

Sabine Hark

Gemeinschaft

der Ungewählten

Umriss eines politischen

Ethos der Kohabitation

edition suhrkamp

SV

Sabine Hark

The Community of the Unchosen

Outlines of a Political Ethos of Cohabitation

(Original German title: Gemeinschaft der Ungewählten.

Umriss eines politischen Ethos der Kohabitation)

approx. 270 pages, Paperback

Expected publication date: 12 September 2021

© Suhrkamp Verlag Berlin 2021

Sample translation by Johanna Schuster-Craig

pp. 11 – 25

Introduction

An observation made by Audre Lorde accompanied me as I wrote this book. “The learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot,” Lorde said in conversation with Adrienne Rich in the summer of 1979. Lorde recounts her experience as a lecturer at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan in the early 1970s. Politically agitated years in the US. Post-Civil-Rights-Movement Years. Years of awakening. Years of rebellion. Years of war. Across the country students protest the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War. For that reason many universities are closed in the spring of 1970. John Jay College is not among them. Just months before Lorde had started teaching in Manhattan, the police in Chicago had shot Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, two Black Panther and civil rights activist, in their sleep. Hampton is 21 years old when the deadly bullets hit him, Clark 22. They are two of about 40 Black Panthers who were killed by the police and the FBI between 1967 and 1970.

In New York, John Jay College had opened up to all New Yorkers with a high school diploma, “independent of test results, grades or any other traditional criteria,” as part of the Open Admission Program of the City University of New York. Due to this policy, the number of students at the college quadrupled in just a few years, and the proportion of Black and POC students also markedly increased. Lorde had been able to convince the President of the College that seminars about racism had to be offered. Her students, she reported – the majority male; white, Black, Puerto Rican, many of them also carrying weapons in the classroom; also some

Black women, almost all of them from lower Manhattan, of working-class background – were affected and agitated by the political events and changes on campus and beyond. Against this backdrop, she says, her seminars were more about setting thought processes in motion than passing on whole “chunks of information.” “Confrontation teaching,” Lorde calls it.

An incitement to riot that is a form of learning. Inciting a learning process that is a riot. The image sticks – with me. Less so because we can or even should approve of every riot, quite the contrary. Not every riot is a democratic riot. Nor is it because a riot is wild and audacious, foreshadowing the taste of freedom and adventure – it is and does all of those things – but because the image of a learning process that is an uprising draws attention to how a riot is work on freedom that requires perseverance and persistence. To be able to rebel may be the “most original gesture of freedom,” as Hannah Arendt ascertained in 1959 in her acceptance speech for the Lessing Prize in Hamburg. To stand up and leave and create new lines of flight, however, is just the first step. And this first step is already anything but simple. Not everyone can stand up, for whatever reason. And even at this first step, we assume that we have something to do, that there is something to learn: about the conditions and the social relations that hinder us in standing up and leaving. Lorde herself was thinking of her Black students, who she wanted to empower to comprehend their position in a racist and heterosexist society shaped by racialized social inequalities – so they would be able to leave both the social relations and the relationships that debased and injured them; so that they could survive. *Survival skills*. For people who are positioned as white and also are classified as “native”¹; who, like myself, teach and write in male dominated, majority white institutions, but who are not seen as subjects in these places (because I am positioned as legally female, because I am read as ambivalently gendered, because I live as a lesbian, because I am a first-generation college graduate who has changed their class status, because ...), the task today is somewhat different. For alongside the task of making it possible to learn such survival skills – skills that we need in order to understand the conditions of obstruction and to be able to leave them – here enters the complex and complicated task of communicating how we are each differently embedded in a culture of domination and in relations of supra- and subordination. How dominant culture thus privileges and protects some while it relegates others and threatens their existence. An

1 Translator’s note: The far-right in Europe often appropriates the language (and positionality) of decolonial, indigenous struggles by claiming the moniker of “native” Europeans (“*einheimisch*” is the word Hark uses here, which can be translated as indigenous, native, domestic, local, or home-grown, among others). The term is frequently a synonym for white.

incitement to unlearn domination culture, to undo dominance, is, in other words, the program. And that means: to recognize and learn to understand intersectionally-organized relations of supra- and subordination, to confront ourselves with them and to deny them our loyalty. That is what is demanded of us. That we are capable of it is just one of the lessons that we can learn from Audre Lorde. Dismantle the Master's House.

Community of the Unchosen is dedicated to one of the most urgent issues of our times. And that is the question of difference and belonging intensely negotiated in all societies. Put in the language of this book: To whom is it given to come in order to stay and live in community with others, that is, to be able to see oneself as part of a 'we'? This is not the first book on this matter, and it will certainly not be the last. The question of who belongs to the 'we' has been on my mind for a long time. It can be traced back to the beginnings of my academic and political engagement with the world. Wanting to know who someone is and how she has become, who belongs to whom and to what, who is 'from here' and why, who is intended in which places or not, what connects and separates us in what way, who owes accountability and answer to whom, in other words, the nexus of identity, belonging and action, of origin and future, drives my curiosity.

Who can imagine themselves to be part of a "we" is a question that touches nearly every aspect that concerns our coexistence as finite beings on a finite, heavily populated planet fighting for breath. How we economize and budget, both with our own energies and with those that we appropriate. How we live and work, consume and move. Who can settle where, who has access to which infrastructure, from access to clean water and fuel, up to access to digital infrastructure and trash removal and including care in times of sickness and dependency. How we place ourselves in relationship to each other and for one another, how we care and watch out for each other, for the planet, with whom we live, and other species, with whom we share it. What we believe in, what we fight for politically and who we treasure. How and what we want to know and which knowledge we share. Who and what we consider normal and worthy of protection. How we live, how we are in the world, and how we shape our coexistence. I call this an *ethos of cohabitation*, i.e. a way of living together. To sketch a broad outline of this ethos is the task I have undertaken with this book.

This book takes its point of departure from Judith Butler's ethics of cohabitation. As I attempt to think through some implications of this ethics, I would nevertheless also like to

suggest a shift. In which I namely do not take the path of an *ethics*, but rather dare to draft just such an *ethos*. It is a beginning. Nothing more, nothing less. What is not on offer is a fully ripened theory that has the answers to all these questions about how societies are best constructed. Instead, what's on the table is a sketch for a thoroughly practical, *democratic way of living* that is sensitive to power. A way of living that is founded upon care for the self, for others, and for the world, and that has found its guiding principle in the simple fact that people populate the earth *in the plural*, which is why everyone is entitled to the same right to thrive in the world, without exception.

The more we ravage this planet, the more inhospitably we structure the societies in which we live, the less frequently we offer shelter that permits people to thrive; and the tighter we draw the boundaries around the space of what is human and what is livable, all the more of us – whether voluntarily or out of necessity – will take steps to alleviate our need and to seek our fortunes somewhere else. And the more an authoritarian politics of discrimination and separation, contempt and disdain, the division into those who are useful and those who are superfluous, those who can be trusted and those who are strange, into normals and deviants, chosen and unchosen, claims space, the more of us will stand up and leave and put all of our energies into re-imagining this “we” as something else – and this won't happen somewhere else, but rather amongst “us.” And who could possibly deny “us”?

So: what is on offer are exercises in political thought, roaming reflections to all those urgent questions of the present as to how we want to live. Globally. Exercises with companions in thought, collected with the intention to think and write with them in democratic constellations. Not in order to prove that there are gaps in their thought, but rather to create connections in community with them. And that means creating possibility, including that of dissent and controversy. Some of them I had explicitly chosen a long time ago as intellectual companions, others fell into my lap while I was working on this book; they crossed my way, some of them, unasked, also imparting something to me. An assembly in which nevertheless every voice counts and should be heard. A polyphonic choir of the many in a litany of rebellion. That has long been underway. On the public squares and streets of this world just as in virtual spaces and in the myriad habitats in which people have crafted a home and shelter for themselves, even if still provisional. In collective housing in Leipzig and Konstanz, in shopping and cooking collectives in Accra and Lagos, and in the kitchens of feminist activists in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Barcelona and Warsaw; in classrooms, at workbenches and on basketball

courts; in community gardens, in queer networks of care, in migrant self-organizations; on rescue ships at sea, and in camps for refugees and safehouses for those who have escaped domestic violence and sexual assault. Everywhere where people insist that their lives also count, that they want to be called by their own names, wherever they insist, no, not that way, not to be ruled, inasmuch as they can rule themselves. Wherever people stand up and leave relations and conditions that exhaust them, deplete their power and etiolate their imagination. *We can find something better than death anywhere*, said the donkey to the rooster, to the cat, to the dog.² *Community of the Unchosen* takes up the baton of an earlier book I wrote together with Paula-Irene Villa. In *The Future of Difference: Beyond the Toxic Entanglement of Racism, Sexism and Feminism* (Verso 2020), we had taken up the ambivalent politics of racist and sexist discrimination in light of the violent events at the Cologne Cathedral during New Year's Eve 2015. Racism and sexism are still produced and mobilized in societies of the present. We ended *The Future of Difference* with some preliminary considerations for “thinking *in* difference *about* difference” and the demand to develop an “attitude” – in the Foucauldian sense – that is both epistemic as well as political: a way to think *with* the world instead of *about* it, a horizontal thinking at eye level with every Other. This book will try to take this approach further. To think *in* difference already signals the direction in which I am convinced this “attitude” should be developed. And that is as a democratic way of living that is sensitive to power, founded on a praxis of care: care for the self, care for others, care for the world. *A political ethos*. A politics of interdependency. *Caring democracy*. In order to characterize this ethos I have developed two terminological triads that move through this collection of thought experiments as both leitmotif and variation. I call them the three As – affinity, affective contagion, and association – and the three Rs – reciprocity, reckoning, and responsibility.

An additional theoretical term that carries weight both in *The Future of Difference* as well as in this book, is the term “domination culture”, *Dominanzkultur*, from the late Birgit Rommelspacher. In German social sciences, this term has become influential in debates about foreignness, migration and immigration, as well as racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. Rommelspacher understands this term to represent a complex social formation structured by an intersectional tapestry of various dimensions of power. This social formation

2 Translator's note: These four animals are the Brementown Musicians of Grimm's fairy tales. The donkey, exhausted by years of carrying sacks as a pack animal, decides to leave his master and utters this statement at the beginning of this journey to an old dog, whose master wanted to beat him when he became too old to hunt, as well as his other travelling companions, the rooster and the cat.

shapes and organizes our entire way of life, our interpretation of ourselves as well as the images that we develop of other people, in categories of superiority and subordination. Domination culture saturates the behavior, the attitudes, and the feelings of everyone who lives in that society. Above all else, however, domination culture mediates between social structures and individual temperaments. If the goal is literally to devise a democratic way of living, this seems to me to be the switch we have to flip: where the current flows between structures and individuals, conditions and subjects, [especially those] that are supposed to keep us in our place. To understand these currents and for domination culture to run out of power, to actively cut off its energy. That is what now must be done. To answer, reciprocally, to another and to reckon with what we owe one another.

And that's why it's important – precisely because this decisive dimension is also important for domination culture – to take into account the moral economy of affect, which connects the individual and the social in diverse and complex ways with each another. Supra- and subordination are not only inscribed into the social structure of various societal contexts; they are decisive factors in determining who is allotted which position within the fabric of society. Supra- and subordinations are also feelings, affects, that conveniently become potent through social schema. Central to the construction of a “we” that can be distinguished from a “you others” are, for example, feelings like love for one's own country and one's own group, or hate, fear and disgust towards those we perceive as strange. Feelings contribute to the stabilization of collectives; they structure our affinities and the kinds of affective contagion we permit; indicate with whom we are prepared to associate, who we acknowledge and recognize as belonging to us, and who we do not.

Emotions and affect shape, in other words, essentially how we are in the world and how we inhabit it with others. What we like or reject, who appears close to us or distant, trusted or strange, what we fear or what we trust, what we find useful and what we find harmful, what we feel responsible for and who is of no concern to us, is what becomes recognizable to us as what we perceive which we feel to be our authentic way of being and not as something socially suggested to us; patterns in which we are practiced and that we also practice. In order to leave this affective moral economy that privileges practices of supra- and subordination behind us, and instead to foster a “sensate democracy” (Judith Butler) we will nevertheless have to know and understand this economy. We will have to both render an account of it and reckon with the fact that it represents a reality.

The methodological heart of this essay is the figure of the *Unchosen*. I understand this figure as a theoretical outline [*Suchfigur*], a liminal figure: *liminal* because it exists in the space between past and future, *transversal* because it is at the border of the human, *epistemic* because it exists at the hierarchically organized point of separation between (cismale) subject and (nonhuman) object. Liminal figures make movement possible in all directions and in this way expand our perspective. The figure of the unchosen one permits me, essentially, to work retrospectively as well as prospectively. This means connecting the political work of inventing democratic life forms that point into the future with the retrospective work of mourning, which I see as an essential component of unlearning domination culture. Thus, to begin to think from the point of what is now and yet at the same time to take what is into consideration that whatever is now was not always so and must not always be so. The function of critique: to work through what is and, in this way, open it for change.

The figure of the *Unchosen* is the figure of such a critique. It enables me to take up the three tasks that Judith Butler recently described as the tasks of critique: diagnosis – we have to describe what is; judgment – whatever is must be judged in the context of how things could be; action – insofar as we come to the conclusion that the world must be ordered differently, we must forge new paths for change. This book is committed to this definition of critique. It aims to contribute to the negotiations about how we want to live a global “we,” not just by simply adopting what is, i.e., normative assumptions about social stability or which needs are considered appropriate, that are anchored in heteronormative, androcentric, white, European bourgeois norms founded on the limitless right to property. And to contribute to illuminating the often merely schematically recognizable and conditional constraints (more) systematically. Theoretically, what thus follows is to conceptualize forms of society and modes of thought as parts of the same context of domination, which is to be deciphered; to also trace domination and control in the categories with which we access and give meaning to World, and in the modes in which we gain knowledge and represent it. Knowing and being are woven into each other in complex relations that are saturated with power and very difficult to break through; we are still called to unravel these relations. And that includes also needing to sharpen our sensitivity for these terms that we apply to the world; that critique resists reifying modes of thought as well as racialized, sexist, misogynist, homophobic, transphobic and ableist writing styles; that critique reveals itself to be resistant to that “which is forced upon it.”

Community of the Unchosen attempts to reckon with this tapestry of patterns of socialization and patterns of thought, and with the methodological and poetological challenges connected with it in multiple ways: over the course of the book, I will both reflect time and again on the tasks and the function of critical theory today, as well as explore the question of how writing styles must be developed that can speak about domination without reproducing it. On the other hand, I will bring theoretical-critical reflection and a sociological diagnostic of the present into dialogue with the voices of poets and writers, because I am convinced that these voices – in a different way than theory – can help us to break through the historic, and so fatally effective, nexus of power, knowledge, and being, and to give shape to the rebellious work on freedom. Hannah Arendt once said, “we expect truth” from the poets, but not “from philosophers, of whom we expect thoughts/ imagination/concepts.” In contrast to the philosophical, conceptual thought, poetic thought also is capable of bringing the wreckage that remains back together. Redemptive writing. Isak Dinesen, quotes Arendt, as saying all worries are bearable if we “put them into a story or can tell a story about them.” That we can expect truth from poetry – in the sense of being a witness to truth – is a thought that also appears in a quote from Toni Morrison. “Art,” Morrison writes in an essay titled “The Price of Wealth and The Cost of Care,” “invites us to take the journey beyond price, beyond costs into bearing witness to the world as it is and as it should be.”

This book thus not only brings together debates that have run separately until now, in international and intersectional feminist theory, post- and decolonial thought and critical race studies, as well as political theory, philosophical ethics, and sociological theory, it also weaves different forms of knowledge all will – academic knowledge, activist knowledge, literary knowledge – into this conversation.

One of my most prominent memories of encounters with Audre Lorde is how she opened conversations. “I did my work. And what is your work?” or “Did you do your work?,” she took care to say when we stormed her with questions after readings or lectures, always wanting to hear more from her. The young student I was at the time found it difficult to answer this question. I probably kept owing it. What remained was the question. *And what is your work?* Today I would answer her with this book. In which I hope to contribute to the task of finding how we can release ourselves from our dominating certainties and gestures, and how we learn to unlearn them.