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Commonplaces and Peculiarities

Let us begin with this paradoxical statement: In a world which sets so much value on diversity, it has become virtually impossible to be different. Not that the whole population would wear the same uniform or share the same interests, on the contrary. Mass production has long been supplanted by customized models, work is individualized, everyone can operate in the networks of his choice. Yet within each loose scene and peer-group the attitudes are quite predictable. Especially in milieus which consider "normativity" as the worst of evils, both language and behaviour actually comply with an imperious set of norms. In the fear of hurting somebody else's feelings, or being branded a reactionary of some kind, or just failing to be positive enough, communication merely consists in the repeated exchange of pre-established codes. This applies to non-verbal communication as well, see the silent, self-disciplined hand signs at protest meetings which have replaced the unruly heckling, clapping and booing. And obviously, this applies to the outfit too. It is indeed amazing how self-styled singularities look alike.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with diversity if this means welcoming and experiencing the multiplicity of flavours, cultural expressions or thoughts the whole wide world can offer. Yet on the political level, "radical diversity" can be a misleading notion. It may become an excuse for the existing social fragmentation, in which all kind of particular interests coexist without being able to exchange with each other or to merge in a common cause. Let us consider for instance the case for cultural relativism. Apparently, it is a sign of tolerance to tell someone: "This is your point of view as an African woman or a rape victim and I wouldn't allow myself to say anything about this." But doesn't it mean in fact: "You are so radically different from me that you have to be indifferent to my opinion"? Which finally amounts to the statement: You have your own subjective truth, I've got mine, we both accept that they stand side by side - period. As the US-philosopher David Detmer puts it: "Relativism removes one of our most powerful motives to study the views of the other - the idea that the other might be *right* and we might be *wrong*." When understood in this way, radical diversity amounts to a radical denial of dialogue.

Majority has become something fishy these days. Not so long ago, people used to think that in order to change the world, you would have to get the masses on your side. Concurring left-wing tendencies were blamed for their born inability to achieve unity, thus failing to defeat the tiny power elite. Now, majority is often equated to the norm, say: the white, heterosexual, adult,

healthy European male. Defining oneself as such would mean identifying with the dominant norm - which shouldn't bother us that much: Who is so numb to *define* himself as a white, European heterosexual male except neofascists who are so keen on identity politics? Most of the people would just say: Well, that's the way it is, there's nothing I can do about it, but never would I identify with such an identity. You just happen to have a white skin or to be born in Europe, this is neither a reason to be proud nor to be ashamed of. As far as sexual orientation is concerned, it can hardly be denied that even in tolerant, liberal countries the vast majority remains (most of the times at least) heterosexual. Of course, this says nothing against otherwise oriented persons. The question is: In the minority-focused narrative, which place is left for the expression of the frustrations and desires most of the people actually experience? As we know, those have little to do with the "norm" as represented in mainstream media and fiction. Indeed, masses of people feel trapped in an identity they don't identify with, therefore they are reduced to embarrassed silence when it comes to it. They might feel sympathetic to all kinds of discriminated groups, but this is of little relevance as far as their own life is concerned. To make things worse, it is widely assumed that their own frustrations and desires are fundamentally different from those of other minorities.

Pluralism is being understood as the addition of singularities. The problem with this notion is that "singular" also has the meaning of "unique" in the sense of: something which bears no comparison to anything else (paradigmatic for this is the German dispute about the singularity of the holocaust). So the reasoning goes like this: Each minority is being subjected to a specific kind of discrimination. Cis-hetero-women are not discriminated the same way as lesbians are, lesbians as queer people and so on. Therefore, each minority has to deal with a particular form of micro-power which cannot be equated to other forms. Moreover, each group stands out for itself with specific codes, feelings and worldviews, it thus needs its own zones sheltered from prejudice and injury (some even aiming at radical separatism). A public encounter with others can be nothing else than a juxtaposition of particular subjectivities staging their own visibility - as in occupy-like movements. There is no way they would merge for a common cause, as this would rebuild a majority which is postulated as being "totalitarian". To put it in a further paradoxical way: This kind of self-empowerment leads to powerlessness.

In a way, disintegration is the state of things most of the people experience at present. They feel estranged from a globalized society which destroyed all kinds of collective ties and social protections. They are left alone in front of invasive forces such as work, commodity and the markets. Cultural identity is the only admitted form of togetherness, provided it remains singular and refrains raising broad social or economic issues. Nonetheless, a majority is not necessarily monolithic. It can be based on the acceptance of all kinds of differences, yet looking for a common ground.