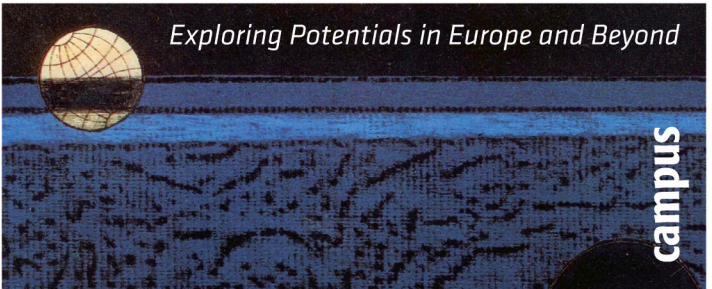


Kolja Raube, Annika Sattler (eds.)

# DIFFERENCE AND DEMOCRACY

*Exploring Potentials in Europe and Beyond*





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# The Concept of Difference

*Christine Landfried*

Almost everyone likes diversity. Who wants to wear the same outfit all the time or never try a new recipe? We travel to far-off countries to enjoy the diversity of cultures and landscapes. Difference, by contrast, is suspect. It evokes conflict and the destruction of harmony and unity.

In a global world we experience a complex diversity of difference. In an age of worldwide migration, moreover, we get to know the manifold differences between cultures, for example in how people see religion and the freedom of opinion, on our doorstep. “The comfort of geographical distance and segregation is lost and the cultural avoidance cannot be maintained any longer within the boundaries of a protected community” (Göle, this volume, 166). But this means that we have to address the fundamental difference of ideas, interests, and institutions between cultures. What do we really know about immigrants, people who have come, for example, to Germany from a wide variety of countries,<sup>1</sup> and what do immigrants know of us? Only if cultures get to know each other and meet in openness can difference unfold its positive potential.

Unlike diversity, difference therefore does not have pleasant, horizon-broadening sides to it from the outset. Conflicts develop on the construction of mosques in Germany (Leggewie 2009, 117f.) and we take note of the Swiss referendum against minarets and the reactions to the outcome of this poll (Göle 2010, 125). Some conflicts about difference turn into confrontations. Such confrontations need to be

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<sup>1</sup> The 6.7 million foreigners living in Germany originate among others from the following countries (Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration 2010, 112): Turkey (1.7 million Turkish nationals, 25.4 percent), Italy (523,162 Italian nationals, 7.8 percent), Serbia (424,037 Serbian nationals, 6.3 percent), and Poland (393,848 Polish nationals 5.9 percent).

understood, explained, and constructively translated (Apel 1981, 127) to enable cultures to live together.

In a global world, democratic governments have not only to pay greater attention to cultural, religious, and linguistic difference and to ensure equality among citizens on the basis of concrete differences. They also face the challenge of institutional difference in national, European, and international systems of governance. Political regulation in the sense of the state intentionally intervening in the structures and processes of society is becoming more complex. New actors are taking the stage. In cooperation with nation-states, institutions such as the European Union, the World Trade Organization, and the United Nations influence the political design of life in the community. More and more frequently, civil-society actors are playing a part in shaping and implementing political regulation (Jakobeit et al. 2010). These new forms of governance (Mayntz 2009, 43) differ depending on the policy area and the level to which a given arrangement applies (Raube, this volume, 116). Globalization leads to the “multiplication of different normative orders” (Sassen 2008, 11) and to collisions between these orders (Fischer-Lescano and Teubner 2006, 36). Nation-states, again, change in quite different ways in this process by which people take increasingly comprehensive, intensive, and far-reaching action across national borders (Beck and Grande 2010, 429; Held et al. 1999, 15).

This manifold difference can have both negative and positive consequences for democratic governance. Therefore, the fundamental question of this concept is how actors deal with difference. This means that politics is called upon to judge difference not prematurely as problematic but to consider in each case how the positive aspects of difference can be brought to fruition. The cognitive interest of the concept is directed towards the capacity of democratic politics “to manage difference [...] in ways that upgrade the collective interest” (Stone Sweet, this volume, 227). Where the negative potential of difference is apparent, countermeasures have to be taken (Putnam 2007, 137–174)<sup>2</sup>.

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2 The empirical study by the political scientist Robert D. Putnam has shown that ethnic difference in American communities leads not only to a loss of trust and solidarity among groups but also within the same ethnic group. The greater the ethnic difference in a community, the less citizens participate in public life and the



Even in language it is evident that the negative meaning of difference is to be attributed to human action. The historian Reinhart Koselleck has been able to show that when groups apply general terms only to themselves, thus asserting an “exclusive claim to generality” (1985, 156) those excluded suffer discrimination. The counterconcept of “Hellenes and Barbarians” offers one example. Barbarians were not only strangers but also strangers with negative characteristics. History knows many counterconcepts designed to exclude mutual recognition. Such counterconcepts—being one form of difference—are asymmetrical (Koselleck 1985, 156).

Thus, it is up to humanities and social sciences to gain empirical knowledge about the concrete conditions that either lead to differences being abused for exclusion, for constructing enemy stereotypes and for negative definitions of others, or that enable the positive potential of difference to be used to “fuel” the freedom and equality of citizens in democratic systems. Political scientists must investigate in which way difference becomes a point of reference for political action (Riedmüller and Vinz 2007, 154). Heuristic access to explaining the negative or positive potential of difference for governance in the nation-state and beyond national borders lies in the assumed link between difference and democracy. This connection is underestimated by both politicians and scholars. Similarities between structures and processes are considered desirable. In European studies, for example, commonalities between European Union member states are particularly sought. Differences, in contrast, are regarded as a problem and much more rarely addressed.<sup>3</sup> It is not by chance that difference often

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more strongly they withdraw into their own four walls as into a snail’s shell. From his results, Putnam concludes that the key challenge for modern, differentiated societies is to create a new, more capacious sense of ‘we’.

- 3 Wolfgang Ullrich has shown astonishing parallels for art studies in his lecture *How. On the Role of Comparison in Dealing with Art* given on the occasion of receiving the Martin Warnke Medal on April 20, 2011 in the *Warburg-Haus* in Hamburg. He points out that art studies look primarily for similarities between works of art, obtaining added value and pursuing the logic of returns with this sort of comparison. “It seems to be overly conducive and conflict avoiding to look for similarities everywhere” (Ullrich 2011, 10). Art theorists who, “unlike art dealers or auctioneers are not obliged from the outset to generate higher values should learn to ‘doubt the evidence’.” It is their job to “point out differences between Dürer and Raphael, between Friedrich and Beuys, between Rothko and Giotto or at least to relativize the commonalities claimed by others” (ibid., 20). However, an analytical comparison

falls by the wayside and the democratic meaning of difference remains hidden. This sense lies in the strengthening of democratic procedures by including difference (Göle 2008, 148). Democratic discourses and negotiations in which difference is taken seriously are most likely to produce reasonable results in a global world (Habermas 1992, 368).

“The sovereignty of the familiar impoverishes everyone.” (Geertz 1986, 119) This statement by the ethnologist Clifford Geertz can also be expressed in positive terms: the productivity of difference makes everyone richer. Finding the conditions of this productivity for legitimate and effective governance in a global world is the aim of this book. From the perspective of various disciplines, countries, and generations we hope to make a small contribution to research into the effects of difference.

In my reflections I first define “difference” and propose a typology of difference. I go on to explain the theoretical assumptions and analytical categories of the difference concept. In the final section I discuss research questions that arise from this concept.

## The Definition of Difference

The term difference comes from the Latin *differe* (to differ) and denotes a distinction in a neutral sense (Grande, this volume, 185). Difference covers structural differences of ideas, interests, institutions, and capacities, systemic differences both between societal subsystems and between systems of the global order (Luhmann 2000), and finally action-oriented differences in dealing with difference (Fuchs 2007). It is a moot point whether difference is a problem or a solution (Schmidt 2010, 184). I therefore ask what conditions make it possible to use difference as positive potential for legitimate and effective governance in a global world while at the same time reducing the negative potential of difference.

Difference—in the “collective singular” (*Kollektivsingular*) (Koselleck 1982)—is an analytical term which has concrete differences related to

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has to “avoid both a simple identity thesis and a one-sided difference thesis” (ibid., 23).