

The Post-Soviet Condition

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I – The Post-Situation

“Post-” and “neo-”: nothing so characterizes our era as the proliferation of these terms

*T*he posts: post-modern, post-Marxist, post-colonial, post-national, post-hegemonic. There are post-patrimonial states in Africa, post-populist regimes in Latin America, and already post-globalization. We are suffering from a kind of post-partum depression. Having long been pregnant with a future to which the world has now given birth (to paraphrase Marx), we are frankly disappointed.

“Post-” finds its position on the left, the moment of critical negation, while the “neo-” position forgets about the past and its disappointments, and with striking historical amnesia, attempts to bring the old up to date.

The neos: neo-liberal; neo-conservative, neo-imperial, neo-Nazi, neo-fundamentalist. The mark of the neo is ignorance of the wisdom that has accumulated from a critique of the original forms and the history of popular movements against them. For example: trade union movements, social

welfare legislation, social medicine, social security, and other social-democratic and New Deal proposals are dismissed in the US by present-day neo-liberals as old-fashioned, whereas they were proposed precisely to compensate for the inadequacies of classical economic liberalism. Early bourgeois ideas are rehabilitated by the neos without reverence for tradition. The gesture is not conservative, not a return to the origin of these ideas, but radical and presentist, producing a right-wing political agenda, and it is a global phenomenon.

The neos are not unprecedented in the era of Western modernity. In the 19th century, architectural fashion was neo-Gothic and neo-Classical; philosophy was neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian. Here, too, neo functioned as obfuscation, an ideological support of power, but in this case it was by rejecting up-to-dateness and veiling present actualities of power behind nostalgic facades, neutralizing any critical capacity that these cultural forms might originally have had.

In the mid-20th century, neo-Marxism and neo-Freudianism opposed orthodox Marxism and orthodox Freudianism in a context that had real political implications. In this time the neos were on the left not the right. They expressed optimism about political change, which was not just a mood but a real possibility, as there were progressive political movements whose interests were expressed in neo-Marxism (socialism with a human face; Allende-style, elected socialism); and neo-Freudianism (critiques of the *social* origins of mental disorders). The New Left was thus not a neo-Left,

not an attempt to bring the Left up to date by forgetting its recent past but, rather, an attempt to keep it on the left precisely *because* of the recent past.

Of course, progressive political movements exist today, but one has the sense that they are flourishing in spite of both the posts and the neos, whose debates are largely academic affairs. Although theorists may take inspiration from them (the Zapatistas, for example), the appreciation is not often reciprocated. This is our present situation. We as intellectuals may be on the left, that is, the post-side of these debates, but we are not thereby automatically connected to public discourse. (Theorists in the United States generally do not get good press. Even the quasi-intellectual *New York Times* can report on a major event like the *Critical Inquiry* Symposium on the state of theory, held at the University of Chicago in 2003, as if it were an absurdly scholastic exercise.)

The neos have had relevance in the public arena. In the US, the Bush administration policy-makers who are responsible for the disastrous, preemptive war in Iraq are hard-core neo-conservatives (some taught by the University of Chicago's Leo Strauss), while neo-liberal economists have had the upper hand since the Regan administration (including the 8 years Clinton was in office). In contrast, the Left that speaks the language of posts keeps the moment of critical negation alive visibly in architecture, art, and certain strands of the counter-culture. But the fact that neither side seems able to get beyond the hyphenated present is symptomatic of our times.

I am not alone in this evaluation. Fredric Jameson has described post-modernism as symptomatic of what he calls “incomplete modernization.”¹ For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “postmodernist currents of thought...are the symptom of a rupture in the tradition of modern sovereignty.”² I will draw implications for theory—both the theoretical understanding of our situation and the methodological implications for doing critical work—that they themselves have not suggested, and that push the debates in a somewhat different direction.

The claim is this: The spread of Western scientific and cultural hegemony was the intellectual reality of the first five hundred years of globalization, lasting from the beginning of European colonial expansion to the end of the Soviet modernizing project (1492-1992). It will not remain hegemonic in the twenty-first century.

If the Soviet experiment is included as part of the era of Western hegemony, then this term is not specific to (late-) capitalism as a mode of production. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* argues just this, that the Cold War was internal to Western hegemony, not outside of it, and that the Soviet experiment failed at least in part because it mimicked Western development too faithfully.³ My position in this book differs precisely here from Samuel Huntington’s description of a clash of civilizations that specifically excludes the USSR from the West.⁴ In fact it converges with the perception of Islamists, who also classify the Soviet experiment as Western. But for Islamist thinkers what counts is the materialism

and atheism that characterizes the modernization policies of both, while from a position internal to the West, it is, quite the contrary, the quasi-religious faith that both Cold-War enemies had in history as the time of human progress, the elimination of scarcity through heavy-industrial development that was to deliver happiness to the masses. Evidence of the end of the Western era has to do more with the ecological disasters brought about by this blind faith in industrial progress than the spiritual impoverishment and existential meaninglessness that so disturbed thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb, theorist of the Muslim Brotherhood—although, as I argued in *Thinking Past Terror*, Qutb’s critique of Western reason can be fruitfully compared with the critique made by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁵

Ours is not merely a post-Eurocentric, nor even a post-Western age. Rather, it is an era when the imagined units of Europe and the West will cease to be the reference point beyond which theorists feel the need to position themselves as post- *or* neo-. It might be argued that I betray my own US-centrism here and that only the United States will cease to be the point of reference—that the European Union, perhaps someday including not only Turkey but Russia and beyond, will become the global model, a new Western way—or that even Bush’s American model of militarily imposed democracy will prevail. I do not think so. The contradictions of the present hegemony are too blatant even on the level of discourse (not to speak of the fundamental structural contradiction between trans-national global markets and

Westphalian-based nation states). George W. Bush proclaims: “freedom is on the march,” John Kerry “reports for duty” as his party’s presidential nominee, and yet neither politician questions the obvious, that the militarist metaphors they employ—and the military force they consent to deploy—contradict the very concepts of freedom and democratic politics in which they are allegedly engaged. Bush’s preemptive war doctrine can be seen as a symptom of US weakness, not its strength, a militaristic forcing of global consent where in fact none exists. Europe is caught “between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia,” (Matti Bunzl’s phrase⁶) as the economic goals of the EU are out of synchrony with politically resistant ideas of sovereignty and national belonging. In the post-Soviet Union, the political and civil democracy that emerged in a very authentic sense in the late *glasnost*’ years of Communist rule has long ago passed its high point and gone into steady decline.

The bankruptcy of Western hegemony may soon be matched literally by economic decline if not bankruptcy in at least parts of the West (the US, with its debt and military spending, is arguably moving in this direction). Whether this decline will mark the end of capitalism is a big question, but perhaps the wrong question, because the whole Western construction of capitalism, both as a concept and a reality, is itself threatened with bankruptcy, to be replaced—by what? I do not think we can know, because our very conceptual frames for knowing are being drawn into the melting-down process, drawn into the debris, and may become part of the ruins.

Thus, attempts to describe the present transformation are bound to fail because the terms of description are themselves undergoing a transformation. It is necessary from a left point of view that this process not merely be allowed, but encouraged. Rigidity of the discourse of critical theory must be avoided at all costs. Nor can any mode of comprehension be excluded out of hand, be it scientific, humanist, aesthetic, ethical, or (importantly) religious. Our era demands a radical creativity of thinking in all of these forms.

At the same time, the past is not superceded. As late as capitalism may be, it still has life in it, and the still-identifiable tendencies and mutations of its structure must receive the closest analysis. As for socialism, we have not heard the last of it. Socialism will come back in some new form as a creative idea, not because of any logic of history, but because material conditions will demand its rediscovery. It will have to be re-imagined as a response to these conditions, because the growing gap between rich and poor, the deep contradiction between public and private interest, the ecological disasters of the present forms of production and consumption will not automatically disappear as a result of the end of Western dominance. These are the unacceptable consequences of what we have up until now called capitalism (the word was put into circulation by Werner Sombart in the early 20th century; Marx himself spoke of capital, not capitalism⁷). However, they do not seem to be qualitatively lacking in, say, the still-communist Republic of China, or in India with its so-called “alternative” modernity,

or in the revolutionary Republic of Iran, where Muslim economics is supposed to be replacing the Western capitalist form. In all of these places, no matter what name is given to the economic system, we find the same tendencies: an obscenely intensifying divide between rich and poor, privatization of the public sphere, ecological ruin, the entrenchment of oligarchy, and imperiled workers vulnerable to the unregulated contingencies of global markets.

From a left perspective, the importance of the distinction between two tasks, the critique of the global economy and the critique of *how* we critique it cannot be overestimated. The mode of production is undergoing a fundamental shift in the relationship between the economy, the world political order, and technologically mediated culture. Our language struggles to keep up. Surely, the long *durée* of global capitalism analyzed by Ferdinand Braudel and others, stretching from the voyages of Columbus to the present, seems more relevant to the new situation than the classical Marxist emphasis on industrialization. While it may still be necessary to describe the present economic situation in terms of tendencies in the mode of production (that is, by locating changes in both productive forces and productive relations), concepts like surplus value, scarcity, real Value, work, the division of labor particularly the sexual division of labor, economic exploitation, class and the class struggle—are all in need of reassessment. If inadequacy of explanatory power is true of the language of critical, Marxist economics, it is even more true of the language of neo-liberal, hegemonic economics, the abstract models of which exclude the referential

world of human bodies and material nature that appear in the discourse as “externalities,” bracketed out of any truth claims generated by these models.

The profound transformation we are experiencing is sensed on the skin as a slow, tectonic shift in the architecture and habits of daily life. We have christened the new globalization, but that term has applied for five hundred years. We talk about ideological *state* apparatuses—but these are now global in scope. We speak of neo-imperialism, but Bush’s foreign policy is a mutant form of two century-old US traditions: preemptive regime change sanctioned by the Platt Amendment to the Monroe Doctrine in 1903, and Wilsonian rhetoric of national self-determination from the time of the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. Gender and sexuality, far from matters of what Marxists used to call “secondary contradictions,” are the lynchpin of today’s ideological warfare. Religion, in no way abandoned in the modernization process, is back with a vengeance, sustaining political movements as dispersed as liberation theology, Brazilian Pentecostalism, and multiply-articulated Islam. “The people” today is not a national constituency. Solidarity that crosses state boundaries is required. Resistance to power will be a global movement, or it will fail.

If I speak of the end of the era of Western hegemony that has lasted from 1492-1992, this is not just a description of time but a construction, a narrative of history. As Jameson writes: “We cannot *not* periodize.”⁸ Here, then, is my periodization. Our era marks a slow but decisive rupture in planetary history, the end of Western hegemony whose term

modernity is, and with it, the end of capitalism as the West has formulated it, that is, as a stage in history that belongs to its own, exemplary trajectory of development. It will be experienced as the end of a stage in the collective imagination, before it will be a rupture of reality. We are not going to get out of the present predicament without a total rethinking of what capitalism is, and what ideas of history and collective agency are dragged along with it.

But not Only this

The culture of critical theory will have to change as well. Not that “Westerners” cannot *do* critical theory, or that it should be replaced by other posts (post-Continental theory, for example, or post-modern Islam), but the next phase of theory will be a displacement rather than an internal development. Western cosmopolitanism has existed at least since the Enlightenment in the sense of urbaneness and worldly sophistication. But what is called for today is a socially committed intelligentsia that can move beyond cultural appreciation to trans-cultural innovation and action. The metropolitan intellectual elites will need to yield ground within the flattened geographies of cyberspace that now link independent cultural producers from Peru, Iran, Serbia, Tanzania, Ukraine, Senegal, Turkey, South Africa, Brazil, Tunisia, Cuba, Shri Lanka, Mexico, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Uruguay, etc., etc., etc.

The theoretical task will be a collective effort. No one book, no one discipline or school, no one cultural renaissance

ce or national academy will provide it single-handedly, but the task can be engaged at any of these sites. Rather than intellectual centers the preeminence of which provide the latest theoretical fashions, there will be a constant need for translation across differences in discursive contexts—translations that, as Walter Benjamin wrote, change *both* contexts, rather than theory being passed down from the center to the periphery in Left-imperial ways.

So, one of the characteristics of the new hegemony is that it will not be the accomplishment of one civilization's intellectuals, an exclusive avant-garde, an "advanced" society or culture that knows, or thinks it knows beforehand where we are headed. The theories that will count are the ones that resonate as meaningful with global social and political movements who can make out the lines, the forms within these theories of their own practical aspirations. What is called for is an exact inverse of the Marxist global discourse of the twentieth century, which was a universal discourse differently articulated. The new Global Left will consist of particular discourses universally articulated to a whole world that observes, responds, and acts.

A vision that can lay claim to hegemonic acceptance must express the universal interests of humanity. This Marxist insight has not been superceded. The Enlightenment, the French and Haitian Revolutions, the Bolshevik and Chinese Revolutions all received their legitimacy by this claim to represent the good of all humanity. It could be argued that the Iranian Revolution (which Foucault at first championed

with enthusiasm) is the last great revolution in this Western mode—complete with a reign of virtue and revolutionary terror (the Ayatolla Khoumeini was in exile in France just before the 1979 revolution began). If the Iranian Revolution became a tyranny of clerics, it was nonetheless a modern dictatorship, complete with written Constitution, national elections, and parliamentary debate. But this is not a case of a Middle Eastern country “catching up” with the West. Rather, it marks the end of a certain Western political ideal: founding the new state through revolutionary overthrow and terror. George W. Bush’s Iraq policy of regime change, achieved through *state* terror, is a caricature of this model, which survives today in this perverse and debased form. The rationalization of Secretary of State Rumsfeld, “democracy is messy,” is a neo-imperialist variant of Lenin’s metaphor, “you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.” However much we may feel nostalgia for narratives of collective heroism, the revolutionary ideal of founding a republic through violent rupture is so bloodstained, its terror is so terrifying actually to live through, its masculine warrior culture is so dismissive of the interests of women and children (and in fact all human, animal, and natural life) that we must be content to see it go.

I come, finally, to the title of this essay. If I speak of the “Post-Soviet Condition,” it is to say that “post-Soviet” refers to an ontology of time, not an ontology of the collective. Post-Soviet is a half-way time, when we have recognized the inadequacies of modernity, but are still too dependent, too underdeveloped to leave it behind. (The political impli-

cations are not unlike those described by Marx in *18th Brumaire*, with figures like George W. Bush in the role of Napoleon III.) The post-Soviet condition does not apply to a curio of specimens who presently inhabit the former Soviet Union or define their situation as unique. This is not about “failed modernity,” or collective cultural difference based on linguistic specificity. Rather: we are all post-Soviet. We are to understand this situation as our own.

Again, to be clear, post-Soviet does not imply a universal global culture, but rather a universal historical condition, one that does and should call for an infinite variety and democratic interaction of response. It is the condition, the historical moment, that is shared. A political definition of the elusive newness of globalization is suggested here, as well as the bare bones, the thin definition, of a new, collective subjectivity:

We, the “we” who have nothing more—nor less—in common than sharing *this* time: that is the universal condition to which I refer.⁹

Globalization as a spatial situation is not new, as it has been the trend precisely of the era of Western hegemony that is coming to a close. But if we give primacy to time (and perhaps all progressive politics gives primacy to time over space), then globalization refers to the recognition of this shared time: there is no part of global space that is “advanced” in time; none that is “backward”; we are all in *this* time that is both transient and universal; we share the same contingent history; we have equal rights to determine our common future.

We take our position in relation to this new situation—that so far has been under the shadow of the reign of the neos and the posts. But if we stop here, stuck in the post-period, or return without memory to a neo-version of the past, then we miss the opportunity that the shared time of a global present can provide. The process might be described as what Helen Petrovsky calls a “human community (or collective) in the making” within the “transient social present,” where we meet “in the absence of all traditional definitions,” working collectively through a juxtaposition of different work, and recognizing our commonality through (again to cite Petrovsky) “the shock of non-similar similarity.”¹⁰ One is reminded of Walter Benjamin’s non-SENSUOUS similarities, a new mimetic skill, an ability to see likeness in difference, the likeness that emerges when images are juxtaposed and yet still *opposed*, perhaps even a third meaning such as Sergei Eisenstein suggests in his theory of cinematic montage—sensing that our common ground is to be found less in the convergence of these images than in the unbridgeable space that holds them apart. The third meaning is not a dialectical synthesis that nails meaning down, not a *point de capiton* or master signifier, but a space of freedom, of creative cultural production that keeps meaning on the move.

Such an alternative suggests a surpassing of the posts and the neos that does not prejudge the form and shape of the new community to come—does not name it by its old name, the proletariat, nor even by the new name of the mul-

titude, as this name is deeply rooted in the particularity of the Christian tradition (and has little generative, mimetic power within, say, the Islamic tradition of critical theory). Let us allow this new community to remain unnamed, but work collectively yet separately to meet in the unclaimed semantic space in order to make the new community happen. This is what might be hoped for from a new, Global Left that finds itself in a “post-Soviet condition.”

Notes

1. Fredrick Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London, Verso, 2002, p. 141.
2. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 143.
3. “It is crucial to recognize that the end of the Soviet era was not limited specifically to the territory of the Soviet Union. The Bolshevik experiment, no matter how many specifically Russian cultural traits it developed, was vitally attached to the Western modernizing project, from which it cannot be extricated without causing the project itself to fall to pieces—including its cult of historical progress” (Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 2002, p. 68).
4. “Marxism was a product of European civilization, but it neither took root nor succeeded there. Instead modernizing and revolutionary elites imported it into non-Western societies; Lenin, Mao, and Ho adapted it to their purposes and used it to challenge Western power (...)” (Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996, p. 52-3).
5. See Susan Buck-Morss *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, London, Verso, 2004, p. 98-9.

6. This was the title of Matti Bunzl's February 2005 lecture at Cornell University.
7. See Ferdinand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, vol. 2: *The Wheels of Commerce*, trans. Siân Reynolds, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p. 237.
8. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 29.
9. See *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, p. 68.
10. Helen Petrovsky, presentation at Columbia University, New York, February 2003, unpublished ms.