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"Is it 'we' that are concerned?" "Being European" as Public Issue

It is difficult not to agree with the argument that Tom Popkewitz and Caterina Martins elaborate in their paper in a very insightful way: showing us "the European" as a new type of person fabricated in various ways through different discourses, practices and technologies including precisely also those of the social and educational sciences. And it seems equally difficult to disagree with their claim that to ask about this production or fabrication is "*potentially* to free one's self from the causality that interns and encloses the present" (my italics). However, I must confess that I feel somewhat at unease reading and rereading the paper. And I have been wondering what it is that instigates this unease, while in general I very much sympathize with the argument and really think that the authors ask some pertinent questions. Of course, one could argue that many more "discourses, practices and technologies" could be described contributing to the fabrication of the European, but that would not touch upon the core of the argument. And the incompleteness regarding what is taken into account is not what causes my unease. Moreover, I do think that this unease has also little to do with de-naturalizing effects that the paper is after. Because indeed, since I am involved as a sort of "European" (at least in the simple sense of living in Europe) and as a sort of educational scientist one could maybe think that historicizing who "we" (and I as part of that we) are would have an estranging effect on myself as reader losing my self-understanding of being naturally and self-evidently a European and educational scientist. Or to put it differently: as a reader I do feel unsettled to some extent, but I don't think it has to do with the paper's "skepticism about 'being' European". Or with what the authors show: that the European is a fabricated person, or how 'we' (the social and educational sciences) contributed in constructing this new type of person, or how it implies the "memory of a common history that simultaneously erases, forgets, and realigns Europe's internal differences".

I might be wrong, of course, but I think that it is precisely the way in which this kind of de-naturalizing or historicizing addresses the issue of the European and addresses a "we" (and me as part of that we), i.e. its critical gesture, that I find difficult to endorse. In a way the gesture that is performed has become a very common and recognizable one (and as I said in a way difficult to disagree with within "our" scholarly community): de-naturalizing what "we" think or experience as being "natural" (or evident, given, presupposed). Indeed, meanwhile this de-naturalizing, historicizing stance has itself become a very "natural" one within "our" contexts. That is the way "we" got. However, I don't want to deal with how we got there, but briefly comment on its effects regarding the discussion about Europe and the European. First of all, I am inclined to doubt whether such a stance is (still) potentially "dangerous" as the authors suggest, referring to Foucault and whether their writing is indeed able to "potentially ... free *one's self* from the causality that interns and encloses the present". Let me start by referring to a quote of Foucault cited by Paul Rabinow: "I don't think that the intellectual can, starting *only* from his erudite and scholarly research, pose true questions concerning the society in which he lives" (Rabinow 2011, 82; my italics) and Rabinow continues say-

ing that the “danger” that Foucault often referred to should not too easily be related to his own work and own scholarly and teaching activities. He writes that “it would be hard to claim that there was any risk of being put to death for fulfilling his statutory obligations at the state-funded Collège de France by lecturing before several hundred auditors on largely textual expositions Foucault was keenly aware that the venue he was operating within provided few, if any, overt dangers” (ibid., 83f.). I think that *mutatis mutandis* this can be translated – without doing it too much injustice – to the paper we discuss here. But leaving this aside, there are in my idea important differences with the (“historical”) exercises of Foucault. I suspect that de-naturalizing or historicizing has in fact turned into a disciplinary exercise of (professional?) historians performing a critical gesture in which they put themselves at a distance (keeping themselves out of the game) and essentially address others (the readers) as not being aware of the way in which what they thought to be self-evident or natural is in fact historical, fabricated and contextualized. And in this case, as not being aware of the way in which they contribute themselves (as educational scientists etc.) to the fabrication of this new type of person: “the European”. So demonstrating the readers lack of awareness or enlightenment. It therefore seems as if the authors of this de-naturalizing and historicizing exercise are not implied in the “we” that they intend to question. At least, it seems as if it is not the “freeing” of their “self” that is at stake. Or to put it differently, it remains unclear how the authors themselves are related to the *We* and “WE” that they mention in their title. Are they part of those we’s? Are they “Europeans!”? In which way? Are they part of the fabrication of another “we”?

In this context, I want to recall that for Foucault “to think one’s own history” was a “philosophical exercise”, an un-disciplinary “exercise of thought” as “the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently” (Foucault 1985). For Foucault, it was himself and the we (the present) that he was part of that was at stake. And his writings were not meant to enlighten his readers, but to transform himself and to bring into play the “we” in which he was taking part. His texts were “experience-books”, as he called them (opposing them to “demonstration books”), or essays “to explore what might be changed, in [his] own thought” (my italics). These texts “function as an experience, for its writer and reader alike” (Foucault 2000, 243) “something that one comes out of transformed” (ibid., 239). They are exercises of thought putting oneself to the “*test of contemporary reality*”, implying an enlightenment not of others but of one-self, but of one-self not as subject of knowledge but as subject of action. They are exercises in the context of self-formation: they seek to transform or modify one’s own mode of being and how one lives in the present. Such exercises imply not so much a critical, historicising distance, but rather an intimate relationship and nearness (beyond a merely cognitive relation) related to an experimental ethos and what Foucault pointed at as “attention sans limite” or even “extrême attention” (Foucault 2001, 1389).

The second comment relates also to the critical gesture that is performed. More precisely, I doubt whether this gesture is indeed able to make the issue of the “we” and of the “European” into a public issue. I would suspect that this critical gesture (of historicizing) is rather part of another history of the social sciences and humanities. A history which is not so much about how the social sciences and the humanities contributed to the fabrication of the “European” (which I fully agree they did), but one which is about how they themselves contributed to preventing the issue of “being European” (or other issues of course) to become a public issue. One which would show how they are part of strategies of privatization or

immunization by appropriating or attributing the issue and by supporting a general detachment from the issue. These strategies implied the continuous and repeated demonstration that it was impossible to get out of context, history and culture. This made that they implied a critical gesture which more explicitly turned into a de-constructing and explanatory one, demonstrating exactly that and how we are all captured by language, embedded within cultures and histories, caught in discourses and technologies of power. It is a gesture which in fact demonstrates and reconfirms always our *appropriations* (to language, to culture, to history). Thereby suggesting that the only option would be to develop a detached position. And as far as the paper could be seen as performing this gesture, it would be part of such a strategy that precisely prevents the “being European” becoming a public issue.

On the contrary, Foucault’s gesture, I think, is rather a public gesture. Not just because it is a gesture to the public of contemporaries, not only because it would articulate something of public concern, but foremost because throughout this gesture things or issues are made public, that is de-appropriated and a public is gathered around them. Making things public is breaking open the common horizon of our self-understanding and taken for granted practices, but not by attributing them to historical facts or contexts, but precisely by de-historicizing and de-contextualising them – freeing them from these appropriations by historical or contextual understandings. And by making fiction that generates a public that is (not detached but) attached to the issue (e.g. of the European).

To conclude, I would say that maybe we – and I explicitly want to include me, since as I said, I am very much in sympathy with what the authors do – would need some more “philosophy”. Not in the sense of a doctrine or of a body of knowledge, but precisely in the Foucauldian sense of “an ‘ascesis’, askesis, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (Foucault 1985, 8f.). And in that sense, my conclusion is somewhat paradoxical: although I have been making comments about the gesture of the paper being maybe too detached, too little of a public gesture, it has made me think about myself and ourselves, the “we” that I and “we” are part of. It has me made struggling with “my self” and has invited a “public comment”.

References

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