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BROKEN ARCHIVES IN A MIGRATING MODERNITY<http://dx.doi.org/XXXXXXXXXXXXXX>**Abstract**

The article queries the trend towards naturalisation that characterises the “contemporary organisation of awareness and knowledge” common to both the human and social sciences. In this way, both disciplines contravene their objective, namely, to show that what is considered “normal”, and for us, more natural and familiar, is merely “normative”. The contemporary articulations of “awareness and knowledge” show us that the human and social sciences are building two languages of conformity; they therefore fail to question their own language, which is (re)produced historically according to specific historical and social representations. As a result, every position that “disturbs” normality and normativity is seen as ideological. The migrant, “invariably non-European, non-white, and non-Christian” is thus constructed as “the enemy”. This is not merely a question of contingency, or an effect of what in the old days we would have referred to as “moment”, but rather, it is the limit of “a precise history and its structures of power”, including ideological structures, that the “moment” allows to resurface. The colonial past and its ideological apparatus – racism – are the foundations of “the very mechanisms of knowledge and power that legitimate the present state of affairs”.

About the author

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Returning recently to the beautifully woven text and images of John Berger and Jean Mohr's prescient work on migration, *A Seventh Man*, published some forty odd years ago, I came across this significant judgement:

«History, political theory, sociology can help one to understand that “the normal” is only normative. Unfortunately these disciplines are usually used to do the opposite: to serve tradition by asking questions in such a way that the answers sanctify the norms as absolutes» (Berger and Mohr 2010, 104)¹.

I feel this is the case, and even more so today. The contemporary organisation of awareness and knowledge overwhelmingly serves to establish an uninterrupted language of conformity. It leads to structural change being obfuscated. Interrogation is silenced in a consensus that refuses to consider our language, position and the making of meaning. Disagreement and disturbance, and not the procedures that seek to crush them, are merely considered “ideological”. Whatever disturbs the status quo is rapidly labelled an anomaly or deviancy: transitory instances of local emergencies on the flat plateau of agreed procedures.

Opposed to this critical foreclosure, I would like to suggest that contemporary migration, or the racism that precedes and accompanies it, is precisely not, as we are taught to believe, about a set of exceptions or emergencies. Both are woven deeply into the web of Western democracy, into its historical and cultural life. With death spilling out of the headlines – from drownings in the Mediterranean to racial shootings in America's inner cities, the violent surveillance of territories and lives in Palestine, bomb attacks and mass shootings in European capitals – I would also argue that the limits and hypocrisies of the moral economy of the Occident are being continually exposed. The “enemy” – invariably non-European, non-white, and non-Christian, fundamentally “queer” with respect to the normative – is immediately identified and externalised. These are the limits of a precise history and its structures of power. They speak of the critical and political responsibilities for those processes that have

brought us to where we are today. This pushes us to understand the present movement of migration from the multiple souths of the planet, the consistency of racism and the rendering of certain ethnic groups, minorities and associated cultures as second-class citizens or not yet modern, a historical condition. These are not temporary phenomena or accidental pathologies; they involve structured, historical processes and apparatuses of power. Insisting that such questions are central, and not peripheral, to modernity is not simply of economical, sociological or anthropological importance. What we touch here are the very mechanisms of knowledge and power that legitimate the present state of affairs.

Modernity as hegemony

It is also here that we are forced increasingly to recognise that the democracy inherited from the liberal state – now fundamentally blocked in the abstract grammar of eighteenth-century constitutionalism and caricatured in the superficial sensationalisms of the mass media – is increasingly gutted and reduced to the state of oligarchy. An accentuated individualism, legally extended and secured in private property rights, cancels social space and public responsibilities. The accentuated utilitarianism of neoliberalism and the absolute valorisation of the individual produces an immanent order in which there are apparently no longer external relations and forces. As Margaret Thatcher succinctly summed it up in 1987: «There is no such thing as society.» Everything is now domesticated and individualised as the factor of life itself. Here the historical antagonism between the prospects of democracy and individual self-realisation have slipped far beyond their earlier and more restricted confines. Ideas connected to the just distribution of resources and opportunities have been crushed by the ideological triumph of responsibilities that serve only to confirm the individual. The autonomy of the self now reaches into the sinews of public government: policing and security, like health and education, are not only atomised in response to restricted individual access and personal wealth, they also become autonomous agencies, increasingly only answerable to their

1. The book was originally published in 1975.

budgets, agendas and language and not the causes they are supposed to serve. If the United States today is the most blatant example, it is not alone. As in so many areas of modern life, it sets the trend for a wave washing through the West and the world.

The presumptions that surround and sustain such concepts as the “individual”, “citizenship”, “democracy” and “freedom” are themselves the products of such mechanisms. While they continue to be presented as neutral and abstract ideals, their practices tell us a very different story. What has been repressed in the representation points us to other maps and temporalities in a planetary modernity that is not merely “ours” to define. If the politics of explaining and managing the modern world can only be sustained through the violent maintenance of unequal relations of power and the associated negation of other voices and histories, then perhaps we should ask ourselves what precisely does this universality, its democracy and modernity, consist of? This is to entertain seriously the idea that modernity itself is historically and culturally the precise mode of Occidental hegemony and that we need therefore to confront and unpack its premises and practices. At the same time, this modernity cannot simply be cast aside or cancelled. It is, after all, the matrix in which we all move, are positioned, and work to find ourselves and other promises and prospects.

The colonial fall-out

This rough, undone and frayed web sustains arguments concerning transit, translation and transformation. There exists no pretence to explain or speak in the name of the non-Occidental world. Here, where my words deliberately fall short, the presumed distinctions between the West and the rest, centre and periphery, are rather problematised and exposed. Altogether more fluid geographies and transitory territories now encroach upon inherited understandings and views. Hierarchies of power and command are increasingly multiple and heterogeneous. This is to begin to register the limits of a knowledge formation that operates as though it were the unique global paradigm, whose history is History tout court. So, to insist on gaps in the account means to listen to other

accents and rhythms, to register resonance and dissonance. This is deliberately to disband the particular form of historical reasoning that secures Occidental thought and practices in a theology of “progress” and its linear conquest of space and time. In a word, it is to slip away from the colonial imperatives that made the West the West. Here, in the break-up of European historicism – where only the West is warranted to tell the tale – the subterranean tempos of deeper times and longer rhythms are rendered proximate. The colonial past, conquests, racist slavery and the division of the world among imperial powers are never simply “back there”; they are constitutive of the present. They live on and continue to mould our comprehension of the existing world. This situation urgently implies changing the conditions of knowledge and posing the «problem of writing critical histories of the postcolonial present» (Scott 2004, 15).

Engaged with the mixing and mutation of time and space, other cultures and lives translate our coordinates from the presumed stability that reflects our passage into a heterogeneous scene seeding different histories and multiple trajectories. The world is crossed and cut-up. It is folded into diverse narratives that refuse to be blocked in a uniform accounting of time. It is precisely in this sense that contemporary migration and racism open an archive; an archive that is not so much an institution as a site of ongoing historical processes and the location of continuing social and political antagonisms. Here colonialism, migration and racism can no longer be contained in the categories of economical or sociological phenomena. Rather, they become instances of epistemological and ontological inquiry. As structures of historical violence they challenge the placid presumptions of both our knowledge and our everyday lives. They produce a modernity incorporated and imagined by other bodies and histories; in particular, by the so-called non-Western world which in being “worlded” by the Occident turns out to be both internal and central to the West that considers itself to be the unique measure of the planet.

«The Industrial Revolution, misleadingly figuring in popular consciousness as an autochthonous metropolitan phenomenon, required colonial land and labour to produce its raw materials just as cen-

trally as it required metropolitan factories and an industrial proletariat to process them, whereupon the colonies were again required as a market. The expropriated Aboriginal, enslaved African American, or indentured Asian is as thoroughly modern as the factory worker, bureaucrat, or flâneur of the metropolitan centre» (Wolfe 2006, 394).

Such intimacies are directly distilled in the intricate relationships of the formation of the modern European nation state, its cultures, cities, and its unilateral fashioning of the world where modernity, colonialism and capitalism became one. This is not about adding the equations of culture and power to the economic formula. It is about an altogether more complex coming together in a precise political economy. Here, to extend the map of the modern nation and include the colonial spaces over which it exercised its military, political and economic authority, is to change our very understanding of what constitutes the contemporary polity, its wealth, culture and population (Ascione 2016). This is to chart its making and practices on a very different map where the colonial periphery turns out to be integral to the making of metropolitan life and culture. Genocide, massacres and all the brutal violence of colonial appropriation and territorial aggression come now to be registered within the making of the modern European nation state. They are not unfortunate incidents, terrible tragedies, taking place far from home. They are constitutive of home itself.

Cruel combinations

This leads to unwinding the claims of democracy and citizenship, of rights and the rule of law, in an altogether more extensive and unauthorised space. For if European states sought to establish their authority in the singularity of the nation, their rivalry remains persistently colonial in continuing to contest the spoils of the planet. Decolonialising this inheritance does not merely mean finally to pay attention to the so-called colonial periphery of yesterday, recovering its histories and registering injustice. Bomb attacks, mass shootings and civilian deaths in Madrid, London, Paris and Bruxelles, render dramatically proximate similar

events in Tunis, Beirut, Baghdad, Kabul, Lahore and Peshawar. Here the colonial concoctions that configured modernity (the European carve-up of Africa and the invention of the “Middle East”) take their revenge on the present. In more immediate terms, raging continual warfare on Muslim countries for almost three decades, from Iraq to Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, leading to the death of more than 500,000 civilians, inevitably leads to what political commentators call blowback. As the writer Hanif Kureishi put it in the aftermath of the London bombings of 2005: «Modern Western politicians believe we can murder real others in faraway places without the same thing happening to us, and without any physical or moral suffering on our part» (Kureishi 2005, 92). This is to forcibly remind ourselves of the cruel combinations of colonial histories and postcolonial proximities that come to be stitched into the very fabric of the modern metropolis. Pulled through these examples into a deeper historical trough we confront the brutal evidence of Occidental colonialism being involved in a perpetual war on the rest of the planet for the last five centuries.

When Europeans arrived in what is now Latin America in 1492, the region may have been inhabited by between 50 million and 100 million indigenous people. By the mid 1600s, their population was slashed to about 3.5 million. The vast majority succumbed to foreign disease and many were slaughtered, died of slavery or starved to death after being kicked off their land. It was like the holocaust seven times over (Hickle 2015).

Tzevtan Todorov has referred to this history as humanity’s greatest genocide (Todorov 1992).

It is in this precise sense that the urgency of a post-colonial perspective is not simply about rescuing forgotten histories and denied lives, and finally adding them to the previous account. The other voices and visions that arrive from the so-called margins of modernity, once directly colonised, today bracketed in the categories of the developing and underdeveloped world, promote a sharp epistemological challenge. The very premises of a modernity no longer guaranteed by a unique universalism is disrupted and dispersed. The exercise of scientific neutrality and critical distance fall apart in a worldly space in which power, no matter how complex, multifaceted and subtle its

exercise, exposes a geopolitical provenance, a series of cultural agendas, a historical will; that is, a series of hegemonies at work. It is precisely through this heterogeneous complexity, even when exposed in scholarly subtleties and sensitive attention to detail, that hegemony, as opposed to mere instrumental domination, is reproduced. Its manner of narration, no matter how liberal or “multicultural” it may seek to be, structurally excludes whatever seeks to challenge its manner of recognising itself and registering others. This, is what the Peruvian anthropologist Anibal Quijano calls the coloniality of power rendered as knowledge (Quijano 2000). The methodology legitimates the dominion of the discourse. What I am arguing here, against that dominion, is that the pieces of an increasingly fragmented tradition can no longer be put back together again. They now constitute a broken archive. Historically inherited elements can only be reassembled in an ongoing configuration where the old binaries of south and north fall away to be replaced by an altogether more heterogeneous and overlapping set of relations. When the once excluded and elsewhere is also in here, then the proximities of dissonance and resonance within an increasing conviviality of languages and localities touches the complexities of all the components.

So, the break-up of empire is not about its immediate cancellation; the colonial inheritance cannot simply be wiped off the slate. It is rather about the emerging assemblage of what has been subordinated or simply excluded from the existing framing and explanation of modernity. This implies engaging with spaces and practices that propose other rhythms and reasons. In the present circumstances these may well be negated, subordinated and reduced to marginal cultures and local histories, unable to claim the universal validity of the West. Nevertheless they exist, persist and resist within that very same modernity as a sore, a wound, a persistent interrogation; what the anthropologist Tarek Elhaik refers us to as an «incurable image» (Elhaik 2016). These are the other histories, and not exclusively human, that ghost our present. They hold Occidental modernity up to the light, exposing its shadows. They propose a re-remembering of the world that evoke other manners of narrating, other shapes and figures that support understandings

of the past-present-future. The archive slips beyond unique control. Modes of classification and meaning multiple. Worldly coordinates loom into view and another universalism begins to emerge: one not dictated and scripted solely by us.

Exceeding the frame

Recognising the irreducibility of the world to a single frame or explanation clearly raises awkward questions that disturb the universal premises of the human and social sciences. The historical awareness of the contingent configuration of knowledge formations as spatial processes and combinatory constellations is accompanied by the disbanding of a unique understanding of time. Despite its global grip, the supersession and subsequent synthesis that apparently leads from one chronological moment to another, charted along a sequential linearity called “progress”, turns out to be a regional and provincial topos. This leads to understanding that subaltern and subordinated elements do not simply constitute a potential counter-hegemony in the dialectic of historical becoming and political understanding. Rather, as heterogeneous fragments and practices they continually threaten to interrupt and undo the hegemonic drive and desire for a unique telling and framing of the world. They are heterotopic; they are already here among us, they co-exist, they are contemporary. Although they cannot replace hegemony with a complete or utopian alternative, they can transform and rework its rationality through other forms of reasoning. Undoing the premises of a particular social and political order is not to cancel that history and heritage, as if that were possible; rather, it is to reassemble the refuse of that broken archive into another set of perspectives and possibilities.

This unfolding critical space is not restricted to being exposed in a generalised critique of Occidental hegemony. It can also be tracked in the very language and grammar of knowledge production and its associated “scholarship”. For all of its subtleties and sophistications, and even in its most critical mode, the latter overwhelmingly clings to modalities of argument disciplined by the unquestioned sequential logic of language and illusions of transparency. Here scholarship

is often simply the synonym for academic liberalism and the unquestioned archive upon which it draws in elaborating understandings of balance, distance and neutrality. Scholarship itself, evoking the combination of institutional support, financing and erudition, is, of course, deeply ambiguous when considered in terms of political and cultural hegemony. Clearly there is no simple exit from this linguistic, institutional and semantic bind. Still, to register and work these limits into the critical language deployed is already to breach a structure of sense that is so powerfully endorsed in practices – from university syllabuses to peer-reviewed journals, competitive university rankings, impact factors and uniform style sheets – that sustain and reproduce this limited logic as the unique measure of truth. In another context – that of the contemporary Muslim world – subservience to this logic has been bluntly identified as “intellectual slavery”, and is considered to be the continuation of a colonising tradition (Hallaq 2014). Opposed to scholarship seeking to nail meaning and hang it out to dry under the sun of a purported science, there remains the challenge of a language that «relocates its relation to truth within historicity, and not against it» (Birnbaum 2016, 16).

To contest such a situation is not to suggest a simple revocation, rather it is to consider the redistribution of resources and knowledge in a fashion that exceeds their reproduction and disciplining as a mirror of the existing state of affairs. To draw upon an earlier lexicon, this is to puncture the pretensions of education and research as an ideological state apparatus or ISA. Obviously, our understandings of knowledge, the state and ideology have shifted sharply since Louis Althusser’s noted essay on the question. However, like an indelible stain, the pertinence of such arguments, which reach back to Antonio Gramsci and his insistence on the centrality of culture in the production and reproduction of political hegemony and power (where the distinction between politics and culture is increasingly leaky), survive and live on to disturb our present.

Turning to other languages for critical and historical understanding also implies seeding doubt in the procedures and premises of those disciplinary accounts of modernity that promised, via the rarely considered positivism and historicism of their nine-

teenth-century incubation, to render the world transparent to our will. This is what, more than half a century ago, Horkheimer and Adorno referenced as the «world of the administered life» that leads to the «conversion of enlightenment into positivism» (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016)². As Gramsci insisted in the Prison Notebooks, it is precisely such positivism that promotes the critical and political passivity that sustains the status quo. It is not by chance that today the purported neutrality of the social “sciences” is increasingly making a historical rendezvous with the equally universal claims of a unilateral neoliberalism and its particular «public pedagogy» (Giroux 2004). Both believe – as though they were a “historical activity outside history” – that the world can be fully audited, researched and resourced, and knowledge rendered fully translatable to the algorithms of information (Castoriadis 2009). It leads to dispossession and privatisation. Education as a public good is replaced by learning as an investment in cognitive capital (Peters and Bulut 2011). There is apparently no alternative to the existing political economy of knowledge... and power. To insist on a critical interrogation of this state of affairs is precisely to disseminate disturbance and disorder. For a critical citizenship can hardly avoid seeing and living the political paradoxes between culture and capital, between science, technology, power and declarations of neutrality, between pedagogy and the public performance of a diminishing democracy now shackled to the brutal pragmatics of capitalist governance. Critical knowledge becomes a problem, even a subversive activity (Harney and Moten 2013). For to think clearly on these points, as Aimé Césaire pointed out many decades ago, is to think dangerously (Césaire 1972).

All of this brings us to consider how academic scholarship, its production and custody of knowledge, is not necessarily the only legitimate mode of critically understanding the contemporary world. There are other languages out there – visual and auditory – probing the same space while also producing others. When language manoeuvres in the dark, refuses to rationalise and insists on the meaning of its meandering, then a gap is installed. Academic reticence, and the reluctance to register its own limits and border zones,

2. The quotes are drawn from the Preface to the 1969 edition.

invariably evades confronting the intellectual domus and epistemological doxa that guarantees the recognition and ultimate authority of its own enunciations. The importance of registering the overdetermination of scholarly and academic protocols, and their bordering effects in disciplining and authorising what is, and is not, considered a legitimate discussion, drives the interplay of knowledge and power into another space. Responding to the cracks and leaks in the academic machine is to appreciate how the categories deeply sedimented in its constitution, such as the “individual”, the “subject”, the “political”, or the disciplinary premises of its sociology and history, frequently remain outside the critical conversation. These assemblages directly participate, whether consciously or not, in the idea that the rest of the world can only really come into existence once Occidental categories have been activated. Yet those very same categories are today being traversed by histories, cultures and voices that they previously neither considered nor contemplated. Something is amiss.

The intention here is certainly not to cancel this complex inheritance, rather to re-cast it on a terrain that exceeds its initial provenance and governance. For those in Africa, Asia and the Middle East confronting the European-derived academic machine, its linguistic and cultural limits profoundly signal the epistemological deafness of the European ear. Insisting on such restrictions can generate further understandings that direct us towards other rationalities and diverse knowledge formations. We may have little choice but to work within and across this inherited tradition and hegemony. But this means to work through it, transforming and translating inherited fields and competences into altogether more problematic and porous practices, insisting on inconclusive processes rather than epistemological and institutional verities. To repeat: this is not simply about contesting the present scholarly lexicon and academic arrangement. I, too, have learnt much from the work produced there. It is rather to register in its historical formation the limits that suggest that it is not the only modality of knowledge that exists. There are other ways of writing and narrating, other knowledges, that escape the lust of certain languages for certitude. With this in mind we can better understand the necessary distinc-

tion between emancipation (apparently granted by the former colonial master and the Occidental knowledge-power apparatus) and freedom. The latter is only attained through escaping from the terms proposed by the powers of the former. Nobody is really waiting to be emancipated, everybody is seeking to be free.

This, to dramatise the point, is about crossing and disrupting a certain set of confines, and learning, in the profoundest manner, from the modern migrant. It involves seeking to understand the political and historical consequences of the continuous configuration of the world the latter is called upon to enact in order to survive and live on. As a modern political subject, her history in becoming ours undoes an earlier historical and cultural settlement. The increasingly aggressive legal framing of migration now seeps into considerations of rights, and contaminates the earlier and seemingly separate juridical definition of the refugee. Facile distinctions between the flight from political turbulence and that from structural poverty are increasingly impossible to sustain (Oberoi 2015). The nominal separation of the two categories is ruthlessly conjoined in a shared refusal to accommodate either: at the end of the day those in movement to secure their lives are on the same boats and beaches, sharing the same camps and holes in the wire. Overwhelmingly produced by the occidental management of the globe, these unwanted arrivals crack the mould and introduce unknown factors into the equation. They push exiting definitions of citizenship out of joint, proposing postcolonial interrogations (Mellino 2013). Here we confront the colonial archive that rendered both migration, structural violence and perpetual warfare central to its modernity. This forces apart the desired closure exercised in the hegemonic variants of contemporary knowledge and power that seek to render that past truly buried and forgotten. For colonialism is irreducible to a chronological occasion and historical event (Wolfe 2004). Colonialism, as a temporal and spatial structure, continues to promote the processes that sustain the present.

While the intellectual enterprise comes under increasing pressure from the neoliberal mandate demanding it render itself transparent to the market, its own particular debt to the dark matters of a particular order of power and knowledge is also increasingly

difficult to refute. If the liberal university and its humanist programme is clearly in ruins it perhaps becomes historically imperative to re-assemble its debris on other grounds, and to begin to explore the critical honesties of a necessary discontinuity. This inaugurates a scenario in which critical knowledge and existing scholarship do not necessarily share a common trajectory or seamlessly fit together. Here the crisis of the university, particularly in the area of the human and social sciences, is today clearly caught between seeking the unconditional autonomy of critical labour or being reduced to certifying instrumental competences that respect the hegemonic languages and logics of the political economy of the present.

Unleashing language

So, apart from the critique of the Occidental academic machine succumbing to the illusion of rendering all accountable to an abstract universalism (that quickly succumbs to the planetary laws of the market as the ultimate verification of social truth), I suggest that we consider the potential intrusion and interruption sustained by music and the visual arts in helping to free existing language and knowledge from their present framing. In promoting a further space, these practices, and most acutely in their postcolonial evaluation, disseminate a critical disturbance. They produce cuts in time where institutional and consequential linearity fails to conclude. Of course, like the academic and research apparatus, they, too, can be rapidly absorbed back into the circuits of capital and the neoliberal politics of immediately insuring the worth of both the artist-provider and the collector-customer through the registration of monetary value. Still, something lives on even within these punishing exchanges. Dismantling the pragmatic imperative for transparent communication and the immediacy of empirical confirmation that sustains a unilateral grasp of the world, such creative practices insist that there are other narratives, other languages and understandings, simply others, that co-exist within the folds of such an imperious logic. Inviting us to think again, to consider further paths across a differentiated modernity, such art reworks, even deserts, the precious con-

finer of the inherited European aesthetic of the beautiful for an altogether more turbulent and disturbing configuration of the senses. Of course, this cut can be ignored, the exposed wound left to fester, or it can simply be reduced to an incidental artistic embellishment distinct from the “real” world. Still, it insists.

Much of this has to do with the power and politics of the image. Here the practices of representation, both those of the mass media and the arts, provide us with occasion for thought. There has occurred a historical shift in modern art and aesthetics from the text or singular art object, whose interpretation relies on the linearity of a narrative in both its execution and explanation (for example, the novel or film, their source of origin in the author, the director and the artist, and their subsequent authorisation in art history, literary and cinema studies and associated publics) to the collage – both visual and acoustic. In the latter case sense is suspended and sustained in the affective instance of the mix. A rigid historicity is dismantled. Time changes from a singular, chronological passage to be dubbed in the remix and the subsequent condensation of the multiple. Such art is not simply relational. Rather, it is overloaded with the aesthetic and ethics of the historical time of an archive that refuses to pass and accumulates as instructive debris in the present. In this sense the truth is there in the image that consistently exceeds the singular point of view. To understand this affirmation is to weave signs, sounds and silences together into multiple conversations able to dub and disturb dominant figures and rhythms. To register the musicality of narrative and memory, their accents and intervals, their cracks and collusions, is to touch the complexity of a layered set of languages and aesthetics as opposed to the presumed clarity of a sharp and a well-defined image or expression. Such a style of remembering is inevitably political, it draws upon a past that is both registered and unregistered. It is distributed in shifting historical and cultural landscapes, sedimented in multiple archives that remain irreducible to an institutional formation, retrieval and capture that is invariably capitalist and colonial.

The historical European avant-garde, responding to the technological reproduction, mobility and the mutation of the image in photography and cinema, drew from the colonial “periphery” for its experiments

in form and language. The geography of the canon, as with all colonialisms, was simultaneously extended and inadvertently contaminated. Is this merely a colonial appropriation, a controlled registration of an extra-European world? In another, more subversive, mapping, coordinated by multiple temporalities, it could also be considered to mark the postcolonial ingression, reworking and interruption of the syntax of a single modernity. The languages of the metropole were not only repeated, reworked, relocated and renewed in yesterday's colonial spaces: Latin America, the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Aboriginal Australia. They have also increasingly encountered local counter-proposals and traditions that translate both internal and external traces into situated immediacies. This is not simply to register a contemporary phenomenon occurring in the audio-visual arts; rather, it is to acknowledge a profound shift in the interpretative apparatus. If the history of art now comes to be renegotiated in another space where the borders of the discipline are crossed and cut up by contemporary urgencies, then history itself (or rather the historiographical operation) is exposed to another manner of telling. It is dragged out of a chronological straight jacket and recombined in a contemporary arrangement that reworks its past, present (and future) significance (Berger 1972; Didi-Huberman 2000).

Here, against the abstract, hence universal, reach of thought, the body breaks into the picture. Marked by the constructions of location, gender and race, ethnicity and sexuality, diverse abilities and orientations, this is a body that refuses to stay still and be confined to an allotted slot in the political and cultural regime. It interrogates the present status of knowledge and its purported democratic order. It threatens all appeals to neutrality, critical distance, and the metaphysics of a transcendent truth. The occidental apparatus that established such categories through the disciplinary protocols of ethnography, anthropology, sociology and political science is unable to contain its matter, its objects, in the sterile cage of scientificity, references and citation indexes. The facts refuse to stick when the violence of the method is contested by those who reject being objectified. Frantz Fanon's famous refusal to negate his humanity in this objectivity – «Look, a Negro!» – draws us to the violent core of a culture

in which subordination through patriarchy, race and racism emerges as a necessarily part of the methodology that maintains the hierarchal order of the world (Fanon 1986). Behind the mask of universalism such a culture refuses to consider the territorial and historical premises that authorises its voice and knowledge. When the abstract, universal subject of the Occident dissolves into incorporated subjectivities and located singularities the claims of a rationality accustomed to rendering the world responsive to only its language and grammar of power inevitably breaks down.

The cracked voice

On the edge of this present critical space, with our stupor mundi or wonder before a world that does not respect or mirror only us, there begins a journey towards decolonizing methodologies and loosening the binds of disciplinary authority (Smith 2012). This leads to registering cuts and intervals in the body of the Occident for whom research is often synonymous with colonialism. It interrogates the very constitution of what passes for knowledge. As a minimum, the existing syntax of understanding, its conceptual lexicon and institutional legitimation, is forced to mark time in a world also composed by other rhythms and the beats of other traditions and translations. It is pressurised into taking an apprenticeship in listening, even cultivating silences that register a gap, an interval, a fracture, in an emerging critical lexicon where we can learn to recognise our limits.

In a recent essay on trans-disciplinarity by Antonia Birnbaum, the author deliberately sets Theodor Adorno speaking on the essay form set against the machinery of scholarship. She argues that the essayist – and Walter Benjamin is here our greatest European example, but we could also think of Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin or Carla Lonzi – is neither a creator nor a scholar, only a critic. With the critic lies a manner of writing that is opposed to a truth guaranteed by disciplinary protocols. The appeal to an eternal veracity sustained by the social sciences and the «absolute idea of reason» that confirms the «coincidence between social rationality and its supposedly objective character» (Adorno 2016, 20) is shattered. The essay, as opposed

to the scholarly paper or monograph, is a heresy, for it works with the breaks, intervals and undoing of discursive rationality. It seeks to «reinvent its method within the process of understanding itself» (Birnbaum 2016, 16). Here it becomes necessary, as Adorno put it, to free «irritating and dangerous aspects» in order to uncover the «memory of the non-conceptual knowledge that adheres to the concept» (Birnbaum 2016, 20, 22).

The algebra of power that produces accredited universal knowledge and history while discrediting other knowledges as local and indigenous, hence limited, are the powers that form and discipline the world in a manner so that its mental and material coordinates become one. Understandings of “freedom”, “democracy”, “citizenship”, and the liberal language that authorises them, are presumed to have unequivocal definitions. Yet if we are willing to recognise that there are other ways of inhabiting these categories and practices, that they can be grounded in multiple and non-universal conditions, then we need also to recognise that the present economy of knowledge rests on a precise and precarious arrangement of powers (Butler 2012, 128). Its universal claims cannot obfuscate its particular historical formation and cultural collocation in the political economy that colonised the world, pursuing the realisation of that particular universalism. Occidental knowledge and practices, too, are caught up in the capitalist relationships of production that have configured modernity. In both institutional and individual terms, they, too, are ensnared and sustained in the present-day molecularisation of physical and cognitive labour, tracked in digital algorithms that research performance and product, while the ivory towers of learning increasingly crumble into the market place. If those practices and institutions have historically been the harbinger of critical thought, today that possibility is increasingly being shut down in the name of cost efficiency, audit transparency, market evaluation and cultural product. Here critical work is increasingly considered an impediment, marginal grit that threatens the smooth operations of the academic machinery. Here «the only responsible criticism is the one that does not criticise; the sole objection is the one that is consensual; the only alternative is endorsement» (D’Eramo 2013, 26).

This darkening scenario of the cannibalising powers of capitalism seeking to subordinate all to its destructive creativity suggests a critical move that might paradoxically retrieve the Occidental archive and its knowledge formation from that destiny. For, as I have suggested, the arguments presented here are not about annulment. Against a linear understanding of the accumulation of knowledge in which the West seeks to retain its legislative power, other knowledges cannot simply be subordinated or colonised. Rather, in recognising their repressed historical presence within the making of modernity we are led into considering re-configurations that propose another critical constellation. If this means to break open the archive that continues to catalogue the privileged history of the Occident (even when it is talking about others and the elsewhere), it means also to embark on journeys into far wider critical spaces. In such spaces authority will have to be renegotiated, decomposed and recomposed, sometimes to lower its voice and reach a moment of silence; always to rework itself in the light of what exceeds its grasp. This leads to unthreading the finely stitched web in which the political economy of capitalism, modernity and colonialism have been so tightly bound into each other trajectories. It suggests other and more sustainable configurations of time, place and belonging. This is not about an alternative knowledge, but rather an alternative configuration of what constitutes knowledge – itself an ongoing process – as a profoundly political and historical question.

In the calligraphy of thought and associated critical practices, writing is never merely the means of a rational and transparent communication. The very gesture of registering time and space installs a limit and reasons a border that is integral to the act of articulation (Mutman 2014). It constitutes a discontinuity, an interval or cut, where a critical trace dispossesses the gesture of arrival of any conclusive understanding. This, to borrow from the South African artist William Kentridge, leaves us with an uncertain grammar of the world that proposes the recognition of «a space of not knowing» (Rosenthal 2009, 67). In the inherited materiality of the world, beyond the limited rationalism of self-confirming thought, there always remains an opening on a future yet to come. It is perhaps here that occidental thought and its philosophy begins to

slip beyond a Platonic framing of the world, and an associated obsession with the question of Being, to acknowledge that the real question lies in the precise, hence political, historicity of its languages, practices and institutions.

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