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Europe – A Construction Site of Translation

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Boris Buden: You are very clear about what has been at stake in *Transeuropéennes* from its very beginning in 1993: the search for a possible return to the political and an open criticism of the essentialization of cultures as well as the ethnicization and communitarianization of politics. It is precisely within this conceptual framework that you have introduced the notion of translation. The 22nd issue of *Transeuropéennes* (Spring/Summer 2002) has the title: "Translating, Between Cultures". Why translation and why at that time? How have you discovered its political meaning and its critical potentiality?

Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes: *Transeuropéennes* is an active process – it is a movement in critical thought. It is underpinned by a reason in which theory and action are intimately linked. Action and reflection. Action generates reflection. Reflection triggers action. It is its "falling trajectory", to borrow an expression used by the composer Ahmed Essyad to evoke what the musical phrase must strive for. This is what has happened with *Transeuropéennes* since 1993: actions and reflection intimately linked to bring about the political. Critical thought has been at work in training and

research activities, in militant action across borders and indeed in hospitable encounters. It was about allowing the necessary confrontation of differences to become interaction, to become a melee – the melee in praise of which, in homage to a Sarajevo under
siege at the time, Jean-Luc Nancy launched the first issue of *Transeuropéennes* in the autumn of 1993 ("In praise of the melee"). This is one of the strands from which we developed the concept of "translating, between cultures".

We must remember that *Transeuropéennes* was created at a fundamental turning point in history. In barely three years (1989-1992), the fall of the Berlin Wall, the first Gulf War, the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the ultimate disintegration of that state, the civil war in Algeria, the increasing power of fundamentalist ideologies and ethno-nationalisms[1] shook Europe and the world. The journal was born amidst a general feeling of extreme urgency. By being based on the necessary connection between "culture and politics", declared in the very first editorial, the journal opened up a field of activity in the criticism of identitarian discourses and their impact of human, social, political and economic dislocation, while at the same time tackling the question of the war head on. It then challenged the idea of Europe as a horizon, a "Europe divested" of itself, in the wars in the former Yugoslavia and after the fall of the Wall, when the European Union was unable to translate itself or to translate the countries of the former "Other Europe" [2] and established a relationship on a subaltern model with them.

As part of the same movement, the journal was founded as a forum for work on the contemporary conditions of living together, of civility (Balibar) and the practice of differing opinions and disagreement. It was by pursuing this theoretical research in

depth, particularly in view of the first Euro-Mediterranean cultural workshops (alternative training of young artists, intellectuals, translators, etc.), in 1999, that the concept of "translating, between cultures" emerged.

The concept arose at a point when the work on *Transeuropéennes* reached maturity, and it follows on from it. The journal was always intended to be a forum for translation, and the great majority of its authors did not speak French. In 1999, the journal had already published two bilingual issues in French and English and we were preparing a third, on partitions. Already, it was moving towards becoming a French-English bilingual journal. As an international journal of critical thought, it turned out to be a veritable translation factory! And that is how it will be defined in the years to come.

In the programmes for training set up in 1994, and for research (from 1996), but also in the militant action conducted during these years, we were confronted with translation issues in all their complexity on a daily basis. The multilingualism of the groups involved (students from the Balkans, young artists from the Mediterranean, etc) was in itself a challenge posed to every participant: a permanent challenge of translation. But it quickly became obvious that what one has to translate goes far beyond language, that the actual subject of translation is far greater and at the same time far more important. It is a question of representing the world, the imaginary, constructions of memory, ways of relating to the body and its signs, to movement, to time, to space, a way of connecting to mankind, etc. It is also about being liberated from a communitarian logic (speaking the language of the community, which is self-sufficient), about circulating knowledge and sharing it on an equal footing; in short, it's about a dynamic that will drive democracy. Every student at our summer schools,

every researcher or artist at our workshops, had direct experience of it at some stage. And so the workshops became a fascinating forum for engaging in translation, which sometimes went as far as dealing with extreme experiences: war, the body, repressed memory, divided language ... In this political exercise, the actual limits of the exchange were patently obvious. There is indeed a "remainder" (Balibar), which cannot be translated, which cannot be shared, and this "snag" is what I find particularly interesting. It isn't necessarily related to the untranslatable (which would be so in essence and for ever) as much as to what is not translated, which is context-bound (in space and time). This "remainder" is akin to the empty space, the space for the *game* that is necessary for translation, this "between" that prompts interaction and is central in "translating, between cultures".

On the theoretical level, three elements led us, in the same movement, to highlight translation issues from the end of the 90s. On the one hand, a critique of the logics of domination, in all their forms (including those imposed by a community on an individual), was delivered through modes of contemporary thought that were generated within very diverse geocultural horizons. On the other, analysing the crisis in the social bond, in the unthought of multicultural societies that have instituted the right to be different in place of the notion of "living together", the crisis in democracy as a crisis in the relationship of alterity within an egalitarian logic, was of key importance to the journal. Finally, the production of identitarian enclosures, all of them moving towards a rejection of hybridization, towards the fantasy of a language of one's own , an identity of one's own, a body of one's own (in the dual sense of the French term, *propre,* which means something that belongs to one, but also something that is washed, spotless) led us to clarify the concept of identity as a process, a movement, something permeable

in the encounter with others, including the others within oneself, and something that changes in the course of interaction with others. Thus, one can fully assess the subversive dimension of translation, which remains fundamental for me.

So, with one thing leading to another and from 1999 onwards, that's how *Transeuropéennes* got to the stage where it developed the concept of "translating, between cultures", as set out in its twenty-second issue (2002) in particular. Since then, this idea is still in circulation and it's alive, feeding into theoretical research almost everywhere. What's more, it's feeding into the new phase of the journal *Transeuropéennes,* through its research, specifically at the International College of Philosophy, and in its new publishing project, and it is structuring future action from the more specific perspective of the politics of translation and their connection with the issues in democratization.

It goes without saying that, from the very first issue of the journal, we deliberately disputed the validity of the logic of "a war of civilizations", then "a dialogue between cultures" – a logic that suddenly appeared as a counterpoint to the fight against terrorism, after 11 September 2001 – which is nothing less than the exact opposite. *Transeuropéennes* has constantly highlighted the heterogeneity of all cultures, the fact that every culture, every language is somewhat akin to a dual process of translation and hybridization. Thus "between cultures" refers to the "game" that works on every culture, keeping it open, and that, in its turn, is translation. Translating is a proposition that enters into this *game*.

As a place of hospitality and a nomadic journal, *Transeuropéennes* is at the heart of translating, in the intervals, the interstices, the deviations, the disagreements in which our collective is so interested. This interdisciplinary collective *Transeuropéennes* is a

threshold, for it is a transition between languages, between ways of thinking, between imaginary worlds, distant and close by, between systems of criticism. These are shifting. As Mustapha Laarissa, a member of the journal's editorial board, expressed it in a workshop on "Politics of Translation in the Mediterranean" (Paris, December 2005), the shock is in each culture, which is always shot through, and it is in each one of us as subjects. We cannot skip over these passages, these translations. They have, it seems to me, some of the characteristics of a global horizon, which should one day draw on a global law and global, democratic modes of organization.

Boris Buden: There is also another context, which has motivated your introduction of the concept of translation – the historical and political context of today's France and Europe, both being in a deep crisis: a late nation-state losing its meaning and importance under the pressure of globalization and a paralysed project of a trans-national political community still lacking democratic constitution. What has translation to offer in this crisis: a sort of solution to it or rather a further deepening of it? What would you prefer?

Ghislaine Glasson Deschaumes: In the context of the globalization of exchanges, the standardization of aesthetics and the depoliticization of thought, of the apparent standardization of concepts and systems of thought, Europe is a fragile, unstable regional system. But it is one which we must not relinquish from our own critical perspective (we, journals and we, journal collectives) at any price; it is one, rather, that we must decentre and go beyond, over and over again.

The title *Transeuropéennes* indicates the desire both for freedom and for involvement: Europe as a point of departure or transition, which one should always revisit from "elsewhere", the point in relation to which one should always decentre oneself so as to be able to invest in it. In 1993, the issue was planning for "Europe" and "its others", Europe's others, or its outcasts, those without rights; it was about planning for Europe at its borders, at a time too – and this is a significant coincidence – when a group of philosophers were discussing Europe as it has been evolving since Strasbourg, under the magnificent title of *Géophilosophies de l'Europe* .[3]

For me, it was initially about setting in motion the lines of division, of building bridges, of going beyond imposed borders and questioning them, even *of insisting on them,* to the point of physical challenge, one day in May 2002, when about fifty women from all the countries of the former Yugoslavia and from France crossed the bridge of Mitrovica, in Kosovo.[4]

My previous experiences, before founding *Transeuropéennes,* had led me to work tirelessly to link the "Other Europe", and in particular its dissident philosophers and artists, with Western Europe. It was also a crossing: breaking a cultural (and political) taboo imposed by the logic of division and the reality of the Wall. From the time when I was a student, France had appeared to me to be fundamentally ethnocentred. From that point on, unfortunately, nothing has happened to contradict this serious trend. However, we know well that what happens at the national level today is no longer in itself relevant. To question and understand a society, a national law, a national economy without putting it into perspective in Europe and in the world is irresponsible and dangerous. To disregard the connection of these perspectives with the local level is equally so. *Transeuropéennes* is supported by the

French language; it leans on it. French is a language I love, one in which I love writing and into which I love translating, even if it is not my job to translate. But the *Transeuropéennes* project is European and global.

Today, Europe projects itself into the world from a discourse of centrality; it forms relationships with its neighbours that fit into a scheme moving from the centre to the margins. In 1993, Europe was a question; it was a heading inviting us towards "another heading" (Derrida). This space for reflection, which was opened up when the Wall fell, has been closed again by the European instititutions and the governments of the old member states. At no time has the opportunity been offered to the former eastern-bloc countries to be translated, to link their past with the European present. The *tabula rasa* to which they have been invited, in the name of democratic transition "towards Europe", has left amnesic societies, which are repressing part of their experience and their history. The perspective of Europe as a project fell apart in Sarajevo and in the wars of the former Yugoslavia. It has not been redrawn with enlargement.

The institutional choice was not so much that between consolidation and enlargement, contrary to what may have been said. It is the very nature of the approach taken towards those countries formerly linked to the Soviet system that must be questioned. The European institutions have concentrated on the *acquis communautaires* (the complete body of EU legislation, regulations and resolutions); of Europe (their horizon during the Cold War) the candidate countries have therefore encountered only the normative whole, of which it is a *de facto* representative. That these candidate countries might also have knowledge has not crossed the minds of those in the West. One might refer to a certain symbolic violence (the violence of the conqueror?) with

regard to societies that are said to be in democratic transition. The conqueror's logic is not a logic of translation. It is a logic of deploying the victorious system. The membership process has been marked by a serious lack of translation, in the broadest sense of the term. So it was inevitable that the divisions should then have arisen, for example when the war in Iraq began.

Through this massive membership process, the European Union has consolidated itself in its normative function, the very one that governs the relationship that it has offered its neighbours (the "European Neighbourhood Policy"). It also governs the representation of Europe that the communitarian discourse disseminates in the world, largely marked by this same position of the centre radiating out towards the margins. In view of this, the onus is on the *Transeuropéennes* collective, in particular, to open up the translation project and translation projects generally in Europe and at its borders.

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[1] This was the question we collaborated on with *Lignes*, in 1990, in an issue entitled: "nations, nationalities, nationalisms".

[2] Also the title of a remarkable journal published in Paris by the Berelowitch brothers up to the beginning of the 1990s.

[3] Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Denis Guénoun, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Derrida, to name but a few, joining forces in a particularly productive movement for reflection, which was unfortunately abandoned out of weariness, no doubt, with the direction then taken by Europe.

[4] “Women’s militant actions across frontiers”, a project by *Transeuropéennes* and ten NGOs from the Balkans, which was begun in 1999 and completed in 2005.