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The Struggle for Europe

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European citizenship cannot be founded on national grounds, because it is transnational. We must be capable of imagining a situation . . . in which your sense of citizenship, or rather your citizenship in the sense of legal and political subjectivity, must be detached from the sense of identity. I am against this closure by which you are something and belong to something: this is mad, it is a form of microfascism. Geopolitically, it is an absolute closure: I am from here, I come from here, this is my land, this is my language, therefore I belong. Postnationalism is thus, for me, a critique of the unitary subject, by which I mean citizenship, politics and the identitarian question. For a European, this entails putting an end to nationalism.

Rosi Braidotti

Abstract

This chapter presents Braidotti’s work and engagement with issues of European identity, citizenship, and democracy. Against the grain, Braidotti does not privilege rights but rather the matter on imagination in the effort to reconstruct a Europe void of nationalist ambitions and exclusionary tendencies. The imaginary in question is, on the one hand, postnationalist and firmly grounded in the Union’s anti-fascist political and intellectual origins and, on the other, feminist in that it is embedded in a critique of the unitary (white and male) subject. Such an imaginary would, for Braidotti, shift the ways in which relations are territorialized by decentering Europe from its position of cultural dominance and overcoming the dualism between the self and the other upon which exclusions and racism are based.

Keywords

Europe, citizenship, gender, democracy, becoming-minoritarian, identity, nationalism, unitary subject
In this opening quote, part of a conversation I had with Rosi Braidotti more than a decade ago on the future of Europe, Braidotti positions her work firmly and passionately in relation to the project or, better still, to the intellectual and political obligation of building a different Europe. Such a Europe would not be dominated by nationalist ambitions, and would not view itself as white and Christian; nor would it put into place the restrictive immigration policies that, in the eyes of many, transformed Europe into an exclusionary “Fortress.” The project of reconstructing Europe is, for Braidotti, first and foremost a matter of imagination rather than of rights. This is not to say that rights are not pivotal but, rather, that the logic of rights is often confined by a legalistic, technical, and juridical language that results in an imaginary that is poor, does not excite us or make us dream, and is incapable of conjuring up an alternative vision of democracy.

The imaginary in question, for Braidotti, firmly postnationalist, a term that she differentiates from transnationalism. While the latter does not radically unsettle the concept of the nation-state, postnationalism interrogates and challenges its very roots in order to envision and give shape to a social and political body that is not grounded upon the nation-state. European postnationalism is embedded and needs to be traced back, Braidotti suggests, to the European Union’s historical roots and to founding texts such as Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi’s (1941) Ventotene Manifesto in order to make more widely visible the fact that the formation of the Union was driven by the desire to restrain nationalism and the excessive power of one state over others to prevent a re-emergence of fascism and intra-European civil wars (Braidotti 2002g). The role that anti-fascist partisans, Jews, and communists played in the conceptualization of the Union, the Union’s origins as a response to the nationalism that engendered the Fascism and Nazism of World War II, and the anti-fascist origins of the political thought that accompanied it are today rarely considered or drawn upon in debates on how to take Europe forward. Quite the opposite—as Chiara Bonfiglioli’s (2014) historical study shows, new social movements, such as the feminist movement that developed in Italy in the 1970s, viewed with suspicion and kept their distance from the anti-fascist and communist politics of those women who, during the Cold War years, led important struggles for women’s political and social rights.

Similarly, the anti-fascist origins of the Union are not a notion that key intellectuals engaged in debate on the state and the future of Europe work with or draw upon. Rather than exploring the potential continuity of such a historical and political project, public intellectuals prefer to stress the need for a rupture with the past and the necessity of constructing new foundations. This is best visible in the debate on the future of Europe in May/June 2013 entitled “Europe from the ground up” hosted by openDemocracy, a UK-based digital commons. The debate originated from the piece by Etienne Balibar (2013) that called for the rebuilding of a more democratic, equal, and social Union. Balibar sees the current European situation as dominated by technocratic governance and marked by a lack of European demos and the hegemony of the north over the south of Europe through the politics of financial debt and crisis, in terms of a “paralysis of political systems” and the “decomposition of the postnational project.” Germany’s economic hegemony is producing a situation of “internal colonization” characterized by a rejection of the European political model and further political
instability. The “solution” to this situation is not a return to the ideas that led to the Treaty of Rome and which inaugurated the Union as, for Balibar, the formal continuity with the inaugural project has been broken. Rather, the key notions that might give impetus to the reconstruction of the Union, so as to build a different Europe, are the restoration of social securities and welfare, regulation of the financial systems, and the constitution of a “new” European demos (via democratic movements) and leadership (possibly “a European Prince”). Leaving aside for a moment the fantasy narrative of a male hero capable of “saving” the European project, what is of interest here is the notion of “demos,” which, for Balibar, is not an entity that is already present, but one which comes into existence and is constituted via democratic movements.

Balibar is not alone in attempting to rethink Europe and its citizenship starting from democratic movements and bottom-up mobilizations. Engin Isin coined the term “acts of citizenship” in his attempt to shift theorization away from citizenship as a formal status and toward citizenship as a process (Isin and Nielsen 2008). Instead of tackling the question of citizenship by beginning with the question “Who is the citizen?” Isin suggests asking “What makes the citizen?” (Isin 2009, p. 383) This shift, apparently modest, instigates an important move from citizenship as a status—and hence institutionally granted—to citizenship as a process through which subjects, by claiming rights and regardless of their citizenship status, constitute themselves as citizens. Emphasis is, therefore, placed on what people do, namely on those claims and actions through which citizenship is enacted. This opens up space for detecting the ways in which those who do not hold EU citizenship and even those who reside outside the EU’s borders can actually act as European citizens (Isin and Saward 2012). This take on European citizenship attempts to exit the dualistic mode—national versus European—in which citizenship is debated in mainstream scholarship. The bulk of mainstream debates revolves, in fact, around issues of how to conciliate the national citizenship of member-states with EU citizenship and on ways to enhance the role played by citizens of member-states in order to foster the development of a European demos. To approach citizenship from the perspective of mobilizations rather than from an institutional or representational angle means to conceive of EU citizenship outside its legalistic and institutional format and to identify the importance of theorizing citizenship and Europe in a way that makes visible the collective and dynamic process through which political subjectivities are constituted (Andrijasevic 2013).

Attempts to reconceptualize political participation and citizenship, starting from the collective and processual aspects, reflect what is happening on the ground. A research project on a variety of social mobilizations and collective activities across Europe, referred to as “subterranean politics,” found out that participation in these mobilizations is not a response to austerity measures but is, instead, driven by belief in the more broad failure of democracy, by frustration with current political practices, and by a deep disappointment with the political system.3 The project also found that, across all the case studies in Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Spain, those partaking in the mobilizations ascribed great significance to the subjective experience of doing politics anew and of “reconstructing democracy out of one’s own actions.”4 What transpires here is that, while the politics of rights is crucial, it is also insufficient to account for the subjective and transformative dimension of “doing politics.” A perspective
that envisions social change via the reconstruction of welfare systems limits politics to a logic of claims and reparations without taking into consideration the extent to which the subjective desire operates as an affirmative and transformative drive toward alternative political arrangements. To wish for “a European Prince” as Balibar does, and to argue for a rupture with the past and for new foundations, is, in the best-case scenario, to deprive ourselves of the potential that social movements hold for the creative re-imagining of democracy and, in the worse case, to forego accountability for Europe’s history of fascism and imperialism.

Braidotti’s writings on Europe offer an important and challenging alternative to the way of envisioning change outlined above. At the very core of Braidotti’s thinking is her critical engagement with the notion of the subject that is commonly not of interest to scholars of Europe and democratization. The notion of the subject-citizen is not self-evident for Braidotti, or even unitary, for that matter. The problem with the self-evident notion of the citizen is that its universal nature is, in fact, exclusionary in as much as it assumes a subject that is male and white and is constructed in opposition to its “others,” such as women and ethnic or racialized groups. This binary logic confines women and nonwhite peoples to the position of the “other” and posits the masculine and whiteness as the universal norm against which “others” are measured and judged (Andrijasevic 2011). This model is thus organized according to the logic of difference, where the difference is always expressed in terms of the negative (i.e., less than). In as much as it is theorized as universal, such a subject is imagined as detached from context and circumstances and, hence, is constructed as neutral, impartial, and politically disinterested or, in other words, objective and unitary.

Braidotti, working alongside other feminist theorists, exposes this universality as a generalized but partial and distorted account of a relatively small social group, constructed through the exclusion of the subjectivities of those positioned as “others” (Code 1993). With the aim of elaborating a more complete interpretation of the social and the political, feminist thinkers give prominence to the so-called “politics of location,” a term coined by Adrienne Rich (1986) to suggest that subjects are always located somewhere and that the specificity of that location is marked by intersecting and multiple axes of power (gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality etc.). These multiple axes result in divergent positionings that bring into question the notion of a unitary subject. Consequently, the constitution of collective political subjectivity appears not as a straightforward process, but rather as a contradictory one, which, contingent on the various locations which subjects occupy, is engendered via multiple and conflicting claims (Andrijasevic 2013).

A vision of a nonunitary subject that embodies, and develops out of, a complex web of social locations is at the very core of Braidotti’s efforts to rethink Europe. Such a subject is postnational in that its nationality, citizenship, and identity do not map neatly onto each other (Braidotti 2002g) and, hence, become open to different connections and multiple belongings. The positioning of the subject within this different and complex web of relations with the self and the others changes, Braidotti suggests, the way in which relations are territorialized (2006b, p. 85). This reworking of relationalities would permit a shifting of Europe from the position of the “center” of civilization and set the coordinates of a new global spatiality devoid of Europe’s
(myth of) cultural dominance. Instead of Europe as a center and its values as universal, this alternative vision of Europe is grounded in the recognition of the partial perspective of Europe’s location. This is what Braidotti calls “the-becoming-minoritarian of Europe” (2006b, p. 92). A further key component of this “becoming” is to critically address and rework whiteness by historicizing it and showing that its naturalness is a construct achieved through the demonization and devaluation of others. Here the link to, rather than the rupture from, the Union’s origins is crucial in that it historicizes Europe as home to nationalism, colonialism, and fascism (Braidotti 2002g, p. 21). Not to sever links and to accept responsibility for this past is to be anchored historically and to be working toward the “strategic-re-location of whiteness” precisely through revisiting and understanding, as Braidotti puts it, “the complicity between ‘difference’ and ‘exclusion’ in the European mind-set” (2002g, p. 27).

The importance and uniqueness of Braidotti’s work on Europe lies precisely in its moving away from the logic of rights that has been dominating the debate on Europe and its demos and toward the historicization of European identity and the power relations that sustain it so as to offer an accountable alternative imagery for Europe to build upon. While, for some, the project of de-identification from national points of reference, the decentering of Europe from its position of cultural dominance, and the overcoming of dualisms between the self and the other might be seen as threats, for Braidotti, they represent an opportunity for the affirmative transformation of identity and for the development of a more adequate European social imaginary. The construction of this imaginary and of the political subjectivity that accompanies it cannot be seen in terms of a straightforward and linear project that, enacted by a homogeneous social movement, would bring about political change. The existence and acceptance of contradictions pertaining to a nonunitary subject are inevitable and fundamental to the constitution of a collective political subjectivity. This constitution is, for Braidotti, an affirmative collective effort and the outcome of an engagement in an epistemic and political struggle against dominant structures of power and knowledge. As she eloquently puts it: “Affirmative politics is about experimenting with alternatives, working both at the concrete and the imaginary levels. Minds that believe in the future put the skills and analytical tools of critical theory to the task of constructing alternative possible scenarios. That is definitely how I see my work” (Andrijasevic 2011, p. 293). For those of us working on issues of European identity and its citizenship, engaging with and expanding on Braidotti’s work is taking forward the struggle for a more inclusive and democratic Europe.

Notes

1 In: Andrijasevic 2008a, p. 2. Original from 2002. Other interviews I held with Braidotti are Andrijasevic 2008b and 2011.

2 The Ventotene Manifesto was written by Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi (1941) while they were held prisoner on the Italian island of Ventotene during World War II. Circulating among the Italian resistance, it would soon become the program of the European Federalist Movement.
References