

# NAKED PUNCH

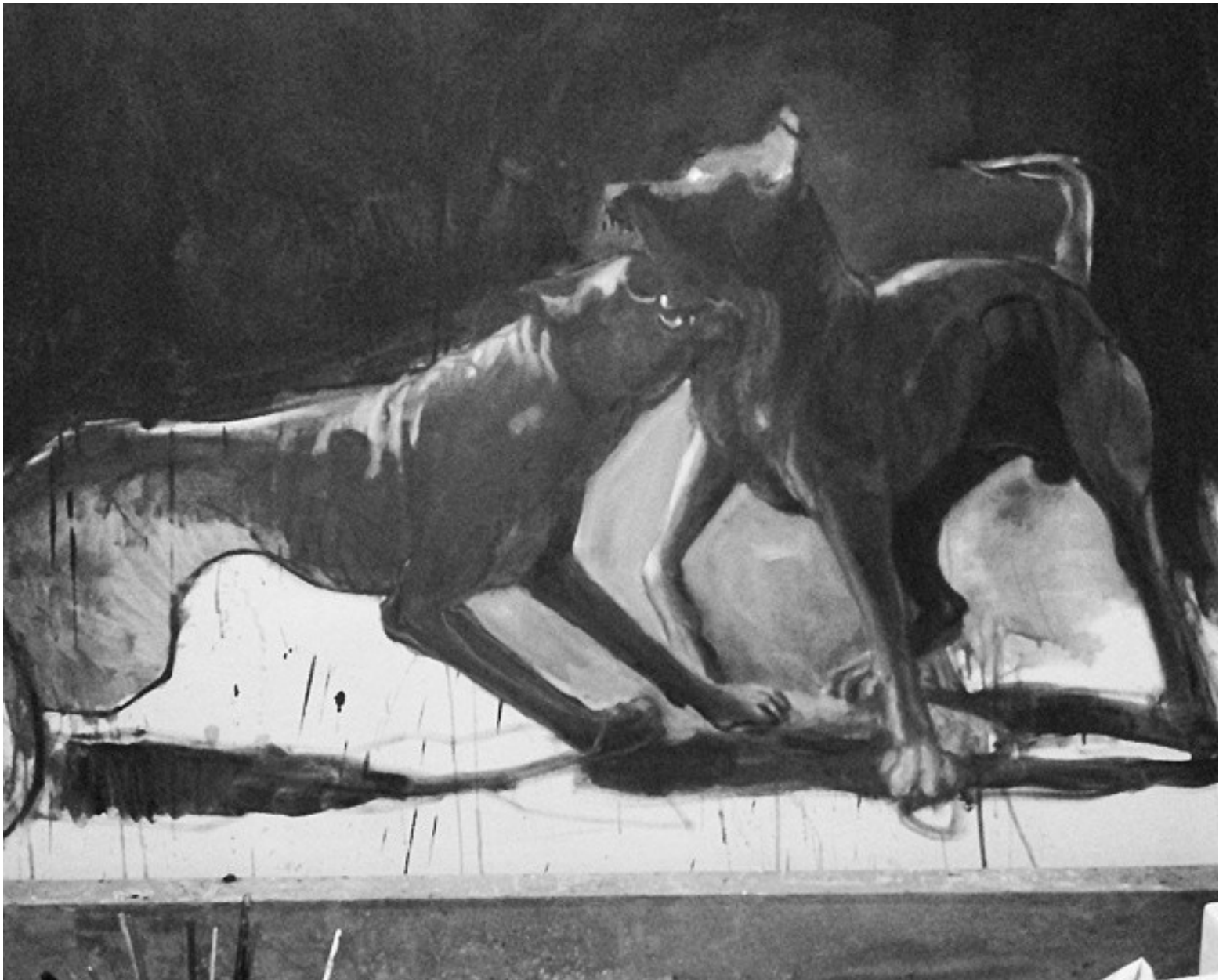
AN ENGAGED REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND THOUGHT

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ISSUE 17: £2





Zahid Mayo - Untitled

# THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

**The politics of antipathy between Saudi Arabia and Iran, forged in the smithy of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, is reduced now – for obvious reasons – to the contradictions of sect.**

## **Satanic Cycle.**

Fourteen years ago, the United States and its allies began a major operation against al-Qaeda called the “Global War on Terror” (GWOT). That war, which is ongoing, began in Afghanistan but then expanded to include large swathes of the planet – from the Philippines to Nigeria. States, built after great sacrifice and difficulty, collapsed under the weight of GWOT – Afghanistan and Iraq, both fragile, could not withstand the stress of US full spectrum domination, insurgency and counter-insurgency. Across the Sahara, states fell as a consequence not only of the GWOT but also of the new trade regime set in place by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) – Libya and Mali had the greatest catastrophes, but not far behind were the victims of Ebola and al-Qaeda, of predatory mining companies and rapacious ruling elites. Syria, once a proud nation, is now prone – a fragile shadow of its own self-esteem. From the West’s point of view, the GWOT has largely prevented any attacks on its own territory. The price for that has been the destruction of the lives of tens of millions of people. There is a *Charlie Hebdo* attack each day in the land of the GWOT. It goes by without sentiment. It provokes the creation of more distress. It gives permission for the GWOT to continue. It is a

Satanic Cycle.

## **Non-State Making.**

Strikingly, in the war against the Islamic State and the Taliban, it is no longer the armies of states that are capable in the fight. In Syria, the most competent outfit is the Lebanese militia, Hezbollah, helped along by newly created Syrian militias (including the fearsome *Shabiha*). Iraq’s army, routed from Mosul, Ramadi and Fallujah, is a pale shadow of the militias such as the Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and the Kataib Hezbollah. Fearful of the fissiparous violence of the 1990s, the Afghan government has tried to rein in the local *mujahideen*; but with the impossibility of making gains against the Taliban without such militia, the government of Ashraf Ghani has once more turned to them. It is the age of Non-State Actors fighting Non-State Actors, this militia against that one. Charles Tilly’s aphoristic claim that modern states are a product of the institutions of war could be turned on its head – states are being destroyed by war, and non-state militias are creating fiefs of their own rather than states with a broader, less sectarian claim.

## **Bombing.**

Desiccated by the avarice of finance capital and bloodied by

the resistance in Afghanistan and Iraq, the states of the West are no longer willing to risk land occupations in their wars. They prefer to bomb from on high – whether from manned or unmanned (drone) aircraft. Assassination attempts masquerade as bombing raids, as the Western craft seek out this or that target for the never-ending GWOT. Taking a page from the Western and Israeli guide-book is the royal family of Saudi Arabia, whose war in Yemen is a mirror of the GWOT and of the periodic Israeli pummeling of Gaza. Saudi jets bomb the Yemeni landscape, claiming increasing civilian lives. The strategic gains from the bombing are doubtful. Nothing on the ground – whether in Iraq, Palestine or Yemen – is clarified by the harsh bombardment. Today the Intellectuals of War are too cagey to be honest about their strategic motivations. A hundred years ago, the imperialists were much more candid. Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill had some ideas when the Kurds rebelled in northern Iraq in 1922: “I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes. It would spread a lively terror.” Squadron chief Arthur “Bomber” Harris, who followed Churchill’s orders, later reported on one such raid: “Where the Arab and the Kurd had just begun to realize that if they could stand a little noise, they could stand

**Etienne Balibar** is a French Marxist philosopher and currently Anniversary Chair of Contemporary European Philosophy at Kingston University London and Visiting Professor at Columbia University. He is the author of: *Reading Capital* (with Louis Althusser and al., 1965); *Spinoza and Politics* (1985); *Race, Nation, Class* (with Immanuel Wallerstein, 1988); *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (2001); *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness* (2013) among many others.

**Martín Espada** was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1957. He has published more than fifteen books as a poet, editor, essayist and translator. His forthcoming collection of poems is called *Vivas to Those Who Have Failed* (2016).

Other books of poems include *The Trouble Ball* (2011), *The Republic of Poetry* (2006), *Alabanza* (2003), *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen* (2000), *Imagine the Angels of Bread* (1996) and *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators* (1993). His many honors include the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Creeley Award, the National Hispanic Cultural Center Literary Award, an American Book Award, the PEN/Revson Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship. *The Republic of Poetry* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The title poem of his collection *Alabanza*, about 9/11, has been widely anthologized and performed. His book of essays, *Zapata's Disciple* (1998), has been banned in Tucson as part of the Mexican-American Studies Program outlawed by the state of Arizona. A graduate of Northeastern University Law School and a for-

mer tenant lawyer in Greater Boston's Latino community, Espada is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

**Vijay Prashad** is Professor of International Studies at Trinity College and Chief Editor at LeftWord Books. His most recent work is an edited collection - *Letters to Palestine: Writers Respond to War and Occupation* (Verso) - and a monograph - *No Free Left: The Futures of Indian Communism* (LeftWord). He has also written *The Poorer Nations, The Darker Nations, Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting, Karma of Brown Folk* and he has co-edited *Dispatches from the Arab Spring, Dispatches from Pakistan and Dispatches from Latin America*. He writes regularly for *Frontline*, *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, *BirGün* and *The Hindu*, as well as for *Naked Punch*.

bombing, they now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage; they now know that within forty-five minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape."

#### **Efficacy.**

Al-Qaeda, the main target of the GWOT, makes gains in Syria and Yemen as well as around Mali. Its offshoot, the Islamic State (IS), metastasizes across North Africa, in the Arab East and into South Asia. Bombing raids in Iraq and Syria make little difference to the audacity of the IS. Its brutality has made the West reconsider its aversion to al-Qaeda, with some Intellectuals of War now offering the latter as a "moderate" alternative. The Saudi bombing in Yemen leaves al-Qaeda alone. What began as a War on Terror has morphed now into the great Cold War of West Asia, between

the monarchical Islamism of Saudi Arabia and the republican Islamism of Iran. The West has become the air-force for both in different theaters, offering its bombing runs for the Iranian alliance in Iraq and for the Saudi alliance in North Africa. Forgotten is the goal of removal of the forces of radical *salafism*; the new goal is to reestablish the pillars of imperialism, namely Saudi Arabia and Israel. It is the West's lowered ambition. The politics of antipathy between Saudi Arabia and Iran, forged in the smithy of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, is reduced now – for obvious reasons – to the contradictions of sect. Saudi worries about the export of Iranian republican Islamism are no longer the surface conversation; what dominates the debate is the Shia-Sunni fissure. It is what provokes the annulment of the Sykes-Picot divisions in the Arab East and the emergence of a new sectarian geography. But sectarianism is merely the stimulant. Other geographies of domination are at work, buried over by the more vulgar display of religious symbolism and hatred. Exits from either sectarianism or imperialism are not visible. Perhaps this is precisely the point of the never-ending GWOT.

**It is the age of  
Non-State Actors  
fighting Non-State  
Actors, this militia  
against that one.**

**Katrine Bregengaard** is a researcher based in New York. She is the founding director of the Human Rights Exhibition Project and a research fellow at the Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University. Her work critically investigates the genealogy of human rights theory, practice and their claim to universality, particularly in relation to their representations in visual culture. She has exhibited her research on human rights in New York and Copenhagen, and is currently organizing exhibitions in France and Australia. Katrine holds an MA in Human Rights from Columbia University and a BA in Philosophy from Copenhagen university. She has worked on safe migration and labour rights in Kathmandu and at Danish Mission to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. Katrine is interested in the state of progressive politics and counter hegemonic practices.

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Sabeen Mahmud - by Zaheer Alam  
Kidvai

**We dedicate this issue to comrade Sabeen, who was murdered in the streets of Karachi for allowing the Baloch a space to speak at her cultural cafe. We salute her solidarity with the oppressed and critical attitude.**

**January 20, 1975–  
April 24, 2015**

# CLASS STRUGGLE



Qalandar Bux Billiwala - Untitled, 2015

That for many – billions – life isn't  
Either easy,  
a bed,  
a house furnished,  
or food in the stomach,  
it isn't  
a laugh  
an orgasm  
or smiles

its hard, like ground constantly, over centuries,  
pounded.  
its sick – like bills that pile up and up and up and  
up.

It smells of unemployment and underemployment  
Of salaries taken away  
It feels like sleep on cemented floors

Its about dreams leant to be unlearnt  
Above all its about numbness – of the sofa and  
the tv and the social media - or of the 8 to 6's and  
8 to 6's and again those 8 to 6's  
It's about constant daily defeats induced by debt –  
life is not an academics essay or a poets poem or  
a artists film or canvas. It is a defeat of your poem  
– never written, of your film- never made, of your  
painting – never painted.

Because life is this for the billions but for some,  
a few:

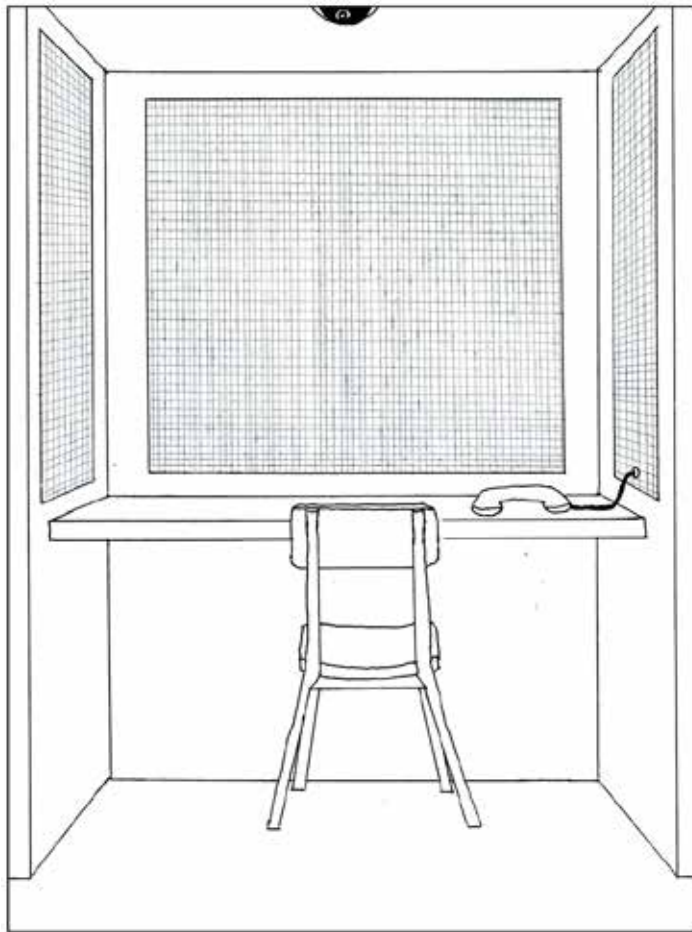
A breeze  
An acquired taste  
A bouquet  
And yoga

A wave of the hand, a trip to the beach, or a schol-  
arship to the US and holidays back and forth,  
That it is scented with fruits and salaries  
That it feels like metal and ice and wooden steer-  
ing wheels,  
And uncles and aunties in high places,

Because life for them is  
Water (imported) garlanded with petals  
And for the billions – life is deferred,

Because of this  
I believe in class struggle.

# THE GUN-SLAVE CYCLE

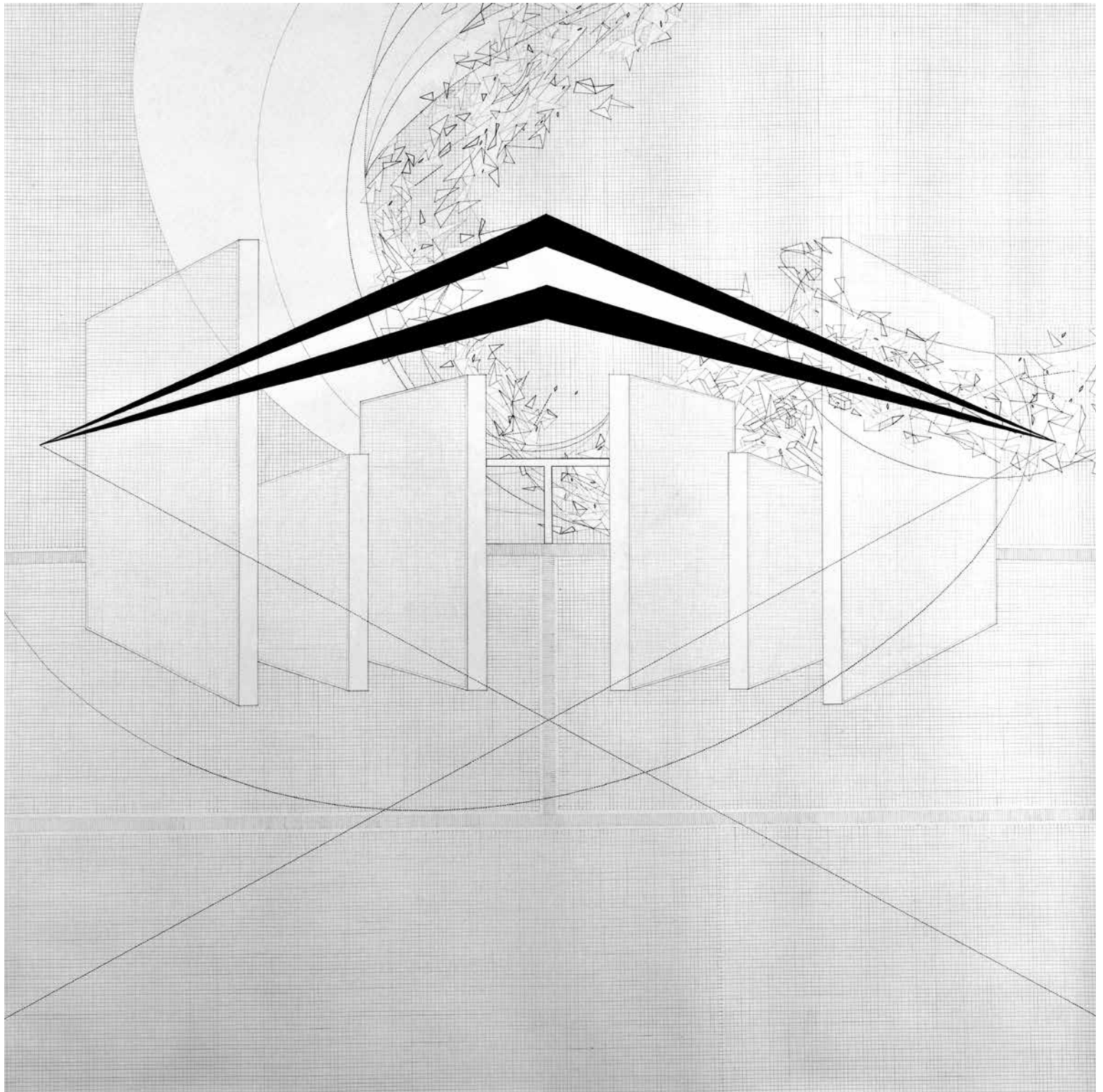


Tings Chak, excerpt from  
*Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention* (2014)

The prisoner sits  
across from me  
in the cramped airless cubicle  
behind the plexiglass  
hands gently folded  
during this middle passage  
between life and death  
wrists ringed by steel  
forged by  
Smith & Wesson  
It is an old story  
of guns and slavery  
Into the lower decks of the ships  
the European merchants loaded  
chests of "fine gunns walnut  
Tree Stocks"  
"trading guns"  
"buccaneer guns"  
musket balls  
blunderbusses with shot  
boxes of flints  
"caskes of powder"  
branding irons  
"3 doz'n and 2 padlocks"  
chains and neck-rings  
manacles and leg-irons  
The hardware of bondage  
to bind the cargo  
plantation-bound  
The guns for an African king  
to wage unjust wars  
to produce the next shipment  
in the gun-slave cycle  
Like manufacturers of old  
Smith & Wesson  
makes the guns  
the handcuffs  
and the profits  
on an ancient metal circuit  
of violence and misery

— Marcus Rediker  
SCI-Greene prison

Waynesburg, Pennsylvania



Seher Shah - Untitled (Walls), 2010  
Images courtesy Green Art gallery and the artist.

# CONFLICTUAL UNIVERSALISM(S): A CONVERSATION WITH ETIENNE BALIBAR



The question of universalism has haunted philosophy from its very beginnings. What are universal values? Who can claim them? How can we discuss universalism in a time of difference? Aren't contemporary claims to universality essentially expressions of Western imperialism? And what exactly is universalism today, if not dead and buried with God, King, and Karl Marx?

The question also haunts the French philosopher and professor Etienne Balibar who worries about a book that he has promised his publishers but can't seem to finish. The topic is too complicated, he says. Yet, Balibar was quick to declare himself a universalist when we met at Columbia University in New York to discuss these issues. Yet, rooted in the speculative thinking that forms part of the French Marxist tradition, Balibar demands that we deconstruct the question of universalism in a way that goes beyond the idea of unity. Instead, he suggests to reformulate the question around the idea of "multiverse" - a term he borrows from the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, and elaborates through Hegel and Judith Butler's idea of a "Conflictual Universalism". This idea, enables us to think of universal values resulting from multiple and heterogeneous conditions. And, rather than merely calling for the inclusion of excluded groups into a pre-stabilized community called "humanity," it opens possibilities of emancipatory politics as a dynamic and indeterminate process always in the making.

Balibar is not only a fascinating philosopher whose thinking unfolds as he speaks, but also a storyteller with hours of anecdotes and tales from a past, which today can seem a world apart. While listening to him speak, it became clear to me that there is an intimate relation between

his thinking, his politics and his life, which itself reflects a conflictual relationship with universalism. Spanning over six decades Balibar's work reflects not merely a history of invigorating ideals worth dying for, but also the untimely death of such ideals. As a prominent student of Louis Althusser in the 1960s, Balibar coauthored the seminal volume *Reading Capital*. Taking his master's reading of Marxism to heart, together with many others, Balibar hoped to save the revolution from itself in shadow of Stalin's calamities. Yet, by the end of the Cold War, the increasing exposure of Soviet totalitarianism led him to critically explore concepts, such as 'human rights,' 'democracy' and 'citizenship'.

Despite the radical left's allegations of his thought being contaminated with liberal sensibilities, Balibar has put forth a convincing argument to reread (and reclaim) these concepts as inherently politically and historically conditioned -- ideas that can offer a critical language for emerging socialist movements. This endorsement continues to set him apart from his contemporary cohort of Marxist thinkers, such as Badiou and Žižek.

Ultimately, Balibar's dialectical thinking urges us to avoid simplifying and condensing important tensions and dilemmas of our time into universal categories of seamless unity. His intervention in the critical thought of our time stands as a constant reminder of the generative qualities of considered conflict, rather than contrived harmony, which keep both philosophy and politics alive.

*The interview is a revised version of a conversation that took place in November 2014 at Professor Balibar's office at Columbia University's French Department.*

## DECONSTRUCTING THE UNIVERSAL

KATRINE BREGENGAARD: Today, universalism is evoked everywhere in the form of human rights, democracy, equality, justice and so on. Yet, several philosophers, primarily postmodern, appear to have declared the concept for dead along with other Enlightenment ideals, or at least they have a highly ambivalent relationship to any enunciation of the universal. Is it possible to speak of the universal today? And if so, how do we do it?

ETIENNE BALIBAR: I believe that if we take a contemporary example with contemporary philosophers who are labeled postmodern — right or wrong — their position is seldom a pure and simple rejection of the idea of universalism. Let me put it in Derridean terms, because I'm his student and increasingly so as I feel the increasing necessity to use some of his notions: In this case, I want to introduce the idea that what is important is not to say something simplistic as "I'm for universalism" or "I'm against of universalism". Rather, it is to deconstruct the idea of universalism, which is a form of internal critique that I believe is indispensable to understand what we mean by it and to change it. The two things are not separable. It is true that I'm not postmodern in the sense of rejecting universalism. I do believe that we need to gain a universalism to come, or a universalism in the making, and I sympathize with a number of

**I want to introduce the idea that what is important is not to say something simplistic as "I'm for universalism" or "I'm against of universalism". Rather, it is to deconstruct the idea of universalism**

formulas that are used by people around us — planetarism instead of cosmopolitanism or new internationalism perhaps. The question of the post-human or post humanism is very difficult one. But above all that, I think that we absolutely need a critical history of the idea of universalism to begin with it's name. Of course that is a very complex history that I am not going to tell you now and also I don't have it. I'm working on a segment of that history, but everything is problematic....

There are very good reasons, as you said earlier, that it begins with the Enlightenment. A certain form of universalism, which I tend to call —in quasi-Marxist terms involving a certain distance from Marxism —, a civic bourgeois universalism. But it is not true that what we call universalism today began with the Enlightenment. I am also an increasing Hegelian. Because Hegel was writing in a moment of intense polemic about precisely the value and content of that civic bourgeois universalism — the universalism of the Enlightenment, he became aware of the fact — to borrow a very useful formula from Butler — that universalism or universalities are conflictual and conflicting. They're conflictual internally and they are conflicting with

other discourses with both things being profoundly linked to one another.

**KB:** Can you elaborate on how universalism can be conflictual? Does it mean that we simply accept that there are different ways to understand the world — or how exactly do different universalist discourses co-exist?

**EB:** Well, you might think that the other discourses with which universalistic discourses conflict are non-universalistic. That is what we hear everyday. For example, the universality of human rights, which includes the equality of every human being, conflicts with views which deny that. So they are non-universalistic in both accounts. On the one hand, they deny the equality of all humans and on the other hand they claim to express, not the values that are shared by the human kind as such, but that belong to specific communities, which can be religious, national, or cultural. Take the well-known discourse on Asian values for example. This very morning I was reading up on the blatant and provocative discourse made by the Turkish president Mr. Erdogan who is notorious for speaking against equal rights among men and women. In referring Sharia, he says: 'how can you believe that men and women are equal? It is clear that women must make children and not do politics and war. And it is clear that they must make children because you just have to look at their body. It is made for

that exact purpose. They have breast to feed their children...' In this case, you have all the ambiguities between equal and similar, which is the common trick in arguing that they are not equal because they are not similar.

But returning to my point, which concerns Hegel and Butler and the concept of conflictual universalism. What is most interesting is not only conflict between a universalistic discourse and a non-universalistic or particularistic discourse, but a conflict between antithetic universalistic discourses. The great conflict between antithetic discourses with which the enlightenment was busy was the conflict between Christian faith, or more generally monotheism, on one side and on the other side the construction called the Enlightenment, which essentially combines two ingredients: one being the juridical and moral equality of human beings and the other being the scientific and also juridical rationality that is supposed to express the very constitution of human understanding. When you put the two things together you have what Kant calls the transcendental subject being the one that inhabits the thinking and the moral conscience of every human being and on the other hand it is the construction of human reason. Put the two things together then you have the core and the well-known canon of the Enlightenment discourse.

But what Hegel says, in the famous section of the Phenome-

**You have to face the fact that before the universalistic discourse of the Enlightenment there is another universalistic discourse — which is that of what we tautologically today call universal or universalist religions.**

nology, is that you have a conflict between two discourses that he presents as educational discourses, which have to do with forming and shaping the individual: One, which is based on reason — that is the Enlightenment — and the other, which is based on faith. Hegel is repeating what very interestingly originated long before his time in the Arabic speaking and Islamic world, because the very first great treatise on the antagonism of the idea of the two antithetic modes of truth is written by a great Muslim philosopher in the thirteenth century — namely Averroes, in the treatise *Fasl al-Maqāl*, also presented as origin of the “averroist” notion of the “double truth”.

So, that leads to the idea that the debate on universalism did not begin with the Enlightenment. You have to face the fact that before the universalistic discourse of the Enlightenment there is another universalistic discourse — which is that of what we tautologically today call universal or universalist religions. And that again is a very tricky issue because there are competing versions of monotheism. But they share some ideas about revelation and a number of essential dogmas or creeds concerning the creation of the world.

**KB:** Isn't the universalism of the Western Enlightenment just a secularized form of Christianity - replacing God with reason?

**EB:** That's the crucial question —

and if I ever write the book, which I had announced, but now am completely reorganizing — I have to deal with that which comes from monotheistic idea in secular enlightened universalistic discourses. One possible answer is everything — everything comes from there. As a consequence, the idea of secularism or secularization should be understood as mere transformation. Talal Asad, with whom I have been starting to discuss, maintains that the secular universalism that the West has been imposing, especially on the Islamic world — and by the West he means Europe and North America — is the secularized version of Christianity. So what they call secularism is in fact Christianity. I would personally argue that he says either too little or too much because that leaves Islam aside. I do believe that Islam and Christianity are just branches of the same monotheistic idea at a certain general level. But then again, you could move ahead in that direction and explain that, yes, I mean, many of the features of Enlightenment universalism and in particular those that appear imperialist (including human rights) and the strong accent, which is put on unity and uniqueness is just one formulation of the faith in the eternal God. So on the one side, it is presented as a consequence of revelation, and

on the other as a consequence of the Declarations, which the French and American citizens made when, they became aware of the imperatives of reason. So the monocratic or monarchic element that is inherent in monotheism, is something that you may argue passes from a religious discourse to a secular. This is an important guiding thread on which we need to work — an instrument of deconstruction of the question of universalism — the legacy of monotheism within rationality or the idea of the enlightenment.

But it is not as simple as that: On the one hand not every religion is monotheistic, so there is already a danger of somehow using this criterion to endorse the idea, that is not purely colonial as it has roots in monotheistic discourse, that polytheism — other world views — which do not know the revelation is somehow primitive or limited. But it is also the case that there are universalistic religions, which are not monotheistic perhaps not even theistic, such as Buddhism, and that is fascinating because it takes you completely beyond the limits of Europe, and because it dissolves the link between the idea of universalism and the monarchic element in monotheism. The reason why philosophers and theologians in West are fascinated by Buddhism is because they think this is a way to overcome the superstitions that are attached to a certain representation of God as a power.

**MULTIVERSE:**

**KB:** What about the limits of universalism, and how do you negotiate these in the context of cultural translation and politics of difference?

**EB:** In my imaginary book, which I had promised to my publisher after two public lectures I gave last January, I stumbled upon so many difficulties that I gave up. It wasn't possible for me to concentrate and my ideas were not clear enough. So I told them that the book will come, but it will be much longer. It remains one of my intentions to address, in my final chapter, a question that is formulated today in many different ways and toward which many of my colleagues are heading. Bashir Diagne, who is increasingly becoming an advocate and representative of the idea of universality in translation in trying to introduce into the concept of the universal the impossibility for such a discourse to be truly universal if it is expressed in one single language. With language comes values and representation. Bashir goes as far, not only to object to the idea that one should not learn foreign language because only one is needed, but he says: 'if you want to be universalist or cosmopolitan in practice you need to speak several languages.' Not only the main languages such as French, Chinese, or English, but the minor languages, such as African languages. It would be good for your understanding of universalism to translate into other lan-

guages what you think and say in one language because you'll find that you cannot, and therefore you have to problematize what seems to be the obvious.

Another idea that I like is the idea of my Italian friend Giacomo Marramao, which he elaborates in his book recently translated into English as the *Passage West*, which is about universality of differences. The difficulty here lies in the "of" because the monocratic and monotheistic representation, including its rationalist version, understands this as including the particular within the universal or subsuming all the differences under more general categories — be they moral or political or logical — as for example reason and democracy which are supposed to be general enough to contain all the possible variations. But the idea of a universality of differences makes no sense if it remains within this hierarchy. So that's the problem of this notion. I am trying— and I'm not saying I've achieved it — borrowing essentially from a great Marxist, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, the expression: multiverse, which is the idea to break with the imperative not only of unity, but of unicity. That's very difficult. Leibniz famously wrote that if you compare / synthesize / think together your different elements you are practically introducing an element of unity. The idea is an idea of unity of opposites. A multiverse is a universe that is not unified or that is not reducible to a single law, principle, or total-

**“A Revolution Within the Revolution Itself”. I believe that that was very much our general concern at the time. We looked for it in every possible direction. That is not only true for us, but for most Marxist of that generation, who were bitterly aware that the Soviet Union and state communism in socialist countries had arrived at an impasse.**

izing category. Of course, that presents a problem and not a solution. We hear the motto all the time: Let's be for the many, and not the one. So, if you're a philosopher you want to think about how to construct the problem of the universal.

#### **MARXISM**

**KB:** Let's turn to the history of your work in relation to universalism, which seems equally conflictual. Without mentioning your age, I believe that you have been around for some time, at least long enough to have engaged with different discourses and ideologies of universalism. You have also experienced a loss of faith in such ideals or a reevaluation of them. (I'm of course talking about Marxism here). If we return to some of your earliest work with Althusser, in which you were try-

ing to create a grand theoretical framework by re-reading the history of Western philosophy from a Marxist perspective, you must have had a more uniform universalist discourse compared to the conflictual one you're proposing today?

**EB:** Believe it or not, 2015 will mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of the two collective books that made my master, Professor Althusser, world famous. The first being a collection of his own essays on Marx called "For Marx" and the second collective book, which unfortunately is known and widely supposed to have been written by Althusser and me, because the edition on which most translations have been made included only my essay in addition to his and therefore leaving aside the other three, and particularly the essay by Jacques Ranciere — who is now a very known philosopher in his own right — that had terrible consequences and takes us back to internal conflicts that are both personal and political and usually not very elegant to say the least. But, leave that aside.

Because of this anniversary, I'm increasingly asked to talk on the story of the collective seminar, which led to the publication of the book. Since we were Marxist, however critical, or heretic or perhaps innovative — don't believe we had an absolute privilege in that respect — I would gladly tie together two formulas at the time. One which comes from

Habermas and one which comes from my friend and comrade, Régis Debray — the one who went to Bolivia with Che Guevara.

The phrase that comes from Habermas is simply that reconstruction is the opposite of deconstruction. Reconstruction of historical materialism or Marxism is a phrase that he used as a book title several years later. So, Habermas had been young at some point in his life -- don't misunderstand me, I have perhaps more than several of my friends and comrades, great admiration for Habermas in many respects, even if his philosophy is not mine. When Habermas was young, he was a Marxist like others and in his own way inspired by the legacy of the great founding figures of the Frankfurt school, Adorno and Horkheimer. He shared the idea that it was not just about the continuation of Marxism, but about a reconstruction of Marxism. This involved elucidating the philosophical prerequisites of Marxism and especially getting rid of the philosophical dogmas imposed on it during the 20th century. His way of doing that, through the Frankfurt School, led to an increasing importance granted to Kant and German idealism.

Althusser's agenda and we with him adding things that did not entirely come from Althusser... It is very wrong to believe that the whole text "Reading Capital" has a single philosophical inspiration that simply derives from the

teaching of Althusser. Of course none of us — neither me nor Ranciere — would have been able at the age of 23 to write 150 pages in a grand philosophical style, if we had not somehow been mesmerized by our master and induced into believing that you don't have to wait. But, we derived our ideas from other masters as well, who were our professors at Sorbonne at the time or outside the Sorbonne: Canguilhem, who is now recognized as a major figure of history of science and epistemology, partially because he is supposed to have been Foucault's master; and Lacan, the great reformer — for better or worse — of French psychoanalysis. That was not something Althusser was against, but something we contributed to the project. So on the one side we have reconstruction of historical materialism — of a new philosophical basis elucidating the obscurities.

The other motto that I believe is revealing is one that Régis Debray proposed in a famous pamphlet that he wrote in collaboration with Fidel Castro some years later. He had come as young friend visiting the revolutionary leader, who in turn was happy to find this kind of interlocutor. Out of that came a book with the title "A Revolution Within the Revolution Itself". I believe that that was very much our general concern at the time. We looked for it in every possible direction. That is not only true for us, but for most Marxists of that generation, who were bitterly aware that the So-

viet Union and state communism in socialist countries had arrived at an impasse. I was too young to be completely aware of it at the time of the Budapest uprising in 1956, which was such a choking experience for communists and socialists all over the world. I was on the contrary fully conscious in 1968 when the Soviet troops marched against the young rebels and protesters in Warsaw and Prague. So, there was an awareness of the fact that the revolution had become not only frozen, but in a sense perverted and reversed against its own ambitions. In spite of many revelations and discourses, we did not always have a full understanding of the extent of which Soviet and China were totalitarian regimes, but we were certainly completely aware of the fact that this had arrived at a dead end. Marxist proved to have totally differing notions and ideas concerning how to start again. Some were more reformist, they believed in the Prague Spring and thought that a certain amount of not only democracy, but perhaps even liberalism or in any case pluralism, had to be introduced against the single party rule of socialist countries. Or that this should be the way that Western European communist should invent their own road to socialism. That became known as Eurocommunism in which the Italians became a leading force. Others looked towards Cuba and Latin American guerrilla warfare. And others started to look towards China and believed in the cultural revolution as a complete break

## The cultural and historical discourses such as feminism on the one hand and anti-imperialism on the other hand were decisive for people in my generation

and renovation. But the formal thing that was common to all was the idea of a revolution within the revolution — meaning that the very concept and strategy of the revolutionary transformation has to become revolutionized itself. We believed it liberated revolution from its pervasion into bureaucracy and oppression while at the same time re-inventing it in new terms.

So, both the idea of reconstruction of Marxism and the idea of the revolution within the revolution mean that you believe in what Alain Badiou has now called the communist idea — and to believe in the communist idea is to believe that there is a certain universal truth in the idea, which is that the line of progress for mankind as such is one that leads to a classless society called communism through the contradictions of capitalism. That is a form of universalism.

**KB:** So, can you say that after monotheistic religions and civic bourgeois universalism of the Enlightenment, you have another form of universalism, which is communism?

**EB:** Yes, or you can think, which is more perilous for Marxists, that it is a sort of combination of both.

It is a new secular religion. This category is very dangerous to use, especially for me, as it was invented by 20th century anti-communists who were anti-totalitarian political philosophers (I don't give names), but which do apply to certain essential aspects of communism. However, communism is a very contradictory form. It is the perfect illustration of the notion of conflictual universalism. Not only because there are several branches of communism permanently fighting one another. But because as Althusser said — and I keep thinking that it was a great formula and invention — Marxism by its very nature, which he took to be a science, but defined in terms, which he called schismatic science — a science whose development cannot exist if it doesn't become divided among conflictual notions. But it is conflictual in an even deeper sense because it is permanently torn between its own aspirations towards rationality and faith. It is also caught between different ideas of emancipation. Some of which are very strongly individualist, which is the great subject of today's reflections on ethics. Marx was absolutely not of the idea that communism would mean that the individual subjectivity would be the expression of the common mind. On the other hand he was a fierce critic, and rightly so, of the selfish, egoistic, and individualistic dimensions of the bourgeois society. He believed that an emancipated social order is one in which individuals are not permanently forced

to fight against one another.

### MARXISM AGAIN

**KB:** As a Marxist you were, of course, a universalist?

**EB:** Communism or Marxism is universalism in the classical sense — and it is a conflictual one as well. But the struggle that I'm embarked in now, especially when I have to answer questions about my Althusserian past, which inevitably leads to interrogating the kind of Marxism we all shared. That leads me, again, in the direction of the idea of the multiverse from a slightly different angle. To talk of Marxism is to talk about discourses, politics, and strategies of emancipation. So, it is emancipation from alienation, domination, or oppression. Let us connect the idea of exploitation of labour with the idea of class struggle. That is a very broad program as class struggles don't always take the same form, because labour is exploited in many different ways, and there is not only labour of the worker, but also the domestic labour of the woman, etc. But the Marxist idea of emancipation from these forms of oppression and exploitation remains a valid one. It is very important to assert it in today's circumstances since it is very much as a result of the collapse of communism that we find the increasing dismantling of the traditional organization of the labour movement. When people see the latent economic inequalities and injustices of to-

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day's world, they tend to return to Marxism — that's in the air. Again, a revolution within the revolution is probably needed today to make good use of it, but Marxism is not something that everybody rules out — far from. I would say that this is a problem that is characterized by a certain universality, meaning: there is exploitation everywhere and the categories that you may want to use to describe the forms and issues at stake in exploitation at the global level are essentially the same. You need to take the differences into account, but these differences are of degree and not of nature.

If you look at the women and the children who are exploited in the worst possible forms in Bangladesh or Africa to make the goods that we use everyday here and which we don't think about too much, these are forms of exploi-

tation that are exactly the same that Marx would describe in the 19th century Europe. Perhaps, if you look around, there are some blind spots even here where you find them as well. But the question again becomes about universalism, because that is not the only form of exploitation or oppression, which this orthodox Marxism was not really able to comprehend. Althusser is an interesting case, because he invented notions that clearly seek to pluralize, multiply, radically diversify our understanding of struggle and practices, such as the notion of overdetermination. The essential idea is that you'll never have a historical moment or process in which humans are struggling for one single reason or in one single direction. However, since he was a Marxist he remained of the opinion that in a sense the multiplicity of practices, values and ideals must be determined in the last instance. So perhaps they are not reducible, but they contribute to an essentially unique transformation process which is class struggle.

Of course, the cultural and historical discourses such as feminism on the one hand and anti-imperialism on the other hand were decisive for people in my generation to understand that you cannot use a category of universalism in that way. So, I'm struggling with the logical difficulty of thinking. Here, I probably have to shift from universalism to universality — to the idea that there are dif-

**if we adopt a more historical, critical and deconstructive approach, we may understand that the debate as it remains framed today between advocates and opponents of human rights as universalistic discourse is a debate that has been framed by the understanding and conditions of use of all these categories in historical periods that roughly coincides with the absolute primacy of the nation-state.**

ferent universalities or universals, which claim recognition even at the same time, so that you cannot sacrifice one to the other. If you say that there is a general problem of the emancipation of women from oppressive norms that has been governing mankind for millennia you know that it is not simple, and we have to do with the fact that it is not possible all over the world to immediately find a single language in which to express it. But I'm a universalist. I believe that there is an essential element in the emancipation of women. I don't buy the discourse that in certain parts of the world women want to be independent and in others women gladly accept to be permanently treated as inferior humans. I believe that there is an essential element of universalism in the emancipation of women. But that's not the same as class. You'll hardly find a situation where the two things are totally separate. While wom-

en are oppressed because they are not considered equal and treated, as old philosophers said, as persons who are by nature dependent on others, their work is also exploited either inside or outside the house. So these are universalities that are different and intersecting. If you have different universalities unfolding or claiming recognition in the same situations there will be conflict. This will not be peaceful. It is the same for cultural rights and emancipatory objectives. Here, I gladly resume Althusser's word "overdetermination". I want to push the understanding of the idea of overdetermination — of the multiverse — beyond the limits of which Althusser himself would keep it. Because he did not deny that there were other emancipatory struggles, but essentially for him, the one that formed the last instance, was class.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

**KB:** I want to turn to the question of human rights - a discourse that dominates contemporary emancipatory discourse and that you've also adopted. Speaking of Marx and his critique of the civic bourgeois notion of rights, you have dared to invoke or reread the French Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen as a response to this critique and you also adopted concepts such as democracy, internationalism, that have often had within left wing circles a guilt by association: 'It is not us who talk about

human rights and democracy its the liberals.' It seems to me that you're caught in a conflictual situation yourself among two different traditions?

**EB:** Yes, and no — I'm no better than you or many others. I permanently find myself in a situation in which I would love to be able to propose a third discourse. Not in what is famously called the third way in politics that practically means 'let's find a compromise'.

Perhaps a sort of dialectical overcoming is not a silly idea because returning to the very beginning, if we adopt a more historical, critical and deconstructive approach, we may understand that the debate as it remains framed today between advocates and opponents of human rights as universalistic discourse is a debate that has been framed by the understanding and conditions of use of all these categories in historical periods that roughly coincides with the absolute primacy of the nation-state. So even if you don't refer to state, but speak of cultures or collective identities, essentially what you're very often reenacting is the dilemma: are there values — rational, scientific, moral, juridical — that range over the particular sovereignties, or is it only from inside such sovereign communities that you can claim and institutionalize rights.

I'm almost certain that we'll have to deal with the nation state for generations. That is not neces-

## the cultural and historical discourses such as feminism on the one hand and anti-imperialism on the other hand were decisive for people in my generation

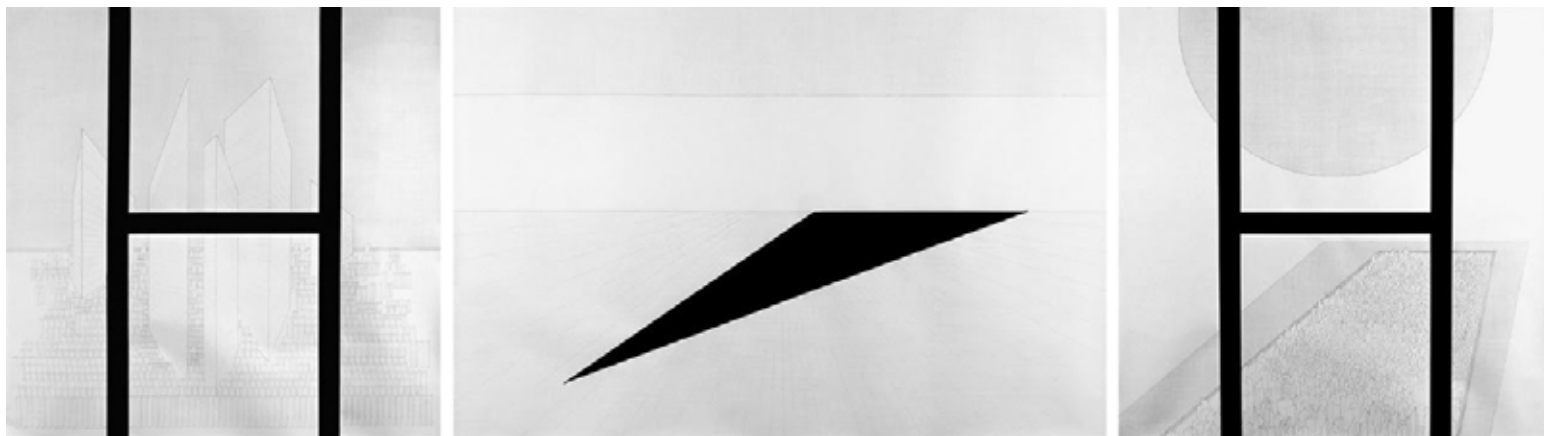
sarily a bad thing in all aspects as there are things to be done with nations, or to put it negatively: when you embark on ignoring the nation or the fact that people belong to nations you sometimes produce catastrophic effects that are not the realization of the beautiful cosmopolitan dream. I nevertheless believe that this historical period is behind us now. So there is an increasing number of vital issues, whether intellectual, cultural, or social, that are not reducible to the representation of what is inside the nation or culture and what is outside. That is why our contemporaries are so interested in everything that has to do with the trends such as border, identity, hybrid, and with the multiplicity of identities that increasingly characterize individuals. There are resistances, but there are also very powerful transformations at stake, and that at some point form a basis on which we can try to build another discourse that isn't fought in the dilemmas or dichotomies you were describing.

**KB:** Historically, human rights appear to have become a viable universalism by the end of the Cold War where prior dreams and grand narratives were left in ruins. Before then, human rights were not really part of social movements in the same way as we witness today. When and why did you adopt the language of

human rights? Did they appear as a moral alternative to the blind alleys of politics?

**EB:** I believe that the conjuncture of the late 1980s and early 1990s marked a turning point in my relationship to a certain tradition of discourses on human rights. At the time, the critique of totalitarianism preceding the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of Soviet system was increasingly influential, but also practically connected with forms of resistance to oppression that you could not ignore even if you were a Marxist — except perhaps Badiou who is extremely dogmatic in this respect. This was the fact that dissidents struggling from the inside of Soviet types regimes including China, not to revolutionize the revolution, but simply to dismantle the state police, the single party system, and the imposition of one single ideology, had to express their objectives in terms of human rights. So either you were for or against. I didn't think I could be against. Interestingly, dissidents had different political views on the future. Some of them were becoming advocates of not only dismantling the Soviet, but of the alignment on Western forms of liberalism — practically meaning capitalist democracy. Others were thinking precisely of a third discourse: a different kind of socialism. But on the specific issue of liberties the discourse had to be one of rights.

It has always been one of my interests, which came from Althus-



Seher Shah - Emergent Structures, 2011

er and others, to read the classical political philosophers who are the founding figures of this discourse. From this point, Spinoza is not very different from Locke. They are both very different from Hobbes who argues not only for a strong state, but an omnipotent state, whereas Spinoza and Locke with all their differences are liberals in that sense.

To me, it was totally uninteresting to try and retranslate a discourse of human rights, particularly the claim of individual freedom, into a different language because you should avoid the bourgeois language of human rights since you were a Marxist and didn't want to drop the idea of class struggle, socialism and communism. I think this takes me away from Lenin and closer to Rosa Luxemburg, who in the middle of the Soviet revolution very clearly indicated exactly that.

Another thought I had was accelerated by philosophical and political discussions at the time in France, which essentially took the form of a controversy between two anti-totalitarian figures with very different backgrounds. On the one side Claude Lefort — the disciple of Merleau Ponty with a Trotsky background — who had written a famous critique of bureaucracy titled "The Invention of Democracy". On the other side, you had someone less well known, Marcel Gauchet, who is now increasingly becoming a nationalist, but at the time was a liberal anti-totalitarian. They

both returned to an eighteenth century problem: is human rights a politics? Gauchet would say human rights is an ethics and moral, but not a discourse of politics. It is a system of values, but not a politics in the institutional, strategic or practical sense of the term. So you must claim human rights, but then you have to adopt a political project to add something practical, which in his case would be the liberal democracy of the Western type.

Lefort argued the opposite. Human rights are politics. One has to remember here that the dispute over humanitarian intervention and humanitarianism as a political implementation of the idea of human rights was not yet the center of the debate. It became so a little bit after. Lefort had two things in mind, which I completely sided with and forgot my Althusser.

First, the claim of rights — and that is not something to be viewed in a linear historical progression. The problem with individual rights and freedom that emerged at the very center of the political stage and framed it in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries bourgeois revolutions is not, as Marxists believe, something of the past. It remains something of the present, even if we don't believe that these are the only rights, because we will continue to deal with regimes, which for one reason or another — religious, political, or even security as war against terror — are

limiting or suppressing different types of individual freedoms, including free speech, expression, and communication over the internet. Therefore, to claim these rights and to to organize collectively that is where the political enters the play. I've always believed that rights applied to individuals and that they're reclaimed, vindicated and imposed collectively.

Then Lefort had another idea that his title "Invention of Democracy" also encapsulated, which is not only the idea of the internal return of the question of rights, but the idea that the list of fundamental rights is not a closed one. Of course that is an element both of continuity and critique with respect to the eighteenth century declarations, because they say that rights are first individual; second, equality; third, property; fourth, resistance to oppression, and of course property is especially problematic. But the important idea is that this is not a finite closed list of rights, so therefore an emancipatory politics of human rights is one that invents new rights or discovers that other rights are also fundamental. So it remains in a sense the same inspiration and it can and probably must clash with the liberal interpretation of fundamental rights. I tried to argue in my idea of equal liberty that you can read the French Declaration in such manner, that there is no real disjunction between human rights on one side and civic rights or forms of em-

powerment on the other side. All this to say that I would side with the idea that human rights are a politics, because I maintain that the human rights are also civic or linked to a certain idea and practice of citizenship, which is the most general term for political participation, and that in a sense gives a guiding thread to enter the debate that you were asking me about: How to be caught or not to be caught in the dilemma.

**KB:** Take the well-known question of humanitarian interventions, they are often done in the name of universal human rights...

**EB:** I never believed that a discourse of human rights only concerns values. I always believed it also concerns actions. But of course I do not believe that the actions are by definition progressive or emancipatory, so here my philosophical political pessimism returns. You can either liberate or oppress in the name of human rights. I'm not absolutely opposed to the idea of humanitarian intervention and would never refer to the kind of reasons that is invoked by nationalist — don't break the sacred line of the national sovereignty! I'm bitterly aware of the fact that in practice humanitarian interventions, which always claim to be justified by immediate danger for categories of populations such as oppressed women of Afghanistan, victims of genocide etc, this is in the hands of the major military and economic powers of the world. The international organi-

zation that is supposed to be at the same time, justifying, legalizing and supervising such interventions, namely the United Nations, is increasingly either at the best impotent and at the worst an instrument that states manipulate. This shows to me that the very idea of intervention is problematic because it always already install a total dissymmetrical relationship of power in which there are victims and saviors. In some cases, you cannot hide behind the idea that you shouldn't treat any population as simple victims, as they should be able to master their own destiny, and therefore don't do anything because it would be oppression and imperialist. It remains the case, that the a priori categorization in terms of victims on one side and benefactors or rescuers on the other side is almost a contradiction in terms of universalist principles. Even if it is not a case of an imperialist intervention covering itself with humanitarian motives - such as presenting it as preventing genocide where in fact its question of preserving the access to oil or uranium, which is the case for almost all the French interventions in Africa these days - there is still a deep contradiction in presenting an intervention as a form of liberation, even if you don't believe in the absolute character of nations. That leads me to the question which I believe is or should be at the heart of the contemporary reflections on post-national or transnational forms of citizenship, namely, cooperation. I've used the term co-citizenship

— as much equality as possible between those who need help and those who bring help, when it comes to addressing humanitarian intervention.

#### ON EUROPE

**KB:** I want to direct our conversation towards Europe. Since the 1990s your work on universalism — both philosophically and politically — has been centered around Europe. You've called it a 'province of the universal' and seen great potential in Europe as a site for bottom up democratic practices that could inspire new transnational institutions and co-citizenship, and counter the racist populism that is on the rise. Are you still as optimistic today in light of the European debt crisis and what seems to be an ever-growing problem of xenophobia and racism? Is Europe still a platform from where new emancipatory discourses can emerge?

**EB:** I'm very depressed. [Laughs]

I could say that I did at some point share Habermas' illusion of the European construction because it was putting the closure and narrow mindedness of national politics into question. It presented a possible breakthrough in the direction of a more cosmopolitan or universalistic policy. But at the time, I had a special interest in the question of migrants, so my illusion took the following form: I was completely

**I always said that Europe will become more legitimate if its offers to its population better opportunities than they would have had in their separate nations. What you see is the opposite. It is not more democratic than in the states, but less, and the national democracies are not in good shape. There is little democracy at the European level, if any, and there is also less democracy on the national level.**

on the side of those militants and activist in France who argues for civic rights for the migrants themselves and which are broader than local rights, which exist in some countries. The Netherlands, which is rapidly moving in the opposite direction unfortunately, proposed the idea that non-nationals could take part in local elections, and I was of the opinion that this should expand to national elections as well, and thought that the European construction would facilitate that. I thought it would become clearer that civic participation is something that exist on different levels than the national. So its local, its national, its transnational as well. I was completely wrong. What happened was not that the European construction progressively imposed that broader vision, but lead to a strong nationalist reac-

tion. And EU itself became sort of a security super-state. The EU is not an intermediary stage between the national and a transnational institution of rights. It's an additional layer of bureaucracy, as Lefort perhaps would say, of concentrated power. There are cases in which it has good effects, particularly because there is a constitutional tradition in Europe which includes a monitoring of states in terms of their implementation of certain individual rights. I'm sensitive to that because France was repeatedly warned and even condemned for its handling of minorities, particularly the Roma people. The Roma are very strongly discriminated - a story almost as long and tragic as the story of the jews in certain parts of Europe. But to the shame of France etc. in the recent period the discrimination and the prosecution still exist. So, the EU criticized that, which is good, but it is not a radically new situation. And especially returning to the question of migrants and the circulation of individuals, norms, and ideas the key issue is the status of the border as a state institution. For years I advocated for what I called the democratization of the border. On the one side, at the level of principle, that certain ideas which are in separate places in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights- such as the rights of circulation on the one side, rights of settlement or naturalization on other places are brought together and considered twin pillars of a different condition for persons. On the other

side, I mean things, which are inspired by other examples of inventions of rights in the modern history. Especially in the field of labour rights, namely something that is not discretionary that is not imposed by the state — even if its in the name of rule of law in a completely discretionary manner — but that is discussed and negotiated and gives rights to the collective rights of the victims or the concerned people so that a migrant is not just a pawn in the hands of an old powerful administration whose decisions can not even be discussed. That is something that is extremely unlikely in today's circumstances, in which Europe is becoming increasingly a sort of collective security mechanism against external threats.

Regarding the crisis, I published a text titled "Europe's final Crisis?" in which I was reacting to the crisis in Greece and expressing solidarity with the Greek population. I reacted to the extreme neoliberal forms of adjustments imposed on them not only to repay their debt but to make it possible for the banks to continue making a lot of money on those debts. The rules of the IMF that usually apply to loans to foreign countries were in this case applied by the EU to part of its own population. It was like saying: "OK you Greeks, and also Spaniards, you are for us (the

majority of European countries) what the bad and failed states, such as Argentina, used to be for the community of wealthy nations. In fact you are not part of us, we have no duty towards you, or the only duty we have is to impose on you what will destroy you." I have given up the idea of publishing something in that general form, because honestly I'm not able to follow the course of the events, but I remain convinced of the fact that the old mantra — what I've called the application of the Hegelian idea of the cunning of reason — that the idea that Europe is inevitable and therefore Europe rescues itself after each of its internal crisis, and even takes advantage of the crisis to introduce new elements of solidarity etc, doesn't work in this moment.

Being French, you cannot avoid to be extremely wary of the nationalism developing in all our countries. It is all the more worrying, because I can understand the reasons for why a French person who is now jobless -- or any other European working class for that matter — because Europe

as such does not address a person who is now jobless, because Europe itself does not address in a radical manner the economic crisis in which we are and keeps subsidizing the banks and subsidizing or supporting the core countries at the expense of the periphery trying to have some European firms - not only German — becoming competitive on the world market, whereas all the losers can be abandoned to their own fate. I can see why people blame Europe for that, and Europe has to be blamed because, at least negatively, it doesn't do the right thing. I always said that Europe will become more legitimate if its offers to its population better opportunities than they would have had in their separate nations. What you see is the opposite. It is not more democratic than in the states, but less, and the national democracies are not in good shape. There is little democracy at the European level, if

any, and there is also less democracy on the national level. This can be blamed on the European construction and the progressive dismantling of the welfare state, or on people who fear that it will be dismantled thinking that the right thing to do is to keep the outsiders away otherwise they'll come and take our bread, our drugs, and our hospitals.

#### **THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PHILOSOPHER**

**KB:** You have expressed that the task for the philosopher with respect to universalism is to understand the logic of its contradictions and in a dialectical way investigate their dominant and subordinate elements, to uncov-

er how they work and how they can be twisted through the interaction of theory and practice. Is this something you are committed to?

**EB:** Yes. A philosopher has to think about that in trying to keep the two extremes of the many — of the multiverse — and the very concrete issues of circulation and social cohesion. That's something I've kept from Marxism. I think the philosopher is someone that travels more or less easily between the two poles: abstract reasoning and concrete issues.

**KB:** The famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach by Marx and Engels is interesting to return to here, as it talks about the role of the philosopher and the relationship between practice and theory...

**EB:** Yes, yes, yes.... this is very often read wrongly. Most people believe that it means leave philosophy aside and go to the place where politics is done to transform the world. But no, it

doesn't say leave speculation or interpretation aside. It says — in a somewhat teleological manner — to do it from the perspective of changing the world. That was a big word: Changing the world.

[Both laugh]



## The Right Foot of Juan de Oñate

On the road to Taos, in the town of Alcalde, the bronze statue of Juan de Oñate, the conquistador, kept vigil from his horse. Late one night a chainsaw sliced off his right foot, stuttering through the ball of his ankle, as Oñate's spirit scratched and howled like a dog trapped within the bronze body.

Four centuries ago, after his cannon fire burst to burn hundreds of bodies and blacken the adobe walls of the Acoma Pueblo, Oñate wheeled on his startled horse and spoke the decree: all Acoma males above the age of twenty-five would be punished by amputation of the right foot. Spanish knives sawed through ankles; Spanish hands tossed feet into piles like fish at the marketplace. There was prayer and wailing in a language Oñate did not speak.

Now, at the airport in El Paso, across the river from Juárez, another bronze statue of Oñate rises on a horse frozen in fury. The city fathers smash champagne bottles across the horse's legs to christen the statue, and Oñate's spirit remembers the chainsaw carving through the ball of his ankle. The Acoma Pueblo still stands. Thousands of brown feet walk across the border, the desert of Chihuahua, the shallow places of the Río Grande, the bridges from Juárez to El Paso. Oñate keeps watch, high on horseback above the Río Grande, the law of the conquistador rolled in his hand, helpless as a man with an amputated foot, spirit scratching and howling like a dog within the bronze body.

# COLONIALITY OF THE PRESENT IN CONVERSATION WITH MARTÍN ESPADA

Qalandar Bux Memon: Would I be right to read the poems “How We Could Have Lived or Died This Way” and “The Right Foot of Juan de Oñate”, as evoking the unfinished processes of decolonialization? Or put another way, the coloniality of the present?

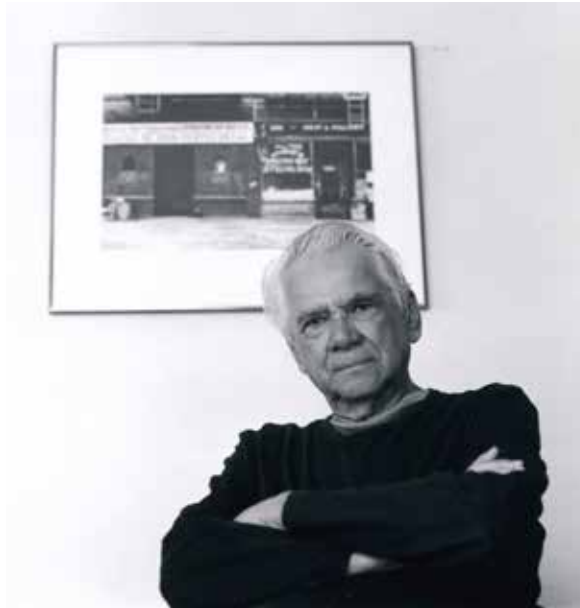
Martín Espada: Yes. These two poems deal directly with the “coloniality of the present.” They do so by looking back into the past.

Let’s start with “The Right Foot of Juan de Oñate:” Juan de Oñate y Salazar was a Spanish conquistador who became the first governor of Santa Fé de Nuevo México—modern-day New Mexico. In January 1599, Oñate suppressed the resistance of the Acoma Pueblo by killing eight hundred villagers and enslaving five hundred more. At Oñate’s command, Spanish troops amputated the right foot of all Acoma Pueblo males over the age of twenty-five. Almost exactly four

centuries later, in 1998, a Native American group utilized an electric saw to cut off the right foot of the statue at the Oñate Monument and Visitors Center in Alcalde, New Mexico. In 2007, another statue of Oñate—the largest equestrian statue in the world—was installed at the International Airport in El Paso, Texas. The poem is based on visits to the sites in Alcalde and El Paso, in the company of novelist John Nichols and scholar Arturo Madrid, respectively, and on conversations with both.

The conqueror goes on conquering. The territory has changed hands—from the Spanish empire to the empire of the United States—but the glorification of the colonizer goes on; the symbolism of conquest is everywhere. Meanwhile, the indigenous people over whom Oñate sought dominion keep crossing the imaginary border between México and the United States.

**To “access” my role as a poet, I must be accessible. I mean “accessible” in terms of clarity (i.e. language and purpose), but also in terms of availability.**



## HAUNT ME

*for my father*

I am the archaeologist. I sift the shards of you: cufflinks, passport photos, a button from the March on Washington with a black hand shaking a white hand, letters in Spanish, your birth certificate from a town high in the mountains. I cup your silence, and the silence melts like ice in a cup.

I search for you in two yellow Kodak boxes marked *Puerto Rico, Noche Buena, Diciembre 1968*. In the 8-millimeter silence the Espadas gather, elders born before the Spanish American War, my grandfather on crutches after fracturing his fossil hip, his blind brother on a cane. You greet the elders and they call you *Tato*, the name they call you there. Uncles and cousins sing in a chorus of tongues without sound, vibration of guitar strings stilled by an unseen hand, maracas shaking empty of seeds. The camera wobbles from the singers to the television and the astronauts sending pictures of the moon back to earth. Down by the river, women still pound laundry on the rocks.

I am eleven again, a boy from the faraway city of ice that felled my grandfather, startled after the blind man with the cane stroked my face with his hand dry as straw, crying out *Bendito*. At the table, I hear only the silence that rises like the river in my big ears. You sit next to me, clowning for the camera, tugging the lapels on your jacket, slicking back your black hair, brown skin darker from days in the sun. You slide your arm around my shoulder, your good right arm, your pitching arm, and my moon face radiates, and the mountain song of my uncles and cousins plays in my head.

Watching you now, my face stings as it stung when my blind great-uncle brushed my cheekbones, searching for his own face. When you died, *Tato*, I took a razor to the movie looping in my head, cutting the scenes where you curled an arm around my shoulder, all the times you would squeeze the silence out of me so I could hear the cries and songs again. When you died, I heard only the silences between us, the shouts belling the air before the phone went dead, all the words melting like ice in a cup. That way I could set my jaw and take my mother's hand at the mortuary, greet the elders in my suit and tie at the memorial, say all the right words.

Yet my face stings at last. I rewind and watch your arm drape across my shoulder, over and over. A year ago, you pressed a Kodak slide of my grandfather into my hand and said: *Next time, stay longer*. Now, in the silence that is never silent, I push the chair away from the table and say to you: *Sit down. Tell me everything. Haunt me.*

The same people he despised go on being despised. And yet they keep coming. It must also be said: if oppression knows no borders, neither does resistance. Thus the chainsaw.

The same applies to “How We Could Have Lived or Died This Way.” The poem draws a comparison between the slave-patrols and slave-catchers of the historical past with the police killings of men and boys of color proliferating in the present. That’s not a coincidence: the police perform the role of enforcing the internal colonization of these communities.

The poem refers to eight different documented cases. Your readers may well be familiar with three of the more recent and notorious cases. To reiterate the facts: “The man hawking / a fistful of cigarettes” refers to Eric Garner, an unarmed forty-three-year-old African-American and asthmatic who died in a chokehold applied by a New York City police officer in Staten Island on July 17, 2014. “The 300-pound boy” and “the body left on the asphalt for

hours” refer to Michael Brown, an unarmed eighteen-year-old African-American shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. “The next Black man, / fleeing as the fugitive slave” refers to Walter Scott, an unarmed fifty-year-old African-American shot five times and killed by a police officer in North Charleston, South Carolina on April 4, 2015.

However, the poems also refers to little-known or utterly forgotten cases. “The conga player” refers to Martín “Tito” Pérez, a Puerto Rican musician and photographer who died in police custody—alleged to have hanged himself with his hands cuffed behind him—in the East Harlem section of New York City on December 1, 1974. He was a friend of my father; this was my awakening to the realities of lethal police brutality.

I want to emphasize, though, that this poem is also about resistance. Not only are the victims of police violence demonized; so, too, are the protesters. That’s why I use the epigraph from “To a Foil’d European Revolutionary” by Whitman, the alliance of the poet with

## If oppression knows no borders, neither does resistance.

“dauntless rebels.” “The rebels marching, hands upraised” refers to the protests in Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere after the Michael Brown killing. And the poets should make clear where they stand and where they march.

QBM: Could you tell us a little about José “Chegüi” Torres and why he inspires you?

ME: José Luis “Chegüi” Torres, from Playa Ponce, Puerto Rico, was light-heavyweight boxing champion of the world in 1965 and 1966. He won the title with a knockout of Willie Pastrano at Madison Square Garden in March 1966, and retired following his knockout of Charlie “Devil” Green at Madison Square Garden in July 1969, after being knocked down and nearly out in the first round. Torres became a writer, mentored by Norman Mailer and Pete Hamill. He published two books—*Sting Like a Bee: The Muhammad Ali Story* (1971) and *Fire and Fear: The Inside Story of Mike Tyson* (1989)—and wrote columns in English and Spanish for various New York newspapers. I knew Chegüi because he was a friend of my father’s, moving in the same political circles. The poem is based several personal conversations with Torres, who I admired first as an athlete and later as a human being. In conversation and in print, he compared the experience of being knocked down to the sensation of “a million ants” entering the body—thus providing the title for the poem.

## A MILLION ANTS SWARMING THROUGH HIS BODY

*For José "Chegüí" Torres (1936-2009)*

There is no storyteller like a storyteller with a broken nose.  
Chegüí would jab my chest before he told the tale, and I would listen.  
He was Puerto Rican, like me, and used to be the champion of the world.

He learned his English at the Army base in Baltimore, cracking  
the sargeant's ribs and jaw with a double left hook, body and head,  
after the Black boys in the barracks taught him what the sargeant  
meant by saying: *Get up nigger. Get up spic.* Years later,  
the sargeant would ask *Do you remember me?* and thank him.

The same left hook knifed the liver of Willie Pastrano at the Garden,  
and he sank to the ropes, a million ants swarming through his body.  
Three rounds later, the referee would tell him: *You have nothing left.*  
The Puerto Ricans at the Garden sang and punched the air for Chegüí  
de Playa Ponce, el campeón, a savior without nails hammered in his hands.

The next day Chegüí awoke with swollen knuckles. He spoke  
from a fire escape at Lexington and 110th Street in El Barrio  
to the Puerto Ricans who gathered in the thousands, roaring  
at every word, janitors and dishwashers ready to march  
and burn down the mayor's mansion at his command.  
*I won the title for all of us,* he shouted, and the fire escape  
shuddered beneath his feet, demon rust loosening the bolts.

One night at the Garden he would fall, legs gone, a million ants  
swarming through his body. When he fell, two men in the crowd  
had heart attacks and one of them died. Chegüí would somehow  
rise and swing, leave Devil Green facedown on the canvas, stumble  
to his corner and tell himself: *You have nothing left.* He used to be  
the champion of the world; now he was a storyteller with a broken nose.

There is no storyteller like a storyteller with a broken nose, but even  
he was not immune to diabetes, the Puerto Rican plague merciless  
as rust. The scaffold of the fire escape would drop beneath him,  
champion of the world and Spanish Harlem, savior of the janitors,  
dishwashers and poets, as it does for all champions and saviors,  
as it does for all of us in the happy crowd, singing and punching the air.

The poem goes beyond “inspiration,” however, to contemplate and critique the nature of what we call “heroism.” Whitman wrote of “numberless unknown heroes equal to the greatest heroes known.” Chegüi’s opposition to racism in the ranks of the United States Army was brave and principled—heroic. But what is “heroism?” The poem also considers the reality that we manufacture “heroes,” in the world of sports and elsewhere, elevate them, and expect far too much of them due to our own personal, political or economic impoverishment, due to our own mortality, projecting ourselves onto the blank screen they must become. Yet they are, in the end, “overcome heroes.” They must fall; they must die, as did Chegüi, as do we all.

QBM: Two of the poems that we are featuring relate to your father, could you tell us a little about his life and influence on you but also, I wonder, as loss of loved ones is such a universal experience, how do you see our relation to those who leave us? I mean you use the term ‘haunt’ - can you explain in what sense you are ‘haunted?’

ME: There is much I could say. My father, Francisco Luis (“Frank”) Espada was born in Utuado, Puerto Rico in 1930 and died in Pacifica, California, in February of last year at the age of eighty-three. He was a civil rights activist, a community organizer, and a leader—some would say **the** leader—of the Puerto Rican community in New York during the 1960s and early 70s, a community of nearly one million people. His history of political activism began in December 1949, when, while stationed at an Air Force in Texas during the days of Jim Crow segregation, he was arrested and jailed in Biloxi, Mississippi for refusing to sit at the back of the bus. He worked with the Congress of Racial Equality, East New York Action, the Puerto Rican Community Development Project and the New York Urban Coalition, among others.

However, my father was, above all, an artist-activist. He was a photographer who founded and directed The Puerto Rican Diaspora Documentary Project, a photo-documentary and oral history of the Puerto Rican migration, hailed as a “masterwork” by

*The New York Times*, resulting in more than forty solo exhibitions and the publication of a book entitled *The Puerto Rican Diaspora: Themes in the Survival of a People* in 2006. His photographs are included in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress.

In December 1964, he spoke at a rally in Brooklyn for community control of schools with Malcolm X. He photographed Malcolm taking questions after the rally; it is his most celebrated photograph. Malcolm X was assassinated only two months later.

His influence on me as an artist and activist, as one who crafts images from words and uses those words to advocate for others, cannot be overstated. It’s much more difficult to articulate my sense of loss, his absence rather than his presence. I am still struggling to define how we relate to those who leave us. As his son, my body is an extension of his body; my mind is an extension of his mind.

I use the word “haunt,” not in the Halloween sense, not in the sense of the haunted house, but in the sense of the “silence that is never silent.” I struggled with the grief; I tried to keep the grief at arm’s length in order to attend to the ceremonies and business of grief,

## HOW WE COULD HAVE LIVED OR DIED THIS WAY

*Not songs of loyalty alone are these,  
But songs of insurrection also,  
For I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the world over.*

*Walt Whitman*

I see the dark-skinned bodies falling in the street as their ancestors fell before the whip and steel, the last blood pooling, the last breath spitting. I see the immigrant street vendor flashing his wallet to the cops, shot so many times there are bullet holes in the soles of his feet. I see the deaf woodcarver and his pocketknife, crossing the street in front of a cop who yells, then fires. I see the drug raid, the wrong door kicked in, the minister's heart seizing up. I see the man hawking a fistful of cigarettes, the cop's chokehold that makes his wheezing lungs stop wheezing forever. I am in the crowd, at the window, kneeling beside the body left on the asphalt for hours, covered in a sheet.

I see the suicides: the conga player handcuffed for drumming on the subway, hanged in the jail cell with his hands cuffed behind him; the suspect leaking blood from his chest in the back seat of the squad car; the 300-pound boy said to stampede barehanded into the bullets drilling his forehead.

I see the coroner nodding, the words he types in his report burrowing into the skin like more bullets. I see the government investigations stacking, words buzzing on the page, then suffocated as bees suffocate in a jar. I see the next Black man, fleeing as the fugitive slave once fled the slave-catcher, shot in the back for a broken tail light. I see the cop handcuff the corpse.

I see the rebels marching, hands upraised before the riot squads, faces in bandannas against the tear gas, and I walk beside them unseen. I see the poets, who will write the songs of insurrection generations unborn will read or hear a century from now, words that make them wonder how we could have lived or died this way, how the descendants of slaves still fled and the descendants of slave-catchers still shot them, how we awoke every morning without the blood of the dead sweating from every pore.

to protect myself from the consequences of grief; I could not. Ultimately, as a poet, but also as my father's son, I feel I should invite the grief, in its most tangible and visceral form, to take a seat at the table. I should invite in all the visions and voices we call memory to "haunt me," even if I'm flooded. It's what I should do as his son; moreover, it's what I should do as a poet. We should, as poets, confront what others avoid, and say the unsayable. Others are counting on us to do exactly that.

QBM: Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Pakistani Marxist poet, famously said that, 'a poet has to be with his/her people'. How do you access the role of the poet/intellectual today?

ME: I am familiar with the great poet Faiz through the translations of Agha Shahid Ali, who was my colleague on the faculty at

the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. I have been deeply influenced by another Marxist poet—Pablo Neruda.

When I visited Chile for the celebration of the Neruda Centenary in July 2004, I was struck by the fact that Neruda is still, even after death, "with his people." On the day I visited Neruda's house and tomb at Isla Negra, I witnessed an extraordinary demonstration. Fifteen or twenty people encircled the tomb in a silent protest. They were carrying or wearing placards with the names and photos of the "disappeared," killed and missing during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship. Democracy had, by that time in 2004, returned to Chile, but there was no justice and no peace for the families of the disappeared, since the killers had never been punished and the bodies had never been found. They had become the conscience of Chile, pressuring the government to investigate, to hold the guilty responsible.

Here's the point: To the families of the disappeared, it made absolutely perfect sense to seek justice at the tomb of Neruda. Once

they learned I was a poet, many of these people spoke to me. I would eventually write a poem about the encounter, called "Rain Without Rain," as I promised them I would do. This was their understanding of a poet's purpose that day.

To "access" my role as a poet, I must be accessible. I mean "accessible" in terms of clarity (i.e. language and purpose), but also in terms of availability. I have given readings everywhere from a tortilla factory in Grand Rapids, Michigan to a boxing gym in Wilimantic, Connecticut. (The latter audience consisted of a team of young amateur boxers, mostly Puerto Rican.) I have visited prisons, jails, halfway houses, drug rehab programs, community centers, and high schools, not only as a poet and teacher but also as a listener, since these places house poets as well.

I believe in the poet as citizen—Shelley's "unacknowledged legislator." I believe in poets organizing themselves, as they did with Sam Hamill's organization in the U.S., "Poets Against the War," of which I was an active member. Ultimately, like Neruda, like my father, I remain an advocate, speaking on behalf of those without an opportunity to be heard.

Martín Espada

## THE BEATING HEART OF THE WRISTWATCH

My father worked as a mechanic in the Air Force, the engines of the planes howling in his ears all day. One morning the wristwatch his father gave him was gone. The next day, he saw another soldier wearing the watch. There was nothing he could say: no one would believe the greaser airplane mechanic at the Air Force base in San Antonio. Instead, one howling night he got drunk and tore up the planks of an empty barracks for firewood. There was no way for him to tell time locked in the brig.

When he died, I stole my father's wristwatch. I listened to the beating heart of the watch. The heart of the watch kept beating long after my father's heart stopped beating. Somewhere, the son of the man who stole my father's wristwatch in the Air Force holds the watch to his ear and listens to the heart of the watch beating. He keeps the watch in a sacred place where no one else will hear it. So the son tries to resurrect the father. The Bible tells the story wrong. We try to resurrect the father. We listen for the heartbeat and hear the howling.