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# Ambivalent Hybridities

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Sometimes the reasons for so-called misunderstandings with regard to a certain term are found in the weaknesses of the term itself. This becomes obvious, at the latest, when even leading theorists in the very area, in which a term has attained central significance, are misled by these "misunderstandings" or even generate them themselves.

The term hybridity is a good example of this. Having become a key concept within postcolonial studies and since then taken over in the broad field of diverse political and cultural activisms, it sometimes seems to express a single major misunderstanding; for instance, when Edward W. Said, author of several standard works of postcolonial studies, looking at migrants of Asian or African origins living in Europe, says: "I think it would be a grotesque misunderstanding of cultural development, if this new area of European/non-European culture were to be excluded for reasons of race or ethnicity. All cultures are hybrid, none is pure, none is identical with a racially pure population, no culture is homogeneous." [1]

Statements of this kind - to the extent that they are limited to the observation that "cultures" are never inherently homogeneous - at first appear to be purely and simply banal. The situation becomes

more complicated, however, as soon as the question is posed as to what "cultures" is actually supposed to mean here: namely if "all cultures" are hybrid, then how can these cultures be identified as such, or more specifically as certain cultural totalities? Every statement of the type "this culture is hybrid" ultimately presupposes that "this culture" has been identified as *this* hybrid culture (and not as another). At the same time, however, this identification cannot be tied to an identity of the intended culture with itself, because it is, in fact, hybrid.

The statement thus spans a discursive field that ranges from a pole of hybridity on the one side to a pole of identification on the other. The attempt to resolve it in the direction of hybridity ultimately leads to the platitude: "all social community is heterogeneous", with which virtually all political and social questions are opened up, but hardly any are answered. Although the assumption of a predetermined identity is precluded at the other pole (as figures of identification can be analyzed as historical narratives or ideological constructions), it still leaves open the problem of operations of identification, as they are still in effect in the statement itself.

All of this is hardly surprising, not only in light of the dubious history of the concept of hybridity, which implicates botany, zoology and, somewhat later, theories of race from the 18th and 19th century [2], and thus an affiliation with ideas and practices of breeding, crossbreeding and social technologies, to which the opposition of "retaining purity" and "mixing" was just as central as a systematic identification intention, which did not, in fact, exclude the "hybrid". Nor is it a coincidence that the concept of hybridity - which is used in more recent theorizing specifically against racist proscriptions - has developed primarily in discourses about "culture". It has often been noted that discourses about culture(s) refer less to given - somehow natural - identities, but instead posit

a schematism of identity (identities), which ultimately leaves the determination of collective identity *void*, but only to focus almost obsessively on figures of cultural identification - in fact, even to *generate* these.

Specifically for this reason, however, the rhetoric of hybridity not only remains peculiarly ineffectual in the confrontation with neo-racist culturalisms of a theoretical or political nature, but even occasionally finds itself directly at their service: about two years ago, for instance, the FPÖ - the Austrian right-wing, so-called "Freedom Party" - advanced the notion that migrants from countries formerly belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire were already felt to be "Austrians" - clearly unlike the "non-European Muslims". The success of the murdered Dutch right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn is based on a similar phenomenon: he claimed to have no problem with the migrants of different generations that mould the society of the Netherlands (following their election success, the Fortuyn List even called for a campaign to regularize the sans-papiers, which was to precede drastically tightening migration laws), but the time had come - since all social problems were tied to migration - to put a stop to it, and aside from that, according to this line of thinking, Islam is allegedly a "backward culture".

Contrary to Edward Said's suggestive formulation, in other words, the acceptance of "hybridity" - *this* hybridity, which is purportedly affirmed in the respective case - may be excellently combined with a rigorous policy of exclusion. The main reason for this is that the negotiation of this or that identity, of this or that hybridity, only serves to disguise *another* mechanism of exclusion, which is not of a cultural nature, but rather a political-legal one: the constitutive legal exclusion of non-citizens from the nation state - with all the consequences that are more highly visible today than ever before (if

we think of the refugee camps, the boat-people, the forms of the economic *inclusion* of migrant workers, who are nevertheless subject to precisely the same constitutive legal exclusion, the resultant compulsion to clandestine existence, but also the progressive militarization of border patrols).

The sociologist Nora Räthzel states the problem succinctly, when she writes: "Thus the answer to the question of which *cultures (ethnicities)* a nation is composed of, is not an answer to the question of how to prevent exclusion processes. On the contrary, the answer that this is hybridity only affirms the framework that produces the exclusion processes by leaving it intact and only defining its contents differently." [3]

In light of all this, how is "hybrid resistance" even imaginable? A somewhat provocative initial response is: not at all. At least, not as long as potentials of resistance (against right-wing extremism, racism, current globalization politics, etc.) are presumed in the mere fact of various groupings of agents. This kind of resistance builds on the conditions of its own impotence; it is in jeopardy of turning abstract heterogeneity into an end in itself that is not further questioned, and of being ultimately crushed by mutually exclusive identifications. The expansion of the concept of hybridity beyond questions of "cultural belonging" in order to cover various types of terrain transgressions between art and politics, theory and activist practice, citizenship and non-citizenship, etc. usually does little to change this situation, even just on the basis of existing structural constraints.

Another perspective is opened up, though, by an analysis of "processes of hybridization" as provided by the postcolonialism theorist Homi K. Bhabha [4]: "hybridity", according to Bhabha, developed in the colonial context primarily because the colonial

powers needed their subjects to take over their symbols and discourses of authority, in order to establish their rule. This *repetition* of domination relationships in the act of subjection, however, is different from its mere representation. Through repetition or through the estrangement created therein, it introduces a difference into the given social conditions, which does not leave either the colonial authority or the oppressed society untouched, but rather "hybridizes" them and simultaneously temporalizes and destabilizes the existing power; according to Bhabha, it estranges and transforms the *symbols* of authority into *signs* of difference.

The potentials of resistance consequently draw from the essence of power itself, which must continuously newly reproduce itself, in order to maintain itself as power: as Judith Butler writes, "The reiteration not only temporalizes the conditions of subordination, but shows these conditions to be, not static structures, but temporalized - active and productive. The temporalization performed by reiteration traces the route by which powers' appearance shifts and reverses." [5] Resistance that forms in this way, however, has a price: it is forced to articulate itself in the framework of a certain complicity with the power it opposes. Or as Butler states, "(...) in the act of opposing subordination, the subject reiterates its subjection." [6] - yet it is nevertheless an act of opposition.

A good example of this is found in the *Wiener Wahl Partie* (Viennese Election Party), a platform that intervened in the Viennese City Council elections in spring 2001. The central point of the campaign was a call for voting rights for non-naturalized migrants, the central point of attack was accordingly the deliberative fiction of a comprehensive balance of interests in society that effectively excludes the migrant portion of society.

Elections thus turn out to be a dispositive allowing for a certain democratic control of state power, but establishing and repeating a mechanism of exclusion that can hardly be challenged within the election itself.

The *Wiener Wahl Partie* reacted to this by not constituting itself as a political party (in German: *Partei*), but rather - in a gesture of estrangement - as a *Partie* (in Viennese: a congenial gathering, a group sharing interests and activities), thus subverting the mechanism of exclusion and enabling a constitutive collaboration between migrant and non-migrant groups. By applying classic election campaign methods (publicity, campaigning at Viennese markets, etc.) and specific strategies (e.g. distributing flyers in Turkish and Serbo-Croatian), they not only campaigned for voting rights, but also encouraged naturalized migrants (especially of the so-called second generation) to participate in the elections, as their below-average participation can be understood as a secondary effect of social exclusion.

Despite their extreme care to avoid complicity with power, even the *Wiener Wahl Partie* was not able to completely elude this complicity: to begin with, an election campaign, whose agents are not eligible for election themselves, naturally already subordinates itself to existing regulations through a kind of self-exclusion. Also, in more general terms, difficulties are already preconditioned, when the different political situations and dependencies of the activists limit and codetermine the options for agency. Finally, the notorious "voluntariness" of activist work, which may itself be decoded as complicity with predominant valuations, is not capable of avoiding dependencies, but is merely redirected into individual exhaustion and economic balancing acts.

What these kinds of experiences evince - apart from the personal discouragement that they partly produce - is primarily the inevitable repetition of existing power relations, in which political activist agency is involved. However, they also indicate the question of *how* this inevitability can be dealt with, in other words, which interlocking of political contents, strategies for action and the production of concrete alliances is actually suitable for effecting a certain "displacement and reversal of the appearance of power" (Butler). In short, they indicate the question of *political organization*.

In light of this question, the answer "hybridity" proves to be an empty formula: even where it goes beyond merely ascertaining heterogeneity, as with Homi Bhabha, to indicate the conditions for the emergence of resistance potentials, it usually falls short of indicating the concrete political potential for *change* inherent to this resistance. In the end, the hybridity discourse significantly seeps back into where it came from: a nebulous "culture", that is now no longer to be understood as "the *source* of conflicts", but rather as the "*effect* of discriminatory practices" and the "*production* of cultural differentiation as a sign of authority" [7], - a culture, however, to which all hopes may be entrusted. Even though there is hardly any doubt that markings of power will be created through this, it is not at all certain that these markings will be anything other than *symptoms* of a society that can find no escape from its problems.
The classic Marxist left-wing claimed to recognize the social subject of change in the proletariat and promised a good and just post-revolutionary society. The left-wing of today that answers "culture", before even posing the question of political organization (and thus of the concrete perspectives for agency of the old and new political alliances), often only promises that the social subject

is itself in the process of change and that potentials of resistance and emancipation will somehow be formed in the course of this change. This might perhaps be comforting, if the political and social repudiations of the societies, in which we live, were not at the same time becoming increasingly bigger and increasingly rigorous.

Oh yes, and since parliamentary elections are scheduled for next year in Austria: it is time to found *Wahl Partien* again!

[1] Edward W. Said, "Kultur, Identität und Geschichte", in: G. Schröder / H. Breuninger (Ed.), *Kulturtheorien der Gegenwart. Ansätze und Positionen*, Frankfurt/M.: Campus 2001, p. 53 f.

[2] Cf. Annie E. Coombes / Avtar Brah, "Introduction: the conundrum of 'mixing'", in: A. Brah / A. E. Coombes (Ed.), *Hybridity and its Discontents. Politics, Science, Culture*, London / New York: Routledge 2000, p. 3.

[3] Nora Räthzel, "Hybridität ist die Antwort, aber was war noch mal die Frage?", in: Brigitte Kossek (Ed.), *Gegen-Rassismen. Konstruktionen, Interaktionen, Interventionen*, Hamburg/Berlin: Argument-Verlag 1999, p. 207.

[4] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London / New York: Routledge 1994, p. 102-122.

[5] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 16

[6] ibid., p. 11

[7] H. Bhabha, op.cit., p. 114.