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Project Proposal Research Traineeship

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Project Title: Free Speech Reconsidered: *Parrèsia* and the Changing Dutch Public Sphere, an interdisciplinary study

Coordinators

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Project Summary

In May 2016, more than 71.000 Dutch citizens agreed to excommunicate Dutch TV personality Sylvana Simons, after she had intimated that The Netherlands are racist and that our country needs processes of ‘de-colonization’ in order to become truly democratic.¹ In the same week, Emeritus Professor of Gender and Ethnicity Studies at Utrecht University Gloria Wekker, an expert on racism, published her book *White Innocence*, which corroborates Simons’ claim, after which member of the city-council of Amsterdam for the liberal party VVD Deniz Yesilgöz and writer Arnon Grunberg blamed her for ‘victimization’.

These were not attempts to start a constructive dialogue about Dutch identity or the inclusiveness of our society, but attempts to silence two Dutch citizens and punish them for criticizing existing power relations. Simons’ and Wekker’s message is, obviously, not a nice one. But the public reactions of ‘excommunicating’ and ‘silencing’ show that the question of the nature, limits and conditions of free speech are in urgent need of reconsideration due to the transformation of the public sphere under the influence of media and new technologies.

This research project seeks to do just that: it re-thinks the nature, limits and normative conditions of free speech in the context of the changing public sphere, by way of

1. Making a discourse and media analysis of the Sylvana Simons and Gloria Wekker cases from a post-colonial and intersectionalist perspective (R1, R2, RT1, RT2);

¹ A Facebook page was set up for Dutch TV-personality Sylvana Simons to announce the event ‘Wave Sylvana Goodbye’ (‘Uitzwaaidag voor Sylvana Simons’) in response to Simons’ joining of the political party DENK and her earlier expression that the figure of Black Pete is racist. By the closing of the FB page a few weeks later, 71.000 people had liked the page to confirm they would join the event of putting Simons on a plane ‘back’ to Surinam.

2. Making a critical analysis of the ontological, epistemological, and socio-political dimensions of Foucault's theory of free speech ('*parrèsia*,' R1 and RT1);
3. Confronting Foucauldian views with Kantian, Habermasian and post-structuralist reflections on the relation between truth, free speech and democracy; and apply these to the cases of Simons and Wekker (R1, R2, RT1, RT2);²
4. Making an in-depth (rhetorical) analysis of the online public responses on Simons' and Wekker's claims, and discuss these in the context of theories on the online public sphere and the functioning of experts and public intellectuals herein (R2, RT2).³

In so doing, this research distills the new rules and norms for the use of free speech in a public debate conducted on social media; it brings to light ethnic/ racial/class fault lines in Dutch society surfacing on social media; and develops a new theory regarding the crucial role of public criticism for a vital, pluralist society and democratic freedom and equality. This will help Dutch public debate move forward and develop new policies targeted at emancipation of (ethnic/ cultural/ economic minorities) in Dutch society.

Its CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS are:

1. How does the Dutch public sphere transform under the influence of debates conducted on television and social media?
2. Which challenges does this pose in regards of the limits, conditions and norms of free speech and democracy?

ITS SUB RESEARCH QUESTIONS are:

3. What is the relation between free speech, resistance and democracy?
4. How can democracy be established when decisions about what the truth is are not unambiguous?⁴

² It considers '*parrèsia*' as a practice of freedom and resistance, which contributes to processes of democratization by uprooting traditional social and political powers; The nature of democracy is understood as 'in crisis' and/ or 'critical', i.e., 1. In crisis; 2. Existent in criticism. To argue for this, this research problematizes and illuminates the epistemological, existential and humanitarian aspects of democracy 'in crisis'/ 'critical democracy'.

³ Cf. Baert & Booth 2012.

⁴ Cf. *Parrèsia* as belief in truth, not as evidence.

5. Can minorities experience freedom without resistance? ITS AIM is to gain insight into the transforming nature of the Dutch public sphere under the influence of new technologies.

ITS OBJECTIVES are:

1. Gain insight into Foucault's, Kant's and Habermas' views on the nature, limits and conditions of free speech and its importance for democracy by way of a literary study using hermeneutical and philosophical analysis by nine months;
2. Gather data and make a media-analysis by way of textual analysis of the Simons' and Wekker cases (focused on conventional and social media output, May-June-July 2016) by six months;
3. Apply theoretical insights to analyze the Dutch case; establish norms and rules for the use of free speech in a democratic society; formulate advices for emancipation and democratization policies by the end of the project.

KEYWORDS

Free Speech/ Parrèsia; Public Sphere; Social Media; Democracy

METHODS OF INQUIRY

1. Philosophical analysis (Kant, Habermas, Foucault and others)
2. Media analysis (case studies Simons and Wekker)
3. Discourse analysis

APPROACHES

1. Critical Theory;
2. Post-Colonialism;
3. Intersectionalism

Under the supervision of R1 and R2, RT1 and RT2 will

1. Learn how to make in-depth philosophical, media, and discourse analyses;
2. Acquire in-depth knowledge of current theories and approaches dominant in the Humanities (philosophy and cultural studies);
3. Learn how to apply these theories to develop innovative analyses, perspectives and ideas;
4. Learn how to convey these new ideas in popular and scientific articles.

OUTPUT

1. Two scientific co-authored articles (R1, R2 and RT1; R1, R2 and RT2);
2. One popular article (R1, R2, RT1, RT2);
3. Monthly seminars for students with (inter-)national guest speakers (organized by R1, R2, RT1, RT2);
4. One-day debating event 'Day of Truth-Speaking' for TSH students (organized by RT1 and RT2)

PROJECT TIME LINE

Month 1-6: Media-analysis

Month 1-9: Philosophical analysis

Month 10-12: Formulate research results and policy advices

Month 1-12: Organize monthly seminars for students with international and national guest speakers

Month 8-12: Write scientific articles and submit it to appropriate journals

Month 10: Write popular article and publish it in appropriate newspaper/ magazine

RESEARCH TRAINEE PROFILE

BA 3 Student DFI/ DCU. Selection by interview with the project leaders.

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