

Translated excerpt

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Sensibel.

Über moderne Empfindlichkeit und die Grenzen des Zumutbaren

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Sore Subjects. On Sensitivity and the Modern Self

Translated by Marshall Yarbrough



SORE SUBJECTS: On Sensitivity and the Modern Self

by Svenja Flaßpöhler

THE RIFT IN SOCIETY

Are feelings a purely personal matter? When is a touch an affront? How much closeness is desirable, and therefore allowed? And where lies the limit of what one can say? Which kinds of speech infringe upon human dignity—and which safeguard it? Should the generic masculine be dispensed with?

Is the “N-word” an unreasonable challenge, even as a quote? Who ultimately decides? Are victims closer to the truth than non-victims because they have personally experienced violence—whether verbal or physical? Is vulnerability the new strength?

Whether it’s #MeToo or Black Lives Matter; debates over gender-sensitive language, trigger warnings, or freedom of expression; disadvantaged groups’ struggle for recognition or the sensitivities of those who fear the loss of their own privileges: clearly we are more involved than ever in recalibrating the limits of what is permissible and what we can reasonably ask of one another.

But the discourse on this topic is getting increasingly bogged down: liberals and egalitarians, right and left wing, old and young, victims and non-victims stand irreconcilably opposed. Where one side says to the other, “You’re overreacting! You’re hypersensitive snowflakes!”, the other responds: “You’re harmful and offensive! Your language is stained with blood!”

The effect of this hostile entrenchment is a steady erosion of the culture of democratic debate and the appearance of a nearly unmendable rift that is tearing straight through the middle of society. All the more urgent then to ask how we might find a way out. I suggest taking a step back and illuminating, in a polemic-free manner, a development that is inextricably linked with the formation of the modern subject: the increasing sensitization of the self and of society.

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE SENSITIVITY

A look at the present makes clear that active sensitivity and passive susceptibility to offense often go hand in hand: That which is considered reprehensible and wrong is usually that which also inflames the passions, and vice versa—and indeed, this holds true in all political camps, albeit in different ways. While forces on the right react sensitively to societal transformations like, for example, so-called “gender mania,” and not rarely employ targeted hate speech or even concrete physical violence, left-liberal thinkers become thin-skinned whenever their notions of social progress are questioned, which occasionally leads to systematic boycotts of specific

individuals. But this link between morality and susceptibility to offense is by no means new; rather it has philosophical antecedents. For instance, delicate Jean-Jacques Rousseau despised with a passion the irritating flood of sensations he found in the city. In the tranquil countryside outside of Paris he developed his system of morality, in which man is good and empathetic by nature and is to be protected from harmful civilizational influences (see chapter 3). You might say that the rural idyll of Montmorency was Rousseau's safe space.

To realize that sensitivity, as a phenomenon, is double-edged, represents a guiding insight for our understanding of the present, and thus for this book as well. Sensitivity is directed both outward and inward. It binds and divides. It is liberating and oppressive. To put it plainly: sensitivity has a violent side, something that is evident early on in its historical emergence. A necessary condition for the development of sensitivity is, indeed, coercion. In his famous 1939 book *The Civilizing Process*, the sociologist Norbert Elias impressively traces back the transformation of human behavior, which through progressive disciplining—starting with eating and sleeping and continuing to complex social situations—can be increasingly refined, and can make individuals markedly more sensitive to the overstepping of boundaries, both their own and those of others.

What Elias describes is a complex intermeshing of “cold” disciplining and “warm” sensitizing, of normalization and shame, of self-control and sensitive awareness of one's self and the world in which one lives. The sociologist clearly demonstrates that the individual can hardly

meet these cultural demands without himself suffering harm, an observation that accords with central insights of psychoanalysis: the advance of the civilizing process has a dark side, which shows, among other places, in its fragility.

Accordingly, as a historical development, sensitization is certainly not free of interruptions and contradictions. In the twentieth century, two devastating world wars and the Shoah bear emphatic witness to the cruelty that resides within the human individual and breaks forth under certain conditions.

Resilience and sensitivity: two concepts which seem irreconcilably opposed to one another, and whose opposition is reflected in the conflict between their corresponding political positions. To be resilient is equated with callousness. With the inability to let anything affect you. Resilience, as it is broadly understood on the left side of the political spectrum, is a male, neoliberal strategy for self-optimization which is incompatible with empathy and solidarity.

The origin of the word “resilience” would certainly seem to justify this interpretation. The Latin word *resilire* means literally to spring back, to recoil. The word originally comes from physics and describes the property of an object to return to its original state after being deformed as a result of an outside disturbance.

But this book intends to show that resilience and sensitivity by no means stand in necessary opposition to one another. They do so only when they are reduced to absolute values.

This book sets out to bring into relief the points of commonality between sensitivity and resilience. For if it were possible to forge an alliance between resilience and the power of sensitivity, it would likewise be possible to diffuse the conflict that currently divides society; a third way would be open to us.

It is evident from the civilizing process itself that the general relationship between sensitivity and the power of resilience is fundamentally far more dialectic in nature than it appears at first glance. Urbanization and technological advance make the individual thin-skinned and excitable; her means of protecting herself is to seal herself off emotionally. Back at the turn of the twentieth century the sociologist Georg Simmel diagnosed a “blasé attitude” in the city dweller, who screens himself off from the many excitations of the world outside along with its attendant demands, thus enabling himself to somehow withstand them and to carve out a realm of inner freedom. Paul Valéry makes a very similar diagnosis: “After a phase of refinement,” sensitivity in the modern individual is “on the wane”; the constant flood of sensations leads finally to a “deadening effect”—an observation that seems to be borne out all the more strongly today, when large parts of the population opt to perceive their surroundings only out of the corner of their eye, if that, as they stare with dull intent at their smartphones.

Overstimulation and desensitization are two sides of the same coin. Bearing this in mind helps cast a different light on the upheavals of the present. Certain parts of society react to the newly formulated demands of minorities with a blasé attitude similar to that of Simmel’s overwhelmed

city dweller. Conversely, the “woke” awareness of the discriminatory implications of certain kinds of language and the attendant prevalence of politically correct language codes are at times marked by a blasé arrogance that is drawn like a protective film over the individual’s own vulnerability.

Historically it can be seen that it is precisely after phases of extreme violence that crucial steps are made in the direction of increased sensitivity. Thus the worst global crimes of the twentieth century led to perhaps the greatest advance in sensitivity in human history. Out of the experience of two world wars and the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe there arose, among other things, the 1949 German constitution, whose first article reads: “*Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar*”—“Human dignity shall be inviolable.” The German *unantastbar* means, in a literal sense, “untouchable”; according to this law, neither the state, nor another person, has the right to infringe upon human dignity. The senses of touch, of tact, of dexterity and fineness of feeling, all are brought together in this so sensory formulation of the inviolability, the untouchability, of dignity. From now on, what Klaus Theweleit identified as the fascist injunction to harden ourselves, to put on armor, belongs to a bygone chapter of history—and indeed, for good reasons. It is sensitivity that rules the day from now on, and that promises to extend the protective aura to which each individual is entitled far beyond the physical body. And indeed, when the constitution speaks of protecting dignity, far more is intended than protection simply from physical violence. But what exactly human dignity is, what touches upon it, what actually does it injury, at what point one person literally goes too far with another person, steps beyond the limits

of respect, is by no means constant or clearly delineated throughout all time, rather it is fiercely contested and highly mutable, and depends on the degree of societal sensitivity.

Where just a few years ago the law governing sexual offences was centered around actual physical violence, now, at least in most European countries, a falsely expressed intention can have legal consequences. Where for the longest time in human history it was considered unproblematic to speak of “women” and “men” and to attribute to them distinct biological characteristics, today this is found to be “transphobic,” i.e., discriminatory toward people who don’t fit in either of these categories.

The increasing sensitivity of society is without question an essential factor in civilizational progress. Pluralistic, highly complex, differentiated societies are, not least on account of their population density, fundamentally reliant on individuals who are capable of being aware of and sensitive to their own interests as well as those of others. But we are currently experiencing how this same constructive force of sensitivity threatens to tip over into destructiveness: instead of binding us together, sensitivity divides us. It splits societies into groups, becomes an actual weapon, and indeed this is true on both sides of the divide. At the heart of the struggle is the question of whether it is the individual who must work on himself in order to become more resilient—or if rather the world around him has to change. Is the “N-word,” spoken on a stage, quite simply art, and thus a reasonable challenge with which to confront an audience—or is it unreasonable, impermissible racism? Is an advance at a hotel bar, a glance at a woman’s breast, or a compliment from the boss

part of an erotic game—or intolerable sexism? Are we on the verge of becoming like the princess and the pea, feeling every little disturbance to be too great an imposition on us—or are these so-called trivialities rather instances of structural violence that must be fought with every means at our disposal? More to the point: when is individual evolution called for—and when societal revolution? When powers of resilience and when a transformation of relations?

All questions for which there doesn't seem to be a truly satisfying answer yet. The U.S.-American philosopher Judith Butler, for example, positions herself firmly on the side of revolution (even if, as we shall see, her position when considered in full is quite ambivalent) when she says, “If someone is offended by a racist or homophobic comment or action, it is a personal experience. But the act and its consequences activate a social structure. The same holds true for sexual harassment [. . .]: Harassment always entails an individual form of behavior, and yet the form or manner of behavior reflects a societal structure and reproduces it.” As accurate and important the observation is that acts that cause offense can be more than merely personal matters reflecting one's particular sensibility, that doesn't mean they always are. Butler does not in fact explain what exactly the structure is where racism, homophobia, and sexism begin. Is the question “where are you from?” always racist, or just a harmless expression of interest? Where does sexism begin: only when someone grabs someone else's bottom, or as early as with the use of the generic masculine? Is it homophobic to insist that it makes a difference whether a child has two parents of the same sex, or a man and a woman? Or is this merely a neutral

comment, stating a distinction? And how do we deal with the fact that not all members of a group feel the same way? What some see as impermissible and inappropriate (for example the label “black”) is for others a suitable option that describes their identity.

The sociologist Andreas Reckwitz, in contrast to Judith Butler, stands more on the side of evolution. Thus Reckwitz emphatically welcomes the increasing sensitization of society and points out that this brings out a refined awareness not only of positive but also of ambivalent and negative feelings. It is however precisely these unpleasant feelings that we are no longer willing to accept, argues Reckwitz, and points to the—in his view problematic—boom in positive psychology: “Sensitivity yes, but please, only in association with positive feelings! Sensitivity yes, but as a sense for well-constructed aesthetic forms, as a sense for conscientious dealings with one another, as a sense for shaping the wellness of body and soul. A feel-good sensitivity.”

As eye-opening as this observation is, it too can show bias: to say to a person of color who gets slurs yelled at her on her way to work on account of her skin color that she must also be open to negative feelings and learn to tolerate them is surely not what Reckwitz means. The big picture is, upon closer examination, more complicated: not every painful experience must be endured, but neither must every painful experience be prevented by society.

Of course this book does not presume to present ultimate formulas for what is and isn’t appropriate or reasonable. The idea is not to lay out precisely what one should and should not be allowed to do. Rather it is

about identifying as truly unreasonable and unacceptable the tendency to reduce things to absolutes that is found on both sides of the spectrum. An absolute resilience is unacceptable because it closes itself off to others' demands. But an absolute sensitivity is also unacceptable, because it reduces the human individual to the status of a delicate creature who is worthy of protection but who doesn't know how to help himself. The limit of what is acceptable, of what we can ask of one another, lies somewhere along the spectrum between these two poles and points to a new, yet to be found relationship between the self and the world.

THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK

The reader should no more expect to find a code of behavior here than a comprehensive scholarly study of sensitivity. The focus is rather on the present, with its concrete problematic situations, as described above. Only by reaching a deeper understanding of the process of increasing sensitization will it be possible to recognize its progressive and regressive tendencies. The goal of this book is to shine a light on the dialectic nature of sensitivity and to reassess its relationship to resilience so that, in so doing, we can find a way out of the crises of our time.

#METOO AVANT LA LETTRE

He came to me, taking no notice at first of my consternation
and wildness (what they had given me made me incoherent

and wild): All goes well, said he, my dear! [. . .] All indeed did go well for the villainous project of the most cruel and most villainous of men! [. . .] Let me cut short the rest. I grew worse and worse in my head; now stupid, now raving, now senseless. [. . .] I remember, I pleaded for mercy—I remember that I said I *would be his*—indeed I *would be his*—to obtain his mercy—But no mercy found I!—My strength, my intellects, failed me!—And then such scenes followed—Oh my dear, such dreadful scenes!—

Thus writes Clarissa in a letter to a certain Mrs. Howe. A man named Lovelace tricked her and lured her away from her family, then took her to a brothel, drugged her with a tea, and, on the same fateful night that Clarissa describes in her letter, breaking her account off with a dash that speaks volumes, raped her. The young woman is never able to recover from what happens to her. All zeal for life leaves her body, whose dignity she had tried so relentlessly to defend.

The scene comes from the epistolary novel *Clarissa* by the British author Samuel Richardson. The book was published in 1747-48. It enjoyed sensational success. Five editions would appear over the next thirteen years. In 1751 the book was translated into French, in 1752 into German, and in 1755 into Dutch. Not only women, but also men were deeply moved by Clarissa's fate. Readers female and male alike sympathized with the heroine, whose suffering is so unsparingly and authentically narrated in her letters from her own first-person perspective. As he had previously in his

first epistolary novel *Pamela*, and as was common literary practice at the time, the author Richardson claims only to be the “editor” of the letters, thus all the more heightening the semblance of realness and immediacy found in the emotions portrayed in the book.

In her book *Inventing Human Rights*, the historian Lynn Hunt demonstrates in clear terms what a major psychological feat the writing and reading of such tales of suffering was at that time. Where up until that point empathy was confined to the circle of one’s immediate acquaintances, now, through epistolary novels, people were placed in the position of imagining the fates of complete strangers. In other words, the act of empathizing was literally taught as an aesthetic practice and, according to the historian, played a decisive role in the progress of humanity. Books alone might not be enough to change the world, but still, for Hunt, it is no coincidence that the heyday of the epistolary novel was followed immediately by efforts to establish a legal foundation for the principle of human equality, both in the United States, in 1776, as well as in France in 1789. “Equality,” Hunt writes, “was not just an abstract concept or a political slogan. It had to be internalized in some fashion.” Substantially encouraged by the trend of empathetic literature, a kind of feeling developed that connected people with one another and propelled civilization a decisive step forward—even if, at that time, women’s rights were still a long way away.

To be sure: “Clarissa” is a fictional character, and one, moreover, who springs from a man’s quill (for a discussion of the limits of empathy, see Chapter 7). And yet: who, in considering the heroine and the emotions

that her suffering aroused, would not think of an emancipatory movement that emerged just a few years ago and has since come to span the entire globe? Who, when thinking of *Lovelace*, would not think of the Harvey Weinstens of our time? *Clarissa*—a kind of #MeToo avant la lettre? In 2017, women on the social network Twitter began recounting experiences of sexual violence. Women and men throughout the world sympathized with the victims, showed solidarity with them online and directed outrage toward their abusers. The empathetic power of millions of people around the world led to abusers being removed from positions of power and arrested; it led to public accusation of those suspected of abuse and to a strengthening of the law governing sexual offences in Germany: a woman is now also protected when she is not capable of expressing her consent—for example when drugs are involved. Richardson's *Clarissa*, if she were alive today, might very well have become a key figure in the #MeToo movement.

But what kind of feeling is empathy, exactly? How is it that people are even capable of identifying with strangers' fates, placing themselves in the inner lives of others? Why does this kind of sensitivity, the ability to be moved and touched by others' suffering, have the potential to spread exponentially, or to put it another way: why is it so contagious?

The philosophy of the 18th century was deeply shaped by these questions. Empathy and sympathy were systematically investigated in a movement that ran parallel with empathetic literature. The relationship between emotion and morality was at the center of countless texts which

together represented, in a sense, the early stirrings of the French Revolution. God was no longer the basis for morals and ethics; rather their origin resided in the emotions of people themselves. This was the groundbreaking, indeed revolutionary shift in thinking that came at a time in which monarchy began to sense that its end was drawing near: a people that discovers the power of empathy, that forms emotional ties that extend beyond barriers of class and in so doing senses equality and fraternity deep within itself, will no longer accept a divisive, oppressive power that is legitimated by nothing more than heredity and transcendental fantasies.

But, as remains to be seen: humanity does not necessarily grow more humane when it becomes more empathetic. Empathy is not equivalent to progress. Looking closer, one sees that the same force that has played a decisive role in the progress of civilization also contains within it regressive, destructive potential. Three factors are essential here. First, the relationship between empathy and morality. Second, the relationship between empathy and femininity. And third, the relationship between empathy and sadism. In order to unpack these relationships, let us turn to the lives and works of three philosophers who count among the most influential thinkers of the eighteenth century: David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade. [...]

THE TOCQUEVILLE PARADOX

The more equitable societies are, the more sensitive they become to still existing injustices and the harms that accompany them. This is the so-

called “Tocqueville Paradox,” a sociological concept named after the philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. Directing his gaze at democracy in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, Tocqueville discerned that increasing equality of living conditions and rights had led to an increasing sensitivity to differences: “As every man sees that he differs but little from those about him, he cannot understand why a rule which is applicable to one man should not be equally applicable to all others.” So observes the French philosopher of aristocratic origin in his work *Democracy in America* (1835-1840), written after he had spent a year in the United States. “Hence the slightest privileges are repugnant to his reason; the faintest dissimilarities in the political institutions of the same people offend him, and uniformity of legislation appears to him to be the first condition of good government.” Tocqueville grows even more pointed when he writes: “The hatred which men bear to privilege increases in proportion as privileges become fewer and less considerable, so that democratic passions would seem to burn most fiercely just when they have least fuel. [. . .] When all conditions are unequal, no inequality is so great as to offend the eye; whereas the slightest dissimilarity is odious in the midst of general uniformity: the more complete this uniformity is, the more insupportable does the sight of such a difference become.”

It seems natural for us to see the Tocqueville paradox carried over into our own times as well, in which, on the one hand, the level of equality between different ethnicities and between the sexes has increased, while at the same time our sensitivity to differences has been refined to a considerable degree compared to the nineteenth century. The question

arises as to whether, as equality of circumstances continues to increase, a point can ever be reached at which no one any longer feels structurally disadvantaged or harmed—or if, conversely, sensitivity will increase by the same measure in which these very structures disappear. Without a doubt, increasing equality indicates progress. But if sensitivity continues to increase even as more tangible disadvantages diminish, then, logically speaking, the development that we are currently experiencing will never reach its goal, but rather will continue to produce new perceptions of injustice. In exaggerated terms: every dismantled structure gives birth to new structures, every sensitivity to new sensitivities. Seen in the context of human history, are we currently experiencing the beginnings of a phase in which the sensitive self is at risk, sooner or later, of simply spinning in circles? Now of course, to consider Tocqueville, on the basis of his aristocratic background, to be a rigid libertarian who merely feared for his own privileges and was blind to existing injustice, would be to misunderstand him. His intention was not to dismiss as mere sensitivity justified outrage over oppressive conditions. To the contrary, the philosopher had a keen eye for the ways in which the power of the majority is capable of devolving into tyranny and undermining rights that it itself has granted. Thus, in a footnote, Tocqueville relates this occurrence:

I [Tocqueville] said one day to an inhabitant of Pennsylvania: “Be so good as to explain to me how it happens, that in a state founded by quakers, and celebrated for its toleration, freed blacks are not allowed to exercise

civil rights. They pay the taxes: is it not fair that they should have a vote.”

“You insult us,” replied my informant, “if you imagine that our legislators could have committed so gross an act of injustice and intolerance.”

“What, then, the blacks possess the right of voting in this country?”

“Without the smallest doubt.”

“How comes it, then, that at the polling-booth this morning I did not perceive a single negro in the whole meeting?”

“This is not the fault of the law; the negroes have an undisputed right of voting; but they voluntarily abstain from making their appearance.”

“A very pretty piece of modesty on their parts,” rejoined I.

“Why, the truth is, that they are not disinclined to vote, but they are afraid of being maltreated; in this country the law is sometimes unable to maintain its authority without the support of the majority. But in this case the majority entertains very strong prejudices against the blacks, and the magistrates are unable to protect them in the exercise of their legal privileges.”

“What, then, the majority claims the right not only of making the laws, but of breaking the laws it has made?”

The fact that people have equal rights does not always mean that they can make equal use of them or receive equal protection from them—not by a long shot. How relevant and urgent this insight of Tocqueville’s from the year 1835 still is today, is shown by the persistent disadvantage suffered disproportionately by racial minorities in exercising their right to vote in many U.S. states (for example as the result of closed polling locations in poorer neighborhoods, higher formal hurdles, etc.).

STRUCTURE AND INDIVIDUAL

What Tocqueville teaches us is to sharpen our perception in both directions. This means, on the one hand, clearly recognizing and calling out structural discrimination (including where it exists despite equality under the law), but on the other also seeing that there is a self-perpetuating dynamic of sensitivity that is itself inflamed by increasing equality. But just what kind of dynamic is this exactly? Tocqueville, in describing it, speaks of “insignificant privileges” and the “smallest of differences,” and one senses immediately how tricky this point is—for of course it touches on the question that was formulated at the beginning of this book: when must society change, because its structures are plainly unjust—and when must the individual work on himself, because he hasn’t taken advantage of the opportunities that are in fact available to him? Do we need legally mandated quotas for women, or is it more about encouraging women and empowering them to achieve what they want, including in the face of

pressure and resistance? The line between societal and individual responsibility is difficult to determine in many cases today; in fact it becomes all the more fluid the more importance a society places on equality of opportunity, which in turn leads to a watering down of the concept of privilege: where does privilege end, where does individual achievement begin? To update Tocqueville's example of the envious neighbor for the present: if my neighbor is more successful in her career than I am and has generally been more capable of firmly arranging her life according to her own wishes and desires, this might be the result of her having been granted tangible societal advantages, like for example a sophisticated upbringing, which gives people more options and tends to produce people who are more confident. But maybe the neighbor also had to overcome massive outward and inner obstacles. It's possible she had to struggle with insistent notions of femininity which often cause women, as if by magic, to drop out of the workforce and disappear into private life after the birth of their first child. It's conceivable that she found herself in numerous sexist situations, but refused to be intimidated. Maybe the neighbor underwent therapy and worked through her own childhood trauma, and thus achieved emotional stability, whereas I in this example have never mustered the strength for such self-examination and now seek to place all the blame on societal, or better yet patriarchal, structures. To put it pointedly: sensitivity to difference, the tendency to point to "structures," can also be a way to evade responsibility. More pointedly still: Not every instance of inequality is unjust and tainted by privilege. There

are instances of inequality that result from individual effort—or a lack thereof.

A committed egalitarian would of course raise an objection at this point: What, he asks, is “individual effort” exactly? Can’t individual achievements also reflect privilege? Namely in so far as certain gifts, as the word itself suggests, are given, which is to say they come from without—and not from within the individual himself? Seen from this perspective, physical strength and intelligence are indeed not instances of individual achievement in the strictest sense. Considered in radical egalitarian terms, a meritocratic society is therefore necessarily unjust, in so far as it rests on capabilities which one person possesses while another distinctly does not. And yes, it’s true: to believe that achievement and success result purely from individual effort and not also from factors determined by chance (our genes, our personal appearance, where we’re born) is simply naïve.

But what conclusion is to be drawn from this? That effort shouldn’t factor in at all and we should no longer expect anything from the individual, but only from society? This conclusion would likewise be dangerously disempowering and infantilizing—indeed it even has the makings of totalitarianism. Structures would no longer be made up of individuals who were capable of changing them through their own power, rather they would be predetermined and prescribed, the people within them nothing more than links in a chain. The theorist of justice John Rawls found the wisest solution to date to the problem here identified. Put simply, it states that inequalities are only justified if they benefit the whole of society. Or in utilitarian terms: the foremost principle is the happiness

of the greatest number. Which means, more concretely, that people must not be permitted to enrich themselves at the cost of others and those who earn more than others must contribute more to the common welfare.

Let's now return to the example of the neighbor who through effort and resilience was able to find herself living a happy life: the capabilities she displayed certainly do not lie exclusively in the realm of individual capacity. The ability to transform severe setbacks and obstacles into energy comes easier to some, harder to others; it is a gift given more to some than to others. Faced with this discrepancy, however, a society that is concerned with justice can only come to one conclusion: that it must undertake more to help as many people as possible to find this strength. Vulnerability is a structure inherent in existence. It is no more possible to imagine human life without it than to imagine life without real experiences of injury. No matter how just a society is, it will never be able to completely protect us from the blows of fate or other types of violence; at least not if we would like to continue to live in freedom. And inequality won't disappear either. People are born different. Some can get pregnant, some can impregnate—just to name one example. A society can, however, ensure that inequality doesn't lead to injustice. Thus for instance it must prevent women from suffering any professional disadvantage as a result of their being absent from work due to pregnancy. What's more, it can strengthen individuals and empower them so that they understand how to take advantage of the opportunities that are available to them (assuming this is what they want). What a society cannot, indeed must not do, however, is to act on individuals' behalf. There is an inevitable point at

which a person must take action on her own and assume responsibility for her own life. If she doesn't, she remains a child.

THE DUAL GAZE

In this book I have attempted to cast a dual gaze in the Tocquevillean sense on the processes of sensitization in society. It has been demonstrated that increased sensitivity towards existing imbalances has driven civilizational progress and advanced the struggle for rights in various ways. Never would victims have been recognized as such; never would women have been placed on equal legal footing with men, or same-sex couples with heterosexual couples; never would a worldwide movement like Black Lives Matter have emerged if people had not shown empathy towards disadvantaged groups, had people not imagined themselves—to the extent that such imagination is possible—in the situation these groups face, shown solidarity with them, bolstered them in their courage. The literature of empathy fostered the societal struggles for emancipation by making a broad audience sensitive to other perspectives. Women's fates became accessible to a large readership for the first time through the fictional first-person perspective offered by the novels of Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (along with the ambivalence, previously discussed, that the male gaze brings with it). The therapeutic practice of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also demonstrates that in the appreciation of narrative, of storytelling, is contained a decisive step towards increased sensitization: on Sigmund Freud's couch, war victims found a language for

trauma. At almost the same time there followed a sensitization of the system of language as such, which, according to the insight of the “linguistic turn,” was found not simply to describe the world, but rather to create a hierarchically ordered world of its own. Later, poststructural discourse and semiotic theorists worked out precisely to what extent language, as a result of its performative force, itself possesses destructive, violent potential.

To dismiss contemporary sensitivity to language as thin-skinned whining is thus to fall far short of the mark. Rather this sensitivity is the product of a long intellectual tradition which links thought and the relationship between the self and the world inextricably to language and the transformation of the previously unspeakable into the speakable. An individual’s bold and open declaration of their personal experience of suffering can lead to that suffering being recognized and shared, and thus in turn lead to societal transformations. Because of this, it has been and continues to be those who are personally affected—and not those who would speak for them—who drive processes of change forward: as their voices become heard, our perspectives of social reality grow broader and more enhanced.

But sensitivity is not the same thing as progressiveness. Rather, conversely, sensitivity can tip back over into regressiveness if it is reduced to an absolute value and glorified for its own sake. And so this book has also made it a goal to shed light on its flip side as well. It is part of the deeply ambivalent nature of sensitivity that it can not only fail to prevent violence, but also encourage it. Empathy is not, in and of itself, morality;

Hume and Rousseau's belief in a sensitivity that is by nature good is shrewdly perverted by de Sade.

The expansion in scope and inflationary spread of the concept of trauma since the 1970s has played a decisive role in the imbalanced state of the sensitization process. More and more, reasons for suffering are sought in an unreasonable externality from which the sensitive subject must be safeguarded. Where Freud's analysis drew on the primordial life instinct as a way of freeing victims, over the course of their treatment, from their powerlessness at the hands of outside forces, such a mobilization of the natural defenses which are birthed precisely at the moment of greatest mortal fear was lost sight of as a result of a one-sided fixation on the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The phenomenon of hypersensitivity can be read as the intensification of a process that banishes victims to places of safety in order to protect them from overexcitement. Collective political action and debate become difficult when people develop sensitivities that are too strongly ingrained. The system of language also loses its authority when every gender identity is meant to be equally represented. A key reason for the increase in sensitivity is that the logic of the general is being replaced by a logic of the singular: per Robert Pfaller, by shedding forms and focusing on true being, "we suddenly feel everyone else on our own skin."

Forms, with their universal authority, are not just effects of alienation, but also hold a protective function: the private and intimate take a step back, and with them the risk of injury. The use of the generic masculine also looks different when seen in this light: its independence

from grammatical gender is the very thing that liberates it from the “tyranny of the intimate” and makes room for an over-arching, liberating play of representations. To be sure, marginalized groups must as a matter of necessity name themselves as groups in order to point to existing injustices. But it is just as true that one of the conditions of a just society is that people do not close themselves off inside their particular interest groups. Rather the idea is to take on quite different perspectives, as an instance of imaginative strength. This is precisely what is meant by the famous “veil of ignorance” in John Rawls’s theory of justice: what if we had no idea what group we belonged to? If we all found ourselves in a kind of original state in which capabilities like intelligence or characteristics like skin color or social status were not yet inscribed within us, and we thus could not predict which place in the overall structure we would eventually fit into? Then we would be compelled to imagine what it would be like to live in society as a man, woman, transgender person, black person, etc.—and would fight to ensure that all received their due.

What is striking, however, in regarding the debates of recent years, is that precisely the opposite is happening. Clear limits of empathy are being insisted upon. It’s true that no one can know what it’s like to be someone else; and it’s also accurate that those who are not confronted with certain forms of discrimination often lack the will to place themselves in the position of others. But to conclude from this that only a young black woman can translate a young black woman, because only she has access to the same range of experiences, literally reverses the challenge advanced first by Adorno, then Rawls, then Butler, to bolster the non-identical over

the identical. What is now considered good is the same, the identical, what Adorno called the “jargon of authenticity.” Difference, on the other hand, is considered dangerous. It is all the more concerning that institutions—publishing houses, universities, media organizations—give into these tendencies virtually without resistance, however honest their motives may be.

If sensitivity is reduced to an absolute quantity, it leads to a problematic notion of the human individual. If words that risk giving offense are to be roundly avoided or completely suppressed regardless of context; if exhibits featuring subjects that have the potential to call forth negative associations cannot be put on; if people lose their jobs for allegedly making harmful comments, then freedom and autonomy are in danger. Put pointedly: the individual is on the verge of becoming an open wound that must be protected from every risk of infection. Accordingly, the cries for institutional and state control grow ever louder. And with that we arrive at the other extreme of the unreasonable: the ignorant, reactionary opponent of political correctness on the one side corresponds to a sensitive self on the other that expects every protection from the world—while expecting nothing from itself.

THE NEW ALLIANCE

Tocqueville presciently challenged majoritarian society to become aware of its own privileges and to sharpen its eye for existing imbalances, however subtle. But if on the other hand it is true that increasing equality calls forth

increasing sensitivity, as the philosopher likewise demonstrated, then a functional society cannot wear itself out with the task of avoiding instances of harm. The deliberate strengthening of resilience, which is essential for the exercise of autonomy, must be just as fundamental. A key intention of this book has been not to reduce this force to an absolute value in turn, but rather to highlight it, to bring it into relief against the process of sensitization itself: it resides in art, in the human passion to create. It resides in the forms—and in the failure—of representation. It resides in the archaic prehistory that the civilizing process carries within itself. It resides in the vulnerability of every human person, and is a treasure that wants to be safeguarded. Resilience is not the enemy, but rather the sister of sensitivity. Only together can they master the future.

[end of sample translation]

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