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The Superiority of the Subjugated:

A Theory of Counter-Communities

(Original German title: Die Überlegenheit der Unterlegenen:
Eine Theorie der Gegengemeinschaften)

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1. In the Realm of Moles (Introduction)

In a lecture about art delivered in Chicago in 1926, W.E.B. Du Bois asked his audience:

> If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful;—what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?
>
> Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your heart that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that—but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.[1]

From the perspective of oppressed, exploited, and marginalized groups, the lives of the rich and powerful do not necessarily seem desirable. This is because the exercise of domination does

[1] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *Writings,* New York, 1986, pp. 993-1002, here: p. 994 f.

leaves it mark on those who dominate: it makes their way of life more ignorant, meaner, uglier, and sadder. On the other hand, oppressed groups in particular often have specific advantages: as Du Bois asserts, they not only know, want, feel, and dream *differently* than members of dominant groups, they also dream *better.*

Descriptions like the one offered by Du Bois can be found at countless points in the history of political and social movements. The forbidden secret knowledge of women, the utopian imagination of the workers' movement, the fulfilling intimacy of care relationships, the stable reliability of collective solidarity, the transgressive intoxication of political action, the artful resourcefulness of queer subculture, the fragile beauty of threatened everyday life—all these are figures through which the self-reflections of subaltern communities claim forms of superiority with respect to those who oppress them, despite the catastrophic nature of their material circumstances. These descriptions thus assert an inversion of relations of superiority: someone can be politically, economically, socially, or culturally oppressed, but still have an epistemic, normative, aesthetic, or affective advantage.

This book sets off from the premise that the performative repudiation of the pathologies of the dominant form of life and the invocation of the beneficial effects of one's own, as articulated by Du Bois and many others, are not simply ideological fallacies with which the oppressed gloss over their miserable situation. Rather, this action represents an attempt to systematically reconstruct and defend the claim of the superiority of the subjugated form of life. The questions I address are the following: How can this inversion of superiority be described more precisely? What exactly *is* the superiority of the subjugated—what kind of superiority are we talking about, what are its prerequisites, and what are its limitations? How can this superiority be explained from a materialist perspective, what are its objective conditions? What does an understanding of it generate for critical social analysis, for thinking about social alternatives, and for an emancipatory theory of transformation? And what might a politics look like that is articulated from the assumption of a superiority of subaltern practices?

In its sweeping generality, the assertion of a "superiority of the subjugated" immediately has something absurd about it. It does not seem to correspond to the factual situation of oppressed groups, which is characterized by violence and suffering, poverty and privation, trauma and misfortune; what's more, it appears to romanticize, idealize, excuse, or at the very least trivialize these situations. After all, the injustice of relations of domination and servitude consists precisely in the fact that the oppressed—as opposed to the oppressors—are deprived of something essential. The underlying argument I am presenting here must therefore be clarified in two important respects. First, it is evident that the kind of superiority that Du Bois and many others are referring to is not afforded to oppressed people as a category, that is to say, they do not receive it *automatically* or *by way of their oppression*. There are many oppressed people who, in their poverty, very much long for a house on the North Shore or a fancy dinner; there are also oppressed people who cannot imagine a "beautiful world" or who lack the words to even conceive of their own situation as something alterable. What's more: there are many oppressed people who become or want to become oppressors themselves, for example because they are guided by to hateful ideas such as racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and transphobia. Thus, the superiority invoked here emerges only within *certain* oppressed groups: those that band together, organize, and interpret themselves in specific ways. Second, the specific superiority of the subjugated should not be taken to mean that their social situation is *desirable*; that is, that one should want to assume their position. While it is their social positioning that allows them to access superior forms of knowledge, values, expressions, and emotions, the content of this superiority is itself dynamic: it urges those who possess it to overcome relations of domination, to *leave behind* their position of being dominated. Thus, to speak of a superiority of the dominated does not mean to suggest say that being dominated is good; on the contrary, it implies that that it is good to start from the political perspective of the dominated, and to continue on from there, that is: to fight domination.

Epistemic, normative, aesthetic, and affective superiority are not *givens,* they are hard-fought *achievements*. They are only accessed under certain conditions and through certain practices. As such, there is a distance or tension between a socially formed perspective and one that has been actively formed by dominated groups. Du Bois hints at this when he concedes that his listeners certainly also visualize the ideals of mainstream society from time to time, but that they know "in their hearts" that they do not "really want" them. He urges them to distance themselves from their immediate but distorted inclinations and to reflect on the strength that comes precisely from this distance. In order to know what one "really" wants—that is, to enter a critical relationship with one's initially experienced empirical desires, dreams, and viewpoints—an alternative interpretive framework is needed, one that helps to cognitively and normatively evaluate experiences in a different way. A 1950s housewife who experiences her daily domestic life as dull and devoid of meaning but has no vocabulary through which to understand her situation as a form of exploitation; a trans teenager living in 2020s Florida who has no subcultural connections and perceives their own bodily experience as abnormal or perverse; a white working-class man in the rural east of Germany whose everyday culture offers him little outlets for transgressing or interrogating existing structures, offering only discourses that seek to justify or intensify them—these are just a few examples of how oppressed groups can be prevented from accessing their potential forms of superiority. Conversely, oppositional and collective frames of reference can liberate an oppressed individual from this speechlessness, loneliness, or corruption: not by allowing them to switch to the dominant position (becoming a Rotarian, Lion, or a What-not), but by opening their eyes to a vision of "what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world."

As such, the capacity of the subjugated to access these forms of superiority is dependent upon specific forms of collectivization, on the ways in which dominated people band together or relate to one another. It is the outcome of the practices of *counter-communities*: communities of oppressed or excluded groups that explicitly or implicitly maintain a relationship of distance

to the dominant society. The collective frame of reference Du Bois invokes when he speaks of himself and his audience in the first-person plural is not a reflection of a purely intellectual viewpoint or political stance but entails a reference to established and practices and habits that have been handed down over generations. Just like the dominant society, counter-communities are shaped by a specific ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), that is, by well-rehearsed customs, implicit norms, collective expectations of action, and cultural expressions. Unlike the ethical life of mainstream society, however, the ethical life of counter-communities never claims to be at peace with itself. It remains in a constant tension, a constant conflict: with its social antagonists, with its social surroundings, with other (counter-)communities, and with itself. But it is precisely this tension—which forms part of the everyday life of all members of counter-communities—that gives them certain advantages. For unlike members of dominant groups—unlike "the average white American" (or German)—they are accustomed to dealing with contradictions and contestations. The ethical life and practices of counter-communities has involved the cultivation of skills and attitudes that are dynamic and transgressive. These are skills and attitudes that are required to positively enact various facets of social practice: for the production of knowledge, the generation of normativity, the appreciation of beauty, and the experience of affect. But if this is true—if counter-communities have epistemic, normative, aesthetic, and affective advantages over dominant groups—then liberation from social domination cannot consist in the inclusion, integration, or assimilation of oppressed or excluded groups into the institutions of existing society. The struggle for liberation must be figured as a struggle for abolition.

Domination and Servitude

In his speech, Du Bois presupposes that the relationship of the Black community to the world of the splendid estates on the North Shore is not simply one of difference, but rather a form of

domination. This is what the notion of the *color line* represents: it is a line that separates not just two different cultures, but oppressors and oppressed. Domination is a social relation in which one side acts on another side through an exertion of power, but the dominator is also affected by this action. The essence of domination is thus to fabricate both an antagonism and a totality: oppressor and oppressed form an antagonism because they have oppositional interests and perspectives, but at the same time they form a totality because they are both part of the same relationship. They cannot be thought without their respective counterpart. The relationship remains external neither to the oppressors nor to the oppressed: indeed it constitutes them in their respective subjectivities. The oppressors subordinate the oppressed, but in doing so, they themselves are also subject to the relationship of domination. A queen, a capitalist, or a president exercises domination over others (and is privileged in comparison to them), but in this, they are not free-floating or independent, but are themselves subject to manifold constraints.

In his short but extremely influential chapter "Domination and Servitude" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel presented the first paradigmatic analysis of the connection between relations of domination relations and the constitution of subjects, and his analysis has lost none of its relevance. What was historically revolutionary about this description was not that it critiqued domination on the basis of natural laws or transcendental moral arguments, but that it used a reconstruction of the genesis of modern subjectivity to reveal that it is impossible to achieve self-consciousness under conditions of asymmetrical recognition. Human forms of life require affirmation by others in order to become independent. Self-consciousness exists, as Hegel says, "only in being acknowledged".[2] Intersubjectivity is the condition of subjectivity. But anybody who does not recognize others as equal, that is, who does not accord them the moral status of a free subject in the first place, cannot receive any meaningful recognition from

[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geiszes,* Frankfurt/M. 1986, p. 145.

them either. When relations of domination and servitude emerge as the result of a historical struggle, this undermines not only the position of the servant but also of the master: his subjectivity becomes empty, vain, lonely. Hegel pushes this analysis of the pathologies of the dominant consciousness even further by arguing not only that the master is deprived of authentic recognition, but that the servant actually has a *better* opportunity to obtain it: through their everyday experiences, after all, they possess an awareness—a "truth," as Hegel puts it—of the nature of self-sufficient consciousness. Hegel grounds this primarily in the practice of work. By having to work for the master, the servant not only has the opportunity to have an experience of self-efficacy, but is also forced by their exploitation to develop an implicitly social conception of action. Thus, their activity expresses something that implicitly corresponds to the very essence of human self-consciousness: a combination of autonomy and sociality. By attributing this experience to the side of the servant and not to that of the master, Hegel makes the first assertion in philosophical history of a superiority of the subjugated.

Hegel's chapter on domination and servitude is based on a series of simplifications that first figures domination and servitude as a personal relation with only two poles. He does not provide a materialist analysis but only a formal schema into which the experiences articulated by Du Bois and so many other theorists of oppressed experience can be inscribed. This schema has been taken up and reinterpreted by countless liberation movements that have updated and varied the inversion of social and epistemic advantages.[3] In Marxist, feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist theory, similar motifs are invoked again and again: the *struggle* through which one group shows itself capable of imposing a dominating social formation on another; *the deficit of the consciousness of the dominator*, articulated with respect to forms of epistemic ignorance, moral indifference and coldness, aesthetic ugliness, and emotional impoverishment; *instances of the superiority of the consciousness of the servant*, of their insights, normative orientations,

[3] For an overview, see Hannes Kuch, *Herr und Knecht: Anerkennung und symbolische Macht im Anschluss an Hegel,* Frankfurt/M 2013.

aesthetic expressions, or affective resources; analyses of the *objective passive conditions* from which the superiority of servile consciousness results, which might include their non-integration into pathological society, the performance of certain activities, or specific experiences of socialization.

Hegel had specific relations of domination in mind when he developed his schema, namely those centrally mediated through labor. In scholarship on Hegel, it is disputed whether he intended to refer to feudal serfs, slaves in Haiti, or domestic servants in bourgeois society, for example. This dispute already shows that in reality, domination takes on many forms and cannot be found in the pure form described by Hegel. Domination can appear as direct violence and the threat of annihilation, as political oppression, as capitalist exploitation and overexploitation, as marginalization or invisibilization, as neglect and exclusion, as normativity, or as commodification. Enslavement, wage labor, sexual objectification, internment, border regimes, the poisoning of people's means of subsistence, gentrification and displacement, and gender (mis)identification are all examples of domination, but they vary greatly in their form, mediation, intensity, and effects. Master and servant, moreover, rarely confront each other head-on: domination is anonymous, mediated via wide-ranging social relations, and regularly involves multiple different articulations (capitalism, sexism, and racism each have economic, cultural, and political expressions that can vary in intensity and interact in complex ways.) Domination also changes over time: for example, patriarchal heteronormativity took the form of relatively rigid instances of exclusion and discipline a mere fifty years ago, but is based more on forms of commercialized conquest in postmodern neoliberalism. Domination, moreover, is not a single act but a stabilized, institutionalized, well-rehearsed, and often naturalized asymmetrical relationship of subordination between heterogeneous social groups. Ultimately, many Marxist theorists have identified the essential feature of capitalist domination in the fact that it does not represent direct domination by identifiable actors, but

rather takes the form of a subjectless "mute compulsion,"[4] in which real people only play the role of "character masks."

A sociologically informed defense of the thesis of the superiority of the subjugated should therefore not proceed as schematically and monolithically as Hegel. First, it must not narrow domination in an economistic way, but must analyze it concretely in its manifold manifestations and their corresponding subjective experiences; second, it must not understand the superiority of servant consciousness as part of a formal scheme but as the precarious result of a contingent process of subjectivation; third, it must not personalize master and servant, that is, imagine them as individual antagonists; fourth, it must not figure the relation of domination as static and continuous, but continually reassess it in its historically shifting modulations; and fifth, it must not dualistically simplify the positions of master and servant (or worker and capitalist, man and woman, colonizer and colonized), but must include diffuse interstices and unstable identities in the analysis.

Du Bois knows that the vision of a "beautiful world" does not automatically emerge from the everyday consciousness of his listeners. He has to ask them to become aware of an inkling that lies dormant and undiscovered within them. He does this by addressing them in the first-person plural: as a "we." Whether dominated people turn out to be able to exploit the structural potential they have by virtue of this position depends in large part on how they relate to one another. Hegel refrains from exploring one of the possibilities that arise from his own analysis: namely, the possibility that oppressed individuals—servants and maids, respectively—turn their backs on their masters, recognize each other, and found their own communities on this mutual relationship of recognition. Such servant communities have formed an essential sphere of experience for oppressed groups throughout history. People who are unable to identify with

[4] See most recently Sören Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital*, London, 2023.

the established society constitute their own contexts of social practice that allow them forms of self-realization and freedom, even within relations of domination.

Counter-Communities

A counter-community is defined by three characteristics. First, its members are socially oppressed or marginalized; that is, subject to forms of economic, political, social, or cultural domination. Second, they are communities in a broader sense of the word; that is, relatively stable and well-worn forms of sociality based on the explicit or implicit affirmation of their members. In this context, counter-communities can be based on networks of kinship, family, friendship, or geographical proximity, but they can also be constituted as oppositional subcultures and scenes, political movements, groups, and parties, sub-economic forms of cooperation, or consciously pursued politics of forms of life, such as in communes or cooperatives. Third, a counter-community is characterized by an intentional or implicit distancing from dominant social structures, which can range from subtle reservations to open opposition (hence the designation "counter").

Counter-communities are forms of life in the sense defined by Rahel Jaeggi. According to this definition, they comprise "attitudes and habitualized behaviors of a normative character that concern the collective conduct of life, although they are neither strictly codified nor institutionally binding."[5] Just like all other forms of life, counter-communities are thus not to be understood as individual practices but as *bundles of practices*; they do not refer to individual but always to *collective* ways of life; in the role of *habit*, they include a well-rehearsed and therefore not always conscious element; and they have a *normative* character, that is, they structure the expectations and orientations of action of their members. Forms of life thus

[5] Rahel Jaeggi, *Kritik von Lebensformen*, Berlin, 2014, p. 77.

encompass a more existential or "deeper" dimension than lifestyles, fashions, or short-lived associations, but they are not as formally regulated as institutions or organizations. However, not all forms of life are counter-communities, but rather only those that are subject to domination (that is, not the Rotary or the Lions Club), that are genuinely communal (not the internet forum of the skater community), and that maintain a distance from dominant ideals (not incels or the right-wing Pegida movement in Germany).

The notion of counter-community has an affinity to a number of similar concepts, such as that of subculture, counterpublic, oppositional consciousness, abolitionist geographies, or the undercommons. In the mid-1970s, Stuart Hall and his colleagues described how resistance is expressed through ritual in youth and other subcultures: it is not a conscious political program but styles of dress, bodily behavior, linguistic idioms, or musical expressions, through which its members articulate a rejection of the values of mainstream society.[6] In the early 1990s, Nancy Fraser criticized the notion of a unified overarching "public sphere," which many liberal and even many critical theorists unquestioningly take as a basis for their discussions, and pointed to the importance of "subaltern counterpublics," in which oppressed groups circulate oppositional interpretations.[7] Michael Warner has taken up this concept, but sketched it out in more detail: a counterpublic is not just an alternative discourse but an antagonistic one; it stands in a relationship of radical contestation to the dominant discourses and their rules.[8] Jane Mansbridge uses the term "oppositional consciousness" to describe the interpretive patterns that characterize the subjective side of political and social movements. In doing so, Mansbridge emphasizes that oppositional consciousness is not a capsule but a spectrum; it is dynamic and

[6] Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, London, 1976; explicitly on the concept of counterculture, J. Milton Yinger, *Countercultures: The Promise and Peril of a World Turned Upside Down,* New York 1984; for a classic of feminist subculture research, see Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From 'Jackie' to 'Just seventeen',* London 1991; for an update of some of the insights of subculture research, see Ken Gelder (ed.), *The Subcultures Reader: Second Edition*, London/New York, 2005.
[7] Nancy Fraser, "New Reflections on the Public Sphere: A Critique of Real Existing Democracy," in *Die halbierte Gerechtigkeit,* Frankfurt/M. 1997, pp. 107-150.
[8] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics,* New York 2002, pp. 118-120.

mutable.[9] Ruth Wilson Gilmore emphasizes the spatial aspect of communities of solidarity when she describes emancipatory social formations as "abolitionist geographies."[10] Finally, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's notion of the undercommons takes the idea of a shared and freely available infrastructure as expressed in the idea of the commons, but combines it with a moment of disquiet and ungovernability. The undercommons is a form of experimental relationality that is open to different marginalized groups but cannot be institutionalized or programmed.[11] There is much overlap between all these concepts; it is common for the same social formation to be described as both a counter-community and as a subculture, counterpublic, counterconsciousness, abolitionist geography, or an undercommons. The concept of counter-community incorporates many aspects of these other terms but focuses on the *social* quality of the corresponding contexts: on the way a collective normatively relates its habitual practices to one another. [12]

Counter-communities are notoriously difficult to identify because there are so many borderline or contentious cases. Is a particular group "oppressed" enough, is it enough of a "community," and is it "counter" enough? One reason for this difficulty is that counter-communities are fundamentally impure and unstable. A group may be oppressed in one respect but oppressive in another; there may be internal uses of power and violence within oppressed

[9] Jane Mansbridge, "Complicating Oppositional Consciousness," in Mansbridge and Aldon Morris (eds.): *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, Chicago, 2001, pp. 238-264.

[10] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Geographies of Abolitionism and the Problem of Innocence," in Mike Laufenbergand Vanessa E. Thompson (eds.), *Sicherheit: Feministische und rassismuskritische Beiträge*, Münster, 2021, pp. 160-181.

[11] Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Vienna, 2016.

[12] In the German-speaking world, Bini Adamczak and Eva von Redecker have presented theories of transformation that emphasize the role of subaltern sociality in the radical upheaval of social structures. A theory of counter-communities can follow these considerations, but accentuates different aspects in each case. The point of the concept of "ways of relating" sketched out by Adamczak is precisely to encompass both close and distant relationships; counter-communities, by contrast, have a denser network of moral practices. Redecker's practice theory of radical change precisely describes the interplay of dis-aggregation, association, and contamination that characterizes counter-community sociality and, building on this, sets out a compelling theory of interstitially prepared radical change. In contrast, an analysis of counter-communities emphasizes the non-elective, heteronomous conditions of constitution of antagonistic contexts of practice as well as the importance of accommodating social disintegration tendencies and crises. Bini Adamczak, *Beziehunsgweise Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende*, Berlin, 2017, especially pp. 239-257; Eva von Redecker, *Praxis und Revolution: Eine Sozialtheorie radikalen Wandels*, Frankfurt/M., 2018.

groups; a group may be oppressed for a long time but then adapt. A community can take on different densities and intensities: it may be organized more loosely or more tightly; it may be open or closed; people may belong to more than one community at a time, and the competing expectations of these communities generate role conflicts. Similarly, the degree of distance between counter-communities and dominant institutions may also fluctuate and vary. They need not always be based on a coherent and comprehensive program of transformation, but may also crystallize on the basis of specific moments of discontent or outrage; their distance may be more diffuse or emotional; they may have an oppositional stance on one issue and a reactionary one on another. We should not, therefore, think of counter-communities as homogeneous, separatist bubbles isolated from the rest of society. Rather than a geographic metaphor, a temporal one is appropriate: counter-communities are impure contexts of practice and long-lasting contexts of negotiation and revision. They have asynchronous temporalities, speeds, lines of development, historical reference points, and future aspirations. The irreducible restlessness and impurity of counter-communities means that all forms of ethical life they form remain characterized by friction and conflict. [13]

[13] The notion of "community" underlying the notion of countercommunity therefore distances itself from fantasies of fullness and presence. Moten and Harney describe the undercommons as a form of "shared incompleteness" that moves close to ungovernability and queerness, cf. Stefano Harney, Fred Moten, *All Incomplete,* New York 2021, esp. p. 122. Despite the terminological reservation of many queer theorists towards the concept of community, the concept of countercommunity thus claims to include queer forms of sociality. For a concept of community that seeks to dispense with the lure of communion and immanence, see also already Jean-Luc Nancy, *Von einer Gemeinschaft, die sich nicht verwirklicht,* Vienna 2018; for a reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of the concept of community for a collective life that allows for difference, see Sabine Hark, *Gemeinschaft der Ungewählten. Umrisse eines politischen Ethos der Kohabitation*, Berlin 2021, esp. pp. 175-184.