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# The postcolonial condition

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# The Postcolonial Condition:
# A Few Notes on the Quality of Historical Time in the Global Present*

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### A Global Mood?

Our time appears entirely incapable of giving itself a positive definition. It is a "post" time: post-modern, post-historic, post-Fordist and, according to an even tiresome refrain, postcolonial. A never-accomplished transition seems to be the only possible framework to grasp the present. At first gaze the postcolonial discourse appears merely to reflect such a predicament. Setting aside, for the moment, the clamour around the question "what is the meaning of 'post' in postcolonial," and looking at the most widespread understanding of this term across the "global" theoretical debate and public discourse, there's little to get excited about. It seems that the era of binary codes, so magisterially defined by Fanon, which organised the space, the time and the experience of the colonies, has been followed by one in which everything is entangled or "hybridised." It seems that we are witnessing the inverse of the movement described by Max Weber in the final, memorable pages of the *Protestant Ethic*: the "iron cage" of colonial despotism is said by many to have turned into a "light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment."[1] A set of displacements is said to have transformed the world into a plane of absolute immanence, crossed by nomadic subjects committed, on the edge of irony, to composing shifting identities: one moment drawing fragments from the now disused warehouses of the old colonial emporia; the next feeding on the memories of the anti-colonial struggles. So creolisation is well on its way to becoming a global mood, promoted by the large corporations as it is by youth cultures; adopted by tailors as it is by architects and restaurant menus.

So, are we faced with yet another form of "weak thought"? In postcolonial studies, which, having enjoyed extraordinary circulation in the 1990s in the Anglo-Saxon world, now begin to seep into Italy, do we discover the umpteenth variant of the apology for the present? That is the suspicion we see expressed, among the others, in three rather poignant critiques directed at the category of the postcolonial. In the first, Arif Dirlik (in *The Postcolonial Aura* as well as in *Postmodernity's Histories*), in particular, has argued that postcolonial studies promote a veritable dissolution of history, of its stratifications and opacity, issuing into a sort of eternal postmodern present, trivializing the revolutionary caesuras of the past and decreeing the impossibility of revolution in the future. Secondly, and in a more refined way, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri have dwelled in their *Empire* on the fact that what many postcolonial theorists extol as the experience of liberation, specifically hybridity and creolisation, in reality points to the terrain upon which the contemporary *dispositifs* or apparatuses of domination and exploitation operate. Thirdly, Slavoj Zizek (e.g. in *Revolution at the Gates*), whose position has recently been bolstered by Peter Hallward's wide-ranging *Absolutely Postcolonial*, has identified in postcolonialism – which he understands as merely the global projection of multiculturalism – the operation of a logic that we might call *indifference*. The right to narrate in the first person is, in postcolonial studies, conceded to the "other" after having deprived him or her of the constitutive wound that cannot be sutured by recognition but only by the "Leninising" conquest of the partisan dimension of truth.

Of course, each postcolonial study should be evaluated according to its own merits. Certainly, there will be no lack of writers or theoretical currents to confirm, along with the validity of these critiques, the sketch we outlined at the beginning of these notes. But things change, as we shall argue, if one takes the *postcolonial condition* seriously, distinguishing it (at least to begin with) from postcolonialism and viewing this latter as a Foucauldian archive in which images, concepts, and words are deposited, enabling one critically to reconstruct the contour of our present. It is possible then to accept, at least in part, the substance of the criticisms that we have mentioned but nevertheless to insist on the timeliness of giving the term "postcolonial" a key role in the vocabulary of critical thought.

What becomes crucial, at this point, is the very question related to the "meaning of the 'post' in postcolonial." It is worth asserting our thesis (somewhat roughly) straight away. Postcolonial time is that in which colonial experience appears, *simultaneously*, to be consigned to the past *and*, precisely due to the modalities with which its "overcoming" comes about, to be installed at the centre of contemporary social experience – with the entire burden of domination, but also the capacity for insubordination, that distinguishes this experience. Confinement, which is the true "epistemic" cipher of the West's project of colonial exploitation,[2] and the resistance against it no longer organise a cartography capable of unequivocally distinguishing the metropolis from the colonies since they shatter and recompose

themselves continuously on a global scale. What this category of the postcolonial suggests is that the unity of the world, the objective of so many "cosmopolitical" projects, has ultimately been realised in ambivalent forms. On the one hand, these forms make up the material horizon within which individual identity tends to inscribe itself[3]; on the other, they do not provide any guarantee that this identity is not the scene in which the capacity for emancipation of a political discourse articulated in the language of the universal is exhausted, finally swallowed up by the spectral objectivity of commodity and money.

**Decentering the Global**

Let us begin with that relationship to history that, according to many critics, represents one of the Achilles' heels of postcolonialism.[4] From our perspective, within the vast laboratory of postcolonial studies, historiography – as developed for instance in the collective work of *Subaltern Studies* — has played a key role in exposing the indissoluble link between anti-colonialism and postcolonialism. Robert Young's seminal study, *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction*, is concerned with this link. In the first place, Young enables us to re-read some classics of anti-colonial thought outside the threadbare rhetoric of Third-Worldism. This allows us to recognise, in these texts, the embryonic traces of an awareness of just how much, over the entire twentieth century, the dialectic between colonialism and anti-colonialism has broken out of the traditional confines to which it had been relegated in the former four centuries. Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* provides us further with a brilliant instance of such a strenuous decentered attitude, emphasising the diasporic and already global dimension of black "double consciousness," in the time-lag of modernity.

Surely, a clear indication of this fact is the certainty with which, in 1955, Aim Csaire demanded that fascism be viewed as a form of colonialism infesting Europe once the overseas territories appeared to be running out, totally saturated. But, as Robin D.G. Kelley has recently pointed out in *Freedom Dreams* (175), Csaire went one step further, suggesting the real "taboo" shuttered by nazi-fascism consists in the very fact of applying directly to white European subjects what was conceivable only in the colonial world.[5] What emerges from this line of reasoning, which had been anticipated soon after the end of the war by W.E.B. Du Bois in his *The Modern World and Africa*,[6] is the sinister valence of postcolonialism. At the very moment when the *dispositifs* of domination, originally forged in the context of the colonial experience, filter into the metropolitan spaces, we find ourselves already, in some way, in a postcolonial time.

This transition — this movement of hybridisation, which can in no sense be said to be emancipatory — is, perhaps, part and parcel of modern colonialism. In an article written in 1979 (*Clues. Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*), Carlo Ginzburg exposed this movement of hybridisation, in magisterial fashion, with respect to the Bengalese origin of fingerprinting.[7] But, in that case, the boundary between the metropolitan cities and the colonies was crossed in order more effectively to control a fundamental internal boundary – the one, so well investigated by Louis Chevalier his study on Paris in the second half of the 19th century, between the "working classes" and the "dangerous classes." This is a little like the case of the machine-gun, which, having given a lethal demonstration of its destructive potential in the course of the American Civil War, was banned in the wars that took place in the "West" only to take on a key role in the scramble for Africa; this, of course, did not prevent it from being used unremittingly in the United States in order to repress the strikes at the end of the 19th century and in the final campaigns against the Native peoples (Diner ch. 1). Finally, when the same weapon was deployed on the battle fields in the Great War, it produced the decisive qualitative leap: the "total war" already practiced by the Europeans in the colonial campaigns then began to expand across the European continent itself. Not long afterwards, another typically colonial *dispositif*, the concentration camp, would stamp the seal of catastrophe upon this movement of displacement (Rahola).

The words of Csaire thus enable us to specify a further decisive aspect of postcolonial historical time, one characterised by the spilling over of typically colonial logics of domination out of the very spaces from which they originated to the point of affecting the "metropolitan city." We are dealing with a movement that is by no means exhausted and that continues to produce its more or less catastrophic effects on the modalities of government, the valorisation of migrant labour and the reorganisation of the control functions of the autochthonous citizenships of the "West." But this is only one contribution, perhaps not even the most important one, which postcolonialism can provide to the definition of a genealogy of our present, once the link that ties it to anti-colonialism has been emphasised. The other contribution consists in bringing into relief the irreversible character of the radical break made by anti-colonial struggles with their immediately global dimension in contemporary history. It is these struggles which, despite the resounding defeats experienced by practically all the political regimes which they engendered, qualify the times in which we live as postcolonial. They do so to the extent that they have disarticulated, once and for all, the idea that the time and space of the colonies were qualitatively "other" from that of the metropolitan city.

In a memorable page from *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon spoke in 1961 of the "discovery of equality" as the motor of anti-colonial insurrection. This is a splendid metaphor for the subjective aspect of a set of processes that have materially constructed and imagined the unity of the world, unhinging the "compartmentalised world" of colonialism in the period before "neo-liberal globalisation" extended its hegemony. From our point of view, one can speak of a postcolonial condition only if one wagers on the persistence, on the subterranean work of this discovery in the texture of contemporary globalisation. Elsewhere we have argued that migratory movements bear the ambivalent signs of this discovery (Mezzadra ch.4). We are sure that it would be possible to show how the discovery of equality continues to nourish the new type of social movements in what used to be defined as the "Third World": movements that, though related to the anti-colonial struggles, are able to place themselves consciously beyond the horizon of the historical defeat sustained by the regimes born of those struggles.

The type of postcolonial studies we are interested in – the ones consistent with the stance that we are outlining – are those that enable us to revisit, in the age of globalisation, Fanon, Lumumba, C.L.R. James and the tradition of "Black Marxism." Not, of course, so as to find there finished models of political action and theory but so as to identify, in the failure of the projects to which their names were connected, the sense of a hidden history erased by the "history of the winners." In his never-ending confrontation with Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno stressed once that the knowledge of history has to move beyond "the unpropitious logic of the succession of victory and defeat," and to address "what did not enter this dynamic, what remained on the way" (Adorno 170). It is precisely this, the "discarded things, the blind spots" (170) which provide the legacy we have nowadays to recover in anti-colonial projects.

**On Transition**

Yet the question persists: why are we still obsessed with the time of the colonies? Is it because the overcoming of this time alludes to a fait accompli and, simultaneously, to a transition that is actually impossible? The elements of continuity between colonialism and the present seem indisputable. "Bloody battle in Affghanistan": The mistake suggests that it is not a headline of whatever current newspaper; it's a quotation from the first pages of Herman Melville's Moby Dick, published in 1851. Such immediacy in analyzing the relationship between colonialism and the present, however, risks leading us astray. For example, the peremptory manner in which colonialism has materially drawn the boundaries of modern geography is obvious. This is a geography inaugurated in the sixteenth century, which projected across the world – first, the lineaments of Europe, and secondly, those of the "West"; a geography that, perhaps, finds its most accomplished expression (in the language of Hegel, it realises its concept) in the borders of Africa drawn in Berlin in 1885 with "ruler and compass."

Acknowledging the extended action of those borders is indispensable for understanding the roots of many of the tensions and failures that weigh upon the present. On the one hand, it contributes to an explanation of the very defeat experienced by the anti-colonial movements, to the extent that the political imagination of these movements was forced to unfold within the register of colonial discourse, deriving from it the form of the nation and internalising its frontiers, as Partha Chatterjee has shown so effectively in his Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World. On the other hand, if one looks at the most significant and dramatic conflicts of recent years, from the occupation of Iraq to the "local" wars, all defined in strictly "ethnic" terms (Rwanda and East Timor, Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone), the generative colonial matrix appears evident and, in some ways, indisputable.

However, the fact cannot escape us that this reading of current conflicts, precisely because of its insistence on their "ethnic" character, ends up functioning as the mirror-image that re-establishes the legitimacy of that old formula, hic sunt leones, which, in the maps of the early modern era, marked out the territories of barbarism. In other words, by exclusively attributing, once more, the responsibility for the massacres and the genocides of the present to French colonialism or British imperialism, it is imperial subjectivity that is installed on centre stage as the only protagonist, thereby eliminating any possibility for action on the part of the 'subaltern'. What we suggest as a far more politically productive image of contemporary conflicts is one that, while throwing into proper relief the absolute persistence of "vertical" threads of domination and of exploitation, underlines the ambivalent role played by the failure of a set of real, historically enacted projects of liberation from those very forms of domination and exploitation.

In fact, the feeling is that in positing, again, a logic of absolute continuity we end up validating and perpetuating a "redemptive" mechanism, whether of self-absolution (in the case of subaltern subject) or of mere removal (in the case of "Western" subject): removal, to the extent that it dispenses with anti-colonial struggles as a mere inconvenience (clearly positive but actually insubstantial) along the linear and uninterrupted thread of the history of domination and exploitation, as well as it deprives the insurgent colonised subject, the rebellious subaltern, of all possible forms of agency or of any possibility of directly intervening in history; self-absolution, to the extent that it eliminates from history all direct

responsibility that is not identified with the colonial West and, so too, any revolutionary act that does not belong to the West, not only hands over all responsibility from but also – and above all – shifts action from the colonised subject to the eternal (neo-)colonial Subject.

Within this perspective, the present is sucked inexorably back into the vortex of the colonial past as its re-presentation (neo-colonialism) or as a variation upon it that is polarised geographically along the borders that divide first, second, third, and fourth worlds. The potential of the "post" necessarily yields to the iron logic of the "again," iterating itself in "neo-colonialism," as Nkrumah asserted in the immediate wake of Ghanaian independence.[8] This potential melts like snow in the sun before the persistence of "underdevelopment" and "dependence" that tie each South of the world to its respective North.

Ironically, categories like those of "neo-colonialism," "underdevelopment," "uneven exchange," and "dependence," regardless of the descriptive utility that they may have with reference to specific cases, end up serving a political rhetoric such as the one employed by the African National Congress at the end of apartheid. They cover up the devastating social effects of the "neo-liberal" policies promoted by South African governments in recent years in the name of the ineluctability and desirability of "development" and tend to stigmatise the extraordinary struggles against those same policies – a paradigmatic example of what P. Chatterjee has recently called "the politics of the governed," so effectively described by Ashwin Desai in We Are the Poors — as "reactionary."

More generally, to the otherwise detailed objections based upon the supposed impossibility of a "post"-colonialism, one can retort that to proceed in this manner is to end up squandering the inheritance and continuity of anti-colonialism in its entirety and, with that, the profound sense of its failure, of its "lacuna" and, following Eric Santner's reading of Walter Benjamin's Thesis on the Philosophy of History, its character as a "symptom that insists" in the present.[9] The powerful, radical and subversive discontinuity that the anti-colonial struggles have introduced, shattering that "homogeneous and empty" time that Benjamin indicated as the constitutive dimension of the historical discourse of the West (and of the colonial), is thereby "sewn together again" (sutured).

For this reason, to speak of the postcolonial is to specify the time that comes problematically "after" the colonies, after that unresolved geography that emerged in Berlin in 1885; it means to bring to light the impossibility of that trench drawn up on paper, the appearance of that territory upon the map, without denying a single drop of the blood that has been shed and continues to be shed because of that map. At the same time, it invites us to ponder again the complexity of a world that, thanks primarily to the anti-colonial struggles, has truly become one and whose unity continues to be crossed by the subversive space of differences as well as by deep inequality, patent imbalances and incessant exploitation.

**Postcolonial Differences**

Such an emphasis on the directly political dimension of differences enables postcolonialism to critically reconsider most of the assumptions related to the field of identity politics. The point at stake is first of all the connection between the colonial experience and the conceptualization of difference. In short, it is clear that under colonialism the trajectories of (material, political and cultural) difference have taken an irrevocable deviation – which is to say, they have been forced to play their part on the basis of a violently common script. Turning the problem around, we can affirm that it is simply impossible to conceive modernity – its discourse on difference and all the conceptual tools it has adopted in order to define, to frame and "measure" its import – without reference to the constitutive, originary violence of the colonies. George Balandier, the French anthropologist who was echoed on the other side of the Channel by Leach, Gluckman and the anthropologists of the Manchester School, meant nothing more and nothing less than this when, in his *Political Anthropology*, he defined the "colonial situation" at the end of the 1960s as the context, *tout court*, of the ethno-anthropological discourse. Furthermore, all attempts to trace a genealogy of the categories through which the discourse on difference becomes fixed in science – race, ethnicity, culture – lead to that absolute origin. The contribution of postcolonial studies seems to be central to this genealogical exercise that draws upon Foucault's work on the modern *episteme*, even as it compensates for some of its lacunae – these lacunae being less innocent than they, at first, seem.[10]

Fanon and Malcolm X, and Du Bois before them, had asserted the impossibility of thinking "race" outside the concrete historical framework of the experience of colonial domination – exploring the devastating effects, the veritable schizophrenia, induced by the simple fact of being represented as a "problem," forced to see oneself through the "eyes" of another: "how do you feel about being a problem?" Developing this line of thinking, Edward Said and Valentin Mudimbe highlighted the regimes of truth crystallised in concepts such as "Orient" and "Africa." And the work of Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo, *Au cur de l'ethnie*, discovered political and governmental origins for the category of "ethnicity" – which is, to say the least, central for anthropological discourse – origins now hidden behind the

"naturalness" of a term periodically employed in order to explain the character, reasons, and "necessities" of many postcolonial tensions; on the other side, Arjun Appadurai brought to light in his *Modernity at Large* the direct nexus between the procedures of classification and the *dispositifs* of exploitation, relating them back to enumerative strategies of colonial *partage* (division or partition), from which not even the calendar, and thus the social organisation of time, could consider itself immune.

But postcolonial studies do not limit themselves to reconfirming the obvious reciprocal implication of differences and colonialism. Although many postcolonial scholars focus their works on re-writing cultural transactions implied in colonialism as well as on deconstructing the mainstream narrative of postcolonial transition, their very object of analysis shifts them towards the "after," towards the "global" present. For this reason, postcolonial criticism opens up, at least potentially, the space of a more complex attempt to grasp the immediate political characters that differences assume in the contemporary global arena. That it to say, it deciphers the specific – often unintentional – strategies underlying the manifestations of difference. Thus, for instance, the use of the Derridean categories of *suturing* and *supplement*, which have been further elaborated by Gayatri Spivak, allows us to deepen the aporias and folds that once operated between the lines of the official colonial discourses, suggesting directly the continuous role they play in present time.

In other words, the ideas of suturing and supplement concern the forms and practices of identity that continue to define themselves in process, through a series of progressive slips that follow the logic described by the rhetorical figure of *catachresis* — literally, the application to an object of a signifier that does not denote it correctly and that, therefore, does not exhaust the process of signification but rather extends and displaces it: for example, the "legs" of a table — and that insinuate themselves in the interstices of the colonial polarisation without reaching a possible synthesis; it is an image of identity and difference that stands in opposition to every simple and innocent image of both *essentialism* and *syncretism*.

It is no coincidence that awareness of the essentially political and process-based dimension of difference, in its material aspects as much as its discursive construction, should have attained what is, arguably, its most significant developments in critical thought on gender and in the critique of abstract universality arising in certain schools of Western feminism. In these cases, the ability to "globally decentre" all binary logic and every potentially absolutist or "absolutising" discourse confers, on postcolonial feminist thought, a transversal political inflection that problematises and enriches the discourse on difference, both in feminism and in postcolonialism. The works of Chandra, Talpade Mohanti (*Feminism Without Borders*), Ania Loomba (*Colonialism/ Postcolonialism*) and other postcolonial feminists have been specifically directed against the myth of the "Third-World woman," the static paradigm of oppression that has occupied a central role in anti-colonial nationalism and in much Western feminism. Rather than interpreting racial, class, cultural, and gender differences as discrete factors or ones whose effects are cumulative, they propose to envisage those elements as interacting, thus producing new and incomparable forms of segregation and subjugation as well as new practices of difference and resistance to patriarchy, racism, and exploitation. From this interaction, the experience of gender assumes an irreproducible dimension and "voice" and, as such, is systematically cancelled or represented as inexorably absent. This is, perhaps, the implicit answer to the question to which Spivak dedicated her critical intervention against a certain naivety of subaltern studies – "Can the Subaltern Speak?" This kind of repression appears to be a constant and characterises the debates on *sati* (the ritual self-sacrifice of Indian widows), the veil, and infibulation. These practices of "traditional" power have opened up interminable "intercultural dialogues" – almost entirely circumscribed within "metropolitan" spaces – for which, as Lata Mani has stressed in her *Contentious Traditions*, women have been, at best, a "site" when not merely a pretext; in any case, they have never been the subjects of this dialogue.

Beginning from these dynamic premises, which are marked at the root by colonial domination and the sequence of its effects – by what Gregory Bateson once called "schismogenesis," a difference produced by difference – the idea of difference suggested by postcolonial critique takes an extremely rich theoretical form, marking what we consider to be a substantive overcoming of the modern relativist discourse and of its most recent political variants, especially the multicultural ones. Indeed, this notion of difference enables us to avoid the drift towards homologation not only, and not principally, in "normative" terms but also in its analytic aspect. Against every rhetorical lament about the "Westernisation" and "Coca-Colonisation" of the world, postcolonial critique affirms the global present as a perpetual incubator of differences. At the same time, precisely because of the constant insistence on the irreducible colonial matrix of such differences, it emphatically denies all possible cultural authenticity, contesting every staging of this matrix on the basis of a logic that Edward Said and James Clifford define as the "symmetry of redemption."

In the face of the rapid spread of essentialism in the debate on multiculturalism (at least in the case of Italy), the postcolonial insistence on the categories of creolisation, syncretism, and hybridity comes as a badly needed breath of fresh air. Yet, as we have already indicated, the semantic field constituted by these concepts reveals itself to be as suggestive as it is hazardous. Here the criticisms of Hardt and Negri, on the one hand, and of Zizek, on the other, hit their target. As an example of the tendency to represent, often in apologetic tones, a fluctuating difference, free of oppressive bonds and the blackmail of a univocal belonging, is not hybridity, perhaps, the implicit or unsaid in the new late-capitalist subjectivity? Conversely, does the emphasis on difference, on the right to narrate in the first person, not exhaust itself in the demand of a "right to difference" that no one actually wants to deny and to which we are always obliged to return?

The risk is that of a form of repression that projects an imaginary discursive level, a level of memory, upon real tensions and struggles and, in doing so, reproduces a twofold distance: a temporal one, to the extent that contingency triumphs; and a spatial one, to the extent that it separates hypostasised differences. That is to say, the postcolonial apology of difference "keeps at a distance," hiding the REAL order of the present that is constructed by the domination of real capitalist abstraction. In substance, this is Zizek's critique. It represents a direct accusation, especially if one bears in mind the insistence on local histories, on the truth of decentred narratives to which many postcolonial studies allude. The problem that Zizek appears to ignore – indeed, Peter Hallward's critique of postcolonialism, which builds upon Zizek's argument, risks to end up proposing, once again, the nation-state as the only horizon within which it is possible to re-inscribe practices of emancipation – is that, generally, in anti-colonial struggles and, specifically, in postcolonial critique, the stakes can no longer be local, and are – it doesn't matter whether out of necessity or choice – unavoidably immediately global, that is to say, necessarily and contradictorily universal. Moreover, we are not dealing with an a priori, an abstract universality but rather with the concrete universality imposed by colonial violence as a common discourse of domination and exploitation.

Behind the insistence on local histories emerge the outlines of a more general theme of historical difference, of the plurality of times upon which the real abstraction of capital has imposed its dominance, arranging those times at first, through colonialism, in a succession of stages, and then, in the postcolonial present, violently synchronising them. Indeed, it is precisely by considering the quality of historical time in our present that, in our opinion, a final and decisive significance of the concept of postcolonialism comes to light.

**Seizing the Present**

From this standpoint, one can forward a not so far-fetched hypothesis about the substantive reasons for why our present appears inclined to define itself through an inflationary usage of "post." Italian philosopher Paolo Virno's thesis, developed in his *Il ricordo del presente*, on the "post-historical" situation, as one in which "the very condition of the possibility of History comes into view," provides a starting point. According to Virno, "post-historical" is the situation in which the tension between "potency" and "act," which founds the possibility of chronological passage and temporal order — i.e. of becoming — ceases to operate behind the phenomena and rather constitutes their perceptible framework.

Let us attempt to interpret Virno's reflection with the aid of categories suggested by Reinhart Koselleck,[11] the general terms of whose analysis of "modernity" are well-known. For Koselleck, modernity is defined by an experience of the acceleration of time that is philosophically grounded in an original gesture of reduction of the plurality of traditional histories to the "collective singularity" of History. The temporal vector that results from this reduction assumes the characteristics of mono-directionality and linearity into which the tension between "horizon of expectation" and "space of experience" is inserted. This tension, in its formal aspects, occupies the same place as "potency" and "act" in Virno's account. According to Koselleck, this marks the origin of a movement of temporalisation of the categories of politics, whose unifying cipher is constituted by the concept of "progress."

Postcolonial critique intervenes on this point specifically. On the one hand, it does so with a somewhat traditional gesture directed towards the past, or rather, to *a* past, that of slavery and the mute, non-dialectical violence of colonial domination. Insofar as this past resists any possibility of compensation with respect to expectations, it obstinately resists being consigned to the past, and populates the present with ghosts. On the other hand, postcolonial criticism invests this same present with a critique of "historicism," such as the one proposed by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, focusing specifically on the possibility of chronologically ordering the *strata* of which global time is composed. In other words, it is the very temporal modality capital is forced to employ today in the construction of its History, that is Benjamin's "homogeneous and empty" temporality, which continuously brings to the surface the plural histories that it has matched, incorporated and overwhelmed in the process of its becoming world.

Viewed from this perspective, the time of the "post" is one in which domination and exploitation can by no means be said to have disappeared. On the contrary, such a time is one in which the very possibility of distinguishing the privileged places for transformation appears to have been suspended (it seems to us that this is the ultimate meaning of the postcolonial insistence upon *displacement*). Then again, it is a time in which every judgement on the "backward" or "advanced" status of a determinate situation becomes provincialized, in the sense that it can find its own operative criterion only in the present. There is no model of "development" that can be regarded as normative.

Outside the West, an enduring theoretical labour to which heterogeneous intellectual traditions have contributed has focused upon the category of transition. The analytic models that have interpreted colonialism through the image of the transition to capitalism have been defeated as have those political projects that, setting out from the categories of "uneven exchange," turned on the allegedly progressive virtues of "development," "citizenship," and "waged labor." As a result of these defeats, a plurality of historical times and thus of forms of dominance and practices of liberation has always been a structural trait of capitalism outside the West. Such a trait nowadays asserts itself on a global scale, penetrating the very space that once used to be called "metropolitan."

Therefore, the "provincialisation of Europe" Chakrabarty speaks of acts in a twofold way. First, it shows how particular and non-generalisable the experience of European (or Western) capitalism has been, revealing — to borrow the terms used by Yann Moulier Boutang in his seminal study *De l'esclavage au salariat* — the importance of "anomalous forms" of the domination of labour in the constitution of historical capitalism as a world-system. Secondly, it defines Europe (as well as the West') as a province at the very moment in which the "Westernisation of the world" appears to have been achieved, to the extent that its borders become porous to the colonial codes that filter into what continues to think itself as "the centre."

This is the image of the present that can be extrapolated from postcolonial criticism: a time in which the ensemble of pasts that modern capitalism has encountered in its course re-emerges in disorderly fashion, in a sort of "universal exhibition." Here, far from being able to define a linear *tendency*, what Marx described so well, for instance in chapter 14 of *Capital*, book I, as the "formal subsumption" and the "real subsumption of labour under capital" hybridise and co-exist side by side. Once the Colonial Border has definitely ceased to organize an entire geography, it virtually proliferates everywhere, reproducing itself on the apparently smooth surface of global present: it drives the new delocalized logic of production; it brutally marks entire societies that once were able to liberate themselves from colonial chains and nowadays are forced to confront themselves with the failures of anticolonial struggles; it introduces new radical differences of status and new forms of apartheid in the postcolonial West; it physically fortifies itself, condemning to death potentially everyone who tries to overcome it, passing through the fences between San Diego and Tijuana, or shipwrecking on the Mediterranean Sea.

It is exactly such a logic of difference that is enacted and translated by western capital: a logic that is able to talk the language of syncretism (as Zizek, Hardt and Negri point out) and that is well ready even to concede a particular synchronicity (that one of the market) to the different forms of life spreading all around the world. That's why equality still sounds like the most provocative and scandalous word of late-capitalism's lexicon. Once we admit that new borders and new *dispositifs* still operate in order to implement differences, we also recognize that yet those apparatuses are continuously defeated by the direct agency of women and men who simply overcome them. For, in present time, the possibility for liberation has definitively ceased to be assigned to the secret operation of necessary, historical laws and, on the contrary, it is entirely entrusted to the praxis of all those who live and act on the earth in their irreducible multiplicity. In this way, the language of the universal (that is, the language of equality), which each day must be reinvented as a common property, also presents itself as a hybrid and mixed one. Beyond every rhetoric, such a language forms the only basis for the articulation of a possible politics of the multitude.

**Notes**

[*] Translation by Matteo Mandarini.

[1] Chard Baxter quoted in Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (181). Rey Chow's recent book, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* provides an original point of view for rereading Weber's classic work in the postcolonial context, in particular related to the ubiquity of the ethnic discourse in present time.

[2] For instance, both Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, and Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture*, underscore this point.

[3] As Etienne Balibar stresses in *La crainte des masses*, we directly experience today the emerging of a new concept of *world*, where, for the first time in history, "humanity" rather than an abstract ideal appears "the condition of existence for the individuals" (430).

[4] Clearly, Arif Dirlik is not the only one to make this point. Rather, strong criticism of such a dissolution of historical time has been developed by Anne McClintock ("The Myth of Progress. Pitfalls of the Term Post-Colonialism") and Ella Shohat ("Notes on the Postcolonial") among others. In an even more radical vein, San Juan Jr.'s *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, drawing on Ahmad, envisages in the suspension of time suggested by postcolonial theory the very negation of history.

[5] Csaire's words are worth quoting at length: "Oui, il vaudrait la peine d'tudier, cliniquement, dans le dtail, les dmarches d'Hitler et de l'hitlerisme et de rvler au trs distingu, trs humaniste, trs chrtien bourgeois du Xxe sicle qu'il porte en lui un Hitler qui s'ignore qu'Hitler l'*habite* , qu'Hitler est son dmon, que s'il le vitupre, c'est par amnque de logique, et qu'au fond , ce qu'il pardonne pas Hitler, c'est ne pas l'humiliation de l'homme en soi, c'est le crime contre l'homme blanc, c'est l'humiliation de l'homme blanc, et d'avoir appliqu l'Europe des procds colonialistes dont ne revelaient jusqu'ici que les Arabes d'Algerie, les coolies de l'Inde, et les ngres d'Afrique" (Csaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* 12).

[6] He wrote: "There was no Nazi atrocity — concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood — which the Christian civilization of Europe had not been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world" (23)

[7] See also Parenti, *The Soft Cage*: "fingerprinting literally migrated from colonial periphery to the economic core. In the United States the first populations to be fingerprinted en masse were convicts, petty criminals, soldiers, and Native peoples" (49).

[8] Discussing Nkrumah's book *Neocolonialism. The Last Stage of Imperialism* (first published in 1965), Robert Young correctly points out in his *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction*: "His stress on the continuing neocolonial dominance has the disadvantage of suggesting a powerlessness and passivity which underestimates what has been achieved since independence, including the independence movements themselves, perpetuating stereotypes of helplessness even while it implies sympathy and reinforcing assumptions of Western hegemony with the third world being portrayed as its homogeneous eternal victim. [...] As a concept,

neocolonialism is as disempowering as the conditions it portrays. Removal of the possibilities of agency is equally a problem of more recent theories of power operating through economic exploitation" (48-49).

[9] Symptoms register not only past failed revolutionary attempts but, more modestly, past failures to respond to calls for action or even for empathy on behalf of those whose suffering in some sense belongs to the form of life of which one is part. They hold the place of something that is there, that insists in our life, though it has never achieved full ontological consistency. Symptoms are thus in some sense the virtual archives of voids or perhaps, better defenses against voids, that persist in historical experience" (E. Santner, *Miracles Happen*, quoted in Zizek's *Revolution at the Gates*).

[10] It is probably not a hazard to envisage in Michel Foucault's work a general removal concerning the colonial hallmark as a dark side of the process he refers to as the construction of modern subject. Partha Chatterjee (in his article "More on Modes of Power and Peasantry") and Gayatri Spivak (e.g. in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?") have brilliantly developed such a criticism

[11] Both Koselleck's *Futures Past* and his most recent *Zeitschichten* are relevant here.

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