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Herausgegeben von
Marianne Schmidbauer,
Helma Lutz und Ulla Wischermann

ULRIKE HELMER VERLAG

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Rosi Braidotti Nomadic Subjects*

Sexual Difference as a Nomadic Political Project

I think that the women who can get beyond the feeling of having to correct history will save a lot of time.

—*Marguerite Duras, 1991*

As I have stated earlier, the nomadic condition that I am defending is a new figuration of subjectivity in a multidifferentiated nonhierarchical way. In this chapter I will explore more specifically how it intersects with the axis of sexual difference. I agree with Luce Irigaray that sexual difference is the question with which we late twentieth-century Westerners are historically bound to struggle; it is our horizon and our utopia. The two main reasons for this have to do with the role played by difference in European history and the very specific place it occupies in Feminist practice. [...]

Throughout the feminist eighties, a polemic divided the „difference-inspired“ feminists, especially the spokespersons of the „écriture féminine“ movement, from the „Anglo-American“ „gender“ opposition. This polemic fed into the debate on essentialism and resulted in a political and intellectual stalemate from which we are just beginning to emerge. I shall return to this point in the next section of this chapter. Nowadays, the antisequential difference feminist line has evolved into an argument for a „beyond gender“ or a „postgender“ kind of subjectivity. This line of thought argues for the overcoming of sexual dualism and gender polarities, in favor of a new,

* Aus: Braidotti, Rosi (1994): *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 146-172.

sexually undifferentiated, subjectivity. Thinkers such as Monique Wittig¹ go as far as to dismiss emphasis on sexual difference as leading to a revival of the metaphysics of the „eternal feminine.“

As opposed to what I see as the hasty dismissal of sexual difference, in the name of a polemical form of „antessentialism,“ or of a utopian longing for a position „beyond gender,“ I want to valorize sexual difference as a project. I have also called it a nomadic political project because this emphasis on the difference that women embody provides positive foundational grounds for the redefinition of female subjectivity in all of its complexity. In the rest of this chapter, I shall outline what I see as the interconnection between female identity, feminist subjectivity, and the radical epistemology of nomadic transitions from a perspective of positive sexual difference. In the first instance, however, I shall proceed to outline my criticism of gender-based frameworks of analysis and thereby clarify what I see as the epistemological advantages and the political relevance of frameworks inspired by sexual difference *qua* project.

Feminist Theory in the Nineties

My starting point is that the notion of „gender“ is at a crisis point in feminist theory and practice and that it is undergoing intense criticism both for its theoretical inadequacy and for its politically amorphous and unfocused nature. The areas from whence the most pertinent criticism of „gender“ has emerged are: the sexual difference theorists; the postcolonial and black feminist theorists; the feminist epistemologists working in the natural sciences, especially biology; and the lesbian thinkers.

A second remark: the crisis of gender as a useful category in feminist analysis is simultaneous with a reshuffling of theoretical positions that had become fixed and stalemated in feminist theory, most notably the opposition between on the one hand „gender theorists“ in the Anglo-American tradition and on the other, „sexual difference theorists“ in the French and continental tradition,² to which I referred briefly before. The debate between these two camps had become stuck in the 1980s in a fairly sterile polemic between opposing cultural and theoretical frameworks that rest on different assumptions about political practice. This polarized climate was reshuffled partly because of the increasing awareness of the culture-specific

forms undertaken by feminist theory. This resulted in a new and more productive approach to differences in feminist positions.

A third related phenomenon is the recent emergence in the international debate of Italian, Australian, Dutch, and other kinds of feminist thought as alternatives that help split asunder the comfortably binary opposition between French Continental and Anglo-American positions.³ These publications have contributed not only to putting another, however „minor,” European feminist culture on the map but also to stressing the extent to which the notion of „gender” is a vicissitude of the English language, one that bears little or no relevance to theoretical traditions in the Romance languages.⁴ [...]

The fourth and final remark I would like to make about „gender” concerns the institutional practice to which it gives rise, which I find problematic for feminists. The scientific-sounding term *gender* appears to strike a more reassuring note in the academic world than the more explicitly political term, *feminist studies*. This factor is partly responsible for the success encountered by „gender studies” in universities and publishing houses of late. In my opinion, this success has resulted in a shift of focus away from the feminist agenda toward a more generalized attention to the social construction of differences *between* the sexes. It is a broadening out that is also a thinning down of the political agenda.

Arguing that men have a gender too, many institutions started claiming the establishment of „men’s studies” courses as a counterpart to or, alternatively, as a structural component of women’s studies. Masculinity comes back in, under the cover of „gender.” Although the male critiques of masculinity are extremely important and necessary, I think this institutional competition between the broadening out of „gender studies” – to include men as a presence and as a topic – and the keeping up of the feminist agenda is regrettable. This situation has led feminists to view „gender” with suspicion at the level of institutional practice.

On a more theoretical level I think that the main assumption behind „gender studies” is of a new symmetry between the sexes, which practically results in a renewal of interest for men and men’s studies. Faced with this, I would like to state my open disagreement with this illusion of symmetry and revindicate instead sexual difference as a powerful factor of dissymmetry. Moreover, I think that the historical texts of the feminist debate on gender do not lend themselves to a case for sexual symmetry. In a perspective of historiography of feminist ideas, I would define gender as

a notion that offers a set of frameworks within which feminist theory has explained the social and discursive construction and representation of differences between the sexes. As such, „gender” in feminist theory primarily fulfills the function of challenging the universalistic tendency of critical language and of the systems of knowledge and scientific discourse at large.

This tendency consists in conflating the masculine viewpoint with the general, „human” standpoint, thereby confining the feminine to the structural position of „other.” Thus, the masculine qua human is taken as the „norm,” and the feminine qua other is seen as marking the „difference.” The corollary of this definition is that the burden of sexual difference falls upon women, marking them off as the second sex, or the structural „other,” whereas men are marked by the imperative of carrying the universal. The symbolic division of labor between the sexes, which the term „gender” helps to explain, is the system set up by phallogocentrism, which is the inner logic of patriarchy. In other words, this system is neither necessary as in historically inevitable, nor is it rational as in conceptually necessary. It simply *has come to be*, as the powerful foundations of a system in which we are all constructed as either men or women by certain symbolic, semiotic, and material conditions.

In such a system, the masculine and the feminine are in a structurally dissymmetrical position: men, as the empirical referents of the masculine, do not have a gender because they are expected to carry the phallus, that is to say, to uphold the view of abstract virility, which is hardly an easy task.⁵ Simone de Beauvoir observed fifty years ago that the price men pay for representing the universal is a kind of loss of embodiment: the price women pay, on the other hand, is a loss of subjectivity and the confinement to the body. The former are disembodied and through this process gain entitlement to transcendence and subjectivity, the latter are overembodied and thereby consigned to immanence. This results in two very dissymmetrical positions and two opposed problem areas.

This analysis by Beauvoir has received some new theoretical input, through the joint impact of semiotics, structuralist psychoanalysis, and autonomous developments within the women’s movement in the eighties.⁶ Central to this new approach is a shift away from the mere critique of patriarchy to the assertion of the positivity of women’s cultural traditions and range of experiences; the work of Adrienne Rich is very influential here.⁷ This shift resulted in new emphasis and value being placed on language

and consequently on representation as the site of constitution of the subject. [...]

The new theorists emerging in the nineties are consequently working along the lines of a multiplicity of variables of definition of female subjectivity: race, class, age, sexual preference, and lifestyles count as major axes of identity. They therefore innovate on the established feminist ideas, in that they are bent on redefining female subjectivity in terms of a network of simultaneous power formations. I will argue next that a new trend seems to be emerging that emphasizes the situated, specific, embodied nature of the feminist subject, while rejecting biological or psychic essentialism. This is a new kind of female embodied materialism.

Central to this new feminist materialism, that entails a redefinition of the text as co-extensive with relations of knowledge and power, is the process of constitution of subjectivity as part of this network of power and knowledge. The issue can be summed up as follows: what if the patriarchal mode of representation, which can be named the „gender system“ produced the very categories that it purports to deconstruct? [...]

The key notion here is that of gender as a regulatory fiction, that is to say a normative activity that constructs certain categories, such as subject, object, masculine, feminine, heterosexual, and lesbian, as part of its very process. This idea of „gender“ as a regulatory fiction must be read in the framework of the critique of the ethnocentric and univocal meaning of the term *gender*.

To sum up this change of perspective in feminist theory, I would like to emphasize the point I have made before, namely that in contemporary feminist practice, the paradox of „woman“ has emerged as central. Feminism is based on the very notion of female identity, which it is historically bound to criticize. Feminist thought rests on a concept that calls for deconstruction and de-essentialization in all of its aspects. More specifically, I think that over the last ten years the central question in feminist theory has become: how to redefine female subjectivity after the decline of gender dualism, privileging notions of the self as process complexity, interrelatedness, postcolonial simultaneities of oppression, and the multilayered technology of the self? In other words, the social and symbolic fate of sexual polarizations is at stake here.

What I see as the central issue here is that of identity as a site of differences; feminist analyses of the gender system show that the subject occupies a variety of possible positions at different times, across a multiplicity of

variables such as sex, race, class, age, lifestyles, and so on. The challenge for feminist theory today is how to invent new images of thought that can help us think about change and changing constructions of the self. Not the staticness of formulated truths or readily available counteridentities, but the living process of transformation of self and other. Sandra Harding defines it as the process of „reinventing oneself as other.“⁸ [...]

Feminist Nomadic Thinking: A Working Scheme

The starting point, for my scheme of feminist nomadism, is that feminist theory is not only a movement of critical opposition of the false universality of the subject, it is also the positive affirmation of women's desire to affirm and enact different forms of subjectivity. This project involves both the critique of existing definitions and representations of women and also the creation of new images of female subjectivity. The starting point for this project (both critical and creative) is the need to have real-life women in positions of discursive subjectivity. The key terms here are embodiment and the bodily roots of subjectivity and the desire to reconnect theory to practice.

For the sake of clarity, I will divide the project of feminist nomadism into three phases, all of which will be linked to sexual difference. I want to stress the fact that these three different levels are not dialectically ordained phases but rather that they can coexist chronologically and that each and every one continues to be available as an option for political and theoretical practice. The distinction I will consequently draw between „difference between men and women,“ „differences among women,“ and „differences within each woman“ is not to be taken as a categorical distinction but as an exercise in naming different facets of a single complex phenomenon.

[...] Following the nomadic approach that I am defending in this book, the cartography can be entered at *any level* and at *any moment*. I want to stress in fact that these layers occur simultaneously and that, in daily life, they coexist and cannot be easily distinguished. I would even argue that it is precisely the capacity to transit from one level to another, in a flow of experiences, time sequences, and layers of signification that is the key to that nomadic mode I am defending, not only intellectually but also as an art of existence. [...]

As Teresa De Lauretis argued, all women are implicated in the confrontation with a certain image of „*Woman*“ that is the culturally dominant model for female identity. The elaboration of a political subjectivity as feminist, therefore, requires as its precondition the recognition of a distance between „*Woman*“ and real women. Teresa De Lauretis has defined this moment as the recognition of an „essential difference“ between woman as representation („*Woman*“ as cultural imago) and woman as experience (real women as agents of change).

In other words, with the help of semiotic and psychoanalytic theories, a foundational distinction is drawn between „*Woman*“ as the signifier that is codified in a long history of binary oppositions and the signifier „feminist“ as that which builds upon the recognition of the constructed nature of *Woman*. The recognition of the hiatus between *Woman* and women is crucial, as is the determination to seek for adequate representations of it, both politically and symbolically. [...]

For Nomadism

[...] To sum up, I would say that speaking „as a feminist woman“ does not refer to one dogmatic framework but rather to a knot of interrelated questions that play on different layers, registers, and levels of the self.

In my reading, the project of sexual difference argues the following: it is historically and politically urgent, in the *here and now* of the common world of women, to bring about and act upon sexual difference. This is also due to the historical context within which the affirmation of the position of difference is taking place, especially in Europe.

I see feminism as the strategy of working through the historical notion of „*Woman*“, at a time in history when it has lost its substantial unity. As a political and theoretical practice, therefore, feminism can be described as unveiling and consuming the different layers of representation of „*Woman*“. The myth of *Woman* as other is now a vacant lot where different women can play with their subjective becoming. The question for the feminist subject is how to intervene upon *Woman* in this historical context, so as to create new conditions for the becoming-subject of women here and now.

In dealing with the becoming-subjects of women, the starting point is the politics of location, which implies the critique of dominant identities

and power-formations and a sense of accountability for the historical conditions in which we share. This implies not only the recognition of differences among women but also the practice of decoding – expressing and sharing in language the conditions of possibility of one’s own political and theoretical choices. Accountability and positionality go together. In emphasizing the importance of accounting for one’s own investments – especially to other women – I have also insisted throughout this book on the need to also take into account the level of unconscious desire and consequently of imaginary relation to the very material conditions that structure our existence. As Caren Kaplan puts it: „such accountability can begin to shift the ground of feminist practice from magisterial relativism ... to the complex interpretive practices that acknowledge the historical roles of mediation, betrayal, and alliance in the relationships between women in diverse locations.“⁹

[...] In my own version of sexual difference as a nomadic strategy, I have opted for the extreme affirmation of sexed identity as a way of reversing the attribution of differences in a hierarchical mode. This extreme affirmation of sexual difference may lead to repetition, but the crucial factor here is that it empowers women to act.

Starting from the premise that the female feminist subject is one of the terms in a process that should not and cannot be streamlined into a linear, teleological form of subjectivity; that it should be seen as the intersection of subjective desire with willful social transformation, I want to go on and argue that sexual difference allows for the affirmation of alternative forms of feminist political subjectivity: feminists are the post-*Woman* women.

In my reading, the feminist subject is nomadic because it is intensive, multiple, embodied, and therefore perfectly cultural. I think that this new figuration can be taken as an attempt to come to terms with what I have chosen to call the new nomadism of our historical condition.

Notes

1 [6] Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

2 [7] See Claire Duchet, *Feminism in France* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

3 [8] See the Milan Women’s Bookshop, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Political Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). See also Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp,

eds., *Italian Feminist Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and *The Lonely Mirror* (New York: Routledge, 1993). See also Joke Hermesen and Alkeline van Lemming, eds., *Starting the Difference: Feminist Debates in Holland* (London and New York, 1991).

⁴ [9] This point is made strongly by Teresa de Lauretis in „The Essence of the Triangle; or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously“, *differences* 1, no. 2 (1988): 3-37; see also the issue of *Les cahiers du Griff* no. 45 (1990), „Savoir et difference des sexes“, devoted to women's studies, where a similar point is raised in a French context.

⁵ [10] One of the classics here is Gail Rubin's „The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex“, in R. Rapp, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975). See also Nancy Hartsock, „The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism“, in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht, Holland/Boston, USA/London, England: Reidel, 1983).

⁶ [11] For accounts of this shift of perspectives, see Claire Duchon, *Feminism in France: From May 1968 to Mitterrand* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); see also Heister Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

⁷ [12] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1976); *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979); *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (London: the Women's Press, 1985).

⁸ [42] Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

⁹ [34] Caren Kaplan, „The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice“, in Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 139.

Rosi Braidotti Biomacht und posthumane Politik*

Ausgangspunkt dieses Aufsatzes ist die Tatsache, dass die soziökonomischen Gegebenheiten des fortgeschrittenen Kapitalismus eine globale, posthumane Politik produzieren. Diese Politik ist gleichzeitig posthumanistisch und post-anthropozentrisch und neigt dazu, zuletzt unmenschlich zu sein. Die Behauptung, dass wir uns mit einer Verlagerung zum Posthumanen konfrontiert sehen, ist in der Auflösung der traditionell einheitlichen Position des Subjekts beziehungsweise der stabilen Identität eines ‚Ich‘, das mit Vernunft und Bewusstsein zusammenfällt, unter den widersprüchlichen Belastungen durch globale, postindustrielle Gesellschaftsverhältnisse begründet. [...]

Auf einer konzeptuellen Ebene ist der historische Moment der Postmoderne durch den Verfall auklärer Thesen gekennzeichnet, die bis dahin als fundamental galten. Grundtenor dieser Thesen war die Annahme, dass die Menschheit sich durch ein selbstregulierendes und teleologisch orientiertes Vernunftdenken zur eigenen Perfektionierung entwickelt. Das Emanzipationsprojekt der Moderne führe zu einer Vorstellung des „vernünftigen Menschen“ (Lloyd 1985: X), die verschiedene ‚Grenzmarkierungen‘, bekannt auch als die ‚konstituierenden Anderen‘, ausschließt. Diese sind die sexualisierten Anderen, auch Frauen genannt, die ethnischen oder durch Rassenvorurteile gekennzeichneten Anderen sowie die natürliche Umwelt. Sie bilden die drei miteinander verbundenen Facetten struktureller Andersheit oder der strukturellen Differenz als Herabsetzung. In dieser Funktion konstruieren diese Anderen gleichzeitig die Moderne und werden von ihr ausgeschlossen (vgl. de Beauvoir 1992; Irigaray 1989; Deleuze

* Aus: Braidotti, Rosi (2008): Biomacht und posthumane Politik, in: Angerer, Marie-Luise/ König, Christine (Hg.): *Gender goes Life. Die Lebenswissenschaften als Herausforderung für die Gender Studies*. Bielefeld: transcript, 19-39.