

CURIOUS ABOUT OTHERS: RELATIONAL AND EMPATHETIC CURIOSITY FOR DIVERSE SOCIETIES



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Abstract Sociable curiosity - wondering and finding out about others (empathetic curiosity), and being curious with them (relational curiosity) - can draw people together, bridging differences and social distances. This promises more than the distant connections that are increasingly recognised and endorsed as mechanisms of coping with diversity and living within societies that have been characterised as diverse. It reaches towards more active and definite engagement with others. But curiosity - associated as it is with taxonomy and therefore with exploring and sometimes disrupting and recasting categories - can also be a vehicle for more fundamental explorations of social difference. Understandings of sociable curiosity are distilled in this paper through readings of theoretical literature on curiosity, wonder and taxonomy, and through a series of more tangible encounters, drawn from experiences of anti-war activism and museum projects in the UK, which bring sociable curiosity into focus.

Keywords curiosity, wonder, empathetic, relational, encounter, disposition, diversity, Muslim

INTRODUCTION: CURIOUS ABOUT OTHERS

Two characters in Iris Murdoch's novel, *The Black Prince*, argue about curiosity. Arnold, a prolific novelist, is interested in everyone and the details of their lives and relationships, and this is reflected in the breadth and volume of the stories he tells. Bradley, an unsentimental and isolated older man, prefers to be left alone with his thoughts and his writing desk, where he struggles with work that, he convinces himself, has more literary integrity:

'Bradley, you mustn't reject people, you mustn't just write them off. You must be curious about them. Curiosity is a kind of charity.'

'I don't think curiosity is a kind of charity. I think it's a kind of malice'.¹

Most immediately a dispute over the ethics and consequences of being curious about other individuals - their personalities and psychologies, affairs and life stories - this exchange also speaks to wider issues: the advantages and disadvantages of an open disposition towards and interest in other members of society. The argument between Bradley and Arnold can to be extended

1. Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince*, Vintage, London 1999 [1973], p 49. Hereafter *The Black Prince*.

from immediately personal to broader social relationships. Curiosity offers a fresh perspective on the implications of different ways of relating to other members of society: whether it is better to show an interest in others or to hold back, maintaining a respectful or indifferent distance.

I will suggest that, if we get it right, being curious about others can be a way of reaching out to them, forging relationships that can have particular significance in diverse and arguably fragmented societies. In this paper, I develop and begin to answer a series of questions about sociable curiosity: What is sociable curiosity? How is it experienced and practiced? Is it a good thing? Is it good for those who are curious? And what about those - things and others - they are curious about? What are the power relations of sociable curiosity? These questions prompt others about the limits of curiosity: whom or what it may be good or defensible to be curious about, whom it may not, and who can decide such matters. These are increasingly challenging questions, which have been occupying philosophers, religious and cultural critics for centuries.² These questions will not be resolved here, of course, but they provide the context for this, more focussed paper, which unpacks the idea of sociable curiosity.

2. Ilhan Inan, *The Philosophy of Curiosity*, Routledge, New York 2012. Hereafter *Philosophy of Curiosity*; Mark Zuss, *The Practice of Theoretical Curiosity*, Springer, New York 2012. Hereafter *Theoretical Curiosity*.

I explore sociable curiosity through readings of theoretical literature on curiosity and related terms, through the novel introduced above and through a series of more tangible encounters, drawn from experiences of anti-war activism and museum projects in the UK. This is not primarily an empirical paper; it is more conceptually driven. Still, there is empirical content, so the methods of data collection and analysis demand some introduction. This paper draws upon research involving Glasgow museums, which was conducted in 2013-14. This research focussed upon a project, introduced later in this paper, which was entitled *Curious* and which encompassed a series of workshops and an exhibition involving children and adults drawn from Glasgow communities. This project worked on the premise that curiosity about others can be socially cohesive. A number of museums were visited, and collections and exhibits examined; secondary data was also collected through the organisation's website and through reports and documents provided directly by curators, who were also interviewed. These interviews were conducted by the author. Permission to record interviews was sought and interviewees signed a statement of informed consent, granting permission to use information either anonymously or in their own name.

This paper also revisits and reinterprets some empirical material that was collected in 2006-08, involving interviews with anti-war activists. That project investigated how groups with different political, religious and geographical identities converged through the anti-war movements that sprung up in the context of military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. Interviews were conducted by the author and two research assistants with leaders, members and observers of socialist, Muslim and nationalist/separatist groups in the UK (*Plaid Cymru* and the SNP). The research assistants, Jamil Iqbal and Naima Bouteldja, are

both Muslim-identified, and their contacts and interactions with Muslim and other interviewees reflected this in various ways. Interviewees were invited to speak about their experiences of the anti-war movements and encouraged to do so in ways that illuminated their political identities and relationships, and this also included broader discussions about the ideas and values that brought activists together. These interviews were not conducted with curiosity in mind, though this was one of the themes that emerged, in terms of the ways in which some activists alluded to other individuals and groups, some expressing the desire to interact with or know others, from different sections of society. Most interviewees wanted to be named; those that did not remain anonymous in all reports and publications based on that research, and in the footnotes provided in this paper.

The literature and empirical material discussed in this paper necessarily illuminate particular subjects of sociable curiosity more than others, attending more to religious and ethnic difference than class or body shape, for example, though the discussion is framed broadly, developing broader arguments about sociable curiosity, which speak to and can be applied to this wider set of contexts.

DEFINITIONS AND CONTEXT

Before going any further, it is necessary to begin to define curiosity. Any definition must be preliminary at this stage, since the purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of a particular form of curiosity: that which is directed at others within diverse societies, and which, for want of a better term, I am calling sociable curiosity. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines curiosity as ‘a strong desire to know or learn something’, and this definition can be adapted to a social context by defining sociable curiosity as a strong desire to know or learn something about others in society.³ Expressed in this way - as a form of desire - curiosity is closely related to, and springs from, other desires or mental and emotional states, in particular wonder. To understand curiosity, this term must initially be distinguished from and related to wonder, and to understand sociable curiosity, this must be distinguished from wondering about others. Unlike wonder, curiosity encompasses more than an awareness of ignorance and/or desire for knowledge; this term also refers to practices, which pursue this knowledge (*Theoretical Curiosity*). Within this broad definition, it is possible to identify two kinds of sociable curiosity: wondering and finding out about others, which I shall call empathetic curiosity, and being curious (about ideas, things, or others) with them, which I shall call relational curiosity. I will suggest that both empathetic and relational curiosity can be important in connecting individuals and communities. These definitions, preliminary as they are, provide points of departure for more sustained discussions of what sociable curiosity is and can be.

Before unpacking sociable curiosity, it is necessary to provide some

3. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Tenth Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, p351.

4. Richard Sennett, *Together: the Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, Allen Lane, London 2012, p230. Hereafter *Together*.

5. Jennifer Lee, *Civility in the City: Blacks, Jews and Koreans in Urban America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002, p6.

6. Allan Cochrane, S. Neal, Katy Bennett, H. Jones, Giles Mohan, A. Ahmet, 'Comforting urban spaces and super-diverse communities: exploring multicultural and belonging in shared public and semi-public spaces', paper presented at *The Future of Social Relations Conference*, Sheffield, 21-23 May, 2014. Hereafter *Comforting Urban Spaces*.

7. Susanne Wessendorf, 'Commonplace diversity: social interactions in a superdiverse neighbourhood,' paper presented at *The Future of Social Relations Conference*, Sheffield, 21-23 May, 2014.

8. Gill Valentine, 'Living with difference: reflections on geographies of encounter,' *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(3), 2008, pp321-335, quotation p326. Hereafter *Living with Difference*.

9. Benet Davetian, *Civility: A Cultural History*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2009, p497.

10. Richard Sennett, *Respect: the Formation*

intellectual context. This paper speaks to debates about dispositions and encounters in diverse societies, and about the implications of expressing curiosity towards others. Some hold that the best way of living in diverse societies is to step back, according others a respectful and perhaps disinterested distance. From this perspective, diversity works best when people rub alongside each other quietly, without getting too close. Richard Sennett, fleshing out if not necessarily endorsing this position, has argued that minority groups with histories of conflict - Korean shop keepers in New York, their 'poor African-American customers' and Latino employees have found workable if imperfect ways to live together.⁴ He stresses their cultivation of emotional distance and silence with 'a tacit agreement to push anger and prejudice into the background' (*Together*, p231). This echoes Jennifer Lee's analysis of 'civility in the city' in which 'everyday interactions' between Korean, Jewish and Black people are can be 'positive, civil, and routine' without being close or direct.⁵ Allan Cochrane also refers to the civility of distant connections, applying the term 'civil inattention' to social practices that revolve around noticing and navigating difference, but not necessarily celebrating it, or getting too involved with it.⁶ 'Pragmatic civility' and 'tactical cosmopolitanism', terms favoured by Susanne Wessendorf, encompass codes of practice towards others, for example the unwritten rule that one does not interrogate others about their backgrounds. She concludes by questioning 'demands for "deep engagement" between people of different backgrounds', arguing that 'pragmatic civility' can maintain 'distance and avoid potential tensions with people who are different'.⁷ And yet, these studies do not entirely gloss over the shortcomings and tensions that can be associated with minimal or passive forms of interaction. These range from uneasy encounters, marked by contestation, conflict and 'low-level incivilities', to more passive but equally alienating expressions of social distance.⁸ Recognising the limitations of this distant form of interaction can prompt the desire for deeper connections. Sennett argues that it can be both happier and more constructive to take an interest in others, finding ways of 'getting along with those who are different' (*Together*, p230). Benet Davetian worries that distant diversity leads into a 'wasteland of freedom in which interactions between self and others lack meaning and depth'.⁹ This picture of shallow interactions echoes a picture of mutual alienation and isolation that was painted, famously and controversially, by Trevor Phillips, then chair of the UK's Commission for Racial Equality, in the wake of the London bombings, when he declared in the media that Britain was 'sleepwalking into segregation'. These interventions beg questions about what more meaningful and deep interactions might entail.

Another view, which corresponds more closely with Arnold's assertion that it can be more 'charitable' to take a closer interest in others, is that curiosity in other members of society is a catalyst for building closer relationships with them. It will ultimately be necessary to problematise this term - charity - but to begin with it is sufficient to note its (modest) ambition: a reaching

out with a degree of altruism. This means aiming towards positive forms of 'respect and recognition of others',¹⁰ and towards what Gill Valentine refers to as meaningful encounters (*Living with Difference*). Paul Gilroy argues that this goes 'beyond the issue of tolerance into a more active engagement with the irreducible value of diversity'.¹¹ This can be expressed through active practices of civility and citizenship.¹² As Helen Wilson puts it, the 'production of connection' depends upon the 'hard work' of finding out about and engaging with others. Such 'genuine dialogues with difference' necessarily begin with 'recognition of a lack of knowledge about others'.¹³ This recognition of ignorance of others, followed by a desire for knowledge about them, can also be expressed as a form of curiosity. Conversely, curiosity can be instrumental in the practices and politics of recognition. Curiosity, framed in this way, may offer a fresh perspective on the recognition and encounters with strangers, which have recently been debated through other theoretical and political registers.¹⁴

WONDER AND CURIOSITY

Curiosity was rarely explicit in my interviews with anti-war activists. Another term, which pointed and related to curiosity, was sometimes more apparent: this was wonder. Sue Davis, a peace campaigner and CND National Council member, then in her eighties, told me about a demonstration that took place in London in 2003 during the build-up to the invasion of Iraq:

I was a steward for the CND and I was in Trafalgar Square and we were up on the plinth trying to stop people climbing up because we didn't want accidents, and somebody from CND was bringing coffee round to stewards who were stuck there and I don't like coffee so I passed my coffee behind me to a young man who was obviously South Asian, Islamic whatever you like to call it, looking like a Muslim, I had noticed that particularly but I passed it to him and said 'I don't drink coffee, would you like this' and he said 'ooh well I don't know it might have been poisoned'. And I said 'oh, oh dear' because the Muslim thing had already started and I said 'oh I'm sorry' and then he laughed and he said 'I'm only joking!' And it was just such a wonderful exchange, and he knew he felt safe to make that really quite risqué joke because we were together in something, it's bringing tears to my eyes even now, I mean I just thought that was so amazing - especially then, you know where this issue had only just started to be aired and it's this bringing together of people.¹⁵

This may be a sentimental and idealised account. Others were less positive about encounters that took place through the anti-war demonstrations and campaigns in the UK,¹⁶ echoing more general arguments that exposure to diversity was not always enough to bring people together, and sometimes could have the opposite effect.¹⁷

But Sue's story is never simply a comfortable one. Sue takes a risk, both in

of Character in a World of Inequality, Allen Lane, London 2003, pxx.

11. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* Routledge, London 2004, p75.

12. Christine T Sistare (ed.) *Civility and its Discontents: Civic Virtue, Toleration, and Cultural Fragmentation*, University of Kansas Press, Lawrence 2004.

13. Helen F Wilson, 'Multicultural learning: parent encounters with difference in a Birmingham primary school', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39, 2014, pp102-114: all quotations p108.

14. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Routledge, London 2000; Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown vs. Board of Education*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004.

15. Sue Davis, interviewed by the author, 19/10/06. Sue wanted to be identified by her real name.

16. Nick Cohen, *What's Left? How Liberals Lost their Way*, Fourth Estate, London 2007.

17. Robert Putnam, 'E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and community in the twenty-first century,' *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30(2), 2007, pp137-74.

her attempt to reach out to another person, and also in her efforts to describe this, something that demands a vocabulary of and sensitivity to difference. She tells of a fleeting and rather awkward encounter between two people with different backgrounds – herself an elderly veteran of the women’s peace camp at Greenham Common (the US nuclear weapons base in England) and a young man, whom she takes to be a Muslim. Her story, of coffee and cautious humour, is also one of care and kindness, which seems to express what Skrbis and Woodward term ‘disposition[s] of “openness” toward others, people, things and experiences whose origin is non-local’.¹⁸

18. Zlatko Skrbis and Ian Woodward, ‘The ambivalence of ordinary cosmopolitanism: Investigating the limits of cosmopolitan openness’, *Sociological Review* 55, 2007, pp730–747, quotation p730. Hereafter *Ordinary Cosmopolitanism*.

Sue’s story tells of wonder, and suggests curiosity in the form of a desire to know another person and learn about his background and community, though it does not necessarily translate to any explicitly curious practice. Sue is treading lightly, avoiding direct questions, and there is no evidence that she has learned anything very definite about this man. The potential significance of this encounter, but also the constraints upon it, manifest in Sue’s reluctance to establish the grounds of difference (whether or not the man was Muslim), are in each case a reflection of the tense context in which it took place: the context of discrimination and hostility towards Muslims that was apparent at the time. But, while Sue’s story describes only the most tentative expression of curiosity, it speaks more directly of wonder. When she spoke of a ‘wonderful exchange’, Sue introduced an important term. Wonder takes different forms, which fall along a spectrum from the casual to the more profound: *I wonder what she’s thinking... I wonder what it would be like to be her... I wonder what it would be like to be Jewish; or heterosexual; or black... In this crowd, in the presence of so many others, I am filled with a sense of wonder.*

19. Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the Curious: Looking Back at Early English Museums*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2006, p255. Hereafter *Cabinets for the Curious*.

Though Sue appealed to colloquial rather than precise understandings of this term, and though she risked sounding rather gushing, she gestured towards what curator and museum critic Ken Arnold has called a ‘refined sense of wonder’.¹⁹ This profound rather than frivolous wonder corresponds to the concept of *thauma*, which has its origins in ancient Greece. Philosopher Ilhan Inan argues that *thauma* entails more than the ‘state of mind one is in when one comes across something unexpected or novel, which gives one a feeling of surprise or perplexity’, and more than the feelings associated with ‘awe’ and ‘amazement, astonishment, or admiration’. As the motivation for enquiry, he continues, *thauma* also entailed ‘a motivating force that gave one the first impetus to inquire into things not immediately present to the senses’. This began with ‘an awareness of our ignorance’ and extended to ‘a kind of inquisitiveness, a way of questioning things unknown; it had to include a form of curiosity to serve as the driving force for philosophy’ (*Philosophy of Curiosity*, p2). This refined wonder prompts ‘the desire to know more’ (*Cabinets for the Curious*, p257). Curiosity, understood in this way, can be distinguished from other responses to wonder such as stupefaction or what Sianne Ngai calls ‘interest’: the integration of new observations into existing knowledge, and the domestication of the wonderful into ‘what is already known’.²⁰ Curiosity,

20. Adam Japser and Sianne Ngai, ‘Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai,’ *Cabinet* 43, Fall 2011.

21. This essay was published online on Sardar’s blog, and in an edited

in contrast, follows through on the experience of wonder, translating it into a questioning spirit and an open disposition.

Ziauddin Sardar values wonder for two main reasons, which establish connections between *thauma* and specifically social concerns. First, he argues, wonder extends what it means to be human:

It is ... this faculty of wonder which generates the inquisitive, creative, imaginative, constructive character of humanity. It produces our drive to question, to know and understand, to harness and comprehend the physical world in which we exist as well as ourselves as human beings within this physical existence. The consciousness and capabilities of human beings are driven by wonder at the complexity, majesty, power as well as the contradictions and perversity we find in all that exists.²¹

But, for Sardar, wonder is also outward-looking: 'the sense of something more than self' (*Touched*, p89). He argues that wondering about others can be a catalyst for 'connective bonds' between people with different backgrounds and faiths. In other words, wondering about others can be a pathway to meaningful dispositions towards and/or encounters with them. Moreover, Sardar's perspective - his attention to this issue, as a postcolonial critic and a scholar of Islam, who identifies as a Muslim - signals the power relations associated with wonder, particularly the wonder and wondering that exists within diverse and unequal societies.

Wonder may be sparked by exposure to others and to things and places that speak of their existence. Wonder is a complex idea. It has attracted a great deal of attention in philosophy and across the sciences and humanities, so it cannot be addressed in any comprehensive way here. But it is important to broach the subject of wonder here in order to draw out the relationships and distinctions between wonder and curiosity, and thus to bring sociable curiosity into increasingly sharp focus. Sardar argues that some but not all times and places are conducive to wonder - and to wondering about others. He fleshes out this claim with reference to the Iberian Peninsula during its period of Islamic rule, when Jews, Christians and Muslims were permitted to coexist and express their different faiths in public.²² There, he argues, the presence of multiple faith communities, and their material cultures, stimulated people to wonder about others.²³ As Arnold puts it, the 'wonder of dealing with charged elements of the material world' - in museums, and public spaces too - belongs within an 'impregnable private realm' (*Cabinets for the Curious*, pp255-256). It is also experienced across forms of social life, since it inspires an understanding-of and reaching-out to others, which Stephen Greenblatt calls 'resonance'.²⁴

Wonder may be starved of oxygen in times and places where differences are concealed or constrained. Sardar may be guilty of some overstatement and oversimplification in his sweeping claim that there is no place for wonder

version in the Liverpool Biennial catalogue: Ziauddin Sardar, 'Touched by wonder: art and religion in the twenty-first century'. In: P Domela (ed.) *Touched*, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial, 2011, pp. 88-107. The latter is cited throughout this paper; with the exception of this quotation, which is not in the printed version. <http://ziauddinsardar.com/2013/07/touched-by-wonder-art-and-religion-in-the-21st-century/> (last accessed 29/01/15). Hereafter *Touched*.

22. Zachary Karabell, *Peace Be Upon You: the Story of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Coexistence*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2007; Stephen O'Shea, *Sea of Faith: Islam and Christianity in the Medieval Mediterranean World*, Walker, New York 2006.

23. See also: Ash Amin, 'Collective culture and urban public space,' *Public Space*, 2006, available at: <http://www.publicspace.org/es/texto-biblioteca/eng/b003-collective-culture-and-urban-public-space> (last accessed 20/5/15).

24. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and wonder', in I Karp and S D Lavine (eds.) *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian, Washington 1991, pp42-56, p42.

- and more specifically for wondering about others - in modern Europe. Still, he paints a fair picture of the contrast between Islamic Cordoba and the same place several decades after the 'reconquest' of Spain by Christian forces, when a period of pluralism 'gave way to intolerance,' culminating in the expulsion of those who refused to convert to Christianity. These ideas speak to other times and places. Sardar makes a connection between Cordoba and a cultural centre, named after it, which was proposed for a site in Lower Manhattan. He claims that, when the Cordoba House proposals were defeated, possibilities for wonder were curtailed, and that this can be seen as part of a broader pattern in Western culture. Sardar's assertion that 'wonder was the first casualty of Europe's construction of the Other' brings a new dimension to understandings of colonial discourse and 'tribalism', which also means 'thinking you know what other people are like without knowing them', and typically falling back on 'fearful fantasies' and stereotypes (*Touched*, p94-95; *Together*, p4). Anas Al-Tikriti, who took the Muslim Association of Britain into the heart of the UK anti-war movements, through a partnership with CND and the Socialist Workers Party (in the form of Stop the War Coalition), argued that western leaders perpetuated colonial stereotypes when they presented the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as crusades for freedom, democracy and human rights, 'harking back to a time when the white man in Europe wanted to go and to civilize and to educate the black man somewhere else'.²⁵ He echoed Edward Said's argument that these stereotypes matter.²⁶

Conversely, wonder can unsettle stereotypes. Wondering about others can spark curiosity about them. I say 'can' because, as Inan argues, wonder is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for curiosity (*Philosophy of Curiosity*). First, it must be the 'right' kind of wonder, introduced above, which can be traced to the Greek concept of *thauma*, and which has also been referred to as a 'refined sense of wonder' (*Cabinets for the Curious*, p257). Second, for wonder to result in curiosity, we also need to *care*. This point echoes the deep, etymological and conceptual association between curiosity and care. Doing so, it necessarily touches upon much broader debates about care, a fuller or more direct discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. That said, it is important to acknowledge claims that curiosity expresses who and what we care about. As Michel Foucault put it, curiosity 'evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist'.²⁷ In this sense, curiosity is an expression of values, so there is no such thing as 'sheer' or 'mere' curiosity (*Philosophy of Curiosity*, p126). 'Curiosity is value-laden,' according to Inan, because 'we are only curious about things that we are interested to know' (p183). Conversely, a lack of curiosity can betray an absence of interest or care (even though it can also reflect other conditions, ranging from a lack of opportunity to be curious, to anxiety about expressing curiosity, to a lack of skills needed to do this). So, as Sue's story suggests, wondering about others - in a particular way and through a particular relation of care - can be a catalyst for a particular kind of curiosity about them. This curiosity may reflect and cultivate 'dispositions

25. Anas Al-Tikriti, interviewed by Naima Bouteldja, 25/04/07; Richard Phillips, 'Bridging east and west: Muslim-identified activists and organisations in the UK anti-war movements', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 34(4), 2009, pp506-520.

26. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1978.

27. Michel Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher: interview first published in *Le Monde*, April 6-7, 1980,' in Lawrence Kritzman (ed.) *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, trans. A. Sheridan. Routledge, New York 1988, p327. Hereafter *The Masked Philosopher*.

of openness towards others' and it may also interrogate the otherness of those others, by examining dimensions of difference and diversity (*Ordinary Cosmopolitanism*, p730). To refine these arguments, it is necessary to be more specific about sociable curiosity, distinguishing the forms it takes, and the consequences it can have.

SOCIABLE CURIOSITY

To develop the idea of sociable curiosity, it helps to begin by returning to definitions of curiosity, the more general term. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* definition of curiosity, quoted above - 'a strong desire to know or learn something' - is apparently general and neutral, but is traceable to a particular intervention in political theory: Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1668), which presents a positive picture of curiosity as the uniquely human 'desire, to know why and how' (*Philosophy of Curiosity*, p6). The historical and political specificity of this definition is a reminder that the meanings of this term have shifted over time, and that they vary between different places. In short, there is no definitive curiosity, but rather a series of different understandings, meanings and practices.²⁸ Brian Dillon, who recently curated an exhibition on this subject, explains that 'if there is something called curiosity, it is an oddly dissolved, indistinct and various notion'.²⁹ Consequently, when cultural critics and philosophers have attempted to discuss curiosity, they have generally opted to focus upon particular forms or histories of curiosity, rather than generalising about curiosity in the way that Iris Murdoch's two characters, Arnold and Bradley, appeared to do.

Philosophers, historians of science and historiographers tend to distinguish between conceptual and practical curiosity, and also between serious or productive curiosity on the one hand, and frivolous or indulgent, on the other; they tend to concentrate upon the conceptual and serious varieties.³⁰ Other forms of curiosity are explored in studies of work and innovation, involving practical curiosity³¹ and readings of sexual curiosity in literature.³² I, too, am concerned with a particular form of curiosity, though I do not frame this choice in the quite the same way as these critics. The sociable curiosity, which is my focus, can be either conceptual or practical or both, and it can have serious and/or frivolous dimensions, so what distinguishes it from other forms of curiosity is really its social dimension. This, as I go on to explain, can either mean being curious about others, or with others, or both.

The idea of sociable curiosity challenges some received wisdom about curiosity, and potentially shifts our understandings of curiosity itself. In particular, it challenges the common idea that curiosity is essentially an individual phenomenon: an essentially interior drive, motivation, desire or state of mind. This idea is spelled out in Daniel Gade's polemical endorsement of curiosity in his own discipline - geography - and beyond. He identifies

28. Barbara Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Enquiry*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2001. Hereafter *Curiosity: A Cultural History*.

29. Brian Dillon, 'Essays at Curiosity' in Brian Dillon (ed), *Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing*, Hayward Publishing, London 2013, pp14-24, quotation p15. Hereafter *Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing*.

30. Daniel W Gade, *Curiosity, Inquiry and the Geographical Imagination*, New York, Peter Lang, New York 2011. Hereafter *Geographical Imagination*.

31. Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2008.

32. Victoria Reid, *André Gide and Curiosity*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2009. Hereafter *André Gide and Curiosity*.

curiosity with lone scholars and other ‘notably curious individuals (p23)’ who ‘are unlikely to compete or collaborate with others (p11)’, and who are typically adventurous and free-spirited in their scholarship and inquiry (*Geographical Imagination*, p82) . This individualistic perspective is not unchallenged, but it is has dominated understandings of curiosity.³³

33. Phillips, R, ‘Curiosity: care, virtue and pleasure in uncovering the new’. *Theory, Culture and Society* 32(3) 2015, pp149-161.

The practice of curiosity revolves around asking and answering questions: fundamentally social communicative and linguistic practices and competences (*Philosophy of Curiosity*). For Inan, (conceptual) curiosity has two components: first, an awareness of ignorance on a particular subject, and secondly, an ability to put this into words. He draws upon Plato, who addressed the leap of imagination needed to inquire into something unknown through an imaginary dialogue, expressed as Meno’s Paradox. Meno asks Socrates, ‘how can you be curious ... about something when you don’t know at all what it is?’(p17). Socrates’ answer is convoluted:

It is impossible for someone to be curious about what he knows or does not know; he wouldn’t be curious about what he knows, since he already knows it, there is no need for such a person to be curious; nor about what he doesn’t know, because he doesn’t know what he is curious about (p19).

Inan argues the curious questioner must be able to specify his or her ignorance and imagine the possibility of an answer (p119). Curiosity is ‘language laden’ because ‘the limits of what we can be curious about are set by the limits of what we can attempt to refer to (p183)’.

Inan brings a new focus and precision to understandings of curiosity as social practice, but two important things are missing in his account. Through these issues, it will be possible to draw out further aspects of the sociality of curiosity. First, to think of curiosity as a purely linguistic competence is to elide the power relations inherent in questions and inquiry. The highest profile translation of Meno’s Paradox in recent years was US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s analysis of known and unknown unknowns of military intelligence. Rumsfeld’s words echo the convolutions of Meno’s Paradox:

As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don’t know we don’t know.³⁴

34. Rumsfeld, quoted by: David A Graham, ‘Rumsfeld’s Knowns and Unknowns: The Intellectual History of a Quip,’ *The Atlantic*, 27 March 2014: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/rumsfelds-knowns-and-unknowns-the-intellectual-history-of-a-quip/359719/> [accessed July 1, 2014].

35. Errol Morris (producer, director) (2013) *The Unknown Known: the Rules and Memos of Donald Rumsfeld* [Documentary Film], Italy, A&E Television (Hereafter *The Unknown Known*).

Despite the ridicule he attracted from some quarters, Rumsfeld did have a point: some questions are unanswered, some unasked, and some are not or not yet conceived. But, as a senior figure in the US Government, he also betrayed the power relations inherent in curiosity. Rumsfeld commanded an audience, with which he communicated through a ‘blizzard’ of internal memos, and through public speeches.³⁵ He directed enormous resources at

military intelligence gathering, scenario building and informed speculation. His curiosity was strategic and powerful: seeking out ignorance and blind spots, asking new questions and exploring ways of answering them, with a view to mobilising findings in military planning and interventions. This indicates that sociable curiosity is situated, not simply within social practices, but also within unequal social relations. This point is anticipated in Arnold and Bradley's conversation, in which the curious figure appears as a powerful dispenser of 'charity', and is further empowered by his curious interest in others, which feeds his novels and the popularity and worldly success they bring.

And yet, curiosity is not simply the preserve of the powerful. Vron Ware echoes Rumsfeld, from a very different political angle, in a new and politicised translation of Meno's Paradox. She argues for a self-reflexive 'feminist curiosity', sufficiently open-minded to reflect on what feminists don't yet know they don't know.

Just as it is impossible to have a fruitful conversation with someone if you have already judged what they are going to say, so the art of dialogue depends on being aware not just of where one stands, but also of how one's location might look from a distance. This demands qualities such as openness, imagination, self-reflexivity, and a willingness to take in what might sound strange and even counter-intuitive to a feminist ear.³⁶

In contrast with Rumsfeld, who investigated these blind spots forcefully and speculatively, Ware argues that it is necessary for western feminists to 'speak to' rather than about women in other parts of the world, and to listen to them, with an open disposition. Reflecting the religious, ethnic and geographical focus of Rumsfeld's agenda, Ware refers specifically to Muslim and Arab women, though her call for a new, politicised curiosity has more general resonance, and illustrates how a feminist curiosity might be configured. An analysis of the power relations of sociable curiosity might be equally nuanced, with the recognition that curiosity can involve power over others, and interference in their lives, but that this is not necessarily or always the case.

To more fully comprehend the power relations of sociable curiosity, it helps to return to Bradley and Arnold as their story unfolds. Their initial positions on curiosity, discussed above, represent considered views and stated intentions, which are in each case unilateral, in a way that social life rarely or never is. Bradley's splendid isolation is compromised repeatedly by intrusions from outside: friends, acquaintances, colleagues, ex-wives, a sibling, and associates and relatives of all of the above. Their phone calls, knocks on the door, visits and agenda all show that Bradley is not the only character in possession of agency. Even his story, though narrated by Bradley, is not entirely under his control; it is 'edited' by one of the characters, whose identity is revealed at the end. Bradley's repeated attempts to escape to a house where he might get some writing done are derailed by others, whom he is unable to ignore.

36. Vron Ware, 'Info-war and the politics of feminist curiosity', *Cultural Studies* 20(6). 2006, pp. 526-551.

He is also drawn into a kind of curiosity about these characters, a wanting to know about them, which he tries but sometimes fails to resist. He finds himself rushing around to visit his ex-wife, who has returned to London, to find out what has become of her. He confides in, and listens to, her alcoholic brother, who pesters him for money and drink. Nor can he resist the desire to know about a young woman, with whom he is infatuated. All this points to curiosity that is not simply willed from within but sparked from without – by experiences that prompt questions. ‘How is it,’ asks Mark Zuss, ‘that, like small flames, questions arise from the filaments of our senses?’ (*Theoretical Curiosity*, p122). Through Merleau-Ponty, he traces questions to sensory experience - the ‘immersion of bodies in the world (p128)’. And, if some things prove irresistible to the senses, sparking questions and desires for knowledge, this is doubly so of other people, who may actively seek to be noticed or to interact. This illuminates curiosity that is embedded in the messy realities of social life, including language, power and interactions with others. The next section examines this sociable curiosity more closely, distinguishing between two forms it can take: empathetic and relational.

EMPATHETIC CURIOSITY

The complex power relations of sociable curiosity are illustrated through Sue’s memory of the anti-war demonstration - meeting ‘a young man who was obviously South Asian, Islamic whatever you like to call it, looking like a Muslim’.³⁷ This encounter is structured by a number of real and perceived differences and power relations, including age and gender, ethnicity and religion, indicating that curiosity is not necessarily or simply the privilege of the powerful. It also underlines a second shortcoming of Inan’s elegant analysis of curiosity, which is that his linguistic approach misses some of the messiness and awkwardness of real communication, questioning and answering. Sue reaches out to a person whom she perceives as very different from herself, though they are also ‘together in something’, with an exchange over an unwanted coffee, an indirect but ‘wonderful exchange’.³⁸ She does not ask him directly about herself, or tell him explicitly about herself, but an exchange takes place nevertheless. This expresses a particular form of sociable curiosity, in which the desire for knowledge and the questions it prompts are directed at other people. This can be termed empathetic curiosity.

The delicacy of Sue’s encounter illustrates Sennett’s more general claim that that ‘getting along with those who are different’ depends upon ‘dialogic’ and other complex communication skills (*Together*, p230). These skills range from the questions people ask and the ways in which they speak to the non-verbal communication they employ: ‘listening well, behaving tactfully, finding points of agreement and managing disagreement, or avoiding frustration in a difficult discussion (p6)’. Sennett stresses the importance of empathetic curiosity in this context, arguing that ‘the listener’s empathy can be expressed

37. Sue Davis, interviewed by the author, 19/10/06.

38. Sue Davis, interviewed by the author, 19/10/06.

by maintaining eye-contact even while keeping silent, conveying “I am attending intently to you” rather than “I know just what you feel” (p21).’ The subjunctive tense is important here, with terms and phrases such as ‘possibly’, ‘perhaps’ and ‘I would have thought’ opening up ‘space for experiment’ and interaction, which more declarative and assertive speech would have closed down (p22). The ‘subjunctive mood’ shapes an ‘open social space, where discussion can take an unforeseen direction,’ expressing ‘curiosity about who other people are in themselves’ (p23). But Sennett’s generalisations may not be sustainable, since the practice of empathetic curiosity demands highly contextual skills and sensitivities. For example, the communication skills suited to the employment counselling sessions cited by Sennett are not likely to translate to the very different settings of dementia care, where empathetic curiosity has also been described and advocated.³⁹ Still, some practices and dispositions do appear to translate between these different settings, these including eye contact, attentiveness to differences in needs, picking up on emotional cues, and being sensitive to pacing issues in the course of conversations. And yet, even this non-confrontational dialogue can be too direct for some situations. Sue’s encounter illustrated the importance of treading lightly and creatively in a tense moment. Rather than asking direct questions, she expressed interest in another person through indirect means, with gentle humour and an exchange over an unwanted coffee, and it seemed to her that he responded in kind.

Not everyone has the social skills required for the kind of empathetic curiosity envisaged by Sennett. Or, perhaps more precisely, few of us have all the skills we might want for this, so we may have to improvise and learn new skills. We may also benefit from help, at times, including through the creation of space in which unusually direct questions can be asked and answered. A scheme, pioneered in Denmark and adopted in a number of other European countries, illustrates how empathetic curiosity can be encouraged and facilitated. The ‘Human Library’ enables participants to take out a ‘human book’ in order to learn about the experiences of minorities, ranging from those who are HIV-positive to members of the Roma community.⁴⁰ Borrowers can ask questions, which their ‘book’ would answer. This scheme introduces some of the practical challenges associated with the practice of empathetic curiosity, and also the thorny power relations that such challenges entail and risk. The power relation of curiosity, in this case, is highly asymmetrical, allowing the curiosity of the majority to be directed at the lives of minorities, who are also symbolically objectified, as books that can answer but not ask questions. I return to the issue raised here - the power relations of curiosity, or rather of some forms of curiosity - later in the paper.

The Human Library scheme was adopted by Glasgow Museums within a larger project, known as *Curious*, which adds to an understanding of what sociable curiosity is and what it might be, and achieve. As its title suggests - *Curious* is an amalgam of *Curio* and *Us* - this project encouraged curiosity

39. Phil McAvoy, ‘Dementia communication using empathetic curiosity’, *Nursing Times* 110(24), 2014, pp12-15.

40. <http://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums/st-mungos/What%27s-On/Documents/Human%20Library%20in%20Museums.pdf> (last accessed 23/03/15).

41. 'Curious was a three year Glasgow Museums project to support and celebrate the London Olympic Games in 2012, and prepare the city to host the Commonwealth Games in 2014.' <http://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums/st-mungos/What%27s-On/Documents/Curious%20Exhibition%20Summary.pdf> (last accessed 23/03/15).

42. Lyndsey Mackay, Learning and Engagement Coordinator, Altogether Glasgow Project and St Mungo Museum, interviewed by the author, 19/09/14.

43. Sadiya Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2011; Pascal Blanchard (ed.), *Human Zoos: science and spectacle in the age of colonial empires*, University of Liverpool Press, Liverpool 2008.

Figure 1 Curious logo. Source: <http://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/museums/st-mungos/What's-On/pages/past-exhibition-curious.aspx>

in the museum collections and also in oneself - which Victoria Reid calls self-curiosity – and in others (Figure 1) (*Andre Gide and Curiosity*). Running from 2009 to 2012,⁴¹ it involved people with different backgrounds, from refugees to more established Glaswegians. The former were engaged through organisations including the Refugee Council, the Muslim Women's Resource Centre and the Interfaith Council; and through a Language Café at the City of Glasgow College, near St Mungo Museum, which teaches English as a Second Language (ESL).⁴² The latter were drawn from the College's vocational students. In addition to the Human Library, *Curious* also ran workshops designed to encourage other expressions of empathetic curiosity between members of these diverse groups. A series of workshops began with small group discussions about the names of participants, and conversations about where names were from and what they represented. The intention was to cultivate mutual curiosity, not to turn minority cultures into curios for mainstream consumption, but to facilitate multidirectional, reciprocal interest in others.

Empathetic curiosity, in which the desire for knowledge and the questions it prompts are directed at other people, is just one form of sociable curiosity. Empathetic curiosity can take different forms and express different relations. It can be exploitative, as for example in the 'human zoos' in which people were once exhibited as ethnographic specimens, and were objectified as curiosities.⁴³ But, if human zoos and their modern counterparts illustrate the 'malice' in curiosity, identified by Bradley, human libraries indicate that empathetic curiosity also has the potential for reciprocity, mutual interest and care, including what Arnold calls 'charity'. Despite the ethical differences between them, these expressions of empathetic curiosity have one thing in common: they are structured around direct relationships between curious subjects and the objects of their curiosity. But sociable curiosity is not always so direct. Another, less overt form it can take is discussed below.



RELATIONAL CURIOSITY

Direct questions, such as those encouraged through the Human Library and the name workshops, can sometimes be intrusive or indelicate; consequently they may not work, or they may be counter-productive, in the sense of pushing people to close down rather than open up. Less direct expressions of curiosity - involving shared interest in objects or ideas - can be more effective and appropriate in such circumstances.

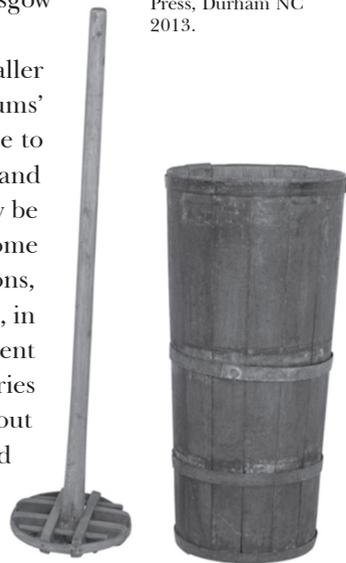
Relational curiosity revolves around triangular relationships: encounters

with other people, through other beings, things, places and/or ideas,⁴⁴ such as the coffee in Sue's story. Things and places can spark memories and conversations, drawing together individuals, and sparking encounters and relationships between them.⁴⁵ This brings us to the 'Curio' in Glasgow Museums' *Curious* project.

Curious began with a series of 'community planning' and smaller hands-on workshops at Glasgow Resource Centre (Glasgow Museums' publically accessible storage facility), where participants were able to access the extensive collections, and were invited to select objects and images that interested them most. Some of these would ultimately be included in an exhibition, which formed the most tangible outcome of their work; final selections were based on practical considerations, and on the stories that could be told about objects. The exhibition, in turn, was the basis for learning programmes and visitor engagement activities, which led to comments being elicited and further stories 'captured'. Selecting and discussing objects, then learning about them, and responding to or commenting upon them, all involved expressions of curiosity in things, and also in other people through things.

The objects formed a catalyst for connection and conversation, allowing people with different backgrounds to engage, without necessarily revealing too much about themselves personally, and to find common ground with others in the group. A granary door from Mali was selected by groups of participants drawn from 'Young Peoples Futures' and the 'Youth Health Service'. Other objects ranged from a 1930s English tea set, decorated with stylised crocuses, to a Russian radio, made in 1967.⁴⁶ Another item, which appealed to participants of very different backgrounds, was a butter churn and plunger, originating in the Shetland Islands in the nineteenth century (Figure 2). Though neither visually striking nor precious, the churn was something that visitors with diverse backgrounds could relate to. Initially selected by a woman from Libya, who recognised this as something she had seen in her own country, the churn interested others too, some of whom brought stories and memories of their own to it. Participants from Kurdistan and Pakistan remembered working songs, which women had sung when they were making butter. Butter-making songs, from the (Scottish) Isle of Skye, were traced by the curators and included in the exhibition. When it formed part of the exhibition, this was seen by visitors from Poland, whose stories and comments were captured and shared, and posted on the project website, along with a recording of Oran Maistrìdh, a Scottish churning song.⁴⁷

Some exhibits brought religious and cultural issues into the field of view, and into conversations that followed. A painting entitled *One Man Band Outside the Fish and Chip Shop* is said to have made an impression on many people and provoked questions about the artist - Hans Jackson, a Jewish refugee who arrived in Glasgow in 1939. This was not simply a *carte blanche*



44. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political: New Openings For the Left*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 2013.

Figure 2 Butter churn and plunger: objects included in *Curious* exhibition. Source: <http://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com/butter-churn-and-plunger/>

45. Helen Manchester, Tangible Memories, www.aliveactivities.org/ourprojects-tangiblememories.asp [accessed 26/01/15].

46. <https://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com/> (last accessed 23/03/15).

47. <https://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com/butter-churn-and-plunger/> (last accessed 23/03/15).

or arbitrary conversation piece, onto which viewers projected their selves and preoccupations. The painting itself mattered, and viewers wanted to know more about it. Another artwork was chosen as the centre-piece to the exhibition.⁴⁸

48. http://www.sibyllevonhalem.eu/works_detail_img.php?group=3&no=1&detail=3&img=1 (last accessed 23/03/15).

Veil sparked some predictable debates about veiling, but also led to some more nuanced and robust exchanges, for example when members of a Muslim women's group visited. The artwork sparked some curiosity about the artist and her background, and this raised wider issues. *Veil* was made in 1991 by Glasgow artist Sybille Von Halem, who had lived in Pakistan as a child. She explained that it was inspired by tensions between Muslims and others, already apparent at the time, and by themes including gender, the body and clothing. *Veil* also sparked curiosity that reached beyond the intentionality or identity of the artist.⁴⁹ As Lyndsey put it:

49. Aileen Strachan and Lyndsey Mackay, 'Veiled practice: reflecting on collaborative exhibition development through the journey of one potentially contentious object', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 28(1), 2013, pp73-90.

there were a lot of difficult conversations that that object made possible' - around issues such as Islamophobia - as well as some more lateral conversations, on themes ranging from body image to clothing practices.⁵⁰

50. <https://curiousglasgow.wordpress.com/veil/> (last accessed 23/03/15).

These illustrate how relational curiosity - shared interest in things, presenting a sideways mirror on other people - can facilitate non-confrontational, unchallenging, but sometimes meaningful encounters, both with members of other social groups, and also within such groups, where other kinds of differences exist and are experienced. This last point raises questions about where differences lie, and what differences are important, and suggests that sociable curiosity can play some part in cracking these open, prompting 'difficult conversations' not as an end in itself, but as a means to some form of social change, which participants in such conversations may shape.

CURIOSITY, DIFFERENCE AND TAXONOMY

Sociable curiosity can do more than facilitate meaningful encounters, which in turn can bridge social distances and differences. It can interrogate, unsettle and even transform understandings of difference. Common expressions of curiosity such as collecting and displaying objects reflect and inform the categories that are used more widely to order and interpret the natural and social world. The arrangement and rearrangement of things in cabinets of curiosity is fundamentally concerned with 'how objects relate to each other', which is how curator Ken Arnold defines taxonomy (*Cabinets for the Curious*, p6) .

Taxonomy begins with putting things into categories and ordering collections, then reaches towards the 'search for a natural order and classificatory logic' (p188). From its origins in museum science, taxonomy reached into other spheres including the classification of knowledge itself, through the demarcation of academic disciplines and the classification of

human societies, cultures and races (p245). As George Lakoff argued in his ground-breaking study of linguistic categories, even apparently stable and factual categories have been produced and are subject to change.⁵¹ Despite efforts to ‘stabilise’ classificatory terminology,⁵² categories and the relative emphases placed on them change and shift. Taxonomies of the natural world are disrupted and reordered by scientific developments and advances (*Cabinets for the Curious*).

In social life, categories - such as classifications of race, ethnicity and sexuality - are equally unstable. This is true both of those handed down from above, such as through census categories for religious identification and sexual orientation, and also those that individuals and groups use to identify themselves.⁵³ Understandings of social categories are closely related to those of social difference and diversity. As Sara Ahmed has argued, diversity is not so much a social fact as a way of seeing, which revolves around the construction and recognition of particular forms of difference.⁵⁴ Though some societies - such as the UK today - are often said to be diverse, diversity is never simply an objective description or fact (*Comforting Urban Spaces*). Rather, the consciousness of diversity in general, and particular forms of diversity, reflects the social categories that are salient in any given context, and the importance that is attached to those categories. For example, in the UK, categories such as sexuality and religion are more prominent today than they once were; conversely, other categories and labels such as denominations of Christianity have been de-emphasised (*Multicultural Politics*). Curiosity has the potential to be fundamentally transformative because it has scope to explore and problematise, rather than simply navigate, existing categories, and the distances and differences they open up. It can disrupt and recast social categories and taxonomies in transgressive and creative ways. The exploration of social categories reflects the broader tendency of curious individuals and practices to do odd things and ask awkward questions, agitating and troubling the established order, unsettling orthodoxy and authority (*Curiosity: A Cultural History*). As Foucault put it, curious people show ‘a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental’ (*The Masked Philosopher*, p328).

The UK anti-war movements, referred to above, provide a tangible example of the transformative and cohesive potential of sociable curiosity. Anas Al-Tikriti portrayed the mass rally of February, 2003 as the coming-together of distinct groups: ‘Muslims standing by non-Muslims’, ‘people of all ages, of all classes, standing together’, and ‘Muslims’ sharing a platform with ‘the atheists and the gays and homosexuals’.⁵⁵ This representation mirrored the tripartite leadership of the anti-war movement, which comprised organisations representing Muslims, Socialists and Peace campaigners, each with a constituency to represent and maintain, and it spoke more generally of social types and tidy categories. Holding these groups apart, even while bringing them together, reinforced the pillars of the anti-war coalition and

51. George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1987.

52. Nicholas Thomas, *Discovries: Art, Science and Exploration from the University of Cambridge Museums*, Two Temple Place, London 2014, p68.

53. Tariq Modood, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2005. Hereafter *Multicultural Politics*.

54. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, Duke University Press, Durham 2012.

55. Anas Al-Tikriti, Muslim Association of Britain, President 2003-04, interviewed by Naima Boutledja, 25/04/07.

56. Floya Anthias, 'Moving beyond the Janus face of integration and diversity discourses: towards an intersectional framing'. *Sociological Review* 61, 2013, pp323-343, quotation p323.

57. Sue Davis, interviewed the author, 19/10/06.

the political alliances it seemed to be spawning, in the form of Respect, a political party that presented itself as a new left alliance. And yet, this project was positioned within a fundamentally conservative model of encounter, difference and diversity, which 'claim[s] to attack social divisions' but is actually 'underpinned by binary and essentialised constructions of these very divisions'.⁵⁶ Sardar finds this static model of difference in multicultural ideals, policies and practices, which he critiques as the 'celebration of enduring difference' (*Touched*, p104).

Curiosity offers something more dynamic and searching, which promises to unsettle the sometimes-static pillars of difference. Sue's story, with which I began this paper, finds its initial reference points in the formal structure of the anti-war movement. Sue positions herself as a peace campaigner and the man she meets as a Muslim. But this encounter proves more searching. Rather than simply a 'bringing together of people' who are destined to remain distinct, their identities intact, Sue edged towards a less generalised and more dynamic account of relationships between 'different' individuals and groups.⁵⁷ She did this, not by dissolving categories in any way, but by complicating them, recognising their indeterminacy, and beginning to unsettle the kind of tidy, mutually exclusive categories articulated by the leaders of the movement.

FOR SOCIABLE CURIOSITY: A CONCLUSION

I have distilled a particular - sociable - form of curiosity and distinguished two, overlapping but distinct forms of this: empathetic and relational curiosity. I have argued that these, in their different ways, can be vehicles for meaningful encounters with others, initially for navigating social distances and differences in diverse societies, but ultimately for interrogating these fundamental terms, and potentially recasting them. Sociable curiosity offers pathways to 'getting along with those who are different', and establishing a basis for cooperative relationships and solidarities (*Together*, p23). Sennett argues that 'paying serious attention to other people' can be constructive - helpful to others on an individual level (he gives the example of employment counselling), and constructive on a social level, for example as a catalyst for generating political ideas (p177). The experience in Glasgow Museums develops these claims, highlighting interpersonal connections with wider social implications.

Nevertheless, curiosity should not be seen in soft focus. Arnold's curiosity was not simply 'charity' as he asserted; it also contained elements of something darker, not necessarily the 'malice' alleged by Bradley, but certainly a nosey intrusiveness (*The Black Prince*, p49). And, even if it had been charitable, that would have introduced asymmetrical power relations between the curious subject and the object of his or her curiosity, as I have argued above in relation to Arnold, and also through the Human Library project. Bradley's belated curiosity - his desire to know about, if not always to know, others - was not necessarily altruistic, nor was it willed by this figure himself, since it was

provoked by others. This illustrates how curiosity in general is too eclectic and slippery an idea to pin down with a single, all-encompassing definition or ethical stance. Curiosity is a 'various notion, overlapping with desire, avarice and envy as well as more abstract or virtuous qualities' (*Curiosity: Art and the Pleasure of Knowing*, p15). So, if it were necessary to answer Inan's rhetorical question of whether curiosity is 'a virtue', the answer must be: not necessarily (*Philosophy of Curiosity*, p185). Accepting that some forms or expressions of curiosity, including sociable curiosity, can be intrusive and/or exploitative, benefitting the curious person at the expense of others, who may become objects of curiosity, it is nevertheless possible to identify other expressions of curiosity that are ethically robust, or at least ethically reflexive (*Curiosity: A Cultural History*). This reflexive curiosity is accompanied by questions, including those raised in the course of this paper: Who can be curious about whom? What are the consequences of curiosity? What are the expressions and consequences of sociable curiosity in diverse societies? Which differences count, are celebrated, or are excluded? Sensitivity to such questions is crucial to the practice of ethical curiosity.

But ethically reflexive curiosity should not be seen in soft focus either. Regardless of its motives, sociable curiosity can lead us to uncomfortable knowledge about others, which may not necessarily inspire respect or mutual acceptance, and may have unintended consequences. On the contrary, it can heighten a sense of difference, but not necessarily renew 'respect for difference' (*Living with Difference*, p325). This resonates with Chantal Mouffe's argument that it can be constructive to lay differences bare, opening up space in which to air and explore conflict, but also that this depends upon agreeing and observing certain ground rules, such as mutual tolerance, respect and limits to the expression of disagreement.⁵⁸ In such conditions, it may be possible to find what Nick Gill calls 'a dual space of recognition and disagreement' - a space for 'functioning politics' and meaningful encounters.⁵⁹

There is a second, more fundamental way in which curiosity can be a catalyst for positive engagements with difference and diversity, and this speaks more directly to Zuss's claim that 'critical curiosity is manifest in acts of intervention into daily life in the interest of transforming it' (*Theoretical Curiosity*, p88). Rather than simply mediating between differences and social distances - though of course there is nothing simple about this - curiosity can be a vehicle for understanding and recasting these differences, and the diversity with which they are associated. Reflecting its taxonomic tradition, curiosity speaks directly to the exploration - including the disruption and recasting - of social categories, differences and distances. This raises questions about what a diverse society is and can be, and what differences are and can be. It also underlines the relationships between diversity, difference and inequality.

In this paper, I have argued not only about but *for* curiosity, but not just any curiosity. I have been searching and arguing for more and better relational

58. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Routledge, Abingdon 2005.

59. Nick Gill, Phil Johnstone, Andrew Williams, 'Towards a geography of tolerance: post-politics and political forms of toleration', *Political Geography* 31, 2012, pp. 509-518, quotation p. 511.

and empathetic curiosity, as an end in itself and as a means through which social change might be explored and pursued. Referring to social change, I have not been too prescriptive. This social change may take different forms, flowing in each case from meaningful encounters and empathetic relationships, which are cultivated through sociable curiosity. This means that being curious about others, though not always highly charged, and not necessarily progressive, can be both of these things, since it can bridge some of the fractures and divisions that exist within diverse societies.

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