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Special Feature: Theorising the Postcolonial, Decolonising Theory

Edited by Emma Battell Lowman and Lucy Mayblin

Marie-Julie Frainais-Maitre, Haifa S. Alfaisal, Samer Frangie, Brantley Nicholson

Articles

Bataille against Heidegger: Language and the Escape from the World

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Democracy's Era of Relative Decline

Andrew Gibson

Two Tunnelers: Digging Through the Differences in the Chomsky-Foucault Debate

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Simon Mussell

Studies in Social and Political Thought
Centre for Social and Political Thought
School of History, Art History and Philosophy
University of Sussex
Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN

Contact: sspt@sussex.ac.uk

www.sussex.ac.uk/cspt/sspt
www.ssptjournal.wordpress.com

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Introduction from the Editors: Theorising the Postcolonial, Decolonising Theory

by Emma Battell Lowman
and Lucy Mayblin

'Postcolonialism' and 'decolonisation' both speak to moving beyond colonial orders; but how this is accomplished remains contested. Are states controlled by settler colonial peoples, like Canada or Australia, decolonised? Where do they stand in relation to African or Asian states controlled by local populations but subjugated in world politics through internalized colonialism and international intellectual and economic imperialism? This all points to the problem of how we think about colonialism. Historically entangled with colonialism, the Enlightenment tradition emerged in a specific time and place. Indeed, the academic disciplines to be found in much of the 'West' today were born of the age of Empire on a continent home to most of the colonial powers of the day. While other philosophies are parochialised in the academy, always to be set within the context from which they emerged, the European is apparently left untainted by culture or history. This privileging of European-derived epistemologies also has its roots in colonial domination, with the latter having asserted a particular and totalizing logic over the past 500 years, insisting that European knowledge is superior to other knowledges. European knowledge represents rationality, science, and reason, while other ways of knowing are constructed as traditional, irrational, spiritual, and contextual. Yet the Western academy, historically home to apologetics for empire and influenced heavily by Enlightenment ideals of progress, has seen over the past thirty years both the assertion of postcolonial voices and the emergence of a postcolonial politics of decolonisation. The knowledges and voices of colonised people, now relevant in the academy and accessible globally, have revealed trenchant insights and productive critiques that have called into question many popular assumptions about culture, power, society and modernity.

The opening up of social and political thought to questions of parochialism and, consequently, entanglement with colonialism has several implications. First, it presents us with a world of theory which is not necessarily rooted in Western European traditions and which therefore offers helpful and previously ignored insights for better understanding a world beyond European conceptual boundaries. This is a significant challenge, as

Shilliam acknowledges in the case of international relations theory, but it is worth undertaking since “globalization has made it increasingly difficult for Western civilization to masquerade as the geo-cultural retainer of a universal experience of modernity” (2011: 3). Second, it poses a fundamental challenge to some of the core concepts of contemporary social and political thought in the academy: ‘modern’, ‘traditional’, ‘society’, ‘democracy’, and so forth. What happens to the idea of modernity when it is reconceived as co-constituted by colonialism? As Bhabra points out, “the Western experience has been taken both as the basis for the construction of the concept of modernity, and at the same time, that concept is argued to have validity that transcends the Western experience” (2007: 4). Third, it blurs the boundaries of who ‘we’ are talking about when ‘we’ speak of ‘society’, ‘modernity’, ‘Europe’, or ‘the West’. If ‘our’ boundaries have become meaningless, then ‘we’ must fundamentally shift our imaginations as researchers to acknowledge interconnections that have been, and continue to be, obscured. Once acknowledged and recognised, we must accept the responsibility to act on these shifts.

There have been two main strands of thought that in recent years have driven forward the agenda of theorising the postcolonial and decolonising theory. These have collectively provided the inspiration for this special section. The first is postcolonial theory, whose founding scholars are often cited as Said (1978), Bhabha (1994), and Spivak (1999). Postcolonial literature calls for a dramatic change in academic thinking, away from the perception of colonialism as being primarily about states and borders, and towards an analysis of the cultural and epistemic legacies of colonialism. It is perhaps pertinent to note, then, that postcolonialism has taken much longer to break in to the disciplines of political science and international relations than sociology and literature. More recently, Walter Mignolo (2000; 2007; 2009), Anibal Quijano (2000) and others have begun to speak of Decolonial theory as a theoretical school whose origins are not so much a critique of Europe from within as a theory of coloniality/modernity from without. When coloniality and modernity are viewed as two sides of the same coin, any analysis of the present must be seen through the lens of the ‘coloniality of power’. This gives the historical events of colonialism very real contemporary implications.

Within these two broad fields there are, of course, a plethora of different perspectives and theories, as well as many crossovers. Both postcolonial and decolonial thought problematise the universalising claims which have characterised European Western philosophy from the Enlightenment period onwards. In this sense, then, both are political projects that seek to highlight implicit assumed epistemological hierarchies. Yet,

while postcolonialism has emerged from within this framework, decolonial theorists such as Mignolo have sought to theorise 'from the borders' of coloniality, from outside European thought. Furthermore, these are just two strands of thought, and numerous interventions have been made which cannot easily be slotted into either box.

As postcolonialism and decolonisation remain contested, flexible and ambiguous terms, they continue to serve as touchstones for some of the most contentious, difficult and powerful discourses occurring both in the academy and in social politics around the world. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been theorised as a settler colonial conflict; American interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan are discussed as enactments of neo-colonial imperialism; indigenous Indians assert their identity against the Indian state, as do indigenous Bantu people in southern Africa; these conflicts are revealed as layered, complex and hybrid in part through postcolonial and decolonising discourses. This underscores the necessity of pushing these discourses ever further: imperialism and colonialism remain active forces in societies and political orders around the world, and as such postcolonial insights and decolonising action must remain similarly dynamic. This is the impetus behind this special section: postcolonial and decolonising analyses are rich and necessary areas of exploration in social and political thought, and warrant our continued attention and engagement.

This conviction has been confirmed by the overwhelming response to the call for papers for this special section of *Studies in Social and Political Thought*. The submissions, received from four continents, were remarkable in the diversity of perspectives, issues, concepts and approaches they represented and the intriguing and novel insights they offered. Indeed, it was a difficult task to choose among such strong and engaging articles, and we would like to express our thanks to all of the authors who put forward their work for consideration. Each of the section's articles represent contributions to the debates and discourses surrounding one of the key challenges facing social and political thought today: namely, how to reconcile core concepts and ideas from canonical authors which, though universal in their claims, are undeniably European in their origins.

In the first of the four articles, Marie-Julie Frainais-Maitre investigates the reception of Chinese philosophy in France. She finds Chinese philosophy is both little known in France and not generally recognised as a valid philosophy. This drives Frainais-Maitre to ask: "does China not think?" European philosophy derived from the Enlightenment predominates, and Chinese contributions are more commonly viewed, and dismissed, as wisdom or spirituality. The author, however, finds Chinese philosophy to be worthy of inclusion in the category 'philosophy' and as such attributes

its exclusion to colonialist, orientalist and eurocentrist perspectives which appear to dominate academia.

Haifa S. Alfaisal engages directly with the marginalisation of indigenous epistemologies by postcolonialism and postcolonial theorists in “Indigenous Epistemology and the Decolonisation of Postcolonialism”. Through investigation of postcolonial theorists who have addressed, even in a limited way, indigenous epistemology, Alfaisal clearly illustrates the dichotomised frameworks that underpin the segregation of indigenous epistemology from postcolonial epistemology. She pushes this enquiry further by considering decolonisation in relation to the challenges posed by indigenous epistemologies. Alfaisal argues persuasively that in order to decolonise postcolonialism the complicity of postcolonialism in the modernity/coloniality complex must be acknowledged and addressed and, further, that a critical, self-reflexive stance must be developed towards the epistemological foundations of postcolonialism.

Following this, in “On the Broken Conversation between Postcolonialism and Intellectuals in the Periphery”, Samer Frangie deals with the reception of postcolonial critique in the periphery. Specifically, Frangie investigates how Arab intellectuals have responded to Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’. He uses the context-driven notion of the ‘problem-space’ to warn against the universalising tendencies of postcolonialism and presents the work of Mahdi ‘Amil and Sadek Jalal al-Azm as demonstrating his case. Ultimately, Frangie is arguing for an excavation of the political from underneath the epistemological critique in postcolonial thought, as a way to renew the broken conversation between the metropole and the periphery.

In the final article, “Decolonizing Cosmopolitanism: Guaman Poma de Ayala’s Early Response to a Singular Aesthetic Economy”, Brantley Nicholson offers a thoughtful and critical consideration of the textual and graphic interventions of Guaman Poma. Nicholson skilfully puts this seventeenth century Andean into conversation with other early philosophers of globalisation and argues that Guaman Poma successfully decolonises postcolonialism through his navigation of aesthetic borders and archival code switching. In so doing, Nicholson makes a strong case for the importance of investigating aesthetic diversity as a critical part of the power dynamics of Empire. His engagement with the historical and contemporary implications of Guaman Poma’s interventions perform the dual purpose of grounding his theoretically nuanced argument and assuring the important place of these works in postcolonial thought and theory.

These four articles from early career researchers offer valuable insights into the new generation of decolonising and postcolonial scholarship. The authors have been robust in their criticism of the field while maintaining

their faith in the underlying motives of the project. We would like to thank Frainais-Maitre, Alfaisal, Frangie and Nicholson for their dedication and engagement throughout the process, and particularly for their hard work in meeting tight publication deadlines. We would also like to thank all the reviewers who so generously shared their time and expertise. Their critical engagement helped enormously to strengthen both the quality and impact of the articles in this special section. Finally, the editors would like to thank Chris O'Kane and Simon Mussell at *Studies in Social and Political Thought* for their support and for taking on a theme outside of the usual journal content. We are honoured to be a part of what we believe is an important intervention, bringing new voices together in a vigorous and necessary discourse that contributes to the analysis and action that will, we hope, help to transcend colonial barriers and to imagine truly post-colonial futures.

Emma Battell Lowman (e.j.b.lowman@warwick.ac.uk) is a PhD student in the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick, and received her MA in History from the University of Victoria (Canada). Her thesis investigates the application of Indigenous methodologies to missionary histories in British Columbia and is concerned with the ethical and logistical challenges of Indigenous-Settler historical research.

Lucy Mayblin (l.mayblin@warwick.ac.uk) is a PhD student in the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick. Her research focuses on the ways in which Britain's colonial history is implicated in its contemporary asylum regime. She is also research assistant for the ESRC network 'Connected Histories, Connected Sociologies, Rethinking the Global', and co-organiser of a forthcoming conference 'Rethinking the Modern: Colonialism, Empire and Slavery' (July 2011).

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The Coloniality of Western Philosophy: Chinese Philosophy as Viewed in France

by Marie-Julie Frainais-Maitre

Abstract

Chinese philosophy is little known in France and is not generally recognised by twenty-first century French philosophers as a philosophy. They often regard its contributions as wisdom, thought or spirituality. But when we study it in detail, we are clearly faced with a philosophy. Why then is Chinese philosophy isolated from philosophy in France? Is it perhaps only the Western world that has the right and ability to think? Does not China also think? This paper attempts to understand this state of affairs by seeking clues that might explain why the notion that Chinese philosophy is not philosophy remains prevalent in France today. This issue may be understood if we place it in the context of the relationship between the West and the others, and therefore in a colonialist, orientalist and eurocentrist perspective. It is possibly because the world remains caught in a persistent intellectual coloniality and an entrenched eurocentrism of thought, such that the West does not recognise the philosophies of 'others'. The West still occupies the epistemological centre of the world and constitutes a unique reference point of knowledge. Finally, some solutions could be sought in order to decentralise philosophy, by opening up possibilities for the diversification and localisation of knowledge and 'provincializing' the West in philosophy.

Introduction

Chinese philosophy is little known in France and is not officially recognised by twenty-first century French philosophers as a philosophy. A philosophy is here understood to be a critical and rational activity, made possible with the emergence of the *logos* (or 'reason', 'thought', 'discourse' and 'study') in ancient Greece, which aims to discover the truth through questioning, the use of rationality, and the creation of concepts, and which became a discipline developed and institutionalised in the West (Lalande, 1999: 774;

Godin, 2004: 742, 979). French philosophers regard Chinese philosophy less as alternative reasoning and more as wisdom, thought or spirituality. Within France, Chinese philosophy is often called ‘Chinese thought’ (see, for example, Jullien, 1998; Cheng, 1997; Granet, 2002), and only ‘Chinese philosophy’ by a small number of authors (Billeter, 2002; Kaltenmark, 1994). The French philosopher François Jullien employs China as the ‘other’ in order to provoke thought within Western philosophy. He strongly differentiates the Chinese wise man and the Greek philosopher (Jullien, 1998). He argues that “when somebody tells me that ‘Chinese thought is not a philosophy’ I answer that ‘it is true, Chinese thought could develop itself in that sense, but it has not made this choice’” (Jullien, 2004: 91). Alain Badiou praises François Jullien for providing structures to Chinese thought, because when he read Chinese thought without preparation and conceptual work, he dismissed it as ‘small talk’, as did Hegel many years earlier (Badiou, 2007: 140).

However, when studied in detail, Chinese philosophy does deserve to be included in the category ‘philosophy’ – understood to mean an activity of thinking which tries to understand and to explain the world and human existence, and which is common to humankind; a philosophy which is open enough to not exclude anything that might help in this endeavour. This does mean that Chinese philosophy lacks the European imperative of rationality, and that Chinese philosophers deploy forms such as poetry and metaphor which are not intrinsic to European philosophy. However, such differences do not need to be seen as disqualifications. Chinese philosophy contains texts which demonstrate an act of thinking, an attempt to explain the world and humankind as well as reflections on the organisation of society. For instance, *Zhuangzi*, written by the Taoist philosopher of the same name in the 4th century BC, contains reflections on death, the political organisation of society, and happiness. The *Zhuangzi* also shows reflections that could be considered as ‘naturalist’.¹

Why, then, is Chinese philosophy isolated from philosophy in France? Is it perhaps only the Western world that has the right and the ability to think? Does China *not* think? This idea that Chinese philosophy is not a philosophy was first linked to the introduction of Chinese culture and philosophy in France in the 16th century by the Jesuit missionaries. Philosophers of the Enlightenment read and relayed the content of the *Edifying and Curious Letters of some Missioners, of the Society of Jesus, from Foreign Missions* to the next generations of philosophers, and so on from there to later philosophers. But these descriptions are skewed. Jesuits were in contact with just one ‘social class’ of the Chinese population, namely, the Mandarins. They also had to justify their missions to Rome and present China in a positive light. However, at that time, Chinese philosophy was

considered as a philosophy by philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire. But in the 19th century, through the rise of Orientalism and scientific racism, the old admiration for China transformed into contempt, as described by Hegel. Hegel argued that China, representing the beginning of the abstraction and the childhood age of the Spirit, has no philosophy (Hegel, 1964: 16; 1965: 287).

In his book *Orientalism* (1978), the theorist Edward W. Said (1935-2003) describes 'Orientalism' as a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East. Orientalism is depicted as the Western style of dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient as well as the constitutive discourse of the West on the Orient. The Orient is the object of the discourse's message and its authors are the Orientalists. From the 16th century onwards, generations of philosophers had built an imaginary of Chinese philosophy which is still observable in academic discourse today.² The status of Chinese philosophy in France has been studied in the journal *Extrême Orient – Extrême Occident*, with the special issue "Y a-t-il une philosophie Chinoise?" [Is there a Chinese philosophy?]. In this issue, the authors noted that Chinese philosophy is not considered as a philosophy. Most articles try to resolve this problem of the existence of Chinese philosophy, but in general the problem is studied within the Western categories of philosophy, and Chinese philosophy is analysed through a Western lens. This makes the problem appear insoluble (see Cheng, 2005). Jean-Francois Billeter has also tried to explicate Chinese philosophy through translations of original texts which contrast with traditional representations of Chinese philosophy as mysticism. This mysticism maintains the myth of the radical otherness of China (see Billeter, 2002; 2006).

John J. Clarke, scholar of the history of ideas, has also contributed to the study of how the West received 'Oriental' philosophies. He aims to highlight the narrowness of Eurocentric intellectual historiography by evoking key moments of the encounter between the two 'sides' of the world, and by examining the intellectual relations between West and East (see Clarke, 1997). Anne Cheng wondered in her inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, 'Does China think'? Cheng stressed that the main issue has always been to 'think China', but she also asked if China is even allowed to think and think for itself (see Cheng, 2009). Finally, Carine Defoort and Rein Raud discussed this subject in a journal entitled *Philosophy East and West*. Defoort studied the problem of the existence of Chinese philosophy and extracted four possible positions, while Rein Raud reproached Defoort for failing to get to the bottom of the problem, namely, Eurocentrism (see Defoort, 2001; 2006; and Raud, 2006).

This paper aims to understand the contention – 'Chinese philosophy

is not a philosophy' – through a colonialist, orientalist and Eurocentrist reading. Eurocentrism is understood here as a kind of ethnocentrism and as an ideology (conscious or unconscious) to focus on, and take as its lead, European concerns, culture and values, at the expense of those of other cultures.³ As such, a key question is the following: Is it because the world remains in a persistent intellectual coloniality and an entrenched Eurocentrism of thought that the West does not recognise philosophies of the others?

The Centrality of Western Philosophy

The centrality of the West in its perception of knowledge can be studied in order to understand why the West represents other philosophies as 'non-philosophies'. Concepts of 'West' and 'East', or 'Occident' and 'Orient', are cultural, geographic and politically instituted concepts. As Said argued, the ideas of 'Orient' and 'Occident' have "a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence" (2003: 5). Orientalism produces imaginative geographies and the West has constructed itself in comparison to the Orient (Gregory, 2004: 4). Uta Janssens has also argued that the West defined and still defines itself in contrast to the East, "with the result that the two concepts are dependent upon a series of opposing values" (2007: 223). The border between West and East has, thus, been invented and reproduced over time.

The discourse of Orientalism created a series of binary oppositions and pairs, and Occident and Orient are an important example of this. In this construction and representation of the world, the West seems to represent the strong and superior centre of the world with the rest serving as its peripheries. This idea of the West as a centre can be found in the field of history as argued by Naoki Sakai, specialist of Japanese intellectual history. For him, "history seemed to be an eternal process of unification and centralization with Europe at the centre. Hence, we designed the history simply as a process of Europeanization" (Sakai, 2001: 91). This phenomenon of the appropriation of the world by the West has its origin in the expansion of European religion developed by the Jesuits and exported through colonisation. This expansion can be observed today in the phenomenon of globalisation. Globalisation is the global extension of cultural, political and economic exchanges. This phenomenon has primarily been a process of unequal exchange and absolute domination with the Occident/West and the Global North at its centre transferring their culture to the Third World, the South and the Orient/East (Bessis, 2001: 27-28).

According to Sophie Bessis (2001: 7), Western supremacy is not only present in personal feelings, but also appears to structure society through

discourse and intellectual spheres. These assertions can be understood through the idea that Orientalism is a discourse constructed through stereotypes, images and representations. The West interprets, depicts and speaks *for* the Orient. In this sense, the West produces a categorised discourse (Said, 2003: 129; 56). Said, through the works of Michel Foucault (1966; 1975), has identified Orientalism as a discourse that helps to understand the Western systematic discipline that allowed Western culture to manage and to produce the Orient (Said, 2003: 3). This context can help us understand why, generally speaking, Western philosophy is considered as the only philosophy, *'the'* philosophy among French academics. The other philosophies do not matter because they are folk wisdom, confined to orbiting around the centre as peripheries, neglected and inferior, never able to reach the privileged higher status of Western philosophy. Thus, philosophy is the property of the West. This situation is fixed by an imagined origin which 'took root' in Ancient Greece, and then in Europe more widely. This ability to think and philosophise is denied to others. Western philosophy is seen as the matrix of thought, and every thought which diverges from it is not acceptable because it jeopardises the West's central and dominant position.

It seems that behind this question of the ability of the others to think, there are remnants of a colonialist thought and a persistent Orientalism. This is the case for the questioning of the existence of Chinese philosophy by Western philosophers, questioning which is linked to entrenched forms of intellectual colonialism. It might appear that with decolonisation in the second half of the 20th century these notions of colonial influence and domination by the West on the world have disappeared. But this is not the case. For sociologist Anibal Quijano, the most powerful myth of the 21st century consists in the idea that "the elimination of the colonial administrations is equal to the decolonization of the world" (Grosfoguel, 2006: 60-61). Indeed, the 'post' of 'postcolonialism' indicates that "coloniality continues under new forms; and post-Occidentalism indicates that Occidentalism continues to be reproduced under new forms" (Mignolo, 2000: 30).

According to Quijano, the concept of 'coloniality of power' is "a system constituted by multiple and heterogeneous forms of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial hierarchies and systems of global domination and exploitation" (Quijano, 1993; 2000; in Grosfoguel, 2006: 57). From this perspective, coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin. Coloniality is the "continuity of the domination and of the forms of exploitation which follow the disappearance of colonial administrations produced by hegemonic structures and cultures of the capitalist/patriarchal modern/colonial world-system" (Grosfoguel, 2006: 61).

It seems that coloniality is beyond colonialism and constitutes a set of values which structures an ideology born with the modern/colonial world in the 16th century (with the encounter of America by Christopher Columbus and other explorers). This is a principle and a control strategy which goes beyond simple economic exploitation. Coloniality institutes Eurocentrism which becomes a source of religious, ethnic and (especially) epistemic discriminations. It implies the coloniser's behaviour as well as the comportment of the colonised.

Coloniality is therefore not only economic but also intellectual. According to the geographer Philippe Pelletier, Western expansion has not only been "economic and political but also cultural and intellectual" (2006: 85-86). The foundations of knowledge were found (and are still found) in Western civilisation and in its multiple and complex possibilities, as long as the conceptualisation (of the right and of the left) remains within the framework of language and modernity (Fals-Borda, 1971; in Mignolo, 2001: 59-60) As Mignolo explains:

From the 16th to the 21th centuries, the colonial difference has been the mechanism which has undervalued the non-western knowledge. The double epistemic conscience of the 'how to be an African philosopher' (Eze) or 'an Indian historian' (Chakrabarty) is still relevant today. The monotypic episteme of modernity is facing the pluritopic episteme of coloniality [. . .] This is an episteme of borders, of the edge of the thought, announced from the perspective of the coloniality (2001: 57)

Intellectual coloniality is illustrated by, for instance, the export of Western concepts and disciplines to Asia at the end of the 19th century. This knowledge is exported via the expansion of the epistemic and philosophical Western concepts as much as by the classification of the social sciences and humanities. This global expansion of "the social sciences implies that intellectual coloniality remains in place, even if this colonization is caused by good intentions, made by people of the left and supports decolonization" (Mignolo, 2001: 60).

China and the Academic Disciplines in France

The humanities, which are built using Western categories, organise the relationship between the world and knowledge through an interplay of subjective techniques and practices. Naoki Sakai and Osamu Nishitani have described a classification which organises the world of knowledge and humanities. This is the distinction between *humanitas*, as subject of knowledge, and *anthropos*, as object of knowledge (Solomon and Habib, 2005:

94).⁴ In light of this, China has been represented by the West as a concept or an object of study. Chinese philosophy in France suffers from its construction as an object of study, rendering it always inferior to French philosophical offerings. Chinese philosophy is used as an argument, a case that the Western philosopher uses in order to improve his or her system.⁵

Chinese philosophy is also used by some French philosophers in helping to understand silences in Western thought.⁶ In the preface to the French edition of Said's *Orientalism*, Tzvetan Todorov wrote that domination could be expressed by this concept. If you say to somebody "I have the truth about you" it is informing the nature of my knowledge but it is also a relationship in which 'I' dominate and the other is dominated" (Said, 2003: 8). In his relation with China, the Western philosopher is in a position of domination because he 'has the truth' about the other because he judges and gives (or denies) the 'philosophy' label. This use of categories in order to distinguish between 'philosophy' and 'Chinese philosophy' illustrates an argument employed by the sociologist Christine Delphy. According to her, to classify is to hierarchise. The power of language and of the discourse is to name something or someone, and then create a reality, a group, and in particular to distinguish 'us' and the 'others' (see Sharp, 2009: 18).

Classification of the philosophies hierarchises them because these two operations are linked and function simultaneously (Delphy, 2008: 40). This notion of domination can be characterised by discourse because the master is the one who is speaking, he speaks for the other and of the other. Language participates in the West's intellectual hegemonic construction of 'others'. Orientalism has been described as knowledge on the Orient but also as power. As Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish*, power implies knowledge and both are constituted together: "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault, 1975: 27). Foucault thought that language is a function of power. Thus, power circulates in the context of representation. There is a connection between differences, power and representations. It is an exercise of the symbolic power through representational practices. The stereotypes created by language are a key point in symbolic violence. Power is not only to constrain but it is also to produce (Hall, 1997: 261). In the case of Chinese philosophy, this power allows for the production of new objects of knowledge (such as the Orient), and new forms of knowledge (such as Orientalism).

The other key point which could help to explain why Chinese philosophy is not seen as a philosophy in France is the universalisation of Western knowledge. One of the central claims of Western philosophy is its universalist vocation, a pretention to the universal which is the characteristic of Europe, according to Jürgen Habermas (2008). As Kenta Ohji and

Mickhael Xifaras underline, the German philosopher has argued, without any contradiction and without using the metaphysical conception of the universal, that pretention to the universal is a characteristic of the West and the criterion of valid norms for everywhere and any time (Ohji and Xifaras, 1999: 42).

Universalism is also the mask of ethnocentrism. In this vein, Todorov has argued that the universal hid the will of European ethnocentrism or Eurocentrism (1989: 510). In that sense, it is not possible to recognise an origin for philosophy other than Greece, nor a philosophy (Chinese philosophy, for example) other than Western philosophy. Enrique Dussel proposes that the origin of this universalist belief can be found in Descartes who initiated the 'ego-politic' of knowledge. Descartes placed European man at the level of God inasmuch as he thought the foundation of knowledge was the 'first and indubitable principle'. Dussel argues that *ego cogito* was preceded by *ego conquistus*, 'I conquer therefore I am' (1977; in Grosfoguel, 2006: 53). Europe has created 'the universal' but has limited its areas of application. This is a process of exclusion. Nowadays, the creators of this notion of the universal have not renounced their right to apply it. They continue to classify what is inside and outside the universal.

The consequence of the universalisation of knowledge is that thoughts are not situated. Thus, the West assumes the paternity of thoughts. Walter Mignolo quotes Enrique Dussel who speaks about the lack of situated thought, which for him shows "the vagueness of the European modern capitalist universal" (Mignolo, 2001: 60). The concealment of the localisation of the subject's enunciation implies a hierarchy of knowledge. After appropriating the origin of bright ideas for knowledge, Europe was able to claim intellectual authority and establish the 'others' as inferior. This situation has logically permitted its domination over the others, and the possibility to colonise them in order to 'educate' and give them superior knowledge; the latter of which may arise from the others themselves. As a consequence, this lack of localisation of the subject feeds the universalist myth. Indeed, by not declaring who is at the origin of an idea or discovery, the West appropriates this idea and at the same time erases the origin of the idea or discovery. This is what happened historically in printing technology. Gutenberg in Germany is said to be the inventor of printing because in 1440 he had the idea to use movable lead characters to print. But according to Joseph Needham and Etienne, this technique was already used for centuries in China.⁷

By the erasure of the localisation of the subject in the power and epistemic relationship, Western philosophy and science managed to produce a universalist myth which covers, or rather

hides the epistemic localisation in power relationships from which the subject speaks (Grosfoguel, 2006: 53)

Thus, the West takes on the 'good role' by colonising the others in order to provide them with science and civilisation, and this constitutes a reason to extend its intellectual and spatial territory. The West believes in its civilising mission as well as in its economic interests. In the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, all the European political movements argued that humanity was led by an order, a scale, and that the top of this hierarchy was occupied by the West. Sophie Bessis conceives of this idea as the "serious mission of civilizing that the white man undertakes, and which then can be used as an excuse for all its enterprises" (2001: 43).

Clues for a Decentralisation and a Decolonisation of Western Philosophy

Solutions proposed by post-colonial theories can help to de-centralise and de-colonise French philosophy. First, it is possible to counteract the idea that the West is the only one to hold knowledge and so has the power to dominate the others. A solution could be to practise a relativism regarding cultures and knowledge in the world. The categories of the Western disciplines are founded upon Western criteria which have been instituted by specific definitions. Many French philosophers refuse China and others the ability to philosophise, because recognising these 'other' philosophies might decentre Western philosophy. According to Mignolo,

It is crucial [. . .] to rethink the articulations in the production and distribution of knowledge, and the role of the Humanities, the Social Sciences and the Natural Sciences in the corporate university under which we are living and working. [. . .] [I]t implies going beyond national literatures and looking at the larger picture in the structure of colonial power, language and the interstate system (2000: 14)

The second solution could be to invert the process of comparison between the centre and the periphery which feeds intellectual coloniality and Orientalism. This comparison could be illustrated by the grammatical construction 'they are like us', where the word 'they' means the 'others', and the word 'us' means the West. It could therefore be a solution to practice a post-colonial language as Naoki Sakai has argued. According to Sakai, this declaration – 'they are like us' – refers to the "conviction of the annihilation of the other", which in its "otherness, is probably the mission of the monist history" (2001: 93). The alternative could be the expression, 'we are like

them', but in this expression the centrality of the West is no longer ensured.

A third solution for restoring the wholes shattered by the universalist discourse of Western philosophy could be to take into account the geopolitics of knowledge. A way to practice this idea would be to highlight the spatiality of epistemology and to thoroughly historicise it. That is to say, one has to seek where and when an idea has been thought. This exercise will consequently de-centralise Western thought. It will highlight several epistemological foci worldwide, with none appearing superior to any other. According to Mignolo, "epistemology is not a-historic. It is not anymore a linear history which goes from Greece to the production of Western contemporary knowledge. Epistemology must be spatialised, historicised by playing the colonial difference" (2001: 61). Thus, a solution could be to put the West in perspective and not to place it in the centre but as a region among others.

Such ideas echo Dipesh Chakrabarty's proposal to provincialise Europe, particularly in the field of history (see Chakrabarty, 2000). This solution would be to think of every culture, every civilisation, as a result of exchanges between, and contacts and bonds with, others. Whether such a universalist humanism can be counterbalanced by respect for epistemological diversity remains to be seen.

Conclusion

These 'clues' have helped us to better understand these issues by considering to what extent China 'thinks', or if it is only the Western world that has the right and the ability to think. The issue of the existence of other philosophies, such as Chinese philosophy, may be explained with a colonialist, orientalist and Eurocentrist perspective. The main reason being that philosophy, understood as Western philosophy, is centralised because the West is seen as the centre of world knowledge. Western philosophy is marked by Eurocentrism and by coloniality of thought. Western philosophy considers itself as dominant, and this idea gives it the asserted right to colonise and civilise others. The 'others' think of themselves in comparison to the West, and the hierarchy of knowledge implies that Chinese philosophy is seen as a peripheral and unable to reach the centre represented by Western philosophy. The universalism of Western philosophy is reinforced by centralism and intellectual coloniality, as well as the lack of temporal and spatial situation of the thoughts in the world. The relativism of cultures and knowledge, as well as the specialisation and historicisation of knowledge, could help to decentre Western philosophy. A modification of the way to construct comparisons between forms of knowledge could also help to break the schema of 'centre and peripheries' that is so often identified. These clues

could help French scholars to correct their “cultural myopia” (Clarke, 1997: 114) and allow for the practice of a new way of thinking about the world and the many philosophies within it.

Marie-Julie Frainais-Maitre (mjmaitre@cityu.edu.hk) is Research Fellow in the Department of Asian and International Studies and in the Hong Kong Advanced Institute for Cross-Disciplinary Studies of City University of Hong Kong. Her research interests are Western and Chinese philosophy, Taoism and decolonial thinking.

Endnotes

¹ See Zhuangzi (1980: 254).

² The concept of *'imaginaire'* or 'imaginary' is borrowed from Cornélius Castoriadis and means 'invention' (see Castoriadis, 1975).

³ On these notions of ethnocentrism and eurocentrism, see Todorov (1989).

⁴ See Sakai and Nishitani (1999).

⁵ For instance, Montesquieu in the 18th century used China to improve his political system (see Montesquieu, 1951).

⁶ François Jullien, a French philosopher, uses Chinese philosophy in order to understand the 'unthought-of' in Western thought (see Jullien and Marchaisse, 2000: 189).

⁷ See Needham (1954) and Etiemble (1988).

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Indigenous Epistemology and the Decolonisation of Postcolonialism

by Haifa S. Alfaisal

Abstract

This paper traces the involvement of postcolonialism in the marginalisation of indigenous epistemologies. It begins by illustrating how postcolonialism maintains a dichotomised conceptual framework that clearly separates indigenous epistemology from postcolonial epistemology. This is followed by an examination of indigenous interventions that have noted the epistemological imperialism of Western ways of knowing and the need to de-link from these. Then the paper examines decolonisation in relation to indigenous epistemologies, which leads to a discussion of Mignolo's modernity/coloniality power complex. This exploration reveals that the dichotomising framework that postcolonialism applies to indigenous epistemologies is symptomatic of a profound shortcoming. This concerns postcolonialism's lack of a critical stance towards its own epistemological foundations, namely, its entanglement with Mignolo's coloniality/modernity power complex. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of the viability of a decolonised postcolonialism.

In "Coloniality of Power and De-colonial Thinking", Walter D. Mignolo insightfully pointed out that, counter-intuitively, postcolonialism is a field of knowledge in need of decolonisation. He stated: "The radical difference between – on the one hand – post-colonial theory and post-coloniality in general and de-colonial projects – on the other hand – lies in the genealogy of thought in which each projects found its energy and its vision" (Mignolo, 2007: 163). Mignolo's point appears to be valid. Postcolonialism cannot engage with indigenous epistemologies unless it also turns a critical gaze towards its own theoretical entanglement with the modernity/coloniality power structure. In short, postcolonialism cannot sustain its ethical purchase unless it decolonises itself. In this article, postcolonialism's encounter with indigenous epistemologies is used as a theoretical yardstick for measuring postcolonialism's ethical purchase. It is prudent, at this juncture, to point out

that the terms *epistemology* and *epistemologies* are used interchangeably to indicate a category that is fundamentally at odds with postcolonialism's epistemology. The plural usage indicates an awareness of the plurality of indigenous epistemologies, and the singular usage is intended to convey the idea that these epistemologies are unified in their appeal to pre-colonial 'ways of knowing', and indigenous 'ways of knowing' that encompass spiritual, economical, environmental and social dimensions.¹ The efficacy of applying indigenous epistemologies to a critique of postcolonialism is further justified by the fact that these are positioned outside the modernity/coloniality complex identified by Mignolo as an integral part of colonial power.² Therefore, this study is by necessity diagnostic but not exhaustive in its approach. The erudite postcolonialist will note the omission of many theorists from the discussion. These omissions are necessary given the focus of this exploration is the consideration of postcolonial theorists who have addressed indigenous epistemology. Likewise, this article will not engage in an extensive review of the considerable work done by indigenous thinkers and critics, except to involve those who have been drawn upon by postcolonial theorists who have explored or commented on the relationship between indigenous epistemologies and postcolonialism.

From 'Nativism' to 'Indigenous Epistemology'

Tracing the genealogy of indigenous epistemology in postcolonialism reveals that the indigenous voice was first addressed as nativism, which can be perceived as a form of cultural essentialism, and then as a more nuanced conceptualisation of indigenous worldviews in "indigenous epistemology".³ This movement towards a better understanding of the issues associated with indigenous peoples' expressions of resistance came about as a result of postcolonialism's growing awareness of the crisis regarding its own ethical purchase and the epistemological challenge that indigenous epistemologies pose.

The postcolonial engagement with indigenous epistemology always occurs within a dichotomising framework. Fanon accurately described the dichotomised condition of native anti-colonial intellectuals as individuals who are caught between "the bourgeois representatives of the mother country" and an anxious impulse to turn to ancient cultures as a source of national culture in an effort to "shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped" (1963: 178, 209).⁴ His centralisation of "national liberation" as the ultimate aim of any recourse to indigenous "ancient" culture confined him to a limited view of nativism that did not take indigenous epistemology into consideration. For Fanon, nativism

remained a possible and competing source of postcolonial identity, a healthier choice for the general “psycho-affective equilibrium”, and an indicator of the failure of colonial assimilation (1963: 210). Fanon never considered nativism as offering a radically different epistemology, which may present an entirely different perspective on liberation that may or may not have anything to do with national constructs. In fact, indigenists⁵ have questioned the nation as an ideal form of a popular, modern, political organisation.⁶ Based on Fanon’s reasoning, postcolonial critics must then ask themselves the following question: How can colonialist assimilation be declared a failure if the conceptual and, indeed, cognitive complex (i.e., Western ratio-centric epistemology) that was highly instrumental in colonisation in the first place still governs all expressions of resistance to assimilation? In other words, if there is no epistemological rupture, can there be liberation? The dichotomy that Fanon noted becomes the *modus operandi* for much of postcolonialism’s consideration of indigenous peoples’ expressions of anti-colonialism. When indigenous peoples’ resistance is subjected to a postcolonialist epistemological gaze, it is dichotomised into two modes: (1) modes of indigenous resistance that are acceptable to this epistemology; and (2) modes that are considered retrograde and archaic because they belong to an indigenous epistemology.

The perceived lack of a role for indigenous epistemology within the theoretical bastion of postcolonialism gains orthodoxy from postcolonialism’s foundational critic, Edward Said. Although Said unequivocally rejected all forms of nativism, he did recognise the absence of “an epistemological critique at the most fundamental level of the connection between the development of a historicism ... and the actual practise of imperialism” (1985: 101). Nonetheless, he rejected the idea of responding to “the tyrannical conjuncture of colonial power with scholarly Orientalism simply by proposing an alliance between nativist sentiment buttressed by some variety of native ideology” (*ibid.*: 103). This antipathy towards nativism extends to one of Said’s, and indeed postcolonialism’s, most ardent foes, Aijaz Ahmad. Ahmad perceptively accused the emerging field of being “postmodernism’s wedge to colonize literatures outside Europe and its North American offshoots” (1992: 276). However, his firm dedication to orthodox Marxism prevented him from seeing beyond postcoloniality as “a matter of class” and beyond the necessity of launching an unending critique of capitalist modernity to counter colonialism (Ahmad, 1996: 289). With his Marxism firmly entrenched in the Western episteme, Ahmad rejected nativism as a form of cultural differentialism, which treats indigenous culture as “self-referential”, “autonomous in its own authority”, and therefore “unavailable for cognition or criticism from a space outside

itself" (1996: 289). He also failed to notice the radical subversive potential posed to postcolonialism by indigenous epistemology.

Benita Parry managed to rescue nativism from outright dismissal by postcolonialism and return it to a more tolerant Fanonian Marxism. However, Parry could not support "the hopeless attempt to locate and revive pristine pre-colonial cultures" (1994: 179). Does this mean that native epistemologies are to be wholly rejected? Parry predicated the acceptance of these epistemologies based on responses to the following: Who is "revisiting the repositories of memory and cultural survivals in the cause of postcolonial refashioning" and why they are doing so (1994: 174)? She therefore accepted recourse to nativism *only* as a source of locating traditions of protest. In other words, Parry accepted modes of indigenous peoples' resistance considered suitable for postcolonialist epistemology, which up to this point were governed by a Marxist episteme that envisioned a materialist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, national liberation movement as an ideal. In fact, Parry's dedication to this materialist epistemology is strikingly apparent in what can only be read as a deliberate overlooking of the challenge of indigenous epistemology. Her lack of consideration of this issue is evident from her decision to limit her exploration of Mudimbe's account of African Gnosis to his comments on Fanon, despite the fact that Mudimbe's signal achievement was that his was the first significant intervention in postcolonialism's neglect of indigenous epistemology (1988).

In fact, Mudimbe's intervention notwithstanding, the mainstream of postcolonial theory continued – and in fact still continues – to have difficulties with regard to its relationship to indigenous epistemology. The difficulty is expressed in postcolonialism's unregistered subjection of all engagements with indigenous epistemology to a dichotomised framework. As postcolonialism began to develop a greater critical awareness of its own ethical purchase *vis-à-vis* the need to account for indigenous knowledge, a change in terminology occurred – that is, the term *indigenous epistemology* replaced the term *nativism* – to signal this newly developed sensitivity. Nonetheless, philosophical, poststructuralist and historicist postcolonialist engagements with indigenous epistemology continued to apply a dichotomising framework without recognising that the Western ratio-centric episteme supporting postcolonialism is, as Mudimbe noted, part and parcel of the "the colonizing structure" (1988: 4).⁷

In his work, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-cultural Encounter* (1996), Dallmayr attempted to locate points of philosophical convergence between different epistemologies and ontologies that would allow a cross-cultural dialogue and promote critical engagement between differing cultures. He used Raimundo Panikkar's "diatopical hermeneutics", which

differs “from monocultural and historicist forms of interpretation” (Dallmayr, 1996: 61). Diatopical hermeneutics relies on “dialogue and processes of reciprocal learning” (ibid.). Dallmayr posited an “ontology of openness”, which “implies at least a certain willingness to transcend established categories in favor of a freer recognition of alien life-forms, thus permitting otherness ‘to be’ in a nonpossessive way” (ibid.: 130). In this way, the Eurocentricity of certain values that are considered universal – such as liberty and equality – is easily recognised. These values are seen as

qualities of individual agents [. . .] of autonomous egos seen as constitutive building blocks of social life; as a corollary, social distinctions or differentiations have to be justified or legitimated against the benchmark of uniformity or equal liberty (ibid.: 131)

The end objective is to counter monolithic universalism with diatopical hermeneutics so as to move towards a “lateral universalism”, which is a “mature stance where universal principles are no longer found beyond concrete differences but in the heart of the local or particular itself, that is, in the distinct topography of the world” (ibid.: 222).

Although Dallmayr did not directly address the topic of indigenous epistemologies, it is safe to assume that they are included in the categories of the local and particular from which lateral universalism can be constructed. His privileging of philosophy as the medium of exploration would appear to marginalise indigenous epistemologies that cannot be adapted to the standards of philosophical speculation and that function according to their own internal logic – their own gnosis, which may denigrate Western ratio-centric reason altogether. The dichotomy is implicit in Dallmayr’s discourse where there is no critical self-reflection on the epistemological foundations of his own discourse and its likely incompatibility with indigenous epistemology. Local and particular epistemologies may – and this is most often the case – be opposed to the ratio-centrism that is the foundation of Dallmayr’s philosophical system. Dallmayr is not at all sensitive to this fact in his proposal for a lateral universalism. This would mean that his lateral universalism, a philosophical construct developed from said ratio-centric foundations, would be used to allow indigenous epistemologies to have their say.

The poststructuralist school of postcolonialism similarly applies a dichotomised framework to indigenous discourse through the concept of the hybrid. This occurs in spite of Robert Young’s intervention, through which postcolonialism began to reflect critically on its own theoretical

underpinnings and the counter-modernity of anti-colonial discourse (2001). For this intervention remained firmly placed within the Western episteme when deconstruction was chosen as the ideal form of postcolonialism. Young considered postcolonialism “a form of cultural and intellectual decolonization” operating within the heart of metropolitan culture (2001: 421). He did not, however, consider whether or not working within metropolitan culture determined the framework of interest, nor did he consider its being determined by what Anibal Quijano referred to as the “modernity/rationality cultural complex” (2007: 171). Young clearly operated within a Western episteme and that is why, in the Fanonian mould, he (like most postcolonial critics before him) dichotomised indigenous epistemology into that which can be assimilated into postcolonialist epistemology and that which cannot. Hybridity was the key notion that allowed him to do so.

Young’s use of hybridity served two purposes: first, to cleanse indigenous discourse from that which is unpalatable for the postcolonial critic; and, second, to give the illusion that indigenous epistemology is being fully considered when in fact the consideration is nominal at best. In terms of cleansing indigenous discourse, Young accepted indigenous anti-colonialist expressions as long as they do not “institute” their “own procedures of oppression” (2001: 164), as do some movements of religious revivalism. To overcome such procedures of oppression, he prescribed hybridising these indigenist conceptualisations of anti-colonialism “with some of the objectives of socialism and feminism . . . as in certain forms of Arab nationalism” so that they “can link positively to the politics of postcolonial critique” (Young, 2001: 164). In other words, he advocated an indigenism that is hybridised with modernity. In addition to its sweeping generalisation, Young’s point here betrays several problems. First is the complete failure to exhibit any form of engagement with indigenous epistemology. Second, Young is strikingly uncritical towards modernity and the contribution it has made to the oppressive and intolerant strain in movements of religious revivalism.⁸ To clarify, modernity is not the root cause of all religious oppression, neither are indigenous religious epistemologies inherently oppressive. Taiaiake Alfred, an indigenous scholar, addressed exactly this point, explaining that the oppressive potential may be found in the betrayal of the traditional values, such as the “principles of respect and harmonious coexistence”, by indigenous leaders (2009: 11).

Young’s use of hybridity to give the illusion that indigenous epistemology is being fully considered is distinctly apparent in his handling of Gandhi’s anti-colonial discourse.⁹ Here, Young clearly perpetuates the use of the dichotomising framework to explore indigenous discourse. Young reads postcolonialism’s exclusion of Gandhi as indicative of this field’s

“unmediated secularism” and its exclusion of “the religions that have taken on the political identity of providing alternative value-systems to those of the west”, to finally declare that postcolonialism “despite its espousal of subaltern resistance, scarcely values subaltern resistance that does not operate according to its own secular terms (2001: 338). Nevertheless, Young himself is not different because he failed to explore the epistemological import of Gandhi’s spiritualised anti-colonial discourse when he neglected to examine what was arguably the most formative element in Gandhi’s discourse. In actuality, this discourse was based on an epistemology that was rooted in a rediscovered Hinduism, which not only opposed Western modernity but also represented a spiritual path for Gandhi himself. Young seemed content simply to allude to the influence of the Theosophical Society on Gandhi’s discourse. By contrast, Young exaggerated Gandhi’s use of the tools of modernity to promote this spiritualised anti-colonialism, thereby suggesting some sort of philosophical complicity with the underpinnings of modernity on Gandhi’s part. Because of his theoretical commitments, Young was obliged to hybridise Gandhi’s discourse, and the only way he could do so was by suggesting the hybridisation of Gandhi’s discourse with modernity. Ultimately, the epistemological import of Gandhi’s intervention remains unregistered.

Aside from Mudimbe’s (1988) intervention, Arif Dirlik’s (1997) *Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* was perhaps one of the first works of postcolonialism to address indigenous epistemology. However, Dirlik’s intervention, which incidentally treats indigenous epistemology as a category, appears to be nothing more than a nuanced echo of Parry’s position. Instead of fully exploring the significance of such epistemologies and recognising the challenge they pose to postcolonial studies, Dirlik – impelled by his ideological commitment to materialism – subsumed these epistemologies under multi-historicalism. He defined multi-historicalism as the multiple and alternative indigenous historical trajectories that present different epistemologies (1997: 3). He described indigenous peoples as “products of a modern historical experience who are internally differentiated, partake of the social, ideological, and cultural diversities of the present and, consequently, hold diverse views of the present, the past, and the future” (Dirlik, 1997: 140). Initially it may not be clear how Dirlik sustained the dichotomising framework. But on closer examination it becomes apparent that while he allowed indigenous peoples to have their own historical trajectory and even defined them in terms of that trajectory, he did not accept their epistemological contribution. The transition from the recognition of indigenous epistemology to multi-historicalism is achieved through his treatment of history as epistemology,

which is based on the idea of the contemporaneity of indigenous peoples (Dirlik, 1997: 3).

Treating history as epistemology and exploring indigenous epistemology on its own terms are very different research approaches. The application of Dirlik's multi-historicalism means exploring contemporary articulations of indigenism in connection with past histories rather than past epistemologies. Instead of trying to trace the epistemological continuity between past and present articulations of indigenous epistemology, Dirlik examined these articulations from the vantage point of sharing a common history, which is governed by a similar historical determinism. Dirlik recognised, however, that history hardly possesses a universal epistemological foundation, and, surprisingly, addressed this issue in an endnote:

I realize that this historicization of indigenism does violence to indigenous conceptions of time and space, which repudiate EuroAmerican notions of history. [...] Indigenism itself, however, has been reworked by the historical developments discussed here, so that there are also postmodern and postcolonial Indians (1997: 22)

Here, Dirlik's solution was to incorporate "indigenous beliefs that repudiated history as epistemology" into multi-historicalism (1997: 22). This statement essentially establishes the plausibility of subsuming indigenous epistemology that repudiates history under the rubric of historiography, irrespective of contradictions involved in such an action. Overall, Dirlik's comments about the importance of "indigenization of epistemology" as "a necessary first step" before achieving "a genuine inter-discursivity" are merely a form of verbal acquiescence (1997: 141).

Although postcolonial critics seem to recognise the importance of including indigenous epistemologies, they predicate this acceptance on epistemologies conforming to each critic's own theoretical concerns and affiliations. This act of predication has necessitated the adoption of a dichotomising framework for the treatment of indigenous epistemology. Moreover, the use of this framework indicates the failure of postcolonialism to reflect critically on its epistemological genealogy. This failure highlights a major flaw since anti-colonial indigenous epistemologies do indeed exist and, more importantly, have been for several decades discussed in serious scholarly works.¹⁰

From Indigenous Epistemology to Decolonisation

There is a subtle but substantial difference between full and conditional acceptance of indigenous epistemology. In his literary masterpiece, *Hombres de maíz*, Miguel Ángel Asturias provided a remarkably complex articulation of indigenous epistemology (1993 [1949]). The ethos and fundamental logic of *Hombres de maíz* are expressed in the following passage from the novel:

The maize impoverishes the earth and makes no one rich. Neither the boss nor the men. Sown to be eaten it is the sacred sustenance of the men who were made of maize. Sown to make money it means famine for the men who were made of maize (Asturias, 1993 [1949]: 11)

Now, from the vantage point of a standard postcolonial interpretation, the expressed sanctity of the land can be understood as being in line with anti-capitalist exploitation and is a metaphorical expression denoting the importance of land for Mayan identity. However, the third sentence of this passage would never be understood literally as a vital epistemology from which a whole worldview is constructed. From the vantage point of Enlightenment-based reason it is hardly “rational” to accept Asturias’ positing that men are “made of maize”. However, from the vantage point of Mayan epistemology, “men who are made of maize” is a lived way of knowing. Similar indigenous voices abound in postcolonial societies, revealing other ways of knowing and being. Moreover, these other ways are not by definition benign. For example, indigenous religious traditions in Guatemala have helped usher in a wave of reverse racism in an effort to exclude *ladinos* from indigenous communities (Warren, 1989: 21). Regardless, indigenous “ways of knowing” need to be acknowledged as valid contributing and indeed powerful epistemologies if postcolonialism is to uphold its ethical purchase.

Indigenist scholars have put forward resonant interventions that note the epistemological imperialism of the West. For example, Taiaiake Alfred (2009) explored the forging of indigenous forms of governance based on indigenous knowledge and a self-conscious traditionalism. Perhaps the most remarkable example – and, indeed, the most striking oversight by postcolonialists – is the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who sought nothing less than the decolonisation of research methods, based on a scathing critique of postcolonial epistemology. In her study, Smith dissected postcolonialism and echoed the objection put forth by Ahmad regarding postcolonialism’s appropriation of the “third world”. Indigenous academics,

she said, suspect that “post-colonialism has become a strategy for reinscribing or reauthorizing the privileges of non-indigenous academics”, because postcolonialism has been defined in ways which “leave out indigenous peoples”, their “ways of knowing” and their “current concerns” (Smith, 1999: 24). In contrast to Ahmad, however, Smith is firmly placed within a critical perspective that recognises the complicity between Western epistemology and the continuing colonisation of all fields of research. Even though she seemed to conflate modernity and modernism with this episteme, she identified the Enlightenment as the progenitor of Western epistemology (ibid.: 58). To illustrate how radically different indigenous ways of knowing can be from Western- or Enlightenment-generated epistemology, Smith provided several examples, including the following: “The Maori word for time or space is the same” (ibid.: 50). Furthermore, Smith echoes Asturias’ aforementioned literary intervention in her description of indigenous space: “Indigenous space has been colonized. Land, for example, was viewed as something to be tamed and brought under control. The landscape, the arrangement of nature, could be altered by ‘Man’ [. . .] not simply for physical survival” but for exploitation and aesthetic concerns (ibid.: 51). But Smith is most compelling when she examines the epistemological import of indigenous spirituality:

The arguments of different indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe [. . .] have been difficult arguments for Western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept. These arguments give a partial indication of the different world views and alternative ways of coming to know, and of being, which still endure within the indigenous world. Concepts of spirituality which Christianity attempted to destroy, then to appropriate, and then to claim, are critical sites of resistance for indigenous peoples. The values, attitudes, concepts and language embedded in beliefs about spirituality represent, in many cases, the clearest contrast and mark of difference between indigenous peoples and the West. It is one of the few parts of ourselves which the West cannot decipher, cannot understand and cannot control [. . .] yet (ibid.: 74)

Smith’s own position is clear from her description of how her grandmother instilled in her “spiritual relationships to the land” and, more importantly for Smith, helped her develop “a sense of quite physical groundedness” that made her “sceptical or cautious about the mystical, misty-eyed discourse that is sometimes employed by indigenous people to

describe our relationships with the land and the universe" (ibid.: 12). This sense of groundedness of which she speaks refers to the very material way in which indigenous ways of knowing were crucial for survival: "We had to predict, to learn and reflect, we had to preserve and protect, we had to defend and attack, we had to be mobile, we had to have social systems which enabled us to do these things" (ibid.: 13). Hence, Smith does not consciously dichotomise indigenous epistemology, as do postcolonial critics, but rather consciously *selects* what aspects of indigenous epistemology she wants to emphasise. At this point, it may be said that Smith modifies the Fanonian dichotomised intellectual. In her discourse indigenous epistemology is the privileged locus. The intellectual is aware of the dichotomy, and, moreover, is self-consciously selective. This is why Smith's decolonisation "does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge". Rather, it means prioritising the indigenous world view and its concerns "and then coming to know and understand theory and research from" that perspective (ibid.: 39).

For some postcolonial critics – like Mudimbe and Quayson (2000) – knowing "these concerns and world view" of which Smith speaks requires an intersection with anthropology. It is at this intersection with anthropology that the fissures of postcolonialism begin to emerge. This is where Mudimbe's celebrated epistemological interrogation of colonial knowledge began. He investigated the epistemological shifts in, and the philosophical contribution to, what he referred to as "African gnosis" – that is, "the scientific and ideological discourse on Africa" (Mudimbe, 1988: 187). However, Mudimbe pointed out the sheer impossibility of escaping the profoundly entrenched roots of the "Western episteme" in this gnosis (ibid.: 185). Instead of harking back to a pristine past, he constructed from within that episteme a theoretical framework that enabled a highly self-critical anthropology.¹¹ By contrast, Smith emphasised the soiled reputation that anthropology as an instrument of colonisation has acquired amongst indigenists. This view of a contaminated anthropological gaze can be considered the launching pad for what is perhaps the most thorough theoretical intervention in the decolonisation of knowledge in general. Mignolo's "decolonisation" extends far beyond that of Mudimbe's self-critical anthropology and echoes indigenist objections to anthropology noted by Smith. Mignolo maintained that decolonisation "implies a de-linking from anthropological agendas [. . .] to agendas that emerge from the decolonial needs of indigenous communities" (2008: 20).

This de-linking involves a thoroughgoing critique of the epistemological foundations of Western discourse, which highlights the interdependence of coloniality and modernity. Although critics, like Smith

and Battiste,¹² have revealed an awareness of this connection, none have exposed its depths, as did Mignolo whose work surprisingly failed to mention Smith's call for decolonisation. Mignolo followed Quijano's (2007) lead and called for the decolonisation of being and knowledge that extends beyond the mere "takeover of the state by the local elite" (2008: 18). Mignolo's signal achievement was his realisation that decolonisation starts with the recognition of the following:

There is no modernity without coloniality; coloniality is constitutive of modernity and not derivative. There is a single modernity/coloniality that is the consequence of the geopolitical differential distribution of epistemic, political, economic, and aesthetic (e.g., sensing, subjectivity) power (ibid.: 22)

Moreover, this complex is fundamentally dichotomising: "colonial differences, epistemic and ontological, are constructed in the rhetoric of modernity – inferior beings (colonial ontological difference), racially or sexually, are beings not well suited for knowledge and understanding (colonial epistemic difference)" (ibid.). In addition, the site of contestation is epistemology. Mignolo's thesis provides a profound understanding of the aforementioned dichotomising drive observed in postcolonialism's engagement with indigenous epistemology. This is because his critique reveals that the source of postcolonialism's dichotomising drive is its dependence upon a Western ratio-centric epistemology that does not recognise the interdependence of coloniality and modernity. This dependence is what, as indigenists such as Smith have already intuited, keeps postcolonialism as an appropriative discourse with regard to indigenous epistemology.

Towards a Decolonised Postcolonialism?

If a decolonised postcolonialism is the goal, then a closer look at the root cause of postcolonialism's recourse to the dichotomising framework is required. Without an awareness of the coloniality/modernity complex postcolonial critics have no choice but to dichotomise. This is why Deepika Bahri is compelled to announce, in advance, the ultimate failure of any effort to understand "ways of knowing that have allowed sustainability and survival among postcolonial communities" because "they would require dedicated engagement with a context unavailable to most metropolitan audiences" (2003: 20). Her comment suggests an implicit and perhaps subconscious recognition of the impossibility of transgressing the

dichotomising framework. The fact that Bahri was content with merely pointing out this phenomenon – instead of examining its full implications for postcolonialism – is symptomatic of a profound anxiety that governs postcolonialism’s encounter with indigenous epistemologies. The anxiety has a great deal to do with López’s objection to the naive search for “a mythical singular ‘authentic’ voice for the indigene”, “as if ‘Columbus’s crunch upon the sand’ had never happened” (2001: 16, 83).¹³ Because they are unable to adopt a radically critical standpoint towards their own epistemological roots, postcolonial critics have no choice but to imagine the unassimilable “other” from within a dichotomised worldview. They cannot, for example, understand that a recourse to indigenous epistemology need not pursue an either/or scenario – that is, *either* a “native authentic untarnished voice” *or* “an already hybrid colonially contaminated subject”. Smith best described the actual stance of many indigenists by pointing out how “solutions are posed from a combination of the time before, colonized time, and the time before that, pre-colonized time. Decolonization encapsulates both sets of ideas” (1999: 24). Therefore, to extend the Columbus metaphor of the colonial encounter, postcolonial critics see only the imprint of Columbus’s foot; they fail to recognise that the beach is vast, with regions as yet unknown and unexplored.

Can there be a decolonised postcolonialism? Until there is a thorough recognition of the involvement of postcolonialism in the modernity/coloniality complex, which is specifically manifested in its dichotomised handling of indigenous epistemology, postcolonialism will not escape the charge that it extends colonial paradigms so as to appropriate “other” knowledge for its own Eurocentric ends. The decolonisation of postcolonialism must involve a high degree of self-critical reflection.

Haifa S. Alfaisal earned her PhD from the University of Essex. She is currently teaching at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Her research interests include exploring religious discourse within postcolonial studies, and more recently investigating Eurocentric travel accounts of Arabia. In 2006, she published a book entitled *Religious Discourse in Postcolonial Studies: Magical Realism in ‘Hombres De Maiz’ and ‘Bandarshah’*.

Endnotes

¹ This usage of epistemology/epistemologies is attuned to the idea that “many tribes did not have ‘laws’ or ‘religion,’ but a single belief system that was described as ‘our way of doing things’” (Alfred, 2009: 67).

² “There is no modernity without coloniality; coloniality is constitutive of

modernity and not derivative" (Mignolo, 2008: 22).

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1999) "epistemic violence" is useful; however, aside from noting the epistemic violence of imperialism, Spivak did not incorporate indigenous epistemology anywhere in her critique of colonialism. Spivak's "strategic essentialism" was founded upon anti-essentialism, which is anathema to most, if not all, indigenous epistemologies.

⁴ Throughout this article the terms 'West' and 'Western' will remain capitalised, while the term 'indigenous' will remain lowercased. This is to indicate and keep the reader aware of the marginalization of indigenous epistemologies as opposed to the centralisation of the 'Western' episteme within postcolonialism.

⁵ I take indigenist to refer to scholars who support or advocate indigenism. The latter has strong roots in Latin America; however, I use it as a descriptive term to indicate whatever entity, mythology, religion, and so on, is invoked as a source of indigenous pre-colonial identity, that is politically legitimate and used as an anti-colonial discourse.

⁶ See Alfred (2009: 77-81).

⁷ Dirlik also discussed the epistemology of postcolonialism – its insistence on difference in identity construction, "the conviction that literary works suffice as evidence of what goes on in the world", and the overriding significance of the politics of identity in place of radical politics (1997: 5-6).

⁸ Critics who reject indigenous epistemologies out-of-hand are excluded from consideration. Moreover, postcolonial critics will note the absence of the feminist school of postcolonialism. This is because this article distinguishes between two modes of feminism: postcolonial feminism is considered as epistemological rupture of the magnitude and type that it is hoped will be possible for indigenous epistemology; indigenous feminism is considered as being part and parcel of indigenous epistemology.

⁹ A case in point would be the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan. For a detailed analysis, see Alfaisal (2006: 182-206).

¹⁰ M. Gandhi's indigenous epistemology is specified here because Young uses him as a case in point, and therefore his failure to fully examine the religious

epistemology of Gandhi's discourse can be taken as indicative of postcolonial theory's neglect of indigenous epistemologies.

¹¹ For example, Alfred (2009); Kunnie and Goduka (2006); Battiste (2000); Kincheloe and Semali (1999); and Deloria (1973). The omission of these interventions from postcolonialists' consideration is striking; however, this study has chosen one particular token intervention to exhibit this shortcoming.

¹² This consists of a "critical synthesis of Foucault's thesis on the last archaeological rupture in Western epistemology, a brief interpretation of Lévi-Strauss's notion of *savage mind*, and finally a plea for the importance of the subject in social sciences" (Mudimbe, 1988: 23).

¹³ The "colonial experience traps us in the project of modernity. There can be no 'postmodern' for us until we have settled some business of the modern" (Smith, 1999: 34).

¹⁴ López adopted this phrase from Brathwaite (1990).

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On the Broken Conversation between Postcolonialism and Intellectuals in the Periphery

by Samer Frangie

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the reception of the postcolonial critique in the periphery, as a way to probe the more general problem of knowledge in and on the periphery. The paper will look at the broken conversation between postcolonialism and some trends of intellectuals in the Arab world. The two moments of the story are the evaluation of anti-colonial intellectuals by Postcolonialism, and the reception of Edward Said's *Orientalism* by intellectuals in the Arab world. Regarding the first moment, the notion of 'problem-space' will be deployed to warn against the universalizing tendencies of postcolonialism. As to the second moment, the work of Mahdi 'Amil and Sadek Jalal al-Azm is presented as illustrating the primacy of the political in their reading and reception of Said's thesis. The conclusion argues for an excavation of the political from underneath the epistemological critique as a way to renew the broken conversation between the metropole and the periphery.

Postcolonialism, Colonial Knowledge and Anti-Colonial Struggles

The problem of knowledge in and on the periphery and its political implication has become a central concern for many trends of thought, a sign of the adoption of post-structural and post-modern theories (or at least sensibilities) to the study of the periphery.¹ Postcolonialism has been a major influence in this respect, with its problematization of Western epistemologies and its questioning of the relation between colonial power and knowledge (Chakrabarty, 2000; Mignolo, 2000; Mehta, 1999). Despite the heterogeneity of this trend and its variable political implications, a running concern among authors writing under this broad umbrella has been the decolonization of the representation of the periphery, and the problematization of the various political and social identities inherited from the Enlightenment. Viewed from

this perspective, Edward Said's *Orientalism* is a central moment in the genealogy of the postcolonial critique (1979). Said's critique of the representation, and creation, of the 'Orient' by the Western gaze opened up a whole new field of investigation through the 'politicization' of Western epistemology and aesthetics. Thanks to this intellectual move, Said widened our understanding of colonialism, uncovering the subterranean alliance between positions that might have appeared as opposed, and the unknowing dependence of anti-colonial discourses on assumptions that belong to the colonial conceptual structure.

Said's intellectual move, and the subsequent postcolonial trend, gained their critical purchase, partly due to their contrasting effect vis-à-vis previous anti-colonial narratives. Said's critique of the 'Orientalist Marx' and his warning in the concluding pages of *Orientalism* against radical intellectuals' participation in their own 'Orientalizing', illustrate the tense relation between these two modes of critique. Marxism or nationalism, despite their radical emancipatory dimension, appear to draw on the same Eurocentric master-narratives, according to this new critical perspective. A similar line of friction appeared between Said's *Orientalism* and part of the modernist and radical intelligentsia in the periphery. According to the broad outlines of this critique, intellectuals in the periphery inherited their understanding of modernity from colonial and Orientalist accounts, condemning them to remain perpetually in the 'waiting-room' of history, to use Chakrabarty's imagery (2000). Describing Arab intellectuals, Makdisi notes that

even many of those who have refused to acknowledge such putative European superiority have nevertheless established their challenges to it in the very narrative and discursive terms that it has itself proposed and invented; hence, such challenges have more often than not been defused or negated by their participation in the very same conceptual and discursive system (of modernity) against which they seek to define themselves as oppositional (1995: 88)

A significant tradition of intellectuals in the periphery, including Marxists and nationalists, emerged after the postcolonial critique. As unknowing participants in their own domination, these scholars framed their opposition in a self-defeating narrative, one that cannot form the basis for a program of emancipation.²

This paper will start from the reception of Said's *Orientalism* by Arab intellectuals, as a way to probe the line of friction between some of the tenets

of postcolonialism and the intelligentsia in the periphery. Through this historical detour, the essay will shed some light on the early differentiation of critical discourses, and will provide a historical context for the question of the relevance of the epistemological critique of intellectuals in the periphery. If the problematization of previous anti-colonial or emancipatory discourses was a welcome and necessary move, the question that needs to be asked in our *post*-postcolonialism era pertains to the continuing critical purchase of this intellectual move, and more specifically for this paper to its critical purchase *in* the periphery. In other words, if the post-colonial move was very fruitful politically and theoretically in the Western academic field at a specific historical and political conjuncture, does this imply that it has the same critical purchase in the context of the periphery?

Travelling Said: On the Production of Knowledge in the Periphery

A fruitful way to start thinking about these questions is to examine the reception of postcolonialism in the periphery. Dirlik hinted at the ambiguity of postcolonialism in the Third World where themes of modernization and nationalism still exert a certain attractiveness, noting the difference between the radical intelligentsia in the periphery and their postcolonial interlocutors (1994: 337). Similarly, Mignolo sensed a certain distrust of postcolonialism among some Latin American intellectuals who saw it as “an exportation of North American intelligentsia” (2000: 173). These ambivalent reactions in no way exhaust the reception of the postcolonial critique in the periphery, where it has a strong contingent of supporters. But they highlight the difference between the ‘problem-space’ of Western academia and that of intellectuals in the periphery, raising questions as to the critical purchase of postcolonialism in different contexts.³ This ambiguity is clearly at work in the travelling of Said’s *Orientalism* to the Arab world, where the reception of his work was ambivalent, ranging from enthusiastic adoption of his thesis to more suspicious evaluations.⁴

The political and intellectual context of the reception of *Orientalism* in the Arab world was different from its context of production. On a political level, the Arab world was witnessing the weakening of the nationalist, socialist and Marxist political options of the 1950s and 1960s with their secularism and modernist slogans, and their replacement with more nativist ideologies, Islamist politics and questions of identities. For instance, the Lebanese civil war (1975-1989), which started for many as two warring ideological camps, had descended in the early 1980s into a struggle between various sectarian groups. More importantly, Said’s book coincided with the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the rise of a radical form of Islam that would

charm, at least in its early stages, substantial groups of radical intellectuals.⁵ *Orientalism* came at a moment of great turmoil in the intellectual history of the Arab world. The defeat of 1967 which heralded a literature of defeat and disappointment among Arab intellectuals witnessed the rise of new questions pertaining to the notion of authenticity, signalling a shift from the modernist project of the middle of the century, or at least the growing concerns with questions of identity. Said's book made its entry into the Arab world amid this troubled context, one that would heavily mark the book's reception.

One of the first discussions of Said's work to come from the Arab world was Sadek Jalal al-Azm's review of *Orientalism* (1981). The Syrian philosopher starts by noting the possible essentialist deviation of Said's text and its bias toward representation, a critique shared by many of Said's commentators.⁶ Moving from this general critique of the text, al-Azm then adopts a more situated perspective, reading the texts from his location in the Arab world. In the last part of the text entitled 'Orientalism in Reverse', al-Azm drags Said's text to the Arab world, finding in some brands of Arab nationalism and Islamic revivalism the same Orientalist logic albeit reversed: This 'Orientalism in Reverse' strives to show the "ontological superiority of the Oriental mind [. . .] over the Occidental one", writes al-Azm (1981: 232). What is interesting in this 'application' of Said is the resulting decoupling between its epistemological and political critique. Whereas Said deployed the epistemological critique in order to question the underlying colonial project and Western gaze, for al-Azm, this mode of critique is used against another target, one that does not appear in Said's book, having no presence in his Western academic problem-space. This is not the case for al-Azm, located in a radically different context: "Ontological Orientalism in Reverse is, in the end, no less reactionary, mystifying, ahistorical and anti-human than Ontological Orientalism proper" (1981: 237). Whereas postcolonialism could uphold a collapsing of essentialism and colonialism, seeing the epistemological as the other face of the political, intellectuals in the periphery were moving in a problem-space that was not amenable to such a theoretical move. The epistemological essentialism was as much part of the 'native' ideology as it was part of the 'colonial' one, offering a weak hold on the existing political oppositions.

al-Azm was not alone in responding to Said. Mahdi 'Amil (1936-1987), a Lebanese Marxist philosopher, devoted a whole book to harshly criticizing Said and his thesis of *Orientalism* (2006). Engaged in the production of a form of Marxism that was rooted in the periphery, 'Amil had tackled in his earlier work the problem of knowledge and its political implications. In 1974, he produced a book-length refutation of claims about Arab 'backwardness'

(2002). In this critique, he toyed with themes that would become the bread and butter of the postcolonial critique, such as the duality of progress and backwardness, the interplay between essentialism and historicism, the notion of Arab civilization and the position of the West in the theoretical imagination of intellectuals. But such a critique of the representation of the Arab world was still grounded in a materialist framework. As 'Amil writes:

the causes of the 'backwardness' are not 'historical' [. . .] i.e. they are not inherited or genetic, but are structural, in the sense that they are located in the nature of the social formation that is determined by the development of the dominant colonial mode of production that requires the persistence of the past social relations, due to its structural dependence on imperialism (2002: 58)⁷

'Amil's critique of the essentialist representation of the Arab world was part of his general critique of the various culturalist conceptions of the Arab world, whether in the thesis of primordial sectarian identities or the essentializations of Islamist and nationalist discourses.⁸

But as a Marxist, 'Amil was also keen to assert the possibility of a universal political theory. Marxism was criticized from different quarters of the Arab intellectual field as an 'imported ideology', one that is not organic to this part of the world. 'Amil found different instantiations of this argument among nationalist authors, whether Arab or Lebanese, and Islamist authors influenced by the Iranian revolution (1990; 2003). Whether due to its conception of a society divided among classes, its position regarding religion or its lack of authenticity in the Arab world, Marxism was deemed not to be suitable to the realities of the Arab world. Faced by these questions, 'Amil was forced to criticize the false universals of 'bourgeois' ideology while asserting the possibility of a universal knowledge, encapsulated in Marxism. It is in the coordinates of this debate that 'Amil received Said's *Orientalism*, read as a form of dangerous relativism. Despite the fact that certain affinities might have existed among the two authors regarding the relation between power and knowledge, Said, according to 'Amil, went too far, falling into the logic of the various primordialist authors that 'Amil was struggling against, thus condemning the possibility of an emancipatory politics in the Arab world.

The 'official' point of contention is Said's treatment of Marx as an Orientalist, a qualification that 'Amil, a Marxist, vehemently rejected. Starting from a similar perspective as al-Azm, 'Amil accused Said of reproducing the dichotomy he was trying to question, and more importantly of reducing all

Western thought to the dominant bourgeois ideology. Furthermore, by constructing such a rigid polarity between the West and the Orient, Said is, according to 'Amil, forced to reject reason *in toto*, opposing it to emotion in a quasi-Romantic gesture. Such a duality is apparent in Said's treatment of Marx as an unwilling Orientalist: "Marx exits the structure of Orientalist thought when he uses his heart", according to 'Amil's reading of Said's text, "yet he comes back to it, falling into its structure, when he uses his mind" (2006: 19). The Orient appears to be only accessible through spiritual means or bouts of individual genius, "since any scientific or rational approach to the Orient seems to be necessarily forced to reproduce the logic of Orientalism" (2006: 20). By favouring the 'heart' over the 'mind', Said slides to an anti-rational position, reducing any theoretical act to an act of violence and denying the possibility of a scientific and hence universal knowledge. Such a position made Said politically suspicious for 'Amil, who concludes by writing:

It is not strange then that *cultural structuralism*, that characterizes the thought of Michel Foucault, would meet *Nietzschean Nihilism*, on a common ground [. . .] Rationalistic imperialism would reconcile itself with the anti-rational nihilism in asserting the oneness of reason, and hence, the refusal of revolutionary reason, the only opposition to the dominant reason (2006: 72)

Without necessarily agreeing with all of the critiques raised above and without positing 'Amil or al-Azm as the sole representative of 'Arab intellectuals', their responses to Said articulate the differences between the problem-space of Said and theirs, providing a way to think about the fate of the epistemological critique when transposed to the periphery.⁹ al-Azm's response illustrates the decoupling of the epistemological and political dimension of the postcolonial critique. 'Amil goes further, with his texts explicating two anxieties at the Saidian move. The first is a radicalization of al-Azm's point. In an intellectual field seen as dominated by primordialist understandings of identity, a nativist return to Islam and culturalist understanding of nations, Said's sole focus on representation was read by 'Amil as a regression from the materialist standpoint, one that can easily act as an endorsement of these positions. But more importantly, the second anxiety was caused by the absence of a clear political angle within Said's critique. Through the questioning of the existing ideological oppositions and reframing the political conflict in terms of representations, the Saidian framework was not very helpful politically for 'Amil, enmeshed in a civil

war, having to struggle against local 'reactionary' ideologies and colonial knowledge simultaneously. These two responses illustrate the growing divide between the grounds of critique of the Western academe and the periphery, each articulating different modes of critique.

The Political as a Connection

al-Azm and 'Amil's critiques of Said were triggered by the ambiguous political implications of his thesis in the context of the periphery. For al-Azm, the target of *Orientalism* when transposed to the Arab world changes drastically from what Said had in mind, while for 'Amil, the political implications are at best weak and at worse pernicious. Such critique paralleled the Marxist critiques of early postcolonial authors, as holding a vague political program, one that lacks the edge of Marxism in its heyday. McClintock has noted, for instance, that "[h]istorically voided categories such as 'the other,' 'the signifier,' 'the signified,' 'the subject,' 'the phallus,' 'the postcolonial,' while having academic clout and professional marketability, run the risk of telescoping crucial geo-political distinctions into invisibility" (1992: 86). The suspicion is that the sophisticated theoretical rhetoric deployed by postcolonialism does not translate into a radically different form of political intervention or even a radical form of politics. In other words, the translation of the epistemological critique to the political field does not yield the same critical effect it has in the academic field, becoming either a vague political statement or a rewording of existing positions.

Irrespective of the validity of this specific critique, it is important to note that it is not the fact that postcolonialism entertains vague political conclusions that is crucial for the current argument. Rather, the relation between theory and politics itself has been transformed with this poststructuralist turn. What appear as vague political implications reflect certain expectations made regarding theory, expectations that have been entertained by post-Enlightenment theories in general, and Marxism in particular with its notion of *praxis*. Scott captures this expectation and the underlying conversation between postcolonialism and Marxism, when he writes:

Marxism had defined in a very fundamental way the ethical-political horizon of our visions of – and commitment to – the making of just and independent societies. And although our intellectual preoccupations had in the meantime been traversed and repositioned by the postmetaphysical critiques of Marxism,

we were still haunted by the specter of a theory that would enable us to deduce a set of rational political practices and procedures for the radical transformation of our societies (1999: 131-132)

If we rephrase the problem of the political implication of postcolonialism into the more general problem of the relation between theory and politics, one can have a better grasp of the ambiguity of postcolonial politics. Postcolonialism has operated through “a certain suspension or deferral of the question of the political”, as Scott writes, through “implicitly occupying the horizon of nationalist politics already defined by the anticolonial project” (1999: 14). In other words, postcolonialism had delegated the political to the same anticolonial discourses they were bemoaning. Such a position has relieved the need to come up with a postcolonial theory of politics, either relying on a rewording of a position that has been discredited at an epistemological level, or privileging a “responsibility to otherness” over the “responsibility to act”, or the privileging of “the opening up of cognitive space for the play of difference over the affirmation of institutional frameworks that embody normative political values and normative political objectives” (Scott, 1999: 135). As such, postcolonialism has fluctuated between, on the one hand, an ambiguous reappropriation of Marxism and, on the other, an ambivalent ethics of otherness, two poles that are united by a similar problematization of the relation between theory and politics.

Such ambivalence can be seen at work in *Orientalism*. The absence of an alternative epistemology, of a clarification of the grounds for the critique of Orientalism or of discrimination among Western knowledge, all entertain a certain political ambiguity (Young, 1990). Such an ambiguity might have been productive in a specific context and at a certain point in time, but was deemed to be untenable in the context of the Arab world by al-Azm and ‘Amil. Indeed, such ambiguity could be entertained in the Saidian text because of the absence of key aspects of the Orient from its narrative. As Binder rightly notes:

Said says nothing [about Islam] and says nothing about why he says nothing, and it is in this double silence which suggests an anomaly, a kind of paradox, an aporia or the very conditions which makes Said’s critical discourse possible. Of course it may be true that if Said were to have written anything about Islam, he might have been able to write nothing about Orientalism (1988: 121)

Such a silence was not an option available to either al-Azm or 'Amil, with Islam in its various instantiations being omnipresent in their problem-space. In other words, postcolonialism's ambiguous politics, despite having been extremely productive in some contexts, did not travel well to the periphery, a problem-space that was not amenable to such ambiguity. The friction between postcolonialism and the periphery is related to the absence of a politics that could respond to the expectations and demands of a problem-space whose stakes have not yet been de-politicized. Describing Arab political thought, Abdallah Laroui, a Moroccan historian and philosopher, linked the popularity of Marxism among the Arab intelligentsia to its capacity to unite politics and theory, via the notion of praxis, while providing a perspective to reconcile the Arab world with Europe without endorsing this latter self-perception (1976). As argued above, both al-Azm and 'Amil reacted to Said's *Orientalism* from the perspective of its political use-value, finding dangerous tendencies in its application. It is one thing to unmask essentialism, but quite another to make this epistemological claim the basis for political intervention. A programmatic politics, aiming at intervening in the real, providing a principle of distinction between enemies and allies, and acting as an anchor point to theory, might have lost some of its lustre in Western academe, but it remains a desirable goal for intellectuals in the periphery.

The Postcolonial and the Post-Colonial

The differing relationships to politics, the growing disjuncture between Said's intellectual fields and his counterparts in the periphery (or at least part of them), and the different stakes that were imparted on the theoretical game, explain the reception of Said by Arab intellectuals, and the ambiguous travel of the epistemological critique to the periphery. Recognizing this fracture might be the first step in appreciating the critical purchase, albeit a localized one, of the various traditions described in this paper. The postcolonial move, according to this reading, has been extremely beneficial in the problem-space of Western academe, whereas its political purchase in the periphery has been more ambiguous. Many of the misunderstandings between the various critical strands are rooted in this desire to jump over this fracture, in an attempt to revive the older desire for reconciliation. In other words, the different political stakes in the two problem-spaces problematizes any straightforward importing of the postcolonial intervention in the periphery. If there is any present value to the history of the reception of Said among Arab intellectuals, it lays in the awareness that different problem-spaces do not only coincide in terms of the political stakes that characterize them.

Part of the misunderstanding lays in the desire of some authors to bridge this gap by universalizing the concerns of one problem-space, subsuming the differences between different fields. As many commentators have noted, there has been a tendency among postcolonial authors to replace one universal by another, despite their questionings of essentialism, rigid binaries and theoretical closures. For McClintock, for instance, the term 'post-colonial', despite its critical deconstruction of post-Enlightenment binaries, "re-orient[s] the globe once more around a single, binary opposition: colonial/post-colonial" (1992: 85).¹⁰ The point is not about the validity of this new binary, but rather pertains to whether this new conceptualization of the conditions of the periphery is not being forced upon problem-spaces which might not share it. The intellectual configurations in which postcolonialism made its intervention, and the stakes that were attached to such an intervention, might not be the same as the ones with which intellectuals in the periphery were dealing, which partially explains the ambivalent reception of this trend.

This line of argument was developed by David Scott who warned against the universalizing temptations of this antifoundationalist trend (1999; 2004). Scott starts from the premise that in the wake of the antifoundationalist move, "criticism cannot operate in the manner of a General Hermeneutic, a Master Narrative, a View from Nowhere (or from Everywhere), the Panoptic of a Critical Theory" (1999: 3). Such an implication allows postcolonial authors to criticize the fixed conceptions of nation, race or class that formed the vocabularies of earlier discourses of resistance. Agreeing with this impulse, Scott nevertheless warns against such a claim turning into a

simple anti-essentialism according to which hitherto existing strategies of criticism are found out, admonished, and dismissed for their epistemological naïveté [. . .] In effect, then, what starts out being a welcome humbling of certain hegemonic regimes of Truth turns out to be little more than the adoption of an updated counter-design procedure, a counter-rationalism, a counter-claim to the *right* way for criticism to carry on (1999: 4)

In other words, what started as a corrosive critique of certain self-delusion, misconceptions or simple imposition, became itself a quest for certainty and an imposition of a vocabulary that ignores the local variability in historical, theoretical and political contexts. Returning to the question of this paper, the postcolonial critical evaluation of the modernist intellectuals in the periphery

is grounded in the assumption that these two groups were trying to answer the same questions, with one of them being more 'advanced' theoretically. And it is such an assumption that would ground the belief that the epistemological critique developed by postcolonialism in the context of Western academe would have the same critical purchase when transposed to the periphery, a context that has different stakes, questions and power configurations.

Political critique, in our post-postcolonial world, is one that cannot endorse a single logic, target or horizon; instead it is condemned to a multifarious and multifaceted approach. Recognizing this reality is a first step, but one that should serve as a ground for rethinking possible reconciliations, for reconnecting broken conversations between different critical strands and for living up to the initial expectations of postcolonialism pertaining to opening up spaces for marginal voices. This second step requires the excavation of the political from underneath the epistemological critique. Commenting on the debate between Dirlik and Prakash, Scott asks whether the conceptual dispute of which both are a part, a dispute whose stakes are epistemological, "continues to be one worth investing in at all". Remaining in the epistemological game, according to Scott, imposes upon us the question of how to write histories of the third world, but not the question of 'to what ends' are we rewriting this history, to what political projects, to what futures? (1999: 137-140). There is no escape from a re-engagement with the political as a way to think the fracture in our modes of critique.

Samer Frangie is an Assistant Professor at the Political Studies and Public Administration Department at the American University of Beirut. His research interests are in the fields of social and political theory, with an emphasis on Arab thought.

Endnotes

¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

² For examples regarding the Arab world, see Aksikas (2009) and Massad (2007).

³ A problem-space refers to a "discursive context, a context of language [. . .] a context of argument, and therefore, one of *intervention*. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a

horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs” (Scott, 2004: 4).

⁴ For details on Said’s reception in the Arab world, see Massad (2004), Sabry (2004) and Sivan (1985).

⁵ The temporal coincidence between Said’s *Orientalism* and the Iranian revolution would be given a more substantial turn by one Arab intellectual, Hazem Saghyeh, who draws a parallel between Said’s critique of the West and the ‘nativist’ ideology of the revolution (1995).

⁶ For a similar critique, see Ahmad (1991) and Porter (1994).

⁷ All translations of ‘Amil are mine.

⁸ For examples of these critiques, see ‘Amil (1989a; 1989b; 1990; 2003).

⁹ This misunderstanding is not simply due to the geographical location of these intellectuals, but also to the disciplinary frameworks in which each trend was mainly located. Both al-Azm and ‘Amil, despite being academics, were mainly public intellectuals and politically engaged. The same cannot be said of postcolonialism, which has remained an academic practice, subject to the rules and stakes of the academic field.

¹⁰ A similar point is made by Shohat (1991).

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Decolonizing Cosmopolitanism: Guaman Poma de Ayala's Early Response to a Singular Aesthetic Economy

by Brantley Nicholson

Abstract

In this article, I analyze Guaman Poma de Ayala and his seventeenth century text, *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*, considering it an early example of border dwelling and cosmopolitan writing. I posit that Guaman Poma decolonizes cosmopolitanism through his tactful navigation of aesthetic borders and archival code switching. In doing so, I put Guaman Poma in conversation with early philosophers of globalization, such as Bartolomé de las Casas, Ginés de Sepúlveda, and Francisco de Vitoria, and global aesthetic theorists, such as Immanuel Kant and Alexander Baumgarten.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, Latin American literature has been rife with treatments of the clash between local subjectivities and global cultural and economic flows. Colloquial oral registers are set in relief against a rigid, lettered city cultural model in Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios* [*Our Lady of the Assassins*] (1994).¹ The most prominent works to come out of Latin America in the post-Operación Condor twentieth century – Luisa Valenzuela's *Aquí pasan cosas raras* [*Strange Things Happen Here*] (1975), Ariel Dorfman's *La muerte y la doncella* [*Death and the Maiden*] (1990) and Ricardo Piglia's *Plata quemada* [*Burnt Money*] (1997) – weigh universal high culture and economic liberalization against the violent experience of local life. And, in the Eloisa Cartonera movement, an alternative publishing industry has been established in Buenos Aires to provide local residents with affordable works that represent local experience, existing in contrast to a global publishing industry based primarily in Madrid and Barcelona.

In the seventeenth century, archival clashes did not enjoy the same audience. Challenges to the cosmopolitan center, be it a symbolic center, as is increasingly the case, or geographical, as has long been the case in the Spanish-speaking publishing industry, have a much stronger voice today

than in the past. My concern in this article is the precedent set by Guaman Poma de Ayala (1535-1616), who, as a cultural border dweller, offers an early guide to navigating the aesthetic border—the place where multiple forms of perception converge. Aesthetic diversity, I posit, should be treated and valued as highly as bio diversity. It faces challenges from the flows of Empire in similar ways, and aesthetic borders just as much as economic and ontological borders act as gateways to alternative epistemological archives. Yet, with Spanish conquest and the high European Enlightenment that followed, the aesthetic field became increasingly leveled. And, the cultural hermeneutics of the time became emphatically singular and extracting rather than dialoguing.

Guaman Poma's life in what is now present-day Perú spanned a period of Spanish conquest in which he experienced early aesthetic, economic and cosmological clashes associated with the inchoate globalization. Here, we read an archetypal American border dweller that used cultural code-switching as a subversive rhetorical tactic. As a member of Incan nobility with a familiarity with Christian faith and the Spanish language – his paternal lineage technically made him an Incan “prince” – he stood between local Incan and global Spanish hegemonies, playing them off of one another in a way that facilitated the liberation of the local, individual body. This was a utility and freedom in discursive maneuvering that, for Rolena Adorno, “was complex but coherent and always unequivocal: in favor of native rule and opposed to colonialism [...] anti-Inca but pro-Andean, anticlerical but pro-Catholic” (Adorno, 1986: 5). Similar to many contemporary Latin American writers that today are both opposed to the local, lettered city, State-model and the global liberal model, Guaman Poma shifted between two epistemological frameworks and occupied the rhetorical externality where the cosmopolitan center ran up against its limits. When he forced the Spanish Court to enter into a communicative dialogue and, through his alternative visual economy, created a diatopical hermeneutic, he interjected the Andean cosmology into the early global aesthetic system, and, in turn, set up an early avenue of resistance to a singular cosmopolitanism.

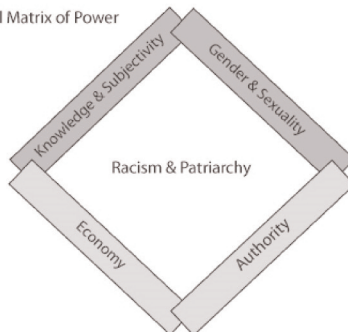
Early Global Symbolic Systems

It is in the context of the burgeoning of a new commercial order centered round the Atlantic Ocean and the urbanization of the masses in Europe during the sixteenth century that we observe the ingredients that led to a novel global design emanating from this formerly backwards and forgotten geographical area of Europe. With Spanish conquest, a political economy

hinged on the relationship between a European center and a colonial periphery began to arise. Land appropriations in the New World, exemplified by the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, along with the enslavement of indigenous peoples caused European economies with a stake in the New World to flourish. This economic boom, in turn, created the bedrock of what would later become a democratic European middle class that permanently modified the political framework of the state by slowly shifting away from governance based on juridical power to one based on biopower.

Yet, European, as did indigenous subjects, began to question the realms of humanity and reason in the exploitation of man and labor, precisely at a time in which the global rhetorical theater began to indicate a novel semantics of human rights and international law. The birth of Western modern philosophy and the foundation of the *civilized* and *rational* human seemed less like a natural global aesthetic and economic system and more like a rigid and exclusive epistemological model imposed from the outside. In contemporary terms, Anibal Quijano has defined this model as the *colonial matrix of power*, pointing out that beyond economic expansion, Empire spread largely in aesthetic terms (Quijano, 2000). Immanuel Kant, who is flanked on either side by Alexander Baumgarten's shifting of sensual aesthesis to a mathematically quantifiable *aesthetics* and Friedrich Schiller's theorization of the relationship between the individual and the collective through the aesthetic citizen, is readily credited with applying the rules of the Newtonian Revolution to perception and, in doing so, theorizing aesthetic modernity. Just as the economy that led to a European middle class was based on a favorable position in the novel global economy, the indigenous subject, as a conceptual construct, provided a negative example for Kant's rational forms of aesthetics.

The Colonial Matrix of Power



Kant's theory of the rational capabilities of the Western modern subject through his/her power of judgment was based on his concept of innate reason and showed a heavy racial bias that, for Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, was a product of Kant's collapsing of morality and geography onto a singular plane (Eze, 1995). Without a dialogue with New World subjectivities, his hierarchical anthropology was based on hearsay and rumors in circulation in the travel writing that Kant read and the conversations that he had with traveling seamen, more than the empirical model for which Kant and Baumgarten acted as champions. While Kant intended to codify the world mathematically with reason and the capacity for judgment as symbolic anchor, he monologically dictated the aesthetic rules of the world based on his own remote archive.

This founding European narrative of reason was part of the larger polemics of World Culture. Culture, as was understood as a necessary tenet of modernity, globally centered Europe while simultaneously trivializing and deterritorializing other cultures; it created the social death of non-European subjects by biologizing, racializing and dehumanizing them through instrumental totalized epistemology. Non-European cosmologies were displaced by the grafting of the novel construct of reason onto the rest of the world, and modernity took on a temporal designing of the world. According to Paget Henry, this was accomplished by using rhetoric such as "behind, barbarous, primitive, traditional, and underdeveloped" resulting in not only the conquest of land and body, but also of mind and soul (Henry, 2004).

The Infrastructure of Reflexivity

Guaman Poma stood out among the philosophers that theorized the novel global socioeconomic system in that he was the first individual to engage with Empire in an aesthetic medium and cosmology that was not an extension of the European archive, itself. In the sixteenth century, intellectuals did speak on behalf of indigenous subjects: Bartolomé de las Casas' questioning of the Catholic treatment of New World subjectivities and Francisco de Vitoria's similar philosophical interrogation of Spanish rights to property and dominion both represent indigenous subjects on Spanish terms. Yet, while neither political stance should simply be dismissed as a malicious act, both Las Casas and Vitoria failed to depart from the modern paradigm, with both falling into the trap of self-reflexive modern subjectivity.

Infamously known as the propagator of the *Black Legend*, Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose early trips to *Española* as a young man would lead him

to become the self-proclaimed 'protector de los indios', feeling a calling to 'defend' the rights of the Indians on the basis of Catholic Doctrine.² Although his ethics and motivation have been drawn into question, Las Casas continues to be heralded by many as an anachronistic progressive intellectual that crusaded for international human rights well before the inception of international law.³ In *Brevísima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (*A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*), Las Casas undertook a lengthy chronicle of the abuse of the indigenous populations at the hands of the Spanish in *Española* (present day Hispaniola, comprising the Dominican Republic and Haiti). Las Casas' principle concern arose from the economic exploitation of indigenous peoples by the corrupting *encomienda* system.⁴ The early socioeconomic infrastructure, according to Las Casas, led to the corrupt practice of the King's agents abroad. This rhetorical maneuver allowed Las Casas to critique the King Charles V's dominion without, in fact, blaming the royal figure himself.

According to Las Casas, the *encomienda* system was exploitative and not compatible with the message purported by Catholic Doctrine, which in effect was used as the apologetic rhetorical device to philosophically perpetuate the economic exploitation of local lands and peoples. Indigenous populations were constructed as barbarous and unable to govern themselves and, as a result, needed an external superior order to create civilized Christians of them. Las Casas' framing of exploitation within the terms and logic of Catholicism, however, had obvious shortcomings. His treatment of indigenous populations was paternalistic, and in one instance he went so far as to metaphorize himself as the shepherd needed to guide the lost sheep of the New World (Las Casas, 2006). Further, he failed to break with the epistemic violence carried out through indoctrination. In effect, he argued against short-term physical exploitation by arguing for long-term indoctrination. In his writings, he did not argue for corporeal and epistemic liberation so much as for a rational approach to creating Christians of indigenous peoples, keeping the debate on European terms and denying indigenous peoples the right to agency and memory.

Las Casas' debates with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda at Valladolid in 1551 reiterated this point. This time, however, the debate was framed not only on European terms but, going a step further, was also carried out on European soil. In contrast to Sepúlveda, here we begin to see why some have argued in favor of Las Casas' actions as constituting a defense of the rights of indigenous peoples. While Las Casas' paternalistic and protectionist treatment of indigenous peoples does not sit easy, Sepúlveda treated them as natural slaves and, in the neatness of one theoretical platitude borrowed from the Aristotelian school, assuaged the Spanish of any guilt, be it human

or Catholic, for the continuous exploitation of their nascent economic and symbolic order. For Immanuel Wallerstein, the debate at the *Consejo de las Indias* marked the foundation of international human rights and its globally totalized and hegemonic counterpart, interventionism (Wallerstein, 2006). Reducing indigenous subjectivity to a dyadic debate between two philosophers that based their arguments on European logic highlighted the foundation of the geopolitics of reason and the zero-point of human rights. Neither the philosophers nor governors among Las Casas, Sepúlveda, and Charles V, who presided over the session, thought to include indigenous memory, subjectivity, or history in the debate over the rights of indigenous peoples themselves.

If we understand Las Casas' writings and debates with Sepúlveda as an early dialogue at the cosmopolitan center of the Spanish Court, then it should follow that the writings of their contemporary, Francisco de Vitoria, marked what would later flourish into international law. A pious Jesuit thinker, Vitoria followed the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Vitoria believed that there was a natural law that man could encompass, theorize, and disseminate. In his lecture at the University of Salamanca in 1539, Vitoria asked if Spanish conquest and the usurpation of indigenous land were justified within the context of natural law. To develop his argument, he called into question the concept of dominion. If the indigenous populations, in fact, had dominion over the territories of the New World, and the Spaniards unilaterally appropriated these lands, then Spanish conquest would be proven to be an infringement of natural law. After all, Vitoria shows that indigenous peoples had a social order prior to the arrival of the Spaniards: "they have some order (*ordo*) in their affairs: they have properly organized cities, proper marriages, magistrates and overlords (*domini*), laws, industries, and commerce, all of which require the use of reason" (Vitoria, 1991, 250). However, Vitoria was quick to turn this point on its head by arguing that the fact that indigenous peoples were capable of reasoning, a faculty that Kant would later deny them (Kant, 2000). This showed that indigenous peoples should easily be able to assimilate into the correct reasoning, that which was brought to them by the Spanish.

In this way, Vitoria simultaneously humanizes and *Humanizes* indigenous populations. He proves that they are worthy of protection by the law, but that the law is necessary to create *rational* creatures out of them. Vitoria uses a Christian vocabulary to explain his concept of law: "Nor could it be their fault if they were for so many thousands of years outside the state of salvation, since they were born in sin but did not have the use of reason to prompt them to seek baptism or the things necessary for salvation". He continues: "Thus if they seem to us insensate and slow-witted, I put it down

mainly to their evil and barbarous education. Even amongst ourselves we see many peasants (*rustici*) who are little different from brute animals" (Vitoria, 1991: 250). Evangelism and baptism are translated into the protection of law, both marking the Christian substratum of Western law and an obvious blind spot in the theoretical bedrock of reason. Those who have not become Christians demonstrate the *irrational rationality* that falls outside of the reach of law, consequently causing indigenous populations to be labeled as backwards and barbarous. Vitoria's clearly biased unseating of local cosmology not only justifies, in his mind, epistemic, territorial, and corporeal colonization but even encourages it by depicting it as noble.

This paternalistic tone should have resonated strongly with anyone privy to Las Casas' writings in sixteenth century Spain. As is the case with Las Casas, Vitoria metonymically stood in for indigenous populations in the debate over indigenous rights and religious freedoms. By only granting indigenous peoples agency on Spanish soil and within the European paradigm through Christian-Spanish thinkers, non-European consciousness is displaced altogether, and an early example of cosmopolitanism resembles, under critical examination, simple reductionism. This natural law that, four hundred years later would be interpreted by Carl Schmitt as the *nomos of the earth*, writes the rules to human rights and international law based on its own convenient interpretation of a reason steeped in Catholic Doctrine. And, when these new concepts of rights and law are confronted by hang-ups or outliers, they simply pay lip service to aberrations with an indoctrinated stand-in; a clumsy metaphorization of New World archives.

This reflexive infrastructure is a clear example of the displacement of autochthonous cultural and ontological registers through colonial semiosis. Taking post-structuralist semiotics as a template, we understand that the articulation of meaning through language always leaves an unfulfilled remainder. The position of the speaker and the interlocutor is as important as the relationship between sign and signified. This impossibility of pure communication is magnified when two peoples without a common symbolic order to act as a reference point engage and interact. Spanish conquest and the self appointment of reason, as is highlighted above, offers an example of this difficulty in communication and further demonstrates what Walter Mignolo refers to as the *locus of enunciation*. In his book, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Mignolo points out that the semiotic disconnect and privileging of the European *locus of enunciation* based in a Catholic symbolic order was carried out by means of favoring a history and cultural memory based on written texts rather than an oral tradition (as was largely the practice in the pre-Columbian New World). The privileging of the European symbolic register is made possible by the nascent Capitalist system

and authoritarian control established by the Spanish explorers. Mignolo writes, "In the first place, colonial semiosis implies the coexistence of 'high' and 'low' cultures. It also implies power relations between, on the one hand, the group of people controlling the politics and economy, and, on the other, the subaltern communities" (2003: 10). Kant's aesthetic classification and the instituting of the infrastructure of Western modernity through debates carried out within the locus of enunciation all use the singular hermeneutic and the privileged space of an implied 'high' culture set in motion by the colonial matrix of power. In creating the Western modern man, a totalized episteme displaces alternative hermeneutics, also understood as alternative *nomoi* or loci of enunciation. But as we see in the writings and drawings of Guaman Poma, opposition to the privileged symbolic order was already in circulation as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Responses of Subjectivity

Guaman Poma, the Andean border dweller whose treatise *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* (The First New Chronicle of Good Government) took to task Spanish Catholic Doctrine and sociopolitical infrastructure in the New World, is exemplary of decolonial thought. Decolonial thinking highlights the fissures in totalized epistemes by theorizing from the borders and arguing for an agency of the silenced. Put in a theoretical vocabulary, it is a metanarrative of the censored that, contrary to traditional metanarratives, does not normalize or instrumentalize its practitioners. Decolonial theorization attempts to interject the displaced original consciousness into the dominant paradigm, allowing for the displaced to speak for themselves. In his letter to Phillip III, *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno*, Guaman Poma interjects the displaced Andean cosmology into the Catholic-based political infrastructure of sixteenth century Spain. He uses the moral code purported by Catholic Doctrine in order to gain agency within the dominant system and recover local memory displaced by the colonialist Spaniards at the cosmopolitan level.

Some critics argue that this does not travel a great distance from Bartolome de las Casas' undertakings. Yet, the debates in Valladolid take place on Spanish soil and in the context of the Spanish royal court. More importantly, they remain firmly rooted within the European Catholic cosmology, using referents exclusively from the Western cultural model. The debate does not give agency to indigenous populations of the New World but instead grants them a symbolic representative within the dominant cosmology. Guaman Poma, on the other hand, shifts the geography of reason by locating the debate in the New World, going so far as to frame Spain

within the Incan archive through his drawing of the cosmos, *Pontifical Mundo* (*The Pontiff's World*), and its division into a center and four Incan *suyos* (roughly translated from Quechua as 'government'). The *Pontifical Mundo* places the Incan world above Castilla in the drawing, which is anchored by a sun rising over the New World at the top of the folio in an emphasis of the importance of nature as foundational to the local symbolic order. This act turns the dominant consciousness on its head by reducing it to the Andean cognitive map and draws attention to the contradictions between Catholic Doctrine and the actions of the Spanish enlightened exploiters.



Pontifical Mundo is the most effective of Guamán Poma's drawings. It reinterprets Spanish cosmology with the intent of calling attention to the epistemic displacement carried out by the evangelism of the self-interpreted natural order. It is also exemplary of his employment of irony, wit, and code switching. By actually saying out loud what is implied in Catholic expansion, i.e. 'this is the Pope's empire', and placing the words in the context of the Andean 'suyo', he enters into a legal dialogue while highlighting the law's absurdity and incapacity to govern the local space. He makes visible constituted global doctrine while showing its constitutive limits. In essence,

he brings the implied cosmopolitan border—a great distance in geographical terms—together in one folio, producing a border poetics and undermining Catholic cosmology. It is an example of this give and take subversion that Rolena Adorno refers to when she writes:

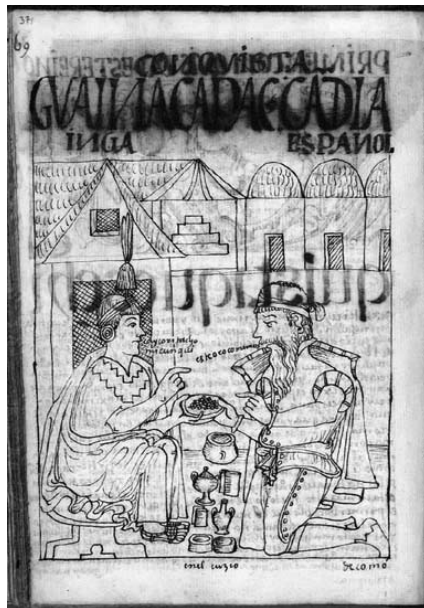
His employment of Andean spatial symbolism challenges the reader's assessment of his apparently assimilated artistic style; his metaphorical identifications, apparently innocent and well intended, possess a dark underside that overwhelms his interpretation of both the European and Andean sides of colonial experience. As a tool of irony, metaphor denies the illusion of unity and wholeness; it disguises differences but acknowledges that they cannot be ignored (Adorno, 1986: 140)

When he forces the cosmopolitan center and the barbarized elsewhere to converge, Guaman Poma both trivializes the metropole and finds an aesthetics that expresses his own existence as an epistemological border dweller.

Throughout the *Nuevo Corónica y Buen Gobierno*, we observe the detailed quotidian issues that weighed on the local psyche during the period of conquest. Many of these drawings highlight the physical violence carried out in the New World through the inception of the *encomienda system*, a representation already circulating in the Iberian intellectual imaginary thanks to Las Casas. However, instead of reducing his arguments to Catholic Doctrine, which he does of course use as a means to gain agency, both as an individual and an Andean, Guaman Poma points to one of the sources of the problem in his poignant drawing, *Es éste oro que comes? (Is this Gold that you Eat?)*.

Es éste or que comes comes from Guaman Poma's chapter on Spanish conquest and sharply draws Spanish economic interests into focus when in the foreground an Andean and a Spaniard sit in conversation. The Andean asks, "Is this gold that you eat?" The Spaniard simply responds, extending a plate of gold, "Yes, we eat this gold". The dialogue and symbolic exchange between the Andean and the Spaniard is fortified by the depiction of grain houses in the background that are used by the local subject to store food, further emphasizing the purpose of Andean labor: survival. The cosmopolitan border that is set as a geographical difference in *Pontifical Mundo* finds an epistemological and social counterpoint in *Es éste or que comes*, where we see that Guaman Poma interprets the Spaniards' occupation of the New World as driven by economic exploitation rather than a cultural dialogue. The metaphor of food is rich; it contrasts the natural sustenance of

the New World subject with the economic, commodity-drive sustenance of the Spaniards, highlighting the birth of the new economic order that, as we have seen, acts as the impetus for modern epistemic categorization. The fact that the Spaniard is portrayed as teaching the Andean to eat the gold is crucial. Not only does the Spaniard encroach upon the Andean's land, but he further displaces the local cosmology by introducing an exogenous value system. In this, and in contrast to the local paradigm, the driving force behind social organization is not natural sustenance, but valuable commodities.



Guaman Poma expresses himself through a border poetics that plays out through subversive rhetorical and aesthetic maneuvering. He reduces the geographical distance used by human rights and aesthetic theorists that displace New World subjects to a single folio in *Pontifical Mundo*; further, he reduces the epistemological distance used by the same theorists in *Es éste oro que comes*. Aesthetically, he transcends the visual-literary binary used to bolster cosmopolitan claims to symbolic dominance by combining visual *and* literary elements in his chronicle. What is the reduction of a geographic

border in the first instance plays out as the reduction of an epistemological border in the second, both of which force the cosmopolitan center to confront its negative referents head on. By speaking aloud what is implied by the early global design of Spanish expansion into the New World, Guaman Poma depicts the aesthetic border at which he dwells and calls into question the universal claims of the cosmopolitan center.

Conclusion

The need to totalize the world arising from Spanish conquest and continuing to the present day by way of modern theorization is a necessary accompaniment to the emergence and development of a modern political economy based on the reproduction of capital through surplus value. Philosophical meta-discourse in addition to a racial hierarchy that is used as an apologetics for conquest through the exoticizing and othering of non-European subjectivities create what is determined from within the privileged discourse to be a natural order or *nomos* of the earth. As a means of maintaining power, dissenting voices are kept within the *locus of enunciation*, thus metaphorically representing alternatives within the confines of the modern paradigm. Aesthetic borders are monological rather than dialogical, and what is claimed to be cosmopolitan remains myopic and reductionist.

Epistemic totality necessarily implies a cosmological displacement by means of codifying the world through a reduction of the global subjectivities to a chain of differences, leaving displaced populations to think of themselves in relation to the universal idyll. However, when Guaman Poma addresses the head of the Spanish Court, Phillip III, he gives voice to the complexities and strengths of Andean epistemology, political organization, history and spirituality. In doing so, he breaks with the self-referential debates carried out within the confines of the European paradigm. This alternative interpretation exemplifies what Mignolo refers to as the pluritopic hermeneutic and emphasizes the escape from totality as such (Mignolo, 2003). Guaman Poma ruptured the circular logic of coloniality by vocalizing a cosmology that does not fit neatly into its assigned position in the colonial matrix of power. He did so on aesthetic terms by giving visual representation to his life as a cosmopolitan border dweller. This act of border thinking adds a dimension to the colonized consciousness and subjectivity of the New World by resituating the exogenous narrative in its locus, and in doing so, points to the need for cosmopolitanism to breathe from a multitude of aesthetic archives. Otherwise, as Guaman Poma is early to point out, cosmopolitanism is simply conquest.

Brantley Nicholson is currently a PhD candidate at Duke University where he will defend his thesis, 'A Poetics of Globalism: Fernando Vallejo, the Generation of '72, and the Contemporary Colombian Urban Novel', this autumn. His work focuses on the representation of globalization and cosmopolitanism in modern and contemporary Latin American literature. He is currently co-editing a volume on the Generation of '72, Latin America's forced cosmopolitans, and from August 2011 will be Visiting Lecturer of Latin American and Iberian Studies at the University of Richmond.

Endnotes

¹ For versions of the mentioned contemporary Latin American texts in English, see Paul Hammond's translation of *Our Lady of the Assassins*, Helen Lane's translation of *Strange Things Happen Here*, Ariel Dorfman's own English version of *Death and the Maiden*, and Amanda Hopkinson's translation of *Burnt Money*.

² The term *Black Legend*, or *leyenda negra* as it is known in Spanish, is a concept developed Julián Juderías in *La leyenda negra y la verdad histórica* (1914), although the term has been in circulation in the Spanish press since 1912. The concept, according to Juderías, depicted Spanish hegemony as excessively exploitative and marred by backward practices such as religious fanaticism and was used by Northern European courts as rhetorical leverage against the Spanish Empire. For a more recent assessment of the concept, see the edited volume, *Rereading the Black Legend* (Greer and Mignolo, 2007).

³ For a good critique of Las Casas' Human Rights campaign, see Daniel Castro's text *Another Face of Empire* (2007).

⁴ The *encomienda system* was the economic model used by the Spanish in the New World to extract raw goods during colonization. Not dissimilar to the slave plantations of North America, the *encomienda* system was based on the exploitation of the cheap and roundly inhumane labor. In this case, indigenous subjects were de facto slaves.

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Images

The Colonial Matrix of Power

Taken from: Quijano, Aníbal (2000) "Colonialidad del Poder y Clasificación Social" *Journal of World-Systems Research* 6(2), 342-386

El Pontifical Mundo

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¿Es Este Oro Que Comes?

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Bataille against Heidegger: Language and the Escape from the World

by Andrew Ryder

Habermas' Identification of Bataille with Heidegger

In 1984, Jürgen Habermas spoke of a "common project" between Bataille and Heidegger (1998: 168). Each desires to overcome modernity, to discard rationalism, and to outstrip subjectivism (Habermas, 1998: 169). Habermas admits two distinctions: One is stylistic, and the other is that Bataille's objection to rationalization is ethical, whereas Heidegger's is ontological (ibid.). He considers both of these gaps to be epiphenomenal. The difference of style is of greater import than Habermas realizes. More than this, Bataille's ethical objection is substantive as well as stylistic; in Heidegger, he sees acquiescence to the hierarchical distinctions of a reified world. The distance of style and an ethic of affect between Bataille and Heidegger separate the former from the political errors of the latter. I will strive to pry apart the equivalence established by Habermas, partly through a measured comparison of both these thinkers to Emmanuel Levinas.

The stakes of Habermas' identification are political. From his perspective, both Bataille and Heidegger to have missed the politico-philosophical point of modernity: the founding of a rational community of mutual understanding. As a result, their writings fail to support democracy; instead, Bataille embraces anarchism and Heidegger, fascism (Habermas, 1998: 170). The identification of Heidegger with fascism is very controversial.¹ Indeed, Heidegger's work has often been read with great interest on the left, and a tendency towards "left-Heideggerianism" has been noted.² I will leave aside the pressing question of the degree to which Habermas is correct in reading Heidegger as a consistent advocate for fascism. Instead, because Bataille agreed with this characterization, subtitled his notes on Heidegger "Critique of a Philosophy of Fascism", this article will instead demonstrate Bataille's extrication of his own ideas from association with Heidegger and his grave political mistakes.³

Habermas notes that both Bataille and Heidegger are attempting to think through atheism. While Bataille repudiates any higher authority, Heidegger's death of God is voiced "in noble tones"; as a result, "it loses all radicality" (Habermas, 1998: 170). He notes that, for Heidegger, there is a

place ready to be filled in by the “hero”, who will turn out to be fascistic.⁴ Habermas sets forth a distinction between Bataille the anarchist and Heidegger the fascist, but sees them as united in their incoherence. From Habermas’ perspective, Heidegger’s open place of authority is ready for some fascistic sovereign; Bataille lies in wait at the same opening, ready to mock and reject the divine emergence. It is my contention that what Habermas takes to be a gap for the divine in Bataille is instead a recurrent fascination with alterity. This opening to alterity is bound up in Bataille’s literary style.

Habermas mentions with confidence that its obviousness must make it superficial: “the obvious differences between erotic writing and scholarly essays on one side, philosophical investigation and Being mysticism on the other” (1998: 168). This difference, the difference of style, is to Habermas negligible. Where Bataille appears frenzied and Heidegger stodgy, Habermas sees this as a distraction from their complicity. Bataille thinks more of his own stylistic difference from Heidegger than Habermas does. Indeed, it is necessary to elucidate how this difference in style is crucial to Bataille’s distance from Heidegger. Bataille states this directly in his “Critique of Heidegger”: “In the moment when I write, I breathe with all my strength, and I breathe free” (2006: 28). He ties love to strength, to freedom, and to writing, a configuration of terms alien to Heidegger. We find in Bataille that his strength becomes apparent, not in a concrete endeavor, but in writing. This is the moment of freedom, and the possibility of love; both these terms rest on a certain understanding of language, and specifically of literary language.

Kojève: Language and Death

Bataille’s understanding of literature inherits ideas from Alexandre Kojève, the thinker most responsible for Hegel’s significance in French thought of the 1930s and 1940s. Kojève’s subject imposes meaning through the negative, related to the consciousness of finitude. For this subject, revelation through language requires a term with no direct relation to the world itself (Kojève, 2004: 39). Kojève asserts that this linguistic mediation relies on death (2004: 36). To make this point, Kojève takes the example of a dog. This dog has an existence in the world, but its distinction from other animals that we give different names is not immediately given by nature. This is language’s separating force, the ability to distinguish the concept “dog” from an actually existing dog (Kojève, 2004: 42). Words have no natural relation with the object they represent. To give a name is to establish a genus and to detach from the *hic et nunc*. Rather than a singular example, we have in addition the concept of a dog, removed from this living and breathing dog.

Kojève believes that this mediation and discovery through language requires mortal man, because only a being capable of imagining the removal from existence of this dog, could be capable of forging the concept in excess of this possibility (its name). In part, this emphasis on death is derived from Heidegger as much as from Hegel, in particular Heidegger's insistence on orientation towards death as necessary to authenticity (Heidegger, 1962: 266). Indeed, Kojève affirms identity between Heidegger and Hegel on finitude (Kojève, 2004: 74). Heidegger will make a similar point about death, language, and humanity, decades later, in his 1959 *On the Way to Language*: "Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do this. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought" (Heidegger, 1971: 107-108). Heidegger notes a relationship that is essential, but declares it ahead of us, not deriving it or following its consequences.

Hegel's discourse is boundless and absolute (Kojève, 2004: 39). Language is capable of asserting anything, discussing impossible objects, constructing agrammatical formulations, and taking on absurd meanings in new contexts. Hegel's goal is to construct the Notion, which is the real building block of existence. This requires correspondence between the negating force of discourse and objects in the world. Without discourse and human negation, we just have raw dumb immediacy, and without reference, we have imaginative excess. The Understanding requires subsequent Reason, which supplies the abstraction of language with its bearings in the world (ibid.). Literary language, however, does not submit itself to this reckoning.

This is why Bataille speaks of the freedom of writing in his critique of Heidegger. This complicity between literary style and death occurs again in his *Inner Experience*. Bataille writes:

Laughter, dream and, in sleep, in the rooftops fall in a rain of gravel [. . .] to know nothing, to this point (not of ecstasy, but of sleep): to strangle myself thus, unsolvable puzzle, to accept sleep, the starry universe my tomb, glorified, glory constellated with deaf stars, unintelligible and *further than death*, terrifying (nonsense: the taste of garlic which the roasted lamb had) (1998: 61)

This parenthetical "taste of garlic" appears to be exactly what Bataille is after: a nonsense that we will find absent from any of Heidegger's phenomenological analyses. Here we find dreams in the sleep of death; the prospect of a further unknown, which Bataille finds at the limits of language's expressive capacity. The ability to produce this effect is one

inherent to Bataille's fragmentary style. We will never find Heidegger writing like this, whatever the encomium to poetry that is his later work. Bataille's linking of this specifically nonsensical poetry to a shore on the opposite side of death evokes Levinas' notion of the *il y a*. This is appropriate, because he gives poetic and artistic examples in order to approach painful Being.⁵ My reading of Levinas' literary qualities, and Bataille's reception of these ideas, is greatly indebted to Jill Robbins's authoritative treatment in *Altered Reading*.

Levinas and the *il y a*

The thesis of Levinas' *Existence and Existents* is that existence in general precedes any particular being (2001: 1). While a being "already exercises over Being the domination a subject exercises over its attributes," we are always capable of looking back over our shoulder to a preexistent period, prior to our individualization (ibid.). Levinas describes an impersonal Being that precedes us and will survive us, and that he identifies with matter and with evil (2001: 4). According to Levinas, Heidegger considers evil to be a defect and anxiety regarding death to be a crucial problem. In contrast, Levinas declares that Being, not its absence, is itself suffering; the impersonal Being that precedes and survives death is already malevolent and disturbing (ibid.).⁶ He identifies the experience of the *il y a* with horror, and contrasts this to Heidegger's "anxiety" (2001: 57). For Levinas, horror is not directed at death itself, it is an awareness of the Being that continues after death (2001: 58). After mortality remains an evil, unthinkable substance.

Bataille read and reviewed *Existence and Existents*. In this review, Bataille considers thought beyond philosophy, suggested by Søren Kierkegaard's "cry" against Hegelian science (1999: 162). Bataille argues that modern existentialists, including Heidegger, are not faithful to Kierkegaard's cry (1999: 159). For Bataille, the language of Heidegger's "philosophy is laborious, it is gluey. There is, it seems to me, a hesitation at its basis. Existentialist thinking is always fleeting but never achieves in itself the annihilation of thinking" (1999: 160). Despite this criticism, Bataille commends Heidegger for synthesizing atheism and religious experience (ibid.). This is high praise from Bataille, whose *Summa atheologica* writings had this goal. Bataille writes that Heidegger's "teaching proceeds from the most meaningful investigation that has been made of the spheres of the profane and the sacred, the discursive and the mystical, the prosaic and the poetic" (ibid.). This opposition and intertwining between sacred and profane, and prose and poetry, is at the center of Bataille's concerns. In this moment, he seems to support Habermas' argument, recognizing Heidegger as his *semblable*. At one point, Bataille even seems to exonerate Heidegger's

political missteps, in a footnote removed from the corrected version (ibid.).

Heidegger and Passion

Bataille proceeds from this praise to a series of vehement criticisms, directly in line with those made a decade earlier in his “Critique of Heidegger”. Bataille argues that Heidegger’s sacred is identical to the realm of the *authentic* (ibid.). For this reason, whatever Heidegger’s commonalities with Kierkegaard in their commitment to the singular as against science, the two are distinct. This is because of the former’s characteristic “misery”, opposed to Kierkegaard’s “passion” (Bataille, 1999: 161). Unlike Heidegger’s, “the authenticity of Kierkegaard is inapplicable to a world, it was a consummation of life so intense that it left the development of knowledge in the background” (ibid.). In contrast, while Heidegger starts from the position of the individual *Dasein*, he characterizes the modes of being according to an authentic relationship with objects and their adequate discernment. For this reason, Bataille “has trouble seeing in Heidegger that which responds to the passion which is truly mad and cried out by Kierkegaard” (ibid.). Whatever Heidegger’s criticisms of rationalism’s forgetfulness of Being, his tone and his values confine him to the realm of the already-given and the sanity of recognition. In this Bataille articulates a kind of ethic of affect.

Bataille declares that Heidegger is consumed with “nostalgia for rare authentic moments scattered in a professorial life” (ibid.). While this is an *ad hominem* criticism on Bataille’s part, the biographical differences between Heidegger and Bataille are here revealed as consequential. Bataille declares that, for Heidegger, “the authentic appears as a consciousness of the authentic [. . .] [and] given over to the *knowledge* of the authentic” (ibid.). Heidegger’s refusal to commit himself to consideration of the experiences that Bataille sees as crucial to the breaking point of subjectivity render Heidegger’s critique of the history of that subject moot. Bataille leaps from this criticism of the tedium of Heidegger’s biography to deduce the cause of his political folly:

This life does not seem dominated by a terrible passion: one cannot be surprised by a slippage, which is not necessary but possible, from the authentic to Hitlerism. What dominated Heidegger was doubtless the intellectual desire to reveal being (being and not existence) in discourse (in philosophical language) (ibid.)

This evocative, too-brief passage, later redacted, links several claims.⁷

Heidegger is accused of timidity and careerism in his personal life, contributing both to his support for Hitler and his need to display Being in the language of philosophy. Bataille claims that Heidegger prefers authenticity to passion. Heidegger's goal is recognition of being, through language, and not the radical *repudiation* in which Bataille locates his version of the sacred.⁸

Heidegger himself would not agree that he is deficient in passion. Rather, he writes that it is essential for the assumption of authenticity to wrench oneself from the illusions of "the They" and embrace an "*impassioned freedom towards death*" (Heidegger 1962: 266). However, Heidegger's passion is not at all consonant with Bataille's. In the chapter "Will as Affect, Passion, and Feeling" of his *Nietzsche* lectures, Heidegger aims to distinguish between different varieties of mood. He believes that Nietzsche conflates affect, a bodily agitation, with passion, which allows him to achieve "lucid mastery" (1991: 45, 48). Heidegger stipulates, "Passion has nothing to do with sheer desire. It is not a matter of the nerves, of *ebullition* and dissipation" (1991: 49). Rather than ebullition, Heidegger's passion is a "lucidly gathering grip on beings" (*ibid.*). Heidegger associates ebullition with affect and with infatuation, which are dubitable, and not truly passionate. He associates passion with values symbolized in Nietzsche by the eagle and the serpent.

According to Heidegger, the eagle represents pride, which is "the fully developed resolution of one who maintains himself at the level of his own essential rank" (1991: 46). This concern for hierarchy echoes a statement made on behalf of National Socialism: "To domination belongs power, which creates a hierarchy of grades through the imposition of the will of the one who rules, insofar as he is actually powerful, i.e., insofar as he disposes those under his rule" (Faye, 2009: 239).⁹ The Nietzschean serpent, according to Heidegger, represents discernment. In this context, Heidegger is talking about passion in terms of love. He thinks that both mature love and the anticipation of death require passion, which depends on pride and discernment. Like Nietzsche, Bataille does not distinguish between seizure by affect on one hand and resoluteness of passion on the other. Rather, Bataille's passion would include the loss of mastery that Heidegger needs to confine to the realm of affect. Through a reading of Bataille, Heidegger's pride and discernment can be seen as ways of covering up the possibility of alterity.

Bataille criticized the figure of the eagle in advance. In an early article, he associates himself with materialism as against the sovereign virility of the eagle (1985: 34-35). Bataille argues that the eagle is aligned with imperialism and metaphysical ideals, and opposes Marx's old mole and Zarathustra's "sense of the Earth" to the prideful eagle (1985: 39). Zarathustra's love for the earth carries with it the realization that the bourgeoisie have killed God, and all that remains is in catastrophic disarray. This landscape is where

Bataille chooses to think.

Bataille, Materialism, and the *il y a*

The sense of the earth, which Bataille locates in both Marx and Nietzsche, appeals to his particular sense of materialism. This materialism also corresponds, in some ways, to the *il y a*. Levinas associates the *il y a* with “the absence of God”, as well as with the primitive, pre-Judaic sacred (2001: 56). He also explicitly identifies this godless, evil, excessive being with matter (2001: 51). Levinas declares that Heidegger is unaware of the horror of the *il y a*. Heidegger begins with Beings already thrown into the world and their anxiety at the prospect of their dissolution into nothingness, and who purchase authenticity by anticipating this eventuality. Levinas, in contrast, argues that an essential problem is indicated by a more profound horror. This horror is not in the face of nothingness, but at the intuition of impersonal being that precedes us, and which lies in wait for us just following our deaths.

Bataille embraces this horror and valorizes it. He argues on behalf of something like Levinas’ *il y a* – a desolate, post-divine landscape of meaninglessness – for the failure of Heidegger’s conception of Dasein, which remains all-too-subjective in its insertion into Being (1999: 173). Bataille and Levinas interpret this immediate entry into Being as an authority over it. Bataille’s fascination with matter reveals the necessity of the *il y a* for Levinas’ post-Heideggerian outlook. Whatever horror is attendant to Levinas’ consideration of impersonal Being, this impersonal-existence-in-general is crucial to his distinction from Heidegger.

The theme of perception is central to these relations of endorsement and critique. Levinas argues that Heidegger fails properly to conceive of evil. Heidegger imagines it to be privative, an impending nothingness, where it is for Levinas a superfluous abundance. Levinas believes that Heidegger strayed into evil because of this failure adequately to perceive its nature. However, it is the nature of the *il y a* to be imperceptible. The *il y a* can only be glanced at through poetry or through art, and written of in an evocative, literary style. In other words, a commitment to lucid perception, vital to Heidegger’s authenticity, by its goals and methods will necessarily fail to grasp the *il y a*, which is the dissolution of any such certain apprehension. A commitment to perception walls off the imperceptible.

Bataille chooses to criticize Levinas’ characterization of the *il y a* as remaining too close to the descriptive realm of philosophical language. From Bataille’s perspective, Levinas remains all-too-phenomenological, and hence, too close to the discursive revelation Bataille identifies with Heidegger’s authenticity. Bataille’s gesture will be towards a different language that does

not appeal to discernment, but rather to a tearing from the world. Bataille indicates that Levinas, whatever his desire to criticize Heidegger, continues to practice philosophical language, and as a result fails to express the force of impersonal Being.

For Bataille, Levinas draws back from evil on a stylistic level. To take the *il y a* seriously is to discard concrete language and to speak in the ambiguity of the literary and to risk meaning nothing. Being beyond death is also beyond the grasp of perception. For this reason, its expression must escape discernment and adequation. The *il y a* interrupts the transmission of meaning, and words that speak of it must do the same. It may not be even be correct to say that one “speaks” of the *il y a*. Bataille indicates that literary language moves towards animal sounds and away from human speech: he speaks of equivalence to the “impenetrable howling of a dog” (1999: 167). In other words, poetry aspires to the quality of barking or howling. The goal would be to dispense with thinking entirely, to instead express an opaque, meaningless shriek.

Bataille appropriates Levinas’ term entirely, at one point even asserting that Levinas’ thought “does not differ, it seems to me, [. . .] from mine” (1999: 168).¹⁰ Bataille indicates that the *il y a* is not an object of knowledge, but an experience: Individual, painful, with “the value of a cry” (1999: 169). The experience is so intimate and nonsensical that is apparently non-communicable. Bataille goes on to indicate that experience is always this way (*ibid.*). Experience, by nature, cannot be “communicated under the heading of clear knowledge, but solely in the form of poetry” (Bataille, 1999: 171). Contrary to Levinas, who sees this type of experience and the poetry that expresses it as a hazard, Bataille acclaims these themes: “I can regard the night of non-knowledge as my deliverance” (1999: 172).

However, it is imperative not to confuse Bataille’s endorsement of the *il y a* as a positive dimension of experience, and his valorization of poetry, with romanticism. For this reason, Bataille’s indication of Heidegger as a romantic is not laudatory (1999: 159). This is clear from Bataille’s reading of Jean Wahl, in the same review in which he treats Levinas. In Bataille’s gloss, Wahl dreamt of “philosopher-poets”, “philosophers by origin but only in order to liquidate a heritage”, who “endlessly resolve the tension of philosophical research in poetic effusion” (1999: 159). Wahl saw Kierkegaard as the first of these, and argued that a greater fidelity to him could be achieved by a poetized version of philosophy. This is not far from the journey towards poetry on which Heidegger embarked, subsequent to *Being and Time*. Bataille does not approve of this aesthetic solution.

Heidegger, Language, and Humanism

Bataille criticizes Wahl for an aestheticism that maintains the coherence of the “philosopher-poet” and his capacity to interact with his situation through art. According to Bataille, Kierkegaard and Rimbaud, who “express existence in intensity”, “are not destroyed by a necessity of which they are conscious” (1999: 163). Expression is not consciousness, and destruction is not a recognized necessity. Bataille’s experience cannot be described as a romantic or aesthetic one, in that, as Robbins puts it, it calls into question “any notion of poetic authority and its concomitant celebration of the creative powers of a subject” (1999: 108). Famously, Heidegger later emphasizes such a departure from the subject in his 1947 “Letter on Humanism”, intended to correct Kojève’s reading of his work into Hegelianism.¹¹ In contrast to Kojève, who posited the human subject as central and language as destructive, Heidegger establishes language and Being as having a kind of priority over human beings. This text posits Man as “the shepherd of Being”, who lets beings Be through language, rather than killing them, as Kojève would have it (Heidegger, 1993: 234).

Heidegger appears close to Bataille when he argues that grammar is a manifestation of the public. The public realm degrades language, with the purpose of “expediting communication along routes where objectification – the uniform accessibility of everything to everyone – branches out and disregards all limits” (Heidegger, 1993: 221). The goal of hastening communication eliminates the specificity in favor of the abstract. Instrumental language “stems from the dominance of subjectivity” (ibid.). Even so, Heidegger’s clarification or revision remains vulnerable to Bataille’s charge of aestheticism. This is because Heidegger’s account of man’s duty to Being rests on a consideration of discernment of existing beings, rather than on the experience of being torn away from them. While Bataille does not entirely endorse Kojève’s more active consideration of Man, he remains much closer to the Kojévian model in his emphasis on language as the carrier of separation and of negativity.

Heidegger tells us that “in thinking Being comes to language” (1993: 218). Language does not separate and recombine the existence of things as the sovereign right of man. It allows Being to appear. Thinking brings Being to language and maintains it there, protecting it from danger. To think is to say the truth of Being, but also to be seized by it. Heidegger’s thinking serves Being, it does not master it as Kojève’s does. Kojève’s Hegelian subject is capable of recombining and representing objects with impunity. It is man as agent of the realization of things, and it is both existentially unique and historically universal (2004: 39). In contrast, Heidegger will advocate a

different mode of revealing Being through language, which will not subordinate Being to the absolute power of thinking man. This seems to abandon the mastery he once argued as essential to passion (Heidegger, 1991: 48).

Heidegger refuses to define thinking as the role of the collective subject, a goal and actor Heidegger considers merely the public and the "they". Heidegger sees the instrumental understanding of language on behalf of history that Kojève endorses as inadequate for the revelation of Being and a "threat to the essence of humanity" (1993: 221). The essence of humanity is to bring Being to thought. This threat, language as instrument, "undermines aesthetic and moral responsibility" (ibid.). Technology conquers language and subjugates it to "mere willing and trafficking as an instrument of domination over beings" (ibid.: 223). Technical language speaks to hubris on the part of man, a metaphysical exaltation of the subject, and abandonment of the duty to Being. This use of language, linked to the emphasis on craft, contributes to the "homelessness of modern man" (ibid.: 243).

Heidegger endorses a partial allegiance to the young Marx's notion of alienation in this consideration of homelessness. For Marx, man, the producer, bows down before his products. Heidegger is not interested in restoring the central place of man, and would not endorse an understanding of things in terms of use-value. He is, however, in agreement with regard to this understanding of man as losing his humanity in service to commodities. To Heidegger, exploitation is one egregious manifestation of the homelessness produced by submission to technological understanding. This homelessness, man's forgetting of himself in favor of a preoccupation with rationality, science, and production, leads metaphysics to be "entrenched and covered up as such" (ibid.). Technical thinking, which necessarily follows from humanist presuppositions, finds the truth of Being in causes and explanations (ibid.: 223).

The problem with humanism is that it situates man as a being among beings, and pretends it already knows what those beings might be. Humanism has decided that Being is expressed in causes and in explanations. Those forgotten presuppositions carry with them a technical and teleological interest in defining objects by their reference to an essence other than their existence. Heidegger calls this technicity, teleology, and essentialism "metaphysics". Rather than being the master of things, naming them and determining their causes, purposes, and explanations, Heidegger opens the question of ontological difference between objects and the raw appearance of their existence. Instead of providing subjective meaning to the world, man is "'thrown' from Being itself" (ibid.: 234). He is himself a being

separate from Being, but uniquely capable of thinking the question of Being. This awareness of the ontological difference, the famous difference between Being and beings, allows man to “guard the truth of Being, in order that beings might appear in the light of Being as the beings they are” (ibid.).

While Bataille’s *moi* is also separate from Being, he would repudiate the essential role of revealing beings through language and Being. Even this duty, from his perspective, remains subordination. His language does not illuminate beings. The “taste of garlic” that Bataille evokes in the apprehension of death is not revealed in his language. It is instead presented as enigmatic, untruthful, and dirty. Bataille’s language is a being that is obscured by death. It is material.¹²

Heidegger criticizes Marxism for a metaphysical commitment to materialism, which posits all beings as “the material of labor” (1993: 243). The tendency to see all objects as congealed labor-time leads Marxism to complicity with technical thinking. Marxism remains as much a threat to man and Being as capitalism. Bataille might share distaste at measuring things according to labor. However, Heidegger’s revulsion is also directed at a material definition of things. Materialism, for Heidegger, must carry with it the desire to seek out an essence distinct from existence, and for this reason be metaphysical. Bataille, in contrast, finds matter to be something else entirely than an adjunct to labor or to metaphysics.

Outside of Being

Bataille speaks of *le moi*, the ego or the self, rather than of *Dasein*. Bataille’s *moi* is distinct from *Dasein* because it is undetermined and absent from the world (2006: 33). While Heidegger would set himself against the determinations of rationalism, his *Dasein* is a being among beings. Heidegger sees *Dasein* as discerning beings through action and language, tending to their appearance. Bataille sees this as belonging to a “system of intentions” against which he is in revolt (ibid.).¹³ He insists on the necessity of value (as against Heidegger’s “pride” of the eagle):

If a man has a sense of his value, which he relates to another, established value, if he relates to the place he occupies on one of the miserable ladders of power, then by so doing he rejects himself *outside of being* and rejects his existence in the mass of squandered existence, existence that has been produced in fact but has not attained the form where it ceases producing itself in relation to other things (2006: 34)

In other words, for Bataille, man is not a being among beings, but a being capable of rejecting his place among beings. The essential capacity is not to let beings be through language, but to tear yourself from them. As Geroulanos puts it, “without a proclamation of insufficiency as a central factor in all existence, Being is nothing but immanence reducing the individual to shared uniform sociality” (2006: 14). Bataille returns to the Kojévian theme of desire as a destructive capacity, carrying with it a force separate from the world as given. Desire proceeds from and aims itself at an insatiable lack.

From Bataille’s perspective, Heidegger’s *Dasein*, thrown into the world and with the duty of tending to the Being of the objects surrounding him, falls short of the freedom of a human individual. *Le moi*, capable of slipping out of this world, carries with it the potential for radical freedom. For Bataille, Heidegger’s reduction of existence to the maintenance of beings mirrors the political accomplishment of fascism, which upholds the profane world under the pretense of transcending it. Heidegger’s authenticity covers up the pain, lack, and horror attendant to existence. This attempt culminates in the project of authentic *Mit-sein*: “Our fates have already been guided in advance, in our Being with one another in the same world and in our resoluteness for definite possibilities” (Heidegger, 1962: 384). It is this world and these possibilities that Bataille’s *moi* escapes.

Andrew Ryder (aryder@emory.edu) is an Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature at Al-Quds University in East Jerusalem. He received his doctorate from Emory University, where he was a fellow at the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry. He has published articles on Freud, Lacan, Sartre, and Derrida.

Endnotes

¹ For condemnations and evidence of Heidegger’s involvement in National Socialism, see Victor Farías (1991) *Heidegger and Nazism*, and Emmanuel Faye (2009) *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933-1935*. See also David Farrell Krell’s discussion in the “Introduction to the Paperback Edition” of Heidegger (1991).

² For the history of Heidegger’s reception in France and its controversies, see Ethan Kleinberg (2005) *Generation Existential*. For subsequent innovations, see Oliver Marchart (2007: 11-34) “The Contours of ‘Left Heideggerianism’: Post-Foundationalism and Necessary Contingency”.

³ For an exploration of commonalities between Bataille and Heidegger, see

Rebecca Comay (1990: 66-89).

⁴ Heidegger writes of an “authentic repetition of a possibility of existence that has been – the possibility that Dasein may choose its hero”, “grounded existentially in anticipatory resoluteness” (1962: 385).

⁵ Robbins points out “an utter intrication of art and the *il y a*” (1999: 93).

⁶ Bataille points out that the distinction from Heidegger is not clear. Heidegger’s ontological difference indicates that Being in general is nearly nothing, and “the nothing”, as such, is the form of Being *qua* Being (1999: 166).

⁷ Bataille removed the reference to Hitlerism from the corrected text that appears in the *Œuvres complètes* (1988a: 285).

⁸ For a brief engagement with contemporary Heideggerian thought on this point, see my review of *Engaging Heidegger* by Richard Capobianco (Ryder, 2010).

⁹ This is quoted from the unpublished Winter 1934-35 seminar, *Hegel, On the State*, citations from which are published in Faye (2009: 203-242).

¹⁰ Robbins sees this as an erasure of the evident alterity between Bataille’s and Levinas’ conceptions of the *il y a*. Bataille appropriates and re-evaluates, rather than citing and reading. For this reason, “each is unable to quote the other” (1999: 99).

¹¹ For this work as a corrective to Kojève, see Kleinberg (2005: 157-208).

¹² As Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree write, for Bataille, “In poetic language, the impenetrable ungraspable is no longer neglected, but neither is it objectified or possessed” (see the “Editor’s Introduction”, 2009: 15).

¹³ Bataille’s association of Heidegger with intentionality may come from the early French readings of Heidegger, which associate him closely with Husserl. Heidegger also uses the language of intentionality in “On the Essence of Ground” (Geroulanos, 2006: 17).

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Democracy's Era of Relative Decline

by Andrew Gibson

Abstract

This article focuses on the question of democratic participation in Canada and in Western democracies more generally. Two approaches to the problem of declining participation are briefly canvassed. The first links the problem to social exclusion and the persistence of “democratic divides”, while the second attributes weak participation levels to institutional deficiencies. The paper problematizes these approaches by contrasting them with a set of insights brought forth by philosopher Charles Taylor in his assessment of the current era as one of *relative* democratic decline. Central to his argument is the idea of a shift in forms of democratic politics from a “broad-gauge” model to a “punctual” one. And behind this lies another shift, between the postwar mobilization of working-class identities and the simultaneous emergence of consumer identities based on status-driven practices of “mutual display”.

Keywords

political participation • citizenship • identity
civil society • consumerism

In many Western countries today, there is a general discouragement about the worth and potential of democratic life. Belief in the notion that in obeying our rulers we are actually obeying ourselves is felt to be half-hearted at best. In exchanging political points of view at the local pub or café, conversations all too quickly fall prey to cynicism and indifference. It used to be that commentators focused their critique on the democratic failings of corrupt and repressive regimes abroad. But an increasing number of men and women are now beginning to worry about the soundness of Western democracies themselves, Canada included.

Scholarly debates seem to have shifted away from the old question of whether we should be advocates of republican democracy or protectors of a more liberal form of self-government focusing on rights and the election of capable leaders. These debates now seem rather moot, as it has become

apparent that the citizens of many Western nations are increasingly unwilling to partake in even the most basic democratic duties. The clearest example of this is the steady decline in participation at the ballot box in recent decades. Thus, quite apart from anything going on in other parts of the world, this has led many commentators to ask about the integrity and sustainability of democracy in its "erstwhile heartlands".

Of course, things are not as bleak as some people make them out to be. Rule-by-the-people continues to be regarded as a cherished ideal with regard to which many men and women remain committed. As testimony of this commitment, we find that a lot of ink has been spilt addressing the weaknesses and shortcomings of Canadian democracy, with the aim of reinvigorating it. And this literature has generated many important insights. Various proposals for institutional reform have been made, just as a strong case has been put forth concerning the material preconditions of democratic engagement. If there is an inadequacy in this literature, it is that it fails to offer a holistic picture of what it is seeking to shed light on.

The present paper seeks to make a contribution to this debate by drawing on the work of philosopher Charles Taylor. In doing so, it provides a critique of current approaches to the analysis of democratic decline, while at once putting forth a more comprehensive interpretation. The strength of Taylor's ideas on the subject is their breadth. His work shows that our focus cannot be limited to the mathematics of parliamentary representation, nor to fluctuating numbers at the ballot box or the amount of members signed up to political parties and to other associations of civil society. For there also needs to be an understanding of how one form of participation differs from another in terms of sustaining overall democratic vitality, just as there needs to be a sense of how personal identities are shaped around non-political vehicles of public expression such as fashion and consumption.

The paper begins by questioning the assumptions behind two prominent approaches to the question of democratic vitality. The first of these focuses its assessment around the "democratic divides" created through various forms of social exclusion. On this view, the fact that large swaths of the Canadian population do not have the resources to permit serious engagement gets at the heart of the problem of democratic decline. A second approach holds that weak public participation can be linked to deficiencies in democratic institutions such as parties and legislatures. In calling into question these different approaches, the paper does not argue that they are simply wrong or that the issues they address are unimportant. Rather, the claim is that social exclusion and institutional deficiencies do not tell us the whole story behind why Canadian citizens are turning away from the ballot box and, indeed, why they seem less interested in "changing the world" than they might once have been.

The second part of the paper turns to Taylor's interpretation of a shift in modes of democratic politics. He describes this as a shift away from "broad-gauge" politics to more "punctual" forms of engagement. The former requires broad social engagement around all the relevant issues affecting the nation, while the latter involves the targeted interventions of "single issue" interest groups and associations. Part of what is at stake behind this shift, Taylor suggests, is the dissolution of working class identities. For, with the newfound affluence of the working classes in the postwar period, broad-gauge mobilization has lost much of its appeal. Yet, as argued in the final section of the paper, what is also at issue is the rise of a different sort of public life altogether, one centered on consumer based practices of "mutual display".

The Social Exclusion and Institutional Deficiency Theses

One approach to the problem of weak democratic participation is to link it to social exclusion. This is essentially a critique of democracy on the grounds that it has failed to include the marginalized and underprivileged – precisely those men and women who could benefit most from having their voices heard. It is hard to disagree that Western democracies suffer from their inability to bring about more equal opportunity. In Canada, as elsewhere, there exist many enduring types of exclusion. Typically, marginalized groups suffer from low levels of education and professional training, but they may also be geographically isolated. They are likely to be discriminated against for reasons of gender, colour, faith or creed. Prejudices tend to work against them when applying for jobs, receiving services and in the mere expression of their views.

The overall effect of these factors tends to be one of material dispossession, poverty and humiliation. Yet it also involves a failure of meaningful participation, such as in political parties or other civic associations. It is not as though there have not been any attempts to reform these conditions. Historically, such initiatives have met with some success. Indeed, it is hard to discount the moral progress of egalitarian reforms over the last two centuries. Still, the critique of social exclusion is right to suggest that the egalitarian project remains incomplete. To take a telling statistic, there is roughly the same proportion of poor and marginalized Canadians today as there was a quarter of a century ago. Further, there is no reason to believe that the unlucky members of this "second tier" of citizens will be able to offer their children a more promising fate. There is no obvious groundswell of egalitarian sentiment on the horizon, nor are there any long-term structural changes to be optimistic about.

Many "first tier" citizens are baffled by the seeming intractability of the problem. Given the many state initiatives and service groups, they are puzzled by the millions of poor that remain. Some end up blaming the victims or attributing their bad luck to irremediable facts of nature. On the other hand, there are also those committed groups of activists and professionals who don't find the problem to be all that puzzling whatsoever. In their view, community and state-based initiatives have simply never been creative or compassionate enough. Consequently, there remain vast numbers of Canadian citizens that struggle daily to avoid humiliating deprivation. These are men and women belonging to large families with low incomes, recent immigrants, single mothers, the long-term unemployed and those feeling the hard pinch of rapidly devaluing job skills.

Operating on a different plane than official politics, their struggles are of a more personal and immediate sort. The worst off are thrown into a protracted crisis-situation involving, as one commentator succinctly puts it, a "series of exhausting, embittered activities" within which they rely on "forms of opposition extending from confrontations with authorities, to desperate efforts to maintain the integrity of both family and psyche, to the mobilization of aid by friends and relatives" (Fraser & Honneth, 2003: 117). These struggles and conflicts typically have little connection to political parties and social movements. They are often poorly understood by the media and public opinion. The afflicted themselves, finally, often have little time or interest for "politics".

We can plausibly assume that it is on the basis of an initial picture of this sort that the social exclusion approach emerges. The main argument of this body of research, as defended for example by Elisabeth Gidengil and her colleagues, is that there are simply too many men and women that are directly or indirectly excluded from political activities for meaningful, widespread participation to occur. It is difficult to deny there being an important element of truth to this argument. Indeed, the reasoning is fairly straightforward: the fewer active, capable and committed participants there are, the less likely it is that we'll find an overall buzz of democratic activity, whether in everyday associative instances, or in the formal sphere of parties, elections and legislatures.

The argument could be extended to specify that it is not just a question of "objective" exclusion through lack of time, education and political knowledge, but also an issue respect. The marginalized classes may have highly relevant contributions to make to democratic debate. We might even assume that their opinions are of the greatest urgency in purportedly egalitarian societies. In the regular humdrum of everyday politics, however, their experiences of felt injustice are seldom sought after. Instead, the

opinions of marginalized men and women are for the most part implicitly devalued and ignored.

Thus the social critique of participation remains crucial. Gidengil and her colleagues are certainly right to suggest that political absenteeism finds "deep causes" linked to inequalities in material resources, education, gender, region and age, creating what they call "democratic divides". These divides form obvious obstacles to a more fully engaged citizenry. Still, it is reasonable to question to what extent such obstacles can be used as an explanation of democratic decline. One cannot help wonder, for instance, why such factors would be any more pertinent today than in previous times. Put differently, we might ask whether there have not always been marginalized men and women, and this in greater proportions than today, i.e. prior to the rise of the postwar middle class.

The social critique of participation tends to come up short in addressing such questions. Furthermore, if it helps to specify who is excluded and why, it does little to address the question of why those who are not excluded are themselves failing to participate. While the latter are more engaged than the former, their numbers are still low. As mentioned above, there is a second type of approach which at first seems better able to shed light on these questions. From this alternative perspective, the problem lies in the deficiencies of official democratic institutions. The focus is thus not on social exclusion per se, but rather on the failing standards of democratic institutions.

On this view, it would seem that the daily functioning of these institutions is so ill-perceived by the public that they are no longer able to motivate citizens to partake in public affairs. Since the 1990s there has been much negative press of this sort at the federal level. Given that voter apathy has struck at all levels of government, calls for reform have also been heard at provincial and municipal levels. But whatever the instance, the main assumption of the institutional deficiency thesis seems to be that if our institutions were better designed, according to more democratic principles, citizens might once again "fly to the assemblies".

Some of the institutions in question include political parties, legislatures and parliaments, as well as the electoral system itself. So, for example, we commonly hear that there is too much party discipline and not enough autonomy in the representation of constituencies; that there is too much power and secrecy surrounding Cabinet and an excessive centralization of power in the PMO; that the Senate is a dysfunctional vestige of the old aristocracy and that the first-past-the-post system consistently under-represents voter preferences.

The list could go on, as demonstrated by Jeffrey Simpson's analysis

in *The Friendly Dictatorship*, which sums up many of the more detailed academic accounts. Much of Simpson's analysis links public ill-feelings to a perception of arrogance among public officials, which Simpson in turn considers to be the consequence of poor institutional organization. With "friendly dictators" at the helm, it is perhaps not surprising to find what he describes as a "sullen and disengaged citizenry" (Simpson, 2001: xiii). From this perspective, what is needed for men and women to regain confidence in political leadership is a sense that our political institutions are running as democratically as possible – in a responsive, participatory and inclusive manner.

The argument of this paper is not to say that the concerns raised by institutional critics are invalid. Few will deny the importance of sustained reflection about the functioning of democratic institutions. Indeed, a clear analysis of institutional shortcomings can show the way toward much needed reforms. But perhaps the problems are less alarming than some critics may suppose, and they may be difficult to resolve without creating new ones. Furthermore, there is something odd about the fervour behind institutional criticism. This is especially noteworthy when contrasted with the social critique. For while institutional critics seek to build structures that perfectly reflect the will of the people, they tend to ignore the circumstances of civil society within which the most basic expression of democratic activity might be expected to take root.

If the concern is with mobilizing the voice of the people, redesigning the technical modalities of official institutions will in all likelihood only go so far. Why not first inquire at the local level to find out why, for example, such a small number of men and women participate in local associations, parties and unions? Surely the fact that few people are used to associating with others in committees and workgroups, of generating agreement and organizing for change, should be of primary concern to those worried about democratic voice. It is difficult in this regard not to see a contradiction in drumming up so much concern for institutional reform. Can there really be such a strong link between public disengagement and the exact structure of official democratic institutions? Should we not be more concerned with the vitality of locally rooted democratic vehicles, such as tenants associations and immigrant advocacy groups, riding associations, workers' cooperatives, trade unions and consumer groups?

Of course, if we consider these democratic settings to be within the purview of institutional change, the argument for reform takes on new salience. But this would involve turning the standard institutional critique on its head, such that reforms would look quite different from those mentioned above. We might think, for example, of a program of "associative

democracy", where underrepresented groups are assured the means and resources of self-organization. Ultimately, it remains unclear whether parliamentary reform, for example, is likely to draw greater numbers of citizens into the democratic fray. Institutional restructuring might well have an important impact in countries where democratization marks a radical break from the past. The situation is different, however, in older, more affluent democracies, where the balance of interest between public and private life appears at odds with mass participation.

Declining and Shifting Participation

At one time in Canadian history elections were hotly contested events that would frequently result in riots. The stakes were understood to be so high that someone could lose a life in their attempt to support one candidate or another (Greer, 1993: 116). In our day, elections have become the minimal expression of willingness to partake in the governance of one's city, province or country. But now even this minimal commitment and expression of belonging seems vulnerable. As mentioned above, over the last twenty years there has been constant decline in voter participation at pretty much all levels of government in Canada. The absence of the youth vote is perhaps what worries commentators most, as they are the inheritors of a tradition that today appears somewhat fragile.

The buzz and excitement of an election, or lack thereof, speaks to the vitality of democratic life more generally. As such, in cases of high voter participation, we might expect a correlate flourishing of civil society, with hundreds of thousands of men and women actively attempting to persuade others of the virtues of this or that party, movement or cause. Political scientists understand this correlation to form the basis of the "canary in the coal mine" argument. The idea is that if voter turnout can be considered a barometer of democratic activity, then dwindling voting turnout is likely to signal a more general decline in a country's democratic vitality (just as the declining breathing capacity of the canary in the coal mine signals a decline in air quality of which miners should be wary).

Some commentators are willing to take the argument one step further. Robert Putnam, for example, claims that voter decline in the U.S. means not only a withering of political activity but also of engagement in social life more generally. His research suggests that Americans have become the shut-ins of a mass media society. Men and women would appear to be unwilling, perhaps even scared, to engage one another in civic contexts. The implication is that the public square has become a meaner, less compassionate place than it once was.

Yet there is also research that contradicts such an interpretation. Perhaps it is true that today's mobile society makes it harder to partake in durable civic associations or even durable friendships. Nevertheless, there would appear to be a willingness to adapt to the opportunities of forming "looser" social connections. Furthermore, research shows that there is still reason to consider Canada and the U.S. to be "activist" civil societies. Compared to our European counterparts, there are more people here that partake in the spectrum of social and political activities. Consequently, it may well be possible that just as fewer Canadians turned out to vote in recent decades, more of them have gotten involved in one form of association or another.

How, then, is this complex state of affairs to be understood, and how does it pare off with the notion of democratic decline? Taylor interprets the situation to mean something other than straightforward decline. Circumstances may better be described as leading to *relative* decline. This is not to suggest that the canary in the coal mine argument is not valid or worrisome. It is hard to see how declining voter turnout would not also signal a weakening of democratic life. And evidence suggests as much, for along with declining voter participation there has also been a decline of membership in political parties. Similarly, there would also seem to be a waning of political campaign activities. Thus, there is still good reason to consider low voter turnout as mirroring broader trends.

But for Taylor, this understanding only gets at part of what is happening with the shifting forms of engagement underfoot. For alongside the decline in traditional modes of democratic politics, there has also been a rise in new forms of engagement. This is not to say that the latter are an adequate substitute to the former. Indeed, the trend Taylor is most concerned about is towards a politics anchored in single issue organizations, "chequebook groups" and litigation campaigns. Research shows that alongside the rising prominence of strategic groups of this sort, there is a perception that such alternative means of change are more effective than "traditional" ones (Gidengil et al., 2004: 131). When political parties, media outlets and other vehicles of democracy begin to feel inaccessible, citizens will turn to other means of engagement.

Taylor describes the shift in question as involving different modes of "citizen efficacy". The first of the two general modes of efficacy Taylor is referring to involves what he calls "broad-gauge" politics, while the second is based on more targeted "punctual" interventions. The difference between the two is perhaps most important in terms of the place social conflict finds in each. Broad-gauge politics involves something resembling a single fault line between contending majority coalitions, such that we can understand

there to be a central point of cleavage throughout society.

Typically, we know of this cleavage as the touchstone of partisan politics – that is, the battle between Left and Right – although Taylor also describes it as a cleavage between elite and nonelite segments of the population. Broad-gauge democratic reforms that break with the status quo are likely to be mobilized by the nonelite majority, what he refers to as the “demos” or “people”. As a paradigm example of democratic citizen efficacy, he alludes to the opposition between commoners and elites in Ancient Greece. It is this rivalry that provided the most powerful motivation for democratic engagement in the polis. When the parallel is drawn to modern democracies, nonelite citizen efficacy is perhaps best understood as passing through workers’ organizations in coalition with marginalized groups of various sorts.

Political parties are not necessarily the sole vehicles of broad-gauge politics. Other groups and associations of civil society may be similarly committed to a program of broad based reforms. Taylor mentions the manner in which the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) functions in the US. In the Canadian context, we might think of a group like the Council of Canadians, with its local “chapters” set up throughout the country. The important point here is that broad-gauge politics involves a commitment to arriving at a common “package” of reform proposals. What is distinctive about this kind of politics is the broad scope of interests at play and the potential for organic linkages between individuals and groups. Taylor describes the inside view of the broad-gauge model of citizen efficacy as seeking to change the “whole governance” of society.

According to the broad-gauge conflict model, the aim of nonelite political parties and affiliate organizations is to win power and concessions from elite wielders of power and holders of wealth. This objective can in turn be seen as part of the modern struggle to reverse entrenched hierarchies of superiority and subordination. Of course, conflict of this sort is not without dangers of excess. We need only consider the egalitarian fervour of Jacobin revolutionaries or later communist horrors. But taken within the framework of established liberal democracies, such a model of democratic conflict is highly defensible. Taylor in fact goes as far as to defend the counterintuitive claim that broad-gauge democratic conflict can actually serve to bring citizens together in a heightened form of common allegiance.

In this latter sense, democratic conflict is seen as the seedbed of arguments and reforms in the interest of the common good. At its best, the rallying of support for one package of reforms or another is a patriotic enterprise through which the ties of solidarity are strengthened and enhanced. Even elite parties must today justify their platforms with

arguments defending some understanding of the common good. Inasmuch as parties both from the Left and Right believe in the respective visions they are putting forth, we can expect the overall process to have the effect of a unifying struggle over the conditions of a shared "community of fate".

The same cannot be said of the punctual mode of politics which Taylor identifies as partially supplanting the broad-gauge model. The punctual mode may be understood as a politics of small-scale associations. But Taylor links it more specifically to "single issue" organizations. Typically, the aims of such groups are singularly focused. They have little interest in building support for a common package of reforms. Indeed, the success of these organizations often depends on their ability to bring strategic pressure to bear on highly focused events and campaigns. The concentration of resources on a single cause is understood to be instrumental in swaying public opinion, politicians and government officials. In recent decades, such groups have increasingly attempted to effect change through litigation battles.

In a fully-fledged punctual politics, the mobilizing issues of the day all stand "orthogonal" to one another. Gun control and "reasonable accommodation", say, are considered as standalone issues that have little to do with an overall view of society. The men and women joined to take a position on single issues have little concern for politics beyond the specific cases they are advancing. Insofar as the different groups in question do not need to rub shoulders and compromise with one another, the threat of social fragmentation is serious. Taylor mentions the American cultural wars as a case in which identification with the polity is weakened by the channeling of political passion into punctual instances. In the U.S., he notes,

The powerful packages have become the lifestyle issues, those that are the object of the present culture wars: abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, sex education in schools. These divisions cut across class, and moreover, they unite very heterogeneous constituencies on each side, and so they do not seem to be able to become the fault line along which a fight that intensifies identification with the polity can take place like the former successful cases of class war (Taylor, 2007: 133)

Taylor also points out the negative effects of the media in exacerbating the conflict level of punctual politics. Thus, we might assume that ordinary supporters of campaigns for and against abortion may not be as divided as the media portrays them to be. In fact, the majority of campaign supporters may only be so involved as to donate a cheque now and then. But this

financial support in turn provides the resources needed for professional lobbyists to continue the war of perception in the eyes of the public. Given the manner in which media representations can spiral out of control, the negative impact of punctual politics cannot be underestimated. As demonstrated by the U.S. case, this sort of politics can wear on even the strongest political identities, let alone one that is wrought by the strains of regionalism, language, multiculturalism and sub-state nationalism.

Given these two contrasting modes of political activity, how then does Taylor understand the motivation behind the shift toward the punctual mode? Bureaucratization and the centralization of political power may be an important part of the puzzle. Distant and unresponsive bureaucracies tend to create alienating gulfs between citizens and public decision-makers. Certain corporations also function as the oligarchic equivalent to this by muzzling the voice of workers in the economy. But for Taylor, these problems, while significant, only go so far in making sense of the shift away from broad-gauge politics. To glean further insight requires an appreciation of the place of affluence in postwar consumer society.

Affluence and Worker Acquiescence

Taylor suggests that postwar affluence has had an effect on the way people understand their place in society. It has also changed their relation to democratic politics. An aspiration towards comfort, independence and control was clearly a central element of the workers movement. But equally important, and linked to this, were certain understandings of mutuality, interdependence and solidarity. With the postwar transition, changing material conditions also meant a shift in these forms of common understanding. For, now, working class men and women could aspire towards material sufficiency more or less on their own, as individuals. They no longer depended on the power of numbers as much as they once did.

The catalyst to these changes was the wave of upward mobility that came with postwar economic growth, workers' rights and the emergence of expansive social programs. Increased access to postsecondary education, the expansion of service sector employment, higher personal revenues and a new diversity of life experiences meant that older forms of mutual help began to recede. Individual men and women became more private, just as they became more autonomous.

A central aspect of these changes was the physical dissolution of traditional working class neighbourhoods. Along with new wealth there came an exodus from crowded city blocks into the world of suburban home ownership. Thus the tightly knit culture of "the street" that was so central

to the older neighbourhoods also began to dissolve. The move away from conditions of tenancy allowed for a new autonomy and control over extensive private space. Along with increased financial security, the connected set of ways through which the working classes understood their social oppression lost its perceived salience.

It was not only the commitment to public housing which began to be seen differently. Rather, it was the whole spectrum of means through which greater personal dignity could be achieved through collective mobilization. Most emblematic, perhaps, was the slowed and weakened intensity of efforts to democratize the workplace. With greater command over private space in the home, the goal of fighting for reforms on the "shop floor" lost its sense of urgency. Of course, the aims of class mobilization were never easily secured. Ironically, however, these aims became even more difficult to push forward once individuals and families accrued greater autonomy.

Taylor links these changes to a transformed perception of political ties and affiliations. "Objectively", he says, "a rise of affluence helps bring about a shift in our understanding of our predicament so that one of the basic retaining walls under the older idea of a class war subsides" (Taylor, 2007: 133). Thus, due in part to a changing socioeconomic environment, involvement in politics recedes in the scale of social priorities. The shared interest that once linked millions of men and women together by way of their common class predicament ceases to carry the same relevance. As he puts it,

Each citizen is cut loose on his or her own, perhaps connected from time to time to people with like interests on this or that issue [. . .] but without a strong identification to something like a movement. This change of consciousness meant that the older kind of broad-gauge efficacy is going to be much harder to recreate (ibid.)

If this interpretation is correct, it makes little sense to explain declining political participation in terms of social exclusion, as suggested above. Disengagement can hardly be understood as a matter of social disadvantage and lack of political means. In fact, quite the opposite would seem to be the case. It is the process of inclusion into a once privileged lifestyle that seems to have distanced men and women from political pursuits. Yet it is not as though a degree of middle class affluence signaled the end of elite concentration of wealth or power. Democratic decline may, in this sense, be understood as a failure of the Left to make the transition from an egalitarian politics of the old blue-collar working class to one that serves similar ends

for a broader nonelite constituency.

The institutional critique may also be of some relevance here. When political institutions turn into inaccessible bureaucracies, the joys and gratifications of private life become more alluring than public involvement. Disengagement should, therefore, not only be understood in relation to affluence, for there is also the institutional constraint of citizen efficacy to consider. But Taylor wants to dig deeper still by attempting to conceptualize forms of social motivation built around emergent consumer based individualism. Far from insignificant, he considers the manifestation of consumerist forms of identity-formation as constituting nothing short of a cultural revolution.

The Politics of Mutual Display

The cultural roots of consumer based identity-formation find their legitimacy in what Taylor refers to as the "ethics of authenticity" (Taylor, 1991). The popularization of this ethics can be dated roughly to the 1960s, but its original sources go back to the Romantic period. Perhaps the core insight of the Romantic understanding of authenticity is that moral virtue is not to be objectively determined, but is rather to be found within oneself. In the late 18th Century, this was understood to be quite a radical discovery. The ultimate implication of this discovery is, as Taylor puts it, that each individual must discover his or her own way of being human. Self-discovery and personal development become central to our understanding of freedom. This, in turn, is not without political relevance.

Whether framed as civil rights or lifestyle liberation, the gains of the 1960s can be understood as facilitating greater freedom to "become who you are". No longer would women accept to be fit into the role-stereotype of the domestic wife, nor would gay people accept to be humiliated for reason of their sexual desires. Moral progress on these fronts was linked to new ethical assumptions. One such assumption was that each person has a unique inner core, unlike anything else under the sun. Individualism itself is of course not new. Even working class collectivism could be said to enable a certain kind of individualism – if only in the sense that the gains of social mobilization permitted these men and women to live more autonomously.

What came about with postwar consumerism, however, is something quite different. The emphasis was no longer just on the affirmation of equality, but also on expressive self-distinction, as against the stodgy conformity of the multitudes. The pursuit of authenticity engages individuals in a transformative process of personal growth throughout which one gains insight into one's own nature and potential. The ethics of

authenticity thus require bringing one's unique set of endowments to fruition. It is an ethics that is perhaps best described through the metaphor of the "journey". Philosopher Stanley Cavell speaks in this regard of a "journey of ascent" which is "determined not by natural talent but by seeking to know what you are made of and cultivating the thing you are meant to do, or to be" (Cavell, 2004: 446).

The ascent to authentic selfhood sometimes requires personal retreat and detachment from the rush of everyday social life. But on the whole, the search for authenticity is unimaginable without the guiding support and encouragement of others. Typically, such mutuality grows out of close relations with friends and intimates. There is, however, no reason to think it incompatible with public engagement. Social participation is not itself the sign of conformity. In fact, quite to the contrary, it should be understood as an important means to particularistic self-knowledge. Engagement with others can help to map one's inner life while at once shedding light onto one's unique place within society. Ultimately, a vigorous social and political life serves to heighten awareness of the personal dispositions of each and all. Self-discovery, in turn, helps one to understand one's life in the form of a purposeful endeavour, not just mere stumbling in the dark.

In contrast to the ideal form of the ethics of authenticity, there has over the last several decades arisen a distorted manifestation of the ethics which is linked to contemporary consumer society. While postwar counterculture is wedded to certain ideals of authenticity, it has also succumbed to a kind of antisocial extremism, where mainstream culture is portrayed as irretrievably corrupt and devoid of any redeeming features whatsoever. Instead of allowing social changes and the search for authentic selfhood to play off one another in the building of a better society, the two processes are set at irreconcilable odds. A narcissistic concern with rebellious distinction is matched by a parallel detachment from social and political life.

The virtues of authenticity were once cast against the disciplined productivity that 1960s youth saw as imperiling their world – a world of unprecedented industrial production that fostered competition in the acquisition of new goods, such as cars, domestic appliances, fashion items, and so on. Yet while originally critical of ever-increasing production and consumption, the countercultural sensibility has done little to attenuate such excesses in the long run. Indeed, in some ways it has served to exacerbate them. For when the search for distinctiveness and originality become the norm, the demands of authenticity can easily be trivialized. One way in which this can happen, as demonstrated by Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter in their book on "rebel consumerism" (2005), is when the pursuit of original selfhood gets reduced to the acquisition of new goods.

In cases where consumer-based forms of authenticity become the norm, the capitalist production process becomes increasingly geared towards meeting "countercultural" demand. There is something quite perverse about this insofar as the countercultural movement's original intent was to transform a system which was considered to be excessively materialistic. It would seem that by the time the utopian hopes of the 1960s had run their course, the countercultural critique had retreated into something less than it once was. According to Heath and Potter, the earlier protest culture was left with little by which to define itself other than seeking out novel forms of consumer lifestyles. Rebel or cachet consumption became the new marker of dissent and self-distinction. Ironically, it also served to spur on new cycles of capitalist obsolescence.

It is fairly easy to see how consumer based individualism can have the effect of sapping precious energies from the democratic life of the political community. This is especially true among youth, whose striking absence from the political scene is paralleled by the development of specialized youth markets. The life stage that has come to be understood as "youth", somewhere between childhood freedoms and adult responsibilities, is a crucial phase in the unfurling of personal identities. But it is a phase where socialization into broad-gauge political identities is on the wane. Accordingly, Taylor suggests that youth identities are increasingly shaped through small stylistically defined groups related to consumer goods and logos. Although dynamic and fluid, these social or public identities are not without a powerful draw.

As such, while democratic forms of public identity are receding, another quasi public dimension is on the rise. For it is not as though public life ceases to exist with the rising prominence of consumer oriented identity-formation. Rather, it is that it comes to be structured around different forms of social interaction. Taylor refers to the general concept of "fashion" to describe the social dynamic behind consumer oriented public life. Thus he considers that democratic spaces of common action, where confrontation, debate and policy proposals might arise, are competing with fashion spaces of "mutual display". In contrast to oppositional political exchange, mutual display involves its own special kind of social responsiveness, where the meaning of any one fashion gesture depends on the background language of style that frames public life. It is a kind of responsiveness where, as Taylor puts it, "it matters to each of us that as we act the others are there as witness to what we are doing and thus as co-determiners of the meaning of our action" (Taylor, 2007: 140).

While in a sense highly individualized, a fashion oriented public culture is one within which a general mood or common feeling may be

struck. Consider, for example, open urban spaces such as parks and malls, where strangers rub shoulders, display their individuality and observe others doing the same. More importantly perhaps, consider the diffuse media spaces structured by corporate logos and other mass-marketed symbols. These "metatopical" common spaces, as Taylor calls them, are not limited to the corporeality of any specific time and place. Indeed, today they may be understood as structured across national and transnational contexts.

Practices of mutual display are in this sense able to plug hundreds of millions of men and women into a common language of style, although one mostly dominated by corporate backed fantasies, heroes and stars. These commercialized spaces of identity-formation act to undermine the possibility of frank self-interrogation about how one might go about living in a manner that is true to oneself. A fashion oriented public culture, while not without its particular joys, can hardly contribute to the creation of a vigorous culture of authenticity defined by what John Stuart Mill once described as "human development in its richest diversity". By contrast, a culture emphasizing practices of mutual display is, as Taylor suggests, ambiguously situated between solipsism and communication, loneliness and togetherness. When such practices overpower more democratic forms of mutuality, such as those of broad-gauge or even punctual politics, they become the emblems of democratic decline.

Andrew Gibson is a postdoctoral student at the UNAM in Mexico City. He has been researching the democratic transition in Mexico within the framework of a study on the role of intellectuals in international politics. His doctoral dissertation examined the Canadian social criticism of philosopher Charles Taylor. He has recently been involved in setting up a field study for young Canadians focusing on sustainable development in rural Mexico.

Endnotes

¹ Voter participation has been in decline since the 1988 federal election. Public disengagement from formal politics was an important subject of inquiry in the 1991 Royal Commission on Election Reform and Party Financing (see *Canada. Reforming Electoral Democracy: Final Report*, 1991). For a more recent study of voter participation, see Centre for Research and Information on Canada, *Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?*, (2001).

² For example, see Pharr & Putnam (2000).

³ The Canadian Democratic Audit series is a worthy example of this. As

editor William Cross puts it, "Our purposes are to conduct a systematic review of the operations of Canadian democracy, to listen to what others have to say about Canadian democracy, to assess its strengths and weaknesses, to consider where there are opportunities for advancement, and to evaluate popular reform proposals" ('Foreword' to Barney, 2005).

⁴ Based on the Low Income Cut Off (LICO) measurement of poverty, which focuses on families that spend a greater percentage of their income on food, shelter and clothing than the average, the number of Canadian families living in 'straitened circumstances' was "11.6 per cent in 1980 and 10.8 per cent in 2005 after rising to a peak of 15.7 per cent in 1996" (Victor, 2008: 160).

⁵ Historian James Struthers, for example, is of this opinion (see Struthers, 1994).

⁶ See Gidengil et al. (2004).

⁷ For an analysis of the systematic moral denigration of marginalized groups see Honneth (2007: esp. chapter 4). For an analysis specific to the "industrial adjustment" process in northern Ontario, see Dunk (2002).

⁸ As they put it, "Canadian society is marked by disparities in income and education and by differences in power and status of groups like women and racial minorities. We cannot overlook the potential of these structural inequalities on the level and nature of citizens' political engagement. We have to ask whether structural inequalities create democratic divides. In other words, are some citizens less engaged than others because they have fewer resources at their disposal?" (Gidengil et al., 2004: 4).

⁹ Aside from the question of low voter turnout, consider the issue of party membership. Gidengil et al. note that only 24 per cent of affluent Canadians have belonged to a political party at some point in their lives (ibid.: 129).

¹⁰ For a good example at the provincial level, see Cross (2007).

¹¹ This is Rousseau's phrase, referring to the motivation felt by citizens of the good polity – that is, citizens motivated to fly to the assemblies (Rousseau, 2003).

¹² Consider in this regard Joseph Heath's observations about proportional representation, free votes in parliament and other such reforms: "Most of

the proposals for reform and the demands for “more democracy” are deeply flawed, and are based on a demonstrably inadequate conception of democratic politics. As a result, it is doubtful that any of these proposals would improve anything in the Canadian system. Furthermore, they exhibit a peculiar blindness to many important features of how the current system works. Thus in many cases these proposals run the risk of destroying elements of the current system that are functioning well, in return for benefits that are, at best, unclear. As a result, I am inclined to view the institutional stasis of the past ten years with significantly less alarm than many other commentators. While there are clearly defects in the current system, all of the proposals for large-scale reform seem to be equally defective. Furthermore, almost every proposal on the table would have the effect, in one way or another, of weakening federal power...In this context, electoral and democratic reform would be far more likely to succeed if one or more provinces were to attempt it first (with, of course, the exception of Senate reform)” (Heath, n.d.: 29-30).

¹³ Consider, for example, parliamentary reforms in the area of party discipline. Will attempts to relax party discipline and give more freedom to MPs to consult with their constituencies have an effect on public engagement? Perhaps, and thus such reforms remain crucial. But I am inclined to believe that more radical reforms are needed at the level of the “secondary associations” of civil society: providing more resources and leverage for associations representing the disadvantaged, less for those representing the well-off. For interesting insights on the actual impact of parliamentary reform, see Aucoin & Turnbull (2003). For a discussion on the problem of everyday engagement in civil society, see Walzer & Miller (2007: esp. chapter 8) and Smith (2005).

¹⁴ Putnam describes this in terms of a loss of civic trust and “social capital” (Putnam, 2000).

¹⁵ See Wuthnow (1998).

¹⁶ As Young and Everitt put it, European countries “tend to have either high levels of group membership or high rates of membership participation, but seldom both. Canada and the United States are unique in that they are ‘activist’ civil societies that possess widespread group membership and high levels of voluntary activity among these members” (Young & Everitt, 2004: 34).

¹⁷ For more on this question, see Young and Everitt (ibid.: 41).

¹⁸ These are not uniquely Canadian phenomena. See Scarrow (2000); Dalton & Wattenberg (2000).

¹⁹ By this he means the capacity of citizens to have an impact on their environment. As he puts it, "One of the most important faculties of the modern subject is the ability to effect one's purposes. This is what I have called 'efficacy'. Subjects without efficacy, unable to alter the world around them to their own ends, would either be incapable of sustaining a modern identity or would be deeply humiliated in their identity. To a considerable degree, each of US can have a sense of efficacy in our own individual action – getting the means to live, providing for the family, acquiring goods, going about our business, and so on [. . .] But important as private efficacy is, it is not possible to make it the whole, to give no thought at all to one's efficacy as a member of society, affecting its direction or having a part in the global efficacy that society possesses relative to nature" (Taylor, 1993: 79).

²⁰ In Ancient Greece, the *demos* were not simply understood as all members of the polity, for the term also held an alternative understanding, which referred to the populace or commoners. It is this portion of the citizenry that had the most to gain from the promise of democracy. As Taylor puts it, the word *demos* is "used synonymously with common people, ordinary people, or in older French, *le menu peuple*. It contrasts to elites, aristocracy, the rich, the powerful, or some such designation of the hegemonic class or classes" (Taylor, 2007: 133).

²¹ As he puts it, "I seek input of influence over the whole governance of my society – that is, not only over the decision on this or that issue but over the whole way these issues are defined, prioritized and related to each other. It makes sense in this picture to pick as my vehicle a party that could aspire to govern or take part with others in a governing coalition or, failing this, a broad-gauge association like the NAACP" (Taylor, 2007: 131).

²² Young and Everitt observe that "over the past two decades, litigation has become a much more significant aspect of advocacy group activity in Canada [. . .] When we think about advocacy groups engaging in litigation, the first examples that come to mind involve equality-seeking groups like gays and lesbians, Aboriginals and women. While these groups have made considerable use of the courts to achieve some significant policy changes, they are by no means the only groups using the courts. In fact [. . .] between

1988 and 1998 [. . .] corporate interests accounted for almost half the legal interventions by groups" (Young & Everitt, 2004: 112).

²³ For a Canadian example linking media and punctual politics to "reasonable accommodation", see Potvin and Tremblay (2008).

²⁴ For a documentation of the culture of the street in working class Britain, see Hoggart (1957).

²⁵ Geographer Richard Harris makes this point with regard to the Canadian context (see Harris, 2003).

²⁶ The extent to which the counterculture abandoned its original ideals is a matter of some debate. Taylor, for example, argues that the baby boomers – or what David Brooks refers to as "bobos" (i.e. bourgeois bohemians) – still carry some of the 1960s idealism. The bobos, he notes "have made their peace with capitalism and productivity but they retain their overriding sense of the importance of personal development and self-expression [. . .] Among the things that get lost in the original package are, on one hand, social equality; bobos have made their peace with the Reagan-Thatcher revolution, with the slimming down of the welfare state, and with increasing income inequality where they sit at the upper end. On the other hand, their highly mobile lifestyle has helped to erode community. But there is more than a residual unease about this among many of these highfliers. They want to believe that they are contributing to the welfare of everyone, and they yearn for more meaningful community relations. In fact, this kind of capitalist subculture, which one found mainly in the information technology world, is not unanimously accepted among the rich and powerful. There still exists a culture of the big vertical corporations, and there is a tension between the two" (Taylor, 2007: 139).

²⁷ Taylor contrasts "metatopical" media spaces with "topical" spaces centered on physical proximity. Nineteenth-century urban spaces, he notes, were topical – "that is, all the participants were in the same place, in sight of each other. But twentieth century communication has produced metatopical variants – when, for instance, we watch the Olympics or Princess Diana's funeral on television, aware that millions of others are with us in this. The meaning of our participation in the event is shaped by the whole vast dispersed audience we share it with [. . .] The language of self-definition is defined in the spaces of mutual display, which have now gone metatopical – they relate us to prestigious centers of style-creation, usually in rich and

powerful nations and milieus. And this language is the object of constant attempted manipulation by large corporations. My buying Nike running shoes may say something about how I want to be or appear, the kind of empowered agent who can take 'Just do it!' as my motto" (Taylor, 2007: 144-145). For related insights applied to media and digital culture see Karaganis & Council Social Science Research (2007).

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Two Tunnelers: Digging Through the Differences in the Chomsky-Foucault Debate¹

by Xavier Scott

In 1971 an epic debate took place between Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault entitled “Human Nature: Justice vs. Power”. Fons Elders’ opening comment – that they are “both tunnelers through a mountain, working at opposite sides of the same mountain with different tools without even knowing if they are working in each other’s direction” (2006: 1) – is incredibly appropriate given the way the debate unfolds. They are working from opposite ends, with different tools, and fail to realize that they will meet in the middle, depending on the concrete obstacles that they meet along the way. The primary area of disagreement between the two thinkers is over the idea of justice and its relationship to power. For Chomsky, justice is the means by which oppression can be unmasked and is used to constitute the basis of his critiques of power. For Foucault, however, justice can be a dangerous ideological tool that obscures the struggle for social hegemony, utilized by both oppressive forces and those who wish to supplant them. Despite their differences, these projects are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although their respective achievements could not have occurred had they included the other’s methodology in their own.

The following article will examine the points of departure between the two theorists, with an attempt to contextualize the positions each takes vis-à-vis justice in relation to the tactics used to combat the power structures that dominate their respective societies. While the philosophical basis and rhetoric each of them employs are markedly different, so too are the contours and obstacles of the mountain of power that stands between them. Brian Lightbody comments that the

debate represents a forum of exchange of two diametrically opposed positions [. . .] and perhaps more importantly, both Chomsky and Foucault are political activists attempting to tear down the same mountain and yet neither participant embraces, fully understands, nor even attempts to try to understand the position of the other (2003: 68)²

Lightbody's view correctly frames the need, particularly among social activists, to understand one another's arguments in order to find commonalities (particularly in objectives), despite the obvious need to maintain a critique of false paths towards greater human freedom. By examining the diverse problems that power presents to Chomsky and Foucault we can find parallels that can help to overcome the initial view of the debate – as consisting of 'diametrically opposed positions' – to locate common ground between the respective projects.

Theory and Tactics

The most interesting part of the debate to both interlocutors was the political portion. The section on human nature, though important to understanding the basis of their respective critiques, is sidelined in favor of politics. As Foucault remarks near the end of the debate,

this problem of human nature, when put simply in theoretical terms, hasn't led to an argument between us; ultimately we understand each other very well on these theoretical problems [. . .] [W]hen we discussed the problem of human nature and political problems, then differences arose between us (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 57)

While they do not agree on the questions raised in the section on human nature, they at least understand one another's projects and the approach each of them takes towards the questions that arise as a result.

The differences that arise between Chomsky and Foucault in the human nature section of the debate have important connections to the political section that will become the locus of their disagreement. Foucault explains the different approaches that each of them takes towards understanding the generation of knowledge:

Mr. Chomsky has been fighting against linguistic behaviorism, which attributed almost nothing to the creativity of the speaking subject. [. . .] In the field of the history of science or, more generally, the history of thought, the problem was completely different (ibid.: 15)

Chomsky's starting point from which to address political problems is his belief that "we're safer trusting to what I hope are the fundamental human emotions of sympathy and the search for justice", which he believes are

maximized in systems of free association rather than coercive institutions (ibid.: 63). For Foucault, as Rabinow notes, a historical examination of 'thought' (or the production of truth) will adopt the tactic of "historicizing such supposedly universal categories as human nature" (Rabinow, 1984: 4).

Their disagreement is largely over the tactics each uses in their respective social critiques. For Chomsky, the critique is based upon an idea of justice that stems from the innate 'generative moral grammar' each person possesses. In his innumerable political writings, he attempts to unmask the immorality of the American political system by applying the same standards of moral judgment that are traditionally reserved for private citizens. Such an approach to politics came out of the intellectual and political context in which Chomsky lived (post-war America). For Foucault, the issue should be framed in terms of the social struggle rather than in terms of justice (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 50). Foucault is distrustful of the revolutionary predilection for universal terms, such as 'justice', 'truth' and 'morality'. Such terms had been employed before, and in fact were employed by the Marxist intellectuals of France at the time, to little effect (or arguably to disastrous effect as will be explained below).

'Justice' as a Tactical and Ideological Term

For Chomsky, the enlightenment notion of imagining a world based upon universal conceptions of justice is of central importance. He believes that it is his own commitment to such an ideal that forms the basis of his critique of power structures that seek to employ Thucydidean political theory in which the "strong do as they can and the weak do as they must" (Chomsky, 2009). Chomsky can be very critical of the misappropriation of the term 'justice' when co-opted by the power structures in the west, but the concept of justice as equal application of universal principles of morality remains the basis from which he criticizes those misappropriations. This, however, is often the same vocabulary that is used to criticize Chomsky. His critics argue that the selectivity of his own examples of western atrocities overlooks the oppression that takes place without western intervention. The criticism most often leveled at his political writings is that he condemns intervention rather than constructive engagement when intervention takes place, but condemns collusion with dictatorships and other abuses of human rights when the United States engages with them. For example, he condemns the intervention in Serbia while condemning collusion with the Suharto regime in Indonesia. Chomsky believes that the application of universal principles of justice help to distinguish which instances are justified and which are not, whereas Foucault would see the application of those very enlightenment

principles as the cause of many of the interventions and collusions of which Chomsky is most critical.

To put the Chomsky-Foucault debate in context it is important to understand why Foucault is skeptical of the term *justice*. Justice, for Foucault, is understood in juridical terms. In the debate, he argues: "if justice is at stake in a struggle, then it is as an instrument of power" (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 40). This is a function of Foucault's critique of the institutions that govern society. His critique relies heavily on a Nietzschean genealogy. As Rabinow puts it,

Foucault is highly suspicious of claims to universal truths [. . .] [H]e doesn't take a stand on whether or not there is a human nature. Rather, he changes the subject and examines the functions that such concepts have played in the context of practices (Rabinow, 1984: 4)³

By historicizing 'grand abstractions' Foucault hopes to strip away the foundation of 'truth' upon which modern bourgeois society is based (ibid.). It is important to realize that Foucault does this not for philosophical reasons (i.e. to arrive at a notion of *the* 'truth') but rather for tactical reasons, inasmuch as he wants to undermine particular power structures without erecting new monolithic structures of thought that can then be co-opted.

Foucault's is a political task that is propelled forward by his writings:

It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 41)

Foucault's critique is important precisely because it is able to discover that we have escaped domination under an old form of power only to find ourselves disciplined by a new form (Taylor, 1984: 161-162). Furthermore, it seeks to avoid the problem of co-optation endemic in the revolutionary struggle.⁴ However, though it functions perfectly well as a critique of the current institutions, Foucault's approach is admittedly unable "to define, nor for even stronger reasons to propose, an ideal social model for the functioning" of society (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 40). It is for this reason that Charles Taylor criticizes Foucault. For Taylor,

Foucault's analyses seem to bring evils to light; and yet he wants to distance himself from the suggestion that would seem inescapably to follow, that the negation or overcoming of these evils promotes a good (1984: 152)

Here it is important to understand that Foucault's reticence in proposing an ideal social model for the functioning of society is not a philosophical mistake but rather a tactical decision. The 'unmasking' that Foucault proposes in the debate does not become a truth itself, as Foucault's entire project is meant to recognize the complexity of the dynamics of power, which would invariably co-opt any new formulation of the idea of truth. The reason he leaves a 'gap' in his thought, which Taylor and Chomsky criticize as implicitly pointing towards an idea of 'Truth', can be explained by examining Foucault's critique of the French 'Marxist intellectuals'.

Foucault's Critique of the 'Marxist intellectuals'

The critiques that Foucault levels at Chomsky on the subject of justice during the debate can be better understood by examining his treatment of the French Marxist intellectuals. Foucault begins the interview entitled 'Truth and Power' by addressing power/knowledge and the social sciences. He began his investigation of criminality and delinquency because he felt that such an investigation was oddly omitted among the Marxist intellectuals of the day. He explains his reasons for undertaking such an investigation by outlining why the Marxist intellectuals failed to carry out such a critique.

Foucault offers three explicit comments on the 'intellectual Marxists' and two implicit ones. (1) They sought recognition by other intellectuals in the universities and consequently addressed only the questions asked by the mainstream. In other words, the intellectual Marxists were co-opted by a desire for acceptance in mainstream intellectual currents. Foucault argues they were no different from the mainstream: they simply felt their interpretation of mainstream questions was superior; (2) 'Post-Stalinist Stalinism' excluded everything that was not a frightened repetition of the party line;⁵ (3) Most condemning of all, Foucault felt there was a suspicion surrounding the (as yet not public) existence of the Gulag. Even if such suspicions did not exist, the head of the party (who knew everything) would have been able to direct research away from such a topic as 'criminality', as a discourse of controlling power.

Implicit in the arguments Foucault makes about the French 'Marxist intellectuals' are two points of importance. First, the membership of most French intellectuals in the PCF (*Parti Communiste Française*) necessarily meant

that they were co-opted. The communists in France were subservient to the party (and the USSR by proxy), and thus precluded themselves from any genuinely subversive protest or new ideas. He describes them as “playing the role prescribed for them by the PCF” (Foucault, 1980: 110). His own membership in the PCF, between 1950 and 1953, might explain why Foucault is critical of the PCF and revolutionary parties more generally. From his criticisms and writings one gets the distinct impression that Foucault quit the PCF because of his dismay at their willful blindness towards the early hints of the operations of the Gulag under Stalin – the publicizing of which dealt a major blow to the PCF. Foucault seems skeptical of the ability of any (even oppositional) political parties to affect change outside of the influences of power. The practice of party politics becomes co-opted by the political power it attempts to wield.

A second implication in Foucault’s critique of the French Marxists stems from the question of why Foucault chooses to address the Marxist intellectuals specifically. Why not the psychiatrists? Why not the dominant intellectual streams? It seems as if Foucault agrees with (or has the most respect for) the stated revolutionary project of the Marxist intellectuals. It is only that they do not accomplish their stated goals because of the organizational structure endemic in political parties, i.e. because of a mistaken choice of tactics. Foucault seems to criticize them for the many faults listed above, but at the same time there is a respect in the very question ‘why have you not addressed this as it could easily have been your project had you been able or willing to live up to your stated aim?’ That he himself was (briefly) led by Louis Althusser to join the PCF, shows the attractive front that their stated project initially presented to him; only to leave him disillusioned and critical of any self-proclaimed revolutionary party, which also helps explain his criticism of Chomsky in 1971.

It is only after the revolutions around the world in 1968, which were notably non-Marxist and devoid of the organizational structure of a ‘revolutionary’ party, that Foucault’s books assumed the political relevance they have today.⁶ The co-opting of the Marxists is the background of the academic context in which Foucault is living at the time of the debate. Foucault seeks to avoid the pitfalls of co-opted Marxism by adopting a Nietzschean interpretation of how power has continued to manifest itself since the Marxist ‘revolution’ in the Soviet Union.⁷

Chomsky, by contrast, is writing in the United States, where there is no Marxist party and any group that considers itself Marxist is extremely removed from the influence of the Soviet Union. As Chomsky notes, prior to the late sixties,

you would have had great difficulty in finding a Marxist professor, or a socialist, in an economics department at a major university for example. State capitalist ideology dominated the social sciences and every ideological discipline almost entirely. This conformism was called 'the end of ideology' (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 79)⁸

While in France the 1968 demonstrations were necessary for non-Marxist interpretations to gain credence (such as Foucault's), in the United States the anti-war movement of the late sixties was necessary for Marxist interpretations to be examined in opposition to the dominant liberal intellectual orthodoxy. In Chomsky's words, "Orthodox economics was very briefly challenged by students who wanted to undertake a fundamental critique of the functioning of the capitalist economy; students questioned the institutions, they wanted to study Marx and political economy" (ibid.: 96).⁹

By examining the respective contexts in which Foucault and Chomsky wrote we can see why Foucault would want to avoid referring to a revolutionary critique of the existing social institutions. In turn, it seems apparent that Chomsky's reliance on what Foucault attributes to 'leftist-orthodoxy' (conceptions of human nature and the emergence of Marxist political-economy) is in fact incredibly subversive. When one considers that in the United States the left is often confined to the liberal attitudes of the Democratic Party, the critical stance that Chomsky adopts lacks the institutional pitfalls for which Foucault critiques the Marxist intellectuals in France. Though the discourse surrounding the idea of justice between Chomsky and the French Marxist might appear very similar, the function that each of them serve is markedly different. It could be argued that Foucault may have found a Marxist end goal that did not fall into the same trap as the PCF and other French intellectuals, namely, of being right 'only with and by the party'. To understand why Foucault had to adopt a Nietzschean genealogical approach to the 'production of truth'¹⁰ one may examine Foucault's critique of Marxist theory, which also explains some of Foucault's critiques of Chomsky.

Foucault's Critique of Marxist Theory and End Goals

Foucault disagrees with the typical "biological image of a progressive maturation of science" that underpins history. This is in contradiction to the 'Hegelian-Marxist-Kojevean' interpretation of history that is typical among the left. He says of Hegel's dialectic:

'Dialectic' is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing it to a Hegelian skeleton, and 'semiology' is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue (Foucault, 1980: 115)

Foucault's project in *Discipline and Punish* is to refute this progressivist 'End of History' view of the French Revolution:¹¹ "How is it that at certain moments and in certain orders of knowledge, there are these sudden take-offs, these hastenings of evolution, these transformations which fail to correspond to the calm, continuist image that is normally accredited?" (ibid.: 112). He begins to answer his own question:

At this level it's not so much a matter of knowing what external power imposes itself on scientific statements, what constitutes, as it were, their natural regime of power, and how and why at certain moments that regime undergoes global modification (ibid.: 112-113)

It appears as though, in attempting to distance himself from 'co-opted' Marxists, Foucault avoids explicitly stating the argument in Marxist terms, though it retains many Marxist elements, particularly a focus on history and materialism. His contention that shifts in discourse and in the 'minute operations of power' occur in a bourgeois society because of a shift in tactics is reminiscent of the Marxist dialectic. "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society" (Marx, 1978: 476). Replace the word 'production' with 'power' and you could be reading Foucault rather than Marx. The capitalist class is essentially reactive and must respond to the many revolts undertaken by the working class.

The production of delinquency and its investment by the penal apparatus must be taken for what they are: not results acquired once and for all, but the tactics that shift according to how closely they reach their target (Foucault, 1977: 285)

Power is assaulted from one position and moves into another. The king melts into society and becomes more difficult to recognize and attack.¹²

The important difference between Marx and Foucault is that while the former has in mind a final goal (Communist society) Foucault has no such guiding telos or even a progression forward.¹³ It is this seemingly 'static'¹⁴

view that also separates Chomsky from Foucault. For Chomsky, one of the central tasks of the intellectual is “to try to create the vision of a future just society [. . .] based, if possible, on some firm and humane concept of human nature” (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 31). Charles Taylor also criticizes Foucault’s position stating that “power, in [Foucault’s] sense, *does not make sense* without at least the idea of liberation” (Taylor, 1980: 173).¹⁵ Since, in Taylor’s words, “power requires liberty”, it also requires ‘truth’ if Foucault’s project is in fact to ‘unmask’ power as he says it should (ibid.: 174). Lack of the possibility for liberation brings us back to Foucault’s specific criticisms of Chomsky and the ‘gap’ previously mentioned in this paper. However, such a gap is not necessarily due to negligence but is, in fact, specifically intended on Foucault’s part, as part and parcel of his overall political project.

Foucault’s Criticism of Chomsky

While explaining the difference between the position of the structuralists and his own, Foucault outlines what he believes to be the central difference between his own approach to scholarship from Chomsky’s. From this follows a refusal of analyses couched in terms of the symbolic field or domain of “signifying structures” and

a recourse to *analyses in terms of the genealogy of relations of force, strategic developments, and tactics*. Here I believe *one’s point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to that of war and battle*. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning. (Foucault, 1980: 114, emphasis added)

This statement suggests that the methodology Foucault uses (i.e. Nietzschean genealogy) is what leads him to a strategy so radically different from Chomsky’s. He specifically condemns (or at least separates himself from) the study of language as a departing point for the study of the structural impact of power. Language is so caught up in the practice of power that it could never hope to deconstruct it. This stems from Foucault’s belief that the ‘social sciences’ are “linked with a whole range of institutions, economic requirements and political issues of social regulations” (ibid.: 109). Chomsky agrees that the study of language cannot serve as a departing point for the study of power, a position which he feels is misattributed to him by Parisian intellectuals in general.¹⁶

The only way in which a 'generative grammar' enters is Hume's quite correct observation that since we are constantly making moral judgments in new situations, we must have internalized some principles that underlie these judgments, and clearly these must have substantially derived from what he called 'the original hand of nature' (Chomsky, August 28, 2010)

Chomsky's political position is founded upon the universal ability of human beings to make and understand moral propositions, which relates to his (later) work in linguistics in only an abstract way.

In order for Foucault to pose the political problems as he did, he was forced to dissolve the (Marxist) phenomenological subject. He says that the problems of constitution could not be resolved by historicizing the 'subject'. He does not say that such an undertaking was or is useless, but merely that it did not seem to solve the specific political problems with which he was grappling. By shifting the focus Foucault also changed what was visible, obscuring certain things (such as end goals) in the process. He therefore adopted a framework he calls "genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject that is transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history" (Foucault, 1980: 117).

Foucault undertakes a genealogical examination of power. He uncovers problems with the ways in which questions of power are posed on both the left and the right. The right understands power in juridical terms of constitution (along the same lines as Hobbes), while the left conceives of power in terms of state apparatus (Marx) (ibid.: 115). The microphysics of power is left alone until the revolutions of 1968 when a genuine grassroots political activism opens the field to non-Marxist challenges to power.

Foucault then turns to the question of ideology, which is obviously related to Marx. He offers three reasons as to why the notion of ideology is 'difficult' to employ:

The first is that [. . .] it always stands in virtual opposition to something else, which is supposed to count as truth. [. . .] The second drawback is that the concept of ideology refers, I think necessarily, to something of the order of a subject. Thirdly, ideology stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant, etc. (ibid.: 118)

Each of these criticisms can be examined in relation to Chomsky's most famous political work (published 15 years after this interview), *Manufacturing Consent*. The third criticism would be largely in line with Chomsky's thesis in *Manufacturing Consent*, the subtitle of which is *The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Chomsky views the mass media from the perspective of the free market. Similar to Foucault's discussion of an 'economy' of power, Chomsky argues that there are economic constraints on the media that shape it towards a given political ideology. Ideological conformity in the media is "not accomplished by crude intervention", according to Chomsky, but by the "internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution's policy" (Chomsky & Herman, 2002: xi). In Foucault's studies, it is "the apparatus of punishment that conforms most completely to the new economy of power and the instrument for the formation of knowledge that this very economy needs" (Foucault, 1977: 304). The shifting set of interdictions that the population places on themselves, in conformity with the new form of hierarchical structures that characterize modernity, are a general theme in Foucault's later studies of power and the formation of the subject found in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*.¹⁷ Chomsky, as an American, confines himself to the critique of modern capitalist institutions within the United States, something Foucault would shy away from because of his problems with the Communist Parties of Europe and the less than noble ends to which they put their own control of the party apparatus.

Chomsky's most scathing criticism is reserved for American 'intellectuals' who serve as the ideological manufacturers necessary to justify the military and economic interventions of the United States. In *The Culture of Terrorism*, he outlines the ideological climate that is produced by the dominant stream of American media that he believes was necessary to justify atrocities in Nicaragua – a case where the American public had to be won over in order to explain the amount of aid given to the Contras who concentrated increasingly on 'soft targets' (Chomsky, 1988: 76). This critique of ideology serving as the basis for violence fits in well with Foucault's own understanding of overt control being replaced by the self-discipline that characterizes modern bourgeois society. The difference is that Foucault, because of the context in which he is writing, does not adopt a universalist moral criteria from which to make his criticism on account of his distrust of the forms in which such moral conceptions have hitherto been used.

Foucault's second criticism of the Marxist intellectuals might also be leveled at Chomsky, since the latter appears to understand ideology in terms of a 'moral' subject. However, the structures of 'generative moral grammar', though perhaps originally developed as something couched in the subject,

is not necessarily bound to be so. Chomsky's understanding that language develops out of a community made him very sympathetic to the idea of resonant structures that formed grammar through the interaction of multiple 'individuals'. Furthermore, Chomsky's research in the area of linguistics offers a strong amount of evidence for the existence of such structures. Chomsky cites many different contributions of various philosophers, dating as far back as Descartes and Galileo, which were instrumental in his development of generative moral grammar. He goes so far as to say "it's misleading to call it 'my theory', except in the specific manner in which theories have developed" (Chomsky, April 10, 2008).¹⁸

The first criticism gets to the heart of the Chomsky-Foucault debate, inasmuch it attacks directly the possibility of generative grammar constituting the biological infrastructure for concepts such as justice and morality, which is where Chomsky grounds his belief in universal understandings of justice and morality. This brings the discussion full circle and back to the debate itself.

The Chomsky-Foucault Debate

When asked about the debate later, Chomsky said that, though he liked Foucault, he had never met anyone so 'amoral' in his life (Lightbody, 2003: 69). To expand upon this, Chomsky later stated:

In the debate, the question came up about the justification for proletarian revolution (he was in a kind of Maoist phase at the time, quite fashionable among Paris intellectuals). *His position was that there was no issue of justice, just of power, and he was on the side of the proletariat (then). I can't think of a more accurate illustration of amorality. Not immorality: just saying that moral issues don't arise, only issues of power. [...]* Out of the limelight, I liked him a lot. The public persona I could do without, but that holds for Paris intellectual life rather generally. A strange phenomenon. (April 10, 2008, emphasis added)¹⁹

Foucault would hardly contest the idea that he is 'amoral', given that he would understand morality to mean behaving according to a code of good and evil. By contrast, Foucault's system of ethics, based around an aesthetic view of life, does away with the coding of ideas according to 'right or wrong'. Interestingly, Foucault equates Chomsky's position with that of Mao (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 44). This comment illustrates Foucault's misunderstanding of Chomsky's desire to base political society upon a

conception of human nature and human morality. There is a reason why Foucault argues against the position of 'moral absolutism' taking Mao as an example. He does so because of an implicit understanding that Mao's crimes were immoral and he wishes to show the danger of basing politics on moral absolutism. However, the fact that he can make such a statement accords with what Chomsky means when he talks about the universal capacity to make moral decisions. From Foucault's (stated) position we can see no reason for condemning Mao – he merely did well in the power game that everyone is playing. However, the common sense morality that Chomsky would advocate would certainly condemn Mao (who has been attributed with sanctioning the death of millions). This is best illustrated in an exchange between them later in the debate. Chomsky distances himself from any conceivable connection to the Maoist position:

If I could convince myself that attainment of power by the proletariat would lead to a terrorist police state, in which freedom and dignity and decent human relations would be destroyed, then I wouldn't want the proletariat to take power (ibid.: 52)

To which Foucault responds (oddly, given his previous equation of Chomsky's moral position with that of Mao):

When the proletariat takes power, it may be quite possible that the proletariat will exert towards the classes over which it has triumphed, a violent, dictatorial, and even bloody power. I can't see what objection one would make to this (ibid.)

In the course of the debate, Foucault seems to fall into the trap for which Taylor criticizes him in "Foucault on Freedom and Truth", arguing against a given arrangement of power without the (usual) implication that a preferable one is possible.

Foucault's criticism comes from his misunderstanding of Chomsky's position as being related to biological determinism, which he sees as possibly leading to Mao's idea of 'bourgeois and proletarian' human natures. To explain the misunderstanding through an analogy, equating Chomsky's view of justice to a linguistic project, Mao's idea of 'bourgeois and proletarian' human natures is equivalent to believing in a universal *language*. This is clearly not Chomsky's position, as no one contends that we are all born with the ability to speak English, for example. He does, however, contend that we are born with the ability to speak (in general). His position could not be used

to argue that there are 'just and unjust' people and that they are biologically determined, as everyone (in his view) has an equal ability to make moral propositions, just as everyone has an equal ability to use grammar.²⁰ Chomsky bases his idea of justice not on a universal *definition* of justice but on a universal ability to *understand* justice. Chomsky, for example, has a very good understanding of how generative moral grammar is expressed 'cross-culturally', as too are conceptions of justice.²¹

Returning to the first of Foucault's three critiques of ideology, what Chomsky fails to appreciate about Foucault's argument is that it is informed by the experiences of the results of a Marxist political project that managed to attain power through its critique of state-capitalist power. Foucault is correct (and Chomsky would not deny) that implied in the critique of ideology is a desire to replace it with "something else, which is supposed to count as truth" (Foucault, 1980: 117). Foucault is extremely critical of the constitution of this new regime of truth. Those criticisms can themselves take on a power of their own and are often willing to undertake some surprisingly immoral actions in order to safeguard that power. This is a common critique of Chomsky in that by damning American foreign policy, he ignores (some say even implicitly supports) the regimes of the Khmer Rouge and the Soviet Union. He consistently denies any such support and maintains that, since it is the common moral sense that everyone inherently possesses that keeps people from setting up gulags or carpet bombing peasants, all such regimes bear moral responsibility for their actions – the United States is merely the worst transgressor. While Chomsky criticizes the current state of American politics on the basis of a possible world that he deems better, he reserves the right to withdraw support from a movement that appears as if it will "exert towards the classes over which it has triumphed, a violent, dictatorial, and even bloody power," which Foucault believed would be justified.

Justice vs. Power

To characterize the difference between Chomsky and Foucault's respective starting points, we must turn to each of their conceptions of 'power'. Foucault's seems to be best summarized as an examination of *power* at the level of how it invests itself in absolutely every activity, so that each activity is co-opted and becomes an instrument for the propagation of power. Meanwhile, Chomsky's could be said to examine *creativity* and see how this expresses itself in every action undertaken, *independently* of power, so that we can envision what it might look like if it was not co-opted by power.

When Foucault talks about power one gets the distinct impression that he conflates two distinct types, namely, the *political* and the *capable*. The

political power about which Foucault talks is the sort of power that allows anything to transpire. He is talking specifically about a type of power that co-opts and controls. Chomsky, on the other hand, clearly differentiates between the coercive power of oppressive political regimes and the creative power of the individual that is used in constructing sentences, for example. If it were the all-encompassing (Nietzschean) form of power, it would not be possible to escape, whereas Foucault seems to suggest that it is.²²

Foucault might as well be criticizing Chomsky's use of the word power when he says that power "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (1980: 119). He levels a valid criticism, however, as it seems to address the second type of power – *capable* power. Foucault seems skeptical of the ability of society to transform itself in a way that frees it from political power while maintaining capable power, though he does not discount such a possibility. As he writes, "One has to recognize the indefiniteness of the struggle – though this is not to say it won't someday have an end" (ibid.: 57).

By contrast, Chomsky's political project is to enable human beings to function and use their 'capable' power (which he defines in the form of 'creativity') to "maximize decent human instincts", which he believes would be best promoted through a decentralized system of association free from the coercion of centralized institutions which he feels maximizes "the worst of human instincts" (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 67). Free from the influences and failures of an *American* Communist Party, Chomsky is much more optimistic than Foucault. He does attempt to formulate what such a society might look like. This understanding of power helps us see why Chomsky is a committed anarchist. Foucault may also appear to be an 'anarchist' but of a different sort:

The anarchists posed the political problem of delinquency; when they thought to recognize in it the most militant rejection of the law; when they tried not so much to heroize the revolt of the delinquents as to disentangle delinquency from the bourgeois legality and illegality that had colonized it; when they wished to re-establish or constitute the political unity of popular illegalities (Foucault, 1977: 392)

Foucault's politics is warier and more removed from organization than Chomsky's. His critique is aimed at the ability of power to co-opt any theory of liberation, and thus he avoids articulating a theory of liberation. While

Chomsky's anarchism is achievable as a form of political organization,²³ Foucault's clearly is not – nor is it meant to be. Such a political organization would only represent a further shift in the apparatus of power, which Foucault contends would be just as coercive. The purpose of resistance, for Foucault, is to achieve a state of freedom. If his ethics is an ethics of aesthetics then resistance to coercion (rather than overcoming it) is the greatest expression of freedom and ethics. In his castigation of the term 'justice', Foucault expresses a fear that such a term can only be translated into a juridical concept which power will use to coerce. Yet it seems that a more 'generative' concept of justice exists implicitly throughout Foucault's work on resistance. He touches on this idea briefly in chapter five of *Power/Knowledge*, when he talks about 'local knowledges' (which he connects to Deleuze's idea of minor knowledges), though he does not elaborate on this idea for reasons already explained.

Conclusion

The subject of the critiques Chomsky and Foucault launch at their respective societies is the oppressive institutionalization of power that exists within each. They have different approaches and methodologies in their theoretical work, but are ultimately able to understand and accept the theoretical projects of one another quite easily. The locus of their disagreement is politics; specifically the tactics to be employed in practicing a politics of resistance. Chomsky, speaking from an enlightenment philosophical tradition, bases his politics on ideas of justice that he believes to be as universal as the generative grammar which expresses them. Foucault, whose Nietzschean genealogy leads him to a fundamental critique of all formulations of justice, brings to light the problems of how power is expressed through the criminal justice system and the application of modern conceptions of justice. The two projects are fundamentally different in terms of their theoretical underpinnings and the tactics they choose to employ. However, their criticisms of the institutions of power demonstrate that the mountain of political coercion before which each of them stands is ultimately the same. The context in which each of the interlocutors writes becomes important because it serves as the basis of their arguments in terms both of the theoretical tradition being employed and of the dominant institutions they are criticizing. The model of American capitalism and the forces brought into the world through the military industrial complex with the complicity of educated elites and media organizations require criticisms that appeal to the conventional moral codes of the American working class – that America is not living up to its stated values. In France, where communism poses an

actual threat to the liberal model, Foucault attempts to show the similarity between the two systems and the injustices perpetrated under both so as not to side with either. What is important for Foucault is that the workings of power be recognized so that moral issues do not reinforce institutional structures of power.

The importance of the debate exists in how two such radically different formulations of the role of justice can be seen as mutually supportive. Both critiques are meant to survey and surmount the same mountain. To gloss over their differences does both projects a disservice, as it is the particularities of the criticisms that make them effective. But by the same token, to privilege the tactics of one over the other does a disservice to the debate itself and the importance of using a multitude of approaches in political activism. The political views of Foucault and Chomsky, respectively, were developed in concrete contexts and, just as an engineer might use a variety of tools and methods to create a tunnel through a mountain depending on the obstacles with which they are confronted, both Chomsky and Foucault have adopted radically different techniques to bore through the mountain that separates them.

Xavier Scott is currently a Lecturer in the departments of Economics and English at the University of Hargeisa, Somaliland. A Canadian, he has a Masters degree in Social and Political Thought from York University. He is currently researching the relationship between Islam and democracy and their role in Somaliland which is a sovereign but unrecognized state.

Endnotes

¹ I would like to thank Noam Chomsky for his incredibly swift responses to my requests for certain clarifications on his part, as well as Brian Lightbody whose guidance and comments made this paper possible.

² Lightbody states in the footnote to this sentence: "I think Foucault is more open minded than Chomsky but, nevertheless, fails to fully appreciate the novelty of Chomsky's position".

³ Note that Charles Taylor criticizes Foucault for doing precisely this, and connects Foucault's refusal of a notion of Truth to Nietzsche (see Taylor, 1984: 160).

⁴ "Well, if one fails to recognize these points of support of class power, one risks allowing them to continue to exist; and to see this class power

reconstitute itself even after an apparent revolutionary process” (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 41).

⁵ The best example of what Foucault is afraid of comes from Trotsky’s stress for Party unity (in absentia) for the Thirteenth Congress of the Communist Party: “We can only be right with and by the Party, for history has provided no other way of being in the right. The English have a saying, ‘my country, right or wrong’. [. . .] We have much better justification in saying whether it is right or wrong in certain individual concrete cases, it is my party” (Trotsky, cited in Arendt, 1967: 307).

⁶ Later in the interview, Foucault says: “Where Soviet socialist power was in question, its opponents called it totalitarianism; power in Western capitalism was denounced by the Marxists as class domination; but the mechanics of power in themselves were never analyzed. This task could only begin after 1968” (see Foucault, 1980: 116). I get the impression that Foucault agrees with both the Marxists and the mainstream academics, namely, that power exists in both the USSR and Western society. His criticism is not that they are wrong, merely that the way in which each criticizes the other comes out of a method of analysis that is necessarily blind to its own abuse of power. By analyzing the ‘carceral archipelago’ Foucault focuses on an apparatus of power that exists in both communist and bourgeois societies. One wonders, were Foucault alive after the fall of the USSR when communism was ‘disproven’ would he would adopt a more Marxist approach, now that the corrupting influence of being an ‘institutionalized’ ideology has been taken out.

⁷ Foucault’s criticism of Marx’s writings in *Power/Knowledge* is worth recalling here. Rather than saying that Marx and Lenin have been misunderstood in the implementation of the Gulag system, or asking what kind of misunderstanding could have caused the Gulag system to have arisen out of a revolutionary party that adopted Marxist texts, Foucault argues it is “a matter of asking what in those texts could have made the Gulag possible, what might even now continue to justify it, and what makes its intolerable truth still acceptable today” (ibid., 135). That Foucault does not apply the same criticism to Nietzsche’s writings, which have been cited as inspiration for much of the National Socialist ideology, it is fair to argue that his criticism of Marx is merely a reminder of the dangers of any philosophy being co-opted if those who seek to apply it do not do so carefully. Marx is referenced specifically because of the context in which Foucault is writing at the time. Perhaps, then, Foucault is not so much ‘anti-Marx’ as ‘anti-vanguard’.

⁸ Note the similarity in language between the intellectual orthodoxy of the 'State-capitalist' academics Chomsky is arguing against in the United States, and the language of the orthodox 'Marxist-intellectuals' (such as Alexander Kojève) whom Foucault is arguing against (see below).

⁹ He also notes that he cannot imagine a similar intellectual climate existing in Western Europe or Japan (ibid.: 86-87).

¹⁰ Foucault's conception of power is inextricably bound to the production of truth: "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (Foucault, 1980: 93).

¹¹ A position recently popularized by neo-conservative Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*, developed largely from Alexander Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*.

¹² "[The 'carceral'] generalized in the sphere of meaning the function that the carceral generalized in the sphere of tactics. *Replacing the adversary of the sovereign, the social enemy was transformed into a deviant; who brought with him the multiple dangers of disorder, crime and madness*" (Foucault, 1977: 299-300, emphasis added).

¹³ It is important to note that Marx (like Foucault) is not a humanist or a moralist. He does not feel that the proletarian revolution *should* occur, so much as he feels that it *must* occur, and that it is in the proletariat's best interests that it occur.

¹⁴ Foucault does see the lines of power and 'counter-power' as constantly shifting. Here I mean 'static' only insofar as he does not envision an escape from coercive institutions of power the way Marx or Chomsky does.

¹⁵ Taylor argues this by saying that "different forms of power indeed are constituted by different complexes of practice, to form the illegitimate conclusion that there can be no question of liberation from the power implicit in a given set of practices. Not only is there the possibility of frequently moving from one set of practices to another; but even within a given set the level and imposition can vary. *Foucault implicitly discounts both these possibilities*" (ibid.: 174, emphasis added). The first because of the Nietzschean framework he uses, the second because of an overly simplified notion of

modern systems of control.

¹⁶ Chomsky explains he was a committed anarchist long before he had even heard of linguistics (Chomsky, August 28, 2010).

¹⁷ This shift in the employment of power has been the basis of modern studies of bio-politics, which characterize post-modern leftist thought epitomized by the recent work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in works such as *Empire* and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

¹⁸ One could perhaps draw a comparison between what Chomsky says about the development of 'his theory' and Foucault's broader understanding of what constitutes a subject in 'What is an Author?' See Foucault's "What is an Author?" (in Foucault, 1984).

¹⁹ Chomsky is quite critical of Foucault, but reaffirms the fact that he did not feel Foucault was 'immoral', and that they got along well before the debate took place.

²⁰ Chomsky says this specifically in an interview: "Only Cartesian common sense, which is distributed quite evenly, is needed" (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006: 70).

²¹ Chomsky brought this up in response to my question, to wit: "According to your theory of generative grammar and the couching of morality in that grammar, are there innate moral 'truths' (e.g. Thou shalt not kill) hardwired into us, or do you mean [. . .] that we have a 'generative moral grammar' where we innately have the capacity to understand things in moral terms and apply a set of ingrained moral schemas to a given situation, in a particular context, from an individual's standpoint [. . .]?" To quote part of his response: "Your description seems to me reasonable, but the conclusions aren't really derived from generative grammar. Rather, they are reached by the same kind of traditional reasoning that leads directly to generative grammar for language. As perhaps you know, there is recent work exploring empirically, cross-culturally, the innate principles that underlie the 'moral grammars' that yield the kind of normal behavior that led to Hume's reflections" (Chomsky, April 10, 2008).

²² Evidence for this position is largely implicit in his concept of 'counter-power' used throughout his work, however, the best evidence I have found to suggest he uses power in this sense exists in *Discipline and Punish*: "In the

classical period, there opened up in the confines or interstices of society the confused, tolerant and dangerous domain of the 'outlaw' or at least of that which eluded the direct hold of power: an uncertain space that was for criminality a training ground and a region of refuge" (Foucault, 1977: 300). If something can elude the direct hold of power, then power is not everything, though today (Foucault contends) it permeates everything.

²³ Chomsky's anarchism is not a utopia, it only seeks to promote certain forms of creative human behavior, while limiting the capacity of people to perform 'destructive' acts without the need of coercive institutions (which he feels are inherently destructive).

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Wikipedia: Example for a Future Electronic Democracy? Decision, Discipline and Discourse in the Collaborative Encyclopaedia

by Sylvain Firer-Blaess

A number of online projects aiming to bring citizens closer to political decisions have appeared over recent years.¹ These projects originate from public authorities seeking to come closer to their citizens, as well as small groups trying to make existing institutions more democratic. The idea of a possible “electronic democracy” is as old as the Network itself, but its realisation remains today at an embryonic stage, limited as much by technical problems² as by a lack of political will. The idea of an electronic agora, where citizens can debate and vote, is very often included in notions of a modern representative democracy moving toward a more direct democracy – or what might be called “participatory democracy” or “strong democracy” after the model described by Barber (1984).

This article describes the mechanisms of a successful product of the internet involving mass collaboration, namely, the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia.³ Wikipedia relates to the world of electronic democracy in the sense that it gives us the successful organisational mechanisms of decision-making processes, and involves millions of people. As such, it could be taken as an example for future projects. As we shall see, the practice of computer technology in Wikipedia has resulted in a pragmatic and unplanned construction, a decision-making process that deviates from the standard direct democracy model (one person-one vote, numerical calculation of votes), and takes rather the form of debates and consensus that, if one looks for historical examples, could be likened to the old method of the palaver or the modern techniques of some left libertarian circles. It should be emphasised that the Wikipedian practice has been built gradually through progressive user-experience. A pre-arranged organisation would have been unable to foresee and cope with the many difficulties facing such a complex project as the construction of a collaborative encyclopaedia, as we shall later argue.

In the first part of the paper we shall analyse the decision making process (DMP), including debates and consensus, which Wikipedia employs, and make a connection with the Habermasian model of rational discourse.

In the second part, we analyse the *disciplines* (in the Foucauldian sense) which underlie and permit this DMP. We find that, on the theoretical plane, despite the harsh criticisms Habermas claimed against the writings of Foucault, we can see a rather complementary relation between the establishing of *rational discourse* in Wikipedia and the effects of its *discipline*. Then, in third part we show the resistances that face the decision-making process and the disciplines, and consider the reactions that have emerged against such resistances. These findings lead on to a discussion of the normativity of Foucauldian disciplines and the possibility of their heterogeneity. Finally, we examine the possible implementations of the Wikipedia system to electronic democracy projects.

1. Practices of Decision: A Debate/Consensus Decision-Making Process, and a Culture of Rational Discourse

Wikipedia has developed an original decision-making process (DMP), mainly thanks to a new technology of electronic editing called *Wiki*. A wiki is a piece of web-based software which generates web pages that may be modified or *edited* by anyone.⁴ This technology enables the communal writing of texts, and from this communal work a DMP has arisen based on debate and consensus. The DMP has been proven to be efficient not only with communal editing but also, and more surprisingly, with other functions, such as the creation of internal rules and with the nomination of users for added responsibility for the site.

1.1 In the Writing of Articles

The best way to explain the decision-making process in article editing is surely to show how a wiki web page works. There are in fact several pages in one wiki page, each of them represented by a tab at the upper end of an article page:



For the DMP, three tabs are of interest: 'article', 'discussion', and 'edit this page'. The tab 'article' simply shows the article. The tab 'edit this page' redirects to a web-based editor enabling users to modify the 'article' page. Last, the tab 'discussion' refers to a wiki-page dedicated to discussions, debates and consensus-making in relation to the article.

Most of the time, the decision-making process is not even communicative. A new edit will be accepted or rejected through what we

can call a *passive consensus*: the new edit stays in place, is deleted ('*reverted*': each version of an article is recorded so you can come back to an older version), or modified. This non-communicative process can go on indefinitely while Wikipedians disagree with one another over whether an edit should stay as it is. At times some users engaged in a disagreement stay in a non-communicative practice and decide to reverse each other's edits in an infinite circle. This practice, called an *edit war*, is recognised, restricted and forbidden by the rules of Wikipedia.⁵ In order to solve their differences of opinion, Wikipedians must then enter into a process of *active consensus*. This is a communicative process and works upon our so-called debate/consensus decision-making process.

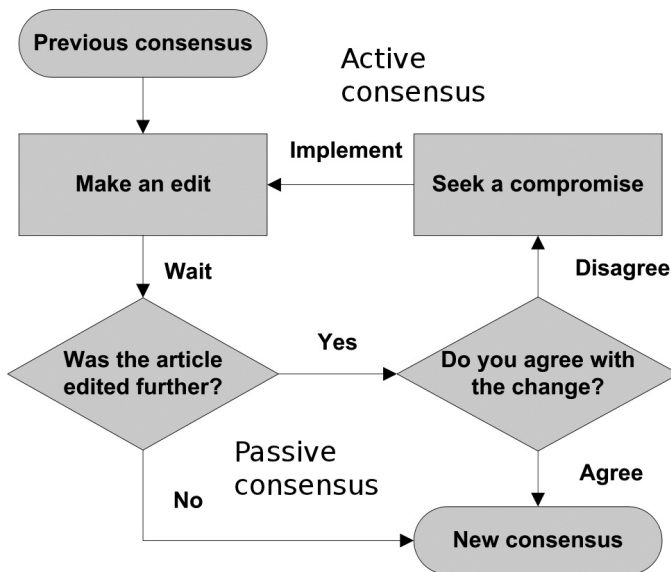


Figure 1: the decision-making process in the editing of articles on Wikipedia⁶

This DMP takes place on the 'discussion' page attached to each article. Here the disagreeing parties will present their arguments and debate on what edits should remain. It is a custom, as well as a policy of Wikipedia, that parties in conflict should find an agreement by themselves. But the debate is also structured by internal rules. Indeed, an article must follow certain rules of style and content, and the decision-making process must end in

agreement with these rules. Therefore, arguments in debates are often based on and legitimated by the aforementioned rules. The most structuring rule of article content is the policy of *Neutral Point of View* (NPOV), which asserts that Wikipedia articles should present all significant facets or competing positions on a given subject in an unbiased way.⁷

We need to say at this point that this method is a success: thousands of edits are created every day by thousands of users, and the conflicts which overflow the debate/consensus DMP, which we shall discuss later, are relatively limited in number compared to the number of edits per se. We shall see now the mechanisms of rule creation.

1.2 In the Making of the Rules

Rules for Wikipedia have not been established *ex nihilo*, but are a product of early practice (Firer-Blaess 2007b; Sanger 2005). The making of the rules has developed from a tension between the *form* of Wikipedia – a wiki – and its *aim* – to build an encyclopaedia. The medium is not the message, but it goes into *resonance* with the latter to create original practices. While the wiki form was stressing a more ‘anarchic’ and ‘let it be’ way of doing things, of allowing people to do what they want and of not applying any written rules, the aim of making an encyclopaedia stressed the need of policies and guidelines.

In 2003, Wikipedians agreed on the process of communal editing, forming a consensus between ‘pro-rules’ Wikipedians and ‘anti-rules’ Wikipedians, resulting in an original set of policy and guidelines. Thus, the rules of Wikipedia are decided in common. They follow the same debate/consensus DMP as in the editing process. They are called *policies* and concern matters of style and content, of behaviour in the editing process, of copyright and other legal matters between Wikipedia and the ‘real world’ legal system, as well as of the enforcement of these very policies. Most of the time, a policy comes to be when some Wikipedians realise that something is not working well or could be improved. A policy proposal usually emerges from a discussion in the *village pump*, the general forum of the Anglophone Wikipedia.⁸ If the community has shown enough concern, a user will create a ‘policy proposition’ page, and advertise the policy proposal by putting an ‘advert’ section in sensitive pages.⁹

The policy proposition page serves as a forum where a debate/consensus DMP takes place. Bit by bit, Wikipedians add their view onto the proposal page, and debate with one another. The process of making a rule is usually quite extensive (lasting several months) and contains numerous discussions. Once the community thinks a consensus has emerged

from the discussion, a *policy page* is finally created (again in a communal way, and following the editing DMP). These policy pages have the status of *official policy*, and therefore can be claimed in any DMP and enforced. Like most other Wikipedia phenomena, things are unfixed, and the policy pages stay open to amendments and modifications following the latest DMP edit.

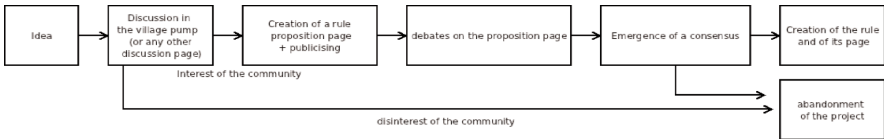


Figure 2: the process of rule-creation in Wikipedia

Rules today appear rather stable. We can count the 5 *pillars of Wikipedia*, which are the structuring rules. All in all, there are fifty rules concerning specific subjects, and more than 200 *guidelines* that indicate the best way to deal with precise matters.¹⁰ Generally, one need only read the five pillars in order to acquire a good understanding of the behaviour to follow with Wikipedia.

1.3 In the Nomination of the Wikipedians with Special Powers

The Wikipedian community has decided to create a small hierarchy for organisational issues. It implies the nomination of Wikipedians who may be granted additional powers, for instance, that of blocking the editing of a page when conflicts go awry, or the possibility of blocking a particular user. The process of nomination is close to an election in modern democratic systems, yet with a notable difference, namely, the replacement of voting with consensus.

Wikipedians with additional powers are trusted users who usually have a long experience of editing in the encyclopaedia project. For a user to be nominated, one needs first to present one's candidacy to a dedicated wiki-page. Usually the candidate will ask other trustworthy Wikipedians to sponsor their nomination with a 'cover letter' written on the page. Then, the community debates on whether (s)he should be granted nomination. Questions are then asked and former acts of the candidate are checked and discussed. At the end of the page, fellow Wikipedians finally give their view on the nomination – favourable, neutral, against.

This nomination process lasts seven days. At this time, a 'special user' with supplementary powers called a '*bureaucrat*' reviews the discussion to see whether or not there is a consensus for promotion. Consensus here is

quite difficult to assert, and seems to be a compromise between the quality and the quantity of the different views, “but as a general descriptive rule of thumb most of those above 80% approval pass, most of those below 70% fail, and the area between is subject to bureaucratic discretion”.¹¹ When the consensus is favourable, the user is directly promoted by the bureaucrat, and given his or her legal and technical powers.

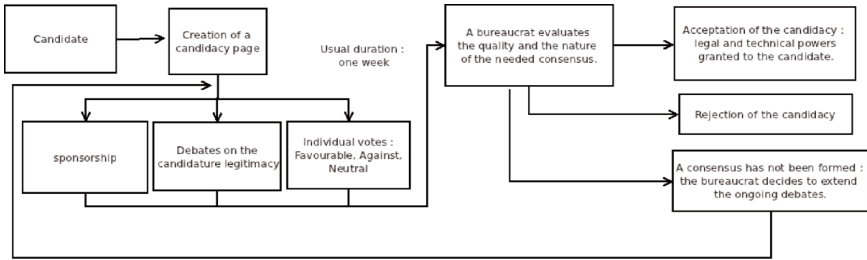


Figure 3: nomination process of Wikipedians with special powers

It is quite striking to see that from different situations the same DMP prevails in Wikipedia: editing, rule-making, nominating. In contrast to the modern democratic system, the means of decision are not the vote but rather consensus: votes are even explicitly excluded from Wikipedia.¹² The Wikipedia DMP is based on the weighing of a point of view by the perceived quality of the argument (see figure 4). This, among other things, maximises the involvement of users. It is not enough to have points of view; one must also make them explicit and rational. Finally, the Wikipedia DMP not only enables the making of decisions, but positively constructs them. Often in the talk pages, long and heated debates take place, and from the debates solutions previously not thought of begin to appear. This is a different situation from representative democracy, whereby citizens have to vote on solutions created by experts. On Wikipedia, by contrast, the agents are the makers and the deciders.

1.4 A Rational Discourse?

We have seen so far the threefold decision-making processes of Wikipedia. Let us now approach the debates occurring within this DMP. If decisions come from a democratic process, nothing tells us about the quality of the debates and, thus, the extent to which they are indicative of progress. A recent study suggests that these debates, nevertheless, have positive elements which create practices approaching a rational discourse.

Hansen, Berent and Lyytinen (2007) have recently shown that we could assimilate the Wikipedia DMP system within the model of the rational discourse of Jürgen Habermas. In his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984), Habermas describes a type of action by which the discursive possibilities of personal and social emancipation are maximised. This discursive action is also called *rational discourse*. The rational discourse is an ideal-type that can never be attained, but it can be approached in practice. For Hansen et al., discourses that take place in Wikipedia approach Habermas' rational discourse, albeit with some limitations.

Habermas distinguishes between three forms of personal action in society: (i) instrumental action; (ii) strategic action; and (iii) communicative action. While the first two types of action are used to reach a rather selfish subjective aim, the third type, communicative action, aims to achieve a level of mutual understanding between actors – it is an “inter-subjective” goal. It is this communicative action which is made possible by rational discourse. A rational discourse can be formed under five conditions: (i) the actors consciously pursue a cooperative search for the truth; (ii) through a formal structure (with rules) (iii) excluding the use of force; (iv) in accordance with the rules of an ideal speech situation (another Habermasian principle); and (v) engaging in open dialogue and with sufficient duration.

For Hansen et al., Wikipedia meets these five conditions. Conditions 2, 3 and 5 are easily satisfied: the debates are structured by the rules of Wikipedia; violence or pressure does not exist; and the debates are open to everyone with an internet connection and have no time limit (often the debate takes months). The cooperative search for the truth (condition 1) can be considered as part of the rules of Wikipedia, especially with the rule of the *Neutral Point of View* (NPOV) seen above. The ideal speech situation (condition 4) requires that anyone can access the dialogue without discrimination, under the condition that one uses a rational argument.

These five principles are the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the establishment of a rational discourse. To identify such a discourse, Habermas has constructed a typology of speeches that can be found in a discussion approaching rational discourse. There is the *theoretical discourse*, a statement of truth based on evidence and logic; the *practical discourse*, based on social norms, statements about what is appropriate and socially acceptable; the *aesthetic critique*, founded on good taste, on ‘standard values;’ the *therapeutic critique*, questioning the sincerity and honesty of a claim; and finally *explanatory discourse*, which consists of clear and intelligible claims made to explain a fact, theory or previous speech. The validity of a statement can be challenged by one of these speeches and a dialogue with these types of discourse can be established. Thus, for Habermas, if a dialogue includes

mostly these types of speech, then it can be regarded as approaching rational discourse. If Wikipedia approaches rational discourse, then, for Hansen et al., Wikipedia is a tool for emancipatory potential in terms of Habermas' critical theory.

Hansen et al. go on to study the content of the debates within Wikipedia to check their hypothesis. To what extent are discourses of a rational type present in the debates of Wikipedia? Hansen et al. here focus on the debates about the *Armenian genocide* article, which can be regarded as one particularly sensitive to the presence of non-rational discourse, devoting considerable space to the passions and with a large number of instrumental and strategic actions. But, in short, the authors counter-intuitively (but certainly in keeping with their hypothesis) find that "[w]hile much of the interaction observed in the article's talk page is patently strategic, each of the [communicative] forms of discourse outlined by Habermas can be observed there as well" (2007: 6). They also find that *theoretical discourse* in particular is used. Participants on the talk page also often use *practical discourse* by reminding others of the rules of Wikipedia, using therefore a clear disciplinarian act (using the *Education* practice described below). Interestingly, users also use *therapeutic discourse* in order to counteract strategic actions, by questioning the sincerity of the other editors as to whether they are looking for the truth or trying to impose their view. Here again, the legal apparatus of Wikipedia is used in order to legitimate such therapeutic discourse, through the invocation of a Wikipedia policy, namely, the "assumption of good faith" policy (ibid.: 7). In conclusion, the researchers write:

[O]ur analysis does show that early in the life of the article, major theoretical discourse occurred. As these truth claims were addressed over the life of the article, practical discourse was also mixed in (as evidenced by the ready elimination of vandal activity), as was therapeutic discourse in the discussion pages (as editors question each others' intentions). The current discursive activity mostly focuses on explicative discourse, such as grammar and phrasing correction (ibid.: 8)

Why then can such an article, as controversial as it is, be the subject of rational discourse? The authors briefly explain that the rules and structure of Wikipedia promote such discourse. For instance:

One of the reasons for such clarity (i.e. good style and grammar in the debates) may lie in the process for resolving disputes that

has been established at Wikipedia. While intervention by an Administrator or the Wikipedia Arbitration Committee is an extreme option for unresolved issues, these avenues take into consideration the previous efforts at resolution pursued by the parties to a conflict. Thus, if events escalate to necessitate third party engagement, the clarity and commitment to dialogue reflected in previous discussions can have a bearing on the outcome of the dispute (ibid.: 7)

These are the mechanisms of regulation and discipline which allow the emergence of such a discourse. We should then highlight the beneficial and emancipatory effects of certain types of Foucauldian subjectivation, some of which we will examine shortly.

2. A Discipline Underlying Rational Discourse and the Debate/Consensus Decision-Making Process

These mechanisms of subjectivation, or normalisation, that lead actors to behave in a certain way, abound in Wikipedia. Wikipedia has original mechanisms of normalisation, which we will call *disciplines*. We can divide these disciplines into two parts: hierarchical discipline, and non-hierarchical discipline, which we will call *rhizomic* with reference to Deleuze (1989). Wikipedia's rhizomic disciplines are relations between agents that are not structured by a specific plan. Lacking any hierarchical pyramid they randomly connect discipliners and disciplined, the agents being able to move from the first to the second role and vice versa depending on the time and situation. Wikipedia also contains a standard hierarchical normalisation structure, but without proper pyramid levels and favouring specialisation by horizontal tasks rather than by vertical levels of responsibility.

2.1 Rhizomic Mechanisms

2.1.1 The gaze of Wikipedia: Hyperpanopticon

Here are the words of Julius,¹³ cited by Foucault:

In times past, the great challenge of the architects was to solve the question of how to give the largest possible number of people access to the spectacle of one event, one gesture, one single man [. . .] This question, which began in the ancient greek society insofar as the latter was a community which participated in strong events that was forming its unity –

religious sacrifices, theatre or political speeches – still continued to dominate western civilisation until the modern days. The question was the same for churches. [. . .] Currently, the fundamental problem for modern architecture is just the opposite. One wants the largest number of people to become a spectacle to one single individual in charge of their surveillance (Foucault, 2006 [1975]: 607-608, my translation)

We could say that with Wikipedia the main problem has been to create an architecture where the many do not see the one nor the one the many, but where the many can see the many. Wikipedia's system of surveillance enables anyone to watch the acts (the edits) of anyone else. The group does not nominate wardens; everyone is or can become a warden. Modern discipline has been trying to diminish the scope of 'private life'. Wikipedia makes it disappear: there is no edit in the online encyclopaedia that cannot be found and identified.

I have named this architecture a '*hyperpanopticon*' in previous papers (Firer-Blaess, 2007b). Like the Bentham/Foucault panopticon, it permits one to see every action in a given area. The prefix 'hyper' refers to the addition of new dimensions: first, a quantitative dimension, in that compared to the panopticon the number of eyes of the hyperpanopticon is dramatically increased, which leads to an intensification of surveillance as such; second, a qualitative dimension, in the fact that it is not a happy few that sees everything, but the entire group that can see the actions of everyone, a change with important ethical implications.

The Wikipedian hyperpanopticon is intrinsic to the MediaWiki software – the programme that runs the Wikipedia website. It is a software body made up of large databases and user-friendly interfaces. These databases list all edits made to Wikipedia, and are accessible to all through certain web pages of Wikipedia. They all show a listing of edits, giving the name of the amended section, time and date of publishing, authors' identities (the user name if the author is listed, or else an IP address), a short description of the edit, and finally its 'weight' in the data. The data access pages provide various tools, allowing them to focus on certain time periods, an article or author, and also to compare different versions of the same article at different times.¹⁴

The hyperpanopticon solves two problems attributed to the ancient techniques of panoptical surveillance. The first is the cost: indeed, in a panoptical system surveillance is a specialised division of labour that brings a certain cost as one has to pay the guards or watchers. In the Wikipedian system the task of monitoring is not specialised and is

distributed among numerous benevolent agents. The second problem is an obvious ethical one, given that with the division of labour the specialisation of surveillance creates a very unbalanced power relationship that is potentially repressive. On the contrary, Wikipedians have no fixed relationship concerning surveillance (we will see this in greater detail shortly).

The multiplication of the eyes involved in the hyperpanopticon makes surveillance very effective in Wikipedia. It has been calculated that flagrant ‘sabotage’, such as insults within an article, is detected and removed, on average, in 1.7 minutes on average (Foglia, 2008: 57). Finally, in and of itself, the hyperpanopticon is not only a surveillance tool, but is also very useful for the decision-making process. It enables Wikipedians to recognise and trust one another during the debates. The hyperpanopticon creates a “relationship of the gaze” among Wikipedians, which fuels the DMP.

2.1.2 ‘Soft Disciplines’, Soft Normalisation

We call ‘soft discipline’ the techniques of teaching and making the individual comply with the rules, *without him perceiving enforcement*. Soft discipline is a *legitimate* form of normalisation, an internalisation of the rule in the thinking and practices the individual freely chooses. Most compliance with the rules of Wikipedia is achieved through these processes of normalisation. Normalisation is often a process of teaching as well as of self-learning: Wikipedians usually invite one another to read a policy or guideline page. They also ask questions in order to acquire more information and to understand how to apply a rule.

This process of normalisation is diffuse in Wikipedia and consequently difficult to categorise. We give here a few examples: the processes of *welcoming*, of *adoption*, of *education*, and of *reward*.

Welcoming: the Wikipedian community shows itself right at the beginning to the newcomers. When a user registers with Wikipedia (which gives him a fixed username, instead of an IP address, as well as several new tools and options), he receives a welcoming message from the community. More than a first communicative bonding, the message gives him the first hints about how to behave, as well as redirections to the main rules of the encyclopaedia. The user is kindly invited to read them, and to put questions to the author of the message. Indeed, some regular Wikipedians group themselves to form a ‘Welcoming Committee’. This committee is in charge of sending all new registered users these messages, and to help the newcomers when prompted.

Adoption: the adoption programme is a new policy of Wikipedia created in September 2006, “as a programme designed to help new and

inexperienced users".¹⁵ The programme gives willing adopters and adoptees a platform to meet. Adoption is a kind of mentorship: it implies an older Wikipedian supporting and helping a newcomer, monitoring his or her edits, giving advice and answering any questions. This new programme does have quite a low number of participants compared to the total sum of newcomers, but it has seen great success among its members and is expanding as a result.

Education: this practice is the most pervasive and omnipresent of all. It is not an official Wikipedia programme like welcoming and adoption, but remains a very common practice. It implies the sending of a message to a user when she has broken a rule, which happens very often concerning newcomers. The message is usually less than a warning and more a reminder of the rules: Wikipedians are used to seeing 'newbies' behaving in the wrong manner, and know that they will learn by trial and error. This is all part of the normalisation process. For instance, if a user downloads a picture on a Wikipedia article that contains a copyright (which is not permitted by the rules of the site), one Wikipedian will surely send him what one calls a 'template', that is, a ready-made message concerning pre-defined matters – in our case this template would contain the rules about picture uploading and legal rights. Templates follow a gradation between a reminder and a warning. If a Wikipedian persists in transgressing a rule, (s)he is sent gradually more and more authoritative messages, before (s)he is punished. In this way, the most authoritative message is the boundary between the practice of normalisation and the practice of punishment.

Finally, *reward:* Wikipedians showing particularly good behaviour can receive 'medals' called *Barnstars*. Gratification still follows in a non-hierarchical way, as anyone can give out barnstars to anyone. There is a great amount of different barnstars, around eighty, each having a different meaning. They are awarded for excellent or very useful edits, the fighting against vandalism, good adoption, good support, and good civility. Barnstars are a way of motivating Wikipedians in an environment that can easily be stressful. The good behaviour is also highlighted, which therefore encourages fellow Wikipedians to follow such behaviour.

In all these processes, there is no real separation between the normalisers and normalised. Wikipedians tend to co-normalise themselves, each one being able to take both roles at any one time. Soft normalisation is the main way of making Wikipedians comply with the rules. Nevertheless, it is not enough, and mechanisms of enforcement based on a hierarchical structure complete the system. They are nonetheless mechanisms of crisis, used quite rarely.

2.2 Hierarchical Discipline: Judge and Punish

When Wikipedians happen to fail to solve their differences in the decision-making process – so that the editing process ends up with practices that are not accepted on Wikipedia (for example, poor arguments, edit wars, insults, and so forth) – the Wikipedians have a complex and progressive dispute resolution process (DRP) that focuses first on a communicative/consensual mode, but which can ultimately go all the way to a court case to enforce its decisions. The DRP contains a set of gradual processes that tries to avoid going to the last step of a judgement procedure. The *Dispute Resolution*¹⁶ is an official policy and gives a series of advice for using when one faces a seemingly irresolvable dispute. These steps can be roughly classified in three groups, from the least to the most authoritarian and energy consuming: (1) individual practices; (2) community practices; and (3) official judgment.

2.2.1 Preventing judgement: the dispute resolution process

The first group, that of ‘individual practices’, classifies things one can do alone. These are simple pieces of advice and things to do which try to clear a dispute within the debate/consensus DMP practice. They are more reminders of the classical DMP than extra policies: focusing on the content of the dispute and not on the personality of the other editor, ‘staying cool’ and taking some time to reflect, rationally talking with the other party, and in the last resort proposing a truce with the other editor in order to be clear of mind.

The second group of practices goes to a level higher in authority and classifies things that can be done when the classical DMP has failed, with the help of the community. Outsider Wikipedians can be asked for help, according to the nature and intensity of the dispute. For instance, first, one can ask for an ‘editor assistant’ if one is unsure of the rules concerning the conflict; second, one can ask for the ‘third opinion’ of a Wikipedian about a dispute concerning only two people; and third, when the dispute concerns precise encyclopaedic content, one can ask for a ‘subject matter’ discussion. If the dispute relates to a frequent issue there are specific ‘noticeboard’ pages on which one can ask for help – for instance, there is a ‘biographies of living people’ noticeboard, a ‘fringe theory noticeboard’, and a special page dealing with incivilities.

The third and highest practice involving the community – the most structured one that should be used in the last instance – is the process of *mediation*. As in real-world juridical conflicts, parties in a dispute (when they both agree) can ask for a third party to try and find an arrangement. There is an informal and a formal mediation process. The informal one is organised

by an ‘unofficial’ club that calls itself the *mediation cabal*,¹⁷ constituted of volunteer Wikipedians. By contrast, the formal mediation process is organised by the ‘official’ *Mediation Committee*.¹⁸ The Mediation Committee is composed of Wikipedians who are not only volunteers but also have been chosen by the community (following the same DMP nomination seen in the first section). There is no rule dictating whether one should ask for the mediation cabal or the mediation committee. However, the more serious a dispute, the more often it goes toward official mediation. When one of the parties is unwilling to go to mediation, or when the mediation has failed, the dispute can go toward the last and highest body of the DRP, the *Arbitration Committee*.¹⁹

The Arbitration Committee “only deals with the most serious disputes and cases of rule-breaking”. We have seen that the Wikipedia organisation tries to avoid recourse to the Arbitration Committee (also called ‘ArbCom’) as much as possible. Wikipedians are reluctant to clear conflicts by legal enforcement (note that the process is called *Arbitration* and not ‘judgement’). Cases are intended to be kept at a low number (unfortunately, statistics are not yet available). Nevertheless, the ArbCom process looks in many ways like the process of a real-world judicial body. The function of *Arbiter* is particularly serious; contrary to the usual debate/consensus nomination process, Arbiters are chosen by polls, and then appointed by Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, in accordance with the votes.²⁰

As always in Wikipedia, cases are public, and a wiki-page is dedicated to each case. The process begins with a *Request for Arbitration*. From here arbiters look at the admissibility of the case (i.e. has the dispute resolution process been rightly followed? Have other ways of resolution been tried before the request? Is the case serious enough that it cannot be settled without arbitration?) If the case is received, *Arbitration* begins. Arbiters create a wiki-page and ask parties to the conflict, alongside possible witnesses for the depositions of complaints and defences, and any other commentaries and testimony/evidence. Arbiters can also lead an investigation and look into the archives of Wikipedia (the history pages of articles and talk pages). This having been done, arbiters give themselves a week to rule the case and publish their decisions. Decisions are presented in a somewhat juridical way: the statement first refers to the rules and jurisprudence which pertains to the case, after which time decisions are made. Decisions have *res judicata* and shall be enforced. For a case to be taken by the ArbCom, the breaking of the rules must be deemed serious, so are the decisions of the ArbCom.

2.2.2 Punish

If prison was and still is the universal and modular punishment of the

modern world, the universal punishment on Wikipedia is the *Ban*. A ban is an interdiction (as well as a technical impossibility) of editing on Wikipedia. As with sentences to prison, bans can be of different lengths depending on the seriousness of the offence. It also adds a 'spatial' modality: one can be restricted to writing a single article, or on one topic.

The Wikipedian Rule assumes apriori good faith toward all users; this apriori is that everyone wants to create an encyclopaedia of good quality.²¹ When there is evidence that a user has been editing for other reasons (personal motivation, lobbying, etc.), the sentence is usually the harshest: the user suffers an indefinite and general ban. Apart from the breaking of trust in good faith, lots of decisions are taken not to prevent users to write on Wikipedia but to make them accept the rules. A good number of cases deal with incivilities and failure to conform to the debate-consensus DMP; in such cases the ban will usually be a few months.²²

This section intends to show which mechanisms of discipline exist in order for Wikipedians to comply with the rules. The structure of these mechanisms is very different from the modern discipline described by Foucault. Modern discipline was constructed around the concentric circles of the panopticon with the pyramid of hierarchy (Foucault, 2006 [1975]: 205). Roles were fixed, whereas with the network structure of Wikipedia, most roles change from one user to the next. The discipline of Wikipedia contains a majority of rhizomic mechanisms, which means that anyone can take the role of discipliner or disciplined following the circumstances; this is the case for the roles of watcher/watched, normaliser/normalised, conflict-resolver/party to a conflict, rewarder/rewarded. This rhizomic discipline is completed with a hierarchical form of discipline that contains fixed roles. This is the case for serious mediations of a conflict, for legal procedures, for punitive procedures. We assume that rhizomic mechanisms of discipline have a more important role. The gaze and the procedures of normalisations (especially *education*) are omnipresent, pervasive in the practice of Wikipedia, while structured mediations and legal procedures are quite rare compared to the thousands of debates taking place every day. Furthermore, the Wikipedians try to use them as little as possible. The hierarchical power of administrators is more present, but mechanisms of nomination and recall (loss of the status of administrator) seem to ensure that an oligarchy is not forming (Konieczny, 2009), and that the acts of Admins reflect the will of the community.

We shall now see the resistance encountered in the previously studied decision-making processes and disciplines.

3. Practices of Resistance: Strategies and Counter-Measures

A power relationship is the act (or ‘play’, or ‘struggle’) of an agent toward another human being aiming to enforce upon him a practice he could have avoided. The discipline we have described above is then a power relationship, as it implies the agents will respect the rules. According to Foucault, a relationship of power goes in both directions, as a person embodies a part of freedom in doing the things asked of him or her, and can either answer the call or resist it. Discipline and normalisation can never be complete, and counter powers tend to take root. Just as, according to Foucault, the panopticon doesn’t succeed in eliminating resistant practices, the hyperpanopticon cannot avoid resistant practices despite the multiplication of the eyes of the gaze and the consequent normalisation. In Wikipedia one has the power of discipline, but also the different practices of resistance of some users against this discipline. Games of power and counter-power are constant in the disciplinary practices of Wikipedia.

Practices of resistance are any practices that consciously disrupt the DMP and go against Wikipedia’s policies. Vandalism *per se* (editing an article in order to lower its quality) is in a way a ‘naive’ and benign resistance, because it can be easily and rapidly reverted. We shall focus here on less visible but more serious practices of resistance, which are the ones that attempt to distort the DMP. First, we see a technique of individual resistance, called *sockpuppeting*. Second, we discuss a collective resistance that we call *lobbying*.

3.1 Sock Puppets

The Wikipedia Debate/Consensus DMP is quite sensitive to the number of people who are part of the debate: the more people share a view, the more it is likely to be adopted. From this fact, a practice of resistance has emerged called *sockpuppeting*. It aims to disrupt and cheat with the DMP by multiplying individual accounts, and ‘playing’ different users in the debate. Next to ‘classical’ sockpuppeting, similar practices have been identified: *Meatpuppeting* consists of recruiting family and friends to create an account for the purpose of influencing a decision; and the inventive *Strawpuppeting* includes the use of a sockpuppet to create a fake ‘opponent’, making poor claims in order to weaken the argument one is against.

Wikipedia’s DMP has shown itself to be quite resistant to these strategies: the debate/consensus style weighs individual points of view not only in relation to the quality of the argument but also to the recognition and popularity of the user. Consequently, the voice of new users will usually be given less weight: Wikipedians are aware of the practice of sockpuppeting,

and will become suspicious if new users enter covertly in a debate to support a minority position.

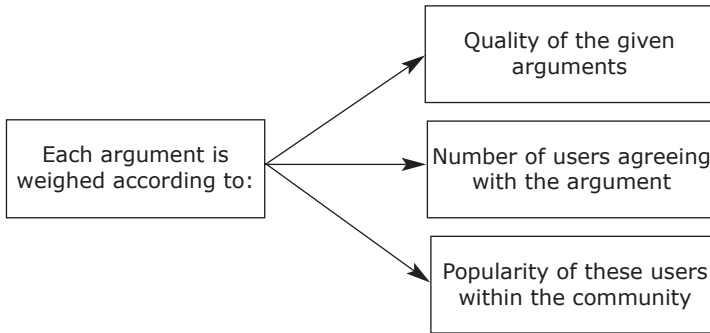


Figure 4: *weight of an argument depending on various factors*

A second defence mechanism is a counter-strategy that uses discipline. Sockpuppeting is strictly forbidden by the rules of Wikipedia and severely punished (usually with an indefinite ban). Thanks to the hyperpanoptical surveillance, when one suspects a sock puppet, one can request special police operatives, called *checkusers*. Checkusers are very few and extremely trusted Wikipedians; they are given a tool that bites the deepest into the privacy of users, as it can localise the computer that has been used. With this tool, checkusers can compare localisation of editions and unmask sock puppets.

3.2 Lobbies

Individuals can, of course, seek to degrade the NPOV policy for any personal, political, religious, and other reasons. More serious is the resistance coming from big organisations, public or private, for their personal purpose. We shall call them lobbies: they seek their own interest and do not care for the global quality of the encyclopaedia. The lobby problem emerged while Wikipedia was becoming popular; now the online encyclopaedia is the third most visited web-site, after Facebook and Google, which means it is the foremost information website on earth. From 2005, dozens of companies and sects have been shown to try to delete or lower criticisms on their related article page: Wal-Mart, Exxon-Mobil, Shell, Microsoft, as well as the Church of Scientology, and the Vatican. Several State Intelligences have also tried to modify sensitive matters, like the CIA and the Australian intelligence.²³

Wikipedia could be distorted by powerful lobbies. One can imagine the creation of entire departments within big organisations, devoted to

overwhelming the debate/consensus DMP and to shaping articles at their will. The answer to such a threat comes from a Wikipedian: in August 2007, Virgil Griffith, a programmer at the California Institute of Technology, released a tool called *Wikiscanner* on his website. It is a publicly searchable database that links millions of anonymous Wikipedia edits to the organisations from where the edits originated. Therefore, Wikiscanner makes it possible to look for organisations and see their edits. One can consider it an extension of the hyperpanopticon that focuses on lobbies which try to modify sensitive matters. As Virgil Griffith says, “Overall – especially for non-controversial topics – Wikipedia already works. For controversial topics, Wikipedia can be made more reliable through techniques like [Wikiscanner]”.²⁴ The aim of Griffith was “to create minor public relations disasters for companies and organizations [he] dislike[s]”²⁵, and in practice it can certainly slow down disinformation attempts from the lobbies. Media coverage has been abundant on this issue since the tool has been released, and editions from both private and public organisations are now scrutinised.

The fight against lobbies will not be solved only by extending the possibilities of surveillance. It will also need the strict application of the NPOV, the debate/consensus DMP, the citation policy. Even if organisations take much effort to modify the free encyclopaedia, their tasks will be quite difficult if Wikipedians find good arguments supported by NPOV and citation policies, if lobby-users are punished when they try to pass in force, and so on. As long as the project finds users willing to build a truth-related, quality encyclopaedia, the governance of Wikipedia will support them and their task.

3.3 Theoretical Implications: On the Normativity of Discipline

We brought up this topic of resistance because, in the Foucauldian logic of discipline, resistance is normally seen as the good side of the coin against the bad dominative discipline. We cannot really deem Wikipedia to be like this. Why? The hypothesis is that a discipline is not intrinsically charged with a specific normativity, but that its normativity depends both on its *function* and its *nature*.

Foucault stays normatively (ethically) neutral in his writings on the subject, but the form and style of his writing, as well as the historical period during which he wrote, cannot but suggest a normative stance for the reader. Reading *Discipline and Punish*, we cannot but feel outraged against the alienating technologies of power, dominating the people. Nevertheless, Foucault never gives normative reasons for criticising them, while he uses

what Nancy Fraser calls a “normative-sounding terminology” (Fraser, 1989: 27), which means that it sounds critical while there are no normative grounds to legitimate the critique. Moreover, concerning Foucault, power is not only repressive in that it does not just say “no to what are defined as illicit desires, needs, acts, and speech” (ibid.: 26), but also creates all these things. Power is *indispensable* to any practice, so it would be useless to criticise or to judge something that cannot be otherwise. However, if power is indispensable to human relations, we could affirm that its modalities can change and give different normative effects to one another. For instance, we can consider that the modern discipline described by Foucault serves norms that come from without, estranged from the will of the people; decided by and serving dominative forces such as states, economic forces, traditions. But in Wikipedia, norms come from within, decided on by the Wikipedians, and they are there to serve a DMP that makes it possible for everyone to express themselves on an equal footing and in a near-rational discourse. The *functions* of modern discipline is domination and productivity, while the *function* of Wikipedian discipline is the creation of a free encyclopaedia and more precisely the application of decisions whose formation strongly approaches the democratic model.

The *Nature* of the discipline also concerns normativity. Mechanisms of modern discipline base themselves on the domination of a minority of watchers, teachers, above the majority. On the contrary, Wikipedia by and large uses rhizomic types of disciplines; power is far more equally distributed. The *nature* of modern discipline is domination of a hierarchical form; the nature of Wikipedian discipline is equalitarian and rhizomic. Finally, it is probable that the rhizomic nature of Wikipedian discipline fosters and supports the Wikipedian rational discourse. The hyperpanopticon creates an atmosphere of common trust between the agents since they can know everything about past edits and the comments of their fellows. Here the destruction of privacy dissolves the possibilities of suspicion. Free from it, Wikipedians can focus on the types of speech that create rational discourse. We also think that the rhizomic mechanisms of normalisation bring a feeling of equality which helps the creation of rational discourse, maximising the condition of non-discrimination toward speeches included in the Ideal Speech Situation and thereby toward rational discourse. Last, the self-managing steps of the Dispute Resolution Process appears to force the agents to use rational speeches in order to settle their disputes, since continuing a fight would make the DRP move to a higher level of involvement, eventually dispossessing the parties to the dispute of the answer to its resolution.

This hypothesis – namely, that rhizomic discipline supports rational

discourse – will need to be refined, both empirically and theoretically. Foucauldian and Habermasian thoughts are not easily combined and future work will need to clarify this theoretical position.

Conclusion: Is Wikipedia a Relevant Model for Electronic Democracies?

Wikipedia and electronic democracy projects have in common the establishment of a mass-scale decision-making process. Could the Wikipedian method be applied to the various e-democracy projects mentioned at the beginning of our article? A thorough review of these projects shall be our next task. We must also raise the substantive differences between these two types of project, which could involve differences between the organisational forms and discourses. To build a free encyclopaedia is not the same as to govern, which is politics in the purest sense of the term. As the first fundamental difference, we note the importance of the choices involved and the potential for conflicts that this entails. The search for the truth within an article is important, but certainly much less than a political choice that would have material and human consequences. The search for consensus is not accepted, consciously or not, by all agents or even by the majority, and the state of mind can vary greatly between different democratic and national cultures. We can therefore assume that debates can surely take place, but that consensus building would be much harder to achieve if not impossible. Perhaps, then, the use of a majority voting system would be required in cases where consensus is not formed.

One could also argue that the timing for both projects is different, for while there is no urgency to write an article, it is sometimes urgent to take material decisions. However, we think that an electronic democracy could only take care of the legislative system, and that the executive one, including law enforcement and the countless micro-decisions that it entails (in the form of decrees and regulations in particular), could be left to the standard executive power. Now, what is particularly criticised in the current democratic system (and especially in France) is the voting of laws that have been proposed because of a precise event and a fleeting emotion. Good laws take time to form and reach maturity, so we see no objection in the fact that a decision would take months to be agreed upon, as is the case with Wikipedia.

There is the question of the frequency of the decisions. Modifications of an article by passive consensus can be numerous on any given day, and of course we cannot conceive the same about laws. But there would be no problem were a bill to be rapidly and frequently modified. Concerning the ‘voting’ of the laws itself, the example of the DMP concerning the Wikipedia

rule-making would fit – i.e. the debates are long and the text changes many times, but ultimately only one act comes to fruition which cannot be changed without a new law-making procedure.

Finally, we think Wikipedia gives us the tools for the different cases of democratic choice: the article edition DMP is applicable for the construction of a bill, the DMP concerning the creation of rules within Wikipedia for passing laws, and finally the DMP concerning the election of Wikipedians with special powers, may apply to elect the executive powers. The Wikipedian experience of resistance to the discipline provides a great example of the possibilities of counter-measure (especially with regard to the lobbies). We do not deny their usefulness in the democratic process of real politics, but their actions, if they comply with the rules, could become more transparent, even if we can never prevent bribery from occurring.

The construction of electronic democracies will certainly occur in a pragmatic way, by trial and error, as has been the way of Wikipedia. Perhaps the designers and the Multitude alike will find it useful to see Wikipedia's mechanisms as examples to build upon, and to construct a reliable system that would become the best advance in democratic systems since the construction of liberal democracy.

Sylvain Firer-Blaess is a PhD student in the Department of Informatics and Media at Uppsala University. He holds a degree in political science from the Lyon Institute of Political Studies and a Masters degree in political philosophy from the University of Sussex. His interest lies in critical theory and Internet studies, and he is currently working on matters of surveillance and privacy on social networking sites.

Endnotes

¹ A list of such projects is available at:
www.metagovernment.org/wiki/Main_page

² For example, the problem of how to provide a totally secure identity to every citizen while conforming to the demands of data protection.

³ In this article, I will discuss the Anglophone Wikipedia, which contains the highest number of articles and sees the highest number of visitors and contributors.

⁴ For more details, see www.en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki

⁵ The policy of the Three Revert Rule has been instated in order to avoid edit wars: it is forbidden to revert and to edit the same thing more than three times a day. People trespassing this limit, or who participate to an edit war by other means, face sanctions from the community.

⁶ Constructed from www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Consensus

⁷ See www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:NPOV

Other policies structuring debates are the verifiability policy, instating that each claim should be quoted with a verifiable and reliable source, and the prohibition against original research (sources must have undertaken a peer review process). Of course these policies need interpretation, and much of the DMP in edition turns around such interpretations.

⁸ See www.en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Village_pump

⁹ For instance, the 'centralised discussion' page, which groups topics of which Wikipedians should be aware. See www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:Cent

¹⁰ See www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars
www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_policies
www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_guidelines

¹¹ www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests_for_adminship#About_RfA

¹² www.en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Polling_is_not_a_substitute_for_discussion

¹³ Professor at the University of Berlin in 1830, and former colleague of Hegel.

¹⁴ A full description of these interfaces is available in Firer-Blaess (2008: 18).

¹⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Adoption>

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Dispute_Resolution

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Mediation_Cabal

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Mediation_committee

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Arbitration_Committee

²⁰ Here Wales plays the role of, as he likes to say, the 'Queen of England'. He keeps this power of nomination in case the things were 'going wrong', but he has never from now refused to go against a decision of the community.

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Assume_good_faith

²² An interesting example is the recent 'homeopathy' case:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Requests_for_arbitration/Homeopathy

Here, a Wikipedian, 'DanaUllman', has been banned for one year because he 'has engaged in advocacy of homeopathy on Wikipedia', therefore breaking the assumption of good faith. Other parties to the conflict have been banned for a few hours or weeks because of incivility and personal attacks.

²³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6947532.stm>

²⁴ <http://virgil.gr/31.htm>

²⁵ <http://creativemac.digitalmedianet.com/articles/viewarticle.jsp?id=172757>

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Reviews

Politics and the Imagination

by Raymond Geuss

New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009, pbk £16.95 (ISBN: 978-1-4008-3213-2), 216pp.

by Chris Allsobrook

For Nietzsche, every culture is a construct of the imagination, “the foundations of which will not bear inspection”. As an agent of enlightenment, the genealogist’s critical task is to cut through layers of significance beneath self-evident customs and civilized consensus, to reveal the underlying tensions of past struggles. Genealogy traces a “history of certain human reactions” that have worked free of embedded contexts and attempt to “deny their origin, in order to become normatively absolute”. The genealogist is also self-critically aware that Enlightenment is not at odds with *Entstellung*; that such acts of recovery cast their shadow on the present. Thus, a question is raised which sets the theme for Raymond Geuss’ latest volume of collected essays, *Politics and the Imagination*, namely, if we cannot free ourselves of our ‘necessary illusions’, how can we make imaginative use of the distance from reality this entails, to radically criticize the way things are, without losing a realistic grip on the context in which we are engaged?

In this sequel, of sorts, to *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Geuss distances himself from the crude *Realpolitik* that has been associated with his previous polemical treatment of the normative grounds of liberal political philosophy. “Realism in politics”, he writes in the preface, “does not mean trying to engage in the utterly incoherent task of thinking about practical politics while abstaining completely from making value judgments” (Geuss, 2009: 30) – of which Geuss, like Nietzsche, makes many. Realism means that “one starts, as Max Weber taught us, from action and its consequences” (ibid.). An experienced diplomat, for example, “does not take the content of what is said in isolation. Rather, he sees specific actions in a particular context” (ibid.: 9).

Like Nietzsche, Geuss rejects the idea of a universally accessible, transcendental perspective, as a framework with which to evaluate all empirical institutions and arrangements. The paradigm of political philosophy – as rational deliberation grounding a political order, or a deductive inference from certain premises leading to a political judgment – gives a ‘distorted’ view of politics. In real politics, standards of evaluation are changing and up for renegotiation. Every perspective has a concrete

“historical genesis and location” (ibid.: 84). While he is at pains to acknowledge the important imaginative political role played by conceptual constructs, culture and values, the point made here is not just that ethical norms are historically contingent but that “Ethics is usually dead politics” (ibid.: 42). *There are no pre-political ethical values.*

Geuss dismisses a dominant ‘ethics-first’ conception of political philosophy, predicated upon ideal, systematic, rules-based, normative deliberation, driven by a non-coercive competition among anonymously held discursive propositions, to be decided upon prior to the persuasions of power and material interests, and then applied to the political domain, to safeguard independent, objective standards of evaluation. The notion of a closed human life guided by fixed, ideal, moral rules is a fantasy. “Of course, no one would want to prevent human agents from trying to bring their own moral beliefs into some kind of order, and making of them a ‘system’” (ibid.: 59). But “it is important not to confuse this rather narcissistic activity with anything that might be called trying to engage *cognitively* (in the widest possible meaning of that term) with the real world” (ibid.).

Questioning the extent to which rule-governed conceptions of politics are valuable *prior* to any study of a context of action, an essay on modernity in the collection draws an amusing satirical analogy between Don Quixote and the figure of the bourgeois enlightenment philosopher: the autonomous modern subject (or, ‘self made Don’) freed from traditional bonds, responsible for self-legislation and the rational organization of his own life according to clear, generalizable rules that he himself has established. Don Quixote puts together and fetishizes a codex of general rules governing chivalrous conduct, to slavishly follow in the secure belief that as long as he follows these rules, he need have no concern about the consequences (ibid.: 64). He is never afflicted with inner doubts or moral uncertainty, even though he can never be cognitively certain whether he has followed the law or his drives, and he has no idea of what impact his conscious decision will have on the world. Quixote shows that the association of imagination and liberty threatens madness in the absence of consideration of external factors.

Such criticism will no doubt prompt philosophers to pose the question: how can we justify, evaluate or criticize power, if the criteria by which we do so are effects of power? Geuss does not dismiss the role of philosophical conceptual analysis, at which he excels, and though he rejects the idea of an absolute morality he does not reject all particular forms of morality. ‘Real politics’ does not mean power and material interest are all that matter. ‘Crude realism’ is incoherent to the extent that it is impossible to specify ‘material interests’ independently of what groups actually pursue. Real politics is not the sort of “hardheaded realism that altogether eschews imaginative constructs” (ibid. x). Even the “deepest kind of political

conformism and any defense of the status quo requires an act of imagining of some kind" (ibid.).

So what do we get in place of politics-as-applied-ethics? Much elaboration on the dictum, 'actions speak louder than words'. Politics involves an interaction between individuals and groups, with different power to control, counter or preempt the actions of others and assess a variety of courses of action, appealing to shared principles and assumptions, asserting themselves and cajoling each other to further particular policies and orientations towards the world (ibid.: 6). Ethical judgments and moral oughts should not always trump other practical considerations. Contexts of action are more important than opinions and beliefs. Realism can be more than an abstract negation of reputable, *rule-centered* Kantian political philosophy. For example, Thucydides takes an *agent-centered* approach to political philosophy, focusing on the power of individuals or groups rather than rules. Instead of asking, following Lenin, what ought to be done, we may ask, "*who [does] what to whom for whose benefit?*" (ibid.: 53).

To readers of Geuss' previous work this may sound familiar, although the topics themselves are often fascinating in their own right, ranging from reflections on radical criticism, bourgeois philosophy and philology, to discussion of such diverse figures as Paul Celan, Richard Rorty and Tony Blair, and analysis of events such as the Twin Towers bombing and the invasion of Iraq. However, the key original motif in these essays, which helps to distinguish 'real politics' from 'crude realism', involves an emphasis on various ways in which "imaginary constructs can create realities that go far beyond merely subjective spheres of action" (ibid.: 68). "There are overpowering imaginary constructs of such seductive power and attraction that they can prevail for centuries against all resistance" (ibid.: 67). The 'state' and the ideal of the 'social contract', for instance, have become so real that it is hard to imagine the artifice of these conceptual constructs.

The activated imagination is not a mere historical *epiphenomenon*, but rather shapes political reality. It constrains the scope of current possibilities and changes the situation in a way that does not simply instantiate pre-existing rules. Imaginative acts, such as poetry, can introduce a *radical* change of attitude, orientation, possibilities and identity with gestures that change the air one breathes. Culture is an artificial, imagined horizon, but the restrictions it imposes are conditions which make it possible for participants to lead a meaningful life. Heidegger, who makes a cameo appearance in two essays in the collection (on his stuttering brother, Fritz, an ironically eloquent Carnival Fool, and on Paul Celan), brings to real politics the idea of the 'project': that "Who I really am, is given to some extent by my possibilities" (ibid.: 123). We need such a horizon to orientate ourselves, otherwise our energies become too diffuse. The paradox surrounding the imaginative

mediation of fantasy and reality, which recurs in Nietzsche and unifies these essays, is that “human beings are subject to certain illusions, which they can to some extent see through as illusions, but which are nonetheless utterly necessary for them to continue to live” (ibid.: 95).

How, then, is it possible to gain imaginative critical distance “without getting caught up in the web of powerful fantasies which our society spins around us?” (ibid.: x). Marx’s insight that customs appropriate to a particular historical context may drag back development as situations change, helps to explain a distinction between two examples raised in the preface: (1) politicians, such as Margaret Thatcher, “bring into existence new brute realities” with the exercise of the imagination (ibid.: ix); but (2) the Bush regime suffered from the hubristic belief that “the United States was so limitlessly powerful it could successfully conjure a completely new reality into existence in Iraq, *without regard* to antecedent conditions” (ibid.). The dialectical point here against hypostatization is raised again in relation to Celan’s poetry and Nietzsche’s philology, the task of which is to bring together past and present with “the intention of using each to criticize the other” (ibid.: 84). The imagination may generate destructive illusions, but with careful attention to *contexts of action*, it can also help us, constructively, to define and fundamentally alter reality.

At times the theme of ‘politics and the imagination’ proves a thin thread in its attempt to draw together work previously presented in diverse contexts and addressing a broad range of interests. However, an overriding concern with the question of the *distance* required for *realistic* criticism may provide methodological justification for the loose connections between these essays, and perhaps even for the essay style itself, which Geuss associates with an alternative conception of modernity in Montaigne, Rabelais, Marlowe and Grotius – a world of skeptical tolerance, affirmation of life, and a concept of liberty not linked to the self-regulated internalized policeman. A literary move away from philosophical treatises, he suggests, could help to free us from the illusion of an absolute autonomous subject and the “fantasy of an overarching consensus” that distorts the political philosophy of the Enlightenment (ibid.: 78).

It is unlikely, writes Geuss, that we can make sense of everything, or even make sense of why we cannot do so. His reluctance to develop a systematic treatise is no doubt motivated by a concern, typical in critical theory, to avoid didactic, moralistic exposition, which lends itself to the reinforcement of hierarchically categorized prejudices effected by social relations of domination. Following Celan, these essays may be said to take the form of a ‘meridian’ (like Benjamin’s ‘constellation’) by bringing together apparently different places and events without subsuming them under a single concept or metaphor (which deprives singularities of their

uniqueness), to create new possibilities and give new orientation, “in a light which shines from the utopia of human memories and past dissatisfactions” (ibid.: 132).

Yet something is still missing in this elegiac re-imagination of ‘real politics’. We are encouraged to check imaginative constructs against real contexts of action, but reality is partly imagined. One also wonders where the action is, amid the abstract meta-analysis of the limitations of political philosophy divorced from real contexts of action. Geuss is a doctor of philosophy, not a mechanic. What we have is a desperate situation of “increased world population, irreversible environmental damage, economic and political divisions, military conflicts over increasingly scarce resources” (ibid.: 184), dominated by real conflicts which “no amount of sophisticated intellectual maneuvering will resolve” (ibid.: 181). These issues will impose radical responses which will require much discipline. It is impossible to continue with the notion of the unbridled productivity of the ‘free market’ and we will be “dragged to confront this” (ibid.: xiii) if we do not come up with some imaginative responses.

Any organized attempt at improvement of our situation will include some at least minimal exercise of the imagination, in that it will require agents to think of ways in which their environment or modes of acting could be different from what they now are (ibid.: ix)

The end of the book is a bit of let-down which follows a typical baby-boomer formulation of ends (an attempt to take with them to the grave their entire inherited traditions: the end of history, modernism, post-modernism, philosophy, ideology, history, job security, affordable housing, the welfare state, and so on). After 192 pages of criticism, the book kills itself in Hegelian fashion, spilling out into the world and over the future. We learn that ‘criticism’, and especially ‘radical criticism’, “emerged from a bourgeois age and is unlikely to outlive it” (ibid.: 185). The comfortable Western European world, which introduced criticism to society, is about to collapse, taking with it a “luxury good that has showed itself to be in practice almost completely ineffective” (ibid.). In response, it is worth pointing to a cruel illusion for the moth who holds the sound principle (before electricity), to wit, ‘the darker it is, the less visible I am’. The closer to the light it flies, the darker the world appears. Perhaps a gloomier enlightenment could help us keep better track of the world as it is, or perhaps this illusion is simply too comforting to lose or surrender.

Chris Allsobrook (callsobrook@uj.ac.za) is a Post Doctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Politics at the University of Johannesburg. His primary research focus is on normative problems of justification (both epistemological and ethical) in social and political theory. Other areas of interest include 19th and 20th century German philosophy, as well as criticism of liberal political discourse on agency, sovereignty, rights and development.

Habermas and Rawls: Disputing the Political

Edited by James Gordon Finlayson and Fabian Freyenhagen

Oxford: Routledge, 2010, hbk £80.00 (ISBN 978-0-4158-7686-5), 315pp.

by Huw Rees

Is there anything left to say about the Rawls-Habermas encounter? James Gordon Finlayson and Fabian Freyenhagen evidently think so, as do the eminent philosophers who have contributed to this book. Its purpose is not, as the editors make clear, to re-run the encounter or assess what Rawls and Habermas said about each other, but rather to “examine how their respective theories deal with the important questions of political philosophy, including wider questions which did not feature directly in the dispute” (Finlayson & Freyenhagen, 2010: 2). It is divided into three sections. The first reproduces the encounter itself – Habermas’ “Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason”, Rawls’ “Political Liberalism: Reply to Habermas”, and finally Habermas’ “‘Reasonable’ versus ‘True’, or the Morality of Worldviews”. The second section, which takes up the majority of the volume, is made up of essays about the encounter. The third and shortest section consists of Habermas’ reply to these essays.

Finlayson and Freyenhagen provide a lucid introduction, including a particularly useful summary of the “prehistory” of the Rawls-Habermas encounter. The editors efficiently sketch out Rawls’ and Habermas’ positions. They assume that Rawls will be better known to readers, and that Habermas’ theories are the ones in need of greater explication. This is clearly a widely-held assumption – several of the contributors to section two share it – but readers who are not so familiar with Rawls (and such people do exist) may need to look elsewhere for an introduction to his ideas. The editors’ blow-by-blow account of the dispute itself is detailed and effective.

Turning to section one, a question immediately confronts the reader: does this book need to exist? It is useful to have the texts by Rawls and Habermas to hand. But these articles have been freely available for years. The first two appeared in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1995: 109-131, 132-180) and Habermas’ reply took up a chapter of *The Inclusion of the Other* (1999: 75-103). Anyone with access to a university library is already able to read them, and given that the book costs £80, it is likely that university libraries will be its main purchasers. The value of the book must lie, then, in the eight essays which make up section two, and Habermas’ comments on them.

The essays vary in quality. Three of them are extremely good, and Joseph Heath’s “Justice: Transcendental not Metaphysical” is the best. Heath defends Habermas against one of Rawls’ fundamental criticisms, namely, his decision to regard the Discourse Theory of law and democracy as a

comprehensive doctrine, and thus not on the same level as Rawls' "freestanding" Political Liberalism. This was one of the impediments to the original encounter, as several contributors note. With his usual rigour and skill, Heath unpicks and inverts this criticism, arguing that Rawls' theory is far more comprehensive than he liked to admit. Heath has a gift for clarifying the murkiest controversies, and readers will welcome his contribution.

Christopher McMahon offers a brisk, laconic examination of "Habermas, Rawls and Moral Impartiality". Both theorists are found wanting, although his focus is on the former. McMahon uses his distinction between "piecemeal" and "integral" consensus (2010: 203) to force open some of the flaws in Habermas' approach, and takes aim at the possible circularity of *purely* procedural justification – a problem which afflicts Rawls as well. His criticisms may not be devastating – Habermas responds to them robustly in section three – but they are well-made and enlightening.

Catherine Audard stages "the debate that never was" (2010: 225) concerning "Rawls and Habermas on the Place of Religion in the Political Domain". While the contents of the first half of her essay will be no surprise to anyone who is familiar with this issue, it is an excellent primer for those who are not. Audard demonstrates the initial convergence between Rawls and Habermas on this issue, as well as showing that the latter has, in recent years, gone much further than the former in his attempts to accommodate religion in modernity. The second half of Audard's essay contains the most stringent criticisms of Habermas to be found in this book. She dismantles his grounding of postsecularism on the "cognitive burden" which secularism (supposedly) places on religious citizens. Ultimately, Audard concludes that Rawls' weak secularism, which asks only for a convergence of minds between citizens, may be more liberal and tolerant than Habermas' postsecularism, which aims for both hearts and minds.

The essays by Anthony Simon Laden, James Gledhill, and Jeffrey Flynn are well-executed and successful exercises in philosophical commentary. Gledhill shares Heath's intuition that Rawls' theory is more substantive than metaphysically neutral. Flynn argues that Habermas' dialogical approach to global human rights, informed by a Honnethian sensitivity to struggles for recognition, is more appropriate for the contemporary world than Rawls' austere formulation. Laden looks deeply into exactly where Rawls and Habermas differ on the matter of justification.

The two remaining essays are not so successful. James Bohman's prose is impenetrable, and his arguments are unclear. Rainer Forst takes twice as long as most of the other contributors to say half as much. Moreover, his essay is a truncated version of a chapter of his forthcoming *The Right to Justification*. Interested readers should wait until December 2011, or seek out the German version.

Habermas replies to his critics in the third section. For all his prolificacy, any new text of his should be welcomed, and this section is one of the book's strengths. The regrettable thing, as Habermas himself acknowledges, is the "irremediable asymmetry" of the fact that he is here to reply and continue the debate, while John Rawls is not (2010: 283). Habermas devotes a short subsection to each of the contributors. Lack of space inevitably means that his comments are general rather than detailed. He sometimes responds to specific criticisms with rather vague restatements of the criticised arguments. Despite this, many of Habermas' comments are illuminating, and the most profitable way of using this book may be to read an essay from section two, followed by Habermas' comments on it.

This is very much a book for specialists. It gives the impression at times of being written by fans of Rawls and Habermas, for fans of Rawls and Habermas, but the best of the essays in section two offer genuine criticisms of the titular theorists. The book will make a fine contribution to any philosophical library, chronicling as it does the only sustained encounter between the greatest political philosophers of the late twentieth century.

Huw Rees (dr81@sussex.ac.uk) is a DPhil student at the Centre for Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex. His research focuses on postsecularism in Habermas' recent work.

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For a New Critique of Political Economy

by Bernard Stiegler

Cambridge: Polity, 2010, pbk £12.99 (ISBN: 978-0-7456-4804-0), 154pp.

by Danny Hayward

What to make of the figure of the proletariat today, when the persistence of *complex* class divisions is so manifestly incontrovertible, and when, in the Western states at least, capitalism seems to have pacified even those whom it immiserates? This is an old and drably familiar question, posed by thinkers as unlike as Theodor Adorno and Anthony Giddens, in various tones of pain and beatific contentment. For the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (who cites Adorno but who is closer in spirit to Giddens), the continued power of the category 'proletarian' is ensured in (what I will contend is) the grand sophisticated tradition: by a change in definition. The 'proletarian' is no longer simply (what it was for Marx) the individual expropriated of the means of production, but becomes, in what Stiegler understands to be an intensification of Marx's thesis, the individual expropriated of '*savoir-vivre*' – of the knowledge of life.

Stiegler's *For a New Critique of Political Economy* is the elaboration of a lecture given in 2009, and the condensation of lessons learnt in a series of books on technics and society, most of which were published in the 1990s. According to the central thesis of this latest text – and this is its explanation in divine *theoria* of the economic crisis that 'began' in 2008 – the knowledge of life is abolished in the process of technological advance: the memory gives way to the hard drive, the instinctive sense of melody to digital audio storage, craftsmanship to the automatically controlled, reprogrammable, multipurpose manipulator. Stiegler sometimes (and following Derrida) calls this process *grammatization*; sometimes he calls it the production of 'negative externalities'. Whatever the designation, at the far reach of the process (that is, we are told, sometime in the early 1970s) grammatization had so completely denuded people of their variable *savoir-vivre* that even "the elites" were proletarianised (2010: 47). A page later we are told that the nervous system has been proletarianised. Sixteen pages further in and the *petit bourgeoisie* too have been subjected to an "aesthetic and noetic proletarianization" (2010: 64). Proletarianisation has exalted itself to a universal condition. It is the very spice of life that embitters all its flavour.

How did we poor humans *get here*? Stiegler has an answer, or, rather, he has a narrative of unusual stretch and impressive grandiloquence, arcing preposterously from "the advent of Neolithic sedentarization" (2010: 9) to the arrest in December 2008 of the Information Age ponzi-sorcerer Bernie Madoff. I do not have time to recapitulate the full arc of this narrative (and

in 130 pages, neither does Stiegler): instead I will recapitulate his account from 1900 onwards.

It begins badly. Around the turn of the century capitalism underwent a crisis of profitability. In a kind of reprieve for the ruling class, the crisis was put off by the invention of a “new industrial model” (2010: 23), available in any colour so long as it’s black. Readers will recognise this as the Fordism thesis. Stiegler’s original contribution is not the periodisation but its hermeneutics. How did Fordism restore profitability? According to *A New Critique*, it did so by inventing consumerism. For Stiegler, profitability resumed not in consequence of the invention of a new and fertile productive line (automobiles), but in consequence of the ‘proletarianization of the consumer’. Whatever capital was perpetrating in the nineteenth century in factories and fields, in the twentieth century the system renewed itself by the “exploitation and functionalization of a *new energy* . . . the consumer’s *libidinal energy*”. This energy, ‘harnessed’ by marketing to the grim warhorse of Sears catalogues and, latterly, of Amazon browser windows, meant that the tendential fall of the rate of profit met, if not quite its *match*, then at least its countertendency.

But all good things come to an end, and not least in what Stiegler calls the “*pharmakon* emerging from the process of grammatization in which, in the epoch of reticulated capitalism, cognitive technologies and digitalized cultural technologies are formed”; and so in the second chapter Stiegler attempts to set his account to work in explanation of the capitalist crisis of 2008 onwards (2010: 48). As the reader may by now have guessed, this account is not akin to those Marxist analyses whose terminology it endorses. In Stiegler’s opinion, the crisis was not in the financial system alone (an assumption he shares with most Marxists), but was also in the libidinal economy (an assumption which he doesn’t), which through its subjection to ‘marketing’ has been bludgeoned and tantalisated into a delirious ‘short termism’, a kind of ‘systemic stupidity’ or ‘carelessness’ that is sufficiently universal to explain both the wide-eyed, speechless enthusiasm of a viewer of *X Factor* and the shut eyes of Alan Greenspan mouthing off in 2007 from his highchair on the Board of the Federal Reserve (2010: 47).

The crisis of capital in 2010 is the *Nachträglichkeit*, the last Freudian aftereffect, of the botched resolution of 1908. In Stiegler’s view, it is also the *pharmakon*, the poison that contains its own remedy. Stiegler describes here the cure for capital in crisis: a new ‘therapeutics’ of investment (2010: 19), where the technologies of grammatization might allow a circumvention of the consumer economy. On the last page of the book we are told – in the lofty tones of the office memorandum – that this circumvention will allow a *potentially* beneficial “inter-systemic macro-tendency formed at the interface of the technical system and social systems, and operating a fundamental

integration between them"; but also that "[d]eveloping such forms of knowledge and valuing them economically will cause a new economic system to emerge from the heart of the social systems" (2010: 129). This might strike the reader as circular: we must circumvent the economy so that we may better integrate the technical and social systems; then we can restore them to the economy and resume our wielding of the price-tag gun. This is not untypical: in Stiegler's quasi-marxist programmatic digest, the Benjaminian *Einbahnstraße* is supplanted by the one way mirror. Peering at its warped surface, the reader sees reflected back the categories of *Das Kapital*; behind them, however, she can make out the faint and faded outlines of another political programme, a tattered manual of social change for jaded cyberneticians. A trip through any page of the endnotes confirms this; and Marxists will baulk at the procrustean bed onto which Stiegler forces economic analysis. The tendential fall in the rate of profit is understood as a consequence of marketing, chronic short-termism and the destruction "of all motives" (2010: 61). How do we understand capitalist decline in the 1970s? Was it due to class struggle? Industrial overcapacity determined by market imperatives to competition? No: the answer is the languid contemplation of billboards.

It was often remarked in the turbid wake of the financial sector crash and the sovereign assumption of private debt that the category 'capitalism' had thrust its way back into popular consciousness. Stiegler's *New Critique* licenses a few antiquated cybernetic remedies to capitalist decline (Stiegler is a Heideggerian prophet come to speak of hackers and social media); but its real and revanchist function is to tear away from the two categories of Marxism and capitalism everything that might make those categories persistently *unpalatable* to a bourgeois and post-Marxist readership. Stiegler's book doesn't just retail a newly evacuated definition of the proletariat in a market of competing class analyses: it *philosophises* the proletariat. Once the philosophical *definition* of the proletariat has been purged of its relation to the means of production, the commodification of those means, and the authorities that police their use, Stiegler has consummately evacuated from his *Critique* any detailed account of property relations; and this in turn licenses the decisive deletion from his Marxism of *communism*, both as the description of a non-capitalist form of property holding and as the inextinguishable horizon for revolutionary action. The old, shuffling horde of proletarian producers, with its familiar iconography of grimaces and flat-caps, its gimmick hammers and its unaffordable pension plans, are swept once again from the stage of history, in emblematic fidelity to a 'social analysis' which has been passed down like a membership card or mantelpiece ornament from the Frankfurt School to Foucault to André Gorz to the hordes of ex-Marxists who from the eighties onwards thronged onto

the sofas of French chat shows to chant their valedictions (and with whom Stiegler understands himself to be in combat).

As I said, this analysis is not a rebuttal of the *categories* of Marx's *Das Kapital*, but it is nevertheless a negation of its arguments, because its resumption of the critique of political economy is delicately negotiated to appeal to the sensibilities of exactly those social groups which Marx's analysis of capital was intended to frustrate – i.e. those who stand to lose on its prognosis – and is calculated to found its appeal in the *universal ascription of membership of the category Marx used to describe capital's victims*. Today, we are all victims, and the final outcome of this is a perfectly abstract description of a better relationship to work “beyond mere employment”, which “consists in action in the world in order to transform it on the basis of the knowledge one has of it” (2010: 131n). But this is a statement just as true of the man who in *The Wealth of Nations* engages forever in the ‘peculiar business’ of putting the head on a pin – or of migrant Philippine textile workers now being exploited in Romania – as it is of humans freed from the grim exigencies of capitalist markets (1986: 110). I would propose that this is a more specific problem in Stiegler than the one that might be diagnosed, of excess abstraction carried out in a social vacuum. In the quashing of social antagonism, it is the function of reactionary thought to trivialise basic differences in *material conditions* by refusing entry of those differences into the hallowed realm of moral thought. Such thinking denies *not the reality* but the *significance* of those basic differences, and it does so in the name of a putatively more basic similitude. After all, screams the refrain, *everyone has to work*. This is the inverse of good class analysis, which attempts to characterise the production of basic similitude (of classes) in solicitude for the experienced significance of differences. Under the fluorescent sign of ‘marketing’ and the grammatized technics it sells us, Stiegler diminishes the ‘proletarian’ ascription to a universal freebie, chucked in to sweeten the deal for the non-committal reader. But this is just one way of picking sides.

Danny Hayward is a PhD candidate in English at Birkbeck College. He works on conceptions of commitment in English Romanticism. An article on the poetry of Keston Sutherland is forthcoming in the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*.

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The Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory

by Axel Honneth

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, hbk £20.95 (ISBN: 978-0-691-11806-2), 96pp.

by Philip Hogh

It is probably no exaggeration to call Axel Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition* one of the most influential works in social philosophy and critical theory of the last two decades. In his work Honneth returned Hegel's concept of recognition to the center of philosophical attention. Honneth's special interest was to use Hegel's early social philosophy to develop a theory of intersubjective recognition that would end up neither in what Honneth called Hegel's monological idealism represented by the *Phenomenology of Spirit* nor in a formal and transcendental moral theory of recognition represented by the works of Jürgen Habermas.

Surprisingly, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* did not play a major role in Honneth's crucial work. In his newly published book, Honneth tries to regain Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* as a theory of the conditions and realizations of individual freedom. In the first of three main chapters, Honneth explains the difficulties one has to face in carrying through this attempt as well as the reasons why it is promising to actualize Hegel's theory in the aforementioned way. Honneth takes into account two problems which every engagement with Hegel's work has to confront: the current disinterest in the *Philosophy of Right*, despite its attractiveness for "the politico-philosophical self-understanding of our time" (Honneth, 2010: 3), has both *political* and *methodological* reasons. Politically, Hegel's work seems to have "antidemocratic consequences because it subordinates the freedom of the individual to the ethical authority of the state" (ibid.), while methodologically the main objection holds that "the steps in Hegel's reasoning can be correctly followed and judged only in relation to the appropriate parts of his *Logic*, but the *Logic* has become totally incomprehensible to us owing to its ontological conception of spirit" (ibid.: 4).

This is why Honneth proposes an indirect and modest strategy in reactualizing Hegel's social theory instead of showing that the two aforementioned objections are mere misunderstandings: "we must criticize them indirectly by demonstrating their irrelevance to any really productive reappropriation of the treatise" (ibid.). In doing so Honneth aims to prove that the *Philosophy of Right* "can be understood as a draft of a normative theory of those spheres of reciprocal recognition that must be preserved intact because they constitute the moral identity of modern societies" (ibid.:

5). Honneth is fully aware that his way of interpreting Hegel's work bears the risk of losing access to its substance. In order to avoid this danger Honneth uses two of Hegel's concepts that are crucial for his system and must not be neglected even though the structure and the idea of Hegel's system as a whole are no longer convincing: these two concepts consist in "objective spirit" and "ethical life". According to Honneth, the former is used to understand social reality as a rational structure, while the latter is used to describe the social spheres of action "in which inclinations and moral norms, interests, and values are already fused in the form of institutionalized interactions" (ibid.: 6). In Honneth's view, these two concepts, and the theoretical consequences resulting from their use, represent the necessary framework if one wants to read Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* as a theory of the realization of individual freedom.

Having explained his theoretical and methodological approach to Hegel's work, Honneth proceeds to read the Introduction of the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel explains his theory of the freedom of the will, and uses the concept of friendship to grasp the normative core of Hegel's work: "as the quintessence of a just social order [Hegel] regards those social or institutional conditions that allow each individual subject to enter into communicative relationships that can be experienced as expressions of their own freedom" (ibid.: 15). Friendship then means nothing else but "being with oneself in the other" (ibid.: 14), so that the normative criteria Hegel uses to decide whether the social spheres allow its members to realize themselves in reciprocal recognition are the criteria of successful intersubjective communicative relations.

In his second chapter Honneth examines the two deficient forms of the realization of individual freedom with which Hegel is concerned, namely, "abstract right" and "morality", in addition to the suffering these deficient forms create – a suffering from indeterminacy. These two forms are necessary but not sufficient forms of the self-realization of the individual. The deficiency of abstract or formal right is that "those who articulate all their needs and intentions in the categories of formal right become incapable of participating in social life and must therefore suffer from 'indeterminacy'" (ibid.: 35). Every bearer of rights therefore has to participate in social relations if she wants the potential of freedom that lies within her rights to be realized. Honneth then discusses the manifold objections Hegel raises to morality, which is the Kantian form of the realization of freedom, but regards only one as being "worth considering, or indeed true: it is the objection to context-blindness" (ibid.: 39). Honneth continues:

As is well known, Hegel's objection to the idea of moral autonomy is that it does not help us in reconstructing how a

subject will ever come to act rationally; for in trying to apply the categorical imperative, the subject will remain disoriented and 'empty' so long as he does not resort to certain normative guidelines drawn from the institutionalized practices of his environment, which provide him with the most basic information about what may be regarded as a 'good' reason in any given situation (ibid.)

The deficiencies from which subjects suffer are isolation from social practices in "abstract right", and emptiness and the inability to act with good reason in a distinct situation in "morality". This suffering from indeterminacy has to be overcome, and Honneth describes this process in his third chapter as a liberation that leads to or creates ethical life:

If we are to list the conditions in brief key phrases, the sphere of ethical life must consist of interactional practices that are able to guarantee individual self-realization, reciprocal recognition, and the corresponding process of education; and the three aims must be closely interwoven, since Hegel seems convinced that their relationship is one of mutual conditioning (ibid.: 56)

For Honneth, it is important to point out that Hegel is not a moral constructivist who outlines moral principles and in a second step then asks what the social conditions for the realization of these principles must be like. On the contrary, on Honneth's reading Hegel thinks that the social conditions of life

generally contain enough justifiable moral norms to serve as a foundation for most of our judgments and decisions; and this thesis itself was the expression of his broader conviction that social reality should be spoken of only as 'objective spirit' because it must be regarded as the result of the rational instantiation of generalizable reasons (ibid.)

The sphere of ethical life is tripartite and consists of the family, civil society, and the state. In a typical Hegelian manner, the family and civil society alone are deficient parts of ethical life that can only be called ethical ("sittlich") if they are integrated into a whole. This integration now can only be guaranteed by the state. As Honneth reads Hegel's work as a theory of individual freedom that can only be realized in social practices of reciprocal recognition it strikes him that Hegel does not conceptualize the state as a sphere of recognition:

If Hegel had thought along such lines, if he had really envisioned an emphatic concept of 'public' freedom, he could easily have conceived the state as a third sphere of reciprocal recognition: what the subjects recognize about each other, if they cooperate in the manner described, is their readiness and ability to cooperate, through their own activities, in the creation of a common good (ibid.: 78)

This means Honneth criticizes Hegel for conceptualizing the state as a sphere of domination and not as a sphere of recognition.

Now I think this is the point where Honneth's reading of Hegel reaches its limits. Of course, Honneth is right in criticizing Hegel's theory of the state as affirmative given that it subsumes individual freedom under the state. But this conservative aspect of Hegel's thought could show its critical truth content if one thinks of it as a realistic expression of the relations between individuals and the state. If one takes into account that even the institutions of the modern democratic state are means of domination then one could read Hegel's social theory as a theory of recognition that knows its limits, as mutual recognition in social practices is restricted by the state. Although Honneth's strategy of an indirect reactualization of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is a strong and stimulating reading of Hegel, the preference for Hegel's early socio-philosophical works – which are foregrounded in *Struggle for Recognition* and the present text – risks lapsing into a romantic distortion of social and political reality. As "The Pathologies of Individual Freedom" is a very short book, one is left curious as to how Honneth will continue his engagement with the *Philosophy of Right* in his forthcoming book on the right of freedom.¹

Philip Hogh (p.hogh@gmx.de) is currently working on his dissertation on Adorno's philosophy of language in the Philosophy Department at the Goethe University Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany. His current research interests are social philosophy, philosophy of language, philosophy of nature, and psychoanalysis.

Endnotes

¹ Honneth's book "Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit" ("The Right of Freedom. Groundwork of a Democratic Ethical Life") is announced to be published in June 2011 by Suhrkamp Press, Berlin.

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Of Jews and Animals

by Andrew Benjamin

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, hbk £65.00 (ISBN: 978-0-7486-4053-9), 208pp.

by Verena Erlenbusch and Colin McQuillan

Andrew Benjamin has undertaken a compelling study of the ways in which Jews and animals are figured in the history of art, literature and philosophy in his recent book *Of Jews and Animals*. Benjamin acknowledges that associating Jews and animals is problematic for historical and political reasons, yet, he attempts to show how both Jews and animals become figures of the 'without relation'. The without relation is, according to Benjamin, a radical separation that takes the form of an absence of a relation. It is an inadequate conception of difference in which particularity is effaced in the name of universality. The purpose of Benjamin's study is to develop a metaphysics of particularity, which would allow a more affirmative concept of relationality than can be conceived through the without relation.

Benjamin begins his study by examining how Descartes and Heidegger define the difference between animals and humans, in order to show that the exclusion of animality, and the negation of any relation between the human and the animal, is constitutive of their respective conceptions of humanity. In both cases, however, Benjamin argues that animality remains essentially related to humanity. When one considers the role animal spirits play in Descartes' account of human physiology, and Heidegger's account of the 'existence' of the dog, it becomes apparent that the without relation is founded on the denial of a more fundamental relation.

Benjamin goes on to elaborate the ways in which human community is defined by the exclusion of the animal. He contends that, for Blanchot, community is defined by the death of the animal. The animal is sacrificed in order to establish the separation from nature and the linguistic relations that obtain between members of a community. The relations that define the community are, therefore, essentially human relations. Benjamin is less concerned about the possibility of including the animal in the community, however, than he is with the possibility of thinking the animal outside the logic of sacrifice and the without relation.

The logic of sacrifice and the without relation are maintained by the anthropocentric bias of the language of metaphysics. Navigating between Derrida's deconstruction of humanism and the space of 'play' that deconstruction opens up between the human and the animal, Benjamin attempts to demonstrate the primordially of relationality. Relationality is always already constituted by the way in which difference is thought. For

that reason, Benjamin emphasizes the way in which difference is figured, rather than the difference between the human and the animal.

Drawing on Hegel's discussion of 'disease' in the *Philosophy of Nature*, Benjamin introduces the figure of the Jew. Benjamin situates his discussion of the Jew within a discussion of disease since the latter "marks the movement in which particularity dominates a conception of possible universality" (2010: 99). For Hegel, Benjamin claims, the Jew "takes the form of a disease that can be overcome" (ibid.: 104). The Jew can be incorporated into the universality of 'man' if his particularity as Jew is effaced. Universality is thus dependent upon the exclusion of particularity and the establishment of a without relation. Instead of arguing for recognition of the Jew as Jew, however, Benjamin insists on a rethinking of relationality which affirms particularity.

Benjamin argues that Agamben neglects that particularity in his account of 'bare life'. He accuses Agamben of effacing the particularity of those who were reduced to 'bare life' in the camps and emptying the political of the "founding mark" of difference (ibid.: 122-124). Doing so, Benjamin maintains, leads Agamben to a utopianism in which 'bare life' is an absolutely indeterminate form of life beyond identity. For Benjamin, this utopianism is problematic, firstly, because it is unable to distinguish between potential and actual victims of violence. Violence is not inflicted on 'bare life' indiscriminately, but rather on those – like Jews in Nazi Germany – whose otherness leads them to be regarded as enemies. Secondly, Agamben also fails to see that particularity must persist in the "coming community", even if the differences which distinguish particularity are no longer considered marks of enmity.

Examining the logic of enmity, Benjamin considers Pascal's reflections on the relation between justice and force. Benjamin argues that justice requires force, for Pascal, because there are always those who are 'wicked'. The presence of the other, the representation of the other as the enemy, and the denunciation of the enemy as wicked, allows force to be exercised against the other in the name of justice. Rather than being the mystical foundation of authority, as Derrida contends, this gesture is for Benjamin "the original and grounding form of violence" (ibid.: 127). The manifest violence in Pascal's identification of the Jew as 'wicked' is the result of a process of universalization, which substitutes the immediacy of identity for the porous and ongoing incompleteness of particularity (ibid.).

Against this "original and grounding form of violence", Benjamin poses the work of art. Although the work of art is often beholden to the same process of universalization that led Pascal to declare the Jew 'wicked', the portrait also represents the particularity of its subject. The distinguishing characteristics of the particular are presented in the portrait in ways that are

neither simple nor immediate. Particularity breaks through the universal in surprising and unexpected ways, when, for example, faces do not look at one another in Van Eyck's *The Fountain of Grace* (1430), or while hands seem to touch without touching in Dürer's *Jesus Among the Doctors* (1506). In both cases, the work of art presents the "complex plurality" that undoes the universalization of identity, exclusion and enmity. For this reason, Benjamin concludes that a just and affirmative encounter with particularity is possible.

Andrew Benjamin offers an important intervention in the philosophical concern with the figures of Jews and animals. His problematization of ethical reflections for being tainted by the founding mark of the without relation between human and non-human beings, draws attention to the necessity of a new way of thinking about relationality. It is not entirely clear, however, if, for Benjamin and in the history of philosophy, the animal is actually presented as something without relation to the human. Benjamin does not consider the ways in which separation, negation, exclusion, and difference, constitute, despite their negativity, forms of relation.

Benjamin's reading of Pascal is likewise questionable since Pascal does not actually call Jews 'wicked'. There is an important slippage in Benjamin's reading, which passes from Pascal's statement that "it is necessary that Jews or Christians are wicked" (ibid.: 130) to the conclusion that Jews are "automatically" (ibid.: 143) and "immediately" (ibid.: 146) wicked. What Benjamin brings out in his discussion of Pascal, however, is a question of philosophical and political acuity. "What does it mean", Benjamin asks, "to be just to particularity?" (ibid.: 145). The answer is as provocative as it is powerful. Instead of understanding justice as force, doing justice to particularity requires a temporal and spatial element that allows immediacy to be displaced and the time of judgment to be held open. Doing justice to particularity means

to hold both philosophically and as a matter of social policy to the maintenance of particularities as sites of conflict and thus within terms they set and create to hold to the necessity that particularities have their own sense of self-transformation (ibid.: 146).

Benjamin's reflections on particularity and the justice it demands deserve the kind of wide readership that the publisher's price tag seems to preclude. Given the lack of an exhaustive bibliography, as well as the shockingly poor copyediting, one is left wondering about the level of care and attention Edinburgh University Press have chosen to pay to this important intervention by a scholar of Benjamin's stature.

Colin McQuillan (cmcquillan@utk.edu) is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He received his PhD from Emory University in 2010.

Verena Erlenbusch (v.erlenbusch@sussex.ac.uk) is a recipient of a DOC-fellowship of the Austrian Academy of Sciences at the Centre for Social and Political Thought, University of Sussex. She is also a Visiting Research Scholar in Philosophy at Emory University.

Adorno for Revolutionaries

by Ben Watson

London: Unkant Publishing, 2011, pbk £11.99, (ISBN: 978-0-9568-1760-0), 256pp.

by Luke Manzarpour

Few calls have been made on the writings of Theodor Adorno to engage in direct political action since his students vainly demanded he march them to the barricades in '68. One recent attempt to chase away his black dog of despair was the decidedly limp autonomist publication *Negativity and Revolution* by John Holloway (2008). Others seeking an affinity between Adorno and contemporary radicalism have sought to apply Adorno's aesthetic theory to the jazz of Coltrane or the punk of Fugazi. The most sustained effort to reconcile Adorno with contemporary praxis has come from music journalist Ben Watson, whose sprawling tomes on Frank Zappa, Derek Bailey and the *avant-garde* are driven by a confidence in Trotskyist politics and its consistency with the doyen of the Frankfurt School.

Adorno for Revolutionaries – a collection of Watson's essays and reviews from early '90s to mid-'00s – offers an opportunity to evaluate the unique contribution to leftist thought of its author. Published under the banner of his newly-founded 'Association of Music Marxists' (AMM), the political and philosophical bases of Watson's *oeuvre* are presented throughout in discussions on a wide range of targets – from The Doors to Plato – showing just why he has devoted so many exuberant pages to music of which the majority of people have no experience. An excellent introduction, then, to Watson's ideas; however, the same cannot be said for those of Adorno.

Watson concludes the book's final piece – a transcript of a talk given to the SWP's annual 'Marxism' festival in 1995 – with the distinctly un-Adornian statement that "contemplation is not the task of revolutionary socialists" (2011: 212). Readers familiar with Adorno's magnum opus *Negative Dialectics* will immediately think of the well-known opening line – a rebuttal of Marx's condemnation of the role of philosophers as merely interpreting the world: "Philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, remains alive because the moment of its realisation was missed" (1973: 3, translation modified). Thus, he calls for a return to the problematic of German Idealism which socialism had thought concluded decisively with Marx and the class struggle. The critique of socialist theory developed in *Negative Dialectics* is not merely an attack on Soviet Diamat (as Watson contends) but strikes at the core of Marxist thought, exposing the primitive in its purported progress. For Adorno, in an age when certainties about how action can resolve the issues of contradiction inherent in capitalism and its philosophy are all but

lost, philosophical thinking is itself an important form of praxis that will help lead us out of the quagmire of actually existing socialist opposition (or lack thereof).

Not so for Watson, who repeats the neo-Kantian dichotomy between thought and action despite his sensitivity elsewhere to such cant in sociology, favouring action over thought. Watson's reading glosses over the significant fact that, for Adorno, contemplation is action, a move which informs Watson's division between what is alive (of practical use) and what is dead ('abstract' philosophy) in Adorno's writings. This is the frustration of the music journalist; ever discussing but never making music. For Adorno, immanent critique of German Idealism fosters truths about society as a whole since he reads the philosophy as the most substantial vessel of capitalist ideology and its antithesis. Watson, however, takes Adorno as reading philosophy as simply an unmediated reflection of the categories of society. Thus, Adorno's critique of the "domination of the concept" since Plato is taken simply as his "shorthand for domination of the boss over the employee" (Watson, 2011: 45). Shorn of the nuances of Adorno's conceptualisation we are denied his vision for a reconfiguration of human relations that Watson too readily assumes will be resolved in class struggle as understood by Lenin.

In this Watson resembles the students to which Adorno referred in a 1955 newspaper article:

Many students wait expectantly to see whose side the lecturer takes; they become excited if they detect an affirmative or polemical judgement and prefer a definite position to mere reflection (Adorno, 2002: 284)

The Adorno that emerges is one of unfamiliar vitality, with Watson egging him on beyond the misgivings over a revolutionary subject to embrace a politics with which Adorno the man would have been uncomfortable.

Unlike Adorno, Watson sees escape routes from the otherwise all-encompassing logic of capital cropping up all over the place, primarily in music. Lacking technical musical training, Watson takes his lead from Adorno's repeated inclusion of his subjective response to music and how sounds resemble objectively existing social phenomena, as opposed to reliance on musicological insight (2011: 190). This informs a fundamental aim of Watson's project; all judgement must acknowledge and include the subjective response of the individual judging if it is to achieve objective validity – "cultural analysis is meaningless that does not admit the point of view of the observer" (ibid.: 7).

Thus, we are taken through a cornucopia of Watson's musical likes,

from Snoop Dogg to Pinski Zoo. Any positive vibe Watson gets from music is put down to a progressive impulse lurking within, broadly following the criteria for radical music Adorno found satisfied through twelve-tone composition. At one point, Watson is candid about the vindication for his likes and dislikes he derives from reading Adorno:

[W]hat I especially like about Adorno is that he explains to me in rational, historical-materialist terms proclivities and animosities I'd previously thought to be subjective and arbitrary (ibid.: 31)

Watson argues powerfully for an "*Aufhebung* of Adorno's score-based aesthetic" (ibid.: 22), applying Adorno's appreciation of modernist composition to music completely alien in the common-sense logic of market genres. In turn, he does not so much appreciate music as use it (and his response to it) for political ends. There is a certain degree of vivacity in his concern with "the establishment of social theory by virtue of explication of aesthetic right or wrong" (ibid.: 102), a celebration of true musical (and, by extension, sensual) experience that relates how one *feels* to the social revolutionary impulse.

Yet the author lacks the dialectical reading of *all* personal proclivities that would validate individual response to even the most commercial of music and thereby universalise his project. It is not made clear *why* Watson's personal preferences happen to correspond to a radical progressive social impulse. Even if we accept his theorisation of the music he likes, he says little about the truth content of personal responses to music he hates. Surely a dialectical approach would extend to find a truth in false form in appreciation of the music of Justin Timberlake and Lady Gaga, even if revolutionary content cannot be readily imputed. As it stands, the subjective responses of the vast majority of society are simply deemed wrong. Again, Watson smuggles in fixed antinomies between progressive and reactionary. Not that there is no true and false in music, but his method cries out for recognising the truth in the false (sensitivity to the commercialism in all music demonstrates recognition of the false in the true). With such an evident lack, a central tenet of the book – namely, that our desires and struggles are significant to the impulse for radical social change – is unsatisfyingly formulated.

Elsewhere, his assaults on undialectical celebrants of pop pap are devastating. Simon Frith, Georgina Born and Sarah Thornton are all exposed for the market promoters they are, with Watson deftly slapping down their sociological/anthropological studies with Gillian Rose-inspired polemics – "Descriptive sociology is an insult to the people it describes: it performs the

condescension of generalising specific experience, of treating human beings as an object of study rather than a subject of address" (ibid.: 139). The Guardian-friendly moralism such thinking engenders in lieu of class analysis – tick-box lists of identity politics causes – is similarly swatted for being ineffectual liberal cant, as is the jargon of postmodern reverence for the 'Other' – "could anyone go on the radio and argue against immigration controls using the concept of 'otherness'?" (ibid.: 117-118). Deleuze's 'nomadic' thought is held up against a passage from Lenin promoting the right of travel for all, while the metaphysics of poststructuralist belief in the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified are dealt with conclusively in a footnote. Watson follows Adorno in holding that the thing conceived will always exceed its conception, and attempts to do justice to the negative in *Negative Dialectics* by insisting on the validity of that singularity contra those who would subsume it in categorical thought.¹

In one article, parallels are drawn between the dialectic of freedom and necessity in both music and political action. Roughly, music and politics take on emancipatory roles only when fantasy, play and accident are allowed to infringe upon predetermined goals. Free improvisation is here linked to Leninist activism in what Watson believes to be a mutual concern with the specific situation and human idiosyncrasy, while presupposing a common objective ground and the possibility of communication. Rules (musical and social) are not simply rejected in this conception in the manner of anarchism/deconstruction, but instead taken as material for analysis and exploration.

At times Watson's fantasy and play produce nonsense. His assertion that the term 'academy' derives from the musical academy was picked up by Gordon Finlayson in an otherwise ineffectual rebuttal of Watson's review of Jarvis (1998) published in *Historical Materialism*. The full text of Finlayson's letter is reprinted here and is followed by Watson's unsatisfying response of rare cringe-worthy self-aggrandisement (e.g. "I am no stranger to controversy"). The exchange is a low point of the book and one suspects its existence and reproduction here discloses more between the two than mere intellectual animosity. Still, in provoking a comparison with the wider analytical Habermasian work of his opponent, the exchange highlights Watson's pressing impulse to get out of the academy, where the inheritors of the Frankfurt School tradition remain, and this at least offers a further vindication of those who read Adorno *contra* Habermas.

Watson's musical judgement can suffer from his over-excitability. His assertion that "atonal music and the blues are both protests against the repression of the tempered harmonic system" (2011: 207) misses the fact that the standard blues song utilises the rigid and tonally consistent pentatonic scale (the microtones of string bends being more occasional derivations than

consistent protest). The link between these two musical forms, then, must lie elsewhere. Watson also holds that the Rolling Stones answer Adorno's call for derivation from an abstractly standard beat, despite Charlie Watts seldom venturing beyond the most basic of rock beats in their entire output. At another point, we are told the inclusion of a double bass in Roni Size's lounge drum and bass "evokes the legacy of jazz and its resistance to commercial hegemony" (ibid.: 163)! This kitsch gesture toward jazz is lapped up by Watson simply because he likes the music – any jazz bassist would find the connection ridiculous.

Here, Watson's assumption of a consistent coincidence between what he likes and objective radical content becomes untenable. At times, he seems to be aware of the problem. The AMM's Manifesto statement – "For **US**, music is a test of you and everything about you, and if you fail that test **YOU ARE THE ENEMY!!!!**" – may sound like the joyfully implacable confidence in personal impulses of a Situationist, but it smacks of mere fun and games when, throughout the text, SWP comrades are let off for not liking 'groovacious' music (a compromise not overcome by his anticipation of its criticism). The conviction is there without the courage, something that may be remedied if the invalidity of an absolute harmony between Watson's proclivities and his politics is resolved.

Despite its shortcomings *Adorno for Revolutionaries* is an immensely enjoyable manifesto for the revolutionary impulse of sensual pleasure, and so far more valuable to mobilisation than the analytical consistency of those leftists with corpses in their mouths. As an attempt to steal back Adorno from academia it is much more alive than the range of available introductions to Adorno and one which, most significantly, should provoke activist readers to put aside quietist academic commentaries and reconsider Adorno for themselves.

Luke Manzarpour studied law at Kent and Amsterdam, and has a Masters in Social and Political Thought from Sussex. He grew up in Brighton (an experience he is commemorating in a book of Lewisian satire called *The Chronicles of E-Z P*) and currently works in immigration law in London. He became interested in Adorno after reading Ben Watson's *Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*.

Endnotes

¹ For example, see Campbell (2007).

² Indeed, the imprint set up by him and Wilson for AMM is named specifically in opposition to such thinking.

³ Against such academic sociology, Watson lauds three books on different genres (jazz, rock, and funk) by people involved in those scenes, and traces the unifying thread in their respective materialist content, generating a boundary-crossing universalism entirely absent in postmodern liberal relativism. The instances of isolated identity politics dissent are repeatedly redirected towards class politics in the tradition of Lenin and Trotsky. Hence the regular refrain that ‘lacking a Marxist understanding’ an author does not quite grasp the significance of their dissent. Thus, universality in music is taken to be the common cause of the universal working-class. Music, for Watson, is entirely social, not the other plane of meaning promoted by music hacks. In turn there is, as such, no contentless form for him; the supposedly apolitical is in fact deeply political. In fact, for Watson, form has more content than lyrics. For this reason, Watson can reject music that lacks innovation but has ‘progressive’ lyrical content (one thinks of Rage Against the Machine, Billy Bragg and Dead Prez here, or, indeed, Harold Pinter): “Bad form, or reactionary, derivative treatments are not something that may be excused by a ‘progressive’ message” (ibid.: 7). Of course, this ignores the fact that a lot of these artists turn people on to left politics, that a Rage Against the Machine are of more practical use in psyching up protestors facing violent police and/or right-wing thugs than a John Zorn, and overlooks the occasional happy marriage of left politics and innovative music (Eugene Chadbourne, Minutemen, Propagandhi), but it opens the way to recognition of radicalism in unexplored and innovative areas beyond gestures to left issues by celebrity artists.

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