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Europe, Where Are We Now?

IAIN CHAMBERS

ABSTRACT

This short essay seeks to consider the present crisis of Europe in the light of its constitutive colonial formation. The argument is made that such a past is not over; rather it continues to shape the polity and culture of contemporary Europe. Both institutional and informal responses to modern day migration have rapidly revealed the facility with which that archive can be activated. Excavating and traversing that same archive with a diverse critical compass, and in the company of the contemporary postcolonial arts, makes the case for another Europe.

Today, stealing a line from David Bowie, where are we now, where is Europe? How should we understand its present policies and its political rhetoric when the narrow line between formal democracy and authoritarian rule everyday grows thinner and civil rights and freedoms are rolled back in the name of security and law and order. Between mounting fears of terrorism and continuing financial vandalism, it seems we are in a state of meltdown. The idealism that launched and recruited many to the European project has been transformed into the iron will of the market whose logic is apparently irrefutable. It becomes increasingly clear that only by bringing into play what the official institutions of Europe have structurally sought to exclude, can the continent, its histories, cultures, and politics, be productively unpacked and transformed into a further set of possibilities. This means acknowledging that the European Union has been profoundly captured by global capitalism and its neoliberal directives: from the juridical and cultural construction of "immigration" to privileging the market and private enterprise over and against the vestiges of the welfare state and a defence of the commons. Appeals to a Kantian cosmopolitanism to shore up the possibilities of Europe and its enlightened tradition is now at a dead end. That inheritance is not so much over because it has been overtaken by other more powerful and cohesive players, for instance China, but rather, and more significantly, due to its own internal contradictions and its failure to understand its own history.

The Colonial Past That Does Not Pass

As a universalising force, Europe drew its historical and cultural energies directly from colonialism and the racial hierarchies it employed in aggrandising and incorporating the rest of the planet. The idea that Europe has learnt from that history and can now play a decisively different role in an emergent global assemblage, is wishful thinking. It is wishful thinking precisely because Europe continues to block its own constituency from evaluating its colonial past and thereby continues to operate in the present with precisely the same semantics as other global hegemonic forces. To undo this state of affairs would be to confront what Foucault in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* refers to as the

inability of a hegemonic order to come to terms with a "general theory of discontinuity" (13). This refusal to rework Europe's colonial archive is intricately bound into the insistence on the nation state as the unique place holder of history, culture, and identity. For if all of Europe was involved in the colonial project as Joseph Conrad famously reminds us via the figure of Mr. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, then its postcolonial undoing and reconfiguration requires the unwinding of that colonial moment and the modern nation state that it promoted. Right now, Europe has become a wall against which counter-histories cast their bodies with little hope of recognition. Only by refuting and dismantling that wall can a radically diverse sense of European belonging emerge.

To undo the unilateral imposition of this dividing line is to reassess the making of the modern world. It leads to understanding that in order for the colonial apparatus to operate unhindered, freedoms elsewhere were negated. Otherwise these would have quickly given rise to counter-versions and opposition to the hegemonic template. This still remains the case today (and perhaps helps us better understand the structural context of the breakdown and hi-jacking of the so-called Arab Spring and the violent re-imposition of neoliberalism in Egypt) as it was for the denial of the Haitian revolution by Europe and the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century, or the European management and division of Africa in the following decades (from the French invasion of Algeria in 1830 to the carve-up of the continent at Berlin in 1884–5). At the same time, the persistence of colonial rule in the fashioning of the present has now decisively moved from yesterday's periphery into the heartlands of the modern metropole. Fanon's Algiers of the 1950s (memorably portrayed in the opening sequence of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, 1966), is not only today's Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg, but also Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Los Angeles. The mapping of the modern metropolis into civil areas and wild zones, divided between gated communities and districts abandoned to decay, is charted in the racialisation of urban space and the colonial accumulation and distribution of resources and means. In the contemporary outpouring of anti-terrorism and anti-immigration legislation we are constantly witness to pulling back the line, erecting the walls, building the fortress. All of this is accompanied by our civil

and political rights being simultaneously rolled back, if not formally suspended, and effectively hollowed out in the pursuit of security.

Here it is important to emphasise that I am not seeking to propose the counterbalance of the non-Occidental world against the North of the planet, but rather attempting to loosen, if not disband, the logics and languages that hold those relations in place. If this points us towards a possible "epistemology of the South," it also clearly exceeds any simple geographical location (de Sousa Santos; Connell; Comaroff). The "South" is here a mobile place-holder. It conjoins multiple localities and temporalities, from the zones of rural poverty in nineteenth-century Europe that conjoins Scandinavia, Scotland, and Ireland with Italy and Greece, to the colonial rampage unleashed by Europe on Africa, Asia, and the Americas since 1500. Stretching from the characterisation of the perceived underdevelopment and barbarism of southern Europe by northern visitors in the eighteenth century, and elsewhere deployed in the colonial worlds of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, its linear location in time and geography today rapidly unravels. Global migration, both within and outside Euro-America, combined with the neoliberal delegitimisation of labour rights and the promotion of precarious livelihood, produces a South within every metropole. So, the argument being proposed here is planetary in scope. It pretends a counter-universality while all the time stitched into localities sustained in asymmetrical relations of power. This other side of our seemingly universal reason, which carries the threat of us being potentially reasoned in another fashion, by another, draws us into the exposed space of the postcolonial condition.

The "South" is a critical irritant, a historical interval and interruption. This affirmation is not intended simply to re-propose geopolitical and economical distinctions embodied in the souths of the world. It is also to consider in intellectual and cultural, hence political, terms what tends to lie beyond recognition by the North of the planet. It is to recognise what, although in the shadows, is simultaneously essential to the unequal relations of power that structure the modern world. So, these distinctions do not serve to indicate simply metaphorical spaces. They speak of those real material differences that insurrectionary languages and practices, emerging from the multiple

souths of the planet, have disseminated: from decolonialising struggles in Asia and Africa to Fanon and the Black Panthers, from Palestine to Northern Ireland, from indigenous struggles in Latin America and India to ecological awareness and protest. This broad front of struggles, and the global perspectives they support, if immediately political in scope are also of fundamental epistemological importance. They query the edifice of Occidental reason and its institutions. They expose its foundations to unsuspected questions. They render its universal pretensions altogether more precise and locatable in time and space.

To think with the South is thus not only to point to the historical and cultural evidence of how the West underdeveloped the rest of the planet over many centuries of Occidental rule. It also pushes us to register how the present-day constitution of European institutions and identities, its democracy, knowledge, and subject formations are sustained and reproduced through that history. The modern metropolis is replete with colonial reminders in its monuments to earlier colonial wars, and in its present day multicultural inhabitants, musics, religions, and cuisine. However, this obvious sociology betrays an altogether profounder historical hubris. The colonial fashioning of the modern world has not simply passed. The very making of the modern political economy, the accumulation of wealth and the colonial divisions of the planet in the endless pursuit of capital in a world made market by the West continues. There have been other empires, other violent exploitations and divisions, but never before on a scale induced by a mode of production that requires the whole world as its measure of wealth, accumulation, and power.

This intricate entanglement of the shared universalism of European humanism and political economy that finds its political expression in liberalism, is the moment or constellation of modernity. Occidental modernity, as a historical movement and language, twists and turns through time—but there remains the constancy of individualism and property secured in law. Again, these abstract concepts, invariably distilled into manifestos of "freedom," are historically secured through the violent negation of other individuals, and their understandings of freedom, property, and law. Our economical, juridical, and political picturing of the world has clearly been attained through the negation

of the freedom of others. Here is how Amitav Ghosh describes the bewildered response of local powers to the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean at the end of the fourteenth century:

> Having long been accustomed to the tradesman's rules of bargaining and compromise they tried time and time again to reach an understanding with the Europeans—only to discover, as one historian has put it, that the choice was "between resistance and submission; cooperation was not offered." Unable to compete in the Indian Ocean by purely commercial means, the Europeans were bent on taking control of it by aggression, pure and distilled, by unleashing violence on a scale unprecedented on those shores. As far as the Portuguese were concerned, they had declared a proprietorial right over the Indian Ocean: since none of the peoples who lived around it had thought to claim ownership of it before their arrival, they could not expect the right of free passage in it now. (Ghosh 287–8)

Time unravels from a single spool. The past becomes proximate. The knowledges and practices that colonised the planet come to be re-assessed by histories, cultures, and lives that were previously unauthorised to pass comment. Our account comes undone as the past refuses to pass or respect our verdict on its present meaning. Seeking to listen and learn from this situation is perhaps to recognise that it is precisely in the heartlands of the Occident that postcolonial criticism most sharply acquires its historical and cultural pertinence. It is here, above all, where the historical hybridisation of the planet that ensures that no culture or identity is "pure" or uncontaminated comes home to roost. So, this is not me speaking from or for the South, but rather that of insisting on listening and learning from what arrives from the seemingly elsewhere to disrupt the securities of my language and the stabilities of my vision.

Geographies of Power

In this proposal the souths of the world produced through geographies of power are not simply the extension of Antonio Gramsci's noted "Southern Question" on an altogether more extensive map. To adopt simply this perspective would find us immediately drawing comfort from an alternative subaltern mirror image, contesting a modernity radiating outwards from a presumed centre in the West. As a subordinated counter-image such an option inadvertently continues to re-affirm the linearity of historical progress and its implacable measurement of the rest of the globe. The critical challenge is rather to consider the question in its planetary location as a moving assemblage of different rhythms and conditions that overlap and intersect in an alternative understanding of a multilateral modernity that is irreducible to a single source or authority. After all, it was Gramsci who taught us that the assumptions of an inferior South were structurally essential to the reproduction of the superior North. The South was not a discarded leftover, or merely the detritus of progress, it was an essential component in the composition and reproduction of a national (and trans-national) political economy. It is here that the seemingly temporal drag induced by the weight of social and cultural complexities and distinctions associated with multiple "souths" breaks up any teleological understanding of historical time. It leads to the critical dissolution of the very idea of a single modernity as it slips into more complex and inconclusive configurations.

At the same time, adopting the global historical frame we, too, also run the danger of rendering the world flat as a map. Here not only local details are lost to view but, above all, the structural impact of asymmetrical relations of power come to be muted in a checkerboard reality in which violence, power, and injustice are only rendered in the most abstract of coordinates. To sense the texture and register the grain is to appreciate the radical challenge of the global archive being always incomplete, yet to be recognised, registered, and recorded. This means to deliberately confuse and confute the drive to render the world transparent to a unique will and acknowledge the waning hegemony of Occidental explanations when the world, rather than simply the West, becomes method (Mbembe). Here, amongst the ruins of purportedly neutral and scientific definitions, we can argue

that there also lies a significant and unexpected rendezvous between the workings of many contemporary postcolonial art practices that act "as a proxy for their desired representations in politics," and an emergent historiographical operation (Wilson 3). Undoing and reworking the Occidental archive, its ethics and aesthetics—from historical knowledge and philosophical presumptions to anthropology and art history—postcolonial artists as diverse as Jimmie Durham, Zineb Sedira, Isaac Julien, Mona Hatoum, and Yinka Shonibare MBE reassemble audio-visual languages in the light of other, invariably non-authorised, narrations of modernity. The archive is reopened, exposed, and renegotiated as it becomes the home for other questions, for others.

The modern emergence of epistemological anxieties over the discarded and refused colonial depository are clearly not only to be associated with the national archives of colonial government and rule that Laura Ann Stoler so sensitively excavates and analyses in the case of Dutch Indonesia (Stoler). Such anxieties are also imbricated in the altogether more extensive and largely unacknowledged registers of colonialism that have structured and sustained the overall making of Occidental modernity, from the modern museum to the class room and the propagation of common sense in the everyday media. For the archive not only speaks, but is also a site of silence. It records what was thought and unthought. It contains, as Stoler reminds us, both directives and doubts, axioms and absences. So, while acknowledging the important specificities of individual colonial archives as institutions, practices, personnel, and juridical enterprises, housed in physical buildings at home and abroad, we need also to move to an understanding of the planetary scale of the archive of colonialism as the fundamental foundation of the modern Occidental edifice, its economics, politics, and culture. This is to make an epistemological argument about what passes for knowledge, and to register a complex, vibrant and ambiguous assemblage and its impact on how we have been taught to see, receive, and judge the contemporary world. In the history of the West, and its appropriation of the world, colonialism, as Stoler most suggestively puts it, is a watermark: indelible and therefore inevitably overlooked. This is to pursue, with Matthieu Renault, the profound implications of a

"decolonised epistemology" (49). It is to push postcolonial criticism into recognising both the genealogies of anti-colonial thought and struggle (both of yesterday and today) and to register the aggression and force of a world still deeply imbricated in a colonial mind-set, both in its political practices and in the disciplinary premises of its knowledge as an "Occidental order of discourse" (Renault 57).

If this might obviously seem to recall Joseph Conrad's prospect of a world "under western eyes," it still very much speaks to a contemporary condition. The world, even in resistance and rebellion, is still caught in that gaze, subjected to its powers, disciplined and structured by its political and cultural pedagogy. What speaks (or is silent) and lies beyond the syntax that assumes language, is transparent to a single order and reason, multiplies the margins of the hegemonic discourse, seeds potential disruption in the space between its pronouncements, darkens the text with unacknowledged shadows, ultimately undoes its illusions on the world. Beneath it all lies an unremitting confrontation with violence. This is the structure of a world brutally made over in Occidental languages and the accompanying lexicons of political and cultural power. There is no way that this arrangement will be placidly undone via a series of agreements and compromises. It can only be violently broken apart in order for its own theories and knowledges to be forced to travel into unauthorised zones of translation. There repeated and interrupted, these can begin to inhabit what Renault in his reading of Fanon evocatively calls a "decolonial geography of knowledge" (51).

Migrating Modernity

Habitual distinctions of core and periphery, North and South, the West and the rest, but also of development and underdevelopment, fall away to be folded into a multi-accented series of ultimately planetary coordinates that cut up and interrupt any singular comprehension of time and space. There is no *a priori* able to compress and comprehend this situation; the vehemence of such epistemological pretensions becomes critically and ethically unacceptable. The very incompleteness of our knowledge, despite its universal claims, alerts us to an altogether wider landscape, one that we are unable to frame. It is precisely in this

scenario that other knowledges, that others, circulate, cross, configure and contest our hierarchisation of the world. This leads us to a double objective when considering the contemporary state of Europe. One is to excavate the sites of its modernity, to consider what is buried and then quickly forgotten in order to permit a single, triumphant version to pass. This is to engage with a deep and messy past that runs in the contours of the present. The other is to register the movement of modernity in a manner that exceeds arrest in a single location or definition. While we are used to registering the mobility of modernity in terms of capital and its culture seemingly irradiating outwards from its presumed source in the West to invest the histories, peoples, and lives of the rest of the planet, we are loath to acknowledge that there exists a more complex narrative that exceeds our authorisation. This would be an account that, as a minimum, acknowledges the coexistence and interpenetration of the formations of colonialism and European civil society, not to speak of the hybrid gestation of the modern world. The accumulative force of the multiple locations and sources of modernity propel our considerations elsewhere.

What today perhaps most forcibly brings together this negated understanding of the multiplicity of the past and the present, is the figure of the contemporary migrant. For if the concept of migration is most directly associated with the ongoing socio-economic phenomenon of the physical migration of people and lives from the so-called South and periphery of the world (itself the latest chapter in the centrality of migration to the making of modernity since 1500), it also confronts us with an altogether wider political and historical challenge. The very syntax of the state, the nation, of citizenship and identity, is directly challenged by the clandestine histories of the migrant and her "illegal" presence. The mechanisms that seemingly secure us in our "home" are here dramatically exposed in all their arbitrary violence. For etched on the body of the contemporary migrant is not only the power of modern European law that regulates his or her status, frequently transforming their subjectivity into objects of "illegality," but also the inadvertent signature of a colonial past. Here the altogether more systematic and aggressive migration of Europeans towards the rest of the planet over a period of centuries, now largely forgotten and obscured, returns to

the complex coordination of the present. We are drawn into a brutal archive where colonial expansion, violent appropriation, enslavement, and migration also provided the coordinates of modern citizenship and the nation state. The much-vaunted mobility of capital and goods in the global market foregrounds a flux and fluidity that also draws us into understanding the altogether more subterranean historical and cultural formation of modernity.

At this point, the migrant is critically removed from the socio-economic periphery of modernity to become central to its juridical and political constitution. Against the desired stability sought in inherited definitions of locality, home, identity, tradition, and belonging, modernity, as a mobile constellation sustained in transit, translation, and transformation, tells us another story. Migrating bodies, matter out of place, challenge the location prepared for them in an existing order. The categories, languages, institutions, and technologies that invest, identify, and catalogue the migrant are themselves exposed to movement and slippage into unauthorised spaces. Here it is not only the migrant who has to negotiate his or her passage in the world. The concepts, practices, and institutions, the bio-politics that nominate and define the migrant also define "us." If such juridical-political practices propose the protection of so-called Occidental democracy, they simultaneously also expose the gaps, failures, and refusals of a democracy and a polity that is structurally limited to some, excluded to others. Simply put, this means that contemporary migration proposes a profound interrogation of the existing forms of the European state; its citizenship, democracy, government, and its juridical pretensions and practices. It proposes a critical interruption and interrogation of the very nature of Europe itself. Here we can most acutely feel the potential of the contemporary arts, particularly in their postcolonial syntax, when they come to stretch our language and imagination in journeys beyond established boundaries and force a relocation of history and culture so that they no longer simply reconfirm us.

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BIOGRAPHY

Iain Chambers teaches Cultural, Postcolonial, and Mediterranean Studies at the University of Naples, "Orientale." He is the author of *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity* (1990), *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (1994), *Culture After Humanism* (2001), and more recently *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (2008), and *Mediterraneo Blues: Musiche, malinconia postcoloniale, pensieri marittimi* (2012).