

SIMILARITY

A PARADIGM FOR CULTURE THEORY

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Edited by

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Preface to the English Edition

This volume presents the English versions of papers first published in German, under the title *Ähnlichkeit*, in 2015.¹ The English volume is supplemented by three new contributions, by Andreas Kilcher, Uwe Wirth and Ravi Ahuja.

In an interview on his recent novel, *The Golden House*, Salman Rushdie emphasizes the problems associated with the current discourse on identity as follows:

So, in New York right now, if you talk about identity, most people will assume you're talking about gender issues. In India it seems to me that the identity debate has to do with authenticity of Indianness and religious sectarianism, and identity becomes an aspect of the Hindu-Muslim issue. In England national identity became very big during the whole Brexit debate, but there the people were in a way harking back to some imaginary golden age of England – an idea of an identity that was pre-European and better than European. So it interests me that in these different parts of the world that I've spent a lot of my life thinking about, everybody means different things by identity, so that just became a natural subject.²

Rushdie's remarks underscore the point that anti-humanist ideologies are obsessed with purity and origins. As against this, a substantive democratic perspective in our times is based on the development of the critical art of inheritance – how to find, rehabilitate, critically inherit and appropriate cultural heritages, combining past and present, establishing links and out of the plenitude of the world deriving that critical assemblage which will enable us to avoid racist, sexist and cultural othering. This is based on mingling, mixing and emphasizing affiliations, alliances and similarities in the complex search for a possible united front against ontologizing differences and against the rise of anti-humanist social forces.

The concepts of identity and otherness are both becoming ever-

more questionable, not least due to global political events of the last few decades. The assumption of distinct cultural identities in the era of greater refugee and migratory flows seems increasingly inadequate. Though the postcolonial critique of identity has also given consideration to alterity and hybridity, this has remained within the paradigm of difference as an overall perspective. For these reasons, it is important to reflect upon whether a concept of 'similarity' can be developed alongside the concept of difference which has hitherto dominated Cultural Studies. The category of similarity, we had suggested in the introduction to the German volume, offers an alternative for examining our increasingly complex cultural world.

'Similarity' is a concept with its own history and affiliations which had been obscured, till recently, by the dominant presence of the research paradigm privileging difference. That is why it was earlier discredited by suggesting that it supported an assimilationist position, leading to a forceful adjustment of cultures, gender or religion. In addition, similarity and thinking in similarity were supposedly part of a premodern way of thinking belonging to other times and places – part of primitive stages of culture or a premodern epoch, and therefore part of a different order of things that was distinct from a rationalist modern epoch in which only exact concepts are valid.

This volume explores the theoretical range of the concept of similarity in historical and systematic terms. It is seen as not only a heuristic concept, but also an argument and an alternative option in cultural practice. The contributions presented here come from literary and cultural studies, from philosophy, political science, sociology, ethnology and history.

Thinking in similarity does in fact oppose the desire to draw precise borders and exact definitions. But this supposed drawback can be an advantage when dealing with complex phenomena of culture where fluid transitions, multiple overlapping and broad spatial borders are a given. The specific epistemological achievement of the category of similarity consists in offering new ways of seeing the diffuse dynamics and fuzzy relations that are characteristic of our complex and entangled contemporary world.

In the German volume we had emphasized that thinking about similarity should not be (mis-)understood as a false form of harmonization or a levelling of differences. Rather, considerations of similarity contain a subversive potential to expose the claimed antagonisms and radical incompatibilities of opposition or difference as nothing more than legitimist ideology. We had drawn attention to the fact that it was by affirming similarity that the ontologizing claims of the caste system as a cosmic order could be exposed. Dr Ambedkar made the criticism, as early as 1936, that the brutal form of systematic exclusion of the Dalits (the so-called untoucha-

bles) in the Hindu caste system is also based on a fundamental denial of the possibility of 'fluidity and equity' in social conditions and in social practice.³ Emphasizing similarity, then, is a subversive form of critique of all attempts to ontologize the appearance of variations in social class or occupation or the body, as manifested in racial, casteist sedimentation of essentialist claims of inherent difference.

We have by now a comprehensive historical archive for dealing with the cultural specifics of our contemporary polyglot, multireligious, pluricultural and syncretic worlds of displacement and migration. Reference to this archive suggests that instead of hard dichotomous structures and hitherto dominant polarities based on notions of difference and alterity, our contemporary cultural processes lead to pluricultural conditions characterized by plurilingual competence, syncretism and heterogeneities that are becoming features of our increasingly complex societies. These processes are characterized by conflicts between heterogeneity and homogeneity in fields of power and domination. Whereas perspectives from participatory democracy celebrate the process of heterogeneity, fascist world-views try to force homogeneity on to the world. Against this background we suggest that the traditional emphasis on the principle of a hermeneutic of understanding difference in culture theory and practice is inadequate for comprehending the processes of space-time transformations which characterize our contemporary world.

Instead of a hermeneutics of difference, we suggest that the perspective of non-hermeneutic dispositions make *similarity* a productive concept for enabling us to come to terms with a complex world of entanglements, shared histories and migrations. It also offers a critique of all forms of exceptionalism, and enforces the need for a new secular, syncretistic perspective beyond all orthodoxies. It disposes us to seeing polyvalent, polycentric, overlapping and transient fields with greater adequacy than traditional hermeneutic approaches. They also replace traditional linearity in favour of a greater emphasis on simultaneity. Critical studies in the humanities then means thinking in analogies and comparisons, seeking affiliations and commonalities, and looking upon cultures as interwoven, shared and 'entangled'. Similarity as a conceptual framework is increasingly being used to analyse situations that were earlier dealt with in terms of ethnic relations, inter-religious relations and intercultural relations. These were traditionally dealt with in binary terms through the hermeneutics of 'self' and 'other'. Instead we pay greater attention to partial overlappings, and partial distances and nearness. This also replaces the traditional emphasis on 'identity'.

In Jewish studies, the concept of similarity is being used to deal

with the complex worlds of Eastern Europe. For instance, Klaus Hödl says: “‘Similarity’ may serve as an important category of analysis in Jewish Studies in that it focuses on commonalities without neglecting the differences between Jews and non-Jews.”⁴ The reassessment of the Habsburg monarchy is again a result of thinking in commonalities and similarities, as against the dominating paradigm of the nation-state in Europe.⁵ This has led, among others, to a revised approach to the Habsburg monarchy, as well as to multilingualism and to the question of identity-based descriptions of large societies.⁶ For instance, Pieter Judson writes that his book ‘underscores just how similar the Habsburg Empire was to other European states while highlighting moments when it pioneered new ideas about nationhood and new practices of governance. Like every European state, however, it also developed distinctive institutions and practices that make its history unique.’⁷ The equation of Indian identity with a Hindu identity is a part of this process of destroying the syncretic, diverse, non-identitarian culture of India that was always based on interactions between many religions, languages and life-worlds, which were in turn based on a functioning play of ‘similarity’.⁸

Instead of treating the multinational, multilingual state as a deviation from the norm of the essentially monolingual nation-state, approaches based on analogous reasoning, overlapping, simultaneity of historically diverse social formations and, in general, the theoretical move to affirm non-linear thinking has been significant. By focusing on similarities we again argue against the closure of identity and the drive towards complete sameness, and emphasize that we deal with various kinds of similarities and overlapping processes in our complex worlds. This may well be the background against which we hope this volume will be read.

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Notes

- ¹ For reviews of the German volume, see Patrut (2016) and Mühr (2016).
- ² From Doshi (2017).
- ³ Cf. Ambedkar’s controversy with Mahatma Gandhi; reprinted in Ambedkar (2014): 347.
- ⁴ Hödl (2017).
- ⁵ This was already evident in the volume on rethinking Habsburg edited by Johannes Feichtinger and Heidemarie Uhl; cf. Feichtinger and Uhl, eds. (2016). Cf. also Fillafer (2012).
- ⁶ For instance, renewed attention to Bolzano’s early writings of 1816 is of increased relevance now. Cf. Bolzano (2007). Cf. also Burger (1993) and Csáky (2010).
- ⁷ Cf. Judson (2016): 12. But also: ‘We need not gravitate to an opposite extreme by asserting central and eastern Europe’s blanket “Similarity” to the rest of Europe. Rather, we need to understand the history of this region – its institutions and its economic, social, political, and cultural development – within, not outside of, a broadly comparative European context’ (ibid.).
- ⁸ For instance, Mohan Bhagwat, the head of the RSS, the Hindu organization which is the backbone of the BJP, is reported to have asserted that one may follow a different religion, different culture, philosophy, language and style of eating, but everyone living in India is a Hindu: ‘Every Hindu is my own brother. In India one may follow a different eating habits, way of worshipping the gods, philosophy, language and culture. But all of them are Hindus. There are many who are Hindu but they are not aware of it. Only those who consider Bharat Mata his own mother are true Hindus.’ Cf. ‘Everyone living in India is a Hindu: Mohan Bhagwat’, *The Hindu*, 25 February 2018; available at <http://www.the-hindu.com/news/national/everyone-living-in-india-is-a-hindu-mohan-bhagwat/article22852200.ece>

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