

AGE OF ANXIETY

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IDENTITY

Takes its Place on the Political Stage

Panta rhei. Everything flows—in nature, in society, in our minds. Our thoughts, like living organisms, are in a state of constant flux. They succumb to external pressures and obey unknown laws, they move relentlessly, accelerating and slowing down, advancing and retreating, attempting sudden leaps along a route that has neither direction nor end. The historical selection of ideas resembles the natural selection of species: the resilience of meanings in this march toward an unknown destination is unpredictable, and the dust of intellectual progress that is scattered by the relentless survival struggle will only retrospectively appear settled. What exists tends to be reproduced wholesale, while newcomers must overcome the inertia of social dynamics and the reflexes that existing semantic orders trigger. Worldviews aren't deposed voluntarily. In a state of vigilant wakefulness, established ideas tend to defend themselves against insidious intruders, whereas new ones, like spermatozoa, look for eggs to fertilise.

But wakefulness itself isn't something new: societies have always devised ways of handling the 'new gods'. What has changed is the way novelty is perceived: intuitions are ever more frequently undermined, ideological convictions weakened, certainties readily abandoned, and entire value systems are deconstructed and reassembled anew overnight. Misreading Arthur Rimbaud ("we must at all costs remain absolutely modern"), zealots of unrestrained modernisation have fetishised newness: conceptual constructs seem finally rid of the compulsion to eternally repeat the same over and over; new ideas, regardless of their actual merit, are perceived *ipso jure* superior to old ones; even language can't tame the forces of change; instead, it is subordinated to them. What's more, the terms that grant access to the valid-as-true have been accorded their own unique political correctness.

Talk of identity and difference must, then, take into account three facts: one, the discourse's merciless intrusion into an already disturbed setting; two, the eagerness with which it is being imposed; and, three, the effortlessness with which it seems to be displacing the established order. *Difference*, suddenly and in stark contrast with the patterns that heretofore designated the political field, is no longer just a natural state, but a crucial claim. The unprecedented clamour of demands for recognition, talk of the individual's right to difference,

and issues surrounding multiculturalism all herald an ideological turn with unpredictable consequences. When difference and multiculturalism take the place of homogeneity and unitarity, the very coordinates of social organisation are at stake.

This means that these notions at the core of the individual's relation to the social collective will migrate to the centre of socio-political enquiry. Bearers of institutionalised and incontestable personal rights, individuals will have to embrace the additional task of determining their identity and carving out their own special otherness. Even if these developments do not immediately register as explicit regulatory adjustments, the shift in attitude is itself telling of a new era. Things are unfolding as if the now-distant existential uncertainty of the untroubled modern socio-political thought is forced to give way to an externally dictated and standardised conformity about primordial alterity. The already unconvincing answers to the question *Who am I?* are for the first time in recent history elevated to objects of systemic control. Identity is politicised.

This book looks at the historical conditions of this ideological remodelling. It focuses on the current political discourse that revolves around identity and difference, a discourse that seems entirely symptomatic of our times. Regardless of complex ethical parameters, underlying this ostensibly pathological obsession with individuality and freedom of choice,

with collective identity, recognition¹, and with difference² is a widespread confusion caused by radical shifts in the historical function of social collectives and of the state. It doesn't seem at all surprising that the sudden outburst of discussion about identities is gaining ground at a time when, one, the ideological cohesion and conceptual wholesomeness of liberal societies is in decline; and when, two, conventional understandings of the relation between individual and society, national and supranational, political and cultural, and, generally, between the individual and its social surrounding are all undergoing sweeping reforms. Seen in this light, the right to difference seems inextricably tied to a semantic redefinition of the conditions of differentiation within the social setting. If representations of the person's place in the world and the terms used for understanding society as a solid and incontestable cultural unity are being reconsidered, the same will happen to the terms concerning human self-knowledge. And, if Gadamer was right when he wrote that "more than anything, understanding constitutes being and produces history"³, then we might indeed be at a turning point. Although it remains impossible to deduce any intention as such behind a historical happening that stubbornly refuses to end, we have every reason to believe—hope, even—that the period we are going through is transitional.

One thing is certain: as far as the terms that we use for understanding ourselves and society are concerned, the break with the recent past is by all means radical. Around the world, delineated and conceptually airtight socio-cultural schemes have been replaced by increasingly open, precarious, unruly even, social formations. The cohesion, stability, and self-sufficiency of grand narratives have been irrevocably compromised. Its political context aside, Thatcher's emblematic catchphrase, "There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women", seems to capture the essence of an age when singular, imaginarily invested, and objectively definable collectives that sustained individuals have been replaced by a vitiating cluster of *alternatives*. Traditional forms of nostalgia and the societies that induced them will never be the same again. Solid and shared symbolic structures have found themselves knee-deep in boundless individualism, saturated with vague anti-statist sentiment, and corroded by the overabundance of irreconcilable signals, symbols, and choices, and can thus no longer function as the palpable reproductive hubs of meaning they once were.⁴ Those ideological bonding agents which guaranteed cultural homogeneity and regulatory independence in societies have been incapacitated, debilitated, and, worse, privatised. We are drifting within a constellation of universal haziness, increased

vagueness, and semantic disorder. It has become harder to gauge the objective historical potency of reality whilst remaining capable of deciphering the meanings and limits of information.⁵ Even if we want to change the world, we have no idea how, or where to start, or what tools to use, or, even, what it is that we want to change.

To make matters worse, this lack of focus has distorted the psychological parameters of socialisation. It has weakened the reassuring sense of belonging to a finite, stable, and coherent social whole. Fewer people than ever seek to satisfy their practical or existential needs as members of some collective entity. Fewer, still, find comfort in the embrace of a multitude that allows them to express their impulses and manage—even possibly control—their inborn panics.⁶ Although people are still free not to overestimate the effectiveness of their personal desires and acts⁷ and whilst remaining cautious of the freedoms available to them⁸, even so, they are expected to toil in solitude to gain their own values and their own meanings, to understand the world and name its contents using their own terms, to choose their own course of action, and to solve their own problems, privately. The range of personal choice has expanded, offering abundant and often contradictory messages outside common networks of meanings and symbols.⁹ This type of freedom owes its appeal to the fact that, like the object of

faith, it can be neither proven nor refuted¹⁰, which explains why it is being offered as both a universal cure *and* a placebo.¹¹ But, like most conventional wisdoms, it too has proven to be spectacularly false: the expansion of liberties hasn't delivered the dawn of a new age of reason we were promised. Our current convictions are neither more rational nor less irrational than the ones they deposed. On the contrary: disenchantment never seemed a more distant feat.¹²