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Zentrum für Frauenstudien und die Erforschung der Geschlechterverhältnisse

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**Gender, Identity, Multiculturalism
and the question of the European Union.**

I am extremely happy to participate in this symposium on a set of issues that I consider of the utmost importance in both mainstream and feminist social theory debates on contemporary subjectivity, sexual difference and diversity. Predictably enough, my framework of analysis is very interdisciplinary and it relies extensively on poststructuralist theories of knowledge, culture, power and sexual difference. The focus is on the inter-relation between a multi-layered understanding of subjectivity, based on gender/sexual difference and issues of ethnic differences and of diversity in contemporary social thought. At the present stage of my reflexion, special emphasis is placed on the quest for new models of 'flexible citizenship', especially for women, within the European Union.

Poststructuralist theories of subjectivity

In the poststructuralist framework I have adopted and adapted to my needs, identity is approached neither in a biological essentialistic nor in social constructivist manner. It is rather understood somewhere in between, following Foucault: identity is constructed in the very gesture that posits it as the anchoring point for certain social and discursive practices. You cannot separate the structures of identity, therefore, from social and symbolic practices, i.e: from knowledge and power.

I would accordingly define gender/sexual difference as a process that relates to multiple differences: those between men and women, but also the many differences among women themselves, including differences of 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.

Therefore, the question 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 Stuart Hall argues, these are

questions about entitlement, agency and subjectivity which rotate around the issue of cultural identity and provide an analytic framework of analysis.

I pay special attention to the intersection of feminist critiques of subjectivity with the discourses of the 'crisis' of the West within poststructuralism and postcoloniality.

Anthony Appiah (1991) 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 European Union and European citizenship

In my present research I have situated this discussion within the political framework of the European Union. I want to argue that, 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 postcolonial world-order and the process of the trans-national economy spells the decline of nation-states as principles of economic and political organisation. The coming of the electronic frontier and the information highways accelerates the process of de-materialisation of the nation state. This decline 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 localised '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 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 Mohanty 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. This is also known as the 'Fortress Europe' syndrome, which has been extensively criticised 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 Europe.

Situating and relocating whiteness

Another way in which gendered and racialised identities and locations intersect in my work is on the issue 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. 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 subjectivity 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 whites. Richard Dyer 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“.

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 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 racialised white people make open spaces to work towards anti-racist 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 historicising 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 the 'strategic re-location of whiteness'.

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