

RESPONSE TO DICK PELS

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Pels' article blends two rather familiar sets of arguments: on the one hand the charges of political dis-investment and ethical indifference, which are by now the staple-diet of anti-postmodernists. On the other hand the charge, made much earlier (and much better) by Gayatri Spivak, that nomadic figurations of subjectivity, such as the emphasis on hybrid subject-positions - nomads, migrants, tourists, travellers etc. - are a metaphorical appropriation of the social realities of the empirical subjects who experience them. According to Pels, the representation of these 'others' by the French philosophers re-peats a dispossession of their cognitive content and it consequently perpetuates their dis-empowerment.

Resting on an epistemological argument, Pels aims to show up the limitations of the postmodern appropriation of marginal 'others'. He argues that the 'flirt' between marginality and intellectuality serves the purpose of inflating the philosophers' own renewed and self-appointed sense of epistemological validity. As such it needs to be critiqued as neo-universalistic.

I think it important first of all to clarify the points of entry into this discussion. Pels' objections are raised from the angle of a discipline that is not French philosophy, but sociology of knowledge (Simmel, Lukacs, Mannheim and Castells come out of this with flying colours). Moreover, Pels translates the poststructuralist focus on the representation of subjectivity into a totally different debate - which deals with the role and function of the intellectual. The terms of both his appropriation of poststructuralism and of the switch of themes are neither made explicit nor are they accounted for. I find this one of the great weaknesses of Pels' case.

As a consequence of his disciplinary mind-set, Pels sees the production of discourse as a cognitive activity. This cognitive subject-position assumes a clear distinction and inter-relation between language and reality. Because Pels assumes a direct link between the two, he reads the philosophical nomadism of the French poststructuralist as an abuse of one's knowing subject-position: it implies speaking on behalf of others and therefore re-presenting their position. This type of metaphorical appropriation of the experience and the cognitive specificity of others lies at the heart of Dick Pels' objection to the figuration of the nomadic subject. I want to make it clear that I find Pels' argument to rest on a serious misreading of poststructuralist philosophies of difference.

The terms of the discussion are set up by Pels in such a way as to neglect the systematic differences in theoretical framework between sociology of knowledge and the poststructuralist philosophy of the subject. The judgmental tone and the dismissive approach Pels adopts towards the otherwise undefined field of 'postmodernism' make it rather difficult to engage in a serious debate.

I will therefore raise a series of inter-related points in order to try and make sense of this muddled discussion:

1. Thinking and knowing.

Not all thinking is implicitly, or explicitly, about knowledge. The link between thinking and epistemological claims is in itself the trademark of a tradition to which Pels clearly belongs and I clearly not.

The poststructuralist redefinition of discourse takes place within a larger framework which identifies thinking and the activity of thought as the main focus of analysis. Much has been written on the 'critique of representation', also known as the 'anti-platonic theory of representation' of the post-structuralists, especially of Deleuze for whom 'representation' is indeed a key concept. Hence also the distinction that both Deleuze and Lyotard draw between

different thinking genres: the cognitive, the speculative, the ethical and the aesthetic. To lump all these into one - the cognitive - is reductive. To confuse thinking with knowledge is equally inadequate in this context. In post-structuralism, knowledge-production or knowledge-claims answer to quite a different set of practices, of which Foucault gave a lucid analysis in his reading of micro-power relations.

There are solid historical and theoretical reasons why this generation of thinkers focussed upon the thinking self and the activity of thought as their central question. This has far less to do with the never-ending quest for a role for the post-Marxist intellectuals - which is the theme of Pels' own work - than with the legacy of some major currents of thought which have shaped French philosophy. Structural psychoanalysis is clearly one.

As far as modern French philosophy is concerned, the impact of psychoanalysis has been a radical deconstruction of the subject, which separates the activity of thinking from the supervision of rationality. As a result, the subject is no longer identified with consciousness: "desidero ergo sum" must replace the old cogito. In other words, the activity of thinking is enlarged to encompass a number of faculties of which affectivity, desire and the imagination are prime movers.

From Bachelard to Canguilhem through to Foucault and his generation, 'thinking' emerges as the material and symbolic site of constitution of a post-humanist subject. To reduce this project to the rise of narcissism, as Pels suggests is a gross sociological simplification.

2. Universalism.

One of the more problematic aspects of Pels' reading of my and other post-structuralists' work is the charge of universalism. Although this follows from Pels' emphasis on the cognitive and the reduction to it of all the work post-structuralists have done on the representation of the thinking subject, it also perpetuates a misunderstanding.

That thinking be a nomadic activity, which takes place in the spaces in-between, in the transitions does not make it a 'view from nowhere'. To be nomadic or in transition, therefore, does not place the thinking subject outside history or time.

Thinking may not be topologically bound, especially in the age of the global economy and telematic networks, but it certainly is not outside the temporal span of history. Quite on the contrary, in my work I go to some lengths to connect the nomadic subject position to the issue of locations as spatio-temporal conditions. Postmodernity as a specific moment of our historicity is a major location that needs to be accounted for.

As I have argued many times before: a location is an embedded and embodied memory. It is a set of counter-memories which are activated by the resisting thinker against the grain of the dominant representations of subjectivity.

As a consequence, the nomadic subject is not as universalistic and disinvested as Pels suggests: it is rather the way of re-figuring a subject position that is politically invested in the task of redefining his/her own accountability. The nomadic subject is a conceptual form of self-reflexivity which is specifically addressed to the subjects who occupy the centre. Deleuze defines them as : " male/white/heterosexual/educated/speaking a standard European language/living in urban centres/owning property".

I have argued that the crisis of representation of this dominant subject needs to be read in the context of the decline of Europe as a world power. It is precisely in this context that the appeal to nomadic subjectivity, with its explicit Nietzschean overtones, is a way of destabilizing the centre of the former phallogocentric sovereign subject. Nomadic deterritorialization is a clear blow to the very system of rational consciousness which is best embodied by philosophers like

Pels, for whom thinking and knowing are synonymous with a normative exercise of reason. Nomadic subjectivity refers to the need to unfold possibilities of alternative becomings which would undo the monolithic power of the phallogocentric subject. Deleuze's work is about the undoing of identities based on this premise. In my work, I have developed this insight first into a critique of the masculinism of this system and more recently, in the direction of a radical relocation of whiteness and thus a critique of Euro-centrism¹.

3. Figurations and metaphors.

A figuration in the nomadic sense is not a metaphor; again, there are serious conceptual differences at work here, that need to be taken into more rigorous account that Pels allows for.

Judging from his own standards, Pels considers any representation as a form of undue appropriation. Resting on Said's classical work on orientalism he then goes on to argue that the poststructuralists romanticize the marginal others. Again, I think this charge rests on a misreading of what is involved in the poststructuralist critique of representation and on what is at stake in the task of redefining alternative subject positions.

Firstly, Pels' appeal on behalf of the allegedly metaphorized 'others' expresses some anxiety about the loss of cognitive mastery that is implied by poststructuralism. It also projects this anxiety towards the allegedly 'marginal' others and acts on their behalf.

Both bell hooks and Stuart Hall have warned us instead of the cheap trick that consists in 'saving' the marginal others from the de-stabilizing impact of postmodernism in general and poststructuralist philosophies in particular. In "Postmodern blackness" bell hooks objects strongly to the way blacks and other 'others' are not supposed, expected or entitled to deconstructive approaches to identity. It is as if they should be stuck with the burden of 'authentic' experience, empirical 'reality' and real-life socio-economic 'conditions'. Hooks argues that racism is perpetuated through the division of labour that declares poststructuralist or nomadic instabilities to be 'dangerous' for black subjects. It is rather the case, argues bell hooks, that postmodern blackness is infinitely more dangerous to racism, in so far as it exposes the white arrogance which consists in automatically assimilating the marginal 'others' to 'the view from below'.

Secondly, because of his philosophical assumptions, Pels has no affinity for discussions of 'subject-positions', or for any post-psychoanalytic understandings of subjectivity. Yet, in my and other poststructuralists' work this is a very important notion.

The relevance of this philosophical psychoanalytic tradition rests on the politically charged understanding of 'the imaginary'.

Since Althusser and Lacan, the imaginary has referred to a set of socially mediated practices which function as the anchoring point - albeit unstable and contingent- for identifications and therefore for identity formation. In opposition to cognitive schemes of definition of the subject, and also to classical Marxist notions of ideology, 'the imaginary' inscribes the process of individuation into a broad web of socio-political relations. Self and society are mutually shaped by one another through the choreography of entitlements, prohibitions, desires and controls which constitute the socio-symbolic field.

Neither 'pure' imagination - locked in its classical opposition to reason - nor fantasy in the Freudian sense, the imaginary for me marks a space of transitions and transactions. Nomadic, in

¹ For a more detailed explanation of this argument, see my article "Figurations of nomadism", in John Burt (ed.) The Theatre of Culture, The Humanities Press, forthcoming.

a Deleuzian sense, it flows like symbolic glue between the social and the self, the outside ('constitutive outside', as Stuart Hall would say, quoting Derrida) and the subject. The subject is enmeshed in this network of inter-related social and discursive effects. This network constitutes the social field as a libidinal - or affective - landscape, as well as a normative - or disciplinary - framework. The important point for poststructuralists is to stress that one's relation to this complex network of power relations is always mediated, ie: it is caught in a web of imaginary relations.

Thirdly and unfortunately for Pels, the imaginary plays a major role in the poststructuralist project of conceptual creativity. For Deleuze - following Bergson and Nietzsche - it is a transformative force that propels multiple, heterogeneous 'becomings', or repositioning of the subject. The process of becoming is collectively-driven, that is to say relational and external; it is also framed by affectivity or desire, and is thus ex-centric to rational control.

Terms like 'figuration' are often used to describe this politically charged practice of alternative representation. It is a way of bringing into representation the unrepresentable, in so far as it requires awareness of the limitations as well as the specificity of one's locations. 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. Once again the impact of psychoanalysis cannot be underestimated here.

Deleuze works primarily on the formulation of alternative conceptual forms of representation for these subjects-in-becoming. The aim here is to provide a materially-based practice of representation of the fast-shifting social landscape of postindustrial societies. Furthermore, poststructuralists attempt to connect these changes to fundamental shifts in the conceptual fabric of philosophy. In his classical text What is Philosophy?, Deleuze, with Guattari, makes it quite explicit that what he is after is a new form of conceptual creativity which would allow us to think and represent change and transformation. Pels choses to ignore this lucid statement of philosophical aims and to judge nomadic philosophy by standards that are utterly alien to it.

4. Feminist theory and the politics of locations.

The feminist 'politics of location' is not a cognitive position in the sense of the standpoint feminism advocated by Pels. The sources and extent of Pels' committment to feminist theory are sketchy at best, though it is always a relief to see feminist epistemology getting some attention, however polemical.

My point is that 'locations' are not cognitive entities, but politically informed cartographies that aim at making visible and consequently undoing power-relations not only between men and women but also among women. The politics of location refers to a way of making sense of diversity within the category of 'difference' understood as the binary opposite of the phallogocentric subject.

Feminist theories of 'politics of location' (Rich), or 'situated knowledges' (Haraway) also stress the material basis of alternative forms of representation, as well as their transgressive and transformative potential. In feminism, these ideas are coupled with that of epistemological and political accountability (Harding), that is the practice that consists in unveiling the power locations which one inevitably inhabits as the site of one's identity.

The practice of accountability (for one's embodied and embedded locations) as a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials is linked to two crucial notions: memory and narratives. They activate the process of putting into words, that is to say bringing into symbolic representation, that which by definition escapes consciousness, in so far as it is relational and invested by a yearning or desire for change. Feminists knew this well before

Deleuze theorized it in his rhizomic philosophy.

By failing to read feminist theory in its broader political framework and reducing it into his cognitive scheme, Pels ends up practising a strange brand of disembodied and disembedded thinking himself. Pels thus repeats the arrogant posture of those who occupy the centre - albeit in an allegedly radical pose - and have no qualms about their entitlement to act as the discursive judges. As a result, Pels' own location and investment in the subject-matter remain well concealed behind the polemic. This position of 'implicit reader' of others is characteristic of Pels' style of argumentation. I find it in total contradiction with the feminist sense of politics of locations as a form of self-reflexive accountability for one's values, theoretical and others.

Feminism does not fare any better than postmodernism in Dick Pels' hands, in spite of a few savvy footnotes. Flattened out to the level of yet another cognitive system, 'cleansed' of its political and ethical underpinning, this 'feminism without women' - to quote Tanja Modleski - is as epistemologically correct as it is sterile. That Pels be concerned with the feminist as intellectual is his prerogative. That he should, however, hold postmodernist or any other type of feminism accountable for the reduction that he himself is operating upon them, is an incongruous and self-contradictory move.