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Crisis of humanism, critique of humanitarian reason

A conversation with Miguel Mellino

Miguel Mellino

From the Spanish by Kelly Mulvaney

Clinamen: Let us recall what began to happen in 2015, when a series of episodes shook the conventional image of Europe: from the attack on the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* to the Greek situation, where after the referendum we all hoped for a European mobilization in its support, and up to the most recent news of movements in Austria and Germany to receive migrants in an often inclusive manner, despite restrictive European policies. In considering these things from Buenos Aires, Miguel Mellino has always been an important interlocutor for us. An Argentine anthropologist, teacher, essayist, researcher and activist who has lived in Italy for many years, Miguel joins us again today, this time to discuss what has mobilized and moved Europe with respect to that which has been called a crisis of migration.

In a widely circulated interview after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack,[1] Miguel, you made a distinction between the Europe that was

moving and the Europe that was not moving. Thus our first question today is: How are we to understand this panorama of crisis of European humanism and the fragmentation of the Europes, between the Europe that is moving and the Europe that is not moving?

M: Speaking of what has been called a crisis of European humanism, I proposed at the time to begin thinking from a place that didn't seem very present in the talk of that moment. My aim was to depart from the facts, and above all to think about the fact that the protagonists of the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* were foremost French youth, born in France, but that they are, as one might say, "different" French, because they are the second or third generations of immigrants. It seems to me that the fundamental question was the following: What is happening in Europe with part of the European population? This is to refer to a part of the population that we can call, for convenience, "postcolonial," in the sense that it is the product of mass immigration to Europe from its colonies after the Second World War. What is this population saying to us, what are its structures of feeling, about how Europe is today?

This is an important question because what *Charlie Hebdo* produced was a situation that had already been repeated. It had occurred after the attack on the Twin Towers, during the wars in Iraq or in Afghanistan of the Taliban, where European young people, but who are of dark complexion or of the Islamic religion, or simply who come from or are related by family history to the ex-colonies, end up enrolling in an Islamic organization and fighting against the European countries in which they were born and lived. We know that organizations such as ISIS or Al Qaeda count on the support of many "European" young people; this is no novelty. In some parts of the European population, religious fundamentalism

is offering a form of subjectivation, of subjective identification, to the annihilating effect of racism. It serves as a "suture" for the open wounds that are the effects of an exclusion and marginalization created by racism.

Fanon described the objectifying or de-subjectifying effect that the racist gaze has on the racialized subject very well. This is a good point of departure for understanding what is happening today. Fundamentalism is channeling the hatred for what looks and feels, in France as in England or in other European countries, like a persistence of white supremacy. This is no new matter; it is already found in the famous autobiography of Malcolm X, who tells of the material and everyday racism he experienced as a black person in the United States, which led him to Islam and fed his rage and rejection of the society in which he was living. It appears to me that this experience of Malcolm X can tell us a great deal about what is happening today in Europe, and above all about what is moving in Europe at present, where a good part of the population of colonial origin suffers from everyday racism.

This everyday racism is integral to the condition proper to this part of the population, which is to say that it is not simply a secondary or residual condition, as the majority of the political-intellectual world of the European left likes to believe. This part of European society is moving, just as immigrants are moving with their antiracist struggles and the refugees today with their desire for freedom, but this movement does not fit the typical political interpellation of the European left, not in any of its versions. I don't have the solution, but I am saying that there is a problem, and that it is important to recognize it. Which does not always happen. To take another famous definition of Fanon: this racism is constitutive and integral to the conditions of exploitation and

marginalization proper to these young people, and under which they, but not only they, suffer.

One way to understand this problem, it seems to me, is to recognize that there is a short circuit between the mode in which a large part of the left and the European social movements speak of racism, on the one hand, and the mode in which these groups and postcolonial subjects live it on a daily basis, on the other. It is clear that this short circuit has alienated these elements of European society from the various interpellations of that which can be referred to as a European left. But it is also possible to state this in opposite terms, which would be to say that the left turned away from these social segments which are, in their great majority, part of what today can be considered a European proletariat. I am not blaming anyone, but saying that the problem exists.

It appears to me that this should be one of the first ways to approach, to reflect on what something like *Charlie Hebdo* was, what it mobilized. For example, we all know that geographically, the responses to the *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy concentrated around the monument to the republic in France, the *Place de la République*. Candles continue to be lit to the "Republic," in order to not forget, holding onto the memory like a kind of cult to the Republic; because *Charlie Hebdo* was interpreted as an attack on the Republic and its values, which are the values of the Occident (liberal, colonial, capitalist and bourgeois) taken as its own and universal. It seems to me that we should view it as an effect of the Republic, of the ideology of French republicanism, of an ideology that extends from the conservative and reactionary right of Marine Le Pen to the left, and not only the institutional left, but also the more radical left expressed by some intellectuals very close to the most radical European social movements. It seems to me that we need to start from here. Ironically, it could be said that the attack

on Charlie Hebdo was undertaken by the sons, the bastards of the Republic…

C: Miguel, in considering a supposed crisis of European humanism, you have elsewhere referred to the structural character of racism with respect to the constitution of Europe. Does it appear to you that racist bias is always present in European humanism?

M: Yes, there has always been a racist core. It is something onto which not only the classical critiques of Fanon and Sartre have shed light, but also a good part of the black radical tradition in North America and the Caribbean, as well as postcolonial studies, although in a somewhat more baroque and less radical way. But what is important about humanism is something else, namely the question: Can we conceive of any universal idea of man, or of so-called rights, of man without the anticolonial struggles, without the struggles and resistances of slaves, without the movements of decolonization or of national liberation in the whole world, without the struggles of women, without the antiracism of black or non-occidental women? It is something that generally remains unsaid when people speak of "human rights" in mass political and televised debates. And yet it is something that would help to revise the material and discursive limits of European humanism. In Europe, this deficiency is very pronounced. The thread that unites humanism, racism and colonialism is not clear in public debate. The role of the colonial question in European history, in its knowledge, cultures and politics, continues to be a topic of discussion only in academic niches, or in any case, with the exception of Great Britain, in spheres isolated from real public debate. In this sense, the point is not to perform a *mea culpa* about

the colonial past of Europe, but rather to understand the material legacy of colonialism in the material constitution of postcolonial European social and political space.

This can also give insight into what is happening with the refugees today, in order to better grasp how the European Union is administering what has been called a "humanitarian crisis." It seems to me that Merkel and Hollande's (among others) decision to partially open doors to the refugees does not represent any kind of rupture with respect to the constitutive logic of EU immigration policy. I do not believe – as it is currently being said in some European newspapers – that the EU is finally recognizing the pressure of immigration as something it cannot detain. It seems to me that the inevitability of migratory pressure has always been known, and therefore there is an attempt to govern migration in a certain mode that is functional for capitalist valorization and for the repressive and securitarian control of populations and multiple territories. This is to point to a repressive control that is constitutive of the neoliberal technology of government. It is truly difficult to believe – as the media claimed in an almost infantile way – that the photo of the dead Syrian boy on the beach has been able to minimally sensitize people like Merkel or Hollande or the "vultures" of the ECB or the European Commission, who didn't have any qualms about opposing recent migratory movements with aerial, naval and terrestrial military force, declaring war on them, or about imposing socially violent conditions of life on the Greek population during the recent negotiations with Syriza.

I do not see any rupture with the system of European government of migration or with the mode in which the heart of the European Union administered the Greek crisis. I also do not see any rupture with a part of the "Republican" mobilizations that informed the reaction to *Charlie Hebdo*. Firstly, I believe that this partial opening

of the borders will not last long, and it will not create any change in the European migration policies. Nothing good can come of this European Union; it is irreformable. The way in which it is administering the crisis is perfectly in line with one of the suppositions at the base of the European regime of migration control: to enhance institutional discretion or arbitrariness in the granting of asylum rights and favoring the incessant proliferation of different migrant statuses, a strategy that necessarily goes hand-in-hand with the stigmatization of a particular category, the "economic migrant." This reinforces the regime of differential inclusion of migrants, which is the true objective of the EU policies.

We also cannot forget that in Europe – above all in the Northern countries – the NGO world is a fairly important lobby. And this world is rooted in an ideology we can call humanitarian more than humanist, and which is not so far from the "humanitarianism" with which the EU is administering this crisis. Humanitarianism from above and humanitarianism from below share a de-mobilizing politics not only with respect to social conflicts, but also of the very life of these populations: they produce the "refugee" as a non-subject who waits for the cure or guardianship of someone to be able to reach the status of subject. This is a de-subjectivizing dispositive of the other, whose status as a subject always depends on the recognition of the master. In this humanitarian discourse the refugee appears as the effect of a natural catastrophe, as the product of a process external to the subject of this same discourse. This serves to silence the responsibilities of the European countries, with their military, political and economic interventions, in the creation of mass displacements or migrations. To summarize, this "humanitarian reason," through its victimizing logic, does nothing but confirm the European as subject and moral

conscience, given that he is the only one capable of granting or legitimizing rights, and the other is confirmed in the position of object and victim. It is as if the old colonial relation were returning, here in a form we can call the "ethical imperialism" of "I will save you."

C: I do not quite see the commonality between the NGO-style administration of the humanitarian crisis and racism. Where do you see the connection?

M: There are various points of connection. First, in many parts of the world, the behavior of NGOs, though obviously not all of them, is complementary to an international order with the United States and Europe at its center. In other words, they operate as one of the hegemonic instruments of occidental domination. In many cases this complementarity has been accomplished through wars or military attacks, meaning it has been very explicit: first the "international community" attacks, intervenes militarily, destroys, generates catastrophes, and later the NGOs arrive to resolve the so-called "humanitarian crises." It is as if the NGOs were finishing or managing what weapons began or left behind. And the effect is always to contribute to a political de-mobilization of the population. Exaggerating a bit, we could say that wherever western NGOs go, political antagonism of the population ends. The humanitarian system works here like an apparatus of population control. At other times, the complementarity assumes a different dynamic, as in this European "humanitarian crisis," although it would be more justified to speak here of a crisis that is being given a humanitarian response, or governed by what we call humanitarian reason.

Humanitarian reason substitutes the politics of rights and justice with an ethics of compassion and suffering. It is a perverse ethic, since it is totally discretional and because it does nothing but introduce more inequality and vulnerability amongst the same migrants, meaning it is another form of hierarchizing the right to citizenship. On what bases is the right of asylum granted to these refugees? On bases that are clearly discretionary: for example, on a very superficial distinction between "secure zones" and "non-secure zones." And how is it decided whether a zone is safe or not? In cases such as the current crisis, humanitarian reason or management contributes to the active mode of maintaining the institution of citizenship as a dispositive of control and hierarchization of populations and territories. Therefore, I believe that we can speak here of humanitarian racism and say that it is fully complementary with institutional racism, or with the racism that emanates from the current European neoliberal dispositive of citizenship.

C: What about the crisis of the European humanism, however, that does not refer to humanitarianism, but rather to the humanism of Sartre and Fanon, that is to say, to a kind of humanism in struggle, antiracist, which wants to destroy the racializing figure of European humanism... It seems that what is missing in the scenario right now are experiences of struggle that allow this equation, this perspective, to be reversed. And in this sense my attention is drawn, for example, to the call that emanated from Greece, the call of the movements, of Syntagma, continuing what had been the squares of the Arab Spring, Tahrir Square, the whole image of the Arab Springs that influenced all the movements of *indignados* in Europe. If these movements have not

led to a different point of view, how do you think it might be possible?

M: It seems to me that the Syriza government was troubled from the beginning, because to believe, as Tsipras and in part Varoufakis believed, that the European Union is reformable from its interior is almost crazy. Tsipras wanted to negotiate a change of policy with the EU, but without anything that could invert the relations of forces, without a social conflict, or rather, in Greece yes, but not in Europe. The fact that during the Greek crisis very little moved in the rest of Europe was very symptomatic of this. Very little in Italy, very little in Germany, and the Germans had a historical opportunity to dis-identify with a certain type of power. Very little in Spain, which is the next place to look. It seems to me that Tspiras' problem and the problem of a large part of the European left is the failure to dis-identify with the civilizing myth of the European Union, of Europe. There seems to be an unconscious and implicit association that Europe is in all manners a place of rights, of integration, a place of community, of cosmopolitanism, and in reality it is not the case.

This is the problem. There is no capacity to frontally place oneself, in an antagonistic sense, against the European Union and its institution, which emanate racism and economic violence from all its pores. In large part, it is as if it taken by a liberal and occidental virus. And regrettably, behaving in this mode, they leave all of the space of radical rupture, to the sovereigntist right, to the racist right, the xenophobic right, which have no problem to say that Europe "is what it is."

C: This reminds me of the latest news from Brazil and the current

situation of the Brazilian Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, "PT"). For us the PT changed in the eighties. When the Soviet Union was falling, it was a party of the New Left, led by the Social Movements, which managed to elude the crisis of the communist and left parties that had remained compromised with statist forms and instead renew a left radicality. When one looks to the current crisis of Brazil, the PT is continuing to support the economic minister who announced yesterday that the model of austerity in Spain would be a model for Brazil. If we complete the map drawn up when Miguel mentioned that "the next laboratory is Spain," and we look to the PT in this position, how can we relaunch figures of antagonism with this image of Europe, with this image of universal adjustment? It seems to me that what is lacking today is a more clear identification towards these points of struggle, which Miguel has called "disidentification from Europe." In a certain sense this image of Europe is a broader, even if it is not exactly the same in Latin America, since the progressivist governments have in fact had an agenda of politically radical, racially mixed struggle with social contents since the beginning. Still, we seem to always have the same problem. What happens with these images? Miguel, what can you say with respect to this link between Europe and Latin America?

M: Well, there are many links because, for example, the kind of exclusion in which the part of the population that I am calling "postcolonial European" lives is the same as that in which many young people in the popular neighborhoods here are living. And it has to do with the double politics or the double system of neoliberalism: a system for the "included" and a system for the "excluded," In the last thirty years, the excluded part has been increasingly submitted to a more punitive, more police-based and

more criminalizing apparatus, and it seems to me that this is a common point between Europe and Latin America. Crossing between the realities of broad parts of the population in Latin America and Europe points, paradoxically, to another commonality: the construction of the dividing line between inclusion and exclusion takes place through racism and through effects of the colonial discourse of race. The double face that neoliberalism shows in its territorial governance is profoundly mixed with racism.

The interview was conducted on the radio show "Clinamen" in Buenos Aires on September 8, 2015[2].
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[1] English, French and Italian translations of the interview "I am the West" can be found at: http://www.decoknow.net/im-the-west/, in Spanish at: http://anarquiacoronada.blogspot.de/2015/01/yo-soy-occidente-entrevista-con-miguel.html.

[2] Recording at: http://ciudadclinamen.blogspot.de/2015/09/crisis-del-humanismo-europeo.html, many thanks to Miguel Mellino for the transcription.