

Richard Rottenburg

**UNTRIVIALIZING DIFFERENCE.
A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION**

I.

It has become something of a ritual to celebrate the constructedness of difference and identity at every possible occasion. I will not examine this emphasis on construction here, although I would insist that it is in fact pleonastic, as identities and differences are always necessarily constructed. What interests me rather are the implications that invariably accompany such celebrations of the constructed nature of difference and identity.

These ritual occasions reinforce a commandment extolling the advantages of pursuing non-difference. If differences, so the implicit argument goes, are constructed, then we might as well dispense with them completely or at least dispense with some of them and make the rest more enjoyable. This argument implicitly presumes that most differences are the result of avoidable performative acts and that they are at least potentially evil as well. Suppressing these performative acts with the help of this commandment would thus reduce the dangers of difference. While all of this is perhaps correct in a certain limited sense, it is nevertheless based on a number of gross simplifications about the construction of realities (including those of identities and differences) and thus leads to serious trivializations. In this short and rather personal introduction, I would like to suggest how we might begin undoing some of these assumptions and their consequences.

II.

The overarching backdrop for current debates about difference and, by implication, about identity is that of globalization. We may be justified in doubting whether the much discussed process of globalization is really a fundamentally new phenomenon. Nevertheless we can identify several aspects that distinguish the present wave of globalization from its historical predecessors. These include the dynamics of globalizing markets, increased personal mobility, and the effects of new information and communication technologies. Similarly conspicuous are changes in the domains of state sovereignty, transnational processes, and global regimes of governance. These developments have been accompanied by changes in perceptions of space and time. What is perhaps

most important and really new in this most recent wave of globalization is 1) that it entails fragmentation and 2) that the foundations of globalizing ideas—nature and science—have lost or are losing their foundational power or universal validity (Latour 2002).

Taken together, these transformations have generated new patterns of inclusion and exclusion for individuals, collectivities, and regions. One consequence has been that the relationship between alterity and identity has changed. We now pose different questions about issues of belonging, and we negotiate our answers to these questions rather differently as well. The fact that collective identities are often staged for and distributed by the media (or even created by the media) has made drawing boundaries between the self and the other more complex. The emergence of greater reflexivity regarding notions of belonging and identity is connected to this as well. This greater reflexivity has also been the result of processes in which collectivities emerge as a consequence of new understandings of property rights resulting from global regimes of governance. In this process, the issue of difference is transposed onto new constellations.

There is nothing new about the fact that social scientists investigate such phenomena. Already during the 1930s, leading social scientists emphasized the negotiable character, the situational dependence, and the dynamics and contingency of identity (and thereby of difference). Beginning in the 1980s with its new wave of globalization and the increased political articulation of cultural identities and cultural clashes, phenomena of difference and issues of “inter-cultural communication” became standard academic topics. The establishment of differences with respect to ethnic groups, nations, religions, gender, sexual preferences, social strata, and numerous other orientations have been examined both synchronically and diachronically. Attention later shifted to multiple forms of belongings and hence to the multiplicity and ambiguity of the phenomena of difference. The situational, relational and permanently shifting dimensions of belonging became the central theme in investigating constructions of identity, thereby making hybridity a central concept.

However, differences in epistemological orientations—i.e., arguments about God and Nature—cannot be easily resolved within such hybrid constructions. Some of these constructions are actually at war with one another, and we were able to understand this war as aberrant and avoidable only as long as we believed that we possessed a single, universally valid solution. The new wave of globalization seems to demonstrate that this single universal solution is itself an illusion, the illusion of modernity.

This process of disenchantment shows that the tension between globally homogenizing tendencies and the simultaneously increased production of cultural particularities in fact represents one version of an ever-present pattern. Homogeneity emerges only in certain situations and in particular aspects of identity; in other respects, differences multiply and continue to provide people with a plurality of alternatives for constructing their identities and their realities. Thus according to most authors, identity must be understood as dynamic

and interstitial, as the simultaneous participation in a number of collective intersubjectivities that are continuously changing. From this perspective, our task becomes addressing the question of how differences are produced in cultural, political, and economic processes.

If we single-mindedly pursue this path alone, however, we run the risk of perpetuating the modernist presumption that all difference can ultimately be negotiated—and negotiated on modernist terrain, e.g., modern science. In other words, the assumption that all differences can be dealt with in terms of simultaneous participation, situational and relational hybridities unwittingly reinforces modernist claims to universal validity—those of science, technology, market, democracy, human rights, and the concept of an independent, autonomous, individual subject. Yet precisely these notions can and indeed are defined differently and constitute the core of the present transitions related to globalization or, more dramatically, the core of our present state of emergency.

III.

It is impossible today to talk about making and unmaking differences without considering the relation between academic positions on this issue and the politics of difference, identity, and recognition.

Since the 1980's, anthropologists have learned to avoid speaking about alterity in an unguarded manner and to abstain from offering self-contained representations of the other. Even a casual remark or a vague implication that could be construed as somehow reminiscent of essentialist differences (not actually invoking such differences but merely appearing to leave the door open for them) often leads to accusations of othering. I offer a personal example here: My book *Far-Fetched Facts* includes an analysis of aspects of bureaucracy in African organizations. Now, bureaucracy is all about rules that have been fixed in writing. In the book I describe the various practices of writing and dealing with written information within such organizations; and I conclude that there are significant differences between the culture of writing implied by the model of bureaucracy as it is appealed to by the respective organizations and the culture of writing actually found in these organizations. One concerned reviewer of the book warned that this observation brought the author dangerously close to culturalist explanations. Well, I do indeed assume that writing is done in different ways and that some of these do become institutionalised in such a way that it makes sense for us to speak of cultures of writing. And if this is the case, why should we assume that writing is done the same way and means the same thing everywhere? What would the implications of such an assumption be? And if we do not explain these differences through the particular historical and socio-cultural conditions in which they arose and continue to arise, how then do we explain them?

What I am trying to say is that as long as we adhere to the commandment of non-difference, we frustrate and ultimately trivialize one of anthropology's central tasks: de-familiarizing and de-centering the Euro-American worldview through pursuing the enigma of radical alterity, through allowing ourselves to be touched by unexpected and unforeseen ways of "world making." In order to do this, anthropologists' strategies for dealing with alterity have themselves become the object of anthropological enquiry. From this meta-perspective, the currently prevailing focus on the social construction of bridgeable differences—i.e., on the harmless alterity implicit in multiculturalism and the hybridization of identities—excludes in principle the possibility of unbridgeable difference—i.e., of radical alterity that allows for epistemological differences and thus for the unpredictable. This careful hedging of real differences is an immunization strategy that ultimately protects universalist claims from any substantial subversion.

If my argument here is correct, then one of our most pressing tasks is to critically re-examine the theoretical preconditions underlying the commandment of non-difference. To what extent can the exclusion of radical alterity be justified without recourse to universalist claims? How can we talk comprehensibly about something that is incomprehensible? How can we approach something radically different without at the same time subsuming that difference and thereby eliminating it? With these last two questions, we return to the aforementioned trivialization of the anthropology of difference implicit in the commandment of non-difference. While the two questions are not entirely misguided, they do conceal the basic presupposition of the problem. This presupposition becomes clear if we pose a different question: How can we talk comprehensibly about something that *is* comprehensible? This seemingly absurd question contains the whole point of the argument *in nuce*.

The point I want to make here with Derrida (1967)—who died in 2004 shortly before the conference at which most of the contributions to this volume were presented and discussed—is non-trivial, simple, and runs as follows: Talking about difference implies talking about *sameness*, i.e., about a thing that is identical with itself and not with something else. Without sameness there can be no difference and vice-versa. Something can be identical with itself only by being different from something else. Talking about the same implies regular *repetition* and hence *laws of repetition*. For something to be identified as the same it must be a repetition; and for something to be a repetition it must follow a law of repetition, for otherwise it would not be a repetition. We can outline this law in two steps: 1) If there is repetition, there is sameness. There is only repetition if it is repetition of the same. 2) Repetition of the same, however, can never be identical. It is this fundamental dissociation of the same from itself that constitutes the principle governing the identity of an idea. Hence, the *same* is a combination of *identity* and *difference* governed by simultaneous repeatability and differentiability. The most striking and simplest example of this is the handwritten signature. If two signatures are one-hundred-percent identical we have good reason to assume that we are

dealing with a case of forgery. It is the minor differences between two signatures that prove they are written by the same hand.

Derrida coined the word *differance* to describe and perform the way in which any particular meaning of a concept or text arises only through the effacement of other possible meanings, which are themselves merely deferred and can be invoked in different contexts. Thus *differance* both describes and performs the preconditions according to which all identities and meanings occur. The general message is this: Without an absent, unspeakable thing, without a gap, we would never have anything to say and, moreover, we would have no possibility of saying it at all. Luhmann (particularly in Chapter 4 of his *Soziale Systeme*, 1984) offers a similar argument to explain the possibility of understanding (*Verstehen*). First, a difference must, according to Luhmann, be set between system and environment as well as between a proposition and its referent. Second, there must be a difference between the information and the message (*Mitteilung*) of a communicative act, a difference that can never be fixed and always remains open. It is this difference between information and message that requires interpretation, and only as a result of this do we have the necessary precondition for understanding the meaning of a statement. Otherwise we would be dealing with the transmission of information as it occurs between two fax machines, which are reliable precisely because they do not understand each other.

If we agree that anthropology's most delicate and yet most significant task is to de-familiarize and de-center the Euro-American (or any other hegemonic universalist) worldview, then anthropologists would be well advised to adopt the non-trivial notion of difference as it has been outlined here. We should not regard difference as something to be avoided as much as possible, but rather accept it as a precondition for saying anything at all about the world. For this reason, any statement necessarily includes difference within itself—a blank spot, a void, an arcanum—that cannot be overcome. The desire to overcome such difference remains an aporia. What we can do, however, is to vary our portrayals of otherness in such a way that they unveil or give voice to those meanings that have been effaced in conventional representations of otherness—this in itself would already be a rather significant accomplishment. The unavoidable price for this is the effacement of other meanings. However, according to this approach, our criteria for determining which particular effacement (or *Invisibilisierung*, as Luhmann calls it) is best at any particular moment cannot be limited to that of faithfulness to the other. It must also ensure that the meanings we unveil subvert prevailing presumptions and certainties (*Gewissheiten*, see Rottenburg 2003).

IV.

The papers collected in this volume are based on presentations made at a conference on “The Making and Unmaking of Differences,” which was held at

the Institute of Social Anthropology at the Martin Luther University in Halle-Wittenberg in October 2004. While the conference served as the inaugural conference of the university's new Institute of Social Anthropology, the conference organizers—Burkhard Schnepel, Shingo Shimada, and myself—were convinced that this issue should not be limited to anthropologists, but rather must also provide space for voices, approaches, and opinions from other disciplines. For this reason, the present volume contains not only anthropological perspectives on this issue, but also sociological and philosophical ones, as well as perspectives from the interstices between these fields and from other disciplines. We would like to thank the Martin Luther University and the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* for providing the financial means that made this conference possible.

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