

- regret which they wish to preserve; they have never been unduly careful of the purity of the black race. . . . Why should a man be proud any more than he should be ashamed of a thing for which he is not at all responsible? . . . Are we to help the white people to build up walls between themselves and us to fence in a gloomy back yard for our descendants to play in?" Charles W. Chesnut, "Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Its Cures: An Address Delivered before the Boston Historical and Literary Association," *Alexander's Magazine* 1 (July 1905): 25.
6. *Ibid.*, 336.
 7. T. S. Eliot wrote: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992): 764.
 8. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): 61.
 9. *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams & Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990): 484.
 10. *Ibid.*, 484.
 11. On the psychological and social significance of multiple cultural identities see Robert Jay Lifton, *Bombardier: Psychological Man in Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1970); Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
 12. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 1.
 13. *Isortia estetiki: Paniamniki mirovoi estetikoskoi mysl'i* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970). Vol. 5, 210.
 14. "Truth and Power" (interview), in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982): 132.

Chapter 5

From Difference To Interference

Mikhail Epstein

From Identity/Opposition to Difference

The concept of difference stands between two related categories of identity and opposition. Opposition was the most powerful theoretical instrument of Hegelian and Marxist theory as based on the dialectical relationship between thesis and antithesis. The Marxist "class struggle" was the exemplification of this logical opposition in the history of society. The principle of identity is deeply connected with the principle of opposition and cannot be divorced from it. If opposition is the basic model of relationship between social groups then each individual is bound to identify with one of these groups. If the meaning of history lies in the opposition (struggle, antagonism) of exploited and exploiters, or North and South, or East and West, or imperialist and colonized, then one can participate in history only through identification with one of these polarized groups. Thus the quest for identity entails the construction of real or imaginable oppositions. I join one party, evidently, in order to oppose another party. I identify myself as a democrat in order to oppose myself to aristocrats or communists.

However, the categories of opposition and identity, though complementing each other, do not preclude the significance of the third category, which is difference. In fact, both identity and opposition are only ideational or ideological projections of difference. We can, for example, oppose black and white because these are not real entities but abstract qualities; however, we cannot oppose real things, such as rain and table or

lake and lion, because these entities are composed of many qualities. Though each of these qualities can be opposed to the corresponding quality of other entities (liquid rain—solid table, black coal—white sugar etc.), the very fact that each entity is endowed with many qualities makes them different from but never opposite to each other. For example, two people, A and B, can be opposed by the color of their skin, but each of these individuals still possesses many other qualities: one is thirty-seven years old, the other is twenty-one; one likes cinema, the other likes basketball; one is Republican, the other is not a member of any party; one prefers meat, the other is a vegetarian. Each of these qualities in their abstractness can be opposed to each other: black and white, meat and vegetables, mature and young; but the specific bearers of these qualities, A and B, do not comprise opposites—they are simply different. In the same way, a person can never fully identify herself with any one of her qualities; to say "I am black" or "I am white" is a way of partial identification that becomes false when it claims to be full and exhaustive. "I" has no color, like the eyes into which we are looking have no color. The principle of difference can be formulated in this way: to oppose oneself to nobody, to identify oneself with nothing. As soon as we eliminate oppositional components in our self-definition, the component of identification will also be abandoned, and vice versa.

Meanwhile, "opposition" and "identity" not only come from the same categorial nest, but in the contemporary humanities they tend to conflate again, which confirms their interdependent nature. For example, in Homi Fern Haber's elaboration of "the politics of difference," which she uncritically identifies as "oppositional" politics, we can find such oxymoronic expressions as the call "to achieve oppositional identities."¹ The goal of postmodern theory, as set by this author, is "oppositional identity formation." This is quite a coherent conclusion, based on her assumption that "the subject must be seen as being formed within communities—many communities and changing communities."² Such is the theoretical limit of social determinism: It is ready to acknowledge the variety of communities, but still insists on the entirely communal nature of the subject. What is the driving force of "changing communities," then, if the individual as such is recognized only as a member of the community, or, according to Haber's words, if "our interests are always the interests of some community or another?"³

No wonder such an emphasis on collective identity reinforces the oppositions among communities and leaves no space for difference as a category that is itself different from both identity and opposition. The

misunderstanding goes as far as to equalize these two notions, "opposition" and "difference," and to use them as synonyms: "My overall project . . . attempts to create a space for oppositional politics that can also be described as a 'politics of difference' . . ."⁴

It appears that a "politics of difference," by its very definition, cannot be oppositional, but should be consistently differential, which means avoiding both extremes of identity and opposition. The "differential" interaction between people emphasizes their personal differences, preventing them from making a "group identity," but also stopping short of stiffening these differences into oppositions (ideological, cultural, social, etc.). The differences complement each other and create a new interpersonal totality to which people belong, not because they are similar, but because they are different.

Certainly, a "politics of difference," in this particular sense, as a truly differential politics, will have to differentiate itself, first of all, from politics understood exclusively as the technology of power. The latter hardly can be "differential" rather than oppositional, because power, by its very definition, is power of one group of people over other group(s) and therefore presumes the opposition between the subject and the object of power. In this case, all claims of politics to be "differential" are purely utopian. But if it is still possible to define politics, or at least a branch of it, as a creative organization of public life or constructive participation in public affairs, then, outside the domain of inherently oppositional power relations, a "politics of difference" can be pursued quite effectively.

The problem with multiculturalism is that it halts the endless play of self-differentiation, with its potential for new creative unities, for the sake of extensive production of self-enclosed and highly oppositional identities. One cannot but agree with Karl Kroeber, who writes in his manifesto for "ecological literary criticism":

The importance of diversity, and ultimately of uniqueness, has been threatened by recent separatist critics as seriously as by earlier modernist proponents of 'universals'—which in fact turn out to be no more than the generalizations of Western European modes of thought. Ecological criticism, rejecting the popular reductionism that goes no farther than 'otherness,' specifies the significance of concrete distinctions—thereby making possible a dynamically complex cosmopolitan vision capable of liberating criticism from endlessly subdividing itself into defensive parochialisms of spirit.⁵

What Kroeber calls "ecological criticism" is a fruitful attempt to avoid the dilemma of old-fashioned modernist "universals" and postmod-

ern "multiple identities;" the natural environment, however, hardly can be presented as the only or the most important target of such an approach. Another attempt in the same direction leads to the notion of "mixed" or "hybrid" forms of identity. It is quite understandable that a person with several ethnic backgrounds or an immigrant would try to substantiate his/her new identity through the synthesis of two or three cultural traditions. What is important, however, is to form new mixed identities in a way that differs from the way traditional mono-identities were formed. The "third zone," as Homi Bhabha puts it, is still a zone separated from the first or the second zone while transculture questions the very principle of zoning. The attempts to announce still another zone or identity actually reinforces the traditional way of thinking in "zones" and "segments" by dividing and multiplying this category rather than transcending it. If a person says that he is no longer simply an American but instead wants to be called an Asian American or a Russian American, he nonetheless still remains trapped within identity-based thinking.

Transcultural thinking does not add new categories to the existing list of identities but moves beyond the notion of identity, whether it is a single, or double, or multiple (hybridized) identity. The question is not who I am but who I might become and how I am different from myself. The category of identity is essentialist and naturalistic, derived from the kingdom of natural forms identical to themselves, including hybridized forms, transitional between various species and kingdoms. Hybridization and mutation, even if these categories are taken as metaphors, are still attached to the notion of species, stable essences as they are manifested in nature.

Beyond Struggle and Power

Contemporary cultural studies in the West is preoccupied with issues of power, empowerment, and political struggle. "There is no sign or thought of a sign that is not about power and of power," writes Jean-François Lyotard.⁶ "Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it," says Michel Foucault.⁷

Power and struggle are based on *abstract* relationships among people using the term "abstract" in a Hegelian sense, as both "devoid of rich specifications" and "historically immature." Although the call for struggles to overcome inequitable power relationships is most often made on

the basis of quite concrete material realities, the struggle itself, as the engagement of an entire human being into an opposition to another human being, is an abstract relationship in the sense that it reduces all human differences to one particular issue that divides them. Both power and struggle usually insist meticulously on some very specific demands and tend to produce their detailed lists, but the type of relationship they inaugurate, that of opposition, renders people only schematic illustrations of some abstract principles: "good and bad," "rich and poor," "oppressors and revolutionaries."

Hegel asserted that the world makes permanent progress from the abstract to the concrete state of the Absolute Idea, and the same law operates in the history of human consciousness. He called this law "the ascension from the abstract to the concrete." On the abstract level, general properties determine the relationship between people. These generalities operate, on the one hand, as struggle or violent opposition; on the other hand, as power or enforced unity. Struggle is the social manifestation of abstract opposition, while power manifests the pretension to abstract unity. Both struggle and power are abstract because people are opposed or united on the basis of one general quality that is alienated from them and dominates them, such as their national identity, class origin, or ideological commitment. The more concrete the relationships between people, the more they abandon both abstract oppositions and abstract identities and base their interactions on difference.

The evolution from the unity-opposition mode to the difference mode follows this course of ascension from the abstract to the concrete that was elaborated by Hegel. Not surprisingly, however, this process of "ascension" finally transcends Hegel's own philosophical system, which logically is still based on the dialectics of opposition and unity, on the "struggle and unity of opposites," as the first and main law of dialectics is called. Marxism was an attempt to concretize this dialectics not only theoretically but practically and to integrate it into the variety of earthly social relationships among people. Marxist intervention in history, however, did not lead to the concretization of the dialectical law but to the increasing abstraction of history itself, which resulted in the absolute power of the totalitarian state and its antagonistic opposition to the rest of the world.

Presumably this paradoxical experiment in historical implementation of dialectics was useful in order to perceive the abstractness of dialectics itself that can never be concretized but renders abstract any living historical situation and reconfigures it along the lines of opposition and unity,

struggle and power. Such an outcome, the greatest historical surprise of the twentieth century, could be predicted from the very premise that both unity and opposition, as basic categories of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics, operate only with general qualities, such as "thesis and antithesis," "antagonistic classes," "progressive and reactionary parties," etc., abstracted from individuals who in reality are neither identical nor opposite to each other but merely different. Dialectics, born from the logical plays of generalities, reproduced the same generalities on the level of historical forces at play: on the one hand, the most unified state in history, solidified by the terror and dictatorship of one party; on the other hand, the most stark and irreconcilable opposition between two world systems and superpowers, between "communist" and "capitalist" camps.

That is why the failure of the Marxist experiment requires the reconsideration of dialectics as such and its fundamental categories, "unity" and "opposition." Instead of concretization of dialectical laws, what appears on the intellectual agenda is the removal or "sublation" of dialectics itself and the search for the principle that would escape the abstractness of unity and opposition. This "third" principle, which provides for a more concrete approach to individuals and totalities than dialectics does, can be formulated as "difference." Difference does not operate with abstract qualities of people and objects but relates to the totality of various qualities, in such a way that this totality cannot be opposed to or identified with any other totality but is only different from them.

Difference in itself, however, also can operate as an abstract principle if it does not bring with it the potential for further internal differentiation. If opposition and unity as abstract principles have led in their historical manifestation to class antagonisms and totalitarian regimes, then the principle of difference, applied abstractly, can lead to complete mutual isolation and self-containment of the differentiated entities and their fixation in the state of *indifference* to each other. The principle of difference, such as it is, opens only a possibility for concrete thinking and concrete historical action, but in its first, most abstract application that is characteristic of postmodernist theory and practice, it generates "indifferent multiplicity," the pure "diversity" of those racial, ethnic, and gender groups that in a contemporary pluralistic society tend to ignore or become estranged from each other.

Therefore the next step of transition from the abstract to the concrete can lead to the fourth principle proceeding from difference but not limited to it. This principle that we call "interference," or "nontotalitarian totality," lies at the foundation of the transcultural project.

What is Different from Difference?

Now that Soviet totalitarianism has receded into the past, the desire and dream for new, nonviolent totalities intervenes into poststructuralist theory. The concept of difference worked successfully and progressively in the 1970s and 1980s, so far as political totalitarianism dominated in the East and a monolithic cultural canon dominated in the West. But in the 1990s, since the fall of the iron curtain, theory has had to respond to the radical changes in a world that is now more multicultural than ever, and more pluralized than polarized.

Transculture is the next stage of multicultural development, when the tendency for unification does not oppose itself to the diversity of cultures but issues from this diversity. The kind of pluralism that prevailed in multiculturalism can be called "passive" or "quantitative" since it recognized the pure, unqualified multiplicity of cultures without posing any ways for them to interact meaningfully and constructively. This pluralism was based on the ethical impulses of *pride*—in relation to one's own identity, and *tolerance*—in relation to other cultures.

What is at stake now is not whether different cultures can tolerate one another but whether they can be creatively involved with one another. From the multicultural perspective, each culture is perfect in its own way, as a self-enclosed and self-sufficient entity; from the transcultural perspective, each culture has some basic incompleteness that opens it for encounters with other cultures. The value of "pride" may be reconsidered in the light of another ethical disposition, "humility," which recognizes one's own deficiencies and the advantages of other(s). Consequently, "tolerance" gives way to active engagement and involvement with other cultures.

Transcultural theory is far from undermining the principle of difference; on the contrary, it pushes difference to the next stage of "differentiation from difference." As the principle of difference is accepted and shared by the major trends of poststructuralist thought, we can now assume the ensuing perspectives of self-differentiation as the foundation of a new, interferential model. Difference should not freeze into a one-dimensional state of self-identity, as a plain difference, or, as it does in many cases, as a catchy label for a simple opposition, like "black and white," or "culture and nature."

Even the classic works of Jacques Derrida on *différance* evidence the permanent danger of relapsing from a differential to an oppositional mode, as many of his favorite illustrations indicate. In discussing the

effects of *différance* Derrida invariably cites the examples of the most traditional oppositions: intelligible/sensible, concept/intuition, etc. "Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (the intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred; the concept as different and deferred, different and deferring intuition; culture as nature different and deferred, different and deferring . . .)"⁸ Or: ". . . the trace whereof I speak is not more *natural* . . . than *cultural*, no more physical than psychic, biological than spiritual. It is that starting from which a becoming-unmotivated of the sign, and with it all the ulterior oppositions between *physis* and its other, is possible."⁹ Why does "something and its other" fall here under the category of "ulterior opposition," not that of difference; and why are the well-established binary oppositions of "natural and cultural," "physical and psychic" chosen to illustrate the play of the trace, the mark of difference?

Thus even the differential model, though highly acclaimed and prioritized in the contemporary humanities, still needs to be delimited more clearly from the oppositional model. The point is that difference, when relying on its own "selfness" and stability, on the value of difference as such, is easily susceptible to oppositional adaptations, as evidenced by the advancement of pure oppositions, like "male/female," "black/white," "heterosexual/homosexual," under the banners of cultural difference and diversity. That is why recently Jacques Derrida found it timely to warn against the reduction of difference to the model of opposition-identity. It is not sufficient to theorize the difference between certain identities; rather, one must explore their capacity for self-differentiation, which will provide their common ground with other identities. "[I]n the case of culture, person, nation, language, identity is a self-differentiating identity, an identity different from itself, having an opening or gap within itself. . . . It is because I am not one with myself that I can speak with the other and address the other."¹⁰

In order to confirm and expand its intrinsic value, difference must differ from itself, which means to posit new creative totalities in the act of progressive self-differentiation. The question, therefore, could be put in this way: How can the value of difference be reinscribed into the enhanced framework of a new wholeness? Is there any prospect for non-

totalitarian totalities that would embrace rather than eliminate the differences among cultures?

We call "interference" this type of relationship between different entities that is different from their difference. As difference has the potential of maturation, it grows into interference, the "wavy" and "fuzzy" intersections and overlappings of two or more cultural entities, mentalities, principles, intuitions. It is a kind of wholeness that acknowledges difference but can be reduced neither to external differences between entities, nor to their predifferential unity. "Interference" leads to the construction of a "non-totalitarian totality" that is produced by the second order of difference—its differentiation from itself.

If we look at some of the most beautiful cultural patterns, such as the architecture of St. Petersburg or Russian literature of the nineteenth century (I take familiar examples), we find the intersection of several cultural flows, such as the Russian communal spirit, Western individualism and rationalism, Byzantine formalism and ritualism, and Oriental spiritual resignation. It is interference rather than merely difference (or an all-embracing and unifying "synthesis") that defined for two centuries the "wavy" patterns of Russian-Eastern-Western cultural interaction. And even the Cold War can be seen as a period of "destructive interference" between the two worlds when the collectivist impulses coming from one pole extinguished the impulses of individualism coming from the other. We know from physics that interference can go through constructive and destructive stages marked by the alternation of light and dark bands on a colored surface or by alternation of increased sounds and silent intervals.¹¹ Perhaps the same alternation occurs in the history of cultural interference, with its periods of light and dark, excessive brightness and emphatic silence, mutual reinforcement or neutralization of cultures.

The new totalities, or transcultural ensembles, that can be envisioned in the near future in the place of "collective identities" issue from the processes of self-differentiation maturing into interferences. In this case differences strengthen our need for each other. Some of our differences are neutralized (in order not to become oppositional), others are intensified (in order to avoid group identification). Interference is what we perceive as the joy and play of communication that reinforces some of our differences and neutralizes others in the play of non-totalitarian totalities. Generally, totality can be developed in two directions: (1) as *opposed* to difference and therefore eliminating all particular differences, as in a totalitarian state; (2) as truly *different* from difference and therefore

preserving and nourishing all particular differences, as in an interdisciplinary community.

These new totalities will shape the transcultural world, which has not yet received any satisfactory theoretical articulation. Deconstruction may prove methodologically inadequate to this emerging class of totalities that could be detected as transcultural communities, or as transmeta-physical systems, as trans-utopian visions, or as transsocial groups. Deconstruction operates through the theoretical differentiation of existing unities while what is in question now is the new integration of differences, the construction of *trans-differential* cultural, social, epistemological totalities.

For example, deconstruction has demystified the so-called metaphysics of presence and revealed the basic inconsistency and even impossibility of rationally unified metaphysical systems. Does this mean that metaphysics is dead forever and will never rise again? Or that new varieties of metaphysics (or rather metaphysics-s, in the plural) may proliferate precisely on the basis of their inconsistency and impossibility? The same relates to utopias criticized as metaphysical projections of the present into the future. As soon as utopias are demystified and the shock of their partial realization has passed away, they will proliferate as utopias no more obliged to be realizable, consistent, or even progressive.

Here is what contemporary Moscow artists and art scholars have to say about the subject: "It is crucial that the problem of the universal be raised as a contemporary issue. I understand that it is a utopia. It is done completely consciously, yes, utopia is dead, so long live utopia. Utopia endows the individual with a more significant and wider horizon" (Viktor Miziano). "The future of contemporary art is in the will to utopia, in the breakthrough into reality through a membrane of quotations, it is in sincerity and pathos" (Anatoly Osmolovsky).¹² The subject here is the resurrection of utopia after the death of utopia, no longer as a social project with claims of transforming the world, but as a new intensity of intellectual vision and a broader horizon for the individual.

This type of mentality can be called "trans-utopian" and "trans-meta-physical," in agreement with the general vector of the transcultural movement. These "trans-utopias" will not be visionary or conceptual unities in the traditional sense. They will not reduce the variety of facts and possibilities to one basic principle or one predominant desire; rather, they will demonstrate the diversity of desires and principles, each of which is sufficient to ground one of possible worlds.¹³

Notes

1. Homi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994): 134.
2. *Ibid.*, 134.
3. *Ibid.*, 1.
4. *Ibid.*, 2.
5. Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 141.
6. *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford and Cambridge [MA]: Blackwell, 1992): 3.
7. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon; trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1981): 133.
8. "Différance," in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982): 17.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976): 47-48.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation*. (Roundtable on 2 October 1994 at Villanova University), ed. with Commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University, 1997): 14.
11. *Constructive interference* occurs at a point where two overlapping waves of the same frequency are in phase, that is, where the crests and troughs of the two waves coincide. In this case, the two waves reinforce each other and combine to form a wave that has an amplitude equal to the sum of the individual amplitudes of the original waves. *Destructive interference* occurs when two intersecting waves are completely out of phase, that is, when the crest of one wave coincides with the trough of the other. In this case, the two waves cancel each other out. The present book concentrates almost exclusively on the possibilities of constructive interference, which in the realm of cultural flows and influences comprises the phenomenon of transculture. Transculture can be defined as the sum total of constructive interferences among different cultures and cultural domains (disciplines, arts, modes of creativity, and communication).
12. *Kto est kto v sovremennom iskusstve Moskv* (*Who's Who In Contemporary Moscow Art*). (Moscow: "Album," 1993) [without pagination]. Viktor Miziano (b. 1957) is an art critic and curator of the Centre of Contemporary Art in Moscow. He is the editor in chief of the *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* (Art Journal). Anatolii Osmolovsky (b. 1969) is the leader of the anti-Conceptualist movements of E.T.I. and the "Revolutionary Rival Program NET-SEZUDIK."
13. On the category of the possible and its implications for the future of metaphysics, see my article "K filosofii vozmoznogo. Vvedenie v postkriticheskuiu epokhu" (Toward the Philosophy of the Possible. An Introduction to the Post-Critical Epoch), *Voprosy filosofii* (Moscow, 1999).