09 2003

Public space as translation process

Boris Buden

I will discuss here the idea of public space in relation to the concept of so-called cultural translation. This concept has been deployed recently (at the end of the eighties and in the nineties) within the postmodern - and especially postcolonial - reflexion to solve some of its most challenging problems, like the problem of universality in culture, or the problem of emancipation in the social and political space which we consider to be historically - to use Ernesto Laclau' term - beyond the emancipation.

Let us begin with a very concrete vision concerning the political and cultural future of the European Union. In his latest book published this year in Germany, French philosopher and post-Marxist Etienne Balibar tackles the problem of a common European culture.[1] He argues that we cannot say yet what shape such a European culture would take: whether it would be a mechanical sum of the national cultures of the EU-members or, more universalistically, a kind of amalgam charged with completely new qualities.
However, there is something we already know: a common European culture - just like European democracy - needs a common European public space. And consequently, in order to function, this common public space needs a common language.

What language should it be? English cannot take this role, as Balibar believes. For it is both more and less than a common European language. It is on the one side a global means of communication, which has countless different forms, and on the other it is the national language of particular nation states. "The 'European language' is not a code but rather a permanently changing system of different linguistic customs, which are constantly involved in the process of meeting each other, in other words: It is a translation (...) it is the reality of social translation practices."[2]

If a nation is always a language community, than Europe can be imagined, according to this idea, only as a kind of translation community. Of course, here we immediately face the next problem: If a national language - as we all have experienced it in our education, which is always already national, both in its idea and its institutional practice – has this quality to build and reproduce a nation (to provide the nation with its identity), then what is the social or political quality of translation qua language?[3]

Balibar does not give us the answer to what new kind of political community the European Union should be developed into. Instead he suggests a new cultural revolution, which he expects to solve this problem. This revolution should begin by abandoning the still dominant concept of education based on Humboldt's philosophy of language, which ascribes the crucial role in the process of nation building to language. Balibar's counter concept - that of the European language as translation - is not simply a utopia. Balibar finds it already practically realized, in fact on two levels: The first is that of the European intellectual elite in the tradition of rootless, exiled writers and intellectuals such as Heine, Joyce, Canetti, Conrad, etc.; the second is the level of different migrants who occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy of the European labour

market. However, the largest and still dominant middle-level - that of the monolingual national school systems - still hasn't been seriously contested by the concept of translation, emphasizes Balibar.[4]

What is particularly interesting about Balibar's vision of the new European public space being generated out of the concept of translation, is that he ascribes a genuine political - actually an emancipatory – effect to it.
He believes that the concept of translation provides a model for a new practice of a global exchange of information, which gives us an opportunity to oppose globalisation through new forms of cultural resistance and which is capable of building a kind of counter power beyond hegemonic identitarian logic, beyond, as Balibar puts it, "the national language culture".[5]

At this point, let me raise the crucial question: how does translation actually liberate, emancipate, how does it bring about a "positive" social change?[6]

In answering this question I will concentrate on the models of translation, which charge the notion of translation with an emancipatory potentiality and a subversive political and cultural effectiveness in a more direct way. There are basically two models of this kind. I will call them the dialectical and the transgressional.

The first belongs to the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt school and its theoretical reception of psychoanalysis.
It is well known that Habermas presents psychoanalysis as paradigmatic example of a communicative practice, which has an emancipatory effect. In *Erkenntnis und Interesse* he understands repression (Verdrängung), one of the most important psychoanalytic concepts, according to the so-called

"excommunication model". Under the pressure of given social norms some symbols are expelled or isolated from the sphere of public communication, for instance those which symbolize, to use a classical example, erotic feelings of the male child towards his mother. Habermas also describes the excommunication of these symbols as a privatisation of their meaning. The psychoanalytic notion of repression finally becomes a kind of repressive production of a private language.[7]
The task of psychoanalysis is thus to retranslate this private language used pathologically by patients into the "public language". In *Traumdeutung* Freud himself defines the interpretations offered by psychoanalysis as "translations from a foreign mode of expression into the one which is known to us".
Therapy helps the patients to read the crippled, amputated, corrupted text of their private language and translate this distorted mode of expression into the mode of expression of public communication. However, this also should have an emancipatory effect. The therapy emancipates the recollections of the patients that have been blocked by their illness, so that they become able to reconstruct their own life history, which means that they become able to reflect the process of their own formation.
This has, of course, a social consequence: a sick man who has been excluded from the community due to his illness, comes out of the ghetto of his private language and becomes a member of the community again, which is always already a language community or a community generated through the communication.

Habermas explains the whole process of this reintegration of the excluded – both the return of the excluded symbolical content into the sphere of public communication and the return of the excluded individual into the community – using the old Hegelian term of "self-reflexion" (Selbstreflexion). He identifies this self-reflexion

explicitly with translation: "Translation of the unconscious into the conscious". It is only (self-) reflexion as translation that can ultimately sublate repression.
What the process of self-reflexion ultimately produces is transparency: on the one hand, the transparency of one's own individual existence and on the other, of society as a whole. Rational transparency is therefore conditio sine qua non of the public space.
This act of self-reflexion as translation is precisely what brings about the emancipation - the rational reappropriation of one's own alienated self, which has been repressed as a result of a mental disorder and in that way made non-transparent and opaque. However, this concept of public space is a genuine dialectical process. Therefore it has also its own agent, which can be imagined only in dialectical terms - as the subject who reappropriates his or her alienated substance.

Within so-called postmodern and postcolonial discourse, the concept of translation and its political meaning has been defined completely differently.
First, the way we understand historical space and the political problems that dominate this space has radically changed. Instead of Habermasian public space, which had its fixed political function within the nation-state, being the very essence of its democratic character as well as a normative generator for the democratic improvement of the broader, international political community, which can be imagined only in Kantian terms of a world progressing and perfecting itself towards the eternal peace, what we have to deal with in the new postmodern space is an endless political play of different identities, which are almost entirely culturally defined.

In the historical space shaped only by the mutual relations of these identities there is no more room for a subject of history or political change, there is no common public space that could be understood according to any kind of universalist logic, there is no fundament of society, such as the well known Marxist material, economic base of the social whole, there is no grand narrative of a universal emancipation, etc.
Within this context the idea of a public space has also been transformed. Public space no longer occupies a central position within society, neither on the level of the nation-state, nor on the supra- or international level. When we talk about the importance of public space in our societies or when we talk about the so-called world public sphere , we use the term of public space only in a descriptive way. In reality we cannot ascribe any essential political meaningto it. Public space, both in the national as well as in the international context, is not the site of political change as it once – in a very profound way - used to be. This happens not because the public space has become somehow weak or because it has simply lost its importance and political meaning. It is the very idea of political changethat has disappeared from our political and historical horizon. It is the concept of political change we cannot talk about any more, not simply the loss of the political meaning of public space.

Instead of political change – which has become unimaginable – we are talking now of cultural subversion. If public space should still have some political meaning in that sense, than it can be defined only in terms of cultural subversion. However, this is not the old notion of public space, which used to play the central role in the democratic reproduction of the old modernist, enlightened, transparent society.

This circumstance also applies to the so-called postcolonial condition. However, in contrast to Habermas and his late modernist vision of the social role of public space, the notion of translation in postcolonial theory is not directly connected to the concept of public space. It is now the so-called third space, which plays the political and social role of public space in a completely different way. The third space is the space of hybridity, the space of – as Homi Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture* – subversion, transgression, blasphemy, heresy etc. He believes that hybridity – and cultural translation, which he regards as a synonym for hybridity – is in itself politically subversive.
Hybridty is also the space, where all binary divisions and antagonisms, typical for modernist political concepts, including the old opposition between theory and politics, do not work any more.

Instead of the old dialectical concept of negation, Bhabha talks about negotiation or translation as the only possible way to transform the world and bring about something politically new. In his view, an emancipatory extension of politics is possible only in the field of cultural production: "Forms of popular rebellion and mobilization are often most subversive and transgressive when they are created through oppositional *cultural* practices."[8]
Within the postcolonial concept of cultural translation, public space loses its autonomous political status. It disappears as an independent political factor being swallowed by an enlarged sphere of culture, which has become the exclusive site of political change. What we are here dealing with is "the pervasive hegemony of culture itself as an untranscendable horizon."[9]

American feminist philosopher Judith Butler uses Bhabha's concept of cultural translation to solve one of the most traumatic problems of postmodern political thought – the problem of universality.[10]

For Butler there is no culture that could claim universal validity. However, this does not mean that there is nothing universal in the way we experience our world today. As she sees it, universality has become the problem of cross-cultural translation. Butler explains it in a way similar to the Habermasian "excommunication model". The effect of universality is produced by the dynamics of exclusion/inclusion processes.

Butler's formula is: Universality can be articulated only in response to its own excluded outside. What has been excluded from the existing concept of universality puts this concept – from its own outside – under pressure, for it wants to be accepted and included into the concept. However, this couldn't happen unless the concept itself has changed as far as necessary to include the excluded. This pressure finally leads to a rearticulation of the existing concept of universality. The process by which the excluded within universality is readmitted into the term is what Butler calls translation. Cultural translation – as a "return of the excluded" – is the only promoter of today's democracy. It pushes its limits, brings about social change and opens new spaces of emancipation. It does so through the subversive practices which change everyday social relations.

Let's emphasize again: the way social change is brought about here is not dialectical. It is transgressive instead. It doesn't happen as result of clashes between social antagonisms respectively through the process of negation, but through a never-ending transgression of the existing social and cultural limits, through non-violent, democratic, translational negotiations.

This model describes precisely how the postmodern concept of public space operates. The fact is that we do not even need this concept as a separate political agency any more.

This understanding of political change has been exposed to the criticism which is articulated under similar premises of postmodern and/or postcolonial reflexion and which operates with the notion of translation as well.
What I refer to here is Gayatri Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism".

Let me explaine her concept very briefly: Spivak knows very well that by means of today's theoretical reflexion we can radically deconstruct almost every possible identity and easily disclose its essentialism as being simply imagined, constructed, etc. However, the politics proper still works with these essential identities – such as nation for instance – as if it does not know they are only our illusions.
Therefore, if we want to bring about some real political change, Spivak suggests – I quote – "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest".[11]
This is the reason why the concept of "strategic essentialism" should be understood as a kind of translation too. For the historical situation we live in articulates itself in two different languages: that of postmodern anti-essentialist theory and that of a parallel, old essentialist political practice. Spivaks concept of "strategic essentialism" simply admits that there is no direct correspondence between these two languages – they cannot be sublated in an old dialectical way by a third universal term which could operate as a dialectical unity of both. Therefore, the only possible way of a communication between between them is a kind of translation.
At that point I still see a need for the old political agency of the public space as a site of translation between, let's say, an actual act of cultural subversion and old-fashioned power politics. For nations – in the political form of nation-state and its national

public space – still exist at least within the political reality we are dealing with. "Nation-states are to geopolitics as letters are to an alphabetical articulation," writes Spivak. She finds the nation-state still "a good abstract category for transnational discrimination", which articulates and makes comprehensible actual power relations. The existing world order is still articulated as a system of nation-states.
However, the solution to the problem brought about by globalization cannot be found within the single nation state. Therefore we need something that Spivak calls "transnational literacy"[12] – this is the way to deal with our historical situation in both languages: that of theoretical, anti-essentialist deconstruction and that of old-fashioned essentialist power politics. This is the reason why we should also undestand the notion of "transnational literacy" as a kind of translation. It suggests that the public space we are addressing and (re)producing in – to use one example of special interest here – our anti-globalization protests and actions is always already a space of translation.

---

[1] Étienne Balibar, "Sind wir Bürger Europas? Politische Integration, soziale Ausgrenzung und die Zukunft des Nationalen", Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003.

[2] Ibd., p. 289.

[3] Balibars vision obviously implicates that the European community should be something - in its social and political sense - essentially different from an ordinary nation state.

[4] Ibid, p. 289.

[5] Ibid.

[6] In answering this question I will skip the classical romantic theory of translation, like that of Humboldt. It focuses exclusively on so-called linguistic translations as a practice of national literature. Its social role - as it was defined by Humboldt, Herder or Schleiermacher – exhausts itself in the building of nation as a language community or, more concretely, in an enrichment of the national mind (Der Geist der Nation). I will also skip Walter Benjamin's translation theory , which is theoretically crucial for the later development of Derrida's concept of deconstruction and its use in postcolonial theory.

[7] To emphasize the social character of this process, Habermas explicitly uses a concrete social metaphor: the excommunication or isolation of the criminals from their social community.

[8] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 20.

[9] John Beverly, *Subalternity and Representation*, *Arguments in Cultural Theory*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999. p. 100.

[10] Judith Butler, "Universality in Culture", in: Martha C. Nussbaum with Respondents, edited by Joshua Cohen, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotisms*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, p. 45–53. See also J. Butler / E. Laclau / S. Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, *Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London; New York: Verso 2000.

[11] Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York : Methuen, 1987, p. 205.

[12] "This learning to ask is 'literacy' in the articulation of the names of nation-states that assemble and disassemble a universal

meta-message that is the incessantly written but never readable synonym for the 'globe' standing in for the 'universe'." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Questioned on Translation: Adrift", in: *Public Culture*, Volume 13, Number 1, Winter 2001, p. 15.