

The South: from geography to epistemology

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The European Enlightenment, casting its light over the world and rendering it transparent to its reason and will, has historically been imbricated in the planetary pretensions of European colonialism. Both took the world as their object. While the product of a precise geo-cultural location in time and space, their intellectual, political and economical forces have persistently insisted on their universal valency. This, we might suggest, proposes a struggle between geography and epistemology, between a location and knowledge. It is something that Antonio Gramsci and Edward Said, both powerful voices from the subaltern peripheries of the European world, deeply understood. It forms the backbone of their respective critiques of hegemony and orientalism, of the world made over in subordinate and exploited historical formations to be rendered a subjugated south on the intellectual and political maps of modernity. Both thoroughly understood that the very subjectivity of Europe, surveying the world flat as a map, rendered all else objects to be classified and categorised. Amongst the latter were other human beings, histories and cultures, subjected to a hierarchisation that excluded their participation. Put extremely simply, we could say that the West was the site of epistemological hegemony and that undoing its premises takes us into a very different space. This is to propose another geography, a diverse mapping of modernity, a different worlding of its premises and practices; it is to confront and contest the logic that accompanies the idea that modernity and its system of knowledge radiates outwards from a European centre towards the rest of the planet.

The brutal physicality of this geographical understanding of human development underwrites a teleological understanding of time where history is reduced to a chronological linearity secured in the geographical expansion of the West over the rest of the globe. We are here immediately cast into asymmetrical relations of power – economical, military, technical, cultural – where the presumed neutrality (and scientificity) of European knowledge established a hierarchy of values that subordinated the world to an Occidental measure. Boaventura de Sousa Santos justly calls this division, distinction and discrimination, “abyssal thinking.” At this point, the political and cultural struggle for the past, for the archives that have produced and formulated the disciplinary protocols and premises of the human and social sciences, clearly

becomes central to the vital struggle for the historical present and future. This is to register an ethical insistence disseminated in the refusal to let the past pass away and die. It is to break-up and redistribute the cultural energies locked in a historicist framing of time whose implacable linearity only confirms European subjectivity and superiority.

So, what happens when the subordinated regions of the world, reduced to objects of European sovereignty, refuse this mode of mapping? To register such a situation is to recognise the limits of our language. Rather than suggest that we should now seek to extend our understanding in order to appropriate what we previously excluded and negated – a further colonising move that continues to confirm *our* centrality – we need to recognise what exceeds and potentially confutes our inherited understandings and begin an apprenticeship in learning and listening.

Obviously such a south – as the subordinated, repressed and refused rest of the world – is a mobile category that operates along a shifting scale from the south of Italy, the south of Europe, the southern shore of the Mediterranean, to the further souths of the world: each with its singularities but simultaneously entwined in a subordinated commonwealth that is continually re-assembling modernity along other, non-authorised, lines. Such a critical initiative annuls or cancels the historical use of space that until now has maintained a so-called critical distance that guarantees universal perspectives now challenged by locatable principles and practices. The holes in the net that Europe cast to capture the world now acquire all of their potential power and significance. After all, it is the holes that constitute the greater part of the net.

Clearly, we are talking not simply of a mere reaction composed in resentment to Occidental power and hegemony. Rather this is a set of articulated responses that takes multiple forms and highlights the geopolitics of knowledge. Dismantling the understandings of the south we have inherited means confronting the hypocrisy of an Occidental humanism that continually proclaims the universal values of humanity while continuing to massacre men, women and children on every street corner of the globe, to mix the voices of Frantz Fanon and James Baldwin.

All of this implies uncoupling the automatic correlation between knowledge and the West. It means, as today many in Latin America argue, de-colonising this logic and its associated structure of knowledge, of power. It means confronting divisions that have been considered to be embedded in historical, cultural and ontological truths, and confuting the distinction between modernity, its assumed progress and knowledge, and an external world that is presumed to be not yet modern and whose knowledge and practices are particular (that is, indigenous), never universal; sometimes not even necessarily human (that is, barbarous, underdeveloped, bestial). The former has won the natural, rather than the civil, right to colonise the latter. So, international law is obviously the application of the Occidental legal system on a global scale: from its definition of human rights to intellectual property and the juridical appropriation of bio-

diversity in the seemingly abstract language of the ‘legal.’ As Boaventura so rightly puts it: “Global social injustice is, therefore, intimately linked to global cognitive injustice.”

At this point, the idea of the non-modern existing out there no longer holds and the spatial-temporal coordinates of modernity become increasingly flexible and unstable. The cultural and historical translation (that always reveals the asymmetrical relations of power and their particular establishment of borders), the transformation of geography into chronology, of the non-European world into underdevelopment, backwardness and the not yet modern, is a temporal and spatial operation that depends upon who draws and defines the map. Who has the power to authorise the knowledge of the world and translate it in his or her language of apprehension? Other definitions and knowledge are subordinated, even excluded, when we try to impose continuity and transparency over discontinuity and the incommensurable.

Yet, we also know that the translation is never complete or final. As Naoki Sakai has insisted, translation is never equivalent to communication: it both polices and politicises language. Translation forces apart the desire for closure and confirmation by registering the not yet translated and indecipherable. Once freed from capture in a uniform logic, translation promotes a transnational space and a pluriform modernity. The continual re-proposing of Kantian cosmopolitanism and its decanting into alternative understandings of the possibilities of ‘Europe’ and its enlightenment tradition is surely over. Not so much because it has been overtaken by more powerful and cohesive players (China), but rather because its own repressed colonial archive has burst apart, spilling in all sorts of ways into the present. A universality, whose historical and cultural energies have been drawn directly from colonialism and the racialising hierarchies it deployed in aggrandising and incorporating the rest of the planet, increasingly snarls up in its own contradictions. The idea that Europe has learnt from that history and can play a more benevolent role in an emergent global assemblage is wishful thinking. It remains blocked in the inability to reassess its colonial constitution and thereby continues to seek to hegemonise the present in precisely the same manner as other global hegemonic forces.

It is precisely, and most profoundly, here that Europe has become a wall, a fortress, against which counter-narratives and histories crash. Only by refusing that border, that wall, and exposing its foundations, can a radically diverse understanding of belonging to Europe emerge. Only in this manner does it become possible to bring into play what institutional Europe and its national partnerships has structurally sought to exclude: a Europe that becomes productively otherwise. If, as Joseph Conrad pointed out, all of Europe went into the making of the colonial project (Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*) then we need now to engage in the undoing of that colonial formation and its fashioning of the present.

Yesterday’s slaves, outcasts and refused bodies have boarded the vessel. They are traversing the gap, fostering the friction, returning the unresolved past to the present. The struggle is no longer taking place elsewhere in the colonial spaces of yesterday, but within the

immediacies of a postcolonial world that is never simply ours to define and direct. We are here in the vicinity of Michel Foucault when, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he referred to the incapacity of historians to accept a general theory of discontinuity. For the latter implies dismantling the European cage or template in which we are held prisoner. The so-called others are not waiting to be emancipated by us, quite simply they want to free themselves of that very logic.

In carrying the abyssal division between the West and the rest over into the heartlands of the Occidental metropolis the return of colonial rule is consistently re-iterated in draconian immigration laws and anti-terrorism legislation: political acts that directly impact on the rights of all citizens, including ourselves. This is accompanied by the undoing of a previous welfare state overseen by the implacable laws of the market: what John Berger not so long ago called “economic fascism.” Here, and to conclude, we come most fully to appreciate Boaventura’s assertion that “political resistance... needs to be premised upon epistemological resistance.” We are now left thinking the unthinkable as knowledges, skills, practices and perspectives not necessarily authorised by the West insist in an emergent planetary ecology. The location of knowledge shifts, slides and suffers, cracking forever the Occidental mirror of self-confirmation.

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