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Translating Borders

Limits of nationalism, transnationalism, translationalism

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Though they may demarcate spaces called “cultural”, all limits are *by definition* political. Borders multiply within and beyond states, *across* the spaces they are supposed to delineate; they may be social, political, legal, economic or otherwise beyond territoriality. *Translation* itself is political and contextual: it happens within globalisation and against the backdrop of *partage de la raison*[1], which is another way of stating *the political*. Concepts come to us in pairs of opposite notions such as male/female, black/white, within/without, up/down etc. The dichotomy, however, hides the dynamics, which are what concern us here. The symmetry in a binary is an illusion, since it usually conceals a hierarchy. Dichotomies are normative, and so are definitions. This creates “identities” and borders, essentializes them and makes you believe that there is such a thing as “East” and “West”, as two opposed entities. Borders in the mind are thus produced. But dyads are never sufficient to express the multiplicity and complexity of things. Proceeding through normative and appropriating binaries has historically been developed in Europe’s colonial expansion, has been maintained as a form of “othering” and is still largely part of

postcolonial cultural and political mores. It is much easier to think with the help of such stable and inherited forms, identities or with borders. But we may now have to think with and from unstable forms and reckon with uncertainty. It is far less comfortable. This is an approach dealing with the dynamics and bifurcations of reason, of the mind and of conceptualisation. The capturing and subject-producing power of such dynamics is much more difficult to grasp than that of mere binaries, since what serves you may play against you. How do we translate two opposite meanings of the same discourse? And since when has there been such indistinctness in things and such dual meaning? *I shall assume that it became very obvious from a specific year: 1989, a turning point, the end of the Cold War (and of a big binary), a year symbolic of a general conflation.*

A whole line in western thinking has theorized the catastrophism of exceptionality (Carl Schmitt, Foucault, Agamben). But positing an exception also means choosing a viewpoint. Seen from Greater China and Asia in general, it could be that the way capitalism developed in Europe is an exception rather than the rule for the planet.[2]

The normativity of sociological or political concepts obscures other horizons

I take *caste to be the example of a normative concept of western sociology for India*. "Caste" is one of those stereotypes of the western mind that fails to be translated into political terms or away from an imagined cultural blueprint. Justice is not always and everywhere perceived or expressed in political terms as these are classically understood in the West. Indian society too has always been concerned about well-being, but usually quite *beyond* (or independently from) principles of equality because of its

individualistic striving for liberation[3]. The concepts of *nirvāna* or *mokša*, individual liberation, fit in here. But the recognition of a *political dimension* in this, on the part of Europe and the "West", is not readily conceded to other continents, despite the fact that it is increasingly evident that the intimately political dimension of inner freedom is the missing link in Western emancipatory patterns. Denying the aura of politics or democracy to others implies not taking the processuality of politics into account. It is a colonial technology of power. This is not to say that "caste" doesn't need deconstruction in India; it does, but in another sense.

Europe as Mediator. Eurasia

First Derrida[4] and then Balibar[5] see Europe as overlapping crossroads over the fictional territory of the continent. Derrida criticises Europe's will to define others while not wanting to be defined, but establishes her identity as self-transformation and capable of evolution quite beyond the fact of her exaggerated tendency to direct and transform others. His view converges with that of Balibar, according to whom "Europe always remains heterogenous and *differs from itself* as much as it *differs from others*". Latouche deconstructs the isomorphism of such logic effectively[6]. We now have the opportunity, quite beyond the bilateral and face-to-face situations of colonial times, to reflect on Europe's own role within a new "mediation" (Balibar), yet to be invented. Differing not only from others but, conspicuously, from oneself too, is simply the basis of life's heterogeneity. Differences, after all, can be translated to some extent. Thanks to context, untranslatable elements in a whole *do not make the whole untranslatable*.

We would dare to say that it is now Europe, rather than her former colonies, that has to be decolonised. As we can see from Aihwa Ong, Asia and Greater China now look beyond colonialism and post-colonialism or are not concerned by it. Many of the political tensions are transposed to the cultural field and towards transnational dimensions that now permeate all spheres of life. But such translation has its own limits. The conversion is done by specific agent(s) and with a political project in view. In South-South relations, Europe could assume this mediating-vanishing role, in Balibar's opinion. This would certainly again be in her interest – though I fail to see how she could be persuaded to adopt such a role any time soon. The problem is that Europe is an *epistemological converter*. But further down the line, is this still a role? What happens when the vanishing mediator has vanished? Is a self-suppressing subject still a subject? Similar paradoxes are well known within ancient Asian theories of liberation. In one sense, postcoloniality is still there, but at the same time it is almost vanishing.

Translation challenges universalising European or Western values. *But it doesn't of itself guarantee anything.* The theory of the *partage* of reason as the philosophical background should allow us to understand how borders arise in the mind and within reason. By situating Europe as a cultural intermediary and converter in international relations, we are in danger of indefinitely reproducing the asymmetrical symbolic – and real – relationship between the West and the Rest, between men and women, because of the tricks universality plays in its association with power. It may therefore be useful, instead, to understand cultural diversity as constituted through processes of permeability, hybridization and pollinization. Otherwise, and in the construction of a hegemony, we are condemned not only to the existence of a hegemony but, worse, to

maintaining the pattern within subsequent hegemonies, between chains of equivalences, as always the same. Certainly a power is normative within its framework and impact, but a chain of equivalences[7], and an *enchaînement de phrases* (Lyotard), *relativised in this*, need not be: in a "chain", the unpredictable element is indeed the manner of the concatenation. The coloniality of power[8], the extraterritoriality of colonies[9] and their extra-constitutional legal status as such[10] should not be constructed into fate.

Europe is being constructed with its (post)colonial and post-Cold War heritage unreflected, partly unconscious and *en creux*, as a "negative" in the photographic sense. Thus, Asia is part of Europe – and vice versa[11], but the relationship is presented as forever asymmetrical in Europe's favour. Strategically upending that relationship in a pivotal time and site, 1989, uncovers other options.

A New Methodology to be developed

The translational relationship is complex: in addition to the "into" and "from", the translator herself, the whole context and the pivotal point (*kucch nahĩ* in *Midnight's Children*) are translated. But I will not call the method and its object by the same name (Mezzadra, Neilson), in spite of their isomorphism. No approach can give guarantees. The border's ambiguous nature is particularly apparent for border dwellers and migrants, and in cases where whole regions, indeed countries, have become borders of sorts (Pakistan, Middle East or Western Asia etc.).[12]

Does a politico-economic approach still apply within overall "culturalisation", in "cognitive capitalism"[13], where the private/

working time distinction has been blurred? A. Ong describes such globalising processes in Asia. Asia's size and proportion make it appear a rule rather than an exception, but it is really the dichotomy itself that is being questioned – by the dynamics.

Borders, Identity, Culture, Sovereignty

Until 1989,while state sovereignty was still holding fast, national borders were thought to be natural markers. The historic (Westphalian) western sovereignty of most states has obviously weakened, though neither sovereignty nor the national state has disappeared altogether or is likely to in the near future. They are recomposed and reorganized at all levels[14] with new functionalities. Borders are subject to constant reinterpretation, reincarnation and redrawing. The rich diversity of complex societies is evened out into a flat surface, whereby borders are introduced deep into the social canvas ("us" & "them"), made analogous to time exclusions: "modernity" versus "tradition" etc. Anticipating identities by nominating them downloads them into material existence. Ethnicisation appears in the process to be a manner of inclusion into the market for migrant workers (Asia), but also for indigenous populations as they claim access to the Nation[15]. It complements culturalisation. It is also the condition of women's insertion into the political society[16]. Creating some borders often enables others to be removed, but the principle of borders remains.

Borders and Autonomy of the Subject: the Missing Citizens

Political economy traditionally looked at the relationship between labour, nation and capital, and not at what outgrows it, not at

subjectivity. Political economy, after all, explains things such as when and where we can distinguish between private and working time, between the factory and the home, between the social and the political sphere, with clear distinctions of ownership. But since the massive advent of biopolitics, these are now again impossible to distinguish. Even profit may be difficult to evaluate in economy since the whole subjectivity of the individual him/herself is vitally necessary to and part of the capital[17]. "Externalities" that were not accounted for previously are now taken into consideration for the cost, in such notions as "human development" instead of "growth". But the notorious fact of the subject being split (Kant) and of "autonomy consist[ing] in believing oneself the author of an order that one has received"[18], relativises the performance of the subject. The subject is *missing* to itself. A theory of political *translation* may have to step in here. Translation can then be seen as a way to revisit the question of citizenship and of political subjectivity *beyond the European metaphysics of the subject* and beyond reductive political economy. I have proposed the concept of *missing citizen* here, as an analogy to the Indian concept of *missing women* designating aborted female foetuses[19].

However, capital may depend on subjectivity since including it (and included in it), there remains in the relationship of the two (an inside-out relation) a *lack of definitive closure of discourse* – which paradoxically cannot be stated by discourse itself - because it is its condition. The missing citizen is an *interruption* in citizenship revealing its limits. I would like to consider the "auto-heteronomy" of the subject and of the citizen. We have a comparable configuration in early Buddhist philosophy. Were we to assert non-being, we would have to do away with borders and distinctions, and thus we would fail. This is why *śūnyatā* (non-being) can never really be asserted; it can at best be *deduced* in a cognitive,

ontological and existential reduction, a step aside. We cannot cross the border between being and non-being in order to probe the conditions of language, because language really draws on *both* in that it lets us say and think *both* and in that it must have *both* – as well as the border between the two – if it is to think either of them.

European colonial expansion, and later the US imperial one, have exported and reconfigured borders. These have been adopted on all continents. The borders' only form of existence is impermanence, however much durability might be part of their myth. Migrations come with these[20]. It is true that neo-liberalism produces structural adjustment as border-changing/-challenging policies, especially in terms of differential citizenship and economic and administrative zoning. The special administrative and economic zones of Shenzhen, the industrial parks close to or hosting universities in Taiwan, as well as land given by states to great industries in India (Orissa, West Bengal etc.) striate territories in such ways as to produce unequal rights that can no longer be exactly mapped onto national geographies.

Subjectivation and non-subjectivation

According to Indian "traditional" stereotypes, non-subjectivation is a real alternative, while duality and differentiation are the result of *avidyā*, ignorance. The dispossession of one's self is culturally valued, posited and cultivated even outside the *guru-śišya* relation. This refusal of the affirmation of the self has a long, interesting history quite beyond the anhistoricity allotted to it. But although it weakens the binaries, it doesn't prevent domination. There is a paradox in the fact that renouncing the self – as used in some Asian philosophies of life – requires at least a minimum of

individual, subjective will, and thus some assertion of the self; *this is an intimately political act*. It is as if escaping the tyranny of the social order could only be achieved by a sidestep *outside* the system. The sidestep ideally means bypassing language and thus avoiding the division of reason (which results from the fact that we originate and we think with the gender difference as our starting point[21]). There is for the Taoists a "supreme void" before any division, named *Qi*, which is the receptacle of both *yin* and *yang* within an undifferentiated but doubly constituted, unity (doubly: full/empty; movement/rest; feminine/masculine): a fundamental unity that prevails over the splits. It is true that both in Chinese as well as in Indian antiquity (see Nāgārjuna), dichotomies are seen as symmetrical and equal because it is the easiest way to conceive of the *two* as inducing harmony. This is comparable to the situation in western thought where the pretended symmetry of the binaries in thought plays the historicising game of the dominant hegemony and where, by a universalising manoeuvring, the pretended symmetry impedes the view of the inequality inflicted on the particular element (and the goal of such impediment is – not to allow the particular to speak or to challenge power). Not only such schools as Taoism, Buddhism, but also the Indian philosophical school of *Sāmkhya* recognize some "primary" level or instance as the origin or context of reason undivided. (It often has a feminine and materialistic character moreover). That "primary" space is a universe not-yet-split, resembling *Qi*; it could be called universal and neutral regarding the differences (particulars) it hosts. But *within* language, we are always already within the *partage*.

In these Asian scenarios, violence is not discussed, but taken for granted, and techniques are developed only for avoiding it *ex post* (knowing that there is no zero degree of violence). The possible advantage of philosophies of the dispossession of the self is, in

principle, the conceptual deconstruction of the conjunction of notions ego-power-violence in hegemony. They mainly do it through their therapeutic practices (*yoga*). But none of them can dispense with the necessity of translation because violence is there, traversing and outgrowing geographic determinisms of philosophies. Such philosophies of dispossessing the self would be considered in the West as unpolitical; medically, they may be conceived of as ailment: this is so because of a normative understanding of the political. But the unpolitical or the depoliticised can be translated, however imperfectly, into the political.

Political subjectivation (a western pattern for both reform and revolution) and the "opposite" project of dispossession of self (or of non-subjectivation) as it appears in some Asian philosophies, have traditionally been pitted against each other in the west, in the latter's endeavour to *depoliticise* all extra-western agency. But the two may not be opposed, and may indeed be concomitant. The pattern of demobilising the self is not at all the polar opposite of revolutionary action in the way of "negative freedom"[22], which may or may not be only one part of it[23].

South –South, from others to others or from elsewhere to elsewhere

Since the dichotomies show the relational aspect of concepts, let's take "South" to mean "displacement", "elsewhere" too. "South-South" then means decentring Europe or the West, a label that originated in a dichotomy now outgrown. We need to accept being questioned by those other ends of the planet because they come from an absolutely *vital necessity of thinking*[24]. If the vanishing mediator really vanishes in conversion, it will have led from

elsewhere to elsewhere. Translation is then the new "political economy" here, as method.

Citizenship, subjectivation and personal freedom

The citizenship hoped for by the migrants calls for a reformed concept – the citizen with all its cultural, social components quite beyond the political or the merely legal or administrative. It need not at all include the wish to take up the citizenship or the nationality of the country of immigration. Such an enlarged concept of citizenship should not prevent us from noting the emergence of more restrictive forms[25], nor should we limit ourselves to the framework of the state.

Although the greatest migrations today are from or within Asia, most Asian cultures have historically cherished an individualistic quest for happiness, inner freedom, harmony and tranquillity, regardless of, or across, varied political contexts, and independently from the question of equality[26]. An individualistic quest with another history. One line of thought in Western thinking has meant that individual happiness, indeed freedom, can be acquired through collective happiness and by some social engineering. We know that the West too had produced its alternative therapeutic philosophies[27]. On the other hand some elitist Asian philosophies have often believed that no amount of social reforms or revolutions will provide individual happiness and freedom.

A synthesis between individual liberty and collective well-being has not been achieved in Europe, while its realisation takes other routes in Asia. What seems to be a turning-point for post-industrial Western societies (turning again to individualistic values) is not so, is not so in the same way, or is not new for India or for a

larger part of the world. Turning to individualistic values, albeit of another kind, has always existed there. *Individualistic values in Asia, including elitist ones such as inner freedom (mokša, nirvāna, ekatā), have not been construed as opposed to collective values.* That opposition is western and modern.

We would gain from including inner freedom within the concept of freedom *tout court*. All this only adds to the reasons why the traditional concept of economy may be insufficient to designate today's capitalism which also mutates through culture. Accordingly, what used to be the field of political economy changes too. It now has to take into account externalities of work, labour outside working time, knowledge, private networks as well as the *living force*, the bodies, processes of subjectivation in migration etc. There might also be some concrete hints of a *rapprochement* between two apparently incompatible or incommensurable concepts (*inner liberty* vs *collective*), among other things (in the political jargon of international relations today), in the notion of *liberating democracy*. Techniques of *liberating democracy* concern all the effects of a *top-down devolution of power*, particularly promoted in Asia (but also elsewhere, including in the construction of Europe).

That there is no democracy without borders means for us *that translation is both impossible, unavoidable* and imperfect. In this sense, *borders are the lines of temporary coagulation of applied power, without being power directly*: they are derived, and so are "identities". The political – along with inequality, borders and conflict – is "primary", as Ch. Mouffe and E. Laclau have it. But the excess, *that which cannot be represented,* is where *subjectivities are made* and where *change* appears: through, across, and in spite of identities or borders.

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[1] I have developed this notion in much of my published and still unpublished work over the past years.

[2] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception. Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty,* Duke University Press 2006.

[3] Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World*, OUP, Delhi 1982; Louis Dumont, *Homo hierarchicus: Le système des castes et ses implications*, Gallimard, Paris 1967.

[4] J. Derrida, *L'Autre cap*, Editions de Minuit, Paris 1991.

[5] See Balibar "At the Borders of Europe", paper delivered on October 4, 1999 at the invitation of the French Institute of Thessaly and the Philosophy Department of the Aristotle University of Thessaly. The text appeared in French in *Lignes* n° 13/*Transeuropéennes,* Paris 2004; also E. Balibar, *Nous, citoyens d'Europe : Les Frontières, l'Etat, le peuple*, La Découverte, Paris 2001; *L'Europe, l'Amérique, la guerre. Réflexions sur la médiation européenne*, La Découverte, Paris 2003 ; *Europe Constitution Frontière*, Editions du passant, Paris 2005; "*Europe as Borderland*",

The Alexander von Humboldt Lecture in Human Geography, University of Nijmegen, November 10, 2004.

[6] Serge Latouche, *L'occidentalisation du monde : Essai sur la signification, la portée et les limites de l'uniformisation planétaire*, Découverte, Paris, 2005.

[7] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso 1985.

[8] Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, 1977, 1978; English translation: *Male Fantasies*, Vol. 2, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis 1978/1989.

[9] Bartolomé Clavero, *Freedom's Law and Indigenous Rights. From Europe's Oeconomy to the Constitutionalism of the Americas*, The Robbins Collection Publications, (Studies in Comparative Legal History), University of California at Berkeley 2005.

[10] In our endeavour, even though this may not be the goal, it may be extremely salutary to explore the role of culture in processes of seeing Europe from the perspectives of Asian observers, or from outside *tout court*.

[11] The EC Treaty for example invites taking into account culture in its Article 151(4) ; see "First-ever European strategy for culture: contributing to economic growth and intercultural understanding" http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/07/646&format=HTML&aged=1&language=EN&guiLanguage=fr and http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/index_en.html; furthermore, the *Agenda for Culture* adopted in May 2007 calls for the

recognition and promotion of a (controversial) common cultural heritage in Europe.

[12] Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have been calling the *method itself a border*, which has the advantage of underlining the uncertainty of any positive knowledge; it also stresses the impermanence, the indecisive character of the parallel sequences of contents/objects of knowledge on the one hand, and of the knowing or learning processes themselves. It is critical and deconstructive of "method" as such, which is very welcome. But borders are not a method. When saying that borders are a method, we take them for a metaphor. We need a "method", indeed, showing that borders operate also in our minds, not only in the things our thoughts refer to. This is precisely the reason why Mezzadra and Neilson want to use *the same term for both*. We really need a philosophy of the borders that explains how they operate starting from reason and the mechanisms of thinking. Such philosophy is that of the *partag*e of reason.

[13] Yann Moulier Boutang, *Le Capitalisme cognitif : La Nouvelle Grande Transformation,* Éd. Amsterdam 2007.

[14] Saskia Sassen, *Territory-Authority-Rights. From medieval to Global Assemblages,* Princeton UP, Princeton-Oxford 2006; "The world's third spaces", *Open Democracy*: http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/globalisation/world_third_spaces

[15] Bartolomé Clavero, *Freedom's Law and Indigenous Rights. From Europe's Oeconomy to the Constitutionalism of the Americas*, op. cit., and other writing by this author. Also: R. Samaddar: "Loi et terreur: le constitutionnalisme colonial", *Diogène* N° 212, 2005, pp. 22-42; see the whole issue of this journal dedicated to « Conflicts and constitutions ».

[16] R. Iveković, *Dame-Nation. Nation et différence des sexes*, Longo Editore, Ravenna 2003; *Captive Gender. Ethnic Stereotypes & Cultural Boundaries,* Kali for Women – Women Unlimited, Delhi 2005; S. Bianchini, S. Chaturvedi, R. Iveković, R. Samaddar, *Partitions. Reshaping States and Minds,* Routledge/Frank Cass, London 2005; Delhi 2007.

[17] Cf. Michael Hardt, Toni Negri, *Empire*, Paris, Kargo 2000; *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Press HC 2004.

[18] Gabriela Basterra "Making oneself a sign", with reference to Levinas, manuscript Collège international de philosophie.

[19] Though the concept of citizen has its limits in the state, we need to engage with them. Positing the *missing citizen* renders the category visible and countable. They are missing seen from both the place *ab quem* and *ad quem*. They are boat-people who drowned en route, those who are assassinated, removed but nonetheless present, the silenced and depoliticised.

[20] The incredible *proportion* of migrants today in the world has its explanation in the brutality of neoliberalism, of wars, of manmade famine and of the all too imminent manmade natural and climatic changes. Migrations can finally be seen as social movements and political movements too, beyond their culturalisation. (Sandro Mezzadra, "Living in Transition", see "Translating violence", http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/1107, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Politics; also Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson, "Né qui né altrove – Migration, Detention, Desertion: A Dialogue", in *Borderlands, e-journal*, 2, 1 : www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/issues/vol2no1.html ,

2,1, and S. Mezzadra & B. Neilson, “Border as Method or the Multiplication of Labor”, manuscript, *op. cit.*

[21] Françoise Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin. La pensée de la différence*, Odile Jacob, Paris 1996. For Héritier, there is no doubt about this.

[22] Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty*, Pimlico 2003 (new ed.); *Liberty*, OUP 2002.

[23] The insistence on reducing politics to ethics in a lot of English-language philosophy, the switching from a vocabulary of state sovereignty to one of governmentality and biopolitics, all serve the purpose of depoliticising the other and are unable to account for *the political* or for the *partage de la raison*. When the language of sovereignty is replaced by that of governmentality, the two are usually constructed into a sequence and the two paradigms are generally made incompatible, which they are not.

[24] Expression used by a reader of the journal *Naqd*, Algiers, in a letter to the editor D. Djerbal on May 6, 2004, in relation to *Naqd* n° 18, “L'Expérience traumatique”.

[25] Saskia Sassen, *Territory-Authority-Rights,* op. cit.; *Cities in a World Economy*, Pine Forge Press 2006; *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001; A. Ong, *Flexible Citizenship. The Cultural Logic of Transnationality, op. cit.*

[26] Maja Milčinski, *Strategije osvobajanja*, Sophia, Ljubljana 2006.

[27] M. Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du sujet : Cours au Collège de France (1981-1982)*, ed. F. Gros. Paris: Seuil/Gallimard 2001.