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Maxims of Empire

Neoliberalism and epistemological violence

"Economics are the method but the object is to change the soul." –Margaret Thatcher

"We are violated in our very imagination. Our conscience is being taken from us," says a Malian woman from the witness stand at the trial of the IMF and the World Bank. In Bamako, Abderrahmane Sissako opens the floor to representatives of civil society to testify against the Global Financial Institutions. But their pleas need not be economics-savvy for them to have political weight: their storytelling, the very enunciation of their condition is an act of resistance to the narrative that has been imposed upon them. Their presence contradicts the interpretation that has been superimposed upon them, and their words are rebellions against epistemological violence, hegemony of consciousness.

In Bamako's ad hoc courtroom, the plaintiffs are told by the defendant attorney (and most of Western Civilization) that they "live in an open world." The trial is a means of reasserting a reality that is constantly denied to them: "We do not live in an open world," says one of the witnesses, "open for Whites maybe, but not for us." The citizens of Bamako, like myriads of victims of neoliberal policies, suffer not only from the Structural Adjustment Policies that affect their material and cultural lives, but from what Habermas calls "the informational colonization of being." (Hardt and Negri, 34) The courtroom structure of Bamako allows for resistance to this process through creating a space for expression and disalienation through testimony. The very first scene of the film shows an old man refusing to leave the witness stand when the judge tells him it is not yet his turn to speak. "Words can create wounds, you shouldn't keep them inside," he says, "my words won't remain within me." Epistemological violence is a new form of objectification: the negation of subjectivity, not only in the ontological realm (the old colonialism already did that!) but at the very cognitive level. The colonized subject is told that she is perceiving wrongly. The attack is not focused on the content anymore, but on the interpretation. It creates an artificial phenomenological disparity, a Kafkaesque incongruity. Another witness comes to the stand without saying more than his name and his occupation --he is a schoolteacher. "Nothing to declare?" He remains silent and leaves, as if not much else mattered than the mere enunciation of his existence and life's work. There is a schizophrenic quality to the tension between the liberating aspect of testimonies loud and clear and the sheer uselessness of it all.

Outside the courtyard in which the trial is taking place, life goes on. People listen to the trial on the radio, but no routine is suspended. In fact, there is never a verdict, and no one awaits. "No one will listen, don't waste your time," says a man to his interviewer. Life is not suspended expecting a verdict as an exterior corroboration for existence. There can be no exit, no resolve, since the two realities --that of the "deciders" and that of those who live with the decisions-- are not contiguous. The alienation is not only that of individuals but of whole worlds; the metropole/colony dichotomy covertly remains. "We might be from the same planet but we are not from the same world," says an alter-globalization slogan; here, however, the asymmetry lies not in the realm of ethics, but in that of the possible.

"The project of corporate globalization has increased the distance between those who take the decisions and those who must suffer them even more...that distance puts justice out of reach." (Roy, 20) The asymmetry between the realities of those who decide and those who suffer need not be dissimulated in a world of hegemonic consciousness. This unilateral lack of responsibility, accountability, and even of recognition of the First world towards the South (former Third) is the foundation of empire. Arundhati Roy quotes George H.W. Bush reacting to the killing of 290 passengers of an Iranian airliner shot down by the USS Vincennes, in 1988: "I will never apologize for the United States. I don't care what the facts are." (Roy, 42) To Roy, this statement represents the impermeability of empire to other epistemologies, which absolves them completely from justification. "I don't care what the facts are. What a perfect maxim for the New American Empire. Perhaps a slight variation on the theme would be more apposite: the facts can be whatever we want them to be." (Roy, 43)

Disturbing inconsistencies can result from this position of unaccountability and univocal vision. In Bamako, the plaintiffs' attorney, in his final plea, quotes World Bank former president Paul Wolfowitz wallowing in the media about dying children in Africa while the sum total of his actions evidently make him too much of a culprit to be allowed to cry along. Another example of these cruel ironies is given by Roy as she quotes Donald Rumsfeld explaining the post-invasion chaos in Iraq: "It's untidy...Freedom's untidy. And free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things." The inconsistency is such that the situation is comical: "Did anybody know that Donald Rumsfeld was an anarchist?" (Roy, 48-49) But "when it comes to empire, facts don't matter," (Roy, 46) and reality can be rebranded to fit the intended message. Definitions are created from above and imposed, new meanings given to umbrella words which are then instrumentalized as flagpoles. Arundhati Roy points out empire's arbitrary delineation of peace and war: "For most people in the world, peace is war-- a daily battle against hunger, thirst, and the violation of their dignity. Wars are often the result of a flawed peace, a putative peace." (Roy, 15) While she shows how what is called "peace" by the hegemonic discourse, is often a silent (economic, cultural) war waged against the people, the military

interventions of empire are also branded as peace: "Finally, although the practice of Empire is continually bathed in blood, the concept of Empire is always dedicated to peace, a perpetual and universal peace outside of history." (Hardt and Negri, xv) The epistemological violence of such a phenomenon is evident: the unacceptable reality is denied by those who perpetrate it, and replaced only in name: the change lies in the perception. "They make slaughter and they call it peace." (Tacitus in Hardt and Negri, 3) (Or: Bush's Clean Air Act.)

In a similar way, the word "democracy" has become instrumentalized by the West, and lost its meaning in the process: "Every kind of outrage is being committed in the name of democracy. It has become little more than a hollow word, a pretty shell emptied of its content or meaning. It can be whatever you want it to be. Democracy is the free world's whore." (Roy, 54) For Roy, the war in Iraq is the apex of neoliberal globalization, and the "democracy" rhetoric that surrounds it a poor excuse: "Democracy has become Empire's euphemism for neoliberal capitalism." (Roy, 56) Empire can also create or extend the meaning of words to exclude what puts it in peril: "According to the state, when victims refuse to be victims, they become terrorists and are dealt with as such." (Roy, 12) Roy gives an example from India, her home country, where a young man using bees in a plastic bag as defense against the police in a political struggle is called "terrorist," thus instrumentalizing global mythical fears. Similarly, French European congressman Daniel Cohn-Bendit denounced in November 2008 the media bashing of the group of French anarchists who had sabotaged a train to protest against the privatization of railways. He warned against the trivialization of the term "terrorist" to feed the media's thirst for crisis. Language, imagery and myth are cultivated in our collective imagination, and leveraged to political ends.

According to David Harvey, appealing to liberal buzzwords such as peace, democracy, or freedom, is part of the legitimating apparatus of neoliberalism. "Cultural and traditional values (...) can be mobilized to mask other realities. The word 'freedom' resonates so widely within the common-sense understanding of Americans that it becomes 'a button that elites can press to open the doors to the masses' to justify almost anything." (Harvey, 39) Yet the "culture" created, the "traditional values" perpetrated, if they do not refer to any coherent reality or mirror an actuality, are losing their function as signifiers to claim the role of the signified. The victims of violence committed in the name of these concept-shells are denied a voice, not only in the literal sense, but in that their very reality is negated as they are asked to replace it by the New Official Version, imposed straight down from those who are perceiving and interpreting on a superior plane-- who could be called the "epistemologically gifted". Sweatshop worker, you are not a victim of neoliberal globalization. In fact, it's your lucky day, you have been chosen, among millions of others, to go through the gate to the free market haven that will get you (well, maybe not you, but your grandchildren for

sure) right up the development ladder and on to consumer citizenship. Welcome to the flat world.

The Washington Consensus, the 10-step program to imperial integration imposed at gunpoint by the global financial institutions on trial in Bamako in the last couple of decades of the XXth century, is based on this kind of rhetoric. The neoliberal economist does not simply disregard or diminish the account of the "collateral damage" of structural adjustment, he denies the validity of the suffering he creates, (while shedding symbolic tears for the camera,) by rationalizing it and presenting it as necessary—even as a positive sign. Unemployment is rising? It means the plan is working! The grand scheme of orthodox economics as a positive science implies a separate, quasi-platonic, higher reality, where theories of growth, efficiency and incentives carry a significance superior to that of the base reality of the human world. And again, the former claims the right to assign meaning to the latter.

The phrase "Washington Consensus" itself represents a form of epistemological violence since it implies a universality, a collective agreement, an infallibility--all of which becoming absurdly paternalistic (and imperialistic!) once we understand that they refer to a superimposed consensus of those already in power. "Washington Consensus" basically means that the hegemony agrees with itself. Robin Broad and John Cavanagh use the following allegory to illustrate this irony: "Washington Consensus--it is a curious but fitting term. And we cannot help but comment on its even more curious-and biased- research design. Polling such DC-based elites as those at the World Bank, the IMF, and the US government in the late 1980s for views on development is akin to polling those in power at the Ministry of Magic and the Death Eaters after the Dark Lord has taken control to determine the prevailing consensus." (Broad, Cavanagh, 3) Consensus as practiced in Washington implies exclusivity and leads to lawlessness: We all agree. Who's at the table? "Now supranational subjects that are legitimate not by right but by consensus intervene in the name of any type of emergency and superior ethical principles," creating "a permanent state of emergency and exception justified by the appeal to essential values of justice. In other words, the right of the police is legitimated by universal values." (Hardt and Negri, 18)

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in Empire, explain how the epicenters of Empire, the headquarters of neoliberal globalization, have been able to get away with replacing law by the myth of "consensus." We are acceding to what they call the "postmodernization of the global economy," (Hardt and Negri, xiii) or, the shift from "disciplinary society" to a "society of control."

Disciplinary power characterized the "first phase of capitalist accumulation," which corresponds to the colonial form of imperialism of the XIXth/XXth century, and consists in "structuring the parameters and limits of thought and practice." (Hardt, Negri, 23) (Ibid.) The disciplinary institutions, "prison factory asylum, hospital, university, school," (Ibid.) are the police forces at

home but also instruments of control in the colonies. Metropolises today are still presenting the imposition of such infrastructures as their redeeming "gifts" to the former colony. If disciplinary society was modern, society of control is postmodern. According to Hardt and Negri, Imperialism, franco-british style, is replaced by an Empire whose very center is not situated in space and whose reach is immaterial. Empire is immanent. Society of control is characterized by the fact that "the behavior of social integration and exclusion proper to rule are ... increasingly interiorized within the subjects themselves." (Hardt and Negri, 23) Hardt and Negri borrow Foucault's term "biopolitical production" to designate the mechanisms in which a society of control exerts power. In the disciplinary society the relationship between power and the individual is static, (Hardt and Negri, 24) a known given, whereas in the case of biopolitical power the "whole social body is comprised by power's machine and developed in its virtuality." (Ibid.) The corporeal/somatic dimension of biopolitical power can also be applied to the neocolonized subject, whose oppression is invisible and unnamed, yet more paralyzing than ever. In Bamako, a woman remarks: "our exploitation is nameless;" just as plaster stays in place after the mold is taken away, empire solidified itself to remain after the last colonial bureaucrat went back to the metropole.

"The great industrial and financial powers thus produce not only commodities but also subjectivities (...) within the biopolitical context." (Hardt and Negri, 32) Neoliberalism is based on the epistemologically violent nature of biopolitical production. And while epistemological competence was denied abroad, the scope of debate and spectrum of knowledge was also shrinking at home. "Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret; live in, and understand the world." (Harvey, 3) Neoliberalism is a hard sell for a traditional disciplinary society, since it can be construed as reverse class war, and the agents of the 1980s Reaction were aware that "an open project around the restoration of economic power to a small elite would probably not gain much popular support." (Harvey, 40) But, since "modern democracies have been around for long enough for neo-liberal capitalists to learn how to subvert them," (Roy, 3) another strategy was followed: the closing of all other paths, as encapsulated by the Thatcher maxim: "There Is No Alternative." "The effect in many parts of the world has increasingly been to see [neoliberalism] as a necessary, even wholly 'natural' way for the social order to be regulated." (Harvey, 41) Only 30 years after Richard Nixon declared "We're all Keynesian now," New Labor apparatchik Peter Mandelson punned: "We are all Thatcherites now." It is telling that, although apparently symmetrical, the statements mean slightly different things: Nixon's point was that the soundness and effectiveness of Keynesian economic policies were a given; whereas Mandelson is talking about the

strict impossibility to even formulate a non neoliberal stance in the public arena; Nixon is observing, Mandelson is prescribing (epistemologically, too.) Neoliberalism is an order that "fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity." (Hardt and Negri, xiv) The Washington Consensus, though no more than 30 years old, is presented as atemporal: « Too often, the prevailing orthodoxy of development in theory and practice is presented ahistorically. Indeed, we would not be surprised if some of you reading these pages were unaware that there was ever a vibrant development debate or that "free-market fundamentalism" did not always reign." (Broad, Cavanagh, 5) The era of Neoliberalism is not understood as Reaction to post-war Keynesian policies, but, ironically, as a revolution: a threshold has been crossed, there's no going back. "Empire was accepted as the 'maturity of the times.'" (Hardt and Negri, 21) Fukuyama's "End of History," is the toll of that "empire" ahistorical and aspatial, that presents itself as naturally arisen, evident, and ultimate. "Empire exhausts historical time, suspends history, and summons the past and future within its own ethical order. In other words, Empire presents itself as permanent, external and necessary." (Hardt and Negri, 11) Since its legitimacy is guaranteed, the proponents of the neoliberal agenda don't need to be as careful to make their message fit reality, a tendency that we have described above. Furthermore, they can afford to be much more unapologetic; Arundati Roy describes the US doctrine of pre-emptive strike as "The United States Can Do Whatever The Hell It Wants, And That's Official." The traditional channels of legitimation are not required anymore in an order that sees itself as ultimate. Cary Nelson argues that under neoliberalism, "If capital was once thought to be at least in symbolic debt to literary culture, that time has passed. Capital owes us nothing and we survive in the margins of its sufferance. Literature is in debt to commerce; the debt cannot be repaid." (Nelson, 5) Intellectuals are not required anymore to morally and aesthetically support the prevailing paradigm since reality and discourse do not need to pretend to match anymore. The "noumenon" and "phenomenon" are not in any sort of correspondence. The image of things does without a narrative because no aesthetical correspondence is necessary.

In Against the Great Defeat of the World, John Berger compares the neoliberal aesthetic cacophony to Hieronymus Bosch's Millennium Triptych:

"This lack of sense, this absurdity, is endemic to the new world order. As Bosch foresaw in his vision of hell, there is no horizon. The world is burning. Every figure is trying to survive by concentrating on [her] own immediate need and survival. Claustrophobia, at its most extreme, is not caused by overcrowding but by the lack of any continuity existing between one action and the next that is close enough to be touching it. It is this which is hell [...] This hell has become a strange prophecy of the mental climate imposed on the world by globalization and the new economic order." (Berger, xiii, xv)

The lack of horizon, in the picture as in the neoliberal order paradigm, represents the impossibility to go anywhere else, the lack of blank spaces to fill, the absence of the yet-to-be-discovered, or the yet-to-be-created. The lack of utopia. "The culture in which we live is perhaps the most claustrophobic that has ever existed; in the culture of globalization, as in Bosch's hell, there is no glimpse of an elsewhere or an otherwise. The given is a prison" (Berger, xv) Another form of epistemological violence, thus, is to suffocate the Imagination. Arguably, the rebellions of 1968 in the west were a crisis of the disciplinary society. One of the most famous slogans of the May events in Paris was "Let Imagination Take Power." Through the society of control, the opposite has happened.

The seminal alter-globalization slogan, "Another world is possible," hence takes another dimension of meaning in the context of epistemological violence. It's all in the "*possible*;" an affirmation not only of the material, or political potentiality of an alternative system, but as opening a lost space for *conceiving* of it. Subcomandante Marcos' wish of "a world with many other worlds in it," apart from being a concrete call for cultural diversity, relocalization and community sovereignty, is also, on a more conceptual plane, a cry for the liberation of our enclosed, stale imaginations. In Bamako, when the defense attorney asks the witness why she is not presenting an alternative plan to the system that she is denouncing, she is not afraid of saying that she does not have one. Likewise, Naomi Klein describes neoliberalism and its counter-currents as "the one no and the many yesses." (New Left Review, 2001.)

How, then, is epistemological sovereignty recovered? Does agency follow or precede political/economic sovereignty or are they part of a dialectics? John Berger argues that to get out of Bosch's hell "a horizon has to be discovered. And for this we have to refind hope—against the odds of what the new order pretends and perpetrates...the act of resistance means not only refusing to accept the absurdity of the world picture offered to us, but denouncing it. And when hell is denounced from within, it ceases to be hell." (Berger, xvi.) Similarly, in Bamako, the plaintiffs' attorney calls for the condemnation of the global financial institutions as "reopening the way to Utopia." In Development Redefined, Broad and Cavanagh suggest that cracks in the consensus have delegitimized it as such; "We have not said that the free-market policies are dead, rather their reign as a consensus (...) has ended. Some key centers of power still subscribe to its religion but the era of prevailing paradigm is over," (Broad and Cavanagh, 5) a statement that implies hope. For Hardt and Negri, there seems to be little possibility for an external utopia; hope lies in Empire's ultimate vacuity; Empire does not really produce anything, it lives off, co-opts, reappropriates the production of the "multitude" (Hardt and Negri, 62), it suffers from an "ontological lack," it is little more than "a spectacular machine." Resistance to epistemological violence, then, can be embraced as a reactualization, a reclaiming of the ontological, the recapturing of our truth, uncovering utopias in the revolutionary revelation

of what already exists. Bamako does end without letting us hear the verdict, but oh, do we *know* what it is.

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