

Postmodern Disalignments and Realignments of the Center/Periphery

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Historical modernity applied its civilizing program by beginning with an image of the Center that could serve as a universal foundation for its dominant Western rationality. At the same time, international modernity patented its formula for reason and progress as a *metropolitan* formula, transforming the Center into a post for control and decision that could geographically regulate the exchanges of value and power.

Latin America debated its identity problems, long captive to this linear contraposition between a Center that irradiated light and a Periphery shadowed by backwardness; a plentiful Center and a lacking Periphery; a dominant Center and a submissive Periphery. The Center and the Periphery translated their historical relation of hierarchies and dependencies into an Original-Copy duplicate that served as a metaphor for the dogma of cultural colonization: the Original as a unique and founding concept of the Center (the Model), and the Copy as a mimetic reproduction in a subordinated language.

During the sixties, socioeconomic modernization and its industrialization of culture resulted in the proclamation of Latin American theories of “cultural dependence” as a Third World critique (anti-imperialist) of the effects of ideological penetration of the messages transmitted and manipulated by the Center. The antagonism with the Center symbolized the response of the Third World to the “northamericanization” of consumption under the world economy of the capitalist market. But multiple political fractures occurred in the leftist-revolutionary utopia of the “new man” and his faith in capitalist de-alienation. There were also several changes in the proposals of Latin American cultural sociology concerning the encounter between modernizing currents and local traditions, which redefine peripheral modernity as a heterodox modernity.¹

These changes forced a revision of the notion of “cultural dependency” based on a dualist model of fixed contraposition between the Center (the international = the fake) and the Periphery (the national = the authentic). Today, it is

no longer possible to reduce in a linear fashion the Domination-Dependency relationship to rigid macro-oppositions that confront the Center (North American hegemony) and the Periphery (the national-popular rescue of traditions free from the pollution of the international market). Today, the techno-communicative interdependency that blends the main informational contexts on a global level goes beyond identities and borders until it crosses its levels of possessions and circulation, making it possible for cultural power to flow through heterogeneous and dispersed micro-circuitry that shatters the category of the Center—at least as a fixed and unitary polarity.

If we understand postmodernity as a problematic of the crisis of centered modernity, then postmodernity becomes the theoretical and discursive code that today speculates on totalities and fragmentations; on the fragmentation of the Center as a totality; and on the *decentralization* of its axes under the semantic and territorial pressures of the *margins* that proliferate within it.

Many agree with the interpretation of the postmodern flexion as the record of an “authority crisis” in the dominant Western culture—a crisis caused by the end of metanarratives and by the lack of confidence in any kind of ultimate truth or final signification that prevails as an absolute under the hierarchical assumption of a universal metadomination. The fall of the eurocentric model would liberate—according to several authors—the voices that until now have been discarded or censored for inhabiting the margins of dominant representation (masculine-occidental). The rupture of totalities and the crisis of totalizations make possible new anti-totalitarian expressions (the multiple, the plural, the divergent, and the minority) that up to now functioned as heterological modulations of the “other” in a postmodern code. What, however, are the *conditions* used by the postmodern discourse to translate its well-publicized revindication of the multidiversity of the “other”?

If we go beyond the academic debate and give post-modernism the diverse significations of an environmental

record that combines modes and fashions, there are multiple examples of how the streets, museums, fashions, television, and music incorporate, within all their ornamentation, signs that testify to the mixture of cultures: a rather scenographic witness to the growing “Latinization of the United States”² or the “third-worldizing of the metropolises.” These mixtures are usually understood to be a collateral dialogue across borders. However, in spite of this understanding, such is not the case given that one of the currents involved, the mainstream, accommodates diversity according to a multicultural cliché forged for the convenience of the passive and insidious pluralism of the Center. This serves as an exotic cliché that works to diminish the conflicts resulting from cultural changes, re-converting the signs of the clash of traditions and identities into banal icons of folk assimilation. Another example of the recolonization of the “other” is provided by the international museums and their stereotyped cataloguing of the “Latin American.” This characterization attempts to reiterate the nature/culture gap, with its ghostly fantasies about origins and its nostalgia for the pre-rational, which locates Latin America in the “here and there” (*en el más acá o más allá*) of the primitive or the fantastic-marvelous of the social codes, in order to deny its historical discourse. Yet, without a doubt, it is in the scenario of international theory where we have the most treacherous associations of the new variables of power and discourse that characterize the postmodernism of the uncentered, of the marginal.

Academic debate in the United States is increasingly centered around multicultural studies, feminist theory, the colonialist discourse, and Latin American literature, which are all considered concerns to be analyzed from the anti-canonic point of view of the strategies of “otherness,” of the subaltern. At the same time, however, postcolonialist intellectuals of the “other” depend on a network of metropolitan thought that, regardless of how much importance is given to the “marginal” as the object of discourse, still exerts a centrist function for those of the margin who figure as the “other,” because they operate outside the hegemonic trace of the metropolitan culture.

As is known, the Center does not use up its signification in the geographical realism of a metropolitan position. Every

axis that makes a system of references move around its symbols of authority is operating as a function of centrism—normative or canonical. And in this sense, the perimeter that determines legitimacy and decrees the actuality of the post-modern theme of the “other” on the international scene is limited by the academic-institutional network (i.e., universities, magazines, publishing houses, museums, etc.) that spreads and consecrates the prestige of European and United States theories. The hierarchical position of the Center results not only from the fact that it concentrates wealth and regulates its distribution. It proceeds, above all, from the investiture of authority that allows it to function as a focus of endowed meaning. The symbolic advantage of the Center is a result of its monopoly over the resources to negotiate the power-discourse relationship through univocal processing and manipulation of the equivalencies of signs and values. In this sense, the figure of the “other” that represents the reflections of the international theoretical scene under the vindicative pressure of the cultural, ethnic, and sexual minorities continues to inscribe itself primarily within the usual parameters of representation-delegation: in other words, the figure of the “other” is still *expressing* a subject of discourse that controls the socio-communicative device of the word-as-a-representation-of-power—in this case, the word legitimated and valorized by the symbolic-institutional credit of First World discourses. If the postmodern inclination toward the “other” is to become something more than a stated disposition, and if it really modifies the discursive-institutional agreement sealed by the official bonds of the Center’s prerogatives, it becomes necessary to decentralize the symbolic power of cultural representation and pluralize the socio-institutional mechanisms of critical participation and debate.³ By not doing so, the “other” faces two risks: either to serve rhetorically as a discursive fetish, so that the progressive intellectuals of the Center pay their radical tribute to the “good consciousness” of the Third World; or to remain confined to the prescribed and supervised territory in the margins, as a zone of non-interference with the institutions of the Center.

The Latin American periphery always oppositionally defined its peripheral consciousness in the image of a dictat-

ing Center that spoke the vertical language of colonialist or imperialist dogma. Today, this Center seems to have converted its old imposing face of command/domination for the relativist and conciliatory masks of the pluralist dialogue. When it took the initiative to speculate in a postmodern way about its own crisis of centrality, the Center seemed to be appropriating from the periphery the latter's leading role on the edges, which had always been identified as anti-hegemonic marginality. Furthermore, the present paradox consists in the fact that Latin America has become one of the margins resemanticized by the postmodern lexicon of the crisis of the centers, modulated by the Center. All of this confusion seems to indicate that the hierarchies between Center and Periphery have been changed. In any case, we need to distinguish, within the postmodern repertoire, those positions that use the de-centrist motif as a simple rhetorical or aestheticist subterfuge from those postures that effectively work to have the defense of the "other" materialized in a critical operation that may correct the imbalances of cultural power sanctioned by metropolitan credibility. Here we would need to quote the leading representatives of what George Yúdice calls an "alternative postmodernity":⁴ Edward Said, Cornel West, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among others. We could agree that many of the postmodern slogans of the "other" explore and exploit the marginal, without, as Yúdice says, "being capable of any solidarity with it."⁵ But this does not imply that the Periphery should renounce taking advantage of the tactical benefits derived from postmodern ambiguities. Nor should it be an accomplice of its most radical theorists—those interested in having "otherness" theories train the "others" (those marginalized from the European and North American constellation) so that the theories can be used as decolonizing tools. It is not only the postmodern premise of the discontinuity of meaning that authorizes us to select and recombine fragments of statements deliberately taken out of their metropolitan context; in other words, separated from their international theoretical involvements (those made in the Center) and refunctionalized to fit the theoretical and political interests of the Periphery. We also can, and should, revert to the networks of accomplices and to the system of solidarity established by those who weave alliances

from the Center that cross the geopolitical borders of metropolitan power. I refer not only to those who speak the language of *Difference*, but also to those who compare this language to the multiplicity of voices reflecting *the differences*: to the "specificity of the situation" that we have to radicalize as a way of informing ourselves locally about every policy of the "other" that counters the postmodern slogan of Otherness. This is what Frederick Jameson refers to in his preface to Roberto Fernández Retamar's *Calibán*:

*We . . . need a new literary and cultural internationalism which involves risks and dangers, which calls us into question fully as much as it acknowledges the Other, thereby serving as a more adequate and chastening form of self-knowledge. This "internationalism of the national situations" neither reduces the "Third World" to some homogeneous Other of the West, nor does it vacuously celebrate the "astonishing" pluralism of human cultures: rather, by isolating the common situation (capitalism, imperialism, colonialism) shared by very different kinds of societies, it allows their differences to be measured against each other as well as against ourselves.*⁶ —

Notes

Translated by María Eraña; edited by Shifra M. Goldman.

1. A reference to José Joaquín Brunner, *Un espejo trizado* (Santiago de Chile: Flacso, 1988); and Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas* (Mexico City, 1989).
2. Celeste Olalquiaga, "Tupinicipolis o la ciudad de los indios retrofuturistas," *Revista de Crítica Cultural* (Santiago de Chile) 3 (1990); reprinted in English in Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 75–91; for "Latinization," see p. 76.
3. Phil Mariani and Jonathan Crary, "In the Shadow of the West: An Interview with Edward Said," in Russell Ferguson et al., eds., *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 93–103.
4. George Yúdice, "El conflicto de las modernidades," *Nuevo Texto Crítico* 7 (1991).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Frederick Jameson, "Prefacio a Calibán," *Nuevo Texto Crítico* 5 (1990). [First published in Roberto Fernández Retamar, *Caliban and Other Essays*, trans. Edward Baker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), vii–xii. The quote cited appears on pp. xi–xii. Ed.]

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