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The others' bodies (summary)

,We' and 'the others'

The word ,aliens' means etymologically belonging to a different place, a different person, or being far from this place. The places which are not here, the existence coming from different places, not from here, those are exactly called the others or aliens. At this point what we need to focus on, is that the concept of 'aliens or the others' is not separable from the recognition of ourselves. When there is a presupposition of the subjective recognition about here, this place, and the familiar things, we can finally recognize the different places from here, and so the aliens. Sociologist Sigmund Bauman said we can exist only if 'while not we, but the others in 'different places' exist"¹

Then, what enables us to distinguish 'ourselves' from the others or aliens? Firstly the distinguishment comes from visual and sensible 'difference', which are the physical characteristics. The reason why physical bodies can firstly distinguish 'we' from 'the others' is that our bodies are the starting point of the ordinary communication. We recognize others' bodies before we start proceeding communication with them in one way or another. The physical characteristics of communication partners, for examples, his or her sex, age, skin colors, eye colors, and so forth define the way of the communication in advance. It is difficult for us to proceed the communication normally without this primary definition of the others. Another reason why bodies are the first indicator, which can distinguish ourselves from aliens, comes from the permanent characteristics of bodies. Language, religion, habit can be changed under certain conditions; however, bodies can define the individuals for lifetime regardless of their languages, religion, habit, and etc.

The problem is that the process of differentiation of 'we' from 'others' has never been value-neutralized. The physical difference between 'us' and 'the others' has not been accepted as itself but evaluated based on the value-hierarchy. The bigger the cultural ethos to make 'us' superior to 'the others' is, the uglier, brutaler, more abnormal, and more disharmonic the other bodies are considered, and by the time the historical philosophical standard 'civilization vs.

¹ Zygmunt Bauman : Vom Nutzen der Soziologie, 2000 Frankfurt am Main, S.79.

barbar' has been introduced, the others' bodies are recognized and described as if they have embodied all the negative characteristics adding to the 'barbar'.

The Bodies of black people

The discussion of the bodies of black people in European cultural history clearly shows how the others' bodies are value-hierarchically accepted and interpreted. From the ancient Black people's 'black skin' and 'curly hair' have been considered the symbol of timid existence, and the negative semantics of the color 'black' in the cultural history of Europe – evil, Satan, darkness, hell, and so forth- have made a great contribution to the creation of more negative image of the bodies of black people.

The book of the founder of modern physiognomy, Casper Lavater, published in 1775, described the face of the Moor (black) as tough and rustic. "The eyes torn to the sides, the nose sank and pressed, especially the strong lips projected forward, the characteristic of the impression of the Moor is far from sophistication and elegance."² Also Herder, in his book, <philosophical principle about human history> written in 1783, has shown the long prejudice on black people, which is black people's bodies are liberal, dissolute, and chasing only amenities. By the time Europe started to use black people as slaves and reclaimed the colonies in African regions, the negative point of view toward the bodies of the black people became worse and worse. For instance, the item, 'Black Niger' in <Dictionary of zoology, humanist, and ethnology> published in 1888 includes long description about how suitable the body of black people for working as slaves.

We know that if the tendency of self-superiority to others based on the difference of the physical difference goes one step further, it will be immediately connected to the racial segregation ideas. Racism regards the others' inborn, biological and physical characteristics as culturally, morally and aesthetically inferiority instead of accepting them as simple differences. Based on this racism the Nazi racist, Warhold Drascher, insisted in his book <The supremacy of the white races> as follows. "The common point of colored races is that their characteristics are all negative [...] Within Indians, black people, Chinese, Japanese,

² Johann Caspar Lavater : Physiognomische Fragmente, 1775, Reclam, S.323.

Malaysians [...] there exists the hierarchy based on their own different skin colors. The darker the skin is, the lower becomes the position. “³

The Bodies of Oriental people

The argument of the physical characteristics of oriental people is not far different from the one of blacks. According to Wilhelm von Rubric (1215-1270) visiting Mongolia in 1252, Mongolians looked ugly as if they were leprosy and their noses are described as if cut by a knife. Also the description of Bernardino Escalate, Portuguese, traveling in China in 1579 and the picture of the four young Japanese mission published in 1586 showed the physical characteristics of oriental people as dark skin - although not as dark as black people -, small and flat nose and narrow eyes torn to the sides. The description of the Chinese is not very different from the above. According to Huan Gonzales de Mendoza's book, <The Histories of the Great and Mighty Kingdome of China > written in 1588, also J. B. Due Halde's book written in 1736 is similar as well. Later, Herder, who has never been to China, but has accepted totally the physiognomic description of the Chinese's people. According to him 'Chinese have small eyes, a flat nose, a flat forehead, a sparse beard, big ears and a big belly by nature'⁴

The European physiological access toward the other ethnics had been continued like this after 18th century and combined to the basic methodology of modern European ethnology/anthropology.⁵ The characteristics of this kind of ethnological/anthropological research and description is that although they are proceeded in the name of science which should be objective and neutral, they set the ideal European bodies as the standard for the research and description of all other non European bodies, and strengthened the hierarchical value system implicitly. Therefore, the others' bodies are described and evaluated ⁶ as 'disharmonies, too small or too big', meaning imperfect, compared to idealized European body standard. The good example of the above statement is the description of Japanese in the book, <General Ethnography > written by German ethnologist, Friedrich Müller in 1873.

³ Warhold Drascher : Die Vorherrschaft der Weißen Rasse. Die Ausbreitung des abendländischen Lebensbereiches auf die überseeischen Erdteile, Stuttgart/Berlin 1936, S.13. In (Hg.) von Joachim S. Hohmann : Schon auf den ersten Blick. Lesebuch zur Geschichte unserer Feindbilder, 1981 Darmstadt, S.109.

⁴ Herder : Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit, Bd2, S.7

⁵ Claudia Schmolders : Das Vorurteil im Leibe. Eine Einführung in die Physiognomik. Berlin 1995, S.30ff.

⁶ Kerstin Gering : Einleitung. Zwischen Sympathie und Idiosynkrasie. Zur Wahrnehmung des anderen Körpers in kulturanthropologischer Perspektive. In Gert Mattenklott (Hg.) : Fremde Körper. Zur Konstruktion des Anderen in europäischen Diskursen, 2001 Berlin, S.280.

The opposite flow of the above tendency firstly appeared after 20th century when European self-centered idea started being shaken. Due to the admiration of oriental culture come from the self criticism of European civilization, oriental culture and art from China, Japan and so on are highly valued against western materialism of the 20th century.

Closure: The ability to endure differences

As Sartre said, men's concept of the others compared to self starts from the fact that his or her own body can be shown to the others.⁷ We recognize that our bodies have been shown to the other people regardless of our own will, and combined this self-body's visibility to our own self-awareness. From this point, human beings are the only existence that can recognize their own visibility. For this reason racist terror, which makes hierarchical the grade of the differences between the characteristics of our bodies from the others, and ridicules, devaluates attacks and even tortures them, is inhuman act denying the existent starting point and the social life itself based on it. Within the racism thoughts, the people, who are considered as inferior to others, conceal, hide and forced to wrap their bodies discarding the differences regardless of his or her own will, and this means they are forced to deny their own existent base. It is natural and inevitable to differentiate self and the others based on the visual difference of the bodies and to try to construct self-identification either. However, when we insert the physical difference to the special hierarchical system in order to insist our own superiority and predominance, we are making violence denying the existent starting point of self and the others.

The ability to accept, endure and stand the differences of the others' bodies, instead of subjugating others into our own value hierarchy or us into others', we should accept the differences between ourselves and the others as it makes the world richer and more affluent, which is our task for building better community.

⁷ J. P. Sartre : Das Sein und das Nichts, S.467.