

# DIFFERENCES IN DIFFERENCE

## A »COGNITIVE MAPPING« OF THE LANDSCAPE OF OTHERNESS

An Essay by Anil K. Jain

### ABSTRACT:

There is a (historical) shift, a reversal in the relation of identity and difference, centre and periphery. Many concepts »originally« rather related to the »outcast« and the marginalised (like »weakness« and »ambiguity«) became core-concepts, and, thus, (the discourse of) difference itself works as a »dispositive« – a (repressive) power structure that governs and excludes. This new »appreciation« of difference is evolving as an effect of today's »global«, post-Fordist capitalism, which is mainly based on the exploitation of (spatial and cultural) difference(s). What is more, there exist multiple hierarchies in the (everyday) practice of »differentiation«, and the construction of otherness in this day and age occurs in a complex situation of manifold uncertainties and ambivalence: clear, binary differences »disappear«, and we, therefore, have to carefully (re-)map the new landscape of difference.

### 1. IN/DIFFERENCE – »TERMINATING« DIFFERENCE OR APPROACHING THE TERM



Things are different with difference. It is a liquid, fluid category, which evades any effort to fix it. Paradoxically, the closer you approach to it, the more you move away from it, for the different, by its »character«, can never be identified. Once that it seems to be grasped, it suddenly disappears, even turns to the opposite – it becomes in-different: identical. No space of unfolding difference is left in the process of defining the different. Defining difference means violating, means destroying it.

Is there a way out of this trap? Perhaps we have to take a different route to approach the field of difference. Thus, let us try and conceive difference here not as a fixed category but as a certain *relation*. Difference is a space in-between – that »third« space (see also Soja 1989/1997 and Bhabha 1994) that opens up in the process of constructing »otherness«. <sup>1</sup> Accordingly, difference can either be seen as a »gap« or as a »bridge«. Anyway, it is only possible to speak of difference in relation to other categories, things, people etc. Or to be more accurate: difference is created in this relation. So it seems that if we know about the other categories, things, people etc. (and their relation), we get very close to the difference which differentiates them.

Does that solve the problem of »terminating« difference? – Only partly: difference merely conceived as a relation, will make it possible to deal with it in a specific setting. However,

this does not tell us about the character of difference in general. But since it is, maybe, the general character of difference that it has no general character, we can now, »enlightened« by this insight, try to follow the historical line of a relation which is at the »core« of difference: the relation of identity and otherness.

## **2. HISTORICAL »BREAKBEATS« IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF OTHERNESS AND COPMLETE(D) ALIENATION (AS A REACTION TO GLOBALISED CAPITALISM AND POST-FORDISM)**

Being different is the »nature« of »the other«. However, the way how »otherness« is created and sustained is not at all given by nature. Of course, there are manifold »natural« differences between people (like height or weight) – as there are manifold similarities. But it matters a lot – and it is not just by chance (but dependent on power, the cultural and historical framing etc.) – which differences serve as the point of reference to identify the other as the other. Most likely, we would e.g. be willing to accept that human rights are not applicable to, say, a stone. The (pre-)supposed otherness of the stone, in relation to mankind, serves here to make a distinction in (juridical) practice. But which difference justifies that some people live under conditions of unbelievable affluence and »others« suffer from deficient nutrition? – We can see: there are differences in difference, and those differences make a difference to us.

As it seems, there is, however, a historical shift in the way how otherness is produced. And that is, of course, a political question, it relates to the (global) distribution of power: the other is a necessary (counter-)part in the process of constructing identity – especially, in the field of politics. For Carl Schmitt, a (right-wing) German political philosopher of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, politics occurs exactly with the division into we and them, friend and enemy (see 1996 [1927]). But one does not have to go that far. A politics of (mutual) acknowledgement and even a politics without any such oppositions is possible or at least has to be our task. But any distinction between friend and enemy, between us and the other(s) is indeed a highly political question. It draws a line that is hard to pass once that it is established – a line that excludes, a line of suppression and domination.

The other thus serves as a »mirror« of our self-definition: we desperately need that other. Other-wise we are in danger of losing our-selves. And this mirror works in a miraculous way – mirrored back, all our bad and weak aspects become nice and pleasing, whereas the other, though being our mirror-»image«, turns to the contrary. A relationship of black and white, good and bad, us and them is established. It is a »binary code« that allows no values in-between. »Whoever is not for me, is against me.« And whoever does not fit in this scheme, who irritates the established patterns of clear demarcation by a »mixed«, ambivalent »outlook«, will face double trouble. Neither us nor them, neither good nor bad, neither black nor white, he or she or rather *it* will be excluded even from simple exclusion, since anyone who endangers

the (fictional, constructed) certainties tends to be seen as a paradox, as a manifest contradiction: a (strange) thing rather than a human being. Exactly the ambivalent similarity to »us«, which at the same time points to the elements of »otherness« within ourselves and which thus reveals the »imaginary« character of mirroring, results in an exaggerated rejection and repression (see also Kristeva 1991 [1988] and Bielefeld 1991). The distinction (between us the others) that forms the basis of our identity is questioned. Accordingly, the »bastard«, the hybrid »half-caste«-pariah that blasts apart the distinctness of identity through its »impurity«, is at a high risk to be eliminated: either by violence (as it was the case with the Jews during the Nazi-regime in Germany) or symbolically: by non-figuration.<sup>2</sup>

The ambivalent, impure »half-caste« is not assignable in the binary relation of identity and alterity and, therefore, has no real, secure place(ment) in society. It is often far better to be an-other than not to be, and although in general the other represents a negative mirror/image, in some cases he/she serves as a projection screen for our (self-)ideals – like in romantic, i.e. narcissist love. Examples of this kind of mirroring are stereotypes (like the peaceful Buddhist culture or the supposed living in harmony with nature of tribal communities). Anyway, the other, as a negative self, bears a certain fascination and attraction. At least (and in fact necessarily) he/she is imagined to be powerful (though, of course, inferior). Wherever we are, the other seems already to be there to challenge us. Nomadic, mean, unscrupulous and with changing faces, the other is indeed dangerous, but lacks the stability, moral principle and real strength that distinguishes »us«.

This is, of course, a description that would have been well fitting for the situation some time back, but which does not seem to be fully adequate any more. The historical culmination point of this »binary« creation-mode of otherness was, maybe, the time of Cold War. But Cold War is over. And even before, there were signs of a change. Today, things are obviously »different«: instead of being rooted deeply to a specific locality/community, mobility is a demanded attribute, and flexibility is seen to be much more appropriate to life in (post-)modern capitalism than following strict principles. Openness for ambivalence and contingency is even an acknowledged virtue. And who would not like to stress having many faces/facets (instead of being limited to a fixed role/identity)? Thus, one might conclude that most of the former fictions about the (weak) character of »the other(s)« have now become core-concepts/ideologies. Suppose this description is correct, how can this (ideological) change be explained? And what does it exactly mean for the question of difference and otherness?

The causes of this shift in the relation(s) of identity and otherness can be traced to the latest developments in capitalist economy. More flexible forms of accumulation (see Harvey 1989) demand a flexible personality/identity (see also Sennett 1998). As an effect, otherness is and has to be constructed in a different way, and attributes that were »originally« assigned to the marginal place of difference »migrate« to the core. This happens because the globalised, post-

Fordist capitalist economy relies, like any kind of capitalism, on the exploitation of difference(s). But whereas it was sufficient in its early days to use power, speed up technological change or just colonise other territories to accumulate wealth from difference (e.g. in the value of labour force), today, other differences and modes of exploitation become more central. Global capitalism got its own contradictions. Its movement is globalising, but the unification-processes – which necessarily occur along with the global spread of capitalist economy and consumption patterns – exactly destroy the economic basis of the capitalist mode of accumulation: the exploitation of difference. Therefore, new kinds of difference have to be focused, and, in the final stage, difference has to be »virtually« created (see also Jain 2002 [2000]).

But this means that a simple logic of difference – the binary relation of us and the other(s) – can no longer work well. More complex and »plural« forms of differences/otherness must be created (in order to exploit them), and instead of marginalising the different, difference (i.e. a certain, capital-compatible type of difference) becomes »central«. This is especially true for cultural (and spatial) difference, for in the evolving »*Economies of Signs and Space*« (Lash/Urry 1996) cultural difference represents a high value/surplus potential (which can be exploited through spatial transfer). Obviously, such kind of economy, which is based on »image(s)«, knowledge and aesthetics, relies on cultural difference, and otherness becomes a source of income – not necessarily for »the others«, but indeed for the global cultural industry.

The effect of this is a new (extended) sense of the term »alienation«: capitalism does not only cause alienation in the field of work and production – where new forms of work organization nowadays create the illusion of a possibility for self-realization within workspace (which, in reality, often means self-exploitation by identification).<sup>3</sup> Alienation, in its new sense, relates to the fact that capitalism is more and more resembling an economy not only of (wage) difference, but an economy of otherness. The alien-other is – as described above – a central source of surplus accumulation, and, on the subject-level, alienation – conceptualised as the identification with the different – represents a final stage in the development of individualism: the »emancipation« from the forces of (»fixed«) personal identity and the *internalization of otherness* (in order to make use of it). We might, therefore, call this decentration of the self by a forced »incorporation« of difference a *complete(d) alienation*.

No wonder then, difference becomes a core concept, and »hybridity, diaspora and post-coloniality are now fashionable and even marketable terms« (Hutnick 1997, p. 118). The hype-r-modern concepts of a »nodal«, multiple identity (see e.g. Gergen 1991) go well together with current management ideologies (like decentralisation, participation, flexibility, team-work etc.). And the new elite, the (trans-)global class (see again Jain 2002 [2000] as well as Sklair 2001)), consequently imagine themselves as cosmopolitan post-humans, far beyond any fixed identity (see in a critical vein Steyerl 2002, pp. 35f.). They use terms like »cyborg« (see e.g. Haraway 1991) or »quasi-subject« (see Beck et al. 2001) to express this post-human, trans-identical

character. Ambiguity now seems to be rather functional and, thus, attractive. The other is »discovered« and »colonialised«: the (transfer-)techniques of »intercultural communication« infiltrate the business sector – since »glocalisation« and a new eclectic (cultural) imperialism are the most effective surplus generators of the day. Or as Bauman (1997, p. 55) puts it: »[...] ours is a *heterophilic* age. For sensation-gatherers or experience-collectors that we are, concerned (or, more exactly, forced to be concerned) with flexibility and openness rather than fixity and self-closure, difference becomes at a premium.« Consequently, for Bauman, that means that we have to learn how to deal with the other and the uncertainty he/she represents – which implies a »true emancipatory chance« (ibid., p. 57).

As it seems, otherness and difference are highly appreciated concepts in current (social science) discourse. In certain fields, like cultural and postcolonial studies, difference and hybridity are mainstream topics and virtually define the »identity« of the discipline (see as a crude example Bronfen/Marius 1997). »Paradoxically[,] in our world, marginality has become a powerful space« (Hall 1991, p. 34).<sup>4</sup> The theoretical »backing« is mostly extracted from the highly influential work of French poststructuralist philosophers: Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, Derrida etc. But also authors like Rorty, Bhabha and others have contributed a lot to this very recent appreciation of difference/-otherness. This is done in various conceptual frameworks and one should not generally question the concern for the other, for the suppressed and the marginal in these concepts. However, their discursive dominance and public presence show that many of these concepts are quite compatible with global capitalism: the cultural neo-imperialism of the post-Fordist era. Difference and its discourse more and more become themselves a regime, a power structure, a »dispositive«. The one who opposes the discourse of difference opposes power in discourse.

### **3. UPSIDE DOWN: EFFECTS OF A NEW HIERARCHY OF DIFFERENCE/OTHERNESS**

How does that affect the (hierarchical) structure of identity, otherness and difference? Obviously, a new relation of otherness and identity is established: otherness is now rather conceived as an old-fashioned insistency on the identical, as being one-dimensional. The (ideological) new self-images of the elite, to the contrary, centre on the marginal: plurality, ambivalence, versatility. The relation of otherness and identity, which defines the different, thus seems to be reversed, and, accordingly, also difference appears in a different light. Identity is created from non-identity and otherness, and difference (or being different), correspondingly, seems to be the (unreachable) target of post-modern self-development.

But, of course, we do not face a simple reversal in the relation(s) of identity, otherness and difference. It is rather the images that have changed. In practice, similar modes of exclusion as before are still at work. We may observe this e.g. in the reality of power relations where white males still dominate or whenever the other (and its ambivalence) is incompatible with

the new capitalist order, that is when the subaltern refuse to be embraced – and exploited. So there is a new (imaginary) hierarchy of difference evolving, which is, however, based on the same old hierarchies.

Anyway, before trying to outline the character of this new cultural and ideological hierarchy of difference, one must be aware that the binary construction of otherness always was ideological in the sense that complex internal hierarchies/differentiations existed at all times – and which in fact served to stabilize this system of exclusion because the privileged of the excluded were ready to (sometimes even enthusiastically) defend the system. As mentioned above, within this hierarchy, the hybrid »half-caste« always had a »strange«, peculiar position. On the one hand, they had a privileged position of »closeness«, on the other hand, exactly this closeness and similarity created reinforced rejection. Today, things have become even more complicated: the (self-)imaginings of the elite approach to the image of hybridity which formerly characterized the »half-caste«. But at the same time the elite is de facto ethnically and in respect of its social background rather homogenous. So the half-caste are still seen to be inferior, but they represent – as »carriers« of difference – a desirable cultural capital.

This is the point where also counter-ideologies set off to give difference a »real« space. They claim that from the marginal position – because of its »decentred« view – one can see clearer. Examples of such theory (just to name some) are the sociology of knowledge of Karl Mannheim (1970 [1929]), one of the greatest sociologists of the last century, who, unfortunately, is rarely referred to nowadays, the subsequent ideas of Zygmunt Bauman (1991), or the recent works of Paul Mecheril (2002), who would like to stress the value of »impurity«.

Unfortunately, this kind of argumentation is always in danger of being absorbed by the dominant discourse and even tends to sustain certain practices of exclusion. Those who insist on identity now appear antiquated and of no avail. The discourse of identity is marginalised, abused and silenced – as identity and its »hardening« effects are generally opposed to the dynamic, fluid system of post-Fordist capitalism, which is based on principles like flexibility and mobility. But the weaker you are, the more you might need the fix-point of identity (and be it the »perverted« forms of nationalism or fundamentalism). So it is once again the weak who are left to the margin (see again Steyerl 2002, pp. 38ff.) – those who cannot afford Vattimo's (1983) *pensiero debole* (weak thought) or the sophisticated ironic attitude of Rorty (1989).

**REMARKS:**

1. Soja and Bhabha both use the term rather in the Foucauldian sense of »heterotopia«, whereas I want to reveal the »relational«, i.e. fully dependent and mediated character of difference by applying the term »third space« here.
2. It was (maybe) Hannah Arendt (1958) who at first thoroughly described the ambivalent position of a hybrid »caste« in society. In her case it was the example of Jewish people in Germany who either acted and were conceived as »parias« or »parvenues«. But see e.g. also Bauman (1991, esp. ch 2) and Mecheril/Teo (1994).
3. Of course, Marx does not limit his concept of alienation to work-space. He is aware that alienation in the production process affects human nature and society. However, he does not address it psychologically – as an internalization of (hybrid) otherness (as I do below).
4. Hall, however, does not apply this argument in a critical vein, but he rather wants to point the (continued) dialects of the local and the global, i.e. there are also powers that are opposed to homogenisation and absorption.

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