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PERSPECTIVES FROM LATITUDE –34°35'15"

Elizabeth Jelin*

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For the last five centuries, the geography of the world was devised in a map with five continents swimming in the seas of the earth: Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas. In this map, Europe has a very special position. Modern history developed in and from Europe; Europe was the political, social, economic and cultural structure that dominated the rest of the world, and the strongest reference point for the rest of the world (joined later by the USA). The point is that looking from the distance (from –35° in Buenos Aires to 50° in Brussels), perspectives and views ~~are~~ changing.

Modern state building in Europe encompassed a double movement: on the one hand, European parochialism and inward looking institutions that conceived themselves as self-contained, autonomous and ‘original’; on the other hand, a voracious process of world domination and unequal exchange where each powerful actor or state had to conceive and construct understandings and interpretations of ‘the other’ –the colonised, the ‘primitive’, the exotic – in order to conquer, dominate and expand its powers. Europe was conceived as the cradle of civilization, of democracy, of modernity and of modernization, in contrast to barbarism and primitivism in other parts of the world. Eurocentric ideas of progress and development dominated. Modernity and rationalism meant a strong belief in linear progress, so that the ‘others’ in the world – when their existence was recognised – were to assimilate, integrate or follow the paths opened by the leaders of world progress. Others had to look towards Europe to design the road to their future.

Sociological theories were part of that scenario. The discipline accepted and elaborated its ideas around tradition and modern, community and society, feudalism and capitalism. Be it in the tradition of various theories of modernization or of various interpretations of Marxism, Europe was the benchmark. The constructions of the ‘other’ were done through the prism of different forms of ‘orientalism’. The unequal exchanges of peripheral extractive industries – be it lumber, oil or grains – were the model for academic data collection based on cheap academic labour: academics in the central countries developed ‘theory’, while the underdeveloped-world

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colleagues – besides being customers of their graduate programmes and their writings – were to provide the data for the comparative analyses needed to test their theories.

Given this geopolitical map, when reaching the Centre, the intellectual production of the periphery had to be subjected to a normalisation strategy based on one or a combination of three possibilities: (1) conceiving it as the ‘exotic’, worth of intellectual tourism; (2) as prey to be incorporated, coopted (the brain drain as the main channel) or eaten up (in the well-known Brazilian metaphor of ‘antropofagia’) by the established powers; and (3) as an issue to be dealt with in a multicultural ‘politically correct’ way – i.e., playing the politics of recognition, and confining it to a ghetto or to a polite ‘how interesting’ comment.

The other side

European categories of language and thought were brought to the periphery in colonial times. The local intellectual response was polarised: there were those who saw in these ideas the desired ‘civilization’ and modernity, and the task was to reproduce the metropolitan tendencies to achieve development and progress; there were those (from left to right) searching for a genuine national core, unadulterated by imports and contact. ‘Imports’ could not be but copies, *ideas fora do lugar* (Schwarz 1973), misplaced ideas that did not fit actual reality.

At one extreme, European modernity is the core and the model to be followed; local traditions are seen as ‘obstacles’ to processes of modernization and Westernisation. At the other extreme, everything coming from abroad is seen as ‘foreign’ and has to be resisted. The search is for authenticity, for local cultural roots, for an essence of the ‘nation’ anchored in taking away – ‘subtracting’ in Schwarz’s ironic turn (Schwarz 1987) – anything that comes from abroad. European ideas and concepts have to be replaced by alternative, ‘Southern’, autonomous or ‘authentic’ discourses, rooted in local/regional historical experiences and cultural practices.

There is, however, another possibility. Local practices and creations do not need to discard European or imported ideas. Rather, the challenge is to understand their transformation when travelling. It implies the recognition of dualisms, contrasts, anachronisms and contradictions. The fact is that peripheral spaces emerged and developed as distinct spaces, not alien to international dynamics. The challenge for intellectuals is to understand and explain the distinctiveness and their location in international dynamics.

This apparently simple statement has been the core of one strong intellectual tradition in Latin America – one that looks at the local or

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peripheral condition not as carrying inside it the 'misplaced' ideas of the centre, ideas that have to be subtracted in order to reach the 'essential' nation, but rather as part of a world system or of world geopolitical and historical relations, where each peripheral position is a specific and distinct place. In such a paradigm, there is no room for questioning issues of authenticity, for denouncing the copy, for a search of an unpolluted essence of the people. There is also no room for idealising Europe, identifying it with civilization or modernity.

Internationalism as an academic, intellectual and political concern emerged and grew in the periphery, where the issue of imports and impositions had to be faced, not in the centre. This internationalism and cosmopolitanism were and are not a copy, but a critical appraisal and debate about the various processes and mechanisms involved. In this, Latin America is not unique. Latin American social scientists introduced dependency theory, marginality, internal colonialism and varieties of hybrid cultures; Indian scholars were the ones to develop post-colonialism and subaltern studies. Could these contributions have been made in the Centre? Most likely, the answer is NO.

Current flows and networks are not transactions among equal partners. They are part of the geopolitical world scene. The wording may vary: world system; centre-periphery; West-the rest; North-South; First World-Third World; or some other – usually spatial – metaphor. The basic question remains: Who defines the transnational agenda? How does the 'Centre' look through the gaze of the 'Periphery'?

A new world scenario is emerging: the Washington neoliberal consensus is in crisis; the periphery has changed and some previously under-developed or 'traditional' countries are showing new faces. China, India and Brazil, just to name the key ones, are large countries on the road to challenge Europe, the Centre and the North. In this context, the Eurocentric paradigm of progress is becoming obsolete. Current realities in Europe are stark: demands for enlargement and incorporation into the European community of peripheral European nations, issues of immigration and citizenship, demands of non-white 'new Europeans', of people who speak other languages, go to other churches and demand the right to dress in other ways. The individualistic liberal response of multiculturalism does not solve the issue. How will Europe deal with it these challenges?

It is time to 'reverse the gaze', in politics and in academia. Slowly, Europeans are looking at peripheries to understand their own internal dynamics and find new models; peripheral outsiders look at Europe not as a model or utopia but as part of the geopolitics of the world. This is the route to renew the flows of knowledge. It may lead to rephrase old

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questions, to unsettle common sense, to renounce supremacy of the political and research agenda.

Processes of globalisation and the creation of decentred networks imply new ways to establish exchanges and contacts. Perhaps it is time to imagine a world with no centre, but with various nodes and decentred centres, where flows can go in various ways, where canons and controls are not in the hands of a single authority but imply multiple and flexible formats. Perhaps this implies more disorder, but also more participation and democracy.

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