Sally Haslanger: „To effect social change, we must change the culture"

Interview with Friedrich Weißbach published at philomag.de 09 June 2023

We live in a society marked by sexist, racist and economic injustices, says Sally Haslanger. This makes social change absolutely necessary. The philosopher and this year's holder of the Benjamin Chair explains in an interview what exactly this could look like and why it also includes a new view of the law.

Ms. Haslanger, at the beginning of your career you were primarily concerned with metaphysical issues. You dealt with the topics of "race" and gender exclusively in activism. Only later did you also address these topics scientifically. What insights from metaphysics help us today to understand social categories like gender and race?

In my research at the time, I was particularly interested in how things persist despite change. Everything is constantly changing and the question is how something can be the same and yet also different. According to the Aristotelian conception, substances have essential and contingent properties. The essential properties are those that make us what we are and the contingent properties are those that change. We still make this distinction today. When I first started looking at "race" and gender, people started referring to gender as socially constructed. It was unclear to me what was

meant by this. My background in ontology and metaphysics helped me understand it.

In what way?

For generations, being a woman has been understood as an essential quality. When people now speak of gender being socially constructed, they are saying, among other things, that gender, and thus being a woman, is not an essential but a contingent quality of a person. We find this differentiation in all things. Take milk, for example. There is oat milk and cow milk. The dairy industry says that oat, soy and almond milk should not be called milk because it is not milk, since it does not come from cows. The question arises: what is essential to milk? Does it necessarily have to be from cows? The question is more than just a linguistic matter. In fact, it is a question of social function: do we relate the concept of milk only to the liquid produced by cows, or do we allow that milk is a functional concept, indicating that one can cook with this liquid or put it in coffee. The same shift has taken place regarding the concept of "woman." The question then is: does the term "woman" denote a person capable of childbearing or is it rather a functional term, according to which a person is a woman if she functions in society in a certain way? In this understanding, we can say that genders are contingent properties that we have because we live in a certain social system. This insight is something metaphysical because it is about what is possible for something and what is necessarily included in it. That leads to a lot of confusion at times. We are confused about what is essential and what is not.

At this year's Benjamin Lectures in Berlin, they explore the possibilities of social change. Why do we need social change?

Our current form of society is deeply unjust and oppressive. It is sexist, racist, exploitative and last but not least discriminatory against disabled people. Our goal should be to form a society where differences between races, genders, and disabled and non-disabled people are not accompanied by differences in power. We need to

work towards a community that is more egalitarian, more democratic, and more appreciative of the value of every life.

So by social change, you mean changing society so that there are fewer forms of discrimination, exploitation and oppression?

Right.

We live in liberal societies where people pride themselves on having equal rights for all. Why is that not enough?

There is a common conception of rights as negative rights. According to this, to have a right is to have a kind of protective bubble around you that keeps you from letting people interfere in private matters such as religion, one's relationship, or issues of the body. I don't think that's enough. Rather, we need to put the idea of positive law that helps us achieve our goals at the center of our thinking. Because in a community, we depend on each other. Food production, education, or love are things that can only be fulfilled in community. If we think of law only as non-interference, then we lose sight of the importance of this human interdependence. So when we think about how we want to shape the world, we need to be clearer about what the needs of other fellow human beings are and how they can be met. But it would be wrong to think that the law can do all this. The state is primarily responsible for regulating the public sphere. Many crimes, however, occur in private, as the fate of many women shows. Also, the distribution of work in the household, such as childcare or care for the elderly, still falls to the disadvantage of women. I think it is wrong to demand that the state intervene even further in private life and say how the division of labor should look in concrete terms. If we focus only on the state and the possibility of legal regulation, we miss out on this crucial dimension of human life.

In your texts you emphasize again and again that it is not enough to criticize the false consciousness of people - for example that by a legally formal equality already social equality is produced. Why?

Because awareness alone does not automatically change anything in practice. Because just because you are aware of something as an individual, it doesn't mean that you can live according to that awareness. You have to change the world in order to live according to that awareness. For example, one can come to the conclusion

that it would be good not to drive a car anymore, because one would pollute the environment less. However, if you live in the countryside and there is no public infrastructure, this insight does not help people much. They are forced to use cars to get around because of the way our world is constructed. You have to change the material conditions. Only then is a new way of living and thus the realization of consciousness possible. In concrete terms, this means rethinking the social distribution of resources and the structuring of the environment.

How is social change possible?

There are three different ways to initiate social change: First, one can try to change the material conditions. This can be done through strikes or blockades. Such actions change the way people move. They disrupt habitual routines and thereby get people to deal with the demands. As a result, they have the potential for people to start listening and showing solidarity. Secondly, it can change the cultural and social meaning of things. I grew up in a school at a time when all girls had to wear skirts all the time. One day there was a protest by all the girls. Everyone wore pants to dinner. We went above the norm and collectively made a statement: Not only did we make it clear that we would wear pants in the future, but in doing so we also gave a different meaning to wearing pants, changing the cultural attribution of what it means to be a boy or a girl. The third possibility is, of course, political and legal change. Despite the above limitation, this is an important part of social change. It just must not be seen as a panacea. Because even if you change laws, it does not mean that the realities of life will also change.

What is blocking social change today?

An important point is the traditions and habits in which people are embedded. They are closely linked to their identities and give them security. However, some traditions and habits, and the identities that arise from them, reproduce oppressive systems such as patriarchy or white supremacy, and therefore must be abandoned. On a societal level, this questioning of stabilizing habits and norms threatens many people's sense of security. They are afraid that order will fall apart. Non-binary people, for example, unsettle many because people do not know how to deal with them. Their presence transcends their practiced norms of action. Moreover, they wonder what the consequences of questioning these norms will be for the concept of family that gives them security. By rejecting these ways of life, they want to avoid

such insecurity. But it is also difficult for the individuals who change their individuality. Questioning oneself as an individual and understanding oneself beyond the usual norms means thinking outside the box. That's unsettling, which prevents many people from taking that step. And ultimately, of course, there are people who are simply interested in maintaining their position of power in society: The rich, for example, are not interested in an equal distribution of property.

What role does theory play in social change?

Theory can explain deeper causes of social problems. Take the example of racism in the US. Theory can show that not only does racialized inequality persist, but that it is historically closely linked to capitalism. At first glance, equality appears to exist after the abolition of racial laws. Yet, in fact, it appears that economic and social inequality has still been maintained along racialized lines. Property relations, which did not change with the liberation of slaves, play a major role in this, forcing non-white people in particular to have their labor exploited for low wages. This is an important factor for the capitalist economy because it depends on this cheap labor. To explain this historical causality, theory is needed. Only from this analysis, one understands that racism is not a problem of ill will, which many people think, but the result of a historical development and in this sense structural. But theory alone is ultimately not enough.

What else is needed for social change?

For social change, the knowledge of those affected is important in order to understand what is going wrong. That is why I am convinced that some things can only be learned in practice. When you think about what needs to change in our daily lives, you should go into practice and start doing things differently. Only then can you see what works and what doesn't. This insight then needs to be fed back into theory. Practice offers its own form of understanding, which is beyond thinking, but which can be a source of knowledge.

What must a successful social critique look like?

It can't be about changing people's hearts and minds on a micro level, nor can it be about aiming to abolish capitalism on a macro level. Social change happens at a middle level, where you coordinate with other people and think together about how to do things differently. You start changing your own behavior, and then in a

collective or movement, you get other people to question their behavior. When you start saying "no" as a group, you create a social movement that has the power to change something across society.

Can you give an example of this?

For example, you get women in a marriage to say, "I'm sorry, I'm not going to do the laundry anymore. I'll show you how. This is a change in social practice, the successes of which are sometimes already visible today. Whereas in my youth no man even touched the laundry, today more and more men are taking on this task as a matter of course. The same applies to raising children or doing the housework. These are major changes that have taken place because women have said: I don't do that anymore. But of course, this change was also in the context of various pressures and is more complex. For example, women also had to start working because they were economically forced to do so because their husband's salary was no longer enough to provide for them.

The title of your Benjamin Lecture is "Agents of Possibility - The Complexity of Social Change." What constitutes the complexity of social change?

There are three different types of systems. One is a mechanical system, like a dishwasher or a car engine. It consists of individual parts that perform a function as a unit. These systems are largely predictable. Then there are dynamic systems like the human body or the ecosystem. Here, the parts have a complex interdependent relationship. An action of one body changes the other, which in turn affects other bodies and thus the entire structure. The system is constantly changing and is therefore difficult to predict. Finally, there are absolutely chaotic systems, which are not predictable at all. A society corresponds to the second system. It is neither mechanical nor chaotic, but very complex in itself. Many theories that think about social change understand society like a mechanical system and think that you simply have to turn individual adjusting screws, such as the laws, and then everything will change for the better. I think that is wrong.

Why?

I think this is too simplistic because it doesn't take into account the interdependence of the different parts in the system. The example of racial segregation in the U.S. shows that changing laws has not led to desegregation because various mechanisms

continue to exist within the culture that maintain segregation. To effect social change, we must change the culture. To do this, we need to think about incremental changes at influential points that change the dynamics of the system in the hope that this influence will have a positive impact.

What do you mean by culture?

We often talk about, for example, German or French culture, in the sense of a way of life and values that are characteristic of a certain group of people. That's not what I mean. I mean culture in terms of social meanings that are socially associated with things and practices, like drinking coffee in the afternoon. Drinking coffee is a social practice of getting together that is determined by unwritten norms: It's clear that you don't eat a big meal, but you might eat a biscuit; unlike a big dinner, it's okay if it doesn't last long. At the same time, the biscuit also has social significance. It can bring up gender issues, for example, when a woman is considering whether or not to eat it because she doesn't want to get fat due to societal perceptions of beauty. All of our interactions and all things have social meanings. And in their totality, these meanings shape a culture.

So culture is both a product of society and, in Bourdieu's sense, habitus-creating?

Yes, exactly. It is circular. But culture and our actions are also in a mutually influencing relationship with matter. Humans are indeed able to shape the world according to their own ideas. But the world is not infinitely malleable and proves resistant, which in turn influences our behavior. Our actions are shaped by the world, just as we also shape the world.

Who are the "agents" of social change?

Basically, we are all stakeholders because we all have the ability to influence the system. Because of the complexity described, even small changes can make a big

difference. So if we empower ourselves and each other to do things differently, it can lead to positive social change.

So there are no special "agents" such as the proletariat, women, or non-whites who are particularly predisposed to social change?

Yes there are. Sometimes there are charismatic leaders who have a vision and can inspire others to that vision. Also, people who are systematically oppressed may have a special position in some circumstances because they have a specific knowledge of existing problems that arises from their situations and that can contribute to a better understanding. However, I do not think that simply belonging to a marginalized group in itself generates special knowledge. As a woman, of course, one has a knowledge of what it is like to live as a woman in this world, but not necessarily a critical perspective on it. On the contrary, many women even consider the current role attributions to be good. They feel safe in this position and are afraid of alternatives. They do not know how things would be if the power relations were not as they are and therefore see a value in what exists. So we cannot assume that all members of a subordinate group have a critical consciousness and give us a knowledge of how things should be.

If norms are socially learned and accordingly are to be understood as historically contingent, how do we know that the norms on which social criticism is based are the correct ones? How can we judge other people's worldview? How can you say to women that although they are happy, they are wrong?

Simone de Beauvoir says in the introduction to "The Second Sex" that the goal is not happiness but liberation. I agree with that. People can be happy because their expectations have been lowered to the point where they feel what they have is sufficient. They don't have the ability to imagine what could even be possible for them. And so they are satisfied. But it is not enough to have many happy but stunted and limited people. It is necessary to strive for more.

But how do you know what the right path is?

John Stuart Mill advocated conducting a thought experiment in which people are confronted with two options. The first is the present situation. The other is a state in which existing constraints of the first option no longer exist. The point is not to think up any utopias, but to choose scenarios that are real, perhaps already existing in

society or at least potentially created in it. Practically, we can imagine a situation where women do not receive education, are confined to the domestic sphere and yet are satisfied. What if women, like the men living with them, had the opportunity to be educated without negative attendant circumstances? Would they choose to do so? With Mill, I think that a person who has the opportunity to live in other conditions, where he has more freedom, would always choose it.

Education is certainly an example where most would agree. But we're in a situation socially where feminists criticize other women and those women say, "I don't feel unfree. I think the situation is fine the way it is." What right do we have to tell them you're wrong?

These are two different questions between which we must differentiate. What do we want to make available to women and what do we want to force them to do? I don't agree that a woman who stays at home, takes care of her children and doesn't pursue a career is necessarily doing anything wrong. If it's her choice, let her do that and be happy. What concerns me is that it is often not a genuine choice. In many cases, they are given a choice architecture where alternative options look very bad, either because they live in a social community where it's frowned upon for women to have careers or the family can't afford for the woman to pursue an education. We need to make sure that the choices women have are good ones and that they are not stuck between bad options. We need to make sure that there are enough choices, that they are really their choices and not those of the society they live in, and that they are not determined by economic conditions in their decision.

Is the method to combat race and gender discrimination the same?

Again, there needs to be a change in the material conditions, i.e., both the resources and the opportunities available to the various groups. There also needs to be a change in culture, in the sense mentioned above, regarding the meanings of dark skin and the female body. But the phenomena also have crucial differences, which means that in concrete terms, the things that need to be changed are also different.

What are these differences?

An important difference between race and gender is that, as Simone de Beauvoir says, women live with the enemy and will continue to do so. Non-white people can live among themselves independently of white people and create their own

communities in which they support each other. This opportunity is not available to many women in this way. They can't say, come on, we're all moving to another country.

But not all men are the enemy, right?

No, they are not. "Living with the enemy" was a slogan of feminist theory.

Young men nowadays are faced with the question of how to behave so as not to reproduce the patriarch type themselves. Do you have any advice?

Bernard Williams said this wonderful phrase that the greatest challenge for a society is to give people a framework that allows them to understand, communicate and act with each other, but at the same time does not stifle the individual who is trying to find a life worth living. This is a balancing act. We are now in a phase in which we are playing with which structures we give up and which we do not. But because the framework is not fixed, this leads to us feeling disconnected and no longer knowing who and what we are. What we need is a free society that allows one to be oneself, but at the same time is structured enough that individual freedom happens in a way that is meaningful to oneself and to others. Finding a balance, being yourself without perpetuating the old structures, is not easy in a time when things are changing quite dramatically. This is true for men and women, non-binary people and trans people alike. We all struggle with this.

There are social theories, such as Nancy Fraser's, that assume that oppressive structures of domination such as "race" and gender are not only products of historical capitalism, but are also still closely linked to it today. The thesis here is that the forms of oppression cannot be abolished unless capitalism is fought/abolished. What do you think of this thesis?

Nancy Fraeser thinks that capitalism as a system produces "race" and gender as categories to sustain itself. She sees race and gender as subsystems of capitalism. While I agree that all three fields are interconnected, I think they form one big system in which patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism are dynamic forces or „logics". It is a dynamic in the sense of a complex system in which the individual parts evolve, change, and influence each other. It may be that we can't get rid of racism and sexism unless we address capitalism. But it is also true the other way around, that you can't get rid of capitalism without getting rid of sexism and racism.

Fraeser emphasizes the logic of capitalism. But there is also a logic of sexism, racism, heteronormativity, and eugenics. There are many interacting logics in this system. If you change one component, it affects all the other phenomena. If we want radical change, we must work on all dimensions of the system simultaneously.