

THE IMPATIENCE OF FAMILIARITY

A commentary on Michael Watts' "Development and Governmentality"

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Michael Watts' engagement with debates about development, Foucault's concepts of governmentality and economies of violence in Nigeria is a rich and challenging piece in which he identifies with certain intellectual projects, implicitly aligns and distances himself from others and, along the way, casts off fascinating "takes" on the way of the contemporary world. As one involved in the "postdevelopment" project that either comes under impatient attack for its familiarity in the guise of something new, or is compared in the same breath to "political Islamism", I am intrigued by the choreography of his paper and challenged by the invitation to intersect its movements, especially as I share with Watts an interest in employing Foucault's governmentality approach to questions and analyses of "development".

Recently, I have had occasion to reflect with Dipesh Chakrabarty and Arturo Escobar on the ways in which our various works have been read and criticised, often together. And this has led to reflection on the commonality of approach, the attitude to the world that incorporates us in a loosely coherent dance of our own. A dance that is quite different, it seems, to the one that Watts is performing.

Perhaps what distinguishes us from Watts is the recognition that *we are dancing*, participating in making a reality in which we are implicated and involved. For me, this is the

ontology-building message of Foucault's approach:

[T]he function of any diagnosis concerning the nature of the present ... does not consist in a simple characterization of what we are but, instead – by following lines of fragility in the present – in managing to grasp why and how that-which-is might no longer be that-which-is. In this sense, any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, i.e., of possible transformation. (Foucault, cited in Brown, 2001:107)

When Escobar presents subaltern and indigenous social movements as "other ways of doing politics" (Watts, this issue, p. 9), when Chakrabarty reads Calcutta for "the sense of hybridity or the difference that remains" (Watts, this issue, p. 28) and when Gibson-Graham and Ruccio "desperately search for some spheres in which non-capitalism resides" (Watts, this issue, p. 28), we are consciously disrupting a narrative logic that emanates from what is familiar to Watts (this issue, p. 29) but, through our genealogical efforts, increasingly unfamiliar to us – "the great clanking gears of capital". What becomes apparent is that we and Watts are committed to different projects,

both of which, whether we acknowledge it or not, are effectively ontology-building.

In *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) abandoned the project of mapping (and thereby participating in constructing) capitalist dominance, and shifted gears to identify, revalue and, since writing that book, even create instances of non-capitalist development. While this project remains unfamiliar to Watts, its valuation of non-exploitative practices, collectivism, fairness in wealth distribution and community-building seems to him (this issue, p. 28) nothing if not familiar, echoing the tenets of “most of left-of-centre conventional development theory”.

But should this be surprising, or necessarily grounds for criticism? Only if one’s analysis of the modernism/postmodernism, development/postdevelopment shift emphasises complete rupture rather than the murkiness of reshaped continuity.

Ernesto Laclau (1996) has pointed to the continuities between pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment conceptions of the ground upon which a political imaginary of emancipation/salvation has been built. When Reason replaced God as the basis of social order, it appeared that people could indeed make their own history, and a radical enlightening break was made with past discourses and dominations. But in the swap of Reason for Deity, there was a continuity of commitment to tethering society and history to an underlying structure that gave it form (one that was now logically knowable, representable and trackable). This premodern legacy became a major attraction of modernism, especially as the (rational) economy became the predominant ground upon which emancipatory politics could be built. The postmodern abandonment of faith in the transparency of society to knowledge – the “death of the ground” – has, Laclau (1996:12) argues, seemingly led to the “death of the universal and to the dissolution of social

struggles into mere particularism”. But such a postmodern epistemology, he points out, merely *ungrounds* universal emancipatory ideals – it does not negate or disable our commitment to them. Indeed, it helps us recognise that “the founding emancipatory act cannot be conceived otherwise but as an act of grounding” (Laclau, 1996:12). We are back with Foucault and ontology-building.

So the political economic ideals that I am seeking to see *grounded* in multiple areas and culturally specific contexts *should* have a familiar ring – they resonate with the ideals of radical democracy forged in so many progressive struggles of the past centuries. Postmodernism/postdevelopment does not, in my view, abandon politics to particularisms, but seeks to partially and precariously offer “universalisable” ideals to which politics inevitably attaches uniquely concrete contents.

If democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation (Laclau, 1996:35).

As Foucault teaches us, all attempts to create order through discourse and other technologies of governmentality have their own inescapable violences. In “Development and Governmentality”, Watts (this issue, p. 24) gives a frightening account of furious struggle in Nigeria as a “veritable jigsaw of militant particularisms”, all competing for universal recognition in an attempt to establish an order of sorts within this “public secret” (p. 26) of a nation state. He has employed the language of Foucault’s governmentality in a promising way that will, no doubt, encourage geographers working in non-western contexts to experiment further with this approach. But, in presenting this economy of violence as the downside of cosmopolitanism, and as the logical extension of the “alternative or plural

modernities” (this issue, p. 27) approach, Watts dissociates himself from a community of scholars that has taken up Foucault’s (cited in Brown, 2001:107) challenge of grounding a yet-to-be “space of concrete freedom” .

From my perspective the question becomes, where does this leave him? In a place that is very familiar to me, in which politics is rough and real, though somewhat distant from the researcher who remains the cogniser and confirmer of existing truth. Here, sheltering under the all too full “*universality* of capitalist modernity” with its all too “terrible realities of unprecedented global economic inequality” (Watts, this issue, p. 28; emphasis in original), Watts stands in good company, on well-trodden and solid-seeming ground, tethered to that great motor of history with its clanking gears and neoliberal grand slams. From this “familiar and general” (p. 29) vantage point, experiments with truth, to use Gandhi’s phrase, seem dispiritingly local, particular, and ultimately chimerical.

Our projects are indeed incomparable. Watts is engaged with the still dominant project of recognising, identifying and knowing the truth of “that-which-is” – with understanding why disorder reigns and capitalism remains. Gibson-Graham, Ruccio, Escobar and Chakrabarty are trying, in a provisional and tentative way, to follow the lines of fragility in the present, to create a different truth, where the “that-which-is” will

no longer be. Small wonder that we are impatient with one another.

In the last conversation we had in Canberra this year, Dipesh Chakrabarty mentioned that he would not want to live in precolonial India with its violence and gender oppression, despite its cultural richness and diversity, even though he might use the record of that diversity to rethink possibilities for the present. In pondering that comment later, I wondered if it arose from dismay at how his work is being represented as complicit with a return to the premodern, in the way that Watts has aligned (despite protestations to the contrary) postdevelopment thinking with Islamic fascism in this paper. This is a dance that need not be performed. I know I certainly want to sit it out and wait for a new space on the floor.

REFERENCES

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