

Stranger neighbours

Abstract: In June 2008, Simon Fraser University hosted a conference on “Madness, Citizenship and Social Justice”. This paper considers the significance that conceptual constellation, finding that it serves to put the City (the democratic state and its bureaucracy) in question. While representing a community that is vitally concerned with democracy and justice, the City operates through a logic of identity that tends to deal out madness and injustice.

Resistance to the City’s violence can lead either to the extension of citizenship or to a hardening of its borders which, in turn, provokes revolution. But revolutionaries who organise along the same dialectical logic of identity risk a simple reversion of this totalitarian violence. This paradox – that a struggle for justice and liberation becomes the basis for further violence – is unfolded with reference to the freedom struggle in South Africa and to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who shows that ethics, one’s responsibility for the life of others, is both prior to identity and the original source of the imperative for justice.

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