

Rethinking the meaning of regions: Translation and Catastrophe

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Globalization has brought forth a considerable transformation in the meaning of the world's geo-cultural regions. Apart from the excitement or anxiety this may produce, it is undoubtedly an opportunity to rethink the meaning of regions in general and the role of humanistic knowledge in their construction.

The current move from conventional geo-cultural regions typical of modernity since the advent of colonial encounter to postmodern networked forms of organization brings new attention to the interconnections between translation and knowledge in the formation of globalized hierarchies. It is crucial to observe that the hierarchies of central concern are, to speak in very rough terms, of two different orders: the social and the cognitive. Each has its own specificities, yet we are still far from understanding how the relationship between the two may in fact determine the way we understand each individually. Particularly when it comes to the cultural conception of regions, principally nation and civilization, we are invariably caught in an oscillation between the cognitive and the social, the natural and the cultural, the empirical and the transcendental. As such, they should be seen as the complement to Foucault's description, in *Les mots et les choses* (1963), of "Man" as an amphibological

combination of transcendental and empirical components. In other words, the geo-cultural regions form a kind of “habitat”—indecidably natural *and* cultural—corresponding to the “empirico-transcendental doublet” that is modern Man. Precisely because geo-cultural regions straddle not just the division between the natural and the cultural but also that between the social and the cognitive, translation, in particular, plays a crucial institutional role.

No institution epitomizes this role more than the modern University. “The University of Culture”, described by Bill Readings as one of the two great models of the modern university (the other being the techno-science model), must in fact be seen as an *institution of translation*. It is a *national* institution of translation charged with the task of “translating” all knowledge into and out of *nationalized* idioms while at the same time legitimizing in a general way the domestic (i.e., *nationalized*) division of labor at the basis of social class. Its very purpose, beyond the actual content of translation, is to institutionalize and regulate the ratio that constitutes the paradigmatic quasi-object of modern spatiality—those complex models of thought + world that we know as geo-cultural regions. The ratio that governs the distribution of the heterogeneity between thought and world—the much sought-after ‘magic bullet’ of modern social theory in general—is what is commonly summoned under the name of “rationality”. It is no accident that the dominant image of rationality in modernity is a

quasi-object that combines both hierarchies of knowledge and social organization in a single geo-cultural unit called, quite notoriously, “the West”. As discussions in international venues and listserves repeatedly show, it is impossible to consider the ratio between thought and world that accumulates, in primitive fashion, to the “West” without encountering the problem of *ressentiment*. The various postcolonial, postmodern and feminist critiques of “Western rationality” have the signal merit of showing us that *ressentiment* is the repressed other of this particular form of rationality.

In *Disorganized Networks* (2007), a short but vigorous work on the transformations effectuated by networked forms of social organization, Ned Rossiter shows how the new forms of dis/organized networks are not just displacing the geo-cultural regions of high modernity but are in fact posing entirely novel ratios between the social and the cognitive. Significantly, these new networked ratios include an intrinsic appropriation of conventional geo-cultural regions based on ethno-linguistic models. Yet these regions do not function exactly like a “ground”. Their referential function has moved from a spatial register to a social register that concerns the fluid dynamic of majoritarian/minoritarian relations around the globe. Evidently, the displacement of modernity’s geo-cultural regions by the postmodern network does not mean that we have found our way out of the quandary of

quasi-objects! On the contrary, the entire problem of regions as composite or amphibological models of transcendental and empirical, cognitive and social, levels is only further multiplied by the essentially epidemic nature of postmodern sociality and knowledge.

One of the challenges posed by this displacement is that it is occurring before there has been sufficient time for the critique of the colonial and anthropological legacy of geo-cultural regions to acquire currency *in a bilateral way*—in a way, that is, that would cut across the colonial divide between “the West and the Rest”—and to produce thereby entirely new understandings of “regions” based on alternative terms of comparison and alternative models of translation. In fact, given the new, “proactive” interventionism and the rise of resentment-based geo-cultural politics of “return to the West, return to the non-West” today, such bilateral critique is becoming ever more precious. The new rationality being promoted by the displacement of geo-cultural regions by networked-regions bears within it an important contradiction that blocks the passage to alternative pasts as well as futures. Highly communicable, it travels like a contagion; yet the very rapidity of communication imposes normative constraints of “intelligibility” according to predetermined codes.

The opportunity offered by “translation”—as a mode of social praxis, as suggested by Naoki Sakai, rather than a mode of “epistemological rendition”—is the

chance to think in terms of dynamic, generative relationships, rather than normative identity blocs. This means that the relationship takes priority in a temporal sense: the identities (at least as far as we normally talk about them) are formed only after the relational encounter. To take but one example, it would make little sense to talk of/critique the West as a specific identity or amalgam of defining traits, since its very formation (as a mode of translation—and certainly not the only mode possible!) determines both what we know and who knows it. The types of critique that assume the identity of the West at the expense of ignoring the “Western relation” will be easily recuperated into the intrinsically-hierarchical structure (no matter what the reversals and permutations may be) of “the West and its others”.

Translation, in its epistemological version, is thus not just a means of making separate that which is essentially hybrid, it is also a means of assuring that this separation cannot be understood from either side of the separation except in a differential way structurally designed to generate *ressentiment*. Resentment is not so much a psychological condition as an economy of return(s) that concerns the formation of subjective identity through the structure of projective return. Within this economy, translation (in its epistemological version) constitutes a form of “epistemological rendition.” Enticing users into closed spaces of an essentially biopolitical nature, it forms the basis of an order that articulates the social to the

cognitive in a fundamental way yet interdicts the possibility of communication without passing through the circuits of this separation. First, because translation is an integral part of each nation's national language, yet is invariably represented as a secondary or exceptional use of language; Second, because the necessity of "translation proper" between languages is taken as the sign that the heterogeneity existing within a single language is of a totally different order; Third, because the plurality of national languages hides the fact that they participate in a collective order; Fourth, because language itself, at the heart of the modern school, directly becomes an "Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)" in the Althusserian sense; Fifth, because language as ISA develops subjects formed on the basis of *ressentiment* (because nearly everybody will have had the experience in school of being corrected for improper grammar, usage, or pronunciation); Sixth, because there is no commensurability between different experiences of victimization, translation assumes the *de facto* impossibility of becoming other than what one is supposed to be. Translation, in this sense, thus presides over the social and cognitive institution of regional rationalities.

We are in need of a new kind of socio-cognitive movement that addresses this ratio or relationship in an integral way, producing an alternative rationality that allows new social and cognitive relations to take place in ways that completely redefine what

“regions” mean. The fact that such massive reorganization is currently underway is everywhere in evidence today. The question is whether it will be guided by destructive forces of self-immunization/overexposure coalescing around geo-cultural regions—a path that leads to catastrophe—or whether we can together reappropriate these transformations for a new invention?

The process of this alternative rationality produces a temporal schism that necessitates two movements, one towards the past, the other towards the future. On the one hand, it demands a radical rewriting of past history and the terms of comparison that ground humanistic knowledge. The flawed Marxist project of rewriting world history on the basis of class rather than nation or civilization is but a caricature of the kind of project required, yet it can serve, in spite of its fatal flaws, as an emblem of the possibility ahead. On the other hand, it will help us look toward the future with the possibility of going beyond “preservation vs. creation” in an integral way.

Translation and Globalization: a biopolitics of catastrophe

Four fundamental characteristics of current processes of globalization are particularly germane to the concerns of translation theory: 1) the reshaping of geographical scale; 2) the corresponding emergence of disorganized networks; 3) the

central role of technologically-assisted forms of communication not necessarily of a conventionally textual or even oral nature that disrupt temporalities and displace the role of “translators” into new relations of production and consumption as well as new forms of life; and 4) the technologically-assisted dominance of global English and the concomitant precarity of other languages.

Author of what may well be the most widely read work on the relation between globalization and translation, Michael Cronin (2003) details the various ways in which translation as a form of social praxis is being appropriated by a new system of immaterial labor that valorizes affects and knowledge in the creation of new “goods” that appear poised to replace texts as the central concern of future translational exchange. At the end of this well-documented account, Cronin offers an eloquent plea for “linguistic difference”. Arguing on two fronts against extreme homogenization and extreme parcelization, he argues the case for “minority” languages, such as Irish, which find themselves in a position of structural indemnity against the onslaught of global English and the technologies of acceleration, amplification and commodification that it commands.

The figure of this indemnity is, ultimately, biopolitical and catastrophic. In the last chapter of *Translation and Globalization*, Cronin deploys an ecological metaphor—the “fragility of the linguistic ecosystem”—to describe the predicament in

which minority languages find themselves today. This metaphor is not Cronin's alone, but draws inspiration from the emerging field of transdisciplinary studies known as "biocultural diversity" (the title of a widely-cited conference collection edited by UC Berkeley faculty member Louisa Maffi, one of the concept's principal promoters) and the corresponding notion of "endangered languages". According to UNESCO, of the some 6,000 extant languages in the world, nearly half are "endangered". With 96% of the world's languages spoken by only 4% of its inhabitants and 90% of its languages not represented on the internet, most languages today (the bulk of these are aboriginal languages) exist in a state of extreme precarity—save perhaps for the 225 languages that enjoy official recognition by the various member States¹. Cronin asks that we recognize a parallel to the intrinsic contradiction modern societies bear at the heart of their "development": constructed according to a scientific paradigm of knowledge modelled after the natural sciences, they are nevertheless creating immense destruction of the natural environment that they would understand and ultimately control. Just as techno-science is creating, accidentally or not, a regime of unwitting elimination of biodiversity, it appears that globalization is accelerating the well-documented disappearance of linguistic difference—understood in ethnic

¹ Cultural Diversity: Common Heritage, Plural Identities (Paris: UNESCO, 2002 年), 35. See UNESCO's webpage devoted to "endangered languages" at: http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=8270&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

terms—at the global rate of approximately one every two weeks. It is by virtue of this ecological metaphor, running through the entire last chapter of this ground-breaking work, that Cronin pleads for the defense of linguistic difference against the ravages of the new “clonialism”—the homogenization of all social relations under the auspices of neoliberalism globalization into the commodity form, linguistically represented by globally-dominant languages.

Clones, endangered species, bio(cultural)diversity...these are not just metaphors drawn from the biological world now applied to language and culture, they are also powerful organizing themes under which different disciplinary objects and discourses—political, juridical, biological, and linguistic—can be articulated, enabling transdisciplinary modelizations. Ever since The Declaration of Belem (1988) announced that “there is an inextricable link between cultural and biological diversity”², there is a growing social and cognitive investment in identifying current catastrophic trends on a “biocultural” level running parallel to the eco-bio-logical scenarios of global collapse. The growing use of an eco-bio-logical matrix to describe the transformation of linguistic difference begs us to ask how translation relates to another salient aspect of globalization—the “fifth element”, as it were—not normally associated with translation: total catastrophe. In an era when the prospect of accident

² “The Declaration of Belem”, Declaration pronounced on the founding of the International Society of Ethnobiology, 1988. Accessed on 01/16/08 at http://ise.arts.ubc.ca/_common/docs/DeclarationofBelem.pdf

(Virilio 2005), risk (Beck 1986) and catastrophe (Dupuy 2003) on an irreversibly massive, global scale looms ahead of us, language (and by extension translation) seem to present us with yet another scenario for disaster associated with the impending-threat and actually-occurring damage to biological life on this planet. We have entered into an age when large-scale eco-bio-logical catastrophe, from viruses and UV rays to climate change and species extinction, informs everyday life, pushing postmodern society into a relentless search for absolute *immunization* from damage. To the extent that translation would be a *prophylactic* method useful to saving precarious languages from further disappearance, as Cronin would propose, it certainly falls under the category of the prospective catastrophe. A fundamental convergence between the temporality of the catastrophe and that of translation remains undeniable. Today's international regime of translation is itself based on a unilateral politics of proactive temporality that projects into the past the normative identities being sought, for defensive reasons, in the present. Yet the advent of real time information technologies and the increasingly widespread use of machine-assisted translation introduces an element of simultaneity that upsets and even reverses the causal relations of the catastrophic event.

In the face of such chronopolitics, one has to ask what other options exist besides preventive postures of defensive preservation? Can the transdisciplinary, transnational

model opened up by “biocultural diversity” be utilized in the service of linguistico-cultural, even biocultural, invention, or has the very nature of invention been so utterly compromised by the ontology of accidents at the heart of modern techno-science as to disqualify its possibilities? What kinds of hidden relations exist between the search for defensive protection and the processes of destruction now underway?

Undoubtedly these questions bear upon a *political* dimension, since they require *collective action*, the traditional purview of modern politics. Yet there are many ways in which we still do not know how to “translate” these questions and relations into a political register. We are increasingly aware today that *prevention* can become the pretext for invasive interventions of the most violent kind by the apparatus of power. And, as the word “*biocultural*” suggests, these are not simply political questions of a cultural sort, either, yet the main axis of the “biocultural” approach seems content to consider life as something to be *preserved*, rather than *created*. This estranged opposition would be powerless by default to speak about that other part of the social body leading towards re-designing the planet. At the dawn of the age of genetic engineering, where custom-designed microbes are being envisaged as a potential mode of communication³, the challenges to thinking about translation through

³ “Scientists take new step toward man-made life” in *The New York Times*, 01/24/08.

inherently estranged categories is itself part of the catastrophe we seek to prevent.

It is precisely in terms of the distinction between preservation and creation that Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics is especially useful. Foucault's idea of biopolitics stresses the necessity of thinking at one and the same time the power over life and the power of life: power and resistance are seen, in Foucault's view, as indissociable. Resistance cannot be seen as merely a reactive, which is to say dialectic, form of power, the "other" of power, but must be seen instead as generative. It produces subjects, practices and, significantly, languages. The category of the biopolitical emerges as a constitutive moment and not just a collection of constraints that turn "men" into "labor" with the birth of classical liberalism. The idea of an immanent, material ontology underlying biopolitics is intimately related to the diversion of biopower into a politics whose terrain is life and the reappropriation of life. It stresses production as creation rather than reproduction, holding that the only way to install an asymmetry between power and resistance occurs through creation. Otherwise, resistance would amount to nothing more than a counter-force that eventually reinforces (and re-enforces) power. Power acts by regulating forms; biopower by forms of life. Biopolitics, by contrast, brings innovation to life, in both senses of the phrase.

The Immunity of Geocultural Regions and the Viral Logic of Networks

If the opposition between preservation and innovation seen in the politics of biocultural diversity is a typical formation of biopower, we must ask whether there would be a biopolitical alternative? Since the biopolitics of translation and catastrophe converge precisely at the point of postmodern, epidemic sociality and immunological response, I will focus my closing remarks on several ideas I would like to submit to your consideration.

Translation, in the “epistemological rendition” critiqued by Sakai, is a specifically modern regime of geocultural difference that roughly follows the immunological model of community recently identified by numerous theorists (Brossat, Derrida, Esposito) of modern democracy. This immunological regime of translation reminds us of what Latour calls “bacterial culture”: a name for that regime of modernity that gives rise to hybrid objects yet conceals them behind strictly differentiated systems of representation. “Translation” has been one of the principal ways in which such essential hybridity has been masked. Lamarre injects a crucial geopolitical element missing from Latour’s understanding of modernity by situating the development of “bacterial culture” squarely in colonialism, thereby implicitly linking two different types of division of labor (the one a Marxian division between manual and intellectual labor, the other a Foucaultian one between different

disciplines). Under the colonial regime, both types of division of labor are articulated to a biopolitics of anthropological difference.

We will be interested to examine the bacterial logic of colonial modernity particularly in regards to the way in which “the West” has assumed the generalized form of paradigmatic immunological region that supposedly offers an “antidote” to the problems of all other regions. Our goal in so doing is to highlight the difference with the new logic of networks—that of the virus, or viral logic. First, the term “virus” works within a specific field or discipline, to indicate and classify a range of distinct micro-organisms, or, in the case of computer science, a number of self-replicating programs. Second, “virus” acts as a much more generic notion that includes and expands well beyond the constraints imposed by the discipline of study. It is the very generic value carried by the term virus, and not its specific meaning as a field-related specific word that constitutes its cultural significance and discursive functioning.

The SARS epidemic of 2003 that struck Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China dramatizes this question and suggests how the immunological is always-already articulated to the viral: The emergence of a virus *as future risk* associated with a specifically-ethnicized population that also happens to be the most prominent source of migrant labor *and* intellectual piracy highlights the relations between and

interconnections among anthropological difference and the division of labor, subjects and objects of knowledge, civilization and barbarism, normality and mutation, cause and effect, determination versus plasticity, etc., that immunological coding tries to manage.

Immunology is, however, always a step behind the unpredictable genesis of viral mutation. Indeed, the problem of generation forms the decisive distinction between what we have characterized as “bacterial” and “viral” logics. Although the only function of the virus is replication, it is ironically capable of genetic mutation; bacteria is parasitic and cultural. The term virus straddles the line between mathematics and biology, programming language and DNA, determination and plasticity, history and future risk. As such, the virus is neither the sort of threatening/desirable indeterminacy and exceptionalism prized by poststructural philosophies of difference, nor the deterministic code sought after by epistemological renditions of science, but an instance of the uncalculable real that is a central concern for future risk analysis. The so-called “wild card effect” is merely an attempt to reappropriate into calculable form the risk of the incalculable with which we are confronted.

Significantly, Marx’s description of the commodity appears to grant it such viral status. Once introduced into a community, through primitive accumulation or colonial

intrusion, its only goal is the replication of capital; yet the reproduction of the social system is effectively and permanently transformed through the mechanisms of formal subsumption, thereby making any return to the pre-capitalist formation simply impossible. Yet, we wonder, is the commodity itself truly that generative, or is it merely parasitic and dependent on living labor? Consider, as Jason Read persuasively does, the chronology of Marx's argument in *Capital*, i.e., the history of primitive accumulation that is only told, paradoxically, after the commodity form has been described. Taken separately, one might be led to believe that the commodity exists independently of the history that created it. Yet taken as a whole, the sequence of categories and concepts in Marx's texts are neither chronological nor determined by a purely logical or conceptual relationship (their sequence "in the idea") but a presentation, or articulation, of the particular relations in capitalist society. This presentation is a necessary abstraction: what is being presented for thought is not an object, but a series of relations. The fact that social relations today are finally being wholly restructured according to the incipient viral logic of capital is yet another way to understand the transition to real subsumption that Negri and others have said describes our era.

Tronti's seminal insight that it is actually workers' struggles—and not the commodity—that provide the dynamic of capitalist development provides an

incontrovertible point of departure for the question of generative ontology. Negri's insistence on the intrinsically political nature of ontology must be seen as an attempt to take this concern with generative politics to a fundamental level. The stakes in making this move are, to say the least, 'phenomenal' (in both senses of the word): since class composition is in constant change, with ever newer forms of resistance=creation arising all the time, capitalism is always already engaged in a rearguard action of appropriation and recuperation. (This fact accounts for what Boltanski and Chiapello call the changing "spirit of capitalism"). Just as much as it cannot actually generate new forms of living labor, capitalism also cannot proactively immunize itself against resistance. What it will do is to create specular images, as Debord might say. To think that Capital *produces* anthropological difference would be a grave mistake. Yet it would be an equally grave error to overlook the ways in which a specular image of anthropological difference—a normalized code of specific differences, i.e., bacterial logic—supports capital's ongoing attempts to manage the ceaseless process of class—a process of composition/decomposition/recomposition that comes in response to the generative invention/resistance of living labor.

It seems futile to ask now whether we nostalgically prefer the bacterial logic of colonial regions to the viral logic of postmodern networks. The biopolitical solution is to be found in recognizing the possibilities inherent in each and, especially, in the

disjuncture between the two. The damage to biocultural diversity we are seeing today is an integral part of the history of linguistic transformation ushered under the regime of translation as “epistemological rendition” that normalizes the world-system of national-States. The viral logic of networks has vastly accelerated this process. What is needed is not an immunological response so much as a reappropriation of the potential for genetic mutation in viral replication. Otherwise, we are left with the highly destructive notion that only a leading or a capital geocultural region can possibly supply the necessary antidote to the coming catastrophe.

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