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# In Spite of the Times

## The Postsecular Turn in Feminism

*Rosi Braidotti*

### **Abstract**

This article explores the so-called 'postsecular' turn from two different but intersecting angles. The first part of the argument offers a reasoned cartography of the postsecular discourses, both in general and within feminist theory. The former includes the impact of extremism on all monotheistic religions in a global context of neo-conservative politics and perpetual war. The context of international violence has dire consequences for the social space, which is increasingly militarized, but also for academic debates, which become more and more restricted in scope and freedom. The article then shifts to mapping the intersection between feminism and the postsecular condition. The main argument is that the postsecular turn challenges European feminism because it makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality. This statement also implies that political agency need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and thus may not be aimed solely or primarily at the production of counter-subjectivities. Subjectivity is rather a process ontology of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values, and hence also multiple forms of accountability. The double challenge of linking subjectivity to religious agency, and disengaging both from oppositional consciousness and critique defined as negativity, is one of the main issues this article wants to address. In the conclusion the article raises the issue of the affirmative power of critical theory and the kind of ethical values it may be able to engender.

### **Key words**

critical theory ■ feminist ethics ■ postsecular ■ subjectivity

### **Introduction: Feminist Dilemmas**

**I**N THIS article I will explore the so-called 'postsecular' turn from different but intersecting angles. These include the impact of extremism on all monotheistic religions in a global context of neo-conservative politics and perpetual war, as well as the quest for ethical values in ways that are attuned to the complexities and contradictions of our era. The first part of my argument offers a sort of cartography of the postsecular discourses within feminist theory. The second develops the theoretical argument that the post-secular predicament stands for a vision of consciousness that links critique to affirmation, instead of negativity, and that it shows traces of residual spirituality.

The contemporary public debate shows a decline of interest in politics, whereas discourses about ethics, religious norms and values triumph. Some underlying master-narratives circulate, which reiterate familiar themes: one is the inevitability of capitalist market economies as the historically dominant form of human progress (Fukuyama, 1989), while another is a contemporary brand of biological essentialism under the cover of 'the selfish gene' (Dawkins, 1976) and new evolutionary psychology. The other resonant refrain is that religion is back with a vengeance. Nietzsche's claim rings hollow across the spectrum of contemporary global politics: God is not dead at all. The monotheistic view of the Divine Being merely slipped out the back window during the passionately secularized second half of the 20th century, only to return through the front door with the failed promises of modernization and the clash of civilizations in the third millennium.

My starting point is that the postsecular turn challenges European feminism because it makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality. This statement has an important corollary – namely that political agency need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and thus may not be aimed solely or primarily at the production of counter-subjectivities. Subjectivity is rather a process ontology of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values, and hence also multiple forms of accountability. This position is defended within feminism by a variety of different thinkers ranging from Harding (2000) to Mahmood (2005) and is explored in innovative ways by the contributors to this Special Section on Post-secular Feminism. The double challenge of linking subjectivity to religious agency, and disengaging both from oppositional consciousness and critique defined as negativity, is one of the main issues I want to address in this article. In the conclusion I will raise the issue of the affirmative power of critical theory and the kind of ethical values it engenders.

Another important debate that is implied here concerns Foucault's unfinished work on the construction of ethical subject relations (Foucault, 1978, 1985, 1986) and I regret being unable to assess it fully (see Cooper, in this Special Section). Suffice it to say that the emphasis on political

spirituality, which marks a turn in Foucault's work on the technologies of the self, was prompted by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and resulted in a reappraisal of pre- and early Christian rituals, protocols and aesthetics of existence (Afary and Anderson, 2005). Foucault's enthusiastic support for the new political spirituality exemplified by the revolutionary Islamic government of Iran took many by surprise and distressed feminists, including Beauvoir and Millett. As Foucault never quite took the trouble to address his androcentric bias, this issue remains a problematic knot in Foucault's unresolved relationship to feminism (Braidotti, 1991; Diamond and Quinby, 1988; McNay, 1992). Again, I shall not discuss this further here, but the point is taken.

### **On Political Subjectivity**

To present the postsecular turn as a challenge for feminism reveals a number of implicit assumptions about the feminist project itself. Let me start by exploring those assumptions, and if possible go on to explode them, in the hope of both broadening our understanding of the postsecular predicament and of mapping its intersections with feminist politics.

The bulk of European feminism is justified in claiming to be secular in the structural and historical sense of the term. Like other emancipatory philosophies and political practices, the feminist struggle for women's rights in Europe has historically produced an agnostic, if not downright atheist position. Historically, it descends from the Enlightenment critique of religious dogma and clerical authority. The massive influence exercised by existentialist feminism (Beauvoir, 1989 [1949]) and Marxist or socialist feminisms (Barrett, 1980; Coward, 1983; Davis, 1981; Delphy, 1984; Firestone, 1970; Mitchell, 1974; Rowbotham, 1973) on the second feminist wave also accounts for a perpetuation of this position. As the secular and rebellious daughters of the Enlightenment, feminists were raised on rational argumentation and detached self-irony. The feminist belief system is accordingly civic, not theistic, and is viscerally opposed to authoritarianism and orthodoxy. Feminist politics is also and at the same time, however, a double-edged vision (Kelly, 1979) that combines rational arguments with political passions and creates alternative social blueprints. In other words, feminists have only paradoxes to offer, as Joan Scott (1996) so eloquently put it.

There are two key ideas at work in this feminist legacy: the first concerns high secularism in the sense of its stated doctrine of the separation of powers. This is a historically consolidated social consensus about the necessity of separating church from state in matters of religious faith, moral values, and spiritual norms and practices. This vision of secularism has been questioned and other plausible definitions of the term have been offered, for instance by anthropology and sociology. The doctrine of separation of powers, however, is prominent in political theory and I adopt it as such.<sup>1</sup> This idea of secularism results in the polar opposition between religion (private belief system) and political citizenship (public domain). The social practice of agency or political subjectivity is clearly situated in

the latter. In so far as the private–public distinction is gendered, moreover, women have a higher entitlement to religious activity than to participation in public affairs, though in view of the sexism of monotheistic religions they are also excluded from active participation in the running of church matters.

The second key idea is that an entrenched form of anti-clericalism constitutes a persistent feature of the European left and of the emancipatory movements it supported. Anti-clericalism and the critique of the Christian church, especially the dogmatic and patriarchal attitude of the Catholic Church, is an integral element of feminist secularism in Continental Europe. The memoirs of the grand old ladies of European feminism are explicit statements of this position (Beauvoir, 1992, 1993; Rossanda, 2005). There are, however, two main problems with these key ideas today: the first is contextual, the second more conceptual. Let me explore each in turn.

Because ‘the clash of civilizations’ is Islamophobic in character and has triggered a wave of anti-Muslim intolerance across Europe and the world, public discussions on the postsecular condition tend to concentrate almost exclusively on Islam, making it the most targeted of monotheistic religions. This reduction of the postsecular condition to the ‘Muslim issue’, in the context of a war on terror that results in the militarization of the social space, means that any unreflective brand of normative secularism runs the risk of complicity with anti-Islam racism and xenophobia. What is needed therefore is a more balanced kind of analysis and a more diversified approach that includes all the monotheistic religions and contextualizes them within shifting global power relations.

Moreover, because a world at war has re-instated conservative norms about the status of women and gays, and about the degrees of tolerable emancipation of both, feminists and queer activists cannot be simply secular, or be secular in a simple or self-evident sense. More complexity is needed in the debate about women’s self-determination and feminist agency, especially in view of the impact of technologies – both information and biogenetic – in the making of subjectivity in our globally mediated world (Braidotti, 2006). The lessons imparted by postcolonial and race studies are crucial to this discussion and their intersection with feminist approaches absolutely necessary. Similarly, the European dimension of the debate is paramount, including the shifting structures of European Union-based citizenship (Balibar, 2001).

In this context, a reductive and ethnocentric position was often taken up by significant European feminists, such as Elisabeth Badinter (2006) in France, Ciska Dresselhuys and Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the Netherlands, and Oriana Fallaci (2002) in Italy, often striking a strident and aggressive note. This is an objectionable position not only because it is racist, but also in terms of its failure to acknowledge the historical specificity of the phenomenon of postsecularism in the world today.

Religious extremism and the politically conservative return of God is a feature of all monotheistic religions today. This multi-layered process

encompasses policy-making at the global level, including the United Nations organizations; widespread and capillary social networks of religious activism at grassroots levels throughout the world, including in the so-called advanced world (Harding, 2000; see Bracke in this Special Section); and the use of violence, both military and guerrilla. In other words, the crisis of secularism amidst both second- and third-generation descendants of Muslim immigrants and amidst born-again and born-that-way Christians is a phenomenon that takes place within the social and political horizon of late globalized postmodernity, not in pre-modern times. It is of here and now. Even Sam Huntington (1996) recognizes this important aspect. This means that some feminists' visceral reaction against the postsecular turn is a serious misreading. It is as if some of them had fallen into bad dreams of their own, as if they were re-living the memories of their struggles against the Christian and mostly Catholic Church on the back of the Muslim headscarves debate, or the never-ending discussions about the veil. By contrast, the rising popularity of the Christian-backed new virginity and sexual abstinence movements seems to evoke less anxiety among vintage feminists.<sup>2</sup> It is urgent therefore to develop more accurate cartographies of the specific postsecular conjuncture they are currently caught in.

It is undeniable, however, that the postsecular defined as a revival of the debate on the relationship between religion and the public sphere both supports and is enhanced by a turn towards political conservatism. This is clearly evidenced by the comeback of Christian and religious militantism all over the world, in the public arena, beyond the boundaries of the private spiritual domain. When he was still only Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI had already declared Nietzsche his own personal enemy. Today, he joins forces with the Evangelical Protestants' 'born-again' fanaticism in levelling the charge of moral and cognitive relativism against any project that challenges the traditional, Christian and humanistic view of the moral subject. This *doxa* or common belief stresses the necessity of strong foundations, like an unequivocally binary gender system, as the basic points of reference that guarantee human decency, moral and political agency, and ethical probity.

Set in these beliefs, the religious hard-line offensive operates a number of disjunctions: it separates women from mothers and rewards the latter, but also subjugates them to the rights of the embryo and the child. It also separates gays from humanity, depriving them of the right to have rights – which is the basic definition of human rights. The forceful collapse of human sexuality into reproduction demonizes all forms of homo- and transsexuality, while campaigning against contraception, family planning and non-marital sex of all kinds. It also produces the absurd proposal that abstinence is the cure for the HIV epidemic, which is spreading not only in sub-Saharan Africa, as everyone knows – but also in former Eastern Europe and especially the Baltic states, as most choose to ignore. Finally, Christian and other religious militants attack contemporary science on two fronts, bio-genetics or genetic technologies and evolutionary theories, to

which they oppose contemporary variations on the theme of creationism and obscurantism.

These disjunctions are further enhanced by the current political context of 'the clash of civilizations' and perpetual wars on terror, which positions women's bodies as markers of authentic cultural and ethnic identity, and as indicators of the stage of development of their respective civilization fault-lines. As a result of this radicalization of global politics in an age of constant warfare, sexual difference has returned to the world stage in a fundamentalist and reactionary version, re-instating a worldview based on colonial lines of demarcation. The dominant discourse nowadays is that 'our women' (Western, Christian, white or 'whitened' and raised in the tradition of secular Enlightenment) are already liberated and thus do not need any more social incentives or emancipatory policies. 'Their women' (non-Western, non-Christian, mostly not white and not whitened, as well as alien to the Enlightenment tradition), however, are still backward and need to be targeted for special emancipatory social actions, or even more belligerent forms of enforced 'liberation'.

This is the line cynically run by arch-conservative and anti-feminist politicians like President Bush to justify their wars on terror through the theory of 'Full Spectrum Dominance', also known as the 'Project for a New American Century'. Paradoxically enough, the same arguments are reiterated, with distressing regularity, by their non-Western opponents. This type of polarization results in mutual and respective claims about authentic and unitary female identity on the part of the 'liberated' West and of its traditionalist opponents. Each fails to take into account the productive and pragmatic work accomplished by the women's movements over the last 30 years, including in the non-Western world. Both delete the feminist political agendas.

The deletion of feminist issues is reinforced by the suspicion the White House throws on intellectuals. In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the US government wasted no time in declaring that academics are the 'weak link' in the war against terror. Being suspected of disloyalty to their culture and lack of patriotism is not new for feminists, though it does leave the century-old tradition of 'academic freedom' in tatters. In such a context, academic debates have become simultaneously less relevant to the public sphere and infinitely more important as a statement of freethinking and a political gesture of resistance, considering the militarization of the social space mentioned above, and the subsequent erosion of civil liberties and democratic accountability. Feminist academic debates are no exception, but their impact is seriously hampered.

One of the most problematic aspects of the current academic debates is the systematic side-lining of feminist scholarship in the discussions about globalization, the war on terror and religious extremism. The extent of the anti-feminism in academic discourse today is surprising and it deserves more specific analysis. It is also made all the more paradoxical by the fact

that gender and sexual difference issues are so central to global politics and contemporary forms of nationalism (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989).

### **The Conceptual Tangles**

#### *The Non-secularists*

Two main questions are left unaddressed in the previous section: first, how secular has European feminism been, after all? Second, what counts as European for the sake of this debate? Let us consider the counter-arguments.

Developing alongside but in antagonism to the mainstream secularist line, other feminist traditions have been thriving. Various schools of feminist spirituality and alternative spiritual practices have a long and established history in Europe and elsewhere. Major writers in the feminist tradition, notably Audre Lorde (1984), Alice Walker (1984) and Adrienne Rich (1987), acknowledge the importance of the spiritual dimension of women's struggle for equality and symbolic recognition. The work of Mary Daly (1973), Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (1983) and Luce Irigaray (1993 [1984]), to name but a few, highlights a specific feminist tradition of non male-centred spiritual and religious practices.

Feminist theology in the Christian (Keller, 1998; Wadud, 1999), Muslim (Tayyab, 1998) and Judaic (Adler, 1998) traditions has produced well-established communities of both critical resistance and affirmation of creative alternatives. Across the great monotheistic religions, feminist theologians have produced a taxonomy of core issues for their field, including the critique of the holy laws, the hermeneutics of the sexism in the holy texts, and the call for new rituals and ceremonies. Among these, the witches' movement, currently best exemplified by Starhawk (1999), and reclaimed by the epistemologist Stengers (1997), stresses the importance of counter-theological heresy, blasphemy and sacrilege as part of the feminist project. In our technologically mediated world, neo-pagan elements have also emerged in cyberculture and various brands of posthuman techno-asceticism (Braidotti, 2002; Epps, 1996; Halberstam and Livingston, 1995).

All non-secularists stress the deep spiritual renewal that is carried by and is implicit in the feminist cause, insisting that it can be of benefit to the whole of mankind and not only to the females of the species (Russell, 1974). This humanist spiritual aspiration is ecumenical in nature and universalist in scope.

Black and postcolonial theories have never been loudly secular. In the very religious context of the USA, African-American women's literature is filled with references to Christianity; black feminist and critical theory have been postsecular for a long time, as bell hooks (1990) and Cornell West (1994) demonstrate. Furthermore, postcolonial and critical race theories today have developed non-theistic brands of situated neo-humanism. Examples are: Paul Gilroy's planetary cosmopolitanism (2000); Avtar Brah's diasporic ethics (1996); Edouard Glissant's poetics of relations (1997



[1990]); Ernesto Laclau's micro-universal claims (1995); Homi Bhabha's 'subaltern secularism' (1994); Vandana Shiva's anti-global neo-humanism (1997); as well as the rising wave of interest in African humanism or Ubuntu, from Patricia Hill Collins (1991) to Drucilla Cornell (2002).

Edward Said (1978) was among the first to alert critical theorists in the Western tradition to the need to develop a reasoned account of Enlightenment-based secular humanism, which would take into account the colonial experience, its violent abuses and structural injustice, as well as postcolonial existence (Bhabha, 1994). French post-structuralist philosophers, while upholding philosophical distance from religious orthodoxy, also argued that in the aftermath of colonialism, Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the Gulag – to mention but a few of the horrors of modern history – Europeans need to develop a critique of Europe's delusions of grandeur in positing themselves as the moral guardians of the world and as the motor of human spiritual and technological evolution. This line is pursued in philosophy by Deleuze's rejection of the transcendental vision of the subject (1990 [1968]) and emphasis on radical immanence; Irigaray's de-centring of phallogocentrism (1985 [1974]); Foucault's critique of European humanism (1977 [1975]); Derrida's deconstruction of the centre (1997); and Glissant's critique of Eurocentrism (1997 [1990]).

Consequently we can detect several intersecting lines of questioning of the secular legacy of European culture and philosophy. The anti-humanism of some social and cultural critics within a Western post-structuralist perspective can be read alongside the cosmopolitan neo-humanism of contemporary race, postcolonial and non-Western critics. Both these positions, all other differences notwithstanding, produce inclusive alternatives to humanist individualism and uncritical secularism. Without wishing to flatten out structural differences, nor to draw easy analogies among them, there is much to be gained by trying to synchronize their critical efforts and respective political aims, and to re-ground claims to connections and transversal alliances among different postsecular constituencies.

#### *The Residual Spirituality of Critical Theory*

There is another conceptual aspect to this discussion. If we can understand humanism as the respect for human rights and the modern notion of equality and democracy, which lie at the core of European modernity and drive the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment, then it could be argued that the value system of European secular humanism is implicitly religious, albeit by negation (see Blaagaard, 2007, forthcoming). This position rests on the notion that a secular distillation of Judeo-Christian precepts is responsible for producing the notion of secularism defined as contractual agreements or respect for the law. In turn, this entails respect for the intrinsic worth of the individual person, the autonomy of the self, moral conscience, rationality and the ethics of love. These values are central to the European modernization process, based on a teleological or evolutionary vision of the future,

and on faith in human reason's capacity to achieve social progress. As William Connolly (1999) astutely remarked, this specific brand of secularized humanism has passed itself off as the embodiment of universalism, thus achieving absolute moral authority and the social status of a dominant norm.

This is why we can rightfully speak of the residual spirituality of contemporary critical theories of the subject: a negation is still a powerful mode of relation. Without the Judeo-Christian tradition there is no progressive emancipation and therefore no secularism and hence no postsecular condition. A double negation engenders the inevitable positivity of the excluded term. This line of reasoning would consequently leave Islam in the singular position of being the one monotheistic religion positing subjectivity without the need for secularist distinctions. By extension, Islam would then have no claim to modernity, emancipation or human rights. This, as Gellner noted (1992), is not only far from unproblematic but also historically false.

The not-so-hidden agenda in this debate is the controversial issue of modernity and the modes of subjectivity and citizenship it supports. The general question can best be stated as a paradox: how to explain the fact that some of the most pertinent critiques of advanced capitalism today, and of the structural injustices of globalization, are voiced by religiously driven social movements? The feminist issue is even more complex: in the allegedly civilizational debates I reported earlier, conservative Western politicians depicted an over-optimistic view of the status of women in the Western world in order to justify their manipulative politics of polarization and neo-imperial warfare against the Muslim world. This depiction is deficient and misleading in terms of the history of women's struggle for citizenship rights in Europe and elsewhere in the Western world, let alone on the global scale. In fact, issues related to women's political participation and full citizenship remain unresolved and highly controversial: did European women have an Enlightenment? Did the Universal Declaration of Human Rights apply to women and other minorities? Or is it rather the case that feminist struggles to achieve basic rights constitute the undercurrent of European modernity? And that, to feminists since Wollstonecraft, the promise of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity sounds rather hollow, even though the process of secularization prompted by the Enlightenment liberated public space for women to participate as active citizens? Such participation was never granted willingly and had to be seized violently through organized struggle and resistance. The struggle is still ongoing and very much unfinished even among mainstream Europeans. To deny this would be to add insult to injury.

How are feminists to react to the foregrounding of women in a post-secular civilizational debate that is really about the social/sexual contract (Pateman, 1988) and the limits of a certain practice of citizenship? The following steps need to be re-asserted in order to recast this debate about the public sphere in less ethnocentric and reductive terms. First, that the modernization processes and the emancipation of women are still in process

in the West. Second, and as a result, that no simple polarizations can be made between an allegedly progressive Judeo-Christian tradition and the allegedly backward Muslim one. Third, the notion has to be considered that the Western modernization model may not be the only or the best one: multiple modernities are actually at stake (Eisenstadt, 2000). Therefore, and in conclusion, different forms of secularism may be engendered by multiple models of modernity. This allows us to venture the idea that the postsecular condition is quite diverse and internally differentiated. Incidentally, I want to suggest that we adopt this multi-ethnic and complex notion of diversity as the standard definition of what counts as European today (Braidotti, 2006).

The extent to which this normative consensus about the uniqueness of the Western model of secularism and the Judeo-Christian roots of European humanism has been shaken is best demonstrated by Jürgen Habermas himself. In his conversations with then Cardinal Ratzinger and in his Lodz lecture of April 2005, Habermas displayed clear signs of postsecular anxiety. A sort of cognitive and moral panic has seized the humanistic community under the pressure of the clash of civilizations and the current political economy of fear and terror on the one hand and nostalgia and melancholia on the other (Massumi, 1992). Part of this panic is the result of contemporary bio-technological advances. Seldom has the future of human 'nature' been the subject of such concern and in-depth discussions by our wise public intellectuals as in our globalized times. Habermas coined the term 'postsecular societies' to signal the urgency of a critical reconsideration of the function of scientific belief systems in the world today. Fear of genetic manipulations, which Habermas (2003) shares with champions of liberalism like Fukuyama (2002), implicitly endorses one of the axioms of all monotheistic religions, namely the sacred nature of human life and procreation. This technophobic reaction to our bio-technological progress has led to a return to Kantian moral universalism. This is quite influential in feminist theory, notably through the work of Martha Nussbaum (1999, 2006) and Seyla Benhabib (2002). Much as I welcome the 'ethical turn' of these theories, I do not share their liberal individualistic premises and the neo-universalism of their ethical values. I advocate critical distance, on both theoretical and political grounds, from the ethnocentrism of their position and also the technophobia it expresses (Braidotti, 2002, 2006).

Another criterion by which we can register the non-secular dimension of critical theory is to look for the missing links between feminism, religious activism and the postsecular condition. I want to suggest that one of these missing links is provided by psychoanalytic theory. Much has been written about Freud's atheism, anti-clericalism and the very pertinent analysis he makes of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). The secularist approach of Freudian psychoanalysis rests on deep scepticism about the delusional aspects of all belief systems, compounded by a scientific form of criticism. At the same time, however, psychoanalysis stresses two aspects

of psychic life that point seriously in the postsecular direction: the first concerns the vitality of drives, including the all-powerful death drive, whose entropic force is central to human desire. The second deals with the crucial importance of totemic and iconic figures as fundamental structures of psychic order and social cohesion. In his meta-psychology period Freud explores the material bases of human psychic and spiritual life, drawing attention to the violent and disruptive forces that both sustain and threaten the social/sexual contract. Foremost among them is exogamy, the exchange of women, as a pillar of patriarchal monotheism.

The main psychoanalytic insight therefore concerns the importance of the emotional layering of the process of subject-formation. This refers to the affective, unconscious and visceral elements of our allegedly rational and discursive belief system (Connolly, 1999). To put it bluntly: the political does not equate with the rational, and the religious is not the same as the irrational. Religion may well be the opium of some masses, but politics is no less intoxicating and science is the favourite addiction of many others. Die-hard champions of the equation of reason with atheism, like Dawkins (2006), are symptomatic of this axiom, being as extreme and intolerant as the religious forces they are allegedly opposing.

The legacy of psychoanalysis allows us to challenge received ideas about the rationality of political subjectivity. Let us take a simple notion, such as faith in social progress and the self-correcting powers of democratic governance. In a psychoanalytic perspective, the operational concept here is faith itself. Psychoanalysis is a sober reminder of our historically cumulated contradictions: we are confronting today a postsecular realization that all beliefs are acts of faith, regardless of their propositional content – even, or especially, when they invoke the superiority of reason, science and technology. All belief systems contain a hard core of spiritual hope – as Lacan put it: if you believe in grammar, you believe in God.

This insight can be compounded by another set of considerations, borrowed from media and cultural studies, about the social imaginary and its unconscious interpellations. Much has been written on the power of identification and the mass appeal triggered by images and representations of dominant icons – ranging from the ubiquitous face of Che Guevara or the young Angela Davis, to the images of Nelson Mandela and other secular saints. Whereas their totemic function is religious in the sacrificial sense of the term ('they suffered so that we may be better off'), their iconic value is clearly inscribed in the market economy. It can be understood as the process of hyper-individualistic branding of the faces of celebrities. This phenomenon is border-crossing and includes Elvis Presley and Princess Diana in some quarters, and resistance or guerrilla fighters and suicide bombers in others. Again, the residues of religious worship practices are evident here: the images of transgressive and iconoclastic female saints or inspiring icons, ranging from Saint Teresa of Avila or Joan of Arc to Anna Frank to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, have played a significant role in the collective cultural imaginary.

Contemporary technoculture has intensified this trend. Madonna, known in her Judaic (con)version as Esther, has a standing dialogue and stage act as/with Jesus Christ. Evelyn Fox Keller (1983), in her seminal work on feminist epistemology, recognizes the importance of Buddhism in the making of contemporary microbiologist McClintock's Nobel-prize-winning discoveries. Henrietta Moore's recent anthropological research on sexuality in Kenya (2007) argues that, considering the impact of grassroots religious organizations, being white is less of a problem in the field today than being a failed Christian. Recently, however, Donna Haraway came out as a failed secularist (Haraway, 2006), while H el ene Cixous saw fit to write a book entitled: *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* (2004). Now, how non-secular is all this?

The mystical elements of mass popular culture have been commented upon by critical theorists as diverse as Adorno and Horkheimer, and Deleuze and Guattari. In the age of digital saturation of our social sphere by fast-circulating visualization technologies, the mystical overtones of global icons and the semi-religious cult and following they evoke have become permanent features of our culture. The relative decline of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical tool of social and cultural critique in academic circles, however, prevents a more coherent reading of the links that neoliberal societies have established between visual culture, global icons and a postsecular social imaginary that fetishizes them into the 'sacred monsters' of global consumption.

This decline of psychoanalysis has to do with a shift of emphasis in contemporary political ontology towards a Spinozist rather than Freudian-Hegelian framework. Such a shift of paradigm means, among other things, that less emphasis is placed on dialectics of consciousness and more attention is paid to issues of empowerment, positivity and the critique of the negative. It also affects the feminist understandings of the postsecular predicament. The Freudian theory of the libido harnessed the drives back onto a system that equates desire with a dialectical structure of recognition and sameness. This inscribes alterity – the structural presence of others – as a limit or negation at the core of the desiring subject. Desire is deployed along an entropic curve for Freud and is equated with lack in Lacan. In my view we are today in a unique position to de-link them because of the new forms of inter-relationality that have been enabled by global technological developments. Contemporary technologies allow for forms of social interaction by desiring subjects, which are nomadic, not unitary; multi-relational, not phallo-centric; connective, not dialectical; simulated, not specular; affirmative, not melancholy and relatively disengaged from a linguistically mediated system of signification (Braidotti, 2006). If we look at recent figurations of major theorists and thinkers, they all attest to multi-layered relationality: Deleuze's rhizomes (Deleuze and Guattari, 1981 [1976]); Guattari's molecular politics (1995, 2000); Negri's multitudes (Hardt and Negri, 2004); feminist critiques of scattered hegemonies by Grewal and Kaplan (1994); diasporic belongings by Avtar

Brah (1996); Haraway's cyborgs (1985); queer subjectivity (Butler, 1991); and my nomadic subject (Braidotti, 2006).

This shift of paradigm from classical psychoanalytic hermeneutics to more multi-layered neo-materialist approaches, however, should not be allowed to obscure the relevance of psychoanalysis to the discussion about the postsecular predicament.

### **Vital Feminist Theories**

One area where residual traces of spirituality can be clearly seen is in the contemporary rise of neo-vitalist thought. Social theory since post-structuralism has emphasized the materially grounded transformative processes of becoming, complexity in network societies or bio-power in the sense of vital politics. The return to vitalism, redefined through technological flows of complex information systems, is itself a symptom of the post-secular turn in political theory. Classical vitalism is a problematic notion, considering its dramatic history of holism and complicity with fascism. Contemporary neo-vitalism as a philosophy of flows and flux, however, presupposes and benefits from the philosophical monism that is central to a materialist and non-unitary vision of subjectivity.

As a neo-vitalist notion, immanence expresses the residual spiritual values of great intimacy and a sense of belonging to the world as a process of perpetual becoming (Bataille, 1988). Moreover, it is the case that, theoretically and politically, vitalism stands against the emphasis on political theology that, adapted from Carl Schmitt (1996), shaped the thinking of Leo Strauss and the American neocons through the Bush Jr years (Derrida, 2002; Norton, 2004). The difference between the two is that political theology in its classical enunciation, as well as in the contemporary interpretation by Agamben (1998), reduces modern political theories to the secularized version of theological concepts. This fundamentally authoritarian reduction over-emphasizes the ruthlessly dichotomous ('friend or enemy') and polarizing nature ('you are with us or against us') of the political relation. By stressing this dimension as what is specific about politics, this theory ends up in a confrontation with death and mortality as well as in an indictment of modernity as being structurally violent.

Neo-vitalist feminist thought, on the other hand, pursues a very different line of reasoning, which stresses the creative potential of social phenomena that may appear negative at first. The theoretical advantage of this approach is the ability to account for the fluid workings of power in advanced capitalism by grounding them in immanent relations and hence resist them by the same means. What is postsecular about this is the faith in potential transformation of the negative and hence in the future; I will develop this in more detail in the next section. For now, let me illustrate this trend with reference to more holistic and integrated ways of discussing subjectivity as flows of inter-relationality. This trend has emerged as a feature of contemporary feminist theory in a number of areas.

Feminism has moved away from Beauvoir's intransigent repudiation of religious beliefs and the subsequent reassertion of classical transcendence as a feminist strategy. This philosophical position was challenged by the notion of non-hierarchical or horizontal transcendence (Irigaray, 1993 [1984]) and by the idea of radical immanence in Deleuzian feminism (Braidotti, 1991; Colebrook, 2000, 2002; Grosz, 2004).

Third-wave feminism (Henry, 2004) has voiced anti-Oedipal philosophical and methodological claims about feminist time-lines that redesign possible futures in affirmative ways. The renewed interest in authors like Darwin (Grosz, 1999) echoes in the rise of multiple micro-political investigations of 'life itself' (Parisi, 2004). This transversal convergence between philosophical anti-foundationalism and feminist epistemology results in a posthuman wave that radicalizes the premises of science studies beyond anything envisaged by classical postmodernist feminism (Bryld and Lykke, 1999; Franklin et al., 2000; Wilson, 1998). Feminist cultural studies of science attempt to disengage biology from the structural functionalism of DNA-driven linearity and to push it instead towards more creative patterns of evolutionary development (Halberstam and Livingston, 1995). The result is a non-essentialist brand of vital neo-holistic thought that points explicitly to a spiritual dimension, best exemplified by the growing number of references to Bergson (Fraser et al., 2006; Grosz, 2004).

Posthuman feminism in the neo-vitalist mode (Guattari, 1995; Haraway, 1997, 2003; Hayles, 1999) is a fast-growing new intersectional alliance that offers hybrid and trans-disciplinary approaches. It gathers the remains of post-structuralist anti-humanism and joins them with feminist re-appraisals of contemporary technoculture in a non-deterministic frame. Posthumanism has also some inhumane aspects; Vandana Shiva (1997) stresses, for example, the extent to which the bodies of the empirical subjects who signify difference (woman/native/earth or natural others) have become the disposable bodies of the global economy. Contemporary capitalism is 'bio-political' in that it aims at controlling all that lives: it has already turned into a form of bio-piracy in that it aims at exploiting the generative powers of women, animals, plants, genes and cells. Because the self-replicating vitality of living matter is targeted for consumption and commercial exploitation of bio-genetic culture, environmentalism has evolved into a new global alliance for sustainable futures. Haraway (1997) recognizes this trend and pays tribute to the martyred body of onco-mouse, as the farming ground for the new genetic revolution and manufacturers of spare parts for other species.

These trends indicate that the postsecular turn has been taken within feminist theory, though it may not always bear that name. The residual spirituality of much contemporary feminist theory demonstrates the compatibility of political subjectivity with issues that do not fall easily within the boundaries of the secular tradition in feminism, as defined in the first section of this article. The new agenda includes straightforward religious matters; questions of neo-vital politics; environmental holism and deep ecology; the

bio-political management of life; and the quest for suitable resistance in the era of bio-genetic capitalism, or what ethical values best suit the respect for ethnic and cultural diversity. Each of these deserves more specific analysis than I can grant it here.

### **On Oppositional Consciousness**

In the rest of this article I want to leave aside the cartographic mode and turn instead to a theoretical argument about the postsecular predicament as a practice of affirmation, instead of negativity, which bears a close link to residual forms of spirituality. More specifically, I shall address and challenge the traditional equation between political subjectivity and critical oppositional consciousness and the reduction of both to negativity. This is important to the discussion about secularism because it casts a new light on the role of spirituality in social and critical theory.

The legacy of Hegelian-Marxist dialectics of consciousness is deep: critical theory banks on negativity and in a perverse way even requires it. The assumption here is that the same material and discursive conditions that create the negative moment – the experience of oppression, marginality, injury or trauma – are also the conditions of their overturning. Thus, the same conditions provide both the material that damages and that which engenders positive resistance, counter-action or transcendence (Foucault, 1977 [1975]). What triggers and at the same time is engendered by the process of resistance is oppositional consciousness. Existentialist critical theory, working from a dialectical scheme, translated this process in terms of the shift from bad faith to authenticity. This has proved of capital importance for feminist emancipation and liberation projects because it provides both a conceptual and an ethical scheme to process the marks of exclusion and the legacy of marginalization, at both the macro and the micro levels. The Althusserian critique of the imaginary role in ideology recasts this debate in terms of the political necessity to elaborate an adequate understanding and suitable representation of our real-life conditions. The negative experience can be turned into the matter that critical theory has to engage with, and thus into the productive source of counter-truths and values which aim at overthrowing the negative instance.

This process is too often rendered in purely functional terms as the equation of political creativity/agency with negativity, or unhappy consciousness. I want to suggest, however, that much is to be gained by adopting a non-Hegelian analysis that foregrounds the creative or affirmative elements of this process. This shift of perspective assumes philosophical monism and an ethical and affective component at the core of subjectivity; it is thus an anti-rationalist position. A subject's ethical core is not his/her moral intentionality, as much as the effects of the relations of power (as repressive – *potestas* – and positive – *potentia*) and hence also the potential for empowerment that his/her actions are likely to have upon the world. It is a process of engendering empowering modes of becoming (Deleuze, 1990 [1968]). Given that in this neo-vitalist view the ethical good



is equated with radical relationality aiming at affirmative empowerment, the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others. Oppositional consciousness and the political subjectivity or agency it engenders are processes or assemblages that actualize this ethical urge. This position is postsecular in the sense that it actively works towards the creation of affirmative alternatives by working actively through the negative instance.

What this means practically is that the conditions for political and ethical agency are not dependent on the current state of the terrain. They are not oppositional and thus not tied to the present by negation; instead they are affirmative and geared to creating possible futures. Ethical relations create possible worlds by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination. They are the driving forces that concretize in actual, material relations and can thus constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others. Such a vision of the subject, moreover, does not restrict the ethical instance within the limits of human otherness, but also opens it up to inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces.

The emphasis on non-human ethical relations can also be described as an eco-philosophy, in that it values one's reliance on the environment in the broadest sense of the term. Considering the extent of our technological development, emphasis on the eco-philosophical aspects is not to be mistaken for biological determinism. It rather posits a nature-culture continuum (Guattari, 1995, 2000; Haraway, 1997) within which subjects cultivate and construct multiple ethical relations.<sup>3</sup> The concepts of immanence and of neo-vital politics, which I discussed above, become relevant again here. This eco-philosophical dimension is essential to the postsecular turn.

I have argued so far that oppositional consciousness is central to political subjectivity but it is not the same as negativity and that, as a consequence, critical theory is about strategies of affirmation. Political subjectivity or agency therefore consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit for ourselves and for future generations. As Rich put it in her recent essays, the political activist has to think 'in spite of the times' and hence 'out of my time', thus creating the analytics – the conditions of possibility – of the future (2001: 159). Critical theory occurs somewhere between the no-longer and the not-yet, not looking for easy reassurances but for evidence that others are struggling with the same questions. Consequently, we are in this together.

### **Conclusion: Out of My Time**

The kind of consciousness-raising required by a political subject in order to actualize a radical repositioning of his/her position is neither self-evident, nor free of pain. In post-structuralist feminism, this process has also been discussed in terms of dis-identification from experiences that may be

negative, but also paradoxically familiar (Braidotti, 1994; De Lauretis, 1987). This strategy of dis-identification is important to the making of a postsecular vision of subjectivity.

Dis-identification involves the loss of habits of thought and representation, which is liberating, but it can also produce fear, a sense of insecurity and nostalgia. Change is certainly a painful process, especially changes that affect one's sense of identity. Given that identifications constitute an inner scaffolding that support one's sense of identity, shifting our collective imaginings (Gatens and Lloyd, 1999) is not as simple as casting away a used garment. Psychoanalysis taught us that imaginary relocations are complex and as time-consuming as shedding an old skin. Moreover, changes of this qualitative kind happen more easily at the molecular or subjective level, and their translation into a public discourse and shared social experiences is a complex and risk-ridden affair. All radical epistemologies have had to confront this paradox. A discursive alliance across the different branches of radical critical theory is therefore a necessary move. This point is stressed by all the contributors to this Special Section. It involves notably feminism, postcolonial and anti-racist theory, in line with globalization studies and the critique of war and the militarization of the social space.

Let me give a series of concrete examples of how this productive alliance on the issue of dis-identifications from dominant models of subject-formation can be affirmative. First of all, feminist theory is based on a radical dis-engagement from the dominant institutions and representations of femininity and masculinity, to enter the process of becoming-minoritarian or of transforming gender. In so doing feminism combines critique with creation of alternative ways of embodying and experiencing our sexualized selves. In spite of massive media battering and the marketing of political conservatism, there is no credible evidence among European women of a nostalgic desire to return to traditional gender and sex roles. Some dis-identifications are here to stay.

Second, in race discourse, the awareness of the persistence of racial discrimination and of white privilege has led to serious disruptions of our accepted views of what constitutes a subject. This has resulted on the one hand in the critical reappraisal of blackness (Gilroy, 2000; Hill Collins, 1991) and on the other in radical relocations of whiteness (Blaagaard, 2007, forthcoming; Griffin and Braidotti, 2002; Ware, 1992). Here, I want to refer to Edgar Morin's (1987) account of how he relinquished Marxist cosmopolitanism to embrace a more 'humble' perspective as a European. This process includes both positive and negative affects: disappointment with the unfulfilled promises of Marxism is matched by compassion for the uneasy, struggling and marginal position of post-war Europe squashed between the USA and the USSR. This produces a renewed sense of care and accountability that leads Morin to embrace a post-nationalistic redefinition of Europe as the site of mediation and transformation of its own history (Balibar, 2002).

Beneficial or positive aspects balance the negative aspects of the process. The benefits are epistemological but extend beyond; they include a more adequate cartography of our real-life conditions and hence less pathos-ridden accounts. This enhances the lucidity of our assessments and therefore clears the ground for more adequate and sustainable relations. It also reiterates the point made before: that the emphasis commonly placed on the force of the negative is out of balance and needs to be reconsidered.

The postsecular position on the affirmative force of oppositional consciousness inevitably raises the question of faith in possible futures, which is one of the aspects of the residual spirituality I mentioned above. The system of feminist civic values rests on a social constructivist notion of faith as the hope for the construction of alternative social horizons, new norms and values. Faith in progress itself is a vote of confidence in the future. Ultimately, it is a belief in the perfectibility of Wo/Man, albeit it in a much more grounded, accountable mode that privileges partial perspectives, as Haraway (1988) put it. It is a postsecular position in that it is an immanent, not transcendental theory, which posits generous bonds of cosmopolitanism, solidarity and community across locations and generations. It also expresses sizeable doses of residual spirituality in its yearning for social justice and sustainability.

In order to ground this statement, please consider the perverse temporality of our social system, with its obsession for the continuous present of everlasting consumption. Being nothing more than all-consuming entropic energy, capitalism is a future-eater (Flannery, 1994). Lacking the ability to create anything new, it can merely promote the recycling of spent hopes, repackaged in the rhetorical frame of the 'next generation of gadgets'. The construction of sustainable futures, to the contrary, is a social project: it is a basic and rather humble act of faith in the possibility of endurance, as duration or continuity, which honours our obligation to the generations to come. Virtual futures grow out of sustainable presents and vice versa. Transformative postsecular ethics takes on the future affirmatively, as the shared collective imagining that endures in processes of becoming, to effect multiple modes of interaction with heterogeneous others. Futurity is made of this non-linear evolution towards an ethics that moves away from the paradigm of reciprocity and the logic of recognition, installing a rhizomic relation of mutual affirmation and accountability. The social construction of social horizons of hope for the future is a form of intergenerational justice which runs against the traditionally hierarchical and oppositional ways in which we think about generational differences. A concern for intergenerational decency is a way of displacing the Oedipal hierarchy and of practising an ethics of non-reciprocity in the pursuit of affirming sustainable futures.

My argument has shown that there is no logical necessity to link political subjectivity to oppositional consciousness and reduce the latter to negativity. Critical theory can be just as critical and more persuasively theoretical if it embraces philosophical monism and vital politics, and

disengages the process of consciousness-raising from the logic of negativity, connecting it instead to creative affirmation. The corollary of this shift is twofold: first, it proves that political subjectivity or agency need not be aimed solely at the production of radical counter-subjectivities. It is not a destructive oppositional strategy that aims at storming the Bastille of phallogentrism, or undoing the Winter Palace of gender. It rather involves negotiations with dominant norms or technologies of the self. Second, it argues that political subjectivity rests on an ethics of otherness that values reciprocity as mutual specification or creation, but not as the recognition of sameness.

The political economy of subjectivity I have been arguing for does not condition the emergence of the subject on negation but on creative affirmation, not on loss but on vital generative forces. This shift is central to the postsecular turn in feminist theory, which imagines a subject whose existence, ethics and politics are not indexed on negativity and hence on the horizon of alterity and melancholia. This subject is looking for the ways in which otherness prompts, mobilizes and allows for the affirmation of what is not contained in the present conditions. This is the core of postsecular subjectivity defined as the ethics of becoming: the quest for new creative alternatives and sustainable futures. In spite of the times, indeed, and hence out of my time.

#### Notes

1. See the pamphlet: *The Case for Secularism: A Neutral State in an Open Society* (London: British Humanist Association, 2007). With thanks to Simon Glendinning.
2. See <http://www.4abstinence.com>
3. Elsewhere, I have referred to this ethics in terms of social sustainability (Braidotti, 2006), though I cannot pursue this argument further here.

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