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Metaphysical Assertions

On the Truths of Others

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Subalterns cannot speak and primitives have no culture. How are these assertions similar, even though they seem to be ripped from such different discourses? Whereas the latter forces an imperial gesture of colonial self-importance into words, the former expresses a postcolonial criticism of hegemonic self-(mis)conception in a – frequently misunderstood – formula. Nevertheless, they function like two sides of the same coin, the same barter currency, that greases the machinery of globalized conditions of injustice. Subalterns cannot speak, says Gayatri Spivak, and adds later as an explanation, that "means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard."[1] Thus it is less a question of whether subalterns speak, but rather of whether they are heard and – even more to the point – who hears them and how. But does the same not apply to the idiocy of the opening statement "primitives have no culture"? Here it is just as little a matter of speaking of "culture", but rather of the perception/recognition of something that seems to have been invented solely to exclude the (subaltern) others from the hegemony of speaking and to characterize them as "primitives".

In a sense, the problem of articulation and recognition raised here seems to be like a delayed aftershock from a dialectic buried by the contemporary neoliberal globalized world (dis)order. The current form of recognizing the Other corresponds more to a productivity of difference that has been made consumable. Roughly speaking, the crisis of global capitalism looks something like this from a social perspective: the incessant spread of capital makes use of the fragments of arbitrary "cultural" difference to make the monotony – and unbearableness – of exploitive hegemony consumable. A shimmering veil of multiculturality woven from the greatest possible diversity of productive difference is intended to cover up the transformation of social conditions into commodities. In other words: in a process of assimilating difference itself, difference from the existing power relations is made exploitable. The simultaneous production and consumption of difference enables capitalism to constantly shift its own boundaries, and also explains why concepts such as the hybridity that Homi Bhaba[2] proposes cannot be unproblematically celebrated as being politically subversive.

In the present essay, I will attempt to uncover some of the mechanisms at work in this incorporation of difference, in order to then pursue the question of which possible consequences for the politics of difference and subjectivity might be tied to them. I will limit myself to the description of two specific cases of (subaltern) speaking in contemporary Central America, but the necessity of self-situation first requires a minor detour through the continent of occidental thinking.

First of all, it must be noted that the assimilation of difference described above is by no means to be regarded as a postmodern trick of neoliberalism. The mechanisms of the – not only discursive – incorporation of the Other instead draw from the underground reservoirs of occidental thinking itself. This is why it is so difficult

to elude the subterfuges of reason, as its traps are set in the midst of consciousness. When Hegel, for instance, argues the principles of what he calls "spirit/intellect" [*Geist*], it is like reading a colonial manual on world domination: "The principle of the European spirit [*Geist*] is therefore self-conscious reason, which is confident that nothing can present an insurmountable barrier to it, and which therefore touches everything to become present to itself in this way. The European spirit sets the world apart from itself, frees itself from this world, yet sublates this opposition again, reassumes its other, the manifold, into itself, into its simplicity."[3] The demand for integration put forth by multicultural politics presumably means little other than unreserved subjection to this compelling mechanics of hegemonic incorporation.

Yet even those who do not seek to declaim the hymn to the (own) spirit with Hegelian conviction will have difficulty granting others the possibility of thinking – and perceptible speaking – without shaking the pillars of occidental self-conception. Merleau-Ponty, for instance, cautions that emancipatory philanthropy is an insufficient condition: "I reach an agreement with the Other, I am determined to live in a 'co-world', in which I grant as much space to the Other as to myself. Yet the proposal of a co-world remains my own, and it would be insincere to think I wanted the well-being of the Other *like my own*, since this adherence to the well-being of the Other still originates with me."[4]

Which lines of flight are there out of the revolving, self-positing thinking that only holds gaps and silence for the Other? What is left of the constructions of western philosophy, if we shake the cornerstone of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*? One of the most extensive collateral damages from this kind of deconstruction undoubtedly applies to identitary politics. Let us therefore attempt in the following to bracket the ego as , the "subject- and ego-

superstition" that Nietzsche denounces in *Beyond Good and Evil* as "the abstrusest metaphysical assertions".[5] Let us not forget that intelligibility, i.e. the ability to think, speak, hear, etc., is not constituted from itself, but rather is always established only in relation to others. "It moves by changing what it makes out of its 'others' – the primitives, the past, the people, the madman, the child, the Third World."[6]

Who Are the Dead?

> "To understand the living, one must know who the dead are. And one must know how their hopes ended: whether they faded gently, or whether they were killed. More precisely than the features of the face, one must know the scars of renunciation."[7]

Who are the dead of the Guatemaltecan civil war, which was sparked by a US military intervention based in Honduras following an attempt to expropriate the *United Fruit Company*, and which was supported throughout the entire thirty-six years of its duration by funds from *US-Aid* and the Anglican Churches of North America? The numbers gathered by the "Project for the Recuperation of Historical Memory" speak a drastic language – 200,000 dead, one million displaced.[8] Of the 20,000 missing persons, buried in mass graves following over 600 massacres on the populations of just as many villages, today only a tiny portion have been exhumed after the signing of the peace agreement over ten years ago.[9] Yet the language of statistics is insufficient for tracing the "scars of renunciation"; discovering the traces of these scars in the desiring of the survivors is the only form in which the hopes that have been silenced can be made audible again. They point us to a discourse of testimony, in which it is less the truth *about* the

others that is articulated, than a truth *of* the others. A meanwhile famous witness of the Guatemaltecan civil war recalls both the killing and the sight of the dead from the perspective of the indigenous rural population:

> "Anyway they [the soldiers of the Guatemalan army] lined up the tortured and poured petrol on them; and then the soldiers set fire to each one of them. Many of them begged for mercy. Some of them screamed, many of them leapt but uttered no sound – of course, that was because their breathing was cut off. But – and to me this was incredible – many of the people had weapons with them, the ones who'd been on their way to work had machetes, others had nothing in their hands, but when they saw the army setting fire to the victims, everyone wanted to strike back, to risk their lives doing it, despite all the soldier's arms. ... Faced with its own cowardice, the army itself realized that the whole people were prepared to fight. You could see that even the children were enraged, but they didn't know how to express their rage. ... [T]he officer quickly gave the order for the squad to withdraw."[10]

The execution described took place in the market place of Chajul, a town in the highland of K'iche. Among the prisoners tortured and killed was a brother of the woman who recounted what she had seen – Rigoberta Menchú, and specifically this passage from her testimonial narrative *I, Rigoberta Menchú* became the primary target in a debate lasting for years about the authenticity and legitimation of the speaking of the Others. In the course of his ethnographic research, David Stoll found out that Menchú was not personally present during the incident and took this fact – confirmed by Menchú – as a pretext for calling the veracity of the

entire narrative into question.[11] What Stoll stages with the invocation of an (allegedly) inescapable authority of facts is an interesting lesson in hegemonic speaking: a white man protects indigenous men from the articulations of an indigenous woman.[12] Stoll, who feared that Menchú's testimony could arouse sympathy for the liberation movement, wanted to save the indigenous rural population from resistance against state power. For him, guerilla war was per se nothing other than "an urban romance, a myth propounded by middle-class radicals who dream of finding true solidarity in the countryside"[13].

In Stoll's view, rebellious subalterns were consequently instrumentalized by non-subalterns – and anyone who contradicts this is referred back to subalternity. "The argument between Menchú and Stoll is not so much about what really happened as it is about who has the authority to narrate ," noted John Beverley aptly in one of his analyses of this conflict.[14]

In this constellation of subalternity, testimony and authorized speaking, in the strategically entered battle scene of identity, I would like to pose a somewhat different problem for discussion. Let us return to the beginning of the text to raise the question of the way in which Rigoberta Menchú's difference to the existing (Guatemaltecan) power relations was made exploitable in a process of assimilating difference itself. First the question must be clarified, of whether difference is involved at all, and if it is, whether its recognition has taken place. All indications of identitary logic suggest affirming both questions: Menchú is woman, indigenous, comes from a family of marginalized farm laborers whose members were almost all killed in the war; she speaks K'iche', did not learn Spanish, which must be regarded as the hegemonic language in Guatemala, until later, and she expresses herself in her quoted *testimonio* through the mediation of an Argentinian-French

anthropologist. The recognition of these differences was already accomplished in 1992 with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, and even the debate discussed above can be regarded as a kind of negative proof of recognition: at least her speaking was expected to generate difference to the repressive state apparatus.

Yet is it also possible to speak of these differences being made productive in an assimilation process? Obviously. The Nobel Prize-winner was granted political asylum in Mexico, and since then she has hardly missed an opportunity to denounce the Zapatist uprising in southern Mexico as a delayed, bleary-eyed and inappropriate rebellion against a progressively humanitarian administration.[15] After returning to Guatemala, she distanced herself from the organized social movements of the country, even from the Comité Unidad Campesina (CUC; Committee of the Farmers' Unity), which was co-founded by her father, with which she was closely tied at the time when her *testimonio* was written. Instead, she provided the right-wing conservative government under President Oscar Berger at the time with an appearance of openness towards the concerns of the indigenous majority population in her office as state "Goodwill Ambassador" in international politics.

This assimilated difference has only recently been refused recognition, specifically from an agent who has previously always only been assigned the role of silent (and manipulated) subalterns in the conflicts discussed here – namely the indigenous population of Guatemala. In fall 2007, Rigoberta Menchú was a candidate – as the only woman and the only indigena – for the office of state president, and on the first ballot she received less than 3% of the votes. In early November of the same year the voters elected Álvaro Colom, the candidate of the political successor organization to the united guerilla groups (URNG; Revolutionary National Unit of Guatemala). Did the population of the country deny their probably

most famous citizen recognition, specifically because she did not do – or only insufficiently did – what Stoll accused her of: namely supporting the demands of the social movements and guerilla groups?

The Magma of the Social

Indeed, as far as it is possible to determine within the limited framework of the present essay, the initially outlined concerns about the politics of identity are confirmed. It is not only that hegemonic jurisdiction, due to its lack of understanding for the truth of the Other, ends up floundering in the whirlpool of self-assurance that propels the authority of one's own speaking to a *nomos* of universality, finally to assert that the subject of the statement – following a Kantian formula – is "capable of a capacity".

Non-hegemonic speaking also becomes entangled in defending its questioned identity, specifically through invoking a collectivity that gives the diversity another name, thus shifting heterogeneity and difference of what is one's own into a larger – and more complex – dimension.

However, this microscopic view of theoretical abstraction has lost sight of the historical-political constellation, in which the confrontation between claim and recognition unfolds. In the language of contemporary political hegemony, the heirs of expansion, colonialism and jurisdiction, which was carried out historically both in the name of the identity of power and the power of identity, criticize the uprising of the subjected, the marginalized and the subalternized, who demand the right to their own equivalent and simultaneously different identity. Ironically,

the criticism of identity becomes all the louder, the more the "damned of the earth" succeed in forging weapons in their battle for recognition from the politics of identity.

Let's look at this kind of precarious inversion of subject positions using a concrete example. The relevant incident took place in Chiapas on the Mexican border to Guatemala shortly after the attacks of 9/11, and it involved the question "Who are the dead?". I was there at that time with a media project for communal communication, and I had prepared a videographic compilation of television reports about the widely discussed events for a planned travelling cinema tour. What was special about the image projections for the rebellious inhabitants of remote rainforest villages was the participation of a young man from New York, who had been an eye witness to the collapse of the World Trade Center. The New Yorker had come to the region of rebellion for several months to do social work, and he was happy to have an opportunity to personally bear witness to a different America. He was welcomed in the villages and asked to give his report after the projection of the TV images. In fact, the eye witness was able to recount astonishing things that were not mentioned with a single word in the satellite information diffusion. He concentrated on telling of demonstrations that took place following the events, which took a completely different course, according to his information, from what was suggested by their representation in the media. He spread the news of thousands of people who, despite the hegemonic identitary politics that turned persons, names, fundamentalisms and rogue states into projection surfaces for hatred in the blink of an eye, demanded peace, rejected retaliation and called for reflection.

A teacher from the autonomous districts got up and politely interrupted the man giving his account. The teacher asked which

reflection was meant and whether the young man perhaps didn't know that the USA had drawn the hostility of the whole world upon itself through its own deeds; and he began to count off an impressive list of military interventions, coups, repressions of rebellions and economic blockades that had all been orchestrated by US American governments against sovereign states of the global south. What kind of peace was called for, he continued, was it not clear to him that a permanent state of war predominates all over the world and so it was hardly surprising when the buildings built with the profits from these wars should once fall upon the heads of the warmongers themselves. And so, the teacher continued with an identitary affirmation, the events were indeed unfortunate, because in the end it was "his" people who made up the majority of the dead, migrants from Mexico, Guatemala, Salvador, Nicaragua, etc.

Many of those present had stood up during this impassioned speech, and the New Yorker had obviously become uncomfortable in his role as witness; he was unexpectedly made responsible for something, from which he had believed himself released, not least of all due to his decision to do social work in the marginalized crisis region. However, the address ended on a conciliatory note: he was told he need not be afraid, in the rebellious villages everyone was welcome who took the trouble to get there. He would be given food and a place to sleep here, even though, as the teacher pointed out, he himself would probably never be received like that in New York.

The "magma of the social" – to borrow a term coined by Cornelius Castoriadis from widespread silence[16] – in which societies *and* their criticism are instituted through struggles for recognition and self-determination, is in danger of vanishing in current political discourses behind the stratifications and segmentations of "culture". Translating social dissidence into cultural difference leads

to an encroaching essentialization of differentness, creating space for political indifference and apparently easily assimilating and consuming non-essentialist counter-strategies. “The notion of culture transforms the hierarchies of global privilege into a horizontal array of mutually indifferent cultures. It replaces the notion of class – but not its rule,” according to Hito Steyerl’s precise assessment.[17] Hegemonic strategy does not so much aim to exclude the Other – a social order that seems to know no outside even establishes difference artificially, if necessary. This reinforces social (biopolitical) control just as it alters and renews the selection of commodities. What is really at stake is making those (subalterns) silent, who call for equality and solidarity as a form of actively recognizing difference.

Is there consequently nothing else we can do but to stage “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest”[18], if we want to impel the reconstruction of existing conditions? If the social meaning of existence is ensured by the societal context, individual existence gains its significance in deviation, in difference. But how can this difference be perceived outside of capitalizing and culturalizing assimilation? Instead of answering this, I would like to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty: Our concept of the human being remains superficial, as long as we do not sense the silence on this side of the noise of words and are capable of grasping the *gesture* that breaks this silence.[19]

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[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Talk. Interview with the Editors”, in: *The Spivak Reader*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, London and New York 1996, p. 292.

[2] Cf. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London / New York: Routledge 1994.

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, *Die Philosophie des Geistes*, in: *System der Philosophie, Dritter Teil (Sämtliche Werke,* Bd. 10*)*, Ed. F. Frommann, Stuttgart 1965, p. 77.

[4] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, Berlin: Gruyter 1966, p. 408 (emphasis in the original).

[5] Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in: *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, Vol. 5, Ed. G. Colli & M. Montinari, Munich 1980, p. 9–243, here: p. 11 and 30. [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/nietzsche/1886/beyond-good-evil/preface.htm; http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/nietzsche/1886/beyond-good-evil/ch01.htm (12)]

[6] Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975, p. 15.

[7] Manes Sperber, *Wie eine Träne im Ozean*, Munich: dtv 2000, p. 698.

[8] Cf. Oficina de Derechos Humanos, Guatemala: *Nunca Más. Informe del Proyecto de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REMHI)*, Guatemala 1998, 4 Vol. The project report identifies the state army as being responsible for over 90% of all the victims.

[9] In his essay in the same edition of *transversal*, Santiago Cotzal provides moving insights into the social dynamics of tracing war victims in Guatemala.

[10] Rigoberta Menchú u. Elizabeth Burgos, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, London: Verso 1984, p.

179. I am quoting the English translation by Ann Wright, because its wording forms the basis of the following reflections. In the original Spanish version the book is entitled: *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, México: Siglo XXI, no year.

[11] Cf. David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, Boulder: Westview Press 1999. Menchú responded that she knew of the incident through the presence of her mother and argued that her description had more of the character of a collective rather than individual testimony (Rigoberta Menchú in a press conference on 20 January 1999, cf.: Matilde Pérez, "La Nobel se defendió", in: *La Jornada*, 21 January 1999; as evidence of Menchú's statement, John Beverley cites an interview with Juan Jesús Arnárez: "Whoever attacks me, threatens the victims", in: *El País*, 24 January 1999, cf. John Beverley, *Testimonio. On the Politics of Truth,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2004, p. 110, FN. 4).

[12] This compression distinguishes Stoll's intervention as the variation of a "masculine-imperialist ideological formation" (Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern speak?", in: Cary Nelson / Lawrence Grossberg [eds.], *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 296), for which Spivak coined the formula: "White men are saving brown women from brown men" (ibid.).

[13] David Stoll, op.cit., p. 282.

[14] John Beverley, "What Happens When the Subaltern Speaks", in: ibid., *Testimonio*, op.cit., p. 81.

[15] As far as I know, Menchú never published these assessments in print, but repeatedly emphasized them in her speeches. This was

the case, for instance, in her opening speech at the Congreso Mesoamericano de Anthropología at the University of Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, 2002. Derision of the rebellion movement as being "bleary-eyed" also occurs repeatedly in the rhetorics of the Mexican government, especially referring to the point in time when the EZLN appeared in public – at dawn on New Year's Day 1994.

[16] Cf. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1987.

[17] Hito Steyerl, "Culture and Crime", http://eipcp.net/transversal/0101/steyerl/en

[18] Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York: Methuen 1987, p. 205.

[19] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, op.cit., p. 218 (quotation slightly altered, emphasis from the author).