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Translation is impossible. Let’s do it!

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There is still a lot to be learned from the linguistic practice of translation. Let’s take a concrete example – the translation of a book title: *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition*.[1] The German translation of this book, which the American philosopher Nancy Fraser wrote at the end of the nineties, was published under the title: *Die halbierte Gerechtigkeit. Schlüsselbegriffe des postindustriellen Sozialstaats.*[2] This small example already demonstrates some of the most important features of translational practice, primarily the actual impossibility of translation; by this I mean the impossibility of finding an exact match between the translation and the meaning of the original.

This is a commonplace of both traditional and modern translation theory. Interestingly, it was precisely in this essential impossibility of linguistic translation that Wilhelm von Humboldt, the founder of the traditional, romantic theory of translation, saw its truly social and political character.[3] Since every word of a particular language expresses its unique spirit, there is no likelihood of finding an adequate match in another language. In order to achieve a good translation in spite of this impossibility, therefore, the translator must possess a special virtue. Humboldt calls this virtue *die Treue* (fidelity, faithfulness, or, what is probably the best

translation here, loyalty). However, this is not primarily a fidelity or a loyalty to some authentic meaning of the original text, as we are almost automatically inclined to believe, but rather the fidelity or loyalty to the mother tongue of the translator or, more precisely, to his or her nation. In fact, for Humboldt, the task of the translator is not merely to make a text written in a foreign language understandable in his or her own language. The task is not to transport meanings across linguistic differences and thus enable or facilitate communication between different languages, nations or cultures, but rather to improve, to build up the language of the translator.

More concretely, a translator should be faithful to what Humboldt calls *das Fremde* (what is strange, foreign and what he differentiates from what he calls *die Fremdheit*, strangeness, foreignness). It is something that the reader should clearly feel in the translation and that, moreover, enriches, enhances and improves the language of the translation. *Das Fremde* is a new quality, which the translator adds to his or her own language, and in this way deepens, improves, or enlarges its spirit.

The fidelity of the translator is aimed ultimately at his or her nation. In so far as a language has the ability to shape (in terms of what Humboldt calls *Bildung* – creation, education, cultivation) the spirit of a nation, i.e. to build the nation itself, the translator's task is precisely to use this ability to build up, educate, cultivate or create his or her national language, or rather, his or her nation. This simply means that the translator's fidelity is, in the final analysis, a patriotic virtue, a loyalty to the nation. What is at stake here is the social, political or cultural meaning of a linguistic translation – its intrinsic connection with a particular political form of society or community (and, in Humboldt's case, this is the nation). No translation can be free of such a meaning.

We also find it in the example mentioned above. The translation of this book title cannot be understood unless its political meaning is considered. Moreover, it could not have happened without being a matter of politics from the very outset.

Sex, texts and a translation

Let's start with the title *Justice interruptus*. It has a clear sexual connotation, actually evoking the notion of "Coitus interruptus" – an interruption of intercourse – a very popular method of contraception, also known as the "withdrawal" or the "pull-out method". Many associations are of course triggered by this allusion to sexuality, but what is at least clear is that it seems to be intentional and that the author didn't choose it randomly. It refers in all likelihood to a justice without fulfilment, a justice that has not delivered what it had promised, what had been desired and expected, a justice that has not fully developed its capabilities, etc. But it refers too to another feature of justice: its gendered character. As an act, the interruption (of intercourse) is not even-handed. There is a major disproportion in the effects of this act and this disproportion is gendered as well. It is the female side that suffers most from the interruption, that is denied fulfilment. For the female, there is a double interruption: she is denied pleasure and also the ability to conceive and give birth to new life.

There is also an essay in the book with the title *Sex, Lies and the Public Sphere*, which explicitly addresses the problem of women who, in the very act of publicly voicing their opposition to sexual harassment, expose their privacy to public abuse, i.e. women who are literally interrupted in their use of the public sphere. To interrupt also means to stop or prevent someone from speaking, from expressing him or herself, to silence someone. An interrupted

person can no longer speak, the person in this particular case being a woman. An interruption implies a power relationship. To interrupt a woman also means to dominate or control her, to subjugate her. Furthermore, if sex and the public sphere appear in the same sentence, it is because they are central to the cause of women's emancipation: to make public what had been private, to politicize the "private sphere".

I am referring here to the well-known fact that the difference between public and private also has a gendered character, that it is rooted in the traditional separation between the household and the workplace.[4] Max Weber saw in this separation one of the major characteristics of the process of rationalization, which was typical of modern western societies. According to this separation, which coincides with the division of social space into two symbolic spheres, a private and a public one, the woman had to assume responsibility for the private sphere of the household, the sphere of family life, childcare, reproduction and, consequently, the sphere of sexuality understood exclusively as a function of biological reproduction. The man, her husband, on the contrary, assumed the role of head of the family, providing for it and representing it in public. He automatically took responsibility for politics, i.e. for the state.

Of course, as with *coitus interruptus,* there is no symmetry between these two spheres. The public sphere is identified with notions of freedom, transparency, rationality, democracy, universality, etc. On the other hand, to belong to the private sphere means simultaneously to be excluded from these values and, what is more important, to be excluded from the location of power, authority and political decision-making, forces which are capable of transforming society and changing existing relations. This explains why the process of emancipation is imagined primarily as a move

from the private to the public, as an inclusion of what has hitherto been excluded from the field of political subjectification and contestation. It also explains why the cause of women's emancipation could have been condensed in the demand to make the private political.

In this context the title *Justice interruptus* also implies a rupture, an interruption of the emancipation process, specifically the break in the process of women's emancipation. But the German translation *Die halbierte Gerechtigkeit*, (a justice cut in half, a halved justice) has no sexual connotations at all and consequently lacks the allusion to an interruption in the process of women's emancipation. There is instead, below the title, a sort of subtitle, which is nowhere to be found on the cover of the original: *Gender Studies*. This subtitle in German in fact replaces the original subtitle, which does not appear on the cover at all.

The original subtitle, removed from the German cover – *Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition* – has also undergone a remarkable transformation in translation. It is translated as *Schlüsselbegriffe des postindustriellen Sozialstaats* ("Key concepts of the post-industrial welfare state"). This reveals another feature of the phenomenon of translation: the impossibility of translating a translation back into the original. No original can be reconstructed from its translation.

But let's return to the subtitle and ask the following question: why is "postsocialist condition" translated as "postindustrial social", or better still, "welfare state"? The first reason is obvious. The notion of post-socialism in Germany immediately denotes one part of the country, which 15 years ago was called the German Democratic Republic and, more importantly, carries strong connotations, such as the experience of communist totalitarianism, the one-party

system, a state-controlled economy, violations of human rights, the absence of free and independent media, the inability to move freely, etc., in short, an experience that most Germans claim never to have had and one that exists today as the specific cultural memory of only one section of the German nation.

The problem is that Nancy Fraser does not mean this post-socialism, but refers rather to a condition that can only be described as both epochal and global. The main features of this condition, which she explicitly calls a "postsocialist age", are:

> - The absence of any credible, progressive vision of an alternative to the present order.
>
> - A shift in the grammar of how political demands are articulated: typical socialist demands for social equality, for the "justice of (re)distribution" are replaced by demands for the recognition of group difference, of a "justice of recognition", meaning the recognition of difference in terms of nationality, ethnicity, "race", gender, sexuality, etc. We may say that the post-socialist condition is politically a sort of translation. In the age of socialism, politics had been articulated in the language of social struggle, i.e. the struggle for redistribution. Today, in the post-socialist world, the majority of political demands use the language of culture, of the "struggle for recognition" between culturally defined "groups" or "communities of values", whose objective is to defend their "identities", end "cultural domination" and win "recognition". What was once class interest has been translated into a group identity that is for the most part culturally perceived, and that has become the chief medium of political mobilization.

- The third feature of post-socialism is what Nancy Fraser calls “a resurgent economic liberalism”, meaning simply the emergence of the global market and new forms of economically induced transnational sovereignty.

Now, all this has been translated into the condition of “postindustrial welfare state”. It must be said that it is a very creative translation. However, this is in no way a criticism on my part. I am not saying whether it is a good or a bad translation. The translator has faced a real problem and has found a solution, which has its good and bad sides. The logical direction of the translation is generally correct, in my view: the translator has managed to prevent an immediate localization, territorialization and particularization of a condition essentially defined as global, and this was no doubt the major risk in misunderstanding the original text.

Quite another problem is whether the condition called “postindustrial welfare state” makes any sense at all? It could be argued that the collapse of industrial modernism, the emergence of the global market and of new types of transnational economic and political subjects (whose power and influence go far beyond – and often completely neglect – the traditional concept of the sovereign nation-state), as well as the implementation of a new mode of production, “post-fordism”, all imply the intrinsic impossibility of any sort of stable, functional welfare state. One could even say that the post-industrial welfare state is a kind of *contradictio in adjecto*, a political institution, which survives today only in its regressive form, i.e. only in the state of its final dissolution. It is an institution that can obviously only be saved by means of protectionist politics, which itself is dependent on some form of racism.

The translation of no return

But why have I specifically chosen this example, the translation of the title of Nancy Fraser's book? The reason is simple – it brings us directly to the core of the problem of cultural translation, the culturalization of today's political conflicts and struggles, which is what Nancy Fraser's book is all about. It is, moreover, precisely in this context that the concept of cultural translation may be understood as both a symptom of this culturalization and – we hope – a remedy for it.

First of all, Fraser's diagnosis of the major political problem of our time points directly to the culturalization of political or, in her words, social issues. The social cause – the struggle for distributive justice – has been transformed or, we can also say, translated into a cultural cause of political struggle, the struggle for recognition. This is clearly a move from the socioeconomic to the cultural problem. She states explicitly that these two political problems are currently dissociated from each other and that her aim is to reconnect them; or, as she states explicitly, justice today requires both redistribution and recognition.

Fraser uses these concepts primarily in analytical terms. We are supposed to imagine a spectrum, which at one end would feature a purely socioeconomic collectivity, like the working class in a Marxist sense, defined exclusively by its position within the general division of labour and whose political aim is to abolish itself as a class. At the other end of the spectrum we have a type of purely culturally constructed collectivity, homosexuals, for instance, whose aim, i.e. whose remedy for the cultural injustice they suffer, for their "despised sexuality" may only be achieved in the recognition of their difference.

Between these analytical categories there is a real world of hybrid communities. (Fraser uses this notion explicitly, but in terms of bivalency: a bivalent community is one that suffers injustice from both sides, in the form of economic exploitation and cultural misrecognition). She chooses gender and race as her examples. The problem is that these two logics – one of redistribution and the other of recognition – are, in the real world of hybrid communities, always in a relationship of contradiction. The logic of redistribution is, for instance, to put gender as such out of business (ending the gender difference in salaries, for example); in contrast, however, the logic of recognition is to promote gender specificity, to change culturally rooted sexism and androcentrism.

The solution to this contradiction, which Nancy Fraser offers in her book, is based on her criticism of liberal or mainstream multiculturalism. According to Fraser, this tries to solve the problem only superficially, i.e. by recognizing both demands for social justice and for cultural recognition. Firstly, however, multiculturalism does not dismantle the underlying political-economic structure (its goal being simply to increase the consumption share of disadvantaged groups). Secondly, it never actually challenges any of the essentialist demands of these groups as identitarian communities. (It recognizes for instance a particular gay identity, but remains blind to its queer character, i.e. to a deeper ambivalent truth of heterosexuality, to the ever-shifting, fluid, constructed, debinarized character of sexual differences.) What is obviously needed is a completely different approach to the question of recognition, i.e. to the question of cultural identities, an approach which Fraser terms deconstruction.

But it is precisely the concept of cultural translation that best represents this de-constructivist, anti-essentialist, post-multiculturalist, post-identitarian standpoint. Cultural translation

is simply the name for the process of production of this cultural hybridity, this cultural "in-betweenness", as Homi Bhabha would say, using the idea of cultural translation to mark the emergence of new, transnational, postcolonial cultural identities. Unlike Gayatri Spivak who, with the concept of "strategic essentialism", recognizes like Fraser the contradiction between the political use of allegedly essential identitarian communities and their culturally constructed character, Bhabha believes in an immediate political impact of cultural hybridization and ascribes an intrinsic subversive power to the process of cultural translation. He sees no contradiction between culture and politics.

Quite to the contrary, both Spivak and Fraser are fully aware of the problem of culturalization, which is for Fraser the major obstacle to resolving the redistribution/recognition dilemma. In fact, Nancy Fraser offers us a solution summed up in a simple formula: socialism in economy and deconstruction in culture. In other words, cultural translation only becomes progressive in socialism, i.e. only on the basis of a rough social equality. For it to work politically, however, this formula requires, Fraser believes, all people to be weaned away from their attachment to current cultural constructions of their interests and identities. But how does one persuade people to forget their cultural affiliations and open their eyes to the social and economic injustice of which they are actually victims?

Culturalization is a sort of translation. The language of social struggle has been translated into the language of the struggle for cultural recognition. The problem is that there is no way back. No original can be reconstructed from its translation. A translation is irreversible. Otherwise, it would be possible to translate an interpretation of a dream back into the dream itself, or, taking our example once more: would it be possible to reconstruct the original

title of Fraser's book (*Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition*) from its German translation (*Die halbierte Gerechtigkeit. Schlüsselbegriffe des postindustriellen Sozialstaats*)? The answer is clear: never! In other words, there is no way back to the community of democratic socialism, however deconstructed – or culturally translated – its cultural identity is.

The virtue of infidelity

In one of the essays already mentioned in the book *Sex, Lies and the Public Sphere*, Nancy Fraser tackles explicitly the problem of a certain reversibility in the process of women's emancipation. The essay is about the case of a woman who tried to publicly address the problem of sexual harassment, but ultimately found herself unable to defend her privacy against public abuse. Originally, the cause of feminist mobilization was situated along the private-public axis (its task being to make the private political). Suddenly it turned back. The cause had now become one of protecting the private *from* the public, which had lost its normative values and its progressive political meaning.

In an essay about public space which was published later[5], Nancy Fraser reflects (also self-critically) on these changes in the political role and in the very nature of public space in the context of a much broader historical change – the collapse of what is known as the Post-Westphalian order, a world order shaped by the 300 year-old concept of the sovereign nation state.

According to Fraser, the classical theory of public space – whose author is, of course, Habermas – is implicitly based on the concept of this Westphalian order and thus presupposes several elements, all of which are indispensable for a public to work according to its

normative claims: a national state apparatus that exercises sovereign power over a certain territory and population; a national economy that is in principal subjected to state regulation; a national citizenry that develops its interests within the national state; a national language that acts as the medium of public communication; a national literature and education that inform and construct a particular cultural identity and a national infrastructure of communication, national press, national broadcasting, etc.

None of these features is valid today. The emergence of new forms of transnational, global sovereignty has jeopardized all of them. As a consequence, the normative meaning and political role of the public space have lost their validity too. The old boundary between private and public has been also blurred, so it is little wonder that the ideas of progress and emancipation, too, have lost their direction.

It was translation, good old linguistic translation that, according to Humboldt, helped the Westphalian order to emerge. This was its explicit social and political task: to build up the communities within this order, the nations of the modern world and their political expressions, i.e. the sovereign nation states. At the end of this process, an end we might call post-modern, post-national, post-socialist, post-colonial, post-Westphalian, post-structuralist, etc. ... translation has become cultural.

Translation is for Walter Benjamin a sort of afterlife of the original (its *Fortleben*). Why not, then, consider culture as an afterlife of society? This implies, of course, an intrinsic irreversibility of this change. No culture can be translated back into society. No struggle for cultural recognition can be read once more as a struggle for social justice. There is no neo-liberal, postindustrial privatization that could be translated back into a social democratic welfare state,

and no cultural deconstruction translatable back into political essentialism. Translation must also be understood as another name for a point of no return, another name for what many still call history, at a point when it cannot be perceived any more in terms of a universal process.

In this context, the idea of translation – both in linguistic as well as in cultural terms – can reassume its political meaning only by building up a new community beyond the boundaries between different cultural identities, beyond the differences between culture and economy, between private and public, between your mother tongue and mine, between material and immaterial labour and, above all else, beyond the very idea of sovereignty.

This sort of community has already got a name – the multitude – and I don't have a better name for it. But what I know for sure is that, for this community to emerge, a translation is needed, a translation that will help to build it up. Humboldt, as I said at the beginning, believed that translation could not fulfil its community-building mission unless it was guided by a special virtue – the fidelity, the loyalty of the translator. (*N.B.* this is loyalty not to the text of the original, but to the translator's mother tongue, or rather to his or her nation). This leads us to a clear conclusion: if translation today is to assume its responsibility for a new, post-national community, it too must be guided by a virtue. I suggest we call this virtue *die Untreue des Übersetzers*, the infidelity of the translator to his or her nation, his or her cultural identity, his or her mother tongue; in short, infidelity to the dead language of old and obsolete emancipation ...

Ultimately, a translator is in any case always a traitor or, as the saying goes, *traduttore traditore*. Whoever translates, betrays. Let's do it then on political purpose.

[1] Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition*, New York, London: Routledge, 1997.

[2] Nancy Fraser, *Die halbierte Gerechtigkeit. Schlüsselbegriffe des postindustriellen Sozialstaats,* Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 2001.

[3] Humboldt, Wilhelm von, „Einleitung zu ‚Agamemnon'" in: *Aeschylos' Agamemnon metrisch Übers.*, Gesammelte Schriften, Abt 1, Werke, hg. v. Albert Leitzmann im Auftrage der Königlichen Preußsichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Bd. VIII, Berlin: B. Behr's Verlag 1903-1936, p. 117-230.

[4] Alex Demirovic, „Hegemonie und das Paradox von privat und öffentlich", in: Gerald Raunig/Ulf Wuggenig (hg.), *Publicum.Theorien der Öffentlichkeit*, Wien: Turia und Kant, 2005, p. 42-56.

[5] Nancy Fraser, „Die Transnationalisierung der Öffentlichkeit", in: Gerald Raunig/Ulf Wuggenig (hg.), *Publicum.Theorien der Öffentlichkeit*, Wien: Turia und Kant, 2005, p. 18-31.