
Ulrich Bielefeld: Aliens - Friends or Enemies, from the Serbian translation

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Ulrich Bielefeld: Aliens - Friends or Enemies, from the Serbian translation, Stranci - prijatelji ili neprijatelji, Biblioteka XX vek, Beograd 1998

The book by Ulrich Bielefeld, a sociologist who works at the Institut für Sozialforschung in Hamburg, was published in a Serbian translation as a collection of lectures, contribution to debates and articles, from which majority was published in German in a magazine of the Institute "Mittelweg 36". Hence, we will not find in the book a focus on a single subject, but a fascinating insight into and overview of a main theme, which is constitution of various "us" and "them" dichotomies based on nation, ethnicity and domicile and alien inhabitants. As author says himself, discussing this problem should lead to development of a sociology of alien following sociological insights of Weber and Simmel (let's remember the famous definition of the latter: alien is the one who comes today and stays tomorrow) and a whole range of authors who after them dealt with this subject, frequently from a very different angles. The book is also a crucial contribution for all those who, in the light of current events whose extremes we perceive in actual political events, want and must allow themselves a theoretical distance and ask a question: what is it that groups individuals into nations and ethnic groups and creates basis for conflicts.

In the first article, titled "Exclusive Society and Inclusive Democracy", Bielefeld, referring to Beck, points at emergence of a new phenomenon: conflicts were usually organized around the "us and them" matrix. However, Chernobyl showed that the difference in the light of danger from a nuclear catastrophe disappears. It means that we all become "them", although it is questionable how much that becomes obvious in a global political consciousness. As most modern author, Bielefeld also inclines to interpretation of belonging to a nation or an ethnic group as a fiction. Namely, we have to fictive collectives, collective of our own and collective of the other. This, of course, is not to say that fictions are less efficient because they are fictions, nor does it mean that members of a collective see them as fictions. But it does mean that there is no successful primordial-essentialist basis for interpretation of grouping on the basis of nationality or ethnicity. Moreover, classification of who is an alien, as author claims, stems directly from asymmetry in power relations, where the center is moved on the side of domicile inhabitants.

It is also worth mentioning, as Bielefeld noticed, that European sociology does not see issue of alien as a central one, in a tradition from Durkheim and Weber, whereas the same problem is constitutive of the American sociology, from the Chicago school on. Interest in the other moved from "a savage", "a cannibal", "a Barbarian" to internal alien. That process makes a nation more colorful within and "its borders expand, although they do not change in reality."

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