerous Others. The panel was held during the annual conference of the Swedish Anthropological Association (SANT) at Lund University, 22-23 April in 2021. It was an outcome of discussions in our reading group within the research network "Social Movements, Activism and Political Violence" in the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. Some of the participants in the panel could not prospectively contribute to this issue, so we invited a couple of others instead, to write on our theme.

Constructing Dangerous Others

Returning to Édouard Louis, his personal experience of violence connects to larger contemporary concerns related to racism and homophobia. In *The Politics of Fear*, linguist Ruth Wodak (2015) argues that far-right populists are normalising discourses around nationalism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia through notions of fear: "fear of change, of globalization, of loss of welfare, of climate change, of changing gender roles; in principle, almost anything can be constructed as a threat to 'Us', an imagined homogeneous people inside a well-protected territory" (Wodak 2015: online, preface). Anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiments are spreading across the Global North, and political debates and decision-making are marked by the image of the dangerous other. Apart from ex-President Trump's relentless scapegoating of immigrants and building of physical walls to separate between 'Us' and 'Them,' in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has expressed fear and hostility towards refugees, France's National Rally (formerly National Front) stigmatises Muslims, and the Italian government portrays immigrants as threatening.

In Sweden, anti-immigration rhetoric influenced the 2022 elections, and the Sweden Democrats became the second biggest party, as well as the largest party in the right-wing winning block. This is an authoritarian and exclusionary political party with cultural and ethnic nationalism at its core, with a background in the neo-Nazi organization "Keep Sweden Swedish" (Bevara Sverige Svenskt, BSS). Similar to other populist, authoritarian, and ethnonationalist right-wing parties, the Sweden Democrats is based on a fear to lose ones' cultural or ethnic identity (Lööw 1995; Rydgren 2018).

The construction of a dangerous Other is manifested through political and media discourses, stricter migration policies, language and citizenship tests, and a rigid set of regulations as well as expectations. The threat in Sweden has increasingly been constructed, in much political discourse, as coming from immigrants and asylum-seekers, and the hostility against 'the Other' is mainly directed against Muslims. Today, processes of othering seem particularly interesting as they connect so intimately with notions of fear.

Since 2016, Sweden has seen an overall trend in which the number of immigrants has

decreased. One could imagine that fewer immigrants would reduce the frustrations within xenophobic parties, but it rather seems to work the other way around. A decreasing number of immigrants has been followed by even more aggressive immigration politics. The Sweden Democrats are becoming more explicit and purposeful with their demands of repatriation and of reaching the zero vision of asylum seekers in Sweden.

Why such a rage about minorities and the weak? This is a central puzzle to Appadurai (2006), and he suggests an answer in *Fear of Small Numbers*. It is actually the small number that represents the obstacle to become a whole, a totality. It is precisely the small gap between having a status as mere ethnic majority and reaching complete national purity that creates frustration and rage against ethnic others. It is the capacity of a small number of immigrants to be able to make the majority feel their incompleteness that creates this rage. The anxiety could also be used to mobilise the majority against the minority, in a fear of reversal of roles; the majority may in the future turn into a minority. It seems contradictory, but the closer authoritarian ethnonationalist right-wing parties get to the visions about a cultural homogeneous nation, the more frustration and hostility may arise against 'the dangerous others.' Talking with Mary Douglas (1966), certain others are seen as "polluting" and as such, they can destabilise the self and threaten established boundaries. They seem to be a reminder of the incompleteness and the danger of the not yet completely fulfilled vision (Appadurai 2006).

Another perspective on othering is related to women and women's bodies. Simone de Beauvoir (2011 [1949]) famously argued that women are not born women, but become women – society's second sex – through modes of othering in relation to men. Women are however, not only made other to men, but also in relation to one another. Writing on the politics of othering during the Trump era in America, Andaya (2019) shows how reproductive governance over women's bodies has become central to conservative political agendas and nativist populism. By portraying the state's foundational principles to be in danger, the Trump administration justified its reproductive control over bodies marked as others in order to create a vision of a restored state. Removing family-planning services, including access to birth control and abortion, have especially impacted low-income women from migrant backgrounds and minority groups (Andaya 2019: 14). Thus, in the US, the control of women's reproductive capacities has become a symbol of political power for a coalition of antiabortion activists, nativist, and white national movements and the conservative economic elite.

Looking at a European context, Sara Farris (2017) introduces the term femonationalism, which points to the intersection of feminist ideas, nationalist ideologies, Islamophobia, and xenophobic rhetoric. From the perspectives of right-wing politicians, neoliberals, and some feminist theorists, immigrant men are seen as oppressive and dangerous. Muslim and other migrant women are thus perceived in need of protection and rescue (cf. Abu-Lughod 2013, 2014). Femocrats have, for instance, supported veil bans and policies of civic integration (Farris 2017). Ten years before Farris' publication, Jasbir Puar (2007) developed the framework of homonationalism and showed in a similar manner how right-wing nationalists together with some LGBTQ-advocates formed an unlikely alliance based on the distinction between "western equality" and "oppressive others".

Imagining the future: Fear or hope?

What or whom we fear and how this is expressed, differs through time and place. Looking at historical aspects of fear, Boscoboinik (2014: 12, 16) gives the examples of plague, AIDS, nuclear weapons, natural catastrophes, climate change, (sub)urban violence, unemployment, immigration, disease, and mistrust of people in power. Citing Frank Furedi, she states that fear has replaced hope as the major sentiment when imagining the future (Boscoboinik 2014).

Sociologists Furedi (2006), Bassner (2010) and Altheide (2002) argue alike that Americans feel more fearful today than a couple of decades back, but that this fear is unfounded to a large extent. While these authors argue that today's world is not exceptionally dangerous, discourses of fear and danger are placed at the forefront by politicians, the media, advocates, organisations, and various stakeholders to profit and forward their own agendas. Thus, processes of othering and increasing perceptions of danger and fear come to justify attempts to govern certain bodies and regulate established social contracts.

The way we look at the world, imagining the future with fear or hope, is something that also permeates the anthropological discipline (Ortner 2016), which of course is related to the societal climates. Ortner begins an article with the following sentence: "Academic work, at least in the social sciences, cannot be detached from the conditions of the real world in which it takes place" (Ortner 2016: 47). In an overview of anthropology since the 1980s she portrays how "Dark anthropology" was substituted with "Good anthropology", forgetting about different kinds of hardship. It is, however, in the more recent "Anthropology of critique, resistance and activism" that she finds a balance between describing the harsh dimensions of social life imbued with power-relations, inequality, injustice and oppression, still managing to keep up and express a hope for the future (ibid.: 61-66).

Why Ortner is describing this last trend of scholars as expressing hope for the future is probably because fieldwork is carried out mainly among activists with whom anthropologists tend to agree. There are today a multitude of ethnographic studies about social movements from all parts of the world, focusing on human rights, economic and social justice, gender issues, and indigenous rights. In comparison, we find much less ethnographic studies about far-right movements, even if they have increased in number (for a useful overview, see Berger, Lems and Moderbacher 2020.) Within our discipline and among scholar-activists there has certainly been a partiality. Pasieka (2017) is one of those anthropologists studying the far-right and she has pointed out the risks for anthropologists of keeping a distance from those people whom we do not agree with. We seem to have a new moral dilemma, Pasieka states. How could we rethink the meaning of empathy and emic understanding without normalising extremist worldviews? (Pasieka 2017). Do we create new Exotic Others? Let us now turn to othering within anthropology.

Anthropology and othering

As already stated, fear is an individual as well as social construction and experience, and it differs across societies and with time. Anthropologists can situate constructions of fear and danger in relation to modes of Othering at a given time and place. We can identify and highlight what and who is feared, and why, the forms of its expression, its strategies, consequences and mechanisms of coping (Boscoboinik 2014).

Framing someone or something as dangerous relates to modes of Othering; a central and

prevalent notion for anthropologists as well as philosophers and literary writers throughout time. Who the other is and what constitutes the other are central queries here. Even though anthropology is particularly suited for understanding how otherness is constructed, our own discipline also began as a history of creating the Other and was deeply embedded with colonialism. As Clifford (1986: 23) points out, it is in the identification of the other that the self comes into being. This was certainly the case for early anthropology, which saw cultures different from the West as others. Some of the dominant others were 'primitives', 'tribals', 'pre-literates' and 'noble savages', who all played central roles for developing theories of cultural evolution and manifesting western dominance. In early anthropology there was thus an interest to understand the Exotic Other and since cultures were seen as bounded to territories the Other belonged to places far away.

Thinking of human development in terms of linear progress, the perceived differences of these others were also seen to provide westerners with a window to the past. Lewis Henry Morgan, for instance, defined the three stages of cultural evolution – savagery, barbarism, and civilisation – through their modes of subsistence and technology. By creating a 'primitive' other, European and North American societies could understand their origins, claim power, and justify discriminatory practices and attitudes through notions of the civilised, and hence, superior self. Although the evolutionary ethnocentrism was replaced by other theoretical paradigms toward the turn of the 20th century, ideas of 'us' and 'them' continued and notions of western dominance remained and impacted societies worldwide through practices and relationships of exploitation and colonisation.

Many anthropologists continued to travel away from their home countries during the 20th century to study groups that were seen as separate and stable entities. Toward the end of the 20th century, the anthropological discipline transformed and became more self-reflexive and aware of the history, power relations and how the Other had been created. Edward Said wrote *Orientalism* (1978), which has been debated and discussed up to this day, in an attempt to show how "the Orient," in a discourse entangled with European colonialism was actually created as an image of "the Other," as a contrast to "the Occident," politically useful to legitimise colonialism.

This relates to the issue mentioned previously. How do we today find a balance in understanding and presenting the worldviews of ethnonationalist right-wing populists without legitimising their ideals and agendas? They seem to get more frustrated, hostile, and zealous, the more the gap narrows between their vision of cultural homogeneity and its realisation.

How is it possible for us as anthropologists to present this emic world-view about cultural homogeneity without othering? Furthermore, Pasieka comments: "if one threat is othering, the second one is (over)familiarization" (Pasieka 2017: 6).

Cultural homogeneity was never the loadstar of anthropology and our ideal has rather been to embrace and portray diversity, differences, and a multiplicity of voices, even though we have not always been successful in our endeavours. Previous processes of othering have been scrutinised and criticised (e.g. Anderson 1983; Fabian 1983, 2006; Clifford 1986). Nevertheless, the processes of othering remain within the discipline in many ways. Scholars have talked about 'decolonising anthropology' and 'decolonising methodology' to emphasise how paradigmatic new ways of looking at the discipline have become necessary, by taking earlier silenced voices into account, learning anew about theories and methodologies from,

for example, African American studies (Harrison 2018), Maori scholars (Smith 2012) or Sami academics (Kuokkanen 2019).

Like others before her, the Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen has complicated the matter of feminism and emphasised the need to "decolonise feminism" (Knobblock and Kuokkanen 2015). We have well-known authors-activists, scholars and feminists such as Nawal El Saadawi (1931-2021) in Egypt, Kumud Pawde (1938-2023) in India, bell hooks (1952-2021) in the US and many others, sharing about their experiences of being treated as Other in more than one way; in terms of gender, but also in terms of racism, class status, and caste belonging.

Let us return to where we started with Édouard Louis. In his most recent autobiography *Changer: méthode* (2021) he dwells into his own upward mobility, since leaving the small industrial town Hallencourt in northern France and his working-class background behind, reaching a new cultural status as a student in an elite university in Paris, to finally become an embraced and internationally acknowledged author. What is won and what is lost in this process of transformation? We do not get the answers, but Louis puts central questions about social relations, processes of change, guilt, contempt, and revenge, but also about fear and danger.

Contributions

This special issue opens with an article by Kenneth Bo Nielsen, M. Sudhir Selvaraj and Alf Gunvald Nilsen about the construction of "dangerous others" in India. They show how the ideology and politics of Hindu nationalism was always based on a discursive construction of "dangerous others" and particularly directed against Muslims, but also Christians. India has come to be defined as a Hindu nation, in which religious minorities do not properly belong to the nation. With examples from the two states of Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, the authors demonstrate how a discursive construction of dangerous others is now increasingly being written into law, through a process of Hindu nationalist statecraft. Even though Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka are markedly different in many ways the BJP governments have effectively relied on law-making to further their ideological project in the two states. The authors analyse legislation regulating, among other things, religious conversions, inter-faith relationship, and population growth. They discuss these laws in terms of "dog-whistle legislation" and argue that a change takes place in the direction of a legal consolidation of India as a Hindu state, in which religious minorities are now increasingly marginalised and stigmatised, seen as dangerous and anti-national others, and have become more exposed to collective violence.

Continuing in relation to contemporary politics, Per Ståhlberg's article focuses on Ukraine. The article starts and ends with Chernobyl. He reflects on this site of a frightening nuclear disaster as an analogy with the current war in Ukraine: The danger that threatens to desolate large parts of Europe is also concealed within Ukraine. The main part of the article is however, about recent instances of symbolic communication taking place in the shadow of the violent terror from a "dangerous other." The article builds on Ståhlberg's experiences during eight years of intermittent fieldwork in Ukraine after the Euromaidan Revolution in 2013. That research was focused on meaning management during perilous times. The theme that conjoins several scattered impressions presented in the article is a concern with the role of a colonial legacy in a country at war. The discussion involves both a revolution and a song

contest. Ståhlberg is theorising the close familiarity that exists between the enemies of the current war and particularly refers to Ashis Nandy's concept of "the intimate enemy" and Nils Bubandt´s idea of "hostile empathy". He concludes that Ukraine is not only fighting a military power but also an enemy that is omnipresent, like an "other within."

The war in Ukraine has, together with discussions of migration, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic, dominated contemporary discussions around fears and the future in politics, media, and among the general public. Looking at COVID-19, the virus has, since 2020, been constructed as a dangerous other, invisible but present among us and harmful not only to individuals' health, but also to their social and economic everyday realities. Lockdowns, school closures, increasing inequalities, and unemployment are among some of the consequences that have impacted individuals and resulted in great social and economic costs for societies worldwide. Fears around the pandemic relate to our fear of the unknown and how it might change or endanger our human existence. The fears connect to our social relationships through questions such as "Who carries and may spread the virus?" and "How should we live during the pandemic?" One group that has been particularly visible in these discussions comprises older people. Anna Gustafsson shows in her article how older people have been constructed as social others during the pandemic. She demonstrates how older people have been considered at risk for becoming seriously ill and a risk for the spreading of the virus and of burdening the health care system; old people were made into a homogenous group, dangerous both to themselves and others. At the center of images like these, later life is seen as a period of ill health, vulnerability, helplessness, and loss of personal agency. COVID-19 is however, just one example of how older people become others and how old age is seen as dangerous in contemporary society. In her article, Gustafsson also points to the anti-ageing movement, dominant gerontological discourses and the slang expressions "OK Boomer" and "Boomer Remover". What these examples have in common is that youthfulness and midlife norms are celebrated while traits associated with later life are considered destructive and negative.

The old people in Gustafsson's article are maybe not the first ones we expect to be among those creating fear in society or to be seen as the "dangerous others". The next article, on the other hand, is dealing with an obvious emblem for "dangerous others". Hardtmann begins her article by commenting on how politicians around the world discuss harsher sentences for those labelled criminals. In the article, however, a movement is portrayed that challenges this view and turns danger up-side-down; the prison abolition movement. This is a movement which has grown tremendously in the U.S. during the last few years, and one of the most well-known prison abolitionists, Mariama Kaba, was on the New York Times Bestseller list in 2021 with her book *We Do This ´Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Contemporary incarceration has been theorised by scholars and activist scholars in the context of racism and slavery, but it is only more recently that anthropologists have shown an interest in the movement. Through meeting ethnography from a conference in Montgomery, Alabama, Hardtmann shows how prison abolitionists not only theoretically situate contemporary incarceration in the context of racism, slavery, and historical struggles, but also concretely in practice too.

Reflecting on the questions taken up in these articles may also challenge our ethnographic thinking. In the anthropological essays that follow, we try to open up questions about fear, danger, and othering with ethnographic examples from different parts of the world. We

hope these will appeal to the readers and be understood as something central, well worth reflecting more about.

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