

Gods, Emperors and Time Governing Humanity

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*From the represented shall come that which
overturns the representation.*

Michael Taussig

Abstract: The twentieth century was a turbulent century in which the temporal discourse was defined by a series of ‘major’ events, of which I will highlight three of particular pertinence to this paper: 1) *the Great Depression*, 2) *the Second World War* and, 3) *the Cold War*. Each of these events, individually and collectively has contributed in the shaping of our current geopolitical reality, and more importantly, in the shaping of our contemporary vision of the world. The great depression was a decisive point in the shaping of the modern Western welfare state, the Second World War culminated in the attainment of hegemony by the United States, and the Cold War became the global war on Communism. Throughout these events, “Time” played a crucial role in the definition of particular actions and their subsequent justification. It seems to me, from my particular understanding of Time that the sole goal of every strategy, has always been to perpetuate capitalism and *spatialize* the relationship between those who “have” and those who “have not”.

Introduction

Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other* brilliantly exposes the reality of “our” Time. The Time, which has allowed the Western world to assume a role of superiority over the people of other cultures, and which has permitted the elites within the Western states to justify their position above the rest of society. No longer the Time of the Judeo-Christian tradition - a Time which was “celebrated as a sequence of specific events that befall a chosen people” (Fabian 2002, 2) - the evolutionist Time which has guided societal development through the achieved secularization, naturalization and spatialization of

Time, has been developed for the sole purpose of “distancing those who are observed from the Time of the observer” (Fabian 2002, 25).

Understood in this way, Time contributed first to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise, and later moved on to serve as a justification of globalization by giving politics and economics “a firm believe in ‘natural’ i.e. evolutionary time” (Fabian 2002, 17). Although in effect, this evolutionary Time has done little more than replace our faith in salvation by faith in progress and industry, the majority of the population has been unable to grasp the fact that “geopolitics has its ideological foundation in chronopolitics” (Fabian 2002, 144), and that “civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization) are all terms whose conceptual content derives from evolutionary Time” (Fabian 2002, 17). Not enough critical mass has been able to assimilate the fact that political space and time are unnatural creations and “ideologically construed instruments of power” (Fabian 2002, 144). If this moment ever arrives, Gods, Emperors and Time might finally fall from grace, and humanity could become ‘truly’ emancipated.

The Great Depression and the Western Welfare State

It would seem odd for many people, to derive a link between the consolidation of the welfare state in response to the Great Depression and the concept of Time as viewed by Fabian. However, this link is not only relevant, but it is also a key ingredient in the development of the welfare state, as we understand it today. In order to view this connection, it is important to reveal how from the eighteenth century onwards, Time was

secularized through the transformation of the message of ‘universal history’ as conceived by thinkers such as Condorcet and Kant, and later developed by its decisive innovators, Hegel and Marx. Hegel saw world history as a process of development taking place ‘in the field of the spirit’ and Marx, noting Hegel’s work, “jettisoned his metaphysics while retaining the idea of history as progress, seeing it instead as a series of modes of production” (Leys 1977, 4).

In regards to the Western welfare state, of course there are many variations, however it is not outlandish to outline the fact that there are three broad categories or regime types, which encompass the types of welfare states we have witnessed in the West. In countries such as the United States and Canada, the regime type is that of the ‘liberal’ welfare state, designed to cater to low-income, working class state dependents. In this regime type, “means-tested assistance, modest universal transfers, or modest social-insurance plans predominate” (Esping 1989, 26). In countries such as Austria, Germany, Italy and France, where the welfare state is conservative and strongly ‘corporatist’, what predominates is the idea of the “preservation of status differentials; rights, therefore, [are] attached to class and status” (Esping 1989, 27). A third regime type can be found in the Scandinavian countries, in which the welfare state is constructed upon the idea of a social democratic model, which promotes “an equality of the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs as [is] pursued elsewhere” (Esping 1989, 27). A welfare model which rests on the need to attain full employment in the society, in order to support the system.

When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, these states responded in different ways. All faced with the prospect of mass unemployment and collapsing productivity, countries had a good chance of becoming 'failed states', and each offered its own solution, none of which focused on the change from a capitalist society to an alternate means of organization. Instead, what happened was the reform of Western capitalism in alternative and creative ways drawn from the spatial separation of the observer from the observed. The elites whose failed capitalism had generated the crisis faced by the population, responded by emphasizing their aim of helping those within the system that had not been able to develop, or evolve as successfully as the rest. A separation between 'us' those for whom capitalism works, and 'them' those who have not be able to benefit from its wonders. It is true, that faced with the crisis, different national capitalists made specific concessions to their population, based on the historical legacies of their state structure and functioning. For example, Sweden ended up with social Keynesianism, whereas the United States institutionalized commercial Keynesianism (Weir and Skocpol 1985, 109), but the goal was always the perpetuation of capitalism and the spatialization of the relationship between those who "have" and those who "have not". A situation clearly highlighted by the fact that even political parties which had "historically formed as programmatic agents for working-class interests, defined their goals in the 1930s in close relationship to existing policies and capacities of the states with which they were dealing" (Weir and Skocpol 1985, 149), hence directly succumbing to the impositions of the ruling elites.

The Second World War, Decolonization and United States Hegemony

The Second World War has been studied in depth, we know that it was a global conflict, which involved all the great powers divided into “Allies” and the “Axis”. Historians have been able to account for the use of 100 million military personnel who helped in the extermination of over seventy million people, the majority of whom were civilians. Out of the conflict, the European empires were left with no option but to begin the process of decolonization, as they focused their resources on the rebuilding of their war torn metropolises. On the other hand, the United States having suffered no inner destruction and with its corporations and banks having profited from the war, now focused its efforts, on loaning money and resources to the allies for their internal reconstruction, and to halt the spread of communism through the notorious left behind armies, which killed many communist and socialist organizers throughout European countries. Through this process, America slowly took over the role of “leading” nation, and faced with this incredible opportunity, quickly began to devise new ways for expansion.

One of the first responses by the United States in its new leading role, was to redefine the image of the “Other”. During the war, the distinction had been clear, it was the “Allies” against the “Axis”, yet, with the fall of Fascism, the “Other” momentarily ceased to exist. Understanding the need for an “Other” in order for evolutionary time to be justified, quickly the United States turned to two “Others” which needed to be addressed. First, the “communists”, and second the “poor”. Internally, through the persecution of communist sympathisers and the aiding of the poor through the welfare state, and outwardly through the Cold War against the USSR, and “the ‘discovery’ of mass poverty in Asia, Africa,

and Latin America”. A mass poverty, through which “the discourse of war was displaced onto the social domain and to a new geographical terrain: the Third World” (Escobar 1995, 21).

The Cold War and the Discovery of Mass Poverty

As the United States’ hegemony in the world capitalist system consolidated during the mid-forties and early fifties, the country was faced with dilemmas that required a swift solution. The first dilemma was to figure out what to do with poor countries, which according to analysts risked succumbing to communism. The second dilemma was what to do with the surplus capital generated by the sale of weapons during the war, and the returns generated from the loans and investments made in the reconstruction of war torn Europe. This situation was addressed by the United States, in the following ways:

First, in an attempt to combat communism frontally, the communist studies field of United States academia began to witness an influx of new American born social scientists ready to do work on “Sovietology”. A field, which was “characterized by denunciations of communist systems as rigid, totalitarian dictatorships ruled by the iron hand of the party” (King 2000, 147). This strategy helped to form the conception of the new “Other”, the communist. By the late 1980’s, however, with communism beginning to falter, “Sovietology” was already merging into the new study of postcommunist Europe and Eurasia, and strong consensus was building among political scientists about the need to bring methods from the study of American and west European politics into this area of

study (King 2000, 169). The “Other” as the Soviet enemy, was rapidly becoming the “Other” that needed help.

Second, having made the ‘discovery’ of mass poverty in different regions of the world, development began to capture the interest of “government officials, as well as [of] scholars and teachers (Burgin [1947] 1967, 466; Escobar 1995, 37). Soon, thanks to the mapping out of the economic and social life of target countries, through the preparation of dossiers by experts in many areas of study, it became apparent that “the essential trait of the Third World was its poverty”. In this way, the need for economic growth and development soon “became self-evident, necessary, and universal truths” (Escobar 1995, 24), and the second “Other”, the underdeveloped, the poor, was born in official discourse.

Of course, the fact that most of the nations that happened to be classified as poor, were decolonized nations – “a prime stake in the Cold War” (Leys 1977, 5) – was barely publicized. Instead, “this new strategy [which] sought to provide a new hold on countries and their resources”, was “couched in terms of humanitarian goals and the preservation of freedom” (Escobar 1995, 26). Forgetting to mention that this “massive poverty in the modern sense appeared only when the spread of the market economy broke down community ties and deprived millions of people from access to land, water, and other resources” (Escobar 1995, 22), philanthropists and investors ran to the rescue of the Third World, rupturing the vernacular relations of whole communities and setting in place new mechanisms of social control (Escobar 1995, 22).

Over the decades, the initial inertia was lost, and what had begun as development quickly transformed. By the end of the 1950s, its limitations had become apparent. By the early 1970's more modest ambitions were already sought, and the end goal was 'redistribution with growth'. By the end of the 1970s, the aim was "to meet the 'basic needs' of the poor" (Leys 1977, 26), and "by the end of the 1980s, the only development policy that was officially approved, was not to have one – to leave it to the market to allocate resources, not the state" (Leys 1977, 24).

Conclusion

Progressive analysis of twentieth century history reveals to what extent "Time and the Other" have played a determining role in shaping our social reality. Welfare states, World Wars, Cold Wars and the war on poverty, all foundational pieces of our understanding of the contemporary world, have all required a spatialized conception of Time, which has separated those employing the discourse, from the "Other" being discussed. Although over time, the discourse and processes have undergone structural adjustments, in essence the goal has remained unchanged – the expansion and perpetuation of capitalism and the class society. In fact, those steering the capitalist society through the passage of Time, have understood, that a Time without the "Other" would mean the end of capitalism itself. It is true, that secular Time has left behind the Godly Time of previous centuries, but in reality, "for the purpose of writing history, the first system, the secular, [only] translates the second into itself" (Chakrabarty 1997, 39). In effect, what has happened, is that we have exchanged our metaphysical Gods, for the semi-material God of capital.

From institutional analysis we can learn that “the institutions that affect the performance of the economy and distribute power in society are ultimately artefacts of political action” (Hall 1986, 283). Therefore, “as long as institutions and professionals are successfully reproducing themselves materially, culturally, and ideologically, certain relations of domination will prevail” (Escobar 1995, 106), allowing development to be defined by those in power. As this paper is being written, the Cold War is long over, but those in power have wasted little Time, and in the early stages of the twenty-first century, they have already shifted “our” enemy to a new “Other”, the Islamic Fundamentalist Terrorist. Perhaps as citizens, we will learn from the “Neoutilitarian claims that a state run by an undisciplined collection of individually maximizing incumbents will tend to become a predatory monster” (Evans 1989, 582), and then we might hopefully take that thought a little further, and question, whether Western states have become predatory monsters in search of the “Other” to devour and “help”. If after close analysis, we determine that this is the case, then we will be faced with the choice of contributing to this conception of Time and the Other, denouncing it, or keeping silent. It is in that choice, that rests the emancipation of humanity, but what is clear, is that “coevalness as praxis, will have to be the result of actual confrontation with the Time of the Other” (Fabian 2002, 153). In the meantime, Gods, Emperors and Time are the governors of our existence.

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