

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

BY

NORBERT ALTER

Université Paris Dauphine, France



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First published as *La force de la différence: Itinéraires de patrons atypiques*, 2012

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Translated by Nathan Khadaroo
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78714-582-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-78714-581-8 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-78714-984-7 (Epub)

ISSN: 2051-2333 (Series)



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ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001



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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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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.

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INTRODUCTION – THE STRENGTH OF DIFFERENCE: ITINERARIES OF ATYPICAL BOSSES

Those who are ‘normal’ generally dislike those who are ‘different’, and the expression of this sentiment takes the form of mockeries, mistrust, trials and exclusions. However, some of those who are different have managed to transform their disadvantages into resources and to turn around their destinies: they have brilliant professional careers, they are leaders. This however does not mean that they became ‘normal’. They may be leaders but they remain strangers to conventional social positions. This book collects and discusses the stories of bosses and decision makers who have succeeded in creating these unconventional positions by turning their differences into strengths.

A self-taught manager, born in Algeria into what we might call a ‘modest family’, gained a Certificat d’aptitude professionnelle (CAP, a French type of vocational qualification) and then started to work in an industry. Thirty years later, she lives in Paris leading a department in a large company which comprises roughly 30 graduates from the best schools and the most comfortable backgrounds. She greeted me in a warm yet simple manner. The weather was pleasant and her office window was wide open. Twice she invited me to walk in the building’s courtyard, so she could smoke a cigarette. She did not correspond to the standard model of a manager: she laughed, weighed her words, didn’t display her status in any way and showed no interest in markers of precedence. On the contrary, she appeared to hide them so as to more directly reach who I was. She told me about how she accepted being uprooted, suggesting an understanding of how to, by understanding others, take root elsewhere. She knew how to relate to me, a bit like how one would tell a story to a child or a foreigner (i.e., with empathy), her beginnings as a worker, her contact with machines, the pleasure she gained and continued to gain from her capacity to, for the greater good, negotiate and have others see reason. She also told me that she continued to feel different. Finally, she explained to me how her passion for success, her will to overcome challenges, absurdities and domination came from a philosophy of engagement which she drew from an analysis of her own life and her parents’ lives. Disabled people, homosexuals, or Maghrebis in influential positions do the same: to occupy a management position despite being different, it is necessary for individuals to have great strength and audacity, and it is also required that they are comfortable with themselves and their own histories. Becoming a leader does not erase these original differences, on the contrary it demands that differences

be transformed into alternative ways of acting, seeing, investing and relating to others.

This is the case of a homosexual manager from the provincial bourgeoisie, who conducted heavy duty and complex projects for a building firm. As a graduate of a Grande École (a prestigious type of French educational institution), he was able to be accepted in an engineering environment that was both elitist and conventional: his career developed rapidly. His appearance was pretty conventional, he was visibly engaged when we talked about management theories, which he knew well. He then talked to me of his homosexuality ('we do not choose it'), of the turmoil that it can create in a traditional family and of the difficulties of having to escape their laws, and sometimes their affections, so as to be able to live freely. With extraordinary precision and perspective, he described to me the behaviours of individuals in the workplace, of trading clients and of his management taking decisions, in a way that suggested that being different had led him to see the world differently, and specifically that it led him to look at the world rather than to merely see it. He combined in his analyses a paradoxical competence composed of a close proximity to the stakes and constraints of his company ('he is committed'), and a great distance from the stakes and the networking that took place in his company (he holds his position, but it does not contain him). He also pointed out that his sexual orientation obliged him to accomplish a perfect professional career, the acceptance of his difference being contingent on him doing so. If the results he demanded from his co-workers were deemed too high, or if his peers were not satisfied by his management, ironic or malicious explanations could have spread: 'It's because he is gay.' He provided me with several examples of this kind of experience, which are perfectly comparable to what might be experienced by female, disabled, self-taught or people of colour in positions of influence: being different requires minimising exposure to criticism, relative to those within the norm. The existence of this risk both sharpens their vigilance and their capacity for observation, implying that for those who are different, constantly being on edge represents the cost of entering the world of 'normals'. Furthermore, the perennial nature of this situation leads them to engage differently with the world of work: through strong commitment they are able to prove their worth, and a strong detachment allows them to better understand its social codes, and objectify lived experiences.

This book looks in detail at the stories of these kinds of bosses. Rather than following the paths drawn out for them, the bosses here in question have preferred to draw their own. Today they hold beneficial and envied social positions. However, 20 or 30 years ago, their differences represented considerable social disadvantages. Descendants of visible ethnic minorities, disabled, autodidacts, women or homosexuals, they have become bosses, business managers or directors, despite these positions being usually reserved for men who are straight, white, from bourgeois families, graduates of Grandes Écoles, and who display a 'correct manner'. I will refer to the former as 'atypical'.

I chose the term 'atypical' rather than 'different' because the bosses studied here cannot be characterised solely by sexual, social, ethnic or physical criteria, but rather by a multitude of specific behaviours which characterise the ways in

which they relate to work, others and businesses and which are not found in the classical typology of leaders. Objective differences therefore only correspond to a single aspect of the individuals in question. Indeed these differences are of little sociological interest, other than through their consequences on relations with others. Thus the female self-taught manager, or the homosexual manager described above mainly manifest subjective differences: distance from their positions, a capacity for engagement and a talent as well as an appetite for analysis and story-telling through representation. The experience of difference, regardless of its nature, consists at least as much of looking at the world differently than of being looked at differently.

For this same reason, I chose not to analyse each difference specifically. Of course, homosexuals are not treated in the same way as autodidacts, nor are disabled people treated the way people of colour are. However, they have all experienced stigmatisation and have, at least for the individuals studied here, gone on to master it. These experiences are based upon mechanisms and learning processes that are infinitely more interesting to understand via their shared characteristics than through their specificities, for at least three reasons. The first reason concerns the shortcomings of categories used to label diversity: for example, I would have to include people who are often sick, excessively irritable, poorly dressed, overdressed, those with 'bad manners', those who are overly sensitive, divorced or/and remarried women, bachelors, the ignorant and the well educated. This list is endless because it is not based on an objective dimension. The second reason is epistemological: it is not sociology's principal objective to understand the situation of populations considered to be different, rather it aims to understand what leads a population to be considered different in the first place. The third reason is fundamental: the capacity to turn around fate has infinitely more to do with how people relate to themselves and to others, than it does with skin colour, sexual orientations or various disabilities. In other words, this book does not principally focus on providing an account of the respective situations of each of the categories identified, but rather on understanding the social and economic processes which allow an inversion of destiny through work.

The atypical bosses in question here represent a group of people who are fascinating to listen to, for at least three reasons. The first reason has to do with the nature of their, so to speak, 'extraordinary' careers, which resemble adventures and therefore capture our attention infinitely more than even the most beautiful of 'normal' successes would. The second reason corresponds to the enigmatic character of their careers: because they have succeeded in defining lives that escape classically identified social positions, atypical leaders challenge conventional models of analysis. The third reason is that, as a result of their need to understand, much better than most, what grounds the ways in which they relate to the world, to others and to themselves, they possess a greater freedom of speech and a rare capacity for analysis.

This last reason led me to make a somewhat atypical choice regarding the presentation of my analysis. Rather than substitute myself for my interviewees, as is generally done by sociologists studying 'indigenous peoples', I chose to transcribe their responses as broadly as possible since their ability to understand often

struck me as being just as convincing as my own analytical capacities. Instead of illustrating my reasoning through direct quotes, I chose to clarify – to allow a good understanding of – my interviewees, own words through my analyses. Ultimately, I have done nothing more than to classify and to conceptualise what was said to me. The main challenge was to remain as faithful as possible to the words of my interviewees and to the spirit of what they were saying.

I have outlined precisely, in the methodological annex of this book, the techniques used to inquire, to collect material, to select individuals to interview, to analyse information as well as the measures taken to respect both the speech and the anonymity of my interviewees. Around 60 people were interviewed, almost always for over two hours. My sample was composed of entrepreneurs, managers and, more rarely, high-level executives.

Fundamentally, this study leads us to turn the way in which the social sciences generally look at the world on its head. Indeed, it highlights the capacity to escape socially determined outcomes, despite the fact that the observation of social life usually shows the opposite. We know all too well that social categories remain largely impermeable to mobility and that they are able to insure their own ‘reproduction’: bosses are thus infinitely more likely to be ‘inheritors’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964) who have benefitted from their parents’ social and economic capital, than they are to be individuals who come from a ‘social nowhere’ or who occupy a position for no reason other than their competence. Similarly, research on gender, ethnic minorities, homosexuals and the disabled confirms that the discrimination against these individuals is based upon the fact that they find themselves dominated by ‘normal’, majority groups, who exclude them from socially advantageous positions. The stratification of the world therefore obeys both economic logics and cultural norms which often overrule profit-driven incentives. For example, we would be otherwise unable to understand the existence of the ‘glass ceiling’, the (non-regulatory but very real) invisible barrier which prevents women in leadership positions from being put in charge, despite them being renowned for their ability. These analyses remain hard to contest: bosses rarely come from working class backgrounds and it goes without saying that few disabled people become entrepreneurs, that homophobia can be found in the management of careers, that, for the same level of ability, people tend to prefer a graduate to an autodidact or a white person to a person of colour, and that few women are part of the leadership of major companies.

Analysing the trajectories of atypical bosses does therefore not imply a denial of global mechanisms of reproduction and domination, rather it involves taking interest in the rare events which defy the logics of these mechanisms. This process is different to the analysis of anecdotes or to the description of ‘success stories’. It assumes that systems are never transformed from the centre because change always begins from the margins. Taking an interest in marginal phenomena therefore represents an opportunity to understand the emergence of new types of regulations and actors. Conversely, neglecting these phenomena can lead to the belief that ‘the die is already cast’, despite the fact that political and social history is constantly showing us that the opposite is true. Furthermore, I believe that documenting instances where the logics of minority actors are more effective

than those of the system contributes to the case for new regulations and for the emergence of these new actors. Articulating changes in the order of the world contributes to its transformation just as much as the denunciation of the domination of the weak by the strong does.

It remains the case that the trajectories of atypical bosses, in the way in which they themselves speak of them and in the way in which they take meaning, begins with stigmatisation, the analysis of which forms the first chapter of this book.

The following four chapters borrow heavily from the works of Simmel. In a short text, of great intelligence and insight, simply called 'The Stranger', he analyses the position of strangers as that of imperfectly socialised individuals: 'Thus strangers are in some ways potential travellers: despite having not followed their paths, they have not completely abandoned their freedom to come and go' (Simmel, 1907/1979, p. 53). It is indeed this position of drifting, of being a border broker, which characterises the situations, actions and cultures of atypical bosses: having overcome stigmatisation, and despite never really being free of stigma, they find themselves between two worlds, between an inside and an outside, between distance and commitment, between recognition and contempt, never ending their movement. This position of in-betweenness leads them to objectify the dominant interactions, norms and representations of a society by constantly mobilising analysis and curiosity, infinitely more than management handbooks suggest. This ability represents a considerable resource in the world of business: it allows the elaboration of forms of engagement that are efficient and independent from conventional norms.

This book represents, from all these perspectives, a contribution to the sociology of the stranger. Indeed, it could well have taken such a title.

In the final chapter, I analyse how this same position leads atypical bosses to look at the world with distance, without ever simply accepting it, and to speak of themselves and of their stories so as to better understand and frame them. The successes of atypical bosses do not make them forget their differences: it is on these differences that their success is based. Difference therefore represents, for those who are not overwhelmed by it, the means of succeeding, of making something of themselves and of giving meaning to their engagements and leadership.