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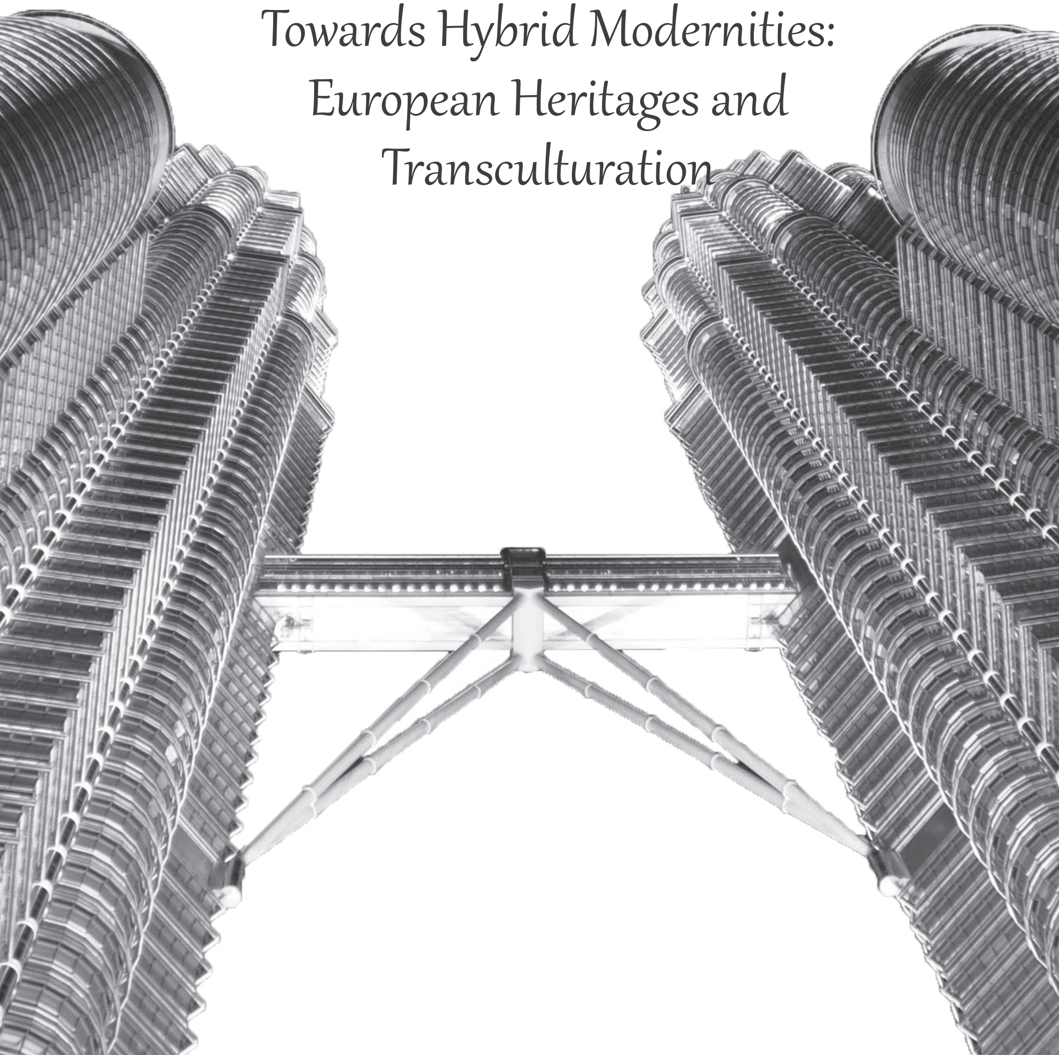
Towards Hybrid Modernities: European Heritages and Transculturation



The diplomacy of the global crowd

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I

The world has recently witnessed massive popular demonstrations that, in the name of democracy, have occupied public space in order to propose living differently within it. While protesters have managed to hold crucial sites in the parks and squares of urban centers, police brutality against the demonstrators became integral to what almost all of the protests were about. Remarkable is the fact that these have taken place in nations that (despite varying degrees of authoritarian rule) have at least some claim to democratic form (popular elections, multiple parties, civilian executives). The list of collective actions is long, and it is global in scope: Tunis and Egypt in 2011, Malaysia's *Bersih* (Clean) movement in 2012, the anti-development demonstrations in Cambodia,[1] Moscow in 2011 against Putin's regime. In the wake of financial crises, these demonstrations spread throughout Western nations, from Greece (democracy's original homeland) to Spain, to England and the United States. More recently, Turkey, Brazil and South Korea have joined this number.[2]

These are specific, local actions, and they have been handled by national governments in very different ways with radically diverse consequences, from, ultimately, a military coup in Egypt to, as an immediate response, Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff's sympathetic hearing of the demonstrators' concerns. But the specifics of each case should not blind us to the fact that together they constitute a global event. Issues sparking the demonstrations are not unique to particular nations: weakening commitment to social welfare programs, privatization-for-profit of public services, rising student costs and university tuitions, environmental degradation for corporate gain, corruption of public officials, and lack of governmental responsiveness to the needs of the majority of citizens.

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[1] Malaysians were calling for clean (free and fair) elections. Cambodians dressed up like the Na'vi tribe from the Hollywood movie *Avatar* (2009) to protest environmental destruction for the sake of capitalist development, specifically the government's plan to convert the Prey Lang forest into plantations and mines. See: http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/01/03/southeast-asia-in-2011-a-year-of-protest/.

[2] In Brazil, the call was for free fares on "public" transportation that is in fact owned by private, for-profit companies; in Turkey, the protest was against further development of the city center that would turn a public park into a shopping mall. In South Korea, it was against election irregularities, and government spying on the political opposition.

In many cases—certainly this is true of the Occupy movements in the United States—protesters were criticized for their failure to voice positive alternatives, and lack of focus on organizing as a political group that might take its fight to the ballot box. Their refusal to play by the rules of national elections and representative legislatures should not be dismissed as incompetence or laziness. Rather, it manifests a growing awareness that the roots of the problem are not national in scope, nor is a remedy possible on the national level. These mass protests in urban, public space were pro-democracy, but more significantly, they were redefining what in our age of global interconnectedness the idea of democracy might mean.

The neo-liberal Global Order that was constructed after the Cold War has brought us an unregulated but integrated global capitalist system of finance, production and consumption. It has brought us a global democratization of the economic elite that is now far more evenly distributed across the world's nations and peoples than was the case during the early post-colonial decades. But it has done so at the expense of an intensified class divide (the oft-cited growing gap between rich and poor), and a global surplus of populations, people who no longer provide the systemic necessity of a global reserve army of the unemployed. The locations of this superfluous workforce are spread like an archipelago throughout the system, which increasingly relies on computerized processes for greater productivity, eliminating human labor in many occupations. Only the most poorly paid workers—the young women in the Bangladesh garment factories, the young men in Africa's mining industries, the immigrant labor force in US meat slaughtering plants, domestic servants throughout the cities of the world—are still absorbed by global capital with apparent ease. In this context, the middle class that was supposed to provide the basis of liberal democracies is threatened as well, because even if their standard of living is on the rise, their quality of life suffers from the very forces that cause the rise.

A central concern in all of the nations of the world is this: how are national governments to negotiate between the interests of global capital and the interest of their own citizens? Given the disparities in power between the economic elite (the infamous 1%) and the vast majority of the population, it is not easy to see how the state in its role as mediator can deliver economic security for its citizens. The reasons are structural. Volatile and prone to crises, global capitalism is a system nonetheless, one that has to grow in order to survive. And as nations compete to attract capitalist investment, the dynamics of growth take place by side-lining social costs and turning a blind eye to environmental degradation, worker safety, and the non-profitable aspects of human existence (old age, chronic illness, education for all). The universalization of this situation, that undergirds the politics of every nation in the world, changes qualitatively the conditions of possibility of democracy. Today, democracy has become a global struggle. The temporal imaginary of development theory, the belief that nations as discrete entities were moving at different speeds through necessary stages of economic modernization as the prerequisite for democratic transformation, the idea that some nations were "behind" and others "advanced," along a continuum upon which all were positioned—this temporal imaginary no longer holds. Democracy needs to be re-imagined without such a stagist temporal apparatus, and without the limits of national borders. All of us occupy the same political time zone.

When the world's citizens are held apart by discourses of national difference, politics is staged competitively as a struggle at home against the economic welfare of national populations elsewhere no matter how politically allied those nations may be. For example, German citizens see their interests as opposed to those of the citizens of Greece. US workers see themselves in opposition to workers in Mexico, as Malaysians do regarding people in Cambodia and Thailand. Between nations, but also within them, specific identity groups see others as the enemy that holds them back. As these perceptions play themselves out within conventional nation-state politics, they lead to ethnic, racial, and religious riots—an escalation of hatred that, in the most extreme cases, has as its consequence civil war.

These are the shared realities within which the new citizen actions have emerged. I use the word "emerge" deliberately, because of its double meaning in English. The phrase "state of emergency" has circulated recently (based on a renewed appreciation for Carl Schimitt's writings on the subject[3]) to define the situation in which a nation's sovereign power finds its very existence threatened, and suspends democracy, the constitution, the law, and citizen rights, in order to preserve itself as the sole legitimate power to protect democracy, the constitution, the law, and citizen rights. This paradox enables national governments that have a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, to use that violence against their own citizens by declaring a "state of emergency." But the word in English in the 16th century had another meaning, the emergence of something new. If we return to this meaning, we can say that the global actions exist in a state of emergency in the anticipatory sense that they are enacting something new, indeed, a new meaning of democracy, one that can no longer be realized within the boundaries of a specific nation-state. It is no small irony that their emergence is a counterforce to precisely that global capitalist system which, through massive movement of peoples and goods, has produced this new situation. Citizens are increasingly aware of the global stage on which they act, and they perform their protests in communication with political actors around the world.[4]

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[3] See Giorgio Agamben, *State of exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005. Carl Schmitt's German term *Ausnahme* means literally "exception," but in English the "state of emergency" has a political meaning commensurate with "state of exception."

This is crucial, because it distinguishes progressive from reactionary demonstrations that are also more than capable of bringing hundreds of thousands of protestors out onto the streets. These movements—anti-immigrant, anti-gay marriage, and against ethnic, sexual and religious minorities—look to the past to reestablish a utopian era that in fact never existed. But the new civic actions are taking place in an anticipatory mode. Participants range demographically over every age group and economic sector, but the impetus comes from the young with a (precarious) future in front of them. They are most often urban-dwellers accustomed to inhabiting multi-cultural, multi-racial spaces. And crucially, they are skilled in the newly decisive, political technologies of social media.

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[4] The Arab Spring initiated these events, inspiring *los Indignados* in Spain, as well as the Occupy Wall Street Movements in the US and elsewhere. The British newspaper *The Guardian* published the "Map of the Occupy World"). See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Occupy_movement_protest_locations.

II

These actors constitute a new political animal in the human gene pool. We can call it **the global crowd**. What are we to make of this monstrous assemblage of humanity? Will it evolve as destroyer or redeemer, friend or foe? Or will it become an endangered species, hounded by surveillance mechanisms into an early extinction? Amorphous, anonymous, still discovering its powers, the global crowd's capacity to survive and flourish in the present political climate is as yet unknown. To speak together, producing collective voices within a trans-local commons, is to enhance its creative potential. The global crowd is not the Other, not an object to be described by intellectuals, but a composite of ourselves. Our speaking of, to, and with the global crowd nurtures its self-awareness with the power of critique. Its potential is our own.

The global crowd differs from what used to be called derogatorily the mob, because the sophisticated use of the new social media acts as a kind of trans-personal, decentralized brain, allowing the collective to self-organize. Like crowd-sourcing, or bit-torrents, it creates peer-to-peer configurations that defy hierarchies of wealth and internet privatization. It creates a web of relationships among people, a social fabric of trust that weighs lightly yet strongly on participants, whose potentially limitless number is its strength. The crowd's horizontal interconnectedness enabled by the new media distinguishes it from the irrational crowd-forms described by Gustav Lebon as a massification of individuals who lose their capacity for self-reflection.[5] The global crowd differs as well from the old-style working class that adjusted to the corporate model of national compromise, because its participants do not see their economic interest as tied to national unions that have long since lost militancy, and because even when the crowd's members are exploited workers in factories (consider the horrendous fate of thousands of women garment workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in the factory fire of November 2012), their struggle needs the global solidarity of shoppers in cities elsewhere, in order to act against corporations that hide the conditions of production from the consumers, getting away, literally, with murder.

The global crowd is also not the multitude. I am referring here to the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri who have given the global citizenry this designation (that resonates with Jesus's blessings of the multitude).[6] There is something too passive about this nomenclature as a description of contemporary political action, and also something too differentiated, focused on a multiplicity of experiences, whereas the present global actors are working in an anticipatory way to produce a unity of practice, rather than an ensemble of identities. This unity is essential for effective action within the political time zone that is now globally shared. If the global crowd has affinities to earlier forms, it is in the tradition of Bakhtin's crowd, a carnivalesque collectivity that enacts a changed social order: people practice living together without the mediations of political representation or capitalist exchange. The global crowd is generic (*générique*) in the sense that It gives new life to the Feuerbachian notion of species-being (*Gattungswesen*) as interpreted by Marx, producing a trans-local commons in the name of a democracy to come.

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[5] Gustav Lebon, *La psychologie des foules* (1895).

What, if not ethnic or class identity, is the new basis of solidarity? Consider the following example that developed spontaneously in Cairo during the height of the 2011 Arab Spring. People who came together in Tahrir Square as a united force to oust the old regime exchanged cell-phone numbers in order to remain in contact as a political force. They gave their individual first names. But the last name for all of them was Tahrir—Leila Tahrir, Abullah Tahrir, Mohammed Tahrir, Mina Abdud Tahrir, Susanna Tahrir, etc. The all-powerful patronymic that shores up property ownership, family patronage, and class/ethic/religious hierarchies, was replaced by the name of a public space that symbolizes a new citizen unity, and (this is new) acts for a global audience that is invited and encouraged to replicate this unity in their own locales, so that the imagined community transcends national divisions. These actions anticipate a not-yet realized possibility of what the global practice of democracy might mean.

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[6] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: war and democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York, Penguin, 2004.

Democracy is not merely a question of winning elections, but of governing for the benefit of the people, all the people. The life of the crowd in the public commons performs this understanding for the world to see. Here the new anarchism of the occupy movements distinguishes itself decisively from the traditional anarchism of the avant-garde. The horizontal democracy of the global crowd in action is anticipatory of the democratic goal. The internet is not merely a means of propagating information, but also now a method of organizing and a weapon of tactical improvisation within crowd action itself.[7] It is worth noting that the global crowd's discontinuous history and dispersed chain of events is well-documented and remarkably accessible in digital form. *Wikipedia* is particularly effective in making this recent history freely available.[8]

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[7] Much has been said about the significance of social media in enabling the Arab Spring, and those demonstrations that, globally, have followed in its lead. But the transformation may not be as radical as some commentators have argued. If we consider as protopypical the crowd actions in spring 2011 in Tahrir Square, need to keep in mind the order of events. Thérèse Tierner tells us that the January the *before* the demonstrations, the Egyptian government shut down internet access for four days in January, believing that stopping internet and cellphone access would cut off any plans to mobilize. In response, "residents left the digital public sphere, reappropriating Cairo's streets and reconnecting the city before gathering in Tahrir Square." Citing the report of Seeta Pena Gangadharan, Tierney observes that "the

The global crowd appears as a body-without-organs, or more specifically, a body without the largest of human organs: the skin. There is no edge to this techno-leviathan, no boundaries to its habitat, no place where it cannot live. It cannot commit treason. It is not bound by contract. There are no limits to the possibilities of integumentary exchange. The global crowd roams the world, and does so as a force of image-production deeply embedded in living beings: "images, bodies, and struggles form part of the same

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media blackout served to mobilize the uprising; people went through their neighborhoods, knocking on doors and spreading the word face to face. It was a combination of street tactics *and* Internet tactics that enabled the revolution." Gangadharan's comments took place during a panel discussion, ISEA, Sabanchi University, Istanbul, 16 September 2011. "[A]pproximately 93% of all Egyptian networks were unreachable by late afternoon [of January 27, 2011]. The shutdown happened within the space of a few tens of minutes, not instantaneously, which was interpreted to reflect companies having received phone calls one at a time ordering them to shut down access, rather than an automated system taking all providers down at once. Analysis by BGPMon showed that only 26 BGP routs of the 2,903 routes registered to Egyptian networks remained active after the blackout was first noticed; thus an estimated 88% of the whole Egyptian network was disconnected" (Thérèse F. Tierney, "Disentangling public space: social media and Internet activism," *thresholds* [Revolution!] 41, *Journal of the MIT Department of Architecture* [Spring 2013], p. 86).

[8] A search of *Wikipedia* for "global protests" by year (beginning abruptly in 2011) brings striking results.

dynamic."[9] This transformation "from mass communication to masses that communicate,"[10] overturns the power relations of mass culture from inside the belly of the beast. the actions of the global crowd are "open to shared experience," life "beyond the identitary."[11] Rabih Mroué speaks of "the pixelated revolution." it is captured and recorded by cellphone videos that are uploaded and go viral as counter-images to the official news channels that do not televise revolutions.[12] He claims that even in the case of the Syrian civil war, resistance is staged in a secular zone, where the violence of the regime is recorded by the prosthetic eye of the cellphone, and streamed to the world as an appeal to human judgment, not a performance before God.[13]

How can the world see? The question is misplaced. The issue is rather, how do demonstrators premise their political action on being seen, not by national leaders, not by the state, but by the world, a vision that circumvents state surveillance and makes public evidence no longer a vulnerability to protesters, but a weapon. President Mubarak on state television speaking paternalistically to "his" people appears foolish on *Al-Jazeera's* split screen along-side Tahrir Square protesters waving shoes and shouting down the mere man, calling for him to resign. Here, the gaze of national power has lost its capacity to to lock in the meaning of political actions by people who are no longer his to address.

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[9] Hito Steyerl, cited in Pablo Martínez, "When images shoot," *Image(s), mon amour: fabrications* (catalogue for solo exhibition of the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué, Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo). Intro. Ana Isabel Mariño Ortega (Madrid, CA2 in collaboration with SALT [Istanbul] 2013), p. 89.

[10] Martínez, p. 92 (p. 90-2).

[11] Martínez, p. 90-2.

[12] Rabih Mroué, "The pixelated revolution," *Image(s)... fabrications*, p. 392.

[13] Rabih Mroué, "The pixelated revolution," *Image(s)... fabrications*, p. 392.

No doubt the internet strength of the global crowd is its weakness as well. The spontaneity that brings success is immediate, but evanescent. Because the crowd maximizes the use of social media, it does not need a party base and as a consequence, it does not have one. We can see how tragically this vulnerability played itself out in the case of Egypt, because there is as yet no alternative to the politics of the nation state. The Muslim Brotherhood had a long-lived and well-established party base that penetrated deep into the lives of ordinary people, so that they were placed strategically to win the first national election. But dissatisfaction with the authoritarian tone of Morsi's rule caused the crowd to reappear on the streets one year later in numbers truly extraordinary.[14] But perhaps here, at the critical moment, the crowd made a strategic error by responding affirmatively to the Egyptian military's offer of support *when they did not need to do so*. The military would not conceivably have used violence against the demonstrators, so that Morsi's threat to impose a state of emergency against the crowd was ultimately hollow. Sovereign power needs the loyalty of the army to ensure its monopoly of

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[14] Reporting on the number of protestors on June 30, 2013, Reuters gave the figure of 14 million, among a population of 84 million Egyptians.

the legitimate use of violence, and Morsi did not have it.[15] The few remaining years of his term in office might have allowed the common sentiment to coalesce, consolidating the opposition. A new majority coalition might have won the next election and continued to inspire the world. Instead, a military coup quickly used violence against unarmed supporters of Morsi (1,000 killed), perpetuating the old meaning of the state of emergency that Morsi had earlier tried unsuccessfully to evoke. The force of the people was pre-empted by the military, threatening to turn control back to the state-within-a-state that is anathema to democracy—Turkish critics have named this the deep state (derin devlet), the techniques of secrecy and surveillance of which are everywhere growing stronger and more globally interconnected.

Events in Egypt show us just how difficult it is for a new democratic force to emerge on the global stage. If in 2011 Egyptians assembling on Tahrir Square inspired the whole world with enthusiasm, in 2013, events were framed by the Egyptian military within narrowly national terms. President Obama, too, acted in old ways, both liberal and national, claiming publically that this was something for the "Egyptian people" to decide for themselves (while excluding political and economic elites, nationally and globally, from this identity-constraint). Such rhetoric sounds tolerant. But it cuts the global crowd into manageable pieces for state control, whereas the radical potential is that these movements will overflow national borders.

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[15] From *Wikipedia* entry “Mohamed Morsi”: “After Morsi ‘temporarily’ granted himself unlimited powers to ‘protect’ the nation from the Mubarak-era power structure, which remained in place in late November 2012 and the power to legislate without judicial oversight or review of his acts, hundreds of thousands of protesters began demonstrating against him in the 2012 Egyptian protests. On 8 December 2012, Morsi annulled his decree which had both expanded his presidential authority and removed judicial review of his decrees, an Islamist official said, but added that the effects of that declaration would stand.”

How do the Egyptian people define themselves? There is not a simple answer. Public opinion polls, looking for the decisive identity-variable, find instead a multiplicity of identifications—Muslim, Arab, Egyptian—the political significance of which is not stable, but changes with shifting contexts.[16] This slippage prevents the "us v. them" thinking that was characteristic of the Manichaeism of the Cold War era. Rather than deriving their politics from their identities, the global crowd negotiates the content of these designations as the *consequence* of their actions, not its cause. In proclaiming to the world, "the state does not represent us," crowds demonstrate that it is through them, not government officials, that the meaning of words such as America, or Egypt, or Syria, or Greece is decided.

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16. "In my May 2012 poll, two-thirds of respondents said they supported making sharia the basis of Egytian law. But when I probed more deeply, things became less clear: Of those who supported sharia as the basis of law, only 17 percent said they preferred applying it literally, while 83 percent said they favored applying the spirit of sharia but adapted to modern times. Little surprise that Egyptian commentator Muhammad Hassanein Heikal describes Egypt as a 'civil-secular country that loves religion.'" See Shibley Telhami: http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/egypts-identity-crisis/2013/08/16/70d1459c-0524-11e3-88d6-d5795fab4637_story.html.

III

My point is that for the global crowd, what is newly emerging is the idea that politics is *not* determined by identity. Not who you are is crucial, but the fact that you are willing to stand with others in public space as an embodiment of the general will—general in the generic sense of a trans-national humanity. However, the politics of global democracy is only a possibility within our shared political time zone, not the rule. The definition of democracy as an ethno-national project, wherein other cultures/religions/ethnicities are minorities within the nation, remains the dominant form.

Malaysia is prototypical in this regard. Its recent history is unique, but the conditions of political action in this country are globally recognizable. Given its multiethnic and multilingual citizenry, the goal has been to establish what is called harmony among ethnic groups, at the same time that Malay, the language of a 60% majority bumiputera group ("sons of the soil") has been officially recognized as the exclusive national medium. This solution conforms to the norm among the world's nations, where citizenry is typically divided between an ethno-linguistic majority group, and various minorities whose status is to be recognized as equal, but not the same. The "special position" of the majority group is ensured.[17] What may not be typical is the range of ethnicities, described as races, that defined the people of post-independence Malaysia: Malays, Chinese, Indians, (but also Ibans, Melanaus, Kadzans and Bajuas), as well as the intensity with which, within a clearly neo-liberal political discourse, the distinctions among these groups have been maintained.

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[17] For the post-colonial historical construction of Malay nationalism, see Ariffin S. M Omar, *Bangsa Melayu: Malay concepts of democracy and community 1945-1950*, London, Oxford University Press, 1993.

The existing global norm of nation-states is based on the problematic assumption of racialized differences, accepted as a given, but always the consequence of a process of historical naming that is anything but natural. In the case of the Americas, successive waves of forced labor were codified in taxonomies of difference by means of the pseudo-sciences of race. Today in the United States, the word race is intentionally avoided, but the category of white is not, and the demographic threat to the "special position" of whites is a central issue in domestic politics. In Latin America, an elaborate caste-based system in the colonial era presumed intermarriage, but adhered to a strict hierarchy along color lines,[18] and still today, the elite remains protective of its Portuguese or Spanish ancestry. In the British Empire, the very construction of racial difference was a legacy of colonialism.[19]

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18. (1) *Peninsular*—a Spaniard born in Spain, (2) *Criollo* (fem. *criolla*)—a person of Spanish descent born in Mesoamerica, (3) *Indio* (fem. *India*)—a person who is a native of, or indigenous to, Mesoamerica, and (4) *Negro* (fem. *Negra*)—a person of African slave descent.

19. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and subject, contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*, Kampala, Uganda, Fountain Publishers, 1996.

Neo-liberalism has its own fantasy of global unity, whereby the reciprocity of trade and economic interdependence is supposed to lead in Kantian fashion to global peace. In Malaysia, (where racial divisions tied to provincial territories, established under European imperialism were accepted after independence), the unity of the nation has relied on "fluency" in the language of business finance, described by Williamson as "certainly the most elaborated public discourse in the country."[20] Malaysian dependency on a global economy is in many ways an extension of the British colonial project that was connected with tin and rubber production for export. And yet, within our shared political time zone, the Malaysian model, which relies on mutual economic interests and a common currency to bind cultural and linguistic differences that are class differences as well, appears anticipatory of the most contemporary political experiments—resonating with the European Economic Union, for example, or even with proposals for an economic resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.[21] The idea of economic harmony based on mutual exchange as a means of transcending economic con-

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[20] Thomas Williamson, "Incorporating a Malaysian nation," *Cultural Anthropology*, v. 17, n. 3, p. 401-30 (2002). "The iconography of the RM 100 note, for example, depicts the Proton (Malaysia's 'national automobile') on its assembly line along with a close-up of its engine. Other denominations feature the telecommunications sector, Malaysia Airlines, and a Petronas oil platform" (p. 402).

[21] Post-colonial nations have a more prominent history of foreign direct investment, but the parallels provide evidence for the synchronicity that characterizes the present global era.

flict based on class, a central tenet of neo-liberalism in the post-Cold War era, is supposed to have made communal and collective ways of living together obsolete, preventing what Derrida called the "spectre of Marx" from making its presence felt in political life.[22] And yet, in Malaysia that past persists in the social unconscious.[23] Perhaps it stirs in the thickets of memory of the global crowd as well.

The 1969 race riots in Kuala Lumpur shocked the government, making it clear that ethnic harmony through economic unity would not come easily. (Race riots occurred in the US in 1964, and in Singapore in 1968; all three of these cases resulted in the government's declaring a state of

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[22] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: the State of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuff, New York, Routledge, 2004. The global crowd is a possible locus of the New International that Derrida considered necessary.

[23] See, for example, the 2006 Malaysian film, *The last communist* (Lelaki Komunis Terakhir), by the director Amir Muhammad, whose "semi-musical documentary" records in images the haunting in the present of Malaysia's anti-capitalist past, by tracing the life of the Communist leader Chin Peng, who is still today living in exile. The film features interviews with people in the towns in which Peng lived from birth to national independence, interspersed with songs that are fashioned after propaganda films. Banned from screening in Malaysia by the government's Home Affairs Ministry, *The last communist* made its world premiere at the 2006 Berlin Film Festival. It has also been shown at the Seattle International Film Festival, the London Film Festival, the Singapore International Film Festival and the Hong Kong International Film Festival, but has never been publicly viewed in its home country. The film has been uploaded in its entirety on YouTube. For an insightful discussion of this film, see Fiona Lee, "Spectral History: Exploring cold War Legacies in Malay(si)an Decolonization through the Historical Documentaries of Amir Muhammad," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of English, CUNY Graduate Center, 2013.

emergency.) The cause of the Kuala Lumpur riots was seen to lie in the relative poverty of the majority Malaysians, hence affirmative action was implemented not to aid minorities, but to aid the majority in making economic gains, particularly against Chinese businessmen. To achieve this was the goal of NEP, or Dasar Ekonomi Baru, established in 1971.[24] Although the NEP was hailed in some quarters as having reduced the socioeconomic disparities, others accused it of having reduced the status of non-Malays to second-class citizens by cementing ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy).[25] The NEP is often invoked as part of the Malay Agenda, which is in turn part of the Malaysian social contract granting Malays special rights in return for citizenship for non-Malays.

In the 1980s under prime minister Mahathir Mohamed (who remained in power until 2003), the model for Malaysia became explicitly that of a corporation. “Malaysia Inc.” was the name for national unity, trade unions were sidelined, and public industries underwent privatization.[26] The fact that a wealthy elite was the beneficiary did not close off the rest of the population from the dream of taking part, promulgating a “heady futurism” in the culture.[27] In 1991, Mahathir announced his plan of Vision 2020, which entailed a strong push for economic growth. The construction of Petronas Towers as the tallest building in the world became an icon of this drive.[28]

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[24] "The numbers cited most frequently were those for ownership of share capital ranked by ethnicity: foreigners owned 63 percent, non-Malays 34 percent, and Malays 2 percent." The New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented to change those in favor of the Malay majority. (Williamson, p. 406). That those benefitting would be a capital-holding minority of Malays was not denied. As the politician Mahathir Mohamed (who became Prime Minister in 1981) stated bluntly in 1970: "From the point of view of racial ego, and this ego is still strong, the unseemly existence of Malay tycoons is essential" (cited in Williamson, p. 407) The "fundamental contradiction" that resulted was that "the NEP aimed to remove ethnic identification in the economy be ethnicizing nearly all facets of it" (Williamson, p. 407).

[25] Ultimately, special privileges for Malays have reversed the socioeconomic disparities. Today poverty is disproportionate among non-Malays, whose sense of outsider status has as a consequence increases in crime.

Malay nationalists expressed concern that Vision 2020 would sacrifice the Malay language for business-dominant English. At the same time, this project intensified non-Malaysian immigrant labor (especially Chinese and Indian workers in tin mines and rubber plantations), and foreign direct investment, hence making national borders increasingly porous, and the national economy increasingly vulnerable to the effects of global financial crises. “By 1997, perhaps two million foreigners worked in Malaysia’s manufactures, plantations, and service sectors [particularly domestic workers]—forming a striking 20 percent of the labor force”; “Thais, Burmese, Fil-

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[26] As prime minister, Mahathir used the model of “Malaysia Incorporated” to define the country, where “’even the unskilled worker or the hawker plays a role in the economic sector and is therefore involved in the Malaysia Incorporated concept’” (cited in Williamson, p. 408).

[27] Williamson, p. 411.

[28] See Williamson, p. 410-11.

ipinos, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, even Bosnians and Albanians—define[d] a new Malaysian social geography," many of whom were illegal.[29]

The economic boom came to a sudden end in 1997.[30] The financial crisis hit not only Malaysia, but Thailand, Philippines, Korea, Hong Kong, Japan—again, as anticipatory of a decade crisis of the global capitalist system that spread around the world. Recovery by official channels required a bailout of key industries, as well as further dependence on global financial institutions and controls, with the biggest sacrifices made domestically by unions and social programs. To the rest of the world's citizens, whether American, European, Asian, or African, none of this is news. All of these developments are familiar from effects of global capitalism in their own countries. And yet, despite extraordinary similarities in the economic situation, the sad truth is that throughout the world, appeals to racism and religious intolerance have proven effective

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[29] Williamson, p. 412. The present prime minister Najib Razak's "1Malaysia" [*Satu Malaysia*] policy of 2010 continues the main features of NEP's emphasis on ethnic harmony and national unity. Stimulating construction for growth and privatizing industries has enabled further inroads by foreign direct investors, specifically, the American banking firms of Goldman Sachs and Citigroup.

[30] Following the 1997 crisis, tens of thousands of Malaysians assembled in dramatic public protests, fearing immigrant unrest, and the possibility that their ethnic supremacy would be undermined (Williamson, 417). An Internal Security Act reflected concern that because of the immigrant population might make trouble, a strong police state is necessary because at any time, ethnic violence might break out (Williamson, p. 417)

as a means of national politics in response to this situation. In the global wake of the capitalist financial crisis, divide and rule has managed to prevent the spectre of Marx's return.

It is here that the global crowd finds a foothold as an alternative to both capitalism and Marxism. At the same time, it is not a replacement for national citizenry. Religious, linguistic, racial, and sexual differences are not obliterated in the crowd. Theirs is not an abstract argument about universal human rights. Rather, citizen variety is displayed as an affirmation of the fact that the political issues that matter are not commensurate with differences in identity. Practical issues are precisely the principle of assemblage of the global crowd, as a forum in which the meanings of the nation, or religion, or ethnicity, are negotiated in full view for the world to judge. Fiona Lee writes about the ”prominence of social media” in the elections in Malaysia in May 2013,

> not just as a tool, but a space where meanings about national identity [are] articulated and contested. Moreover, its location on the Internet, wherein information speedily travels beyond the geographical boundaries of the nation-state, highlights the fact that the place in which national identity politics plays out is not confined to the geographical location of the nation, but occurs in a diffuse and transnational realm.[31]

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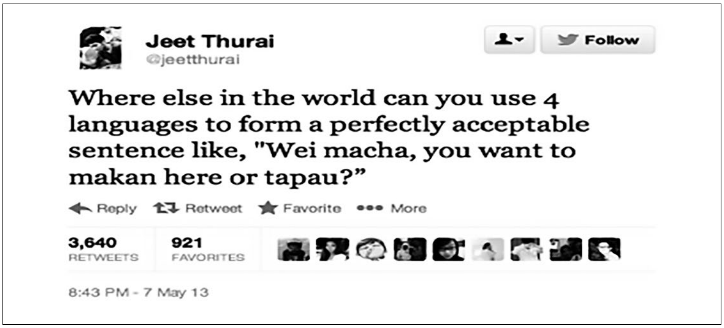
[31] Fiona Lee, "Reading nation in translation," Ph.D dissertation, Department of English, CUNY Graduate Center, 2013.



Jeet Thurai
@jeetthurai

Where else in the world can you use 4 languages to form a perfectly acceptable sentence like, "Wei macha, you want to makan here or tapau?"

8:43 PM - 7 May 13

Lee reads this trans-national tendency of display for a global audience, in *Jeet Thurai's Tweet*, which went viral shortly after the May 5, 2013, general election in Malaysia that witnessed the highest voter turnout in history. Four languages make up this sentence: Malaysian English, Malay (*makan*), and transliterations of Tamil (*macha*) and Cantonese (*wei, tapau*) words. Lee translates into American English: "Hey, bro. You wanna dine-in or do takeout?"[32] My point is that translation is a process that produces something new, in this case a national identity that is itself mediated by global forms of understanding.

IV

What a time (Autumn 2013) to be writing of the global crowd in such an optimistic fashion! Syria has used chemical weapons against a domestic opposition that began with Tahrir-like demonstrations. The US has threatened to intervene in this civil war, which is looking very much like the old-style proxy wars of the Cold War—hardly a new situation. Egypt has undergone the military overthrow of its first democratically elected leader in a coup that is not allowed to be called by name. The global crowd, throughout the world, is eerily silent. Women's rights and minority rights have suffered setbacks. US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan has had little to do with the theme of democracy. Post-secular politics have not produced a better world.[33]

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[32] Lee, "Reading nation in translation."

What is democracy in global terms? The promise and hope provided by the global crowd is precisely the possibility of unifying peoples' struggles across the boundaries of

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[33] We might pause to consider whether religious unity, which also defies geopolitical boundaries, does not indeed provide an alternative to nationalism, and to the racism and exclusionary concept of citizenry that these imply. In certain (but not sufficient) ways, the answer must be yes. Surely a democratic strength about the concept of the *umma* is the inclusiveness of its political views and tolerance toward other religions, as well as its indifference to national boundaries. When Malaysia offers sanctuary to Miana refugees persecuted by the Buddhists in Bangladesh, we see how meaningful the political impact of Muslim ethics can be. Turkey has increased democratic participation in many ways beyond the military government that preceded it (and Turkey is the model supported by most Egyptian Muslims today). The cosmopolitan, if controversial leader of Indonesia (1999-2001) Abdurrahman Wahid ("Gus Dur"), precisely because he was a Muslim, staunchly defended human rights, a domestic free press, and the secular tradition of Indonesian government. Democracy, he claimed, was not only allowed in Islam, it was a compulsory element, given the need to respect the multi-religious, multi-ethnic population of his country. *Wikipedia* tells us that he lifted the Suharto regime's bans on all forms of Chinese culture and also the ban on Marxism and Leninism; he defended Salman Rushdie for his controversial 1988 novel *The satanic verses*; he took an actively conciliatory stance toward Israel. He was impeached in 2001, allegedly by pro-Suharto forces.

nations on a basis other than ethnic, religious, or class belonging, all categories of distinguishing friends from enemies on the basis of who they are, rather than the truly political ground of where on the issues they stand. The slippages within political naming have never been more extreme. The need to translate local terms for a global audience marks a change the political horizon.[34] With the disillusionment of the dream that capitalism would be sufficient for a political harmonization of interests, coming close on the heels of another failed dream that Marx's historical predictions would inevitably be realized, the global crowd has emerged as a space of democratic experimentation. Its history remains to be written. Our conference in Kuala Lumpur is a chapter in the global intellectual exchange, and contributes to this process.

The theme of our conference is "Post-Regionalism in the Global Age." We might look at it this way: the global crowd occupies a space traditionally monopolized by interstate diplomacy. And in its progressive forms, it democratizes this space. It is anarchist insofar as the people, not their governmental leaders, appeal directly to the world, and negotiate recognition of their place within it. Whereas traditional diplomacy is secret, the diplomacy of the global crowd makes publicity its practice. Traditional diplomacy mediates cultural exchanges via state-approved forms. The diplomacy of the global crowd produc-

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34. Lee makes this point by reference to Walter Benjamin's theory of translation, whereby both languages involved in the process are transformed.

es its own, shared culture: street art, political performance, as well as a shared mass culture of popular music, independent cinema, imitated fashions, viral videos, tweets, Facebook postings, open source software, cellphone directories, and more. Those who participate in the global economy, at no matter what income level, have access to at least part of this media arsenal, particularly young people, and demographic trends are in their favor.

The effects of this new diplomacy—trans-local rather than sub-state[35]—are not yet tested. The capacity of the global crowd to improve traditional institutional orders is a conjecture, and a hope. Its actions, so far, have appeared to be easily overpowered by state violence, power politics, nationalist enthusiasm, and proxy wars. But the global crowd's enormous potential as a political force will not simply disappear. It is vital that the crowd's participants remain visible to each other. States and corporations must be prevented from controlling the global field of meaning. Not just freedom of expression is at stake. The new media must be kept open and publically available because publicity is the only antidote to a monopoly of the internet's revolutionary technology for the purposes of wealth accumulation and population surveillance that define the interests

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[35] Sub-state diplomacy has been also in the news: the Catalan government proposes its own economic and foreign affairs goals. Kurds in three nation states (Iraq, Syria, and Turkey) desire collective autonomy. The diplomatic goal of Palestinian statehood is in some ways the prototype.

of global corporations and the deep (undemocratizable[36]) state. Nothing will be more critical for the meaning of democracy in the future than the struggle against state and corporate appropriation of media information that denies access to it by the global crowd.

The global crowd is a power block. It takes its place among other power blocs, including the BRICS alternative to Western hegemony, and the Chinese state's bid for superpower status. This power bloc has no bars to entry. It performs for a world wide public. Its political effectiveness depends on a synchronicity of actions within our shared political time zone. It has the power to challenge the practices of the national security state and global capitalism alike. The very fact that it is a player in global space, not the only one, but the one most open to the world's immensely varied populations—varied religions, varied genders, varied languages, varied traditions—anticipates a changing world order, one with weak boundaries and shifting nominations. And it brings to international diplomacy something that this field has never even pretended to deploy in its most enlightened Western forms: democracy. Not the technology of global communication, but the claim to democratize global space by means of it—this marks what is new in the present situation. To speak about, to and with the global crowd is to help it to emerge.

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[36] Neither al-Qaida nor the military state can practice effectively without secrecy. The fact that they share this situation says a great deal against both these forms.