
Weergave van de lezing op 7 april 1997 in de serie 'Een avond aan zee' van Management Studiecentrum De Baak te Noordwijk.

Text of a lecture given at management study center De Baak (Noordwijk, the Netherlands) on April 7, 1997.

Gender, identity and multiculturalism in the context of the European Union.

Rosi Braidotti

Introduction: the condition of postmodernity

One of the defining features of the postmodern condition is that it rests on the paradox of the simultaneous occurrence of contradictory trends: for instance, on the one hand the *globalization* of the economic and cultural processes which engenders increasing conformism in consumption and consumerism, life-style and tele-communication. On the other hand we also see the *fragmentation* of these processes: the resurgence of regional, local, ethnic, cultural and other differences not only *between* the geo-political blocks but also within them.

Following the work of postcolonial thinkers like Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and others, I think that -from a European perspective- one of the most significant effects of postmodernity is the phenomenon of trans-culturality. World-migration -a huge movement of population from periphery to centre- has challenged the alleged cultural homogeneity of European nation-states. This new historical context requires that we shift the political debates from the differences *between* cultures to differences *within* a culture. One of the central paradoxes of the postmodern historical condition is the shifting grounds on which periphery and centre get pitched against each other in such a perversely complex

manner as to defy dualistic or oppositional ways of thinking and to require instead more subtle and dynamic articulation.

The feminist movement is especially conscious of this necessity. Spivak states it clearly¹:

The face of global feminism is turned outward and must be welcomed and respected as such, rather than fetishized as the figure of the Other.

This new context requires that we shift the debates from the differences between cultures to differences within a culture.

Thus, postmodernity is about the shift of geo-political power away from the North-Atlantic in favour of the Pacific Rim and especially South-East Asia. Cornel West put it succinctly, from a North American perspective:

Postmodernism (...) is a set of responses due to the decentering of Europe - of living in a world that no longer rests upon European hegemony and domination in the political, economic, military and cultural dimensions which began in 1492².

The convergence between the discourse of the 'crisis' of the West within poststructuralism and the post-colonial deconstruction of imperial whiteness is not a *sufficient*, though I would argue it is a *necessary* condition for a political alliance between them. At the very least this convergence lays the grounds for the possibility of such an alliance. Anthony Appiah³ reminded us of the need *not* to confuse the 'post' of postcoloniality with the 'post' of postmodernism but to respect instead the specific historical locations of each. And feminists are in a very good position to know that the deconstruction of sexism and racism does *not* automatically entail their downfall. Speaking as a feminist anti-racist post-structuralist, however, I also wish to stress both the concomitance of these lines of critique and their necessary intersection over the issue of political subjectivity and resistance, identity and sexual difference or gender.

I think that facing up to these contradictory demands is our historical responsibility because as early-21st century North Atlantic people we are historically condemned to our history, because we are the ones who come after the historical decline of the promises of the Enlightenment. Whether you choose to call our predicament 'postmodern', 'post-humanist' or 'neo-humanist' makes little difference. What does matter, however, is our shared awareness that we must make ourselves *accountable* for the history of our culture without burying our head in the sand but also without giving in to relativism. Relativism is not an option because it erodes the possibility of both political coalitions and intellectual debates.

European citizenship

I think it important to contextualize this discussion within the political framework of the European Union. As a progressive project the European Union is an attempt to come to terms with the historical decline of European nation-states and more specifically of the century-old virus of European nationalism. Nationalism in European history goes hand in hand with the self-appointed mission of Europeans to act as *the* centre, i.e. their universalistic pretension. Nowadays the post-colonial world-order and the process of the trans-national economy spells the decline of nation-states as principles of economic

and political organization. The coming of the electronic frontier and the information highways accelerates the process of de-materialization of the nation-state. This decline has generated a wave of nostalgia which is one of the key features of contemporary politics⁴.

This has generated a wave of nostalgia which is one of the key features of contemporary politics.

The nostalgic political discourse can be clearly noted in discussions about European citizenship and immigration. The project of European unification has in fact triggered a wave of reactions which are simultaneously anti-European, xenophobic and also enact a fragmentation of larger national identity into regionalist or localized 'identities'. I take this paradox of simultaneous globalization and fragmentation as one of the defining features of our era and I am especially concerned to analyze its effects on women and female citizenship.

That it had actually taken almost 50 years for the issues of *culture* and education to be put on the agenda of the European Economic Union indicates how complex and potentially divisive a political notion 'culture' is. It contains potentially explosive issues of entitlement and diversity. I think consequently that it is of the utmost importance to rethink issues of multicultural and gender identity from a European perspective. I stress this point because, given the legacy of colonialism, it is much easier for Europeans to address social questions related to far-away places than to stare at the problems in our own backyard. The feminist movement is not an exception. Although women of colour like Chandra Mohanty⁵ have warned us very strongly against the ethno-centric habit that consist in constructing the 'third world woman' -or the Eastern European woman or the Muslim woman- as an abject of oppression that requires our support. Spivak has also equated this form of 'solidarity' to benevolent paternalism, which has a lot to do with colonialism. It is against this flight into abstraction that feminist scholarship has proposed a method based on situated perspectives and on the politics of location.

This type of research is also aware of the danger of recreating a sovereign centre through the new European

federation. Also known as the 'Fortress Europe' syndrome this has been extensively criticized by feminists and anti-racists such as Helma Lutz, Nira Yuval-Davis, Avtar Brah, Floya Anthias and Philomena Essed. They warn us against the danger of replacing the former Eurocentrism with a new 'Europ-ism', i.e. the belief in an ethnically pure Europe. 'Fortress Europe' is a problem not only for the many it locks out but also for those it locks in. The much-celebrated 'free circulation' of people hardly covers the ethnic minorities living in Europe⁶.

Situating and relocating whiteness

Another way in which gendered and racialized identities and locations intersect in my work is on the issue of *whiteness*. Let me explain.

It has been argued that the idea of cultural homogeneity⁷ is the foundational political myth in Europe, much as multi-culturalism is the central myth in the United States. Of course European history at any point in time provides ample evidence to the contrary: waves of migrations from the East and the South make mockery of any claim to ethnic or cultural homogeneity in Europe while the persistent presence of Jewish and Muslim citizens challenges the identification of Europe with Christianity. Nonetheless the *myth* of cultural homogeneity is crucial to the tale of European nationalism. In our era this myth is being exposed and exploded into questions related to entitlement and agency. Thus, the European Union is faced with the issues of entitlement I mentioned earlier: can one be European *and* Black or Muslim? Paul Gilroy's work on being a Black British subjectivity⁸ is indicative of the problem of citizenship and blackness emerging as contested issues.

I want to argue however that 'whiteness' is also called into play. One of the radical implications of the project of the European Union is the possibility of giving a specific location -and consequently historical embeddedness or memory- to anti-racist whites. Historically in our culture in fact only white supremacists, nazi-skins and other fascists actually had a theory about qualities that are inherent to white people. Like all fascists they are biological and cultural essentialists. Apart from this whiteness was, quite simply, invisible, just *not* seen.

at least not by whites⁹. Richard Dyer¹⁰ defines whiteness an emptiness or an absence. Being the norm it is invisible, as if natural and inevitable. Ruth Frankenberg defines this as a "structured invisibility"¹¹.

Non-whites have a much clearer perception of whiteness than whites.

The process of naturalization/invisibility of whiteness makes it not only politically pernicious, it also has methodological implications. Whiteness becomes very difficult to analyze *critically*; it tends to break down into sub-categories of whiteness: Irish-ness, Italian-ness, Jewish-ness etcetera. It follows therefore that non-whites have a much clearer perception of whiteness than whites¹². In this framework Frankenberg calls upon whites for radical embodiment and for accountability: by viewing their subject-position as racialized white people make open spaces to work towards antiracist forms of whiteness or at least anti-racist strategies to rework whiteness.

The strategy I want to defend in this regard is one of accountability without either relativism or guilt. I support the claim to European identity as an open and multi-layered project, not as a fixed and given essence. A cultural identity of this kind is a space of historical contradictions which needs to be turned into spaces of critical resistance to hegemonic identities of all kinds. My own choice to re-work whiteness is firstly to situate it - in the space of Europe and within the political project of European citizenship. This amounts to historicizing it and de-mystifying it. The next step, following the method of feminist politics of location, is to analyze it critically. The third step consists in trying to re-locate European identity so as to undo its hegemonic tendencies. This shift of perspective entails the recognition of the multicultural social realities of our time. I refer to this kind of identity as 'nomadic'. Being a nomadic European subject means to be in transit within different identity-formations but sufficiently anchored to a historical position to accept responsibility for it.

Dr R. Braidotti is professor of women's studies in the Arts Faculty of Utrecht University and scientific director of the Netherlands Research School of Women's Studies. She coordinates ATHENA, the European Thematic Network of Women's Studies for the SOCRATES programme of the commission of the European Union, as well as the NOISE inter-European university exchange programme. In the academic year 1994-95 she was a fellow in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. She is currently concentrating her philosophical research on the concept of difference in the work of Gilles Deleuze.

Address: Universiteit Utrecht, Dep. of Women's Studies in the Arts, Kromme Nieuwegracht 29, 3512 HD Utrecht.

NOTES

1. G.C. Spivak, 'French feminism revisited: ethics and politics'; in: J. Butler & J. Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political*; New York, Routledge, 1992, pp.54-85. Quote from p.54.
2. C. West, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*; Common Courage Press, Monroe, Maine, 1994, p.125.
3. A. Appiah, 'Is the post- in postmodernism the post- in postcolonial?'; in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, Winter 1991, pp.336-57.
4. F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*; Duke University Press, Durham, 1991.
5. C.T. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses'; in: P. Williams & L. Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*; Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, pp.196-220.
6. H. Lutz, N. Yuval-Davis & A. Phoenix, *Crossfires*; Pluto Press, London, 1996, p.5.
7. M. Walzer, *What It Means To Be An American*; Marsilio, New York, 1992.
8. P. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*; Hutchinson, London, 1987.
9. T. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*; Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1992.
10. R. Dyer, 'White'; in: *The Matter of Images*; Routledge, New York/London, 1993, pp.141-63.
11. R. Frankenberg, *White Women. Race Matters. The Social Construction of Whiteness*; University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p.6.
12. B. Hooks, 'Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination'; in: *Killing Rage. Ending Racism*; Holt & Company, New York.