

From the Critique of Identity to an Ethics of Plurality: Sabine Hark's Collaborative Vision

Judith Butler

The work of Sabine Hark has always been collaborative. That collaborative spirit has clearly taken the form of co-authoring books and building whole programs with colleagues, building networks to create and support gender studies programs throughout Germany and beyond. It also takes another form: the gathering of a wide range of thinkers in her course assignments and in her writings. What she assigns as well as her citational practice reflect a certain practice of thinking with others, sometimes building on their theories, sometimes putting positions together in unprecedented ways, sometimes absorbing the ethos of a written text in order to reproduce it in a singular way, asking it to keep company with other positions, seeking out the constellation that this textual assembly creates. Collaboration has been quite literal – working with others to create programs and ideas. But it is also a way of thinking and writing, which for Hark is a thinking and writing with others. There is always a relation to the other in what Hark writes, whether it is the unknown reader appealed to on every page or the authors, both dead and alive, with whom a living conversation takes form as thought. Sometimes I have had the sense that other authors are building blocks for what she makes. And I think of my own work as one such building block. Hence, this essay poses the question, can the building block speak? And, if so, what might it say? For I am somewhere in this work at the same time that I am transformed by the company that this work asks me to keep.

It is no accident that collaboration has been the practice, and that conversation has become a mode of thought, and that cohabitation proves to be the explicit ethical and political ideal in Hark's work. In 2012, Hark gave a lecture at an event on »The Politics of Coalition« in Geneva where she deftly diagnosed the advent of identity politics at the time, asking that we reconsider the importance of coalition and its power to ameliorate forms

of possessive individualism and noxious nationalism (Hark 2016). In that lecture, she distinguished between different forms of identity politics, including those embraced by nationalist governments and those that emerge from marginalized or effaced communities whose access to identitarian politics has been blocked. Much could be said about the difference between nationalist forms of identity politics that oppose immigration and sometimes espouse ethnic cleansing and those forms of identity assertion that emerge on the left by those who are struggling against racism, social effacement, and political negation. Hark distinguishes between identity politics from above and identity politics from below (Hark 2016, 171). The former includes forms of nationalism and white supremacy, islamophobia, and they shore up anti-migrant politics and traditional social hierarchies and mechanisms of exclusion. The latter are efforts to overcome effacement and assume discursive standing in the public sphere.

Even as identity claims often assert their unchangeable and essential character, they nevertheless emerge in history, suggesting their more fundamentally contingent character. As Hark herself puts it, »the contingent historical genesis of its claims is something that identity politics must constantly repudiate« (ibid.: 173). Yet, Hark makes a further claim: those forms of identity politics which, in asserting their essential and timeless singularity, carry the risk of becoming dogmatic, if not authoritarian. Indeed, whether emerging from the top down (forms of nationalism and state racism, for instance) or from the bottom up, all such forms of identity politics can become rigid and exclusionary, and serve an authoritarian politics.

If we pay attention, however, to the historical conditions under which identity politics emerges, we might, following both Hark and Peter Wagner (2002), query whether the assertion of identity as an indisputable, singular, and essential phenomenon, expresses less a desire for identity than a desire for action. This kind of diagnosis demands that we understand that the assertion of identity may well be a quest for the possibility for agency, that is, the power to have a transformative effect on the world. If we are within the conceptual framework of identity politics, and feeling its essentialist pull, it may be because we are looking for ways not merely of asserting ourselves, but finding the capacity or power to act (*Handlungsfähigkeit*). If we were not living in a world in which so many feel that they are powerless, that their actions do not matter in light of more powerful social forces, we would not be arguing about identity.

This kind of diagnosis is valuable precisely because it asks after the very historical genesis of identity politics which identity politics repudiates, or from which it dissociates. Just because we cannot ask the question of historical formation within the framework of an unchanging view of identity does not mean that the rest of us cannot treat identity politics as a historical phenomenon within contemporary political life that calls to be explained. The problem with such a diagnosis is that it may well rely on a psychologizing presupposition, or turn out to be speculative, even paternalistic, substituting the language used by those who assert their identity for another language that claims to understand their motivations better than they do. Hark considers that it may be necessary to treat identity politics as a symptom: »Is the increasing discussion of and about identity, then, a symptom indicating that action itself – genuine political activity in Hannah Arendt's sense – is disappearing from the world, or has already disappeared?» (Hark 2016: 175) That genuine political activity can be defined as »action« in the Arendtian sense, but it is also essential to democracy, the cooperative and participatory processes that are part of a polity in which self-governance remains the central principle. Thus, we could conclude that some people revert to identity claims when they feel that no meaningful political action is available to them. But the more fundamental point is that identity claims become sites of increasingly intense investment when a sense of despair is widely shared about the fate of democracy. For Arendt – and for Hark – there is no democracy without meaningful action. The collective and transformative forms of action we might expect from robust democracies are now replaced by assertions of identity. That assertion of identity appears to be the only available action or the only form of action that an individual self can initiate and seek to control. The question implicitly (or symptomatically) posed by identity politics, then, is whether it is possible to exercise collectively a right to govern ourselves. The despair evident in some forms of identity politics tends to reduce the collective to groups, presuming that both are more or less the same, and thus forsakes both the challenge of difference and the kind of collective exercise of rights that belongs to democratic self-government.

This critical framework that diagnoses identity politics as a feature of vanishing democracies, or the vanishing hope for democracy, in turn raises a number of questions. First, can the same diagnosis be made about the forms of identity politics exercised from above as those that emerge from below? Indeed, do we always know how best to distinguish between identity politics from above and from below? What if there are poor white people espousing

anti-Black racism in the US and there is also a government in power that is espousing it from above? Is it all »from above« because white supremacy is always a more powerful structure? Or is there a dynamic between »above« and »below« that calls into question the sharp distinction between them? Second, from what position does a social diagnosis emerge? Is the critic free of the symptom that they diagnose, and what is the »normal« or the »normative« against which the symptomatic emerges as such? Hark distinguishes between the symptomatic and the critical. Identity politics that tend toward the assertion of rigid identities as a form of politics are symptomatic of a configuration of modern political life in which the conditions for translating private or local concerns into public ones have become increasingly remote. A critical view considers the conditions under which such claims emerge, and asks why. Hark proposes to understand this problem in the following way:

»The fact that [identity claims] are specific, historically contingent institutionalizations of identity – performatives – is probably more evident today than it has ever been in the modern era, yet that fact is continually blotted out by the usually naturalizing discourse of identity: they are treated as constatives.« (Hark 2016: 175)

Her point is that a punctual assertion of identity only works if it can be repeated through time. And yet, this very requirement of an identity claim – to be repeated and re-institutionalized through time – shows how contingent the claim is. It proves to be historical since it only exists in time, and because it can change depending on the condition and form of its iteration, it is hardly fixed in time. By definition, no identity claim can ever be fixed in time. Its very dependency on time guarantees that that is true. Politically, this insight proves to be true when we consider efforts to limit and govern the conditions in which anyone can say, »I am German« or, more broadly, »I am a citizen.« Rebuttals are all too common: perhaps this or that person from North Africa has papers of citizenship, but their claim to be now German is rebutted by those who hold to a rigid and naturalized version of who can rightly make that claim, that is, who *really* belongs. Those who police German identity know that such statements are historical, depend on the contingency of time and place. In fact, those who oppose migrants on the basis of some established sense of German identity claim that they must be policed precisely because migrants multiply over time and space. If there were a natural constraint imposed upon such statements, then the police would be redundant. Thus, those who seek to preserve the »natural« character of German identity

must secure their claim through historical means because »German-ness« has already exceeded the boundaries of any putatively natural definition.

Arendt provides an important counter to these forms of identity politics, and helps to highlight the distinction between what Hark considers a »critical« position and a symptomatic one. To the extent that politics depends upon the plurality of the people, that is, their differentiated character, difference is a presupposition of collective self-making and self-governance. If and when politics becomes defined as identitarian, it loses that dimension of difference which alone can secure the idea of a political plurality. Of course, this is a complicated claim, since very often »identity politics« from below defines itself through the language of difference. Marginalized or excluded communities are »different« or they occupy the position of »the Other« in relation to dominant ideas of community and nation in which they have no place. They also sometimes claim to speak or think from the point of view of difference: hence, the journal title, *differences*. Thus, it becomes important to distinguish between (at least) two forms of difference. First, we may say that a collective, understood as a plurality, must include those who are different from one another. The collective is thus internally differentiated, multiple (if not multicultural), and heterogeneous. Second, we may also claim that even an internally differentiated community or collective can exclude a range of others, such that those others do not even qualify as an internal difference. For instance, a fully assimilated person who arrives in Germany from elsewhere can demonstrate the presence of internal difference within a national community, but the one who maintains a cultural or religious practice or sense of belonging from the place of origin can mark the kind of external difference that cannot, or should not, be accepted or assimilated. They figure the limit of assimilation, often identified with an unacceptable alterity or, indeed, a threat to the nation or the collective itself. In such cases, the nation comes to represent identity politics »from above« and those considered threats to its integrity become a radically inassimilable difference. If those considered to be such threats start to describe or make known their own cultural heritage, describing their histories, they are often cast as »identitarian.« Yet, the reason for insisting on their specific existence is that that existence has been refused or effaced. Hence, it is all the more important to track the dynamic process by which effaced identities give themselves a public face, refused identities become more than »refuse« in the public eye. It is therefore not enough to distinguish between top down and bottom up forms of identity politics. Rather, it becomes important to show how these two forms tend to

engender one another, provoking the re-statement of identity claims over and against those that are perceived as threatening established notions of racial supremacy, nation, and community and those whose petitions to belong are regularly denied or made provisional and revocable. Thus, to follow Hark's argument, even analytic distinctions between top down and bottom up can fail to analyze »distinctions as disciplinary constructions« (Hark 2016: 183). To do so would be to recognize that »the processes of disciplinary differentiation« (ibid.), understood as restrictive schemes of intelligibility can, and do, reproduce social exclusion and effacement. Does top down/from below work to explain the peripheral and the effaced? Or does it always presume an established social hierarchy in which all positions are legible?

In an act of radical imagination, Hark links Arendt's claims about action, plurality, and the ideals of democratic self-making and self-governance to Bernice Johnson Reagon's reflections on coalition politics in 1981 (Reagon 1983/2000). Arendt does not dwell on the affective tenor of plurality when she argues that action must be plural, and that this plurality is different from both individualism and forms of collective merging or non-differentiation. The »we« is one who is engaged in debate and in action, and it is never characterized by a singular feature. It is marked by internal difference of the kind that we mentioned above: heterogeneity. What bounds the community, and how that boundary or border is decided is more complicated. But Arendt's view on the stateless makes clear that every individual has a right to belong, even if the jurisdiction or country to which they belong is not always clear. That right to belong is precisely the right of the I to become part of a we – not dissolved into a homogenous »we«. The »we« is, for Hark as for Arendt, the plurality who debates the course of politics, decides on action, whose speaking is already a form of acting, a way of bringing about – or seeking to bring about – a political world of co-habitation. The right to belong is a right that individuals have to become part of a »we« who decides the form and trajectory of a polity. Reagon's view on coalition is not quite a political theory of plurality, but it illuminates the difficulty of decision, conversation, working together, and building an alternative political world together. Those who enter into coalitional decisions do not always love one another, but they are bound to live with one another and they proceed with a commitment to each other's continued life. When Reagon claims, »[I] ain't gonna let you live unless you let me live,« she brings acute attention to the life and death struggle of coalitions (Reagon 1983: 365). To say that one will not secure the conditions of another's life unless that other secures the conditions of my life holds within it a less

threatening and more promising formulation. Since we live on this earth together, and we are both living, we must find a way to co-habit on this earth that lets each of us live. The coalition we join, the collective of which we are a part, is one that must be premised on a commitment to continuing each other's lives. Reagon points out that we might want to depart from such a compact, since we may not love one another. Indeed, we may find each other very difficult to bear. But she asks us all not to leave, to stay in, since, as she puts it, »there's also a possibility that we can both live – if you can stand it« (ibid.).

Hark takes this comparison in a new direction. For the purpose of coalition is not only to recognize each other's identities, but to pay attention to »differences.« And this shift from identity to difference allows us to understand how categories fail us, including the categories of identity. If I seek to show myself to another, I am already in some relation to another. I ask the other to see, or hear, or read. And so, although it seems that I am involved in a purely reflexive activity – I name and show myself – I am actually involved in a scene of address. I seek to show you something and, if that is true, I am trying to reach you, or asking you to reach me. There is minimally a dyad within this scene of address, but what if we broaden the idea of the addressee to »anyone who will listen or see or read«? To show one's identity through such a scene of address is also a petition to enter into a new kind of relationship, one in which reciprocal recognition proves to be centrally defining. The interpellation reverses the Althusserian scene. It is not the police who yells out, »hey you!« but rather the most marginalized and effaced who call out, »Hey you, here I am. I exist!« and wait for some other to respond and confirm. The scene is social, and it carries with it the despair and hope of connection. Although we rarely find that affective tenor in Arendt, perhaps we can see the difficulty, the desire and anger, the hope and despair, that comes with a commitment to each other's life on this earth (which would, of course, require a commitment to the continuing life of the earth).

Hark makes clear that the principle of identity, if taken to the extreme, will undercut all processes of democratization. She also shows us that identity claims tend to become authoritarian, rigid, and exclusionary, thus supporting the aims of dominant powers, becoming increasingly identified with the top down model. In her book co-authored with Paula-Irene Villa, *The Future of Difference: Beyond the Toxic Entanglement of Racism, Sexism, and Feminism*, Hark contributes to an analysis of racism and sexism in the aftermath of the brutal sexual attacks on women in the railway station in Cologne (Köln) on New

Year's Eve in 2015. Although some feminists espoused racist views of the men who committed such crimes, other feminists refused to respond to hideous sexism with hideous racism. The necessity for feminism to take on racism followed not just from abstract ethical principles but precisely because of the importance of black feminism and women of color feminism to the movement, and the theory. And also, of course, the need to reflect on the intersecting dynamics of sexism and racism which constitute the »double jeopardy« of women of color in contemporary societies. Invoking the rough love of Bernice Johnson Reagon, the authors write, »anyone who denies [to] others the right to exist has forfeited the right to be listened to« (Hark/Villa 2020: 134). This »authoritarian foreclosure« of another's right to speak and to be listened to threatens the linguistic and conversational basis of democracy, and seeks to limit the forms of differences that can be included in a society.

In this discussion, it is the doubled status of »difference« as something that can be counted, and discounted, within a polity and as that which is excluded from any possible belonging. The equivocation between the two constitutes the volatility of the social dynamic and its challenge to any democratic polity that claims to be opposed to authoritarianism in its logic and its institutionalization. Both authors call for »working through differentiation in dialogue [as] perhaps the greatest challenge implicated in the preservation, defense, and deepening, of pluralist democracies today« (Hark/Villa 2020: 135). The point is not to affirm identity or remain encased within such categories, but to answer to the call, to be engaged by differences that risk a new relationship and a transformation of some aspects of our basic political vocabulary.

In some ways, this essay has recounted Sabine Hark's critique of identity politics within the context of her ongoing commitment to collectives, coalitions, and pluralistic forms of democracy and democratization. And yet, I would be remiss if I did not point out that her latest publication, *Gemeinschaft der Ungewählten* (Hark 2021), *Community of the Unchosen* in English, takes up through an ethical framework precisely the living status of those who are denied the right to belong, whose »difference« is not captured by the »differentiation« assumed to be already internal to an established community. It turns, rather, to the difference against which that very community is defined, elaborates even more fully on the responsibility to answer to the call put out by those identified with inadmissible forms of difference. Arendt continues to establish the basic contours of a theory of democracy, as does the struggle named by Bernice Johnson Reagon to commit to securing the conditions of

living for all those from whom we require an equal commitment in kind. In this most recent work, Hark makes clear that this last is an ethical struggle, one in which »answerability« becomes paramount. Here she makes clear that responsibility is not the same as living according to strict duties prescribed by existing hierarchical authorities. It is not the same as a submission to law. Rather, it is, in her words, »a horizontal, collaborative praxis where thinking and judgment are bound together in a form of doing« (Hark 2021: 199, translation: JB). This ethical commitment is one that commits to the »foreignness« of the other without seeking to take and domesticate. The point is to come to know, without capturing, alterity as a manifestation of one's commitment to the life of the other. And to live together within terms that make that commitment reciprocal. The fundamental question is not then, who am I? Or even, what am I to do? It is rather the open-ended question, how are we to live together, we who renounce the power to decide who shall live and who shall die? If we ask how we are to live together, then we begin the most elemental of political conversations. It is the relation between us, precisely as living beings, from which the most important forms of world-making emerge. How shall we build this life together, this life we share? From the we, from the space of relation between us, comes the power to speak, to act, to make, and to decide the course of our common political lives. We are neither so fixed in identity that we cannot know what is not-me, nor are we so undifferentiated that we do not know the difference between our histories and how the powers of the world have formed us. It is in the midst of that necessary bind, that difficult conversation, that space that links us and distinguishes us that we begin to talk, to enter speech precisely as action, as making, as judgment, and as a commitment to the future of our entangled lives. We never chose to live in this world together, yet this »unchosen« quality of our lives established the conditions of our ethical commitment – answering the call of the other with another call, a call to and from common life.

Literature

Hark, Sabine (2016): »Who We Are and How We Act. Identity Politics and the Possibilities of Collective Action,« in: Delphine Gardey/Cynthia Kraus (eds.), *Politiques de coalition / Politics of Coalition*, Zürich 2016, pp. 171-193.

- Hark, Sabine (2021): *Gemeinschaft der Ungewählten. Umriss eines politischen Ethos der Kohabitation*, Berlin.
- Hark, Sabine/Villa, Paula-Irene (2020): *The Future of Difference: Beyond the Toxic Entanglement of Racism, Sexism, and Feminism*, London.
- Reagon, Bernice Johnson (1983/2000): »Coalition Politics. Turning the Century,« in: B. Smith (ed.), *Home Girls. A Black Feminist Anthology*, New York 1983, pp. 356-368 (Reprint New Brunswick 2000).