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Roberto Schwarz: A Quiet (Brazilian) Revolution in Critical Theory

During July and August of 1995 I taught as a visiting professor at the University of São Paulo. The official subject of my course was “a teoria literaria e o ‘postcolonial,’” under which rubric I had included readings not only by the “usual suspects” (Said, Jameson, Spivak, Bhabha, Fanon, Ngugi, *et al.*) but by a number of Latin American critics and theorists as well. I had never really doubted that my students at USP would be at least generally familiar with Said and Jameson, and I was certainly confirmed in this from the very first class. Even Bhabha was already widely known and cited by many of them, particularly those who were doing graduate work in English or Comparative Literature. What I was not prepared for, however, was the general lack of familiarity—thinly disguising, perhaps, something even more perplexing: a lack of concern—with the works of, for example, Mariátegui, Fernández Retamar, or Monsiváis. Part of this had to do, of course, with the considerable cultural and literary barriers that still separate Brazil from the rest of Spanish-speaking Latin America. All my Brazilian students certainly had profound involvement with their own national intellectual and literary-critical traditions, above all that of Antonio Candido, whom they regarded—no doubt, correctly—as the unquestioned founder of modern Brazilian literary studies. But to know Bhabha and not, say, Ángel Rama? This was a mild shock for me, and it complicated my already ironic position as a white, North American, male purveyor of “postcolonial theory” to Brazil even more so as I was now also converted into the inadvertent—and underqualified—ambassador of Peruvian, Cuban, Uruguayan and Mexican critical theorists as well. The lesson implicit in all of this, however, gradually became clear: the walls dividing Brazil from the rest of Latin America were the same as those dividing it, say, from India or China. They were not insuperable; they had a gate. And that gate was both single and universal: it was the Euro-North American metropolis. Bhabha had passed through it, and therefore was an acknowledged figure. Rama, the most prominent literary theorist and critic from Brazil’s neighboring country, Uruguay, had not passed through it—or

at least, had not, having entered the metropolis through it, passed out of it again—and was therefore a relative unknown. The "post" in "postcolonial," already subject to multiple and indefinitely limiting qualifiers, had suddenly become even more tenuous and ephemeral.

My experience in São Paulo nicely dramatizes, I think, the peculiar ambiguities that accompany any legitimate effort to promote greater intellectual intercourse and "dialogue" between the two Americas. For not only is there the chronic and familiar danger that Latin Americanism in the North and in Latin America itself may tend to become two separate entities, the former simply draining off the resources of the latter. There is likewise the problem that, even within Latin America itself, the familiar, still effectively neo-colonial structures of intellectual distribution and consumption tend to persist. As Latin Americanism becomes more and more of a "growth industry" in the North¹—and as it finds itself getting absorbed into new "theoretical" waves such as postcolonialism—those who seek a genuine North/South dialogue must (to borrow Doris Sommer's *mot*) "proceed with caution."² By this I mean: one must avoid *not only* the flagrant intellectual opportunism and "cultural imperialism" of simply re-packaging the South for the ever-shifting intellectual consumer demands of the North, "theoretical" and otherwise; one must *also* avoid the less obviously false assumption that the South itself does not already participate, under its own steam, in this process.

The path towards real dialogue has to be sought in a careful and nuanced understanding of what—in a rigorously material sense—the real North/South relation is, and what patterns of intellectual traffic it makes both desirable and necessary. Much about this relation has changed in the wake of expanded and accelerated "globalization," but the fundamental economic and political inequality it entails, and that used to go by the name of "dependency," has only grown more complex and disguised, not less essential. It is an error to equate the surface trend toward greater integration with any sort of structural revolution. There is, for instance, much excitement and interest generated by the new, "hybrid" and "border" cultures within which, in effect, North and South begin to lose what were assumed to be their distinct contours.³ The continuously self-displacing location of the "border" has, up to a point, become a new species of master metaphor or paradigm for Latin Americanism. But, salutary as this is in respect to older, "essentializing" paradigms of straight-faced Eurocentrism or cultural-nationalism, even the de-centering "border" perspective risks keeping the northern academy complacent in its imperial provincialism, distracting it from the possibility that the South, while not the locus of the absolutely subverting and authenticating "otherness" once attributed to it by an erstwhile "third worldism," might nevertheless be just as likely an incubator of critical-theoretical breakthroughs as the North. For, just as "globalization" does not automatically lead to the breaking down of all

cultural and intellectual "trade" barriers and disparities (as my experience in São Paulo showed), neither does it necessarily equalize or de-center the particularities of national or regional intellectual cultures that go into producing "world-historical" ideas. A genuine dialogue with the South might, that is, have to start by re-authorizing the South not only to speak to us of itself but to speak to the North about *theory*—i.e. about *ourselves* as well—in *the very process* of speaking of itself.

It is this possibility that I want to explore in more detail by discussing the recent work of the Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz, work in all respects central to my own. Although some of his most important work is now available in English,⁴ Schwarz may not be the first name on the lips of northern Latin-Americanists and postcolonialists when queried about important Latin American critics. Even my students at USP, although they had all heard of Schwarz and had even read him on occasion, were surprised at my claims for his significance and thought of him mainly as an important Machado scholar and disciple of Candido. (He is, in fact, both of these as well.) But Schwarz's critical approach to problems of Brazilian culture and society have, in my view, profound if still relatively unexplored implications for Latin Americanism as a whole, and perhaps no less so for a theory of "postcolonial" culture and society. Indeed, as the title of my essay suggests, I think the careful extrapolation of Schwarz's core theoretical insights—that of "misplaced idea," for example—to other, not necessarily Brazilian contexts promises to lead us straight into certain of the most fundamental questions of critical theory as such, in particular that of the possibly changed structure of mediation linking the socio-historical totality to its political and cultural levels. This is not to argue that Schwarz can or should simply be lifted out of Brazil and installed as still another contemporary oracle of "Theory." In fact, it is just Schwarz's modest and scrupulous insistence on working out of and through the concrete Brazilian conditions that are his given intellectual and political circumstance, his ability to resist the urge to a jejune and abstract globalism, that—not so paradoxically, really—give to his critical departures their broader, global implications.

Schwarz, of course, belongs to a critical tradition that, as much as any other, makes good to transcend the barriers and disparities of a neo-colonialized intellectual culture. This is the tradition of Marxism. (The son of Austrian-born, left-wing Jewish refugees from the *Anschluss*, Schwarz might claim nearly as direct a descent from a Central European school of dialectical critique that includes Lukács, Adorno and the Frankfurt School as from Brazil or Latin America.) Until recently at least, no one would consider this as in any way an anomaly for a Latin American intellectual, Marxism, in one of its modes at least, being as commonsensically *Latin American* as it is stereotypically *un(North)American*. But Schwarz is also atypical in this context as well. I do not know how he would respond

personally to the insinuation here, but, reading him, I am reminded of Lukács's well-known and still controversial claim in *History and Class Consciousness* to the effect that, even if all of Marx's historical and political theses were shown to be mistaken, it would be possible for a Marxist to concede such mistakes *without* conceding an orthodoxy that, as Lukács unequivocally states, "refers exclusively to method."⁵ It strikes me that in Schwarz's contributions to a social and cultural theory of the (neo-/post-) colonial condition we find a set of ideas as challenging and disturbing to the dogmas of a Marxist "orthodoxy" of "theses"—dogmas no less familiar in Latin America than anywhere else—as they are rigorously orthodox to the dialectical method of Marx.

I cannot make a systematic case for these assertions here. But I think a more concrete insight into Schwarz's "quiet revolution" can be obtained by a brief, contrastive pair of citations, followed by some moderate commentary. Let me try to demonstrate:

Writing in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Gayatri Spivak responds to Benita Parry's criticisms of her positions as follows:

Whatever the identitarian ethnicist claims of native or fundamental origin (implicit, for example, in Parry's exhortation to hear the voice of the native), the political claims that are most urgent in decolonized space are tacitly recognized as coded within the legacy of imperialism: nationhood, constitutionality, citizenship, democracy, even culturalism. Within the historical frame of exploration, colonization, decolonization—what is being reclaimed is a series of regulative political concepts, the *supposedly* authoritative narrative the production of which was written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe. They are being reclaimed, indeed claimed, as concept-metaphors for which no historically adequate referent may be advanced from postcolonial space, yet that does not make the claims less important. A concept-metaphor without an adequate referent is a catachresis. These claims for founding catachreses also make postcoloniality a deconstructive case.⁶

In his recent article, "A Seminar on Marx," Schwarz, commenting here on the fundamental theoretical departure achieved in F.H. Cardoso's 1962 monograph, *Capitalismo e escravidão no Brasil meridional*, but in an indirect characterization of his own work as well, writes in what seems a remarkably similar vein:

The most innovative implication, though, concerns the application of European social categories (not excluding the Marxist ones) to Brazil and to the other former colonies, a procedure that induces error but is at the same time indispensable. Let us set aside criticism of the rote following of formulas, a just criticism but valid in the Old World as well as here. Our difficulty is more specific: in the countries that have emerged from colonization, the system of

(historical categories shaped by European experience comes to function in a space with a *different but not an alien* ("diverso mas não alheio") sociological conjunction in which those categories neither apply properly nor can help but be applied; better, they circulate in counterfeit but are an obligatory reference and even tend toward a certain formalism. This space is *different* because colonization did not create societies similar to that of the mother country, nor did the subsequent international division of labor make them equal. But it is a space *of the same order*, for it too is controlled by the embracing dynamic of capital, whose developments give it a standard and define its guidelines. From a distance, the partial operativeness of European coordinates—a disconcerting, *sui generis* configuration, which requires the observer's differentiating astuteness—is a tangible effect of the modern world's tendencies, or of capitalism's uneven and combined developments . . .⁷

"Concept metaphor for which no historically adequate referent can be advanced from postcolonial space"; "a space . . . in which those categories ['shaped by European experience'] neither apply properly nor can help but be applied." There seems no question that both Spivak and Schwarz are, at the outset, describing the same "space," the same, seemingly insoluble, historico-epistemological puzzle here. And Spivak's formal, discursively oriented term for this puzzle—"catachresis"—might serve both attempts to theorize it as a useful shorthand. Is not "catachresis" a reasonable alternate locution for "misplaced idea," i.e. in Schwarz's own (translated) words, "the dissonance between representations and what, upon consideration, we know to be their content"?⁸ I emphasize this formal, abstract point of convergence between the deconstructionist Spivak and the Marxist Schwarz (an opposition that, of course, Spivak herself would not allow as final) as a way of stressing that those who, like myself, argue against the poststructuralist variant of postcolonial theory on historical-materialist grounds, must grant that, despite the mystification, some partial truth is run up against in theories of "catachresis," "hybridity," etc. There is a genuine problem to be grappled with here, and it will do no good simply to cast off as specious jargon something that earlier versions of third world cultural nationalism, often with a false consciousness and jargon of their own, tended to treat as a simple matter of "returning to the source." Aijaz Ahmad justly singles out this same passage from *Outside in the Teaching Machine* as evidence that Spivak unwittingly converges on the right-wing cultural nationalism of Hindu fundamentalists (who also insist that no "historically adequate referent" can be had in India for such "western" things as democracy and constitutionality).⁹ But he thereby risks conveying a tacit belief that the exposure of the poststructuralist mystification obviates the need for a historical-materialist understanding of "catachresis."

It is precisely this latter understanding that Schwarz, more than anyone working today I think, has substantially clarified in essays such as "Misplaced

Ideas," "Nationalism by Elimination" and in the as yet untranslated work appearing in the 1999 volume of essays, *Sequências brasileiras*.¹⁰ The central insight running throughout is, rather than to think out the puzzle of catachresis as ultimately resolvable on its own terms, to "stand" it instead back on its "feet" and thus to grasp it as that precise form of "inverted consciousness" corresponding to a concrete *mode of socio-economic being*—"Brazil," for Schwarz—that *itself* constitutes the radical "difference" of the "postcolonial space." The problem of catachresis—of imitation, of "misplaced ideas"—is a *false* one, and yet its very falsity obeys a social and historical *necessity*.¹¹ The *solution* to such a necessarily false problem cannot be to solve it on its own (false) terms; but nor can it be to reject the problem out of hand, as if it were merely the result of a chance mistake or a lapse of consciousness. The "return to the source" as a search for origins leads, as in the peeling away of the skins of an onion, to nothing. But "one cannot solve the problem by going to the opposite extreme. Philosophical objections to the concept of originality tend to regard as non-existent a real problem, that it is absurd to dismiss."¹²

Schwarz, that is, simply brings the Marxian theory and critique of ideology to bear on the catachrestic puzzle. But note that this conceptual move, obvious as it may at first seem, requires that we think not just the "idea" in its positive content but *also and equally* its accompanying effect of "misplaced-ness" as ideological reflexes. The seemingly self-evident truths of a nineteenth-century European liberalism—e.g. the right of the individual to be judged on his or her own "merits"—become, in the setting of a slavocratic Brazil, "ideologies to the second degree," "necessary illusions" no longer (as in "first degree" ideology, per Schwarz's wonderfully succinct definition) "well grounded in appearances," but still grounded, nonetheless, in the social, economic being of a ruling class so conditioned by the extreme "social duality" of "its" national formation that it cannot generate "ruling ideas" of its own.¹³ "Favor" not "merit" decides the fate of the individual, but if it were to acknowledge and defend this reality openly and directly, the official, ruling consciousness would already be undermining its own exceedingly narrow basis for self-legitimation. It is because of this, reasons Schwarz, that the "misplaced idea" much more readily lends itself to its social, emancipatory critique: "widely felt to be a defect . . . this system of displacement certainly did debase ideological life and diminished the chances for genuine thought. However, it made for a scepticism in matters of ideology which could be both thorough and effortless."¹⁴

But, in order to raise this critique itself to the highest level of theoretical consciousness, one must carefully avoid falling back into the more Eurocentrically Marxist procedure of representing the "ruling ideas" as if the self-transparency and, so to speak, nation-centeredness of their enveloping social space were automatically assured. The very social, class space in which the ideological mechanism functions must never cease to be

thought of in its simultaneous condition of provisional self-integration and extrovertedness—“*diverso mas não alheio*.” That is, one must think critically by means of the already developed Marxian categories, but at the same time think *against* their own tendency to “catachresis” or “misplaced-ness” by working a social and economic reality never systematically addressed by Marx *back* into the categories themselves. For, if, as Marx writes, the categories of social and political-economic theory are themselves “but forms of being, conditions of existence” raised to the level of consciousness, then so too raised to consciousness must be the differential gap—social and historical, i.e. “material” in nature—that appears, on the superficial plane of ideology, merely to “misplace” them in relation to a “Brazilian” or “postcolonial” material being. It is in this way that I understand Schwarz when, commenting again on Cardoso’s *Capitalismo e escravidão*, he notes that the “rather macabre dislocation” between concepts of productivity and capitalist economic rationality and the reality of the nineteenth-century Brazilian slave economy neither “disqualifies” these concepts nor is itself “insignificant.” “Quite the contrary: then as now, discrepancies [the original Portuguese here is “*inadequações*” or “inadequations”] of this sort opened our eyes to the dark but decisive side of contemporary history, to its global side of unintended consequences that developed behind the backs of the principal parties.”¹⁵

Returning to Spivak, I think it must be evident by now that in posing the question of postcoloniality in the terms of a relation of catachresis she rightly seeks to avoid the relapse into the nativist position apparently prescribed by Parry. But she does so only so as to take up an uncritical stance herself with respect to the *social and historical conditions* underlying catachresis as “ideology to the second degree.” The abrupt assertion that postcoloniality, because it must always start out from the place of its own “founding catachreses,” is therefore a “deconstructive case” marks, in fact, the precise place of Spivak’s own—and much contemporary postcolonial theory’s—failure to consider the postcolonial as a “case” for a critical *social* theory. True, there is no illusion here as to the possibility of solving the catachrestic puzzle *qua* puzzle, whether through a neo-third-worldist cultural essentialism or a surrender to Eurocentric “universals.” And Spivak does not deny that claims for “democracy,” etc. must still continue to be made from “postcolonial space,” despite the absence of “historically adequate referents”—although just why this should be so is not explained. The uncritical turn here is not, to repeat, the pointing out of a historical inadequation of concepts, but the stubbornly and rather conventionally literary-formalist failure to attribute this inadequation to historical and social factors themselves, as if its explanation could only be sought in the abstract, formal content of the concepts or “concept-metaphors,” or in their discursively structured field. Once this failure is in place, the turn to a supposed “politics” of deconstruction, in which, for example, the post-

colonial plots to subvert Western imperialism itself by revealing the catachreses lying at its own foundations, or by exposing the West's transcendental need for a "subaltern" or "hybrid" other, etc., etc., strikes me as practically a matter of indifference. Once again we find ourselves on the fantasmagorical terrain of Bhabha's "ambivalence."¹⁶ One might just as well believe in the propensity for imperialism to deconstruct itself.

It seems to me painfully typical of our present political and intellectual moment that the most theoretically impoverished aspects of "postcolonial studies" should now be aggressively exported from the metropolis to regions such as Latin America, while the genuinely thoughtful and rigorously theoretical work of a Roberto Schwarz still languishes in relative neglect outside of Brazil. Here, as I have already stressed, we see a certain colonialism still at work, not to mention a universal and unabated hostility to Marxist thought. Indeed, even Marxists sometimes have to learn to turn their faces to the South. Inducting Schwarz into the vanguard corps of metropolitan "Theory," however, while it would surely have many beneficial side effects, would ultimately be self-defeating. And in any case, it is not a likely scenario. The still predominantly poststructuralist literary-academic ambience that quickly finds a niche for a Néstor García Canclini or a Nelly Richard will find little to tempt it in works such as "Misplaced Ideas." Rather, it will have to be the northerner's job, Latin-Americanists and otherwise, to extrapolate and disseminate. What we need, to be precise, is not just to reproduce the theoretical space cleared by the work of Roberto Schwarz but to reproduce, for purposes of our own, local intellectual and cultural politics, the United States, say, as the conceptual equivalent of Schwarz's "Brazil." "Brazil," that is, neither as globalized simulacrum nor as endless catachresis, but as the space, "*diverso mas não alheio*," of our own millennial version of the mediated, concrete universal.