

Translated excerpt

Thomas Bauer
***Die Vereindeutigung der Welt. Über den Verlust
an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt.***

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Thomas Bauer
***The Decline of Complexity in the World. On the Loss of
Ambiguity and Diversity***

Translated by Rodney Livingstone



'Everything here is so bright and gay'

An age of diversity?

In 1978 Nina Hagen sang in her punk song 'TV-Glotzer' [Telly Watcher]

I stare from East to West, 2, 5, 4

No way I can decide

Everything here is so bright and gay!

I stare at the TV

What shall we say today when almost everyone can access hundreds of programmes, to say nothing of the proliferation of new media? But it is not just the new media that have become more diverse; the same is true of identities, crime series, toothpastes and chocolate bars. Admittedly, there is nothing surprising in the fact that in a capitalist consumer society the goods on offer have proliferated – and along with them the possible identities for everyone who buys these goods. But does this really mean that we live in an age of diversity? In Germany, the bird population has declined by 80% since 1800. The situation with insects is even more desperate. The Entomological Club of Krefeld, for example, has pointed out that in the last 25 years the insect biomass has decreased 'by up to 80%'. This means that by losing 80% of their populations in 25 years insects 'have suffered a far greater loss than birds over a period of 200 years'. And what about plants? According to the lists published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, 'approximately 70% of all plants are at risk' and the number of endangered species 'has grown by over 50% in the new millennium. Biologists fear that by 2030 one in every five known species could die out, and by 2050 this could even rise to one in three.' This, according to Peter Berthold, the ornithologist, is the work of *homo horribilis*, who has gradually turned into *homo suicidalis* because he may well not survive the disappearance of the species he has unleashed. Thus in nature diversity is on the retreat to an unprecedented degree and at an unprecedented speed. But what is the situation with culture? Let us begin with what human beings have done to nature through the processes of cultivation and breeding. There are 'Red Lists' for domestic animals as well as for animals in the wild. Each of these domestic animals possesses characteristics that make it especially suitable for particular conditions and uses. The dying out of ancient

domestic animals is not just an aesthetic loss; it will also lead to the loss of valuable genes that might prove indispensable for the survival of future animal breeding. Organizations such as The Society for the Conservation of Old and Endangered Livestock Breeds (GEH) are concerned to promote their preservation and to produce their own Red Lists. The balance sheet does not look any healthier in the case of cultivated plants. It is true that there are now more varieties of potato crisps or muesli than ever before. But increasingly, according to the journalist Sylvia Liebrich, we are presented with the same indistinguishable mush. 'There used once to be 30,000 varieties of maize, but nowadays only a few dozen are cultivated on a large scale. Genetically modified plants predominate.' In the case of bananas only a single variety can still be found worldwide. Whereas there used to be 20,000 different kinds of apples, customers are nowadays normally offered a choice of six. Given the premise that, according to the Living Planet Index of the WWF, the biodiversity of our planet declined by 27% between 1970 and 2005, we can scarcely describe our age as the age of diversity!

But can there perhaps be a greater diversity among human beings today, even though that is not true of the natural world? Here too the findings are disappointing. Firstly, there is a reduced diversity in the way human beings communicate. The Society for Endangered Languages has predicted that almost one-third of the existing 6,500 languages spoken worldwide 'will die out in the coming decades'.

Languages and dialects, says the Society, are not merely the expressions of human culture and the human spirit; they are also the means of disclosing the world and enabling social contact for their speakers. They represent a value in themselves and ought, therefore, to be preserved and documented as manifestations of the creativity and diversity of the human mind.

And as for culture, as Nina Hagen noted in the song quoted above, the multiplication of TV programmes does not necessarily imply greater diversity as far as the contents are concerned. The hundredfold increase in TV programmes since 1978 has brought no change in that respect. On the contrary, the strange growth in the number of thrillers and quiz shows has driven culture programmes either into niche channels or else into the post-midnight timeslots.

And what about the multicultural society? It seems to me that here too we are looking at a pseudo-diversity. The first point to make is that over many centuries Europe has been one of the most monocultural

regions of the world. As the western edge of Asia, Europe has always been relatively isolated and for that reason has attracted fewer immigrants than, for example, the Middle East. Moreover, the religious homogenization that followed the Christianizing of Europe led to a religious coherence here that was scarcely to be found anywhere else in the world to the same degree. The adherents of non-Christian faiths were forbidden to establish themselves in Europe. Only Jews were allowed to settle, but for the most part they were barely tolerated and often persecuted. 'Heretics' such as the Cathars were inexorably wiped out and Europeans made short work of the followers of Islam as soon as they were militarily in a position to do so. When something resembling a Christian plurality began to emerge in the 16th century, wars broke out with a vehemence unparalleled in Islamic history, for all the antagonisms and episodic hostilities such as those between Sunni and Shia. In the pre-modern period no continent was as unified religiously and culturally as Europe. Only against this background can we begin to understand why people started to think that with the arrival of 'guest workers' from the 1960s on, with their different eating habits and to some extent also their different religions (although it was in part not all that different), our towns and cities had developed into multicultural towns and cities. In contrast, a genuine multiculturalism predominated in pre-modern times on the trade routes from West Africa through Egypt, the Middle East, Central and Southern Asia and as far as China and Indonesia. All these cities from Marrakesh via Cairo, Tabriz, Mumbai and Bukhara, as far as Xi'an and Aceh, contained houses of worship of many different faiths, their peoples were dressed in very different ways and you could hear numerous languages in the streets, and all this seemed normal and self-evident to everyone. Today, even when people speak Hausa and Swahili in Berlin and London, even when Sikhs wear turbans and Chinese restaurants serve roast chicken feet, this multiculturalism does not compare with that of the old Silk Road or of the Ottoman Empire before the First World War, because the old multiculturalism no longer exists. Stefan Zweig described this development in a perceptive essay as early as 1925:

The most potent intellectual impression gained from every journey in recent years [has been] a faint horror in the face of the monotonization of the world. Everything is becoming more uniform in its outward manifestations; everything is being levelled down to a unified cultural schema. The characteristic traditions of different peoples are being worn away; native clothing becomes uniform and customs international.

Countries seem to have merged into one another; people's lives and activities increasingly fit the same pattern; more and more, towns and cities grow similar in appearance. ... Never before has this plunge into uniformity on the part of external forms of life taken place so rapidly, so capriciously as in recent years....This is perhaps the most urgent, the most critical phenomenon of our times.

And according to Zweig, this has consequences. In particular,

it betokens the extinction of all individuality up to and including people's outward appearance. People do not all dress alike with impunity...Monotony inevitably penetrates to the human interior. Faces become more like one another because of the similarity of passions, bodies become more similar through the practice of the same sports, minds more like each other because of sharing the same interests. Unconsciously, a similarity of souls arises, a mass soul comes into being through the intensified drive to uniformity, the atrophy of the nerves in favour of the muscles, the withering away of the individual in favour of the type.

Regardless of where we look, whether in nature or at human beings and their culture, what we see is a tendency to a reduced diversity, a diminished variety. We can list a whole series of (largely interconnected) causes for this development, including urbanization, greater mobility, globalization as such, the problems created by transport, an industrialized agriculture, climate change, the monopoly of the large supermarket chains, and in general, the capitalist economic system. However, all these factors do not amount to an inevitable human fate. Hence something like a modern predisposition to destroy variety must exist. The impassioned debates about multiculturalism show this very clearly. Even though in Germany we are talking about a form of multiculturalism smoothed out by the levelling process of globalized modernity, it has become one of the thorniest topics of political discourse. Evidently, we can attract more attention with senseless debates about 'dominant cultures' than about the variety of foods and the reliability of their supply, while a 'headscarf debate' agitates people far more than the disappearance of birds and insects. In the following pages, we shall be less concerned with mapping the variety all around us than with our readiness or reluctance to tolerate diversity in all its manifestations. We shall focus our attention on the one hand, on how we interact with

outward variety, such as ethnic diversity, or the variety of life projects, while on the other hand, we shall consider how we come to terms with the diverse truths of an ambiguous world. For 'ambiguous' is precisely what our world is. Human beings are constantly exposed to impressions that permit different interpretations, that are unclear, that produce no unambiguous meanings, that appear contradictory, that trigger contradictory feelings, and that appear to suggest contradictory courses of action to us. In short, the world is full of ambiguity.

Pages 25-30:

A brief stalemate in Geneva

The age of the Renaissance witnessed the emergence of a surplus of ambiguity, a fairly rare occurrence in European history. While art and culture flourished in the most spectacular fashion in Italy, many people refused to allow the excessive tolerance of ambiguity by the Renaissance popes to pass unchallenged any longer. The result was once again typically European. In other regions of the globe, compromise solutions would have been found, in other words, reforms instead of the Reformation. In Europe, however, what followed was schism in the churches and a religious zealotry of a sort that had hardly ever been seen in the world before on such a broad front. And yet there were plenty of both warning and conciliatory voices, like that of Erasmus of Rotterdam, for example, as well as much willingness to compromise in many places, such as Geneva, where even so the Reformation ended up assuming an especially radical form. The fact that it came to this was far from inevitable. Religion on its own would not have had the power to establish a 'tyranny of virtue' in Geneva – to cite the title of a book by Volker Reinhardt. Generally speaking, religious zealotry motivates only individuals. To turn that into a broad movement requires political motives and, above all, favourable political conditions. These were to be found in the case of both Luther and Calvin, and it is no different with the Taliban and Isis. Even deeply religious people know or unconsciously sense that religion is a highly ambiguous matter, one in which ultimate certainty can be postulated only at the cost of utter self-denial. If religious zealotry is to be mobilized along a broad front, an external impulse is needed. More common are cases in which the external, political motive enlists religious energies in the service of its own cause.

The Reformation in Geneva provides a good illustration of this. It started here too with attempts at reform, which, however, were not pursued with any great zeal. 'Live and let live' was the motto that prevailed at the time. Matters might have gone on like that had it not been for political forces that had to be opposed. There were, in particular, the unpopular Dukes of Savoy, who people wanted to distance themselves from by establishing a pro-confederate politics [*Combourgeoisie* or *Burgrecht*]. But when Berne introduced the Reformation two years later, while Freiburg chose to remain a bulwark of the old faith, pressure grew on Geneva finally to choose one side or the other. The pragmatic burghers, who had little time for zealotry, attempted to resolve the issue with a classic instance of a solution tolerant of ambiguity. They sought a 'Third Way', by 'declaring faith to be a matter of individual conscience, by ordering priests to deliver sermons purely on the foundation of God's word and otherwise by leaving everything as it was'. Even Lenten sermons were to be based entirely on the Bible, while at the same time the requirement to abstain from eating meat was upheld. However, since it is difficult to sustain ambiguity, and since neither Catholics nor Protestants were satisfied with this solution, and since, furthermore, there were more than enough political and even military reasons to decide in favour of one direction rather than the other, this attempt to find a middle way came to an end a few years later, on 8 October 1535, when the very last Catholic service was celebrated in the cathedral. Guillaume Farel, the preacher who had raged against 'the sullyng of faith by self-interested Roman inventions' had prevailed. The following year, with Farel's support, John Calvin settled in Geneva and imposed his 'tyranny of virtue'. When nowadays Muslim fanatics aspire to do the same thing, it is always said that they wished to establish a 'theocracy'. The concept of 'theocracy' comes from St Augustine's *The City of God*, but he meant something entirely different by it. It has no Arabic equivalent and in Islam the concept is as elusive as it was in Calvinist Geneva. For that reason, it should be avoided as far as possible today. Beyond these conceptual matters, however, there are striking similarities between Calvin's 'tyranny of virtue' and Islamic ideas about society. Both can be encapsulated in the concept of 'fundamentalism', which has had many definitions and meanings. What is of interest, however, is which of its meanings can be derived from an intolerance of ambiguity, for it can scarcely be doubted that such intolerance underpins fundamentalism of every kind. Once this has been recognized, it is easy to identify fundamentalist characteristics in social spheres where hitherto it was not customary to speak of fundamentalism. Let us begin with the concept of 'truth'. Anyone who

aspires to unambiguous statement will insist that there can never be any more than a single truth and that this truth is always unambiguously evident. A perspectival and therefore not unambiguous view of the world is rejected. In Calvin's eyes, the Bible is absolutely unambiguous in all important points and hence binding in every respect – without any scope for interpretation. Parallels with fundamentalist tendencies today in Islam and other religions, world-views and political ideologies are obvious.

The complementary concept to 'truth' is that of 'probability'. A classical Islamist legal scholar did not claim to be asserting the 'truth' in giving an expert opinion, but only that he had good reason to believe that he had in all probability discovered the correct solution. Similarly, the parliaments of democratic societies do not proclaim the truth but seek only what is probably the most appropriate solution. If there is but one single truth, this truth must be valid for all time. If particular things have been seen differently at different times and given different interpretations, these perceptions and interpretations must be false, because otherwise there would have to be several truths. The second basic characteristic of fundamentalism consists therefore in the rejection of history. Calvin's 'Plan for the organization of a Christian community began with the iron resolution not to create anything new, but to derive everything from the oldest and purest models. Whatever had not been done by the Apostles and their immediate successors had no justification.' If we substitute the Prophet Muhammad for the Apostles, the same claim may be made on behalf of Salafist Islam. This explains why it is ridiculous constantly to accuse fundamentalist currents of wishing to return to the 'Middle Ages'. For one thing, the historical period for which the not especially meaningful concept of the 'Middle Ages' has become accepted, was for the most part not especially fundamentalist at all. For another, fundamentalists vigorously repudiate the historical development of their religion together with its diverse traditions of interpretation and the gradual emergence of its theological superstructure. The only thing that counts is the initial phase in which the will of God or of the founder of their religion was still acknowledged and practised in its supposedly pure and unfalsified form.

That leads on to the third characteristic, that of purity, which overlaps with that of non-ambiguity. Only when something is pure can it also be unambiguous. As soon as something else, something alien, enters the scene, explanations are needed. Is this impure thing still the same thing it was when it was pure? How does this pure thing relate to what has been added to it? Does this additional factor have its own meaning or does it

modify the meaning of what was originally pure? And even if it does not, it would still have to be subjected to interpretation so that the original pure thing would inevitably cease to be unambiguous. Whatever has to be interpreted ceases to be pure.

This notion of purity can already be found in a reformer such as Farel, who desired to purify the true religion of all accretions that did not derive from Scripture. Calvin too wished to bring about the purification of Geneva by exiling everyone with false opinions or even having them burnt at the stake, as was the case with Michael Servetus, 'that walking site of infection'. Obsession with truth, denial of history and striving for purity are the three characteristics or basic concepts of the intolerance towards ambiguity that form the basis of fundamentalism of every kind. This is the fundamentalist pole of intolerance towards ambiguity. Everything is unambiguous, either wholly true or wholly false, and this judgement is valid for all eternity. There are in principle only two ways to escape ambiguity. Ambiguity does not exist if either (1) a thing has precisely one meaning only, or else (2) it has no meaning at all. I call this second pole the pole of indifference. The word evokes a number of associations. If something has no meaning, then all interpretations are a matter of indifference. If all interpretations are a matter of indifference, the whole thing loses its meaning (in the sense of its 'importance') and can therefore be regarded with indifference or at most with a superficial curiosity.

My thesis, then, is that our age is an age which has little tolerance of ambiguity. In many aspects of life – not just in religion – we find ourselves attracted by ideas that offer us salvation from unavoidable ambiguity. The supporters and disciples of such ideas regard them as especially topical and progressive. And they have conquered the high ground in many realms of discourse. As opposed to this, variety, complexity and plurality are frequently not felt to be enrichment. This development leads to what is referred to in the title of this essay as the 'Disambiguation' of the world, a reduction of meanings, of ambiguity and variety in all spheres of life. In the sections that follow, my task will be to show how this view of the world, with its poles of fundamentalism and indifference, is becoming more and more widespread, in religion, art and music, as well as in politics. It will be left to the reader to extend these reflections to other spheres of life, starting with the increasingly identitarian eating culture and proceeding via life style and fashion to literature and scholarship.