

IDENTITY DISCOURSE AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION: WHY THE ONE CAN'T DO WITHOUT THE OTHER

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Résumé: On argumente que le discours sur l'identité contemporaine ne pourrait dispenser quelques formes de représentation politique et, donc, d'identité.

Ainsi, on peut chercher recours pour meilleur comprendre la notion controversée de Spivak autour de "l'essentialisme stratégique"

Mots-clé: Discours sur l'identité, politique de représentation, essentialisme stratégique, Derrida.

Resumo: Argumenta-se que o discurso identitário contemporâneo não pode prescindir de algumas formas de política de representação, e, portanto, de identidade.

Desse modo, pode-se buscar recursos para um melhor entendimento da noção controversa de Spivak sobre o "essentialismo estratégico".

Palavras-chave: discurso identitário, política de representação, essentialismo estratégico, Derrida.

What makes contemporary identity discourse so noticeably different from its predecessors is its unanimous and emphatic rejection of essentialism. By essentialism is meant the doctrine according to which the different entities or objects that are believed to make up the world have properties that are essential to their nature, alongside those that are only accidental to it. Or, in Diana Fuss' (1989) memorable phrase: "belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity".

So long as the idea that there are essences out there (*substance* as opposed to *accidence*, Aristotle's terminology) that can be apprehended as such was considered sacrosanct and beyond reproof, there was no problem of identity. In other words, strange as it might indeed appear at first blush, identity discourse today is about the very impossibility of identity—if by identity one means that which persists unchanged, and unchangeable, over time. Identity in its time-honoured sense is a thing of the past because there is today a widespread perception that there no longer are any essences lurking inside objects, as Aristotle thought, or *apart* from them, as his teacher Plato held.

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Contemporary discourse on identity either laments or celebrates the impossibility of stable identities. What it no longer calls into question is the claim that attempts to anchor our unstable identities to anything that is not itself caught up in the vortex of volatility are doomed to fail. Contemporary theorists of identity no longer find it necessary to point out that identity is not a straightforward matter of fact or something that exists *in natura*; rather, it is something that is constructed and constantly in the process of being re-fashioned (Rajagopalan 1998). Furthermore, the construction of identities is eminently discursive—that is to say, it is in and through our everyday, routine discursive practices that we fashion our own identities and those of the persons/entities around us. All this is part of the set of common, taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin contemporary debates over the issue of identity.

Even the expression “*in natura*” as used in the foregoing paragraph, has lost most of its sheen in our discursive practices today and, if we still continue using it, it is because of what one might call a sheer “force of habit”. For, as contradictory or counter-intuitive as it might indeed appear, it turns out that Nature itself (or if you will, the idea we have today of what constitutes Nature) is not a natural object. In other words, our present-day conceptualization of Nature is a highly sophisticated cultural product. Consider, for instance, that our present-day idea of Nature—in particular, the idea that Nature is an endangered object—is largely due to the enthusiastic promoters of Greenpeace, the Green Parties and the like. It is doubtful if the primitive man/woman—or, for that matter, the millions of men and women around the world that live in societies that have not yet been in contact with what we call modern civilization and the sort of creature comforts typically associated with it—ever had a notion of Nature even remotely comparable to the one being bandied about nowadays. But then even to imagine such a primitive form of life—past or present—is to walk straight into an argumentative snare of our own fabrication. The image of the Noble Savage could simply not have germinated in the mind of someone who was/is primitive.

Building on the Foucauldian notion of gaze, John Urry (2002) argues in his book *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* that very idea of tourism would not have bloomed and become a multi-billion dollar business the way it has right across the world, had it not been for our capacity and insatiable need to marvel at the extraordinary. For Urry, however, all this presupposes a basic, binary opposition between the ordinary (everyday, humdrum) and extraordinary (exotic, outlandish), which in turn calls for some amount of daydreaming and willful conjuring up of a mythical space untainted by modern civilization. It follows that what the tourist industry systematically does through massive advertising is create a lon-

ging—in the mind of those who can afford to bankroll the expenses—for a return to a putatively pristine state of origin, unmindful of the obvious fact that those who do undertake such an imaginary leap into the past end up defiling the object of their curiosity at the very moment of encountering it.

Long before Urry problematized the tourist gaze, the pair of oppositional terms nature/culture had been at the centre of a major conundrum identified by Levi Strauss (and which, years later, was to be described by Derrida (1967) as a veritable “scandal”). At the epicentre of the scandal was the phenomenon of the prohibition of incest which, Levi Strauss felt, could be characterized as universal, and hence part of nature—in the sense that, on the basis of his knowledge of a large number of societies across the world, he was willing to speculate that in no human society would incest be considered normal behaviour. On the other hand, equally strongly, he felt that the phenomenon at hand could not possibly be a universal trait—if only for the simple, incontrovertible reason that we are, after all, looking at an act of *prohibition*, which implies that the act being forbidden could jolly well take place were it not for the law prohibiting it. So here we have an aporia: prohibition of incest must be both natural and cultural, thus rendering the very distinction between nature and culture questionable.

Having identified the aporia, what Levi Strauss does not proceed to do is to recommend that we throw the binary distinction between nature and culture overboard and expect to fashion more efficient tools of the trade. Rather, he exhorts us to hold on to the distinction for the reason that it has proved helpful otherwise and that, if for nothing else, it has helped found the enterprise of anthropology. If anthropology is the science of man and if culture is that which man willfully adds to what he has presumably already found in nature (or, conversely, if nature is what is left over once we subtract from the sum total of phenomena all that is the fruit of human labour), then the opposition nature vs. culture is one anthropology simply cannot live without, because what is stake is nothing short of erecting a branch of science about man’s presence on earth. What, then, do we do with the aporia? Levi Strauss short answer: grin and bear it.

It follows that man’s nature, if at all there is anything that answers to such a descriptive phrase, must itself be a product of culture. After all, it is only man’s ingenuity that could have raised the very issue of there being such a thing as human nature. Or, for that matter, the very idea of nature, especially with its contemporary connotation of pristine purity and innocence! What else is, when all is said and done, the idea of nature if not another name for man’s eternal curiosity as to what it would have been like to inhabit a world where evolution had not yet introduced the species called *homo sapiens*, “the roof and crown of all creation” as the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson famously put it?

However, the question that we must pose at this stage is not whether or not we are still entitled to posit a state-of-affairs prior to man's presence on earth and which man's presence on the earth had not had the time to spoil yet. The question should rather be: For what rhyme or reason do we keep pining for such a pristine state-of-affairs and the phantasmagorical figure of a "pre-human human" endowed with the powers to spoil it, even after sober reason tells us that our quest is doomed to turn out to have been a wild goose chase?

It is while trying to come up with a satisfactory answer to the above question that we stumble upon the notion of the politics of representation. In other words, there comes a moment in our inquiry where the focus shifts from ontology to politics—from pure contemplation to action. The ontology of nature may not withstand critical scrutiny of the kind Levi Strauss undertook, but there still is a case to be made for the politics of positing such a thing as nature. We have just looked at one: the survival of anthropology as an academic discipline. Where ontology has run its course, there is still room for politics of representation and identity.

As it turns out though, the binary distinction between nature and culture is not the only one that caves in so easily under pressure from deconstructive thinking. As the bulwark of binary thought itself, the collapse of the distinction only opens the flood-gates that will ultimately inundate, who knows, all our metaphysics!

But here is where we need to take a long and deep breath and ask ourselves if our deconstructive train of thought can at all lead us out of the clutches of metaphysics. Derrida himself has gone on record as having raised serious doubts regarding the very possibility of pulling off such a feat. For one thing, the very ambition to transcend the limits imposed by metaphysics amounts to a desire to transcend the human condition while retaining what is distinctively human about the very endeavour. We have already seen how the idea of nature (along with all the attributes that we would like to bestow upon it) is an attempt to conjure up a "pre-human human"—analogous to a "pre-metaphysics" with all the trappings of metaphysics.

Perhaps one could argue that Nietzsche's darling concept *Übermensch* too runs the risk of being sucked in by the same logical vortex—positing, as it were, a "post-human human".

"I teach you the Superman. Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All creatures hitherto have created something beyond themselves: and do you want to be the ebb of the great tide, and return to the animals rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And just so shall man be to the Superman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment". (Nietzsche, 1981:8)

At least this was to be the thrust of Heidegger's celebrated argument that, with all his anti-metaphysical zeal, the best Nietzsche could hope to be is the last metaphysician of Western philosophy—a criticism that arguably seems to have been underwritten by an ambition in no way different from the one he accuses Nietzsche of. Derrida for one has time and again reiterated the inevitability—even the necessity—of working within the bounds of metaphysics, even as one tirelessly endeavors to question, to deconstruct, its working premises. Referring to Derrida's celebrated phrase “explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the de-construction of that heritage itself” (Derrida, 1967 [1978]: 289), Peggy Kamuf (1991: viii) observes something of fundamental significance in this regard:

As used here, “de-construction” marks a distance [the space of a hyphen, later dropped] from the structuring or construction of discourses, such as Levi-Strauss', that have uncritically taken over the legacy of Western metaphysics. If, however, it cannot be matter of refusing this legacy—“no one can escape from it”—then the discourse or difference in question is in the manner of assuming responsibility for what cannot be avoided. Deconstruction is one name Derrida has given to this responsibility.

Identity construction can be carried out either with the active participation of the parties concerned or without such participation or even their willing acquiescence. In the latter case, we may say that new (and often undesirable) identities are foisted upon someone who is in no position to resist effectively. Thus, in our age of propaganda and counter propaganda, we are increasingly witnessing the use of massive efforts aimed at branding certain undesirable elements as forces of evil, terrorists, enemies of civilization, apologists of chaos and anarchy and so forth. Once the label is attributed, the innocent are deemed guilty until proven otherwise.

But, as already pointed out, new identities can be created also by claiming for oneself new attributes. One may argue that the two processes are but two sides of one and the same coin. In all likelihood, they are. For, given our preferentially binary approach to classifying things (including ourselves), the very moment we identify the Other as the Devil Incarnate, we are also claiming for ourselves the right to some Divinity or, the very least, a balcony ticket just below His throne on the Judgment Day. Such is the rhetorical power of our exclusionary logic.

As we move our gaze from the ontology of identity to the politics of identity, what we witness is a struggle for carving out identities contrastively with those whom we would rather see on the other side of the fence. It may well turn out to be the case that our institutions (academia, for instance—cf.

Rajagopalan, 2002) coerce us to assume or forge new identities, even against our will). In other words, in our present-day discourse on identity, talk of dispersion, dissemination, hybridization and all the rest of it must necessarily be rounded off with due reflection on the politics of representation and how identity politics takes over in the absence of stable identities (Rajagopalan, 2006). This is where Gayatri Spivak's much-maligned notion of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1993) fits in. Indeed, part of the reason why Spivak continues to be misunderstood is that many have fallen into the trap of reading back into it an ontologizing gesture. Which is far from being the case. As maintained by Brenda Carr (1993) and so many others since then, what we are looking at here is practice, not theory; politics, not ontology.

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