

Translated excerpt

Isolde Charim
Ich und die Anderen.
Wie die neue Pluralisierung uns alle verändert

Paul Zsolnay Verlag, Wien 2018
ISBN 979-3-552-05888-0

pp. 9-22

Isolde Charim
Myself and the Others.
How Modern Pluralization Changes Us All

Translated by Jefferson Chase



Contents

Preface

Chapter 1

A Look Back: The Illusion of the Homogeneous Society

Chapter 2

In the Here-and-Now: Why it Takes More Effort to be Less Me

Chapter 3

The Religious Arena: The Pluralist Believer

Chapter 4

The Cultural Arena: Tradition's Hostile Takeover of Modernity

Chapter 5

The Political Arena – Participation: From Party Member to Fan

Chapter 6

The Political Arena – Populism: It's Time to Talk about Political Emotions

Chapter 7

The Political Correctness Arena: Identity Politics on the Right and Left

Afterword: What to Do? A Question as Symptom

Acknowledgements

Notes

Preface

The Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller was said that she was twenty years old before she saw her first black person. He was, of course, visiting Hungary. "That sort of person" didn't exist in Budapest back then. Today, if you talk with Western European children, both in big cities and increasingly in smaller places as well, they tell of five, six or seven languages – German, Serbian, Bulgarian, Arabic, Chinese, Italian or French – being spoken in their school classes. The same applies to countries of origin, skin colors and religions. What a change!

Heller's world – and also the world of my own childhood in Vienna – has disappeared, just as Communist East Germany has disappeared. In the case of East Germany, I was at the scene on the day, or more accurately the evening it disappeared. November 9, 1989. At Checkpoint Charlie and East Berlin. There you could witness a state power implode in real time. For the end of the former Europe, the former Vienna, there is no one such moment or date.

Their disappearance wasn't a discrete event. It was a creeping development people first noticed once it was complete. In that sense, even if he or she lived in Austria, Vienna or Europe, no one was at the scene when the Austrian, Viennese or European world turned into another one. Because no one noticed. We weren't present when we became different people because we didn't realize it. Even if this change – the change that comes with pluralism – was as massive of that of the fall of the Berlin Wall, we didn't experience it. It happened to us. One day, we simply awakened in a new world and as a new person.

This sort of fundamental change was possible within a single lifetime. Over the course one and the same life, people could experience what Agnes Heller did, that is, a relatively homogenous, unified society, and what we today are experiencing. And our experience today can be summed up in a single sentence: We live in a pluralized society.

Chapter 1

A Look Back: The Illusion of the Homogeneous Society

We live in a pluralized society. This is not only a relatively recent, but also an immutable fact. There's no way back to a non-pluralized, homogeneous society – it's that simple. But it's not nearly as easy to answer the question of what this all means. What is a pluralized society? What effects does it have on every one of us? Or put in a different way: Why does it actually mean to live in such a society?

To address this question and approach an answer, we have to take a look back. In order to measure the scope and extent of this novelty, we must turn our attention to "pre-plural" societies, the societies of Western Europe before they were pluralized as objects of comparison. Homogeneous societies – those societies with a relative ethnic, religious and cultural unity – are to an extent the negative image, the backdrop, from which our pluralized societies today stand out.

These homogeneous societies didn't simply exist as the result of some sort of natural growth process. They had to be created, which required a number of often brutally repressive political interventions. Homogeneous societies are the result of conscious political action. Or in other words: of nation-building.

There is a plethora of excellent historic studies that illustrate the symbolic and physical violence necessary to propel the nation-building of the nineteenth century. Nation-building was an artificial unification that had to be imposed upon diversity. And that, in turn, necessitated operations on many levels and in various areas. Unification was material, emotional and cultural.

Take, for example, language. What a long, hard process it was to limit and exclude all the regional languages and dialects so that a unified and formalized "mother tongue" could be asserted as a national idiom.

Or take something as seemingly simple as a train schedule. How much material, objective unification had to first be performed before such a schedule could function. A consciousness of time accurate to the minute had to be instilled, and information about arrivals and departure had to be circulated and made accessible to all. Something as seemingly simple as a train schedule was actually preceded by a huge amount of material and physical effort, which was needed to get a whole society ticking to a single rhythm.

But even this effort alone wasn't the end of the story. A homogeneous society needs not just to be unified materially. It also has to be emotionally harmonized. The unity of a society must be

anchored in feelings, and a whole set of participants, in areas from literature and music to education and schools, played a role – for instance by charging a central category, territory, with meaning. Places such as borders, landscapes, cities and rivers become emotionally laden. The emotive imagination of the nation happens partly through the territorialization of national emotions, the connecting of feelings to spaces. This, in turn, happens via a multitude of concrete practices. In schools, of course, but also in banal everyday situations such as weather forecasts, where, as Benedict Anderson has shown, the circumferences and thus borders of territory are inculcated and communicated as a compact (weather) space of one's own. There are so many and so many various exercises by which space is infused with emotion. Only when it succeeds, only when feelings get connected with geography, do places become more than arbitrary and turn into symbols.

Nation-creating doubled the state, adding a symbolic territory to the material one and making it into a place to which feelings could attach themselves.

Of course, it is easy to disprove anyone who asserts that absolute homogeneity exists. No shortage of detractors has criticized the nation for never having truly achieved the ideal of homogeneity. The unity of society has perennially remained, at least in part, a fiction, which constantly needed reinforcing with massive political interventions, even where national-building seemed to be extremely successful. A whole genre of critical history has devoted itself to proving that the nation was never complete, and that homogeneous society was never entirely homogeneous. But the insights of critical history don't capture the whole truth. They overlook something fundamental that shouldn't be underestimated. National homogeneity was a fiction that functioned.

To reiterate: the idea of a homogeneous society may have inevitably been a fiction, but it was a fiction that functioned. Indeed, the nation was an extremely useful fiction.

Since Benedict Anderson we know that nations are an "imagined communities," as he titled his 1983 book. The phrase entails that the assumption that the nation as an idea, as a product of the imagination, functions. We could say that the basis of the political constellation of the "nation," the foundation of the homogeneous society, was the political power of imagination. People believed in the nation, and they believed that the nation was real. For that reason, no matter how fictional the nation may have been, it functioned. Moreover, for the same reason, the idea that "we are one nation" actually did produce a national society. That doesn't mean that homogenization was ever completely realized. There were always deviations from homogeneity. But the nation was *the* political form for bringing together and integrating a diverse, heterogeneous mass. It was the *political* narrative for forming masses into a society.

In the scholarly literature, this form of national integration is always connected with Anderson's assertion that the imaginary community functions because the members of a nation all live in the illusion of knowing all the other members. In that regard, the nation was both imaginary and also a community. But why would people believe such a thing? The illusion of knowing all the members of a nation was able to function because the nation was more than a material unity, a unity of language, time and space. It functioned because the nation is just an emotional unity that occupies its space and its symbols emotively. The nation needed a third, a cultural unity. This is not to be understood primarily in the sense of an opulent, traditional high culture. Cultural unity asserted itself upon the masses in a very different way from high culture. It developed a national type. A type with unambiguous identity characteristics. A type with clearly defined attributed. For example, the Austrian type. Or the German type.

And what precisely is a national type?

At this juncture we should note the convergence of two historical dynamics: the democratization of European societies and their nationalization. Both appeared together. It was a connection Jürgen Habermas terms the "historic symbiosis of republicanism and nationalism," the coupling of the democratic political process with the national culture of the majority. Now while it so happens that both processes appeared simultaneously, in terms of identity politics they're very different. We can go even further than that. In terms of identity politics, the nation and democracy are antipodes. So what happened with both in terms of the creation of individual identity?

All of us who live in Western, i.e. democratic nations are demonstrably doubled. We are simultaneously *bourgeois* and *citoyen*, private and public citizens alike. As the former we are individuals with certain distinguishing character traits: we are male or female, rich or poor, officials, farmers or teachers – whatever the case may be. But as *citoyens*, public citizens, we are all equal. Precisely therein resides the democratic moment. It makes us into abstract equivalents.

Democracy, as we have thus far known it, is the production of an "individual of the universal," as French historian Pierre Rosanvallon has called it, the production of the political subject as a citizen and voter and of the judicial subject as a legal subject. Democracy entails the individualization of society, and we can say that individualization doesn't first arise with our society, but is rather a much older dynamic that was already created around 1800.

In this movement, which we could describe as the first age of individualism, the individual emerged from his preordained circumstances. This first individualism – from our perspective the "old" one – liberated the individual from the proscriptions of caste society. It may be a paradox, but individualism meant that all individuals became equal. People were individuals as citizens, voters, as

judicial subjects – in those areas where special discrepancies like caste, class or religion were put to one side. This was the individualism of large-scale formations like nations or political parties. This individual entered the public arena as an equal.

The "old" individualism – and this is the crux – was different to the one we know today. It also produced another type of individual. The legal subject, the voter and the citizen is created by abstraction. Privately, individuals qua individuals are concrete and distinguishable. But as public people they are equated by abstracting away what distinguishes them. It is only when their specific differences are ignored that they become equal parts of the whole – equal parts of the sovereign power, the people. In that regard, what connects individuals is the abstraction of their specific qualities. One can only be an equal part of the whole if one ignores what distinguishes us from others. This abstract generality of the universal individual is especially apparent in conjunction with elections and voters.

Democratic elections run on the principle of one person, one vote. No matter how different we are, as voters we are all equal. Everyone counts once. Everyone has an equal share. With elections all differences dissolve in a single number: one person, one vote, no matter who we are. Every person becomes a number. Universal suffrage has made us all equals – arithmetic equals. It's an abstract form of equality.

We only have to think of women's or census suffrage to remember what a long and brutal process it was to institute this abstraction. It took a rocky historical road to create the citizen, the *citoyen*, from this abstraction. What's crucial to our analysis is that the individual only became an equal part of the whole – a "political atom," as Claude Lefort termed it – on the basis of abstraction from his or her particular qualities. These equalities are so to speak the "zero point of the social," since they arise from the abstraction of all social preordainment and from the ignoring of all difference. But what Lefort fails to note is that this is not all there is to the formation of the identity of the democratic nation. He fails to mention a necessary supplement to democratic abstraction. This, however, is precisely the moment that has become so crucial and acute today.

The creation of abstract equality may have been the progressive and emancipatory expression of the democratic process, but it has always been true that people need more than just democratic abstraction. Alone it is not enough, and the something else was provided by the nation. To reiterate: in terms of identity politics, nation-building was the antipode of democracy. The nation was the exact opposite of democratic abstraction and offered the abstract democratic subject, the abstract *citoyen* and the abstract legal personage the opposite of abstraction. A form with positive identity characteristics for the individual as a public person. Whereas the voter is an abstract equal

who only counts in a numerical sense, and the political and legal subject an abstract equal who is only a part of the sovereign people in this regard, the national subject is concrete and specific, not just an abstract part of the social whole. This supplement to democratic individualism, this counterweight to democratic abstraction, is what Lefort failed to name: the national figure, the "national type."

What is this national type? A type that characterizes and determines the public person. We all know that the Austrian is like this, the German like that and the Italian different still. Charming but treacherous. Pedantic but obedient. Epicurean but unreliable. Most recently the financial crisis in Greece gave us a new version of such national stereotypes on a grand scale.

It's like the old joke. In an attempt to save his sinking ship, a captain wants to convince people to jump overboard. He tells the Englishman it would be unsporting not to jump. He tells the Frenchman jumping overboard is *très chic*. Meanwhile he orders the German to jump and informs the Italian that jumping is forbidden.

There are legions of jokes about national differences, and we should not be so quick to dismiss them as trading in mere stereotypes, that is to say, unreliable generalizations. They are more than that. They are exercises in national form. They help us learn to belong to some and to exclude others.

The narrative of the nation is a set of brackets that connects the concrete individual with the public individual by offering a concrete form for his or her public identity – a form with which he or she can be integrated into the whole not only as an abstract, numerical unit, but as a concrete part with positive identity qualities. In short, the national narrative offered the democratic individual a figure in which he or she could recognize him- or herself as a public person – even though the contours of this form remain malleable.

Precisely because of such forms, we believe we know all the other members of our nation. We identify ourselves and others according to type. Precisely because of such forms, the national illusion functions, as does the illusion of a homogeneous society.

National democracies not only doubled individuals (initially only males) into private and public citizens, political and private individuals. They didn't just convert these individuals into abstraction and give them form. The whole dynamic went further. Or to put the matter differently: as a dominant narrative, the nation entailed an even extensive intrusion into the individual's identity. The nation was not just the offer of further specification. It was the offer of a superlative specification for each and every individual. That means that the national moment of identity binds

and organizes all a person's various other biographical elements – man, woman, worker, artist, young, old – in a specific way. It collects them into a whole, a unified whole, into what Louis Althusser called an "expressive totality": a whole with a center that transforms every part into its expression of the collective. For the nation, this means that national specification becomes the central identity specification that transforms all other biographical moments into expressions of this center. Men become German men, workers, Austrian workers, and women, Frenchwomen. The narrative of the nation reorganizes social difference.

The concrete differences between individual citizens, of course, are not erased by the national type. Not even in a homogeneous society. But the differences lose significance. You can be a farmer or an entrepreneur – but both are Austrians. You can be a man or a woman, but we are all Germans, French and whatever. The difference in a society becomes secondary in the face of the overriding national equivalence. The national narrative thus gives everyone – farmers, officials and workers – an identity in which they can unite.

Homogeneity in a society is not simply equivalent to unification. On the contrary, the homogeneity of a society means making difference secondary. A society isn't homogeneous when differences no longer exist, but when they are of subsidiary importance in the face of what people have in common. The commonality produced by the national type is based on the principle of similarity. All members of the nation can recognize themselves in this form. The imagined community is one of likeness.

In this sense, the nation was an attempt to introduce community into society under modern conditions – an imaginary community that suggests that complete strangers could form an association of equals, of like with like. The narrative of the nation was thus a way of producing actual connections in mass societies.

Such a homogeneous society, as fictional as it may be, functions on two levels: the level of identity and of belonging. It offers us a special public identity, the national type. And it also offers us a special type of belonging. A society is homogeneous if people believe they belong to it directly and as a matter of course. If people believe they belong to it completely and entirely. That is its basic definition

But what does it mean to say "completely and entirely?" Since Freud we know that every identity that believes it is complete is mistaken. Every identity purporting that you are who you think are is an illusion. Since Freud we know that every identity purporting that you really are who you think you really are and every idea of being identical with yourself is an illusion. Since Freud we know that every sense of belonging purporting to be inevitable and unmediated is based on a fiction. "The

ego is not master in its own house" runs Freud's famous dictum. The crux is that Freud calls into question both the ego and the house. Freud questions both the ego's self-understanding and the house's status as its own. That notwithstanding, for a long time, the nation was the successful attempt to maintain these two illusions on the grand scale of a whole populace.

The illusion of an intact ego, the illusion that if I embody a national type, I am this type. Completely and entirely. The illusion that to be a German or an Austrian was to be true German, an authentic Austrian.

Likewise, the nation propped up the illusion of the house, the illusion of a house of one's *own*. The country as the ego's house of its own. The country as the house in which the national ego actually is master.