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The Art of Being Guilty is the Politics of Resistance

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When we discuss the question of so-called hybrid resistance, we show ourselves to be, first of all, true children of our (postmodern) times. Indeed, what else could we do, as left-wing intellectuals, who already move in the broad border area between art/culture and politics just for professional reasons? Found a party? Develop a coherent ideology system and follow instructions for its practical political application? Or simply join the political and ideological forces of actually existing parliamentary democracy and fight for power in the respective nation-states?

With respect to the latter, we are too left-wing, with respect to the rest too postmodern. That means that we simply cannot accept what is given, as it is. We cannot even perceive this existing reality, without wanting to change it. That is what being left-wing still means, namely. However, this world that is to be practically changed, cannot be comprehended anywhere anymore as a societal totality that is closed in itself. And it is even less possible for our volition to be founded on a coherent subjectivity. Worse yet: there is no longer even any "we". It has long since broken down into a multitude of fragmented social identities, which no ideological appeal or collective action can turn into a unified subject for

changing the world. Even a common enemy is no help anymore. The (classically modernist) era of binary logic is over. There is no "we" that can be constituted from the opposition against "them", no self against the "other", no inside against the outside. For social conflicts and political struggles today, there is no longer any firm antagonism, in which all other social conflicts could be rooted. The scene of these conflicts, finally, has become even less definable. No one can separate the space of the political from the once autonomous sphere of culture nor keep the two spheres and the field of economy apart from one another.

All of this means living "dans la condition postmoderne". And these circumstances are quite aptly described by the term hybridity. Our current historical experience can hardly do without it anymore and does not have to, either. Its descriptive value is incontestable today. Or could there be an idea of taking recourse to the old belief in originary, homogenous identities, to the essentialism of social subjects? This seems both simply improbable and unnecessary.

The so-called postcolonial situation seems to have come to terms especially well with the concept of hybridity. The world of postcolonial migration, of diasporas separated from their origins and dispersed all over the world, and their countries of origin that have been fundamentally changed by colonization, has in fact become a world of mixing and dislocation in the age of radical globalization, a world of mimicry and ambivalence, of broken identities, in short, a world of cultural hybridization par excellance. What we are concerned with, however, is not a correct description of this world, but rather changing it. Our question is actually what the idea of hybridization can achieve in this respect, what its political and emancipatory potential is.

Hybridity can be grasped, first of all, as a factor of social harmonization. There, where cultural, racial and ethnic differences threaten to catapult society into a chaotic state of endless conflicts, hybridization promises to reinforce social cohesion. With a kind of synthesis or fusion, it is hoped that these conflicts can be domesticated, so to speak, can be made bearable, in other words, and thus amalgamated into the whole of society. In a political, ideological sense, this vision corresponds to that which some authors call "liberal hybridism". [1]

The concept of hybridity is dealt with quite differently in postcolonial cultural theories. Although the process of cultural hybridization is regarded just as positively as in liberal hybridism, it is for opposite reasons. Postcolonialist theorists [2] do not regard hybridity as a factor of social harmonies, but rather as a force of (emancipatory) subversion. Instead of resulting in a happy fusion of differences, hybridization prevents identity's attempt to constitute itself essentialistically and become established as an entirety free of contradictions. In this way, the social-critical meaning of the differences, which has been completely neglected by the liberals, is represented in postcolonial cultural criticism. Here, hybridity has a critical political connotation that is entirely unequivocal.

The anti-essentialist approach, the emphasis on the necessary incompleteness and the antagonist character of every formation of identity, not only reveal the theoretical roots of Postcolonial Studies in poststructuralism, but also bear witness to their political affinity, their proximity to left-wing post-Marxist and neo-Gramschian theories, which look for the real medium for social change in and around the concept of hegemony. In this context, hybridity is intended to open up a new space for general human emancipation and give it a new chance.

But how does hybridization actually emancipate? First of all, by calling already established cultural and social identities into question, subverting them, so to speak, from the inside out. Specifically that, which is excluded in the constitution of an identity as its outside or as Other, in other words what is socially marginalized or oppressed, returns through hybridization into the interior
of this identity and thus decisively changes its "essence". [3] The emancipatory effect of this "return of the excluded" is not found in an inversion of the hierarchical dualism between black and white, colonized and colonizers, center and periphery, etc. Instead, it is the binary character of culturally articulated power relations that is rescinded - through this transgressive transculturation - once and for all. For the same reason, resistance against racisms, nationalism, fundamentalisms, etc., does not take place along a front line between the subjects of liberation and the subjects of oppression, but rather through an irresistible transgression of the border lines between established identities, which are simultaneously lines of exclusion and subjugation. Instead of attacking them frontally from their excluded outside, hybridization pounds even the most rigid identities soft in their hard core, makes their mechanisms of exclusion run aground on their own contradictions, and activates their repressed potential for inclusion. Identities are not monolithic blocks of ice that could be broken down with a frontal attack, but more like yeast dough: through the process of hybridization, they grow larger than themselves, until their original form is no longer recognizable. [4]

But what happens to the potential for emancipation and resistance that is invoked with hybridity, when we transfer it from the (cultural) identity debate into the the field of left-wing political activism, there where people are attempting to concretely resist the

growing pressure of right-wing conservative or racist politics? Here too, the concept of hybridity is obviously applied descriptively. However, is it more than just a name for the heterogeneity of our activist initiatives and social interest groups? Does a mutual intermixing of art practices and (left-wing) political initiatives automatically lead to a new - specifically hybrid - form of emancipation? And if so, how?

Today there can be no talk of a subversive effect of crossing the borders between the fields of art and politics. As mentioned above, the border lines between the spheres of culture, politics, and economy, previously considered autonomous, are already in a permanent process of shifting in postmodernism. In other words, this movement crosses borders that have already been set in motion. Creating so-called autonomous zones - also a carnivalesque hybrid form of social space - as a sphere of uninhibited transgression, where the will to freedom is pleasurably given free rein and social experiments can be tried out without responsibility or risk, promises just as little. The existing system can tolerate temporary suspension better than ever before. It is no longer grounded in stable hierarchies and repressive authority that could feel challenged in this way. Power, or rather the current forms of domination today, are just as fragmented, plural, hybrid, in short just as flexible, as the forces that attack them. [5]

Hybridization alone, as it undoubtedly takes place at the intersection between art and left-wing political activism, does not result in liberation. For this reason, it should also not be stylized as an emancipatory end in itself. On the other hand, though, it appears inevitable: resistance has become hybrid. Why? Because the interests of emancipation can no longer be articulated in the form of today's democratic politics; because there is no longer any use for the freedom of art in art itself, so that it may roam at will

throughout the entire social space; and because emancipation is again more urgent than politics and more beautiful than art. As long as the two intermingle for its sake, hybridization has a meaning. But not, conversely, as a means of harmonization or, which would be even worse, as a comfortable assurance of unassailability; roughly in the words of Patti Smith: "I am an artist and I am not guilty." Hybrid resistance must not become a secure area of retreat for those in revolt, an illusionary space of an originary innocence. Must one remain forever innocent with respect to one's own nation-state and its parliamentary system just spinning its wheels, with respect to sanctified liberal-democratic values, in short: with respect to democracy as it really exists? Those who must already atone now, will be permitted to be guilty first. Won't they?

[1] See Ien Ang, On not speaking Chinese. Living Between Asia and the West, London/New York: Routledge, 2001. Ang explains the idea of "liberal hybridism" with a concrete case, specifically the conviction of part of the Australian public that so-called intercultural marriages and the resultant hybridization are the best protection against having the country turned into a battlefield of "warring tribes". The author herself does not believe in the harmonizing effect of hybridization. Even though it appears to white nationalism as a progressive alternative, "the rosy melting-pot vision of liberal hybridism" oversimplifies the real situation, disguises power relations and thus leads to the dead-end street of depoliticization. P. 195 and 197.

[2] Authors such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, etc.

[3] This is the case, for example, with what Hall and Gilroy call "Black British". Through the articulation of a blackness position within the British national identity, the essentialist white, exclusivist definition of this identity is subverted. British identity turns out to be a necessarily impure and plural formation that can no longer deny its own blackness.

[4] Not everyone can identify with the emancipatory promises of hybridization. For Jonathan Friedman, for example, the difference between a hybrid and and essentialist understanding of identities is primarily a difference in social positions. He maintains that it is primarily the poor and disenfranchised masses of this world that cling most to their essentialist - especially ethnic - identities, whereas a hybrid identification is more typical of the cultural, political and intellectual elite, who owe it to their class privileges that they are able to afford a hybrid cosmopolitanism at all. (cf. Jonathan Friedman, "Global Crisis, the Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans versus Locals, Ethnics and Nationals in an Era of De-Hegemonisation", in: Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (Ed.) Debating Cultural Hybridity, London/New Jersey: Zed Books 1997.)

[5] Hardt/Negri's criticism of postmodern and postcolonial theory - and thus also their criticism of the hybridity concept - particularly emphasizes this point: "Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around to their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference." (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press, p. 138.)