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Claudia Honegger/Caroline Arni (Hg.)

Gender – die Tücken einer Kategorie

Joan W. Scott, Geschichte und Politik

Beiträge zum Symposium anlässlich der Verleihung des
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Rosi Braidotti

On Conceptual Personae and Historical Narratives

A Comment on History and Poststructuralist Philosophy

I do not wish my paper to read like too uncritical a celebration of life and work of Joan W. Scott, nonetheless, I cannot altogether avoid making a *laudatio*. I will consequently attempt to strike a compromise, or a middle-position. I will definitely want to congratulate the University of Bern on their good judgement, sense of value and quality, as expressed in the choice of Joan W. Scott as recipient of the 1999 Hans Sigmund Prize. I will however try to avoid the tone of tragic solemnity that usually marks these occasions and makes them peculiarly like funerals. This symposium, in fact, is not about the dead, but the living. Moreover, it's not about a scholar, a public intellectual or a speaker who can easily fit into the canon of century-old university-sealed knowledge. Joan W. Scott is the kind of scholar who, on the contrary, has both qualified for admission into the canon and at the same time has challenged the theoretical, methodological and socio-political foundations of institutionally-sanctioned scholarship.

Neither the authority of the past, nor the sovereignty of experience goes unchallenged in Joan W. Scott's remarkable scholarly production. Yet Professor Scott never steers too far away from either, not only out of politeness, but also because at heart, she's too much of a scholar to be happy anywhere else than in that very world of knowledge and research which she is so passionately committed to reform, improve, and enlarge. A rebel *with* a cause; a sharp-witted progressive public intellectual, Scott is a scholar who never allowed the pursuit of excellence to falter or to fail. Nor did she let it interfere with the equally noble, relevant and worthy task of improving social, political and cultural life. A remarkable woman of substance, of passion, of excellence – Joan W. Scott is a worthy choice for the 1999 Prize.

Between History and Philosophy

Being a philosopher by passion and by training, I cannot say that my relationship to the discipline of history has been anything less than stormy. Reading Joan W.

Scott's not less uncomplicated quarrel with the corporation of the historians has always proved a great source of both comfort and inspiration for me. As if the perennial clash between philosophical fictions and historical facts were not enough, I also can pride myself in having received a very traditional education in philosophy, first at the Australian National University, and later at the Sorbonne. Paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze, I would say that I am of the generation that was crucified on the cross of that meta-discursive canonization express-way called "the history of philosophy". Any self-respecting continental philosopher in fact has to undergo the gruelling training exercise known as *the* history of Philosophy. The 3 "H's" – Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger – are compulsory for any self-respecting philosopher student. No matter that they turned out to be among my least favourite thinkers: their central presence in my academic curriculum and consequently in my intellectual landscape was simply not negotiable. There is no denying the weight of authority that makes certain historically sedimented thinkers or systems of thought equate with, and hence constitutive of, the grand tradition of philosophy.

The so-called post-structuralist generation of 1968 singled out the ponderous authority of the canonized, institutionalised history of philosophy as their political and theoretical target. With the privilege of hindsight, one can argue that one *dogma* was replaced by a transgressive *doxa*. Be it as it may, the 3 "H's" got replaced by the 3 "M's" – Mao, Marx, Marcuse. Both major philosophers like Deleuze and Foucault and commentators like Christian Descombes and Sherry Turkle stress the importance of this shift of perspective.¹ Eros and Revolution took over from Reason and Authority. Philosophers were central to this shift, which resulted in singling out the discipline of history of philosophy as a major obstacle to the practice of critical reason and even, for some, of clear thinking.

Having had the privilege of studying with one of the most inspiring historians of philosophy – Geneviève Lloyd² – I have a passionate relationship to this discipline. Especially in Continental philosophy, one can hardly separate the actual discipline from its history. Far be it from me, therefore, to reject the relevance of the history of philosophical ideas. What I do think of the greatest philosophical importance, however, is to question critically this history, opening it up to angles of reflection that come from outside philosophy. Furthermore, it is the authoritative nature of the appeal to the history of philosophy that I want both to resist and to challenge. Within the philosophies of post-modernity, the quarrel between philosophers of history and historians of philosophy is not systematic, though it is an old and persistent one, a zigzagging pattern of cross-questioning and often, talking at cross-purposes (*un dialogue de sourds*). A sort of persistent cross-interrogation

became the mode of inter-relation of these two disciplines. On the one hand philosophy as the practice of abstract thinking on the possible, desirable and likely unfoldings of human endeavour. On the other the history of philosophy as the record and the incontestable empirical evidence regarding the greatness of certain great thinkers at different points of the past.

I think this distinction, which in some ways is internal to philosophy applies just as strongly to Joan W. Scott's work. All along Scott's historical investigations are brimful with speculative insights, theoretical ideas and philosophical concerns. That philosophy as a discipline defined itself by choosing abstractions over empirical presence, while history did exactly the opposite, is one of those 19th century love-stories that never wants to die. Its swan-song however, has filled our cultural and social spaces since the end of the 19th century with a range of discourses about crises and losses. As Foucault has argued in his archaeology of modernity, the crisis of humanism comes down to the erosion and the erasure of the boundaries between those two "frères ennemis", history and philosophy.³ A radical displacement of what goes on between them is at the heart of that loss of certainty, or epistemological insecurity that marks modernity.

The quarrel between history and philosophy becomes a fully-fledged polemic in the work of the leading post-structuralist philosophers Irigaray, Foucault and Deleuze. All of them engage critically, passionately and often violently with *The History of Philosophy*. Foucault's critique of discourse as power is also a quarrel with the classical institution of philosophical learning. Irigaray's mimetic dialogues with the masters of metaphysics is a way of interrogating the institutionalization and canonization processes by which some thinkers become legislators of human truths. More radically still, Deleuze's meandering itinerary in and out of historical texts is constitutive of his philosophy of de-centralized subjectivity.

For me, the history of philosophy is the most abstract branch of this discipline – very analogous to a portrait-gallery of great thinkers, who need to be 'studied' and approached carefully. What I find extremely convincing in post-structuralism is the idea of cultivating an *approach*, that is to say a style of thinking, in a self-reflective mode. For conservative neo-liberal philosophers like Martha Nussbaum, on the other hand, philosophy is a technique of management of truths and of their opposite⁴ (but what is, precisely, the opposite of truth?). It is a way of joining institutional power with universally-held commonplace beliefs; it's a case of *potestas* meets *doxa*. The appeal to the history of philosophy fulfils for Nussbaum the role of an invention of tradition. Were this tradition acknowledged as an invention, it could even be interesting to engage in a critical discussion of it.

Given, however, that it is posited as a self-evident and morally unquestionable truth, I find it objectionable both in form and content.

Very much in tune with post-structuralism, J. Scott turns history into a verb – she wants to historicize interpretation, reality and the discourse of history itself. By de-essentializing the discipline, Scott follows in the footsteps of l'Ecole des Annales and Michel Foucault by challenging the cognitive mastery that is inherent to the discipline of history. By showing the extent to which the identity of history as a discipline has to do with processes of inclusion/exclusion, normalization/pathologization Scott writes power, power-relations and webs of interaction straight into the heart of the discipline, thus opening it up to serious critical scrutiny. This practice of genealogical critique, the turning of history into a verb – calls for distance, dis-identification and a sort of cognitive disobedience, a sort of dis-loyalty, within limits, and with much tact and elegance.

In some ways, Joan W. Scott's brand of historical enquiry functions like a challenge to the cognitive mastery that is built into the discipline of history. In opposition to the solemn respect of tradition and the linear deployment of the authority of experience, Scott favours an approach based on discontinuities. Whereas historical narratives both assume and construct a solid, unitary subject, Joan W. Scott is not afraid of fragmentation and complexities, of contradictions and loops of logic. I think that one of the major points of intersection between Scott's historical research and post-structuralist philosophies is precisely the emphasis on the positive, politically empowering force of an open-ended or non-unitary subject. An integral part of this vision of subjectivity concerns a psychoanalytically-informed vision of the role of the unconscious in the constitution of the social field. I think this aspect of Scott's world is among the most influential in contemporary gender research. This gets expressed in a number of factors, such as the emphasis Scott places on issues related to the body, defined as both a bio- and a socio-logical construct. Sexuality is a crucial part of the attention Scott pays to issues of embodiment and within sexuality, fantasy is a primary element. Scott's work continues an established feminist tradition in viewing sexuality as a positive force, but also in translating it into a source of knowledge and wisdom. It is the cognitive potency of pleasure, desire and fantasy which lies at the heart of the psychoanalytic vision of the split subject. Re-read with Foucault, such open-ended subjectivity acts as a factor that guarantees non-closure. The libidinal structure of the subject, that is to say his/her affective, sexual, fantasy-prone drive, is the source of possible forms of resistance to dominant regimes of power and discourse.

In this regard, a pragmatic brand of psychoanalytic politics is at work in Joan W.

Scott's texts. The resisting subject is a desiring subject who opposes the tyranny of linearity, self-transparency and objectivity that is to say, all that in post-structuralist philosophy goes under the name of "phallogocentrism". This translates into a style of historical narrative which, as I mentioned above, leaves ample space to discontinuities and intervals or contradictions. It also operates a significant and equally powerful displacement of the position of the reader. By thematizing openly issues of desire, fantasy and the imagination, Scott itemizes the question of identification with one's research-objects/subjects. This amounts to dismantling all pretense at academic distance or neutrality, in a style of direct involvement in the research process, which is crucial to the tradition of "standpoint feminism"⁵.

This is also a device to speak more directly to other women, starting from the readers who are drawn into the text in a variety of multi-layered points of entry.

For instance in *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminism and the Rights of Man* Joan W. Scott historicizes the different traditions of feminist thought, by showing the complex political and rhetorical strategies that constructed each of those seemingly self-evident traditions.⁶ This genealogical approach return each of the women to their singularity by highlighting the discontinuities inherent not only to the common tradition they establish together in the category of "gender", but also internal to each one of them. This genealogical move makes Joan W. Scott's work extremely relevant for philosophy today – especially feminist philosophy.

Embodiment and Philosophy

I would like to think of the relationship to the history of philosophy along the humble, but also intellectually more stimulating ways that both Lloyd and Deleuze taught me. Cultivating an approach, like trying to learn a musical score, requires some powers of listening, some deep respect for the text and its effects. I've been often stuck by how similar Lloyd and Deleuze are on this point: both eminent Spinoza scholars, they never stopped questioning the history of philosophy – they did so, however, almost like a form of apprenticeship towards their own philosophical style. When Deleuze argues that learning to think philosophically is like learning to use colours in painting – and that the history of philosophy is the necessary background training for the use of colour – he is elevating the question of 'style' to a conceptually central position. This goes hand in hand with his conception that philosophy today can *only* be the creation of concepts, i.e.: creativity, not truth, is the issue at stake. For her part, the philosopher Lloyd never disengages

her own work of analysis or commentary on historical texts from something akin to an intellectual autobiography. Each philosophers marks, quite literally, a *moment* of being. Some last longer than other; none is ever a quick shot. Philosophy banks on the long term, and is aware of the selective and partial structure of memory. Doing philosophy in postmodernity is like composing a musical score. It's about duration, repetition and thus ultimately, about movement. Difficult texts get illuminated over time, with the build-up of experience and under the motivation of endless frustration. A good philosophical course – but this is actually true of any discipline – is a living tune that goes on resonating. You just can't put it down. Understanding requires as much passions as intelligence; as much emotion as erudition. As Emma Goldman once put it, in an altogether different context: 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be a part of your revolution.'

This assumes both a subject that does *not* coincide with his/her consciousness and the unity of reason and passion – a non-unitary subject. Thought is made of sense and value: it is the force, or level of intensity, that fixes the value of an idea, not its equation to a pre-established normative model. Philosophy as critique of negative, reactive values is also the critique of the dogmatic image of thought; it expresses the force, the activity, of the thinking process in terms of typology of forces (Nietzsche) or an ethology of passions (Spinoza). For instance, a rhizomatic style brings to the fore the affective foundations of the thinking process. It is as if beyond/behind the prepositional content of an idea there lay another category: the affective force, level of intensity, desire for affirmation which conveys the idea and ultimately governs its truth-value. Thinking, in other words, is to a very large extent unconscious, in that it expresses the desire to know and this desire is that which cannot be adequately expressed in language, simply because it is that which sustains it. This desire remains unthought at the heart of thought because it is the force which propels it in the first place.

After psychoanalysis, life/the living emerges as a mixture of Darwin and Bergson, matter and memory – in ways that challenge any linear biological or psychic determinism. Neuro-sciences and radical philosophies of the anti-humanist persuasion are in open conflict here. This post-humanist framework produces a very distinctive philosophical style, best expressed in figurations, or alternative images suited to an intensive subjectivity. Conceptual personae, not essences – historically sedimented geological layers, not substances. Processes, *not* concepts. Figurations as rhizomes, nomadism, bodies-without-organs express the notion of an idea as a line of intensity, which opens up hitherto unsuspected possibilities of life and action. Ideas are events, lines which point human thought towards new horizons.

An idea is that which carries the affirmative power of life to a higher degree. The force of this notion is that it finally puts a stop to the traditional search for ideas or lines which are 'just' (in theory and politics alike). For if ideas are projectiles launched into time they can be neither 'just' nor 'false'.

Post-structuralist analysis of thinking point in fact to a sort of structural aporia in philosophical discourse.⁷ Philosophy is both logo-philic and logo-phobic, as Foucault had already astutely remarked.⁸ Discourse – the production of ideas, knowledge, texts and sciences – is something that philosophy relates to and rests upon, in order to codify it and systematize it; philosophy is therefore logo-philic. Discourse being, however, a complex network of inter-related truth-effects, it far exceeds philosophy's power of codification. So philosophy has to 'run after' all sorts of new discourses (women, post-colonial subjects, the audio-visual media and other new technologies, etc.) in order to incorporate them into its way of thinking; in this respect philosophy is logo-phobic. It's always behind its times.

This creative approach to philosophy calls not only for a new theoretical style, which resists the elaboration of dogmatic ideas, untouchable sacred dogmas, sanctified by a socially dominant notion of 'scientificity' or of 'political correctness'. It also hijacks the philosophy book away from the traditional vision of the text as a sacred container of truths. Deleuze's redefinition of ideas as nomadic forms of thought offers us a theoretical defence against all mental and theoretical codifications. Innovating even on Foucault's radical notion of the text as a tool-box, Deleuze sees the philosophical text as the term in an intensive process of fundamentally extra-textual practices. These practices have to do with displacing the subject through flows of intensity of forces which come from the encounter with others. Doing philosophy means connecting the textual moment to other texts or other non-textual moments, as relay-points.

It seems to me that another extremely important implication of the new conceptual scheme is the way in which it alters the terms of the conventional pact between the writer and his/her readers in a way that echoes some of Joan W. Scott's concerns and choices. If the philosophical text is to be approached on the model of connection, it is relinquished into the intensive elements that both sustain the connection and are generated by them. The writer/reader binary couple is split up accordingly, and a new impersonal mode is required as the appropriate way of doing philosophy. This impersonal style is rather 'post-personal' in that it allows for a web of connections to be drawn, not only in terms of the author's 'intentions' and the reader's 'reception', but rather in a much wider, more complexified set of possible inter-connections. The complexity of the network of forces that come to bear on

the subject is such that it blurs established, that is to say hegemonic, distinctions of class, culture, race, sexual practice and others. The image of the rhizome pops up here as a figuration for the kind of political subjectivity Deleuze is promoting.

This philosophical stance imposes not only the conventional academic requirements of passionless truth, but also the passionate engagement in the recognition of the theoretical and discursive implication of rethinking the subject. It is all a question of what kind of rhizomatic connections we can draw among ourselves, here and now, in the act of doing philosophy. This choice I am following the call for 'passionate detachment' in theory-making. In other words, as nomadic interlocutors in a philosophical text, we are expected to be not just traditional intellectuals and academics, but also active, interested and concerned participants in a project of research and experimentation for new ways of thinking about human subjectivity. As readers in an intensive mode, we are transformers of intellectual energy, processors of the 'insights' that we are exchanging. These 'in'-sights are not to be thought of as plunging us inwards, towards a mythical 'inner' reservoir of truth. On the contrary, they are better thought of as propelling us along the multiple directions of extra-textual experiences. Thinking is living at a higher degree, a faster pace, a multi-directional manner – beyond psychoanalysis: a non-essentialist, high-tech brand of vitalism, which is reminiscent of, but does *not* coincide with the classical theory of the drives – though this has become fashionable again.

The Poststructuralist Politics of Figurations

I would argue that feminist theory is a reasoned, positive response to the structural aporias that mark philosophy in post-modernity. Feminist thought challenges the self-indulgent celebration of the aporetic, which in some ways is the dominant mode of reflection in post-structuralist philosophy. This over-emphasis on philosophy's aporias and impossibilities, paradoxically re-confirms philosophers in a position of mastery, even though what they master is the plaintive discourse about philosophy's loss of mastery. As a feminist, this strikes me as a very classical move which makes philosophy coincide with a state of crisis and emergency. As a feminist, I situate myself in a dissonant or dissymmetrical position vis-à-vis this crisis.

Rather than attempting a hasty and – in my eyes – premature resolution of the paradoxes and reconciliation of this dissymmetry, I see it as a task of philosophy to explore, account for and work through the differences it harbours within itself. The

collary of the above is that philosophy must relinquish any hope for – and illusion of – being able to produce new universals. In other words, the historical decline of what Lyotard labelled as 'the master narratives' of Western phallogocentrism implies necessarily a conceptual shift towards many and multi-fold 'micro-narratives'.

Contrary to those who fear that the proliferation of micro-narratives will result in a relativistic drift into nihilism, I see this process not only as a very productive but also as the only viable option left for philosophical thought. It has to re-invent itself by deconstructing the web of power-relations on which it is built. As Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze put it: as a discipline of thought philosophy holds a privileged bond with domination, with oedipalization (a great machine of intimidation).

Philosophy posits its values through the exclusion of many – non-men, non-whites, non-learned etc. The structural necessity of these pejorative figurations of difference within a structure of thought that used to insist in claiming universal validity does make it difficult for philosophy to accommodate the very questions that are central to feminism: the critique of phallogocentrism and of ethno-centrism and the affirmation of the positivity of difference. Nonetheless, not in spite but because of these difficulties, the issue of gender simply won't go away.

I would put this issue in terms of a productive paradox. It is the paradox of a female feminist subject that wants to be affirmed in the positivity of her difference. She is no longer 'the other' as the complementary and yet, dis-empowered specular reflection of a 'same' which is equated with masculinity in its universalistic posture. Rather, it is the effort to refigure, re-present, and conceptualize this 'Other' in relation to the historical reality, the cultural capital and the symbolic presence of female subjects of the post-Woman kind, who are committed to the undoing of phallogocentrism. These are the female feminist subjects of quite-another-story. The affirmation of a common symbolic condition is, however, only a partial starting point because women are not, in any way, *the same*. Feminist theory is a philosophy of multiple location and of multiple differences among women, rejecting thus global statements in favour of more situated and consequently more partial perspectives. The politics of location in not only a spatial concept – related to geo-political concerns – but also a temporal one: it has to do with the development of alternative genealogies and of suitable conceptual personae to express them in figurations.

I would rather define feminist philosophy as the practice of unfolding the complex and potentially contradictory layers of signification, of sedimented meanings and

truth-effects, which are contained in the signifier Woman. Please remember that this is the bloated signifier that female feminists have taken and even distance from and which now, like a vacant lot – awaits re-de-mis-construction. Far from being an essence, this is a site of active and collectively accounted for re-definition. In *Nomadic Subjects* I have described this practice alternatively as nomadic shifts within the landscape of the empty lot that is Woman (as other of the same) – shifts which aim at asserting a female subject in relation to other women – this is what Irigaray calls ‘the other of the other’.⁹ It can also be figured – however – in terms of the mimetic re-appropriation of the feminine (understood as not the ‘other of’ or ‘less than’ Man) by female feminists. I often call this the ‘metabolic consumption of Woman’ (as the other of the same) by female feminists involved in the quest for adequate representations for post-Woman female subjectivity. This theoretico-political practice can be read as affirmative though it proceeds by deconstruction, in that it proceeds by unravelling the different layers of complexity, as well as the specificity of female embodied and embedded perspectives, which also entail, in turn, processes of othering and of exclusion – that is to say they are *not* outside power but fully enmeshed in it. This kind of metabolic consumption of the feminine by female feminists who pursue the re-negotiation, its inscription in a new socio-symbolic contract, is the practice by which new spaces can be opened for alternative representations of the female subject (see Cindy Sherman; see most contemporary fiction).

A figuration is the expression of one’s ‘politics of location’ – to quote Adrienne Rich. It is self-reflexive, moreover, not an individual activity, but rather an interactive process which relies upon a social network of exchanges. Figurations thus act as the spot-light that illuminates aspects of one’s practice which were blind spots before. A conceptual persona is no metaphor, but a materially embodied stage of metamorphosis of a dominant subject towards all that the phallogocentric system does *not* want it to become. It is a historically embedded *moment* in a process of transformative changes. In order to meet the challenge of these ‘micro narratives’ and more specifically in order to find adequate forms of representation for the new forms of subjectivity elaborated by female feminists, however, one needs to broaden quite radically the definition of what counts as a scientific, theoretical and philosophical text and of who is entitled to claim access to it.

I would not restrict the definition or the function of philosophy to the prepositional content of its utterances. Rather, I would enlarge it so as to conclude the layers of affectivity, or passion, which underlie those utterances. A philosophical idea is an open question within which lucidly formulated insights combine with unspoken

affective motivations, to produce possible itineraries of thought. What matters, however, is that the affectivity, force or passion, (Deleuze/Nietzsche/Spinoza) that underlay the whole exercise – which I call the desire for philosophy. Critical thought stresses the sense of this *singularity*, this non-coincidence of a philosophical idea with its rational core or prepositional content – that philosophy can still claim a position of relevance to the questions that mark our historicity. Only paradoxes to offer indeed – as open and un-folding processes, time-lines and time-zones creating order in and through dis-continuities. Another name for this is political passion. And in this project Joan W. Scott is for me one of the great sources of inspiration.

Notes

- 1 Christian Descombes, *Le même et l'autre*, Paris 1979 (English translation: *Modern French Philosophy*, translation by L. Scott-Fax and J.M. Harding, Cambridge 1980); Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytical Politics*, New York 1978.
- 2 Geneviève Lloyd, *The Man of Reason. 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, London 1984.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours*, Paris 1971.
- 4 Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Cambridge Mass. 1999.
- 5 Sandra Harding (ed.), *Feminism and Methodology*, Bloomington/Indiana 1987.
- 6 Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminism and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge Mass. 1996.
- 7 Especially in: Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Paris 1962 (English translation: *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, translation by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, New York 1983).
- 8 Foucault (see note 3).
- 9 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York 1994.