DIOGENES

Diogenes 50(1): 27–35

Democracy De-realized

Homi K. Bhabha

'We are witnessing a globalisation of the economy? For certain. A globalisation of political calculations? Without doubt. But a universalisation of political consciousness – certainly not.'

Michel Foucault, 'For an Ethics of Discomfort' (1979)[1]

The images of death, destruction and daring that invaded our homes on 11th September 2001 left us with no doubt that these unimaginable scenes belonged to a moral universe alien to ours, acts perpetrated by people foreign to the very fibre of our being.[2] But CNN had a sobering tale to tell. While the headline news staggered from one towering inferno to another, the ticker tape at the bottom of the screen interspersed its roll-call of the brave and the dead with lists of Hollywood movies – films that had told a similar story many times before and new, unreleased movies that were about to tell it again. What were only action movies for the longest time had turned into acts of war. Same mise en scène, different movie.

I do not want to blast Hollywood, nor to rail against the violence of the mass media. And I am certainly not suggesting, wistfully, that life follows art, because that only rarely happens. I have chosen to start with the global genre of the terrorist action film in order to put into question the widely canvassed cultural assumptions that have come to frame the deadly events.

The embattled and embalmed narrative of civilizational clash is often deployed to justify the reckless destruction of civilians who are suspected, by virtue of their culture (considered to be their 'second nature'), of being tainted with the 'guilt' of their traditions and temperament. Only those societies of the North and the South, the East and West, which ensure the widest democratic participation and protection for their citizens – their majorities and minorities – are in a position to make the deadly difficult decisions that 'just' wars demand. To confront terror out of a sense of democratic solidarity rather than retaliation gives us some faint hope for the future, hope that we might be able to establish a vision of a global society, informed

Copyright © ICPHS 2003
SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com
0392-1921 [200302]50:1;27–35;032750

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by civil liberties and human rights, that carries with it the shared obligations and responsibilities of common, collaborative citizenship.

The civilizational argument is less visible but no less insidious in times of peace and prosperity. The defence of the Western 'civilized' world is mounted in favour of what John Gray, the British political philosopher, describes as the priority of protecting an 'intact bourgeois civilisation'. For instance, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism*, John Gray's spirited jeremiad against the tyranny of the American 'global market', mourns the loss of an Edenic Western 'intact bourgeois civilisation', now held to ransom by that great Anarch American, upon whose treacherous teats the ailing Asian tigers suckle. Gray argues that, within the globalizing world,

> A contradiction has emerged between the preconditions of an intact bourgeois civilisation and the imperatives of global capitalism . . . As a result, familiar contrasts between middle-class and working-class life have diminished reality. The post-war trend to embourgeoisment is being reversed, and working class people are being in some degree re-proletarianised.[3]

Turning the global 'contradiction' on the moral pivot of an 'intact bourgeois civilisation', Gray suggests that the critical problem lies at the level of civilizational/cultural 'origins'. It is this perspective in Gray's account of the titanic 'clash of civilisations' that gives it an uncomfortable eurocentric 'edge'. The dawn of global markets 'accelerates the process whereby the United States ceases to be a European "Western" country'.[4] At the other end of the world lie the 'anarchic' Asian global markets and the Tiger economies which 'destroy old capitalisms and spawn new ones, while subjecting all to unceasing instability'.[5] Although Asian social institutions have been 'modernising' [or westernizing] for centuries, creating their own sense of 'alternative or counter modern public spheres', Gray depicts the intractable problems of Asian markets as part of the shadow-world of privative Asian society, the not-quite social, the not-yet civil,

> largely subterranean social and cultural institutions whose practices are saturated with local history and traditional knowledge . . . If history is our guide . . . Asian capitalisms will emerge from the current crisis altered unpredictably rather than remade on the Western model. But even if Asian capitalisms were to converge with those of the West, it would be in a traumatic process of cultural and political change spanning generations.[6]

Whose histories, what forms of cultural understanding and critique, can we call upon in this shared hour of need? I have long argued that, when faced with the crises of progress or the perils of democracy, our lessons of equality and justice are best learned from those marginalized, peripheralized peoples who have harvested the bitter fruits of liberalism in its project of colonization and slavery, rather than those imperial nations and sovereign states that claim to be the seed-beds of Democracy.

To pose the crisis of democracy in terms of its unrealized ideals does not adequately challenge the failures of its promise. 'Falling short' is often a strategic 'necessity' for democratic discourse, which acknowledges failure as part of its evolutionary, utopian narrative. The argument goes something like this: we fail because we are mortal and bound to history, the faith of democracy lies not in perfectibilty

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but in our perseverence and progress, our commitment to set the highest ideals before ourselves and struggle towards them to revise and reshape our 'best selves'. Such an internal dialectic of the 'unrealized' and the 'utopian' encounters the negative instance of 'failure' only in order to provide a strange moral coherence and consolation for itself.

I would thus propose that we consider democracy as something de-realized rather than unrealized. I use 'de-realization' in the sense of Bertolt Brecht's concept of distantiation – a critical 'distance' or alienation disclosed in the very naming of the formation of the democratic experience and its expressions of equality. I also use 'derealization' in the surrealist sense of placing an object, idea, image or gesture in a context not of its making, in order to defamiliarize it, to frustrate its naturalistic and normative 'reference' and see what potential that idea or insight has for 'translation', in the sense both of genre and geopolitics, territory and temporality. If we attempt to de-realize democracy, by defamiliarizing its history and its political project, we recognize not its failure but its frailty, its fraying edges or limits that impose their will of inclusion and exclusion on those who are considered – on the grounds of their race, culture, gender or class – unworthy of the democratic process. In these dire times of global intransigence and war, we recognize what a fragile thing democracy is, how fraught with limitations and contradictions; and yet it is in that fragility, rather than in failure, that its creative potential for coping with the trials of the new century lies.

The transformations of our own global century form part of a longer lineage of fraying and fragility that takes us back to an earlier phase of global governance – the colonial empires. With the resurgence of neo-liberalism after the Cold War, it becomes especially important to grasp the internal de-realizations of that global ideology, and to delineate its colonial genealogies. For instance, the great liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill realized that one of the major conundrums of his celebrated theory of liberty consisted of the fact that he was a democrat in his own country and a despot in another – India. For the canons of British literary culture to take responsibility for such a double or forked ancestry requires a revisionary critique of liberal democracy as an ideology of conquest, or a political instrument in the culture of colonial appropriation. What has to be acknowledged – as Mill was not able to do in that great document of modern democracy, *On Liberty* – are the implications of the self-contradictoriness of liberal democracy, which has a war raging in its heart. This war internal to democracy is a struggle between a sincerely held 'universalism' as a principle of cultural comparison and scholarly study, and ethnocentrism, even racism, as a condition of ethical practice and political prescription. At the heart of democracy we witness this fraying, de-realizing dialectic between the epistemological and the ethical, between cultural description and political judgment.

Those in the North and the South, in metropolises and peripheries, who have been the victims of democracy de-realized have their own lessons to teach. For they not only experience the injustice of colonization and slavery, but know, in some profound way, the ethical impossibility of perpetuating discrimination, segregation or global injustice in the modern world. 'It is not possible in a modern world to separate people by vertical partitions', W. E. B. Du Bois, the great African-American poet-

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

politician, wrote in 1929, 'Who was it that made such group and racial separation impossible under modern methods? Who brought fifteen million black folk overseas? . . . The world has come together in an organization which you can no more unscramble than you can unscramble eggs.' The spatial connectivities and contradictions of the late modern world-picture – reflected in the gargantuan discourses of the 'global' – must be placed in a relationship of ethical contiguity with the scrambled sites and subjects of racial separation and cultural discrimination. Unless we recognize what is old and weary about the world – those 'long histories' of slavery, colonization, diaspora – we are in no position to represent what is emergent or 'new' within our contemporary global moment. What does it mean to 'look global' today? What measure could we apply to assessing the transformations of global change?

The 'new' is only a historic destiny that lives among us like the ghost of the future; slender as a leaf of time turning, a sheet of space folding, inscribed on one side by the past, and the other by the present. The announcement of the 'new' – as in the New World order, or the new global economy – is almost always the recognition of a 'turning point in history, the experience of a moment in transition, or in "incubation"' as Antonio Gramsci, the Italian political philosopher, has described it. 'What exists at any given time [in the name of the new] is a variable combination of old and new', 'a momentary equilibrium of cultural relations . . .'.[7] Discourses of 'incubation' drive us definitionally to and fro as we try to derive a critical and epistemological vocabulary of measure from the global discourse itself. '[The] becoming worldwide [or mondialisation] of the world is not the unfolding of a normal, normative or normed process', Jacques Derrida warns us. The contingencies and contiguities of the new cartography of globalism mutate and vacillate, mediate and morph: the North–South axis of the globe shifts to the global and the local, and thence to the preferred 'southern', postcolonial designation, the local–global. For some, globalism is the advent of 'disorganized capital' playing to the risk society; for others it is 'a fluctuating web of connections between metropolitan regions and exploitable peripheries'.[8] Yielding national 'sovereignty' to the international regime leaves the compromised nation-state suffering from 'social schizophrenia' (Manuel Castells), its affiliative authority now metonymically displaced onto the 'global city' that reveals the 'unbalanced playing field' of the growth of global capital and the claims of marginalized peoples. The territoriality of the global 'citizen' is, concurrently, postnational, denational or transnational. Legal activists and scholars argue productively for what they call 'effective nationality' that contests statist discourses of citizenship by emphasizing those articulations of civic and civil life that lie adjacent to the considerations of 'formal nationality' and statute law. Indeed, the arguments for a change in the definition of citizenship are based on areas of everyday experience and are better articulated in case-law 'concerned with a person's connections in fact – their social, political and psychological connections'. And finally, according to the legal scholar Larry Lessig, the cyberspace actor is 'actually living in two places at once, with no principle of supremacy between . . . multiple non-coordinating jurisdictions'.[9]

The 'non-coordinating jurisdictions' that embody forms of global knowledge and practice, are not adequately represented in the scalar measures of the gigantic and

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the increasingly small. The propinquity of these jarring jurisdictions – conflictual yet communicative – emerges from the structure of the global political economy, which the economic historian Saskia Sassen describes as the 'insertions of the global into the fabric of the national . . . a partial and incipient denationalisation of that which historically has been constructed as the national, or rather, certain properties of the national'.[10] The global discourses cited above all represent a double move: the discordant or disseminated sites of the global jurisdiction are, simultaneously, marked by an ethical and analytical desire for proximity. We have to learn to negotiate 'incommensurable' or conflictual social and cultural differences while maintaining the 'intimacy' of our inter-cultural existence and transnational associations. The uneven and unequal playing field of the global terrain – 'partial' and 'incipient', neither past nor present but 'incubational' – is nonetheless encountered and experienced as living in, and through, a shared historical time of 'transition'. Where do we turn, as the global world circles around us, to find a critical tradition for our times?

There is, of course, no easy structural analogy between the colonial-state and the denationalized 'global'-state; and anti-imperialist struggles cannot simply be equated with the resistance to global Empire (as Toni Negri and Michael Hardt have recently called it). Nor, indeed, does the pre-national 'colonial' state parallel the denational global state. But it takes only a little imagination to see that, in both cases, minoritarian or marginalized cultural agency and political advocacy have to be manoeuvred from the borders or limits of state-formations. To labour for freedom from an oblique or extra-territorial position contiguous with the state – but discontinuous with it – is what makes the 'subaltern' social group a prime site for those involved in the struggles of minoritarian representation and humanitarian advocacy. My revisionary 'return' to Antonio Gramsci from the perspective of the partial 'denationalization' of the global condition is based on his scattered speculations on what it means to create a 'cultural front'. A cultural front is not necessarily a political party; it is more a movement or alliance of groups whose struggle for fairness and justice emphasizes the deep collaboration between aesthetics, ethics and activism. A cultural front does not have a homogeneous and totalizing view of the world, it finds its orientation from what Gramsci describes as 'the philosophy of the part (that) always precedes the philosophy of the whole, not only as its theoretical anticipation but as a necessity of real life'.[11] Today, as we are offered the stark choices of civilizational clash – between Faith and Unfaith, or Terror and Democracy – it is illuminating to grasp something that demands an understanding that is less dogmatic and totalizing, a philosophy of the part, a perspective that acknowledges its own partiality 'as a necessity of life'.

The subaltern group is

> deprived of historical [dominance] and initiative; it is often in a state of continuous but disorganic expansion, without a necessary party affiliation; and [crucially for the issue of de-nationalisation], its authority may not be able to go beyond a certain qualitative level which still remains below the level of the possession of the state.[12]

This includes those who are committed to cultural justice and the emancipatory work of the imagination. The utopian dream of 'total' transformation may not be

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

available to the subaltern perspective which is nonetheless engaged in both struggles as an active inventory of emancipation and survival as modes of forbearance that link the memory of history to the future of freedom. Discourses that champion social 'contradiction' as the *a priori* motor of historical change are propelled in a linear direction towards the terminus of the state. The subaltern imaginary, deprived of political dominance and yet seeking to turn that disadvantage into a new vantage point, has to proceed at an oblique or adjacent angle in its antagonistic relation to 'the qualitative level of the State'. Subalternity represents a form of contestation or challenge to the status quo that does not homogenize or demonize the state in formulating an opposition to it. The subaltern strategy intervenes in state practices from a position that is 'contiguous' or tangential to the 'authoritarian' institutions of the state – flying just below the level of the state.

It is in this sense that the subaltern group is not a 'sub-ordinate' class. It propagates an ethico-political practice in the name of the 'human' where 'rights' are neither simply unversalist nor individuated. The 'human' signifies a strategic, translational sign that gives ground to, or gains ground for, emergent demands for representation, redistribution and responsibility – claims of the excluded that come 'from below the qualitative level of the state'; modes of community and solidarity that are not fully sanctioned by the sovereignty of the state; forms of freedom unprotected by it. Such an 'opposition in terms of human rights', Claude Lefort argues,

> takes form in centers that power cannot entirely master . . . From the legal recognition of strikes or trade unions, to rights relative to work of social security, there has developed on the basis of the rights of man a whole history that transgressed the boundaries within which the state claimed to define itself, a history that remains open.[13]

Contiguity, as a critical measure, enables us to evaluate the movement that exists between the borderline jurisdictions – national, denational, transnational, post-national – of the global regime. My own speculations on the ethical and existential 'location' of such cultures of 'border' living owe something to the work of the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's meditations on the process of 'contiguity' as a form of space and time [within] 'the actual world in which the individual lives, which can be objectively perceived'.[14] Contiguity, Winnicott suggests, explores a third area of life, between the individual and the environment. It is 'an intermediate area', a potential space between subject and object in which cultural experience is located. An area of 'intermediate living' is, in Winnicott's words, a third space of psychic and social 'variability', whose agency and creativity lie in experiences that constellate or 'link the past, present and the future'. It is the contiguity of these space-and-time frames that constitute the 'cultural' as a practice that can both signify, and survive, the turning points of history and its transitional subjects and objects.

My interest in the 'intermediate life' of the global experience – that 'third' space somewhere between the old and the new – did not start with art or literature or even philosophy. It was through my reading of economic and legal debates about 'global citizenship' and 'cultural rights' that I became aware of a kind of contiguous, double horizon that hovered over the global discourse. It was a shuttling back and forth between continuity and contiguity, the tension of the 'new world order' surviving in

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a movement between the persistence of the national and the proleptic, futurity of transnational and international civil society. Between them emerges 'this third space', a contiguous relationship between older and newer social and psychic forms.

It is with the contiguous, discontinuous languages and cultures that cross and cut in the making of the modern globe that Derek Walcott works out the ethics and politics of the contemporary 'world' as a terrifying translational tryst:

> But we were orphans of the nineteenth century,
> Sedulous to the morals of a style,
> We lived by another light,
> Victoria's orphans, bats in the banyan boughs,
> Dragonfly, dragonfly
> …………………………….
> Caught in the lamp of Giorgione,
> Dragonfly, in our ears
> Sang Baudelaire's exhortations to stay drunk,
> Sang Gauguin's style, awarded Vincent's ear.
>
> I had entered the house of literature as a houseboy,
> Filched as the slum child stole,
> As the young slave appropriated
> Those heirlooms temptingly left
> With the Victorian homilies of Noli Tangere
> This is my body. Drink.
> This is my wine………
> In the beginning,
> All Drunkenness is Dionysiac, divine.
>
> And then one night, somewhere,
> A single outcry rocketed in air,
> The thick tongue of a fallen, drunken lamp
> Licked at its alcohol ringing the floor,
> And with the fierce rush of a furnace door
> Suddenly opened, history was here…….
>
> Gregorias. Listen, lit
> We were the light of the world!
> We were blest with a virginal, unpainted world
> With Adam's task of giving things their names,
> With the smooth white walls of clouds and villages
> Where you devised your inexhaustible,
> Impossible Renaissance,
> Brown cherubs of Giotto and Massacio,
> With the salt wind coming through the window,
> Smelling of turpentine, with nothing so old
> That it could not be invented. (294)[15]

The contiguities of our own 'incubational' global moment, both old and new, return in those lines that have echoed throughout my article: 'Nothing so old that it

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

could not be invented'. This is Walcott's translational claim as he exerts his ethical and political 'right to narrate', revising the great frescoes of the 'Impossible' Renaissance – whose 'originality' it is now impossible to assert after the belated task of the translator who inscribes across the 'origins' of the Renaissance, the history of the middle passage of intermediate living – the unsettled jurisdictions of our cultural and political lives echoed in the disruptions and displacements of Empire. I use the term 'the right to narrate' to signify an act of communication through which the recounting of themes, histories and records is part of a process that reveals the transformation of human agency. What I mean by narration is close to Hannah Arendt's account of the agent-revealing capacity of action and speech: 'Action and speech go on between human beings, as they are directed toward them, and they reveal their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively "objective", concerned with the matters of the world of things.'[16] Thus narrative as communicative, performative action is concerned with what lies between people, 'something which inter-ests, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.'[17] Such a 'right' is not merely a legal, procedural matter; it is also a matter of aesthetic and ethical form. Freedom of expression is an individual right; the right to narrate, if you will permit me poetic licence, is an enunciative right rather than an expressive right – the dialogic, communal or group right to address and be addressed, to signify and be interpreted, to speak and be heard, to make a sign and to know that it will receive respectful attention. And that social 'relation' – to relate, to narrate, to connect – becomes our *juris-diction* and our *juris–dictio*, quite literally, the place from where we speak.

As I end let me return to the beginning of my article, to the fallen towers and falling idols. What has befallen the ideals and the ideas of global progress now that the New World is bereft of its towers, its towering ladder without rungs targeted as the symbol of our times? Such days that eerily hollow out the times and places in which we live confront our sense of progress with the challenge of the unbuilt. The unbuilt is not a place, Wittgenstein says, that you can reach with a ladder; what is needed is a perspicuous vision that reveals a space, a way in the world, that is often obscured by the onward and upward thrust of progress:

> Our civilisation is characterised by the word 'progress'. Progress is its form rather than making progress being one of its features. Typically it constructs. It is occupied with building an ever more complicated structure . . . I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundation of possible buildings.
>
> (*Culture and Value*, 7e, 1930)

Neither destruction nor deconstruction, the unbuilt is the creation of a form whose virtual absence raises the question of what it would mean to start again, in the same place, as if it were elsewhere, adjacent to the site of a historic disaster or a personal trauma. The rubble and debris that survive carry the memories of other fallen towers, Babel for instance, and lessons of endless ladders that suddenly collapse beneath our feet. We have no option but to be interested in constructing buildings; at the same time, we have no choice but to place, in full view of our buildings, the vision of the Unbuilt –- 'the foundation of possible buildings', other foundations,

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

other alternative worlds. Perhaps, then, we will not forget to measure Progress from the ground, from other perspectives, other possible foundations, even when we vainly believe that we are, ourselves, standing at the top of the tower.

Homi K. Bhabha
Harvard University

Notes

1. 'For an Ethics of Discomfort', in *Politics of Truth*, ed. S. Lotringer, New York, Semiotext(e) 1997.
2. This text is an abridged version of the talk ' The Art of Democracy' presented by Homi K. Bhabha at the first session of the 11th platform of *Documenta* at the House of World Cultures (Berlin) on 9th October 2001 on the subject *Democracy Unrealized*.
3. John Gray, *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism*, New Press 2000, p. 217.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Ibid*., p. 216.
6. *Ibid*., p. 221.
7. David Forgacs, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, New York University Press 2000, p. 353.
8. Alan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Dusseldorf, Richter/Rotterdam, The Center 1995.
9. Larry Lessig, *Code and other Laws of Cyberspace*, New York, Basic Books 1999.
10. Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents*, New York, New Press 1998.
11. D. Forgacs, *op. cit*., p. 337.
12. D. Forgacs, *op. cit*., p. 351.
13. Claude Lefort, *The Political Form of Modern Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press 1986.
14. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London and New York, Routledge 1971.
15. Derek Walcott, 'Another Life', *Collected Poems, 1948–1984*, London, Faber and Faber 1986.
16. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press 1958.
17. *Ibid*.

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219210305000104 Published online by Cambridge University Press