

[Given as invited respondent to Rosi Braidotti's keynote speech at the *Society for European Philosophy and Forum for European Philosophy Joint Annual Conference*, Dundee, September 2015]

Seven theses for affirmative praxis: a response to Rosi Braidotti [draft of 1/12/15]

It is a challenge to respond to Rosi Braidotti's work on affirmation as relational ethical praxis, because I read it as a manifesto – the *zoë manifesto*, the life manifesto - that not only carries through the vital commitments of her earlier work, but also points to its political and ethical engagement in the urgent struggle to transform our world for the better.

What I want to do here is condense the manifesto a little further into 7 theses, as if we had a new philosophical declaration to hand out, publicise and, most importantly, to follow by constantly rethinking it as part of our everyday practice (including the practices of teaching and learning that are coming under threat in today's outcome-measured and ranking-based universities). When setting out each thesis, I will make brief remarks which do not so much raise objections, but rather point to minor inflections that come out of my current work on the process philosophy of signs. I will also briefly try to sketch discussions that come out of these neighbourly paths.

Thesis 1: Affirmative ethical praxis is a collective creative practice transforming our world beyond its unsustainable present failings

The emphasis on collective is important here. It does not mean a group of individuals coming together, having already decided what to do alone as rational agents, but rather a collective practice where ethical actions influence theory and give it practical context, as we address transformation together. This positive transformation is not primarily conditioned by opposition to a current state. It is driven by a search for a new series of constructions, moving away from an unsustainable present. Collective and experimental creation of new, fair and resilient environments would be an example of this kind of ethical praxis.

Some pressure points: There might be a problem in the definition of the collective: the 'we' involved in the action. Lyotard addressed this problem as the difficulty of defining a 'we' without exclusions, oppositions and narratives of belonging and banishment. So, for instance, it is hard to imagine a collective on climate change that brings together nations at different stages of development without appealing to some kind of theoretical universal such as 'humanity'. There is a related problem that could come out of Habermas's work and questions about modes of interpellation: to whom and how will this invitation to praxis be addressed, if it has to appeal to audiences with different interests? Will it have to presuppose common rationality, or shared

linguistic and conceptual frames, or at least a common sphere of experience? I suspect that the concepts of multiple and overlapping ethical collectives and of emerging actors, rather than neatly defined ones, will help in pushing beyond these critical pressures.

Thesis 2: Praxis is located and calls for a mapping of its embedded location as *past, present and future transformations from a worse world to a better one*

The first thesis could be seen as a practice involved in the purity of a new beginning: the kind of utopian thinking that can either ignore or, more seriously, erase the difficult entanglements of the past and their effect on the present. This is exactly not what Braidotti's affirmation is about. On the contrary, Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault's philosophies influence the practical and creative sense of having to act collectively, in an ongoing location that is both complex and dynamic. So the move to a better world necessarily involves a mapping of the continuities and discontinuities running from the past, to the active present and towards the better future. Braidotti calls this a creed of belonging. We need to draw up diagrams (as defined by Cull and Alliez in creative practice, and also by Mullarkey and O'Sullivan) from a differentiated past (in the sense of multiple), in the present but with an ethical commitment to the future (and to the wrongs of the past). Such maps or diagrams are essential for creative praxis, because without them it will lack a sense of its location, and a sense of the importance of located creativity for the determination of the ethical, as sensitive to difference, to continuity and to productive discontinuity (I am tempted to use the important Deleuzian concept of disjunctive synthesis to define this ethical act). Collectives that are currently recreating old and corrupted institutions, such as our universities, into new and more affirmative associations — less beholden to forms of repression and negative power — are examples of this past, present and future mapping. It is not a question of doing away with all of the old, but of how to affirm those lines that can escape from intellectual and financial corruption.

The old and displeasing problem of relativism shakes itself awake here: Located must mean immanently and singularly located, since there is no external point of reference. A diagram is drawn from within, rather than mapped according to global coordinates. So there isn't a problem of individual relativism but a problem of collective relativism (where the diagram stretches from, as it were). So the problems of the writing of history, creating in the present and projecting into the future raise the difficult question of 'From where?' to accompany the early questions of 'By and to whom?' It is quite easy to put this problem back to sleep, because the answer is simply: 'From here and here and here, to us and with them and them'. The problem of relativism only makes sense if there is an alternative pure or absolute position free of the requirement to map the locations we are unavoidably thrown into (always together). Relativism is only interesting as a problem because it reminds us of the requirement to be attentive to the affirmative theses of location and praxis.

Thesis 3: There is only *one continuous world* where all lives are within one another. Every life in this world is driven to thrive by affirming its interrelations

The thesis of location could be misunderstood as a thesis about fragmentation and isolation, in the strong senses of independent monads, or warring and introverted islands. This would be to miss a fundamental constant in Braidotti's work around the concept of immanence. When we map a location from the past, through the present and into the future we can never delineate final boundaries for our diagram (as we can for a simple map). Why is this? It is because anything beyond those fixed boundaries — including nothingness — plays an active part in the inside. We could think of it as a slogan for the philosophy of immanence: 'Everything and everybody are inside.' Now, this is a much harder thought than you might think, since it means that we cannot draw strength from the repudiating 'not us' and 'nothing to do with us' gestures — our instincts to despise others and think ourselves pure. It explains the importance of the ethical in Braidotti's work and the energy she and her teachers draw from Spinoza. Two pairs of concepts allow this to be understood. We must work to let ourselves express the truth that *life is joy first and sadness only second*. The sad passions of repudiation are self-destructive because we are always related to what we reject, in the strong sense of a shared genealogy. Joy is to connect and in collective creation (I want to say to grow together, but I mustn't for strategic reasons linked to Capital). We must also be subtle and knowing about power. *Affirmation is through collective life force (power as potentia) whereas the sad passions work through might (power as potestas)*. A good example of the distinctions at work here can be found in the difference between the destructive use of a position of strength (when the 'rich' destroy the 'poor' they still need to exploit) and the discovery of new life affirming energies by connecting with others (when our differences are joined into new forms that increase our creative power — the burgeoning of artists' colonies and new ways of thinking trans-border left-wing politics are good current examples of this)

Burnt once by metaphysics and twice by cynicism. I'd prefer this to be a speculative rather than materialist thesis, because of the epistemological and metaphysical commitments we have to make in following Spinoza's distinctions and philosophy of immanence. It is not the accusation of dogmatism I fear, but rather that an explicit materialism can become another transcendence, whereas a more explicit speculative tone allows greater space of creativity and openness to the new (to a counter-matter, as it were). That's not to embrace the current vogue for speculative materialism, but rather to add a speculative moment to materialism embedded in philosophy and science. Second, a cynic or a student of Machiavelli might worry about abandoning any thought of potestas too soon — our enemies are strong, fearful, stupid and ruthless. Still the biggest danger is to fall into the trap and extortion (of Capital and Power) of playing to their rules when ours are better.

Thesis 4: Because every life is striving with other lives there will always be the pain of a thwarted life. By collectively affirming our interrelations in new ways, we must strive to keep from falling from pain into negation

There is always a moving moment of attention to pain in Braidotti's thought that is unusual in large areas of contemporary philosophy, which has lost the ear for suffering found in ancient wisdom and Spinozist ethics. Her response to pain is never to fall for the technological and ideological magic of pretending we can live free of suffering, but rather to recognise how pain will always accompany affirmative striving, because our interrelated collectives also pull apart and tear as they thrive but also decay. This is also true for each one of us, as fragile multiplicities. The greatest danger, though, is to be pushed by pain into negation: turning inwards or lashing outwards. If we do that we forget that pain is secondary to thriving and is carried best by affirmation rather than negation.

The ghost of Camus and Cioran: affirmation is one way of carrying suffering, but sometimes, given its scale, inevitability and recurrence, it is tempting to turn back to thinkers of the absurd, such as Camus and Cioran. Instead of a collective ethical engagement, a life lived in the absurd is a way of drawing a kind of creativity and strength from it. There, perhaps the danger is closeness to negativity and to the cynical individual. Instead, Braidotti's affirmation is about fortitude and resilience, rather than the difficult leap with the absurd.

Thesis 5: 'Ethical' applies to the *rhythmic variation of increases and decreases of potential thriving across connections, rather than to the limited outcomes of individual acts or the intentions of individual subjects*

Common sense draws us to thinking about the ethical in terms of the acts of individuals: a good person doing good or evil. Braidotti's affirmative philosophy is ethical in an altogether difference sense. We should not be surprised by this, since neither the individual nor the individual act is significant in her ontologies. Individuals give way to collectives and, ethically, acts give way to rhythmic variation of increases and decreases of potential thriving. This does not mean we should discard the idea of a collective act as creation but rather that we should not judge the act through limited and pre-set outcomes. A collective creation is ethical by participating in an upswing of potential thriving, itself sensed and considered within a complex rhythmic variation. This ethical sensation and reflection is therefore always tentative, provisional and open to reassessment.

Beware the market: A worry about this rhythm of increases and decreases is that it might fall back into the clutches of market-based liberalism. I can even imagine some post-Randian fans of market-based capitalism claiming themselves as the rightful custodians of measures and means to thriving. To keep them at bay, send neoliberals back to theses one and two.

Thesis 6: Affirmative relational praxis is about the ethical creations of subjects, but subjects must be *extended (embodied, embedded, enacted) beyond the human into the non-human, post-human and inhuman*

So who creates, if not individuals? Subjects create. But subjects are not individuals; they are extensions into multiple collectives. These will be technological, animal and natural extensions around anthropological locations that draw each other into new ethical affirmations. Here Braidotti's post-humanism meets the 4Es of recent philosophy of mind, where mind is extended, embodied, embedded and enacted.

Genealogy of the 4Es: What would Foucault make of these extensions? I worry that they have reductively technological and engineering, solution-based, roots. They still carry crude ideas of the mind into their extensions, but at the same time they also risk overly positive views of the nature of extension, without the pain, rhythmic variations and surprising openness to outside afforded by the idea of affirmation. Extension might betray the other theses.

Thesis 7: Affirmation always starts *together* in autopoiesis and we cannot affirm if we create from negation or let our maps be drawn by it

We do not rest on the seventh; this is not a religion. We reaffirm the joy of eternal return...

James Williams, Edinburgh, December 2015