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**MALCOLM GLADWELL (2019). TALKING TO STRANGERS: WHAT WE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE PEOPLE WE DON'T KNOW. LITTLE, BROWN & CO, BOSTON, 400 PP., ISBN 978-0316478526.**

According to Shayne Lee, associate professor of sociology at the University of Houston, Malcolm Gladwell is a “detective” of emerging fashions and subcultures, chronicling jobs that were never known to exist. His work is overturning popular understanding of prejudice, crime, food, marketing, race, consumers and intelligence. Gladwell’s writing skills and his way of doing analysis of social phenomena have the ability to shape and redirect popular understanding of sociological concepts makes his work an excellent framework for exploring human action and the shape of consciousness shaped by cultural and social structures.

As in all his journalistic and scientific articles, in his latest book, analysed here, sociologist Gladwell uses scientific data collected by leading social scientists and intriguing stories to present a more complex model of society. Writing about issues such as otherness, difference and cultural relations on different levels of scale make people more informed about the nuances and complexities of the human condition. Sometimes the best conversations are those in which the stranger remains a stranger.

The act of understanding each other is complicated by language, but also by history, culture, sense of humour; even more complicated is the act of trusting. What we personally believe to be good abilities to read the intentions of strangers is not always so, and history sometimes gives us examples of this: when the British Prime Minister, Chamberlain met Hitler, Gladwell reports, he judged him to be a “reasonable man dedicated to peace”.

But understanding each other and interpreting each other’s intentions are necessary activities for life in society. Gladwell, using some case studies, analyses the major difficulties that can be encountered, and the serious and harmful consequences to which they can lead, in the hope that increased suspicion and distance from those around us will not remain the only means at our disposal.

Let us imagine hypothetically that we are in the middle of a crowded square and suddenly see someone we do not know, a stranger, who appears in front of us. He speaks our language, but does not seem to be trustworthy. He looks unkempt and is quite talkative. How would you act? Would you interact with him or would you rely on your first judgement and avoid him by turning your back on him?

Deciphering and understanding someone you do not know is more difficult than you might think. The art of understanding someone is already difficult in relationships with loved ones, relatives, friends, and therefore even more complex in front of a stranger.

Since our life is full of strangers (just walking down the street, getting on a bus to meet new people), it is necessary to analyse the strategies we use when dealing with others. These are often influenced by prejudices which do not allow us to properly assess who we are dealing with. This understanding, moreover, is the basis of many professions. Think, for example, of a policeman at a checkpoint who has to stop a motorist in the street, or an emergency doctor who encounters a patient for the first time. For Gladwell, as human beings, as social animals, we constantly need to understand strangers, the problem is that we are not very good at it.

Contrary to what we think, we are essentially incompetent at this task of understanding. The evidence of our inability is not only evident in our daily lives. They are present in certain historical facts. And it is precisely this that Gladwell intends with *The Stranger's Dilemma*, to highlight this inability of ours to overcome stereotypes and prejudices in the relationship of understanding the other through events of the past. Gladwell's aim is to overturn common sense, to turn personal beliefs upside down, and to explain what misunderstanding and the failure of communication are all about. He is convinced of the idea that understanding depends not only on language, but also on the culture and history of individuals.

The beginning of the book focuses on an event that took place a few years ago in Texas: a policeman's arrest – at a roadblock – of a young woman, Sandra Bland, who committed suicide in her cell a few days later. For Gladwell, this is one of the most sensational events related to the inability to judge a stranger and shows how communication difficulties can lead to the worst possible consequences. This event started the Black Lives Matter movement, which we know all too well today. Another example happened in 1938, when Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, judged Hitler to be a peaceful and trustworthy man at their first meeting, a historical error with well-known consequences. How is it possible to misjudge someone you do not know?

According to the author: "The belief that we know more about others than they know about us, and that we can understand them better than they understand themselves (but conversely they cannot understand us), leads us to speak when we would do better to listen". This belief is called the illusion of asymmetrical understanding. In addition, according to the author, we make three mistakes when dealing with strangers: the presumption of honesty (judging an innocent person by their appearance), the illusion of transparency (the inability

to consider a stranger as a person) and finally the underestimation of the context in which a stranger presents himself. These mistakes lead to failed communication.

Thanks to this book, it is possible to understand some strategies to understand the mistakes we make with strangers. *The Stranger's Dilemma* is a book that reveals how we relate, a description of contemporary life that confronts us with our beliefs and prejudices in order to analyse and understand them. The ultimate goal? To accept one's limitations, to admit that understanding others is not easy, to admit that it takes an arduous effort.

To sum up, here are the salient features of the sociologist's thinking. This book is based on a dilemma. We have to talk to strangers, we have no other choice, especially in a world without borders, which we have today. We no longer live in villages. Police have to stop people they don't know. Intelligence officers have to deal with deception and uncertainty. Young people go to parties precisely to meet unknown people, it is part of the romantic thrill of discovery. Yet, faced with this most necessary task, we find ourselves incapable. So, we think we can transform the Unknown into the familiar and the known without sacrifice and additional costs, but it is not so.

What to do then? Accepting our limitations in deciphering the unknown, surrendering to otherness, is the most likely solution. What we can understand of a stranger, Gladwell argues, will always be as fragile as crystal. At the slightest mistake, it will shatter into a thousand pieces. Despite this, the risk is worth taking. As human beings, our mission is to live in society and to cooperate with Others, even if they are strangers. Cooperate and communicate with others with caution, especially in times of pandemic. Where we are distant but united, sensitive, hurting, masked and unknown. However distant.

In conclusion, looking at the current scenario of health and economic crisis, one of the most complex challenges that institutions and citizens had to face after the Covid-19 pandemic was to communicate and understand the emergency, rebuild their routines, re-evaluate their relationships, change schools, give up losing a job. Our mobile lives have become immobile in an interconnected and sick world. At the same time, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of social relationships and how human communication with the Other can transcend all legal and cultural boundaries. This is another reason why, as Gladwell says, we should strive to understand the Unknown rather than simply criminalise it, especially in the context of global crises.

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