

An Overview of the Research Project

“MEDDLESOME AND CURIOUS”

On the Realization of Democratic Freedom in Forms of the Non-Identical

The relevance of the foreign, the unfamiliar for a functioning democracy is negatively assessed in various quarters today. Instead of seeing the foreign as a prerequisite for a liberal society, the encounter with it is seen as a threat or even as a real danger. Proceeding from reflections of the Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot this research project will focus on a quite different perspective. Diderot envisions a pluralist society, which is really dependent on there being this foreign element. This is a state of affairs that is to be not only tolerated in all facets, it is also to be welcomed by society as something indispensable for the realization of individual freedom and social progress.

The complex understanding of democracy, which Diderot developed with regard to the foreign, also impacts on his view of the public role of art. If artists strive to portray what is foreign, unfamiliar as authentically as possible, they are indeed actively engaging in “an aesthetic form of meddling” serving the realization of democratic freedom. Here these artists seek to find the right ways to lend expression to the foreign as precisely as possible. They thus advocate a certain idea of democracy that has been largely neglected in political theory. This research project sees aesthetic endeavors to find suitable means for expressing the foreign as a full-fledged contribution to the realization of freedom within society and also as a response to the democratic-theoretical question as to how freedom is to be defined as self-determination. The goal here is to establish how certain forms of art can be seen as contributing to political theory and to discuss the consequences that these might have in addressing current political issues.

Meddling in many different and foreign matters as a democratic disposition

The Greek words *allotrio-* and *polypragmosyne* (αλλοτριπραγμοσύνη/πολυπραγμοσύνη) hark back to the 5th century B.C. In the writings of Herodotus and Thucydides, the two terms refer to a form of heightened activity that is described as having an immediate effect on society. The psychological disposition to engage in this kind of activity, to be curious and meddlesome in foreign and unfamiliar matters, is also seen here a cause of political unrest. Whoever engages in this meddling in the affairs of others and backs the interests of others is, through his or her actions, promoting political subversion – something, which in this historical context means promoting the emergence of democratic conditions. In Plato, the democrat is seen as the prototype of someone meddling in many different foreign matters. Since Plato renounces democracy it comes as no surprise that in his texts the disposition to such meddling is also condemned. In early usages, this concept has mainly a negative connotation and even in a longer philosophical tradition the idea of meddling in different foreign matters is looked down upon. But this is surprising considering the close link that was established in antiquity between meddling in foreign matters and the emergence of democracy. Proceeding from the writings of Antiquity it would make sense to see this practice of meddling in a more positive light in texts backing democracy. This, however, is not the case. It was first and foremost Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the well-known advocate of de-

mocracy who opposed the meddler in foreign matters, seeing in him the opposite of a subject capable of democracy (in marked contrast to Plato). Rousseau's disapproval was to have a lasting negative effect on the reputation of these two terms.

The planned project sees meddling in foreign matters in keeping with the perspective of thinkers of Antiquity as a specifically democratic and as such desirable stance and thus explores how such a stance can make a constructive contribution to the cause of freedom and democracy. To become involved in the perspectives and concerns of others, of even every other individual, and to not rule out that even the most insignificant thing that happens to another person could also be related to oneself. This is thus seen as fundamental for the realization of freedom, which in democratic circumstances is always also seen as including the realization of the freedom of others. In this project we are interested in various forms of the non-identical, which are seen here in particular as the product of an aesthetic form of meddling in foreign matters.

Aesthetic meddling in different & foreign matters and democracy

In modern societies, it is first and foremost artists and writers who engage in this form of interfering (meddlesome and curious) and are constantly refining this practice. Where the writer not (only) shapes his/her own view of the world, he/she becomes, in our understanding, a kind of aesthetic meddler in the matters of others. When writers try to render one or more foreign perspectives as loyally as possible, so as to show what it means to figure *in* the world of others, they are, I would suggest, practicing this type of meddling, interfering in an aesthetic sense. Here such writers try in an intensive, and in a certain sense 'hyperactive' way, to find forms in which the other can be expressed as adequately as possible. To what extent these compositional devices and aesthetic strategies can be used to develop an original contribution to both the realization of individual freedom and to respond to the question of the theory of democracy – how freedom can be defined as a form of self-determination – will be studied in this project.

Texts by Denis Diderot will serve as the basis for this research project. At the same time as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but in clear opposition to him, Diderot developed a notion of democracy in which the 'Other', the foreign, unfamiliar, was indispensable in the realization of liberal societies. At the intersection of philosophy and literature Diderot developed a formal idiom for alterity and plurality, elaborating his idea of freedom, postulated as it was in a general sense. Departing from the idea of aesthetic meddling in foreign matters, which we can find in Diderot who elaborates on this, our study of forms of non-identity and its contribution to the theory of democracy is also to be extended to other texts located at this intersection between philosophy and literature – texts that in various ways continue to develop Diderot's ideas into the 20th century. Following in Diderot's footsteps, these writers have also assigned a special political function to drama, theatre and acting in democratic conditions. Selected texts by Bertolt Brecht, Albert Camus and Elfriede Jelinek, among others, forms of the non-identical will be analyzed and critically examined, taking up the concerns relevant to democracy that these authors address.

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