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Chapter 4

**GENDER AND THE CONTESTED NOTION OF EUROPEAN
CITIZENSHIP**

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Introduction

In this paper I will argue that "European citizenship" is a contested notion in the framework of the on-going process of European integration within the European Union. I take it that most readers will be familiar with at least the broad outline of this on-going political and social process. An interesting cross-comparison could be drawn with the vicissitudes linked to the simultaneous expansion of NATO to cover countries of former Eastern Europe, but I regret that I cannot pursue this here.

This particular context puts at the centre of the social and political agenda the question of European identity and of citizenship, that is to say, questions of access, entitlement and participation. The focus of my paper accordingly is on the inter-relation between a multi-layered understanding of subjectivity — which includes as a significant variable gender/sexual difference — and issues of nationality, including ethnic and race differences. I could sum it up by saying that it is about the notion of "diversity" in contemporary social thought. Special emphasis will be placed on the quest for new models of "flexible citizenship", especially for women, within the European Union.

Gender and identity

I would start with the question of the structures of identity, with special reference to poststructuralist theories of language as the main form of cultural mediation. In this framework, identity is approached neither in an essentialistic nor in a classical social constructivist manner. It is rather understood somewhere in between. Following Foucault, I think identity is constructed in the very gesture that posits it as the anchoring point for certain social and discursive practices. Consequently, in my perspective, you cannot separate the

structures of identity from social and symbolic practices, i.e., from knowledge and/as power.

Gender/sexual difference is accordingly defined as a process that relates to multiple differences: those between men and women, but also the many differences among women themselves, including differences of nationality, ethnicity or "race". An important role is played in my work by the psychoanalytic definition of identity as being split and internally differentiated. This implies that the "subject of feminism" is not a Cartesian entity, but rather a non-rationalistic subject, for whom desire — mediated through language and culture — plays a constitutive role. The emphasis on the role that desire and fantasy play in the constitution of identity has the advantage of not separating affectivity or emotions from the question of politics. For me this is an advantage because issues related to identity, especially to gender, national or ethnic identity, tend to be loaded with emotional implications and strong affectivity. Re-introducing the classical notion of "passions" into the political debate may consequently be a progressive move at a time when racism and xenophobia make the discussion of European identity into a potentially explosive and divisive one. The positive aspect of this affectivity is that it mobilises people's desire and imagination, thus offering great opportunities for a process of transformation of identities which would run parallel to the larger processes of change that are taking place in Europe today.

Given the above, the question for me is no longer the essentialist one — what is gendered, national or ethnic identity? — but rather a critical and genealogical one: how is it constructed? By whom? Under which conditions? For which aims? As many cultural critics like Stuart Hall have argued, these are questions about entitlement, agency and subjectivity which rotate around the issue of cultural identity without essentializing it.

I want to pay special attention to the intersection of feminist critiques of subjectivity with the discourses of the "crisis" of the West, which is predominant within poststructuralism and postcoloniality. A great deal of contemporary social thought about European identity today focuses on issues related to the decline of European hegemony and the consequent crisis of the values of European humanism. The work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo and Massimo Cacciari, to name but a few, points strongly in this direction.

Significant postcolonial thinkers like Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and others, think that one of the main structural social changes introduced in postmodernity is that, because of the coming of multicultural societies, we need to shift the political debates from the differences between cultures to differences within the same culture. Feminist social critics are especially conscious of this necessity (Spivak, 1992: 54). One of the central paradoxes of our historical condition is therefore the shifting grounds on which "periphery" and "centre", "difference" and "identity" relate to one another, so as to

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

Anthony Appiah (1991: 336-57) 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. I would argue that the parallels between the two are not a *sufficient*, but rather a *necessary* condition for a theoretical overlap between them. I also wish to stress their necessary intersection over the issue of political subjectivity and resistance, identity and sexual or gender difference. The debate on gender and cultural or ethnic diversity is simply at the heart of the contemporary social agenda.

European citizenship

I think it important to contextualize this discussion within the political framework of the European Union. As a conservative project, the European Union was aimed at streamlining the reconstruction of Europe in opposition to the Soviet-dominated countries of the East, and thus it was a major pawn in Cold War politics. As a progressive project, however, 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. You may remember that the historical origin of the project of European federation dates back to the end of the second World War and more specifically to the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of the war-torn European economy. The Allied forces, led by the American government, were simply determined to prevent further intra-European in-fighting and thus aimed to squash the nationalistic spirit that had ravaged the continent of Europe by linking some of these countries in a federal system.

I want to remind you of this fact because in a great deal of contemporary discussion this historical perspective is often forgotten. Euro-scepticism is strong among European feminists and it results in what I consider a misunderstanding of both the origins and the stakes of this project. By reminding you of this I also wish to stress that, as far as I am concerned, the notion of European citizenship is not only a contested notion, but also one in which critical and progressive intellectuals, including the feminists, should get more involved and try to exercise more influence.

In the absence of a concerted involvement of feminists in the progressive potential of the European project, more conservative forces are setting the agenda. We are all aware of the danger constituted by the effort of recreating a sovereign centre through the new European federation. This is also known as the "Fortress Europe" syndrome, which has been extensively criticised by feminists and anti-racists such as Helma Lutz, Gloria Wekker, Nira Yuval-Davis, Avtar Brah, Floya Anthias, and Philomena Essed. They warn us against

the danger of replacing the former Eurocentrism with a new "Euro-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 Europe (Lutz, Yuval-Davis and Phoenix, 1996: 5).

The issue of "ethnic minorities" brings me to another point. 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. Europe as a world-power has practiced this metaphysical cannibalism or consumption of others. As I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Braidotti, 1991), these constitutive "others" are the specular complement of the subject of modernity. They are: the woman, the ethnic or racialized other and the natural environment, including animals, plants or forests. They constitute respectively: the second sex or sexual complement of Man; the coloured or marked other that allows the Europeans to pass off their whiteness as the defining trait of humanity; and the physical environment against which technology will be pitched and developed.

To say that the social and symbolic organisation of differences which lies at the heart of modernity is over would be as over-optimistic as historically inaccurate. I have often argued rather that postmodernity can be defined as the return of these multiple "others", as a sort of return of the repressed of modernity. As Luce Irigaray has powerfully argued, this makes "difference" into the central concept of our times.

Moreover, nowadays the postcolonial world-order and the process of the transnational economy with the complex effects of globalisation open a new chapter in the history of the decline of European nation-states as principles of economic and political organisation. The coming of the electronic frontier and the information highways accelerates even further the process of dematerialisation of the nation-state.

This decline, far from being greeted everywhere as a step forward, has also generated a wave of nostalgia which is one of the key features of contemporary politics (Jameson, 1991). 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 and xenophobic. They also enact a fragmentation of larger national identities into regional or localized sub-identities. I take this paradox of simultaneous globalisation and fragmentation as one of the defining features of our era, and I am especially concerned to analyse its effects on women and female citizenship.

That it actually took 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 is "culture". It contains 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 no exception, although women of colour like Chandra Mohanty (1994: 196-220) have warned us very strongly against the ethnocentric habit that consist in constructing the "third-world woman" — or the Eastern European woman, or the Muslim woman — as an object of oppression that requires our support. Spivak has also equated this form of "solidarity" with benevolent paternalism, which has a lot to do with colonialism.

It is against this flight into abstraction, which merely perpetuates the construction and consumption of significant "others", that I would stress instead the need to practice what Adrienne Rich has called "the politics of location". This notion is both analytic and normative: firstly, it helps define the structures of identity in terms of specific locations of class, race, nationality, age and sexual preference. Secondly, it provides a framework in which a political analysis of the differences among women can be developed, along those same lines of individualisation. Thus, "the politics of location" is a method through which power differences among women can be inserted in a larger perspective which defines power as a web of interconnected effects. In some of my work (e.g. Braidotti, 1994) I have also re-read this with Michel Foucault's theory of the "microphysics of power". More recently, this notion has been elaborated by Donna Haraway in terms of "situated knowledges".

Situating and deconstructing whiteness

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

It has been argued that of the idea of cultural homogeneity is the foundational political myth in Europe, much as multiculturalism is the central myth in the United States (Walzer, 1992). Of course, European history proves the contrary: waves of migrations from the East and the South make any claim to ethnic or cultural homogeneity in Europe suspect at best. The long history of Jewish and Muslim cultures in Europe also challenges the identification of Europe with Christianity. Nonetheless, the *myth* of cultural homogeneity is crucial to the tale of European nationalism. In our era, under the pressure of the historical forces I sketched above, 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 subjectivity (1987) 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 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 whites; it took the work of leading black writers and critics to expose whiteness as a political issue (Morrison, 1992). Richard Dyer defines whiteness an emptiness or an absence (1993: 141-63). Being the norm, it is invisible, as if natural and inevitable. Ruth Frankenberg defines this as a "structured invisibility" (1994: 6).

The process of naturalisation/invisibility of whiteness makes it not only politically pernicious, but it also has methodological implications. Whiteness becomes very difficult to analyse *critically*; it tends to break down into sub-categories of whiteness: Irish-ness, Italian-ness, Jewish-ness, etc. It follows therefore that non-whites, like the critic bell hooks, have a much clearer perception of whiteness than whites. 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 anti-racist forms of whiteness, or at least anti-racist strategies to re-work 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 in the era of postmodernity 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 analyse 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. The key words in this project are: "accountability" and "strategic re-location of whiteness".

I would also describe this as a great historical chance for Europeans to become more intelligent of our own history and more self-critical in a productive sense. Nietzsche argued earlier in this century that many Europeans no longer feel at home in Europe. At the closing of that same century many would want to argue that those who do not identify with Europe in the sense of the

centre — the dominant and heroic reading of Europe — are ideally suited to the task of re-framing Europe by making it accountable for a history in which fascism, imperialism and domination played a central role. I believe that feminist women can be major players in this historical project.

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