

# 'Naturalization', 'Denaturalization': What Is Meant by these Terms?

## Starting out from the Notion of a Constitutive Outside

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*Abstract:* In this article, I argue that it is important to understand naturalization in a broader, more formal sense than that of specific essentializing concepts, such as biologicistic notions of gender or 'race'. We are complicit in naturalizing *discourses per se* whenever we treat a given set of concepts as self-evident or devoid of alternatives – as something other than a discourse in the Foucauldian sense of being historically contingent and open to change. The notion that there is no discourse devoid of a constitutive outside or exclusion is helpful in drawing our attention, both to the exclusions we ourselves promote, and to the limits of our capacity to recognize this. Due to the latter, naturalization can occur as readily in queer-feminist, anti-racist and other progressively oriented research as in hegemonic discourse. I exemplify this by focusing on the theorization of happiness offered by Sara Ahmed – herself an important writer on naturalization.

*Keywords:* Biologism, Deconstruction, Discourse, Essentialism, Emotion

„Naturalisierung“, „Denaturalisierung“: Was meinen diese Begriffe? Vom Konzept eines konstitutiven Außen ausgehen

*Zusammenfassung:* In diesem Artikel spreche ich mich dafür aus, Naturalisierung umfassender und in einem formaleren Sinn zu verstehen als in dem bestimmter essentialisierender Konzepte, wie z.B. biologistischer Auffassungen von Geschlecht oder *race*. Wann immer wir Konzepte als selbstverständlich oder alternativlos behandeln, naturalisieren wir *Diskurse als solche*, behandeln sie also als etwas anderes denn als Diskurse in einem foucaultschen Sinn – d.h. als kontingent und veränderlich. Die Annahme, dass es keinen Diskurs ohne konstitutives Außen, ohne konstitutive Ausschlüsse gibt, hilft, die Aufmerksamkeit auf die je selbst praktizierten Ausschlüsse zu lenken, zugleich aber auch auf die Grenzen der Möglichkeit, diese zu erkennen. Aufgrund dieser Grenzen kann Naturalisierung ebenso leicht in queerfeministischer, antirassistischer und anderer progressiv orientierter Forschung erfolgen wie in hegemonialen Diskursen. Dies zeige ich exemplarisch am Beispiel der Theoretisierung von *happiness* durch Sara Ahmed, die selbst eine wichtige Autorin zum Thema Naturalisierung ist.

*Schlagwörter:* Biologismus, Dekonstruktion, Diskurs, Essentialismus, Gefühl

## 1 Introduction

What is meant by non-essentializing/non-naturalizing research, as invoked in the Call for Papers for this issue – or by denaturalization? And to what extent can scholarship be entirely non-naturalizing? In this article, I put forward the thesis that it is important to understand naturalization in a broader, more formal sense than that of specific essentializing concepts, such as biologicistic notions of gender or ‘race’. We are complicit in naturalizing *discourses per se*, whenever we treat a given set of concepts as self-evident or devoid of alternatives – as something other than a discourse in the Foucauldian sense of being historically contingent and open to change. Such moves can occur as readily in queer-feminist, anti-racist and other progressively oriented approaches as in hegemonic discourse (scholarly or otherwise). Indeed, this is probably the prime way in which specific discursive frames are depoliticized, in that they are rendered as indisputable. This is why it is politically important to scrutinize our own discourses in particular (as discourses with a critical intention) for *their* constitutive outside: for what they foreclose, render invisible, or treat as unintelligible, if only inadvertently. The notion that there is no discourse devoid of a constitutive outside or exclusion (Butler 1993: 22, 3) is helpful in drawing our attention, both to the exclusions we ourselves promote, and to the limits of our capacity to recognize this. As Michel Foucault wrote, “it is not possible for us to describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak” (1972: 130) – the archive being “the law of what can be said” at a given spatio-temporal conjuncture (ibid.: 129), as he puts it in rather structuralist coinage. As I will argue, drawing on certain texts by Judith Butler as well as Sara Ahmed, to assume that there can be wholly non-essentializing/non-naturalizing research would risk being oblivious to these limits to self-transparency, and hence, to the limits placed upon the possibility of denaturalization. The terms (*non-*)essentializing and (*non-*)naturalizing are used synonymously throughout this article.

## 2 Against naturalization, not ‘nature’

In its most narrow meaning, naturalization might be taken to refer to biologically reductionist notions of sex, race, or other social categories which situate these – and situate ‘the biological’ – beyond the social. Even ‘nature’ could be subject to naturalization, then, in the sense that it could be reduced to physical features inscribed as being beyond any entanglements with discursive, historical, social dynamics; conversely, Donna Haraway, for example, understands nature as itself historical and social, and as intertwined with *human* history and sociality (2008). But many in the social sciences would not limit ‘naturalization’ to biologicistic ideas. For instance, cultural essentialism has been critiqued since at least the 1980s – e.g. in the context of cultural or ‘new’ racism (Barker 1981). Often, essentialism in the construction of ‘culture’ or ‘nation’ has been associated with binary notions of difference that are not necessarily biologicistic. Kien Nghi Ha, for instance, has analyzed uncritical notions of cultural hybridity as follows: