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Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe:
Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands

Evelyne Keitel, Cecile Sandten (Eds.)

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**Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms
in Europe**

Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands

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Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe: Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands

Cecile Sandten, Claudia Gualtieri, Roberto Pedretti, Eike Kronshage

Introduction

When we started brainstorming about this workshop, pulling together the threads of engaging theoretical conversations and teaching activities in our Cultural Studies groups, we thought about the future of Cultural Studies in its specific German, Italian, and European contexts. We were interested in connecting the politics of Cultural Studies to our pedagogical practices in the academic world. Some of the questions we wanted to address concerned: how teaching Cultural Studies in universities would cope with the widespread economic and social crisis; how Cultural Studies would resist the tendency towards assimilation within canonical subjects; how political involvement and participation in a wider and ethical sense could be supported and enhanced in Cultural Studies university courses; how the project of Cultural Studies could continue to be "done" in the contexts where we lived; how our pedagogy would continue to be collaborative, dialogic, and transdisciplinary; and how we, as practitioners of Cultural Studies, could help to read the present through the lens of the past for a better future. We did not have "perfect stories" nor exhaustive answers since, as Lawrence Grossberg claims, we "don't believe that there is a perfect story to be told" (De B'éri/Audette-Longo: 3), and so instead we opted for a conversation. The voices of intellectuals, teachers, artists, and students contributed to a dialogue that was purposely interdisciplinary, plural, and interactive – but also, at times, provocative and unstructured – and, above all, which included experiences from outside academia. It is our ambition to continue this open conversation on Europe and Europeans from both global and local perspectives.

As we write, Europe is facing a systemic crisis, which seems to undermine the future existence of the European Union and its institutions, and shake at its foundation the delicate compromise and the balance agreed on after 1989. The emergence of different forms of regionalism and centrifugal parochialism – even within the founding nations of the Union – blatantly exposes this problematic situation. We are witnessing the formation and spreading of political subjects and movements aimed at recomposing imagined exclusive motherlands, protective of narrow forms of identity and of enclosed communities. Contextually, the emergence of new regionalisms feeds on both the nation-states' inability to provide shared forms of citizenship, and on the political paralysis of European institutions. Consequently, regionalisms and forms of neo-nationalism burst into the void that is generated by the progressive estrangement of citizens from European

political institutions that now lack credibility. The political actors who are generally identified with the problematic definition of populisms gather consensus from the sections of society that are mostly exposed to economic crisis and are affected by a rhetoric of insecurity, fears of invasion, and the weakening of cultural specificity. Oversimplification and trivialisation qualify a public chaotic narrative that particularly exploits electronic media, social networks, and the internet in order to articulate political messages that stimulate emotional rather than rational reactions. The conflict in the Ukraine, the growing tensions in the area of former Yugoslavia, the worsening of the relationship with Turkey, the pressure on the southern borders of Europe, and the astonishing result of the Brexit referendum bear witness to the present European crisis, and to the dreaded failure of a yet to be realised political project rooted in peace and integration. Over the next few years, many people in various European countries will vote for renewing their governments and parliaments. The future of Europe may depend on the results of these elections.

The word "crisis" initially mostly pertained to the economic and financial sectors, and has slowly entered the wider domain of public discourse. There were analyses of a rapid economic transformation towards an ever more dominant financial dimension, but the cultural and political aspects of the crisis were still underestimated. We thought it relevant to engage in a conversation on these neglected aspects, as we perceived them to be fundamental to understanding the crisis. It seemed inevitable to situate and read the crisis within the conjunctural and contextual perspectives of Cultural Studies.

The conjunctural perspective invited us to consider the current European crisis as the symptom of a more complex process in which different forces have operated and interacted, together provoking the emergence of multiple fault lines that affect societies and unsettle their established structure. According to Antonio Gramsci, this happens when the hegemonic status quo is disrupted and under stress, and calls for a revision of social relationships in order to establish a new order (Gramsci 1971: 450). The contextual perspective takes in Europe and its dominant historical narratives. Today, many media discourses nurture fear and insecurity, which contribute to shaping and defining the crisis. For us, as practitioners of Cultural Studies, any cultural practice is in itself part of the wider context that influences and determines it, and the articulation of cultural practices in context produces effects that are political themselves. We are convinced that there is a politics, an ethics in "doing" Cultural Studies that brings us together in conversation, working with and in cultures, and looking towards a future horizon.

To inform this dialogue, we have taken the following aspects and pressing political and cultural issues into consideration. At the present cultural moment, we often hear, as stated above, that Europe is increasingly riven by intractable divisions of financial, political, and cultural affairs and concerns. Particular problems, it is often argued, arise from the migration and flow of refugees from diverse

countries in the global South into Europe, who have been facing war, terror, conflict, and immense human atrocities. The literature, and the cultural representations of the countries involved – in Europe and beyond – have started to reflect upon the conflicts and questions arising from such divisions. They have much to teach us about the historical foundations and developments of Europe, on the one hand, and the paradoxes of democracy, on the other. This is because the latter also represents a Europe that has been engaged in imperialism and, in effect, in a civilizing mission in and of the world, which has often been perceived as the harbinger of new liberalism, capitalism, and competition, but also choice. Yet, the paradoxes of democracy can more prominently be observed in Europe's (not only) former ruthless colonial activities, which have been dismantled as Eurocentric, violent, and arrogant – in actual fact, 98% of the globe was colonized by Europe.

These aspects stand in stark contrast to the discourse of security that prevails in current media reports and (non-)political attitudes (e.g. "Pegida"). This discourse is often post-humanitarian, as it proclaims the rules of membership and citizenship for those who are within, and shuts out those – also through legislation – who must apply in order to get in, or alternatively (and often life-threateningly), have to cross the borders, illegally. As Ulrich Beck poignantly puts it: "People from sub-Saharan Africa or the Arab world continue to regard [the EU] as the Promised Land and are willing to set out for its shores at tremendous risk to themselves", currently largely due to wars, hunger and terrorism (2013: 11).

This scenario quite revealingly poses the issues that we want to address with this collection of essays in our volume on *Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe: Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands*. The authors of the essays do not only tackle a juncture that branches out into the two different possible roads of critical inquiry as outlined above, but also point to where these two strands meet and intersect because of their shared interrogations of notions of the nation/national and regional, the diaspora and its subjects, and refugees and their (precarious) bodies. However, in order to have citizen rights, people need to be members of a community, and we must therefore ask: how do we analyse a world where people actually live in connection *and* disconnection? In her writings, Hannah Arendt always emphasized that the world is not only made up of people who are connected, but also of people who are not connected, and that this is part of who we are as human beings. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt states that the

full implication of the identification of the rights of man with the rights of peoples in the European nation-state system came to light only when a growing number of people and peoples suddenly appeared whose elementary rights were not safeguarded by the ordinary functioning of the nation-state. (1973 [1951]: 291)

Following this train of thought, on the one hand the flag of the European Union, as well as international political and economic corporations and organizations in the EU, represent the transnational and global efforts at countering, for instance, the financial crisis or climate change. On the other hand, though, they gesture at an

understanding of citizenship, community and belonging, in which the individual nation-state still strongly prevails. However, this concept of the nation-state only counts for those who belong and/or whose countries are not at war. Thus, Europe expands its borders internally but closes them externally. Consequently, the refugee, asylum seeker, or illegal traveller is often perceived as a site of transgression that seeks to broaden or break the confining definitions of the nation, and is accused of re-inscribing or reimagining the European member states' national myths by infusing her/his own cultural and religious specificities into 'ours'. As Giorgio Agamben has appropriately elucidated, "by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty" (2004 [1994]: 117).

In contrast to this prevailing notion of the refugee or asylum seeker as "invader", she/he is often transformed into a passive, needy "other", a transnational or post-national icon of suffering and tragedy. This, as it turns out, leads to a lopsided situation that we could most readily describe with the well-known binary of "master (controller)/slave (controlled)", or in other words, the discourse of power. However, migrants' movements, as we maintain, will perhaps challenge the formulaic and romanticized conceptions of Europe, the nation and related national myths, or the "Brussels-dominated Europe with nation-state orthodoxy" (Beck 2013: 38). In this frame, the discourse on race, racism and xenophobia – as a central dispositive of modernity – needs to be confronted, too. Therefore, since the so-called refugee crisis has led to a current and most pressing crisis of the allegedly fixed European identity, it seems a necessary undertaking to rethink the very fundamentals of the European idea: to question European universality and the European arrogance and violence that colonialism has enacted and brought, seemingly lastingly, to the fore. In addition, it is not only in academia that the "crisis of representation" (Nöth 2000: 55; 162-168; 230) has, since the mid-1980s, been at the centre of the postcolonial debate. Accordingly, every representation of (not only) non-European cultures has been a delimited, positional history, in which power relationships are conveyed, and in which the "self" is defined through the "other", or, vice versa, when the "other" is defined through stereotypes and regulations of the "self". Thus, alternative constructions of modernity are needed, which help to decentre histories, hegemonies, and power structures, and which focus on interactions of the local and the global, or on what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has termed a "provincialized Europe".

Thus, the central question that our two DAAD conferences¹ posed was that of how Cultural Studies can be used as a theoretical and methodological tool in the analy-

1 The two conferences, "Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe" (2-5 December 2014 at the University of Milan), and "Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe II: Emergency Diasporas and Borderlands" (1-5 June 2016 at the Chemnitz University of Technology) were funded by the Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst, DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) and the Federal Foreign Office Germany.