

The World of the In-between  
by Nava Ebrahimi

Opening speech for the exhibition NO SOCIETY WILL EMERGE WITHOUT  
COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY – Guerrilla of Enlightenment

If it weren't for the fact that we must challenge ourselves on a regular basis, I would probably have declined the invitation to give this opening speech.

To gain centre stage and to raise my voice goes completely against what I have been exercising since my earliest childhood; to be modest, grateful, uncomplicated, pleasing. Just don't cause any trouble. Don't provide anybody with a target.

To demand something from the majority society, even if it is only fifteen minutes of attention, feels like an act of violence to me.

The fact that I was raised in Germany as an *Ausländerin* (a foreigner)—I grew up with that word—has shaped my personality. I internalised racism and lived in this way for a long time in the belief that racism did not concern me. I didn't want to be a victim, that didn't fit with my self-image.

Instead, I preferred to sacrifice myself a little. And earned much recognition for it.

“Persians are always so well integrated.”

“Turks and Arabs will simply never learn German as well as you do, there is something different in the brain structure” (quote of a German ambassador).

“Such beautiful dark eyes, such beautiful dark curls!”

I'm telling this to illustrate how racism manifests itself in many ways. And what “well integrated” often means in the end. It does not mean “equal”. Methods such as ethnic profiling reveal what neoliberals and well-meaning Christian democrats do not want to acknowledge: Not *only* performance counts and *not everyone* can make it.

Additional circumstances raise problems for me; Hermann Broch put it as follows:

“Confidence in the notion that human beings are capable of persuading one another with words and language has vanished in the most radical sense. Everything associated with *parlare* has taken on negative connotations.” Although the masses loathe the word, he writes, the whole world is full of voices. In this “hullabaloo of language and opinions being spoken past each other,” the writer identified “the terrifying noise of a silence that accompanies murder”.

He wrote this in 1934. It probably also makes your hair stand on end when quotes from that time seem as current as today's weather forecast.

Never, it seems to me, has so much been written, said, interviewed, blogged, commented, podcasted, monologized, mansplained, discussed in panels and talked about. But we reach each other less and less with our messages. Or, in other words, only our own messages reach us.

The mere fact that you are visiting this place suggests that we agree on fundamental social and political issues.

A classic speech against racism, against national isolation and right-wing identity politics and for diversity, openness and a humane approach to those seeking help is not what is needed here.

It would seem like that *parlare* to me. We assure each other that we are on the right side and thus create a “you” that is on the wrong side. Meanwhile, dying on the Mediterranean goes on in all silence. After making the rescue of migrants at sea a criminal offence, European politicians are no longer even trying to pretend that the people who drown are equal to us.

And a broad European public accepts that; after all, people are not equal, and the dignity of some people, depending on where they were born, can be trampled all over. And thus, the most important legacy of the Enlightenment. We are part of the structures that we criticise.

Everything I can say against the backdrop of these events seems at least useless to me, sometimes even hypocritical. Actually, I don't want to say anything more about it. If I'm not ready to sell my life tomorrow morning, buy a rescue ship and put to sea, then I just want to keep quiet.

Keep quiet, but write.

I search in silence, sitting at my desk, protected from divisive debates, for the things that connect us, for the world in between. Where there is no “we” and no “you”. For me, to always look for the in-between is one of the most urgent tasks today.

To leave the “we”, which is always exclusive. To seek the conversation from this outside, to listen, to integrate the position of the other into one's own horizon. To have an attitude: the attitude to reach true convictions in conversations. And to discover something we have in common in the in-between. I know this can be very difficult at times. And, of course, the possibility of dialogue ends where contempt begins.

Finally, I would like to forge a bridge to the Enlightenment. Because I hear so often that the Islamic world desperately needs the same:

The Enlightenment has guided Western thinking to differentiate, to classify, to work out the essence of something and differences.

Something is either the *one thing* or the *other*. In this sense, the in-between does not exist. It is this illusion of self-contained cultural identities that right-wing supporters rest on today.

First, I hesitate to talk and then I have a real go at the Enlightenment. I don't mean it that way. But when it comes to transitions and ambiguities, that is to say, what makes up our world today, the East knows better.

Excerpt from Nava Ebrahimi's speech at the opening of the exhibition on 14 June 2019.

Nava Ebrahimi, born in 1978, is writer and lives and works in Graz.