

THE STRENGTH OF DIFFERENCE

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

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INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON EQUALITY,
DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION VOLUME 5

THE STRENGTH OF DIFFERENCE: ITINERARIES OF ATYPICAL BOSSES

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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PREFACE

Contrary to what common sense may suggest, individuals are not free in their choices. In his writings on suicide, Durkheim brilliantly showed that this was the case: indeed while committing suicide is a fundamentally individual act, it is the nature of an individual's belonging to a social category that explains their propensity to do so. This same idea also explains diets, marriage or how people name their children: individuals feel that they are choosing freely, and yet they name, consume and marry according to the 'laws' of their environments.

Thus, individuals find themselves assigned to places and to social destinies, even though their values and desires may lead them to project themselves differently. Indeed, 'dominant' actors guarantee, in a more or less subtle and brutal manner, the stability and inequality of the system.

Those who escape their social destinies, therefore, represent sociological puzzles, the solving of which constitutes the aim of this book.

How are some women able to rise above the 'glass ceiling'? How do Maghrebis manage to become bosses? Why do homosexual, disabled or self-taught people eschew their attributed places and use their differences to accomplish careers which 'normals' come to envy? How, more broadly speaking, are all these people able to turn around their destinies, or, more specifically, the destinies that were promised to them?

Asking these questions and attempting to answer them leads us to focus on phenomena that are quantitatively marginal but qualitatively central since they reveal the existence of alternative trajectories to those determined by social places. Nonetheless, this book should not be understood as a contribution to the fields of positive psychology or positive economics, whose biases involve analysing and illustrating the factors which lead to well-being and efficiency, while avoiding any analysis of factors which prevent access to such benefits. Similarly, this book is not a contribution to the field of 'critical management studies', which seeks to uncover mechanisms of domination present in the world of organisations. The position of this book consists specifically of analysing the tension between the weight of social constraints and the weak freedom of actors, all while showing that there is always a path, an extremely narrow possibility, to be found in what we call social destinies.

From this latter perspective, 'The strength of difference' represents a message of hope and, I hope, provides certain reference points for how to act when one does not accept their assigned place. Therefore, while this book does not represent a contribution to critical sociology, it is nonetheless engaged. It uncovers the violence that 'normals' inflict upon those who are different but also takes pleasure in describing the ways in which some have been able to subvert domination. It prefers to account for the capacity for soft and efficient subversion that the weak

can display, rather than confirming once again the power that the powerful have over the established order.

This book thus bears an implicit professional message, one which is central to sociology: articulating the existence of 'extraordinary' trajectories can contribute to the projects of those hoping to escape assigned positions; articulating these possibilities can create a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. Enunciation is thus preferred over mere denunciation because by fuelling 'disillusionment' and by showing the inability of subjects to become actors, sociology risks participating in a different self-fulfilling prophecy, that of the impossible; this provides scarce grounds for hope, other than through radical social change.

However, I have tried to give as much space to my interviewees' voices as I have given to my own. Given that the trajectories described here do not follow conventional, sociologically 'normal' paths, an inductive approach was necessary. This suggests providing a direct link with individuals, in which the 'scholar' accepts to put aside their hypotheses and their own certitudes so as to listen and understand the beliefs and worldviews of their interviewees. By giving the same amount of space in this book to interview extracts than I gave to my own writing, I hoped to show respect for what I had been given. I also wished to convey the charm that occurs when individuals, conscious of having escaped their destinies, share beautiful thoughts on the issue. And, by deliberately interweaving the views of people who are different through their skin colour, their physical capacities, their sexual orientations, their gender or their level of education, I wished to share with my readers what I understood when I re-read these interviews: that beyond convened categories, there exists a whole raft of fundamental relationships, which define the relationship between 'normals' and those who are different; these are often overlooked due to an excessive focus on vertical relationships of domination.

It remains the case that lucidity, free-thinking and reflexivity – 'distance' – characterises these interviews. Indeed, the trajectories of atypical bosses lead them to become strangers to their original positions or labels, while, at the same time, never being completely included in new positions or labels. They are neither completely here nor completely elsewhere. They thus find themselves defined, from a social and identity perspective, by the in-betweenness of their positions. Strangers are therefore not only those who 'come from elsewhere', they are also those who, because they come from elsewhere, are always partially on the outside of the worlds in which they find themselves. This lack of a place, experienced subjectively and objectively, leads to the mobilisation of a paradoxical relationship with others and with social conventions characterised by greater distance, because they are imperfectly included, and greater engagement, because they must constantly provide proof of their ability. A source of effort, risk and anxiety, this situation can also represent a source of satisfaction and self-esteem: finding oneself perennially on the margins allows one to be free from past forms of domination while remaining loyal to one's original identity. The often cruel position of strangers can thus be cherished as such.

The sociological analysis of this position has a heuristic and epistemological scope that is beyond the scope of this book. The effervescence of modern societies, characterised by mobilities of all kinds, be they economic, social, cultural

or spatial, undoubtedly multiplies the number of situations in which ‘strangers’ occur. A more systematic use of this concept would allow an understanding of what is at stake, anthropologically speaking, in this collective movement. It would certainly lead to the traditional, vertical reading of relations between dominants and the dominated, and between different social positions, to be combined with a horizontal reading of relations between natives and strangers, and between ‘normals’ and those who are different.

Finally, this book shows that a sociologically imperfect socialisation can be a form of socialisation: those who lack a social position can create their own social space so as to live with others, and themselves. This does not mean that they find themselves alone: being unable to rely upon relationships mechanically produced by clearly defined social positions, they patiently construct their own network of relations which support them and reduce their unease. They fuel these networks according to a quasi-systematically verified principle: they invest in them a generosity, in terms of social capital and affective engagement, that is disproportionately greater than what others will give back to them. In a sense, they place people in their debt. And even though they know that their gestures in no way guarantee gratitude, they have understood that to be accepted and then helped, by ‘natives’ they need to create social bonds regardless of the cost of doing so. In other words, their strength resides in the relational capacity, much more than in their physical congruity. More broadly, their capacity for resilience rests upon their ability to be social, despite everything.

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The extraordinary quality of the views of atypical bosses led me to associate them with my project, so as to make it our project. In accessing the subjectivity of my interviewees, I discovered a social intelligence which I could not hide and which, on the contrary, I had to highlight, because it seemed to me to be the jewel of this study. Thus, my interviewees speak here as much as I do. Making this choice required a long moment of reflexion, an effort of which I had underestimated both the content and the intensity. Today I have the feeling of having produced this study so as to give back to my interviewees at least a little of what they had given me. Thanking them for the time, the engagement and the reflections that they have provided me with is not a convention: it underlines what this study owes them, and what I personally owe them.

The theme of the research presented here was in no way one of my priorities but slowly but surely it became the focus of my attention. Almost four years ago, the directors of the 'Diversity and Management' committee of the Fondation Paris-Dauphine, Jean-Francois Chanlat, Stephanie Dameron and Michel Kalika, offered me the opportunity to carry out a study on the topic of diversity. I accepted without giving too much thought to the consequences of doing so, mainly so as to participate in this new type of arrangement, supported by the XXIst century Club, GDF-Suez, La Poste, MACIF and SFR. For two to three years, I regretted this commitment which I found too encompassing, too emotional and too exhausting. Today I feel that my colleagues were correct when they made me go on this adventure, and that I was correct to go along with it.

I have found in my laboratory colleagues, the CREPA, an always welcoming source of attention, and with them I often find the sentiment of existing collectively. Here and elsewhere, work can become a pleasure, that of cooperation, when complicity unites colleagues. Marie-Pascale Giovanangeli and Laurence Servel, with whom I run the 'Management, and social work and development' masters course, offer me this opportunity on a daily basis. I thank them for substituting their gaze for argumentation.

Sociologists in training often thank, in their first publications, their parents. One could think they do so in order to thank them for being able to be proud of themselves, and in order to share the said pride. But we might also think that they manifest their gratitude in this way towards those who provided them with questions that allowed them to rethink their social destinies, and social destiny more broadly. This gratitude lasts longer than the sociological training. All sociology is therefore partially a form of 'reasoned autobiography'. Only, with time, we adopt conventions founded on the sole principle of objectivity, even though all our field work speaks to people, just as much as to experts in social relations.