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# 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 and the role of humanistic knowledge in their construction.

The unprecedented wave of global deterritorialization ushered in by colonial encounter beginning in the 15$^{th}$ century established the modern concept of regions on the basis of catastrophe. The division of the newly-formed unitary globe into geo-cultural macro regions or "civilizations" reflecting premodern empires ought to be seen as a response (in the form of reterritorialization) to the catastrophe of colonial deterritorialization. Needless to say, throughout the period of colonial modernity, these spatial regions were understood to be organized temporally in essentially hierarchical fashion, with one region "ahead" of all the others. The current move from nation-States to civilizations, on the one hand, and from geo-cultural macro regions to postmodern networked forms of organization, on the other, brings new attention to the

way in which global regions and their attendant spatio-temporal hierarchies are being reorganized.

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 it own specifities, 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. 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 social *and* cognitive—corresponding to the "empirico-transcendental doublet" that is modern Man. Precisely because geo-cultural regions straddle not just the division between the the social and the cognitive, but also divisions within each, *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. Beyond the crucial the University plays in the creation of national culture, its other purpose is theoretical or rational: 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". Theories of translation informed by philosophies of difference (such as those by Derrida and de Man) generally argue that rationality, as a form of distribution or economy of the heterogeneous relation between thought and world, is itself established on the hidden basis of the intrinsically related operations of metaphor, metonymy and translation. The University in its modern form has thus been fundamentally linked to these two types of translation essential to the creation of modern regions: the creation of national culture and the establishment of a reasonable ratio between thought and world.

It is thus 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 beteween 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 *Organized 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 urgent even as it becomes ever more scarce. 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 new 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 pronounciation); Sixth, because there is no commensurability between different experiences of victimization, translation-as-epistemological rendition 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 known as "cultures".

We are in need of a new kind of socio-cognitive movement, or practice of translation, 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?

**Translation and Globalization: a biopolitics of catastrophe**

Four fundamental characteristics of current processes of globalization are particularly germane to the concerns of translation theory and its bearing upon how we imagine regions: 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 the extremities of homogenization and 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

transdiciplinary 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 exist in a state of extreme precarity (the bulk of these are aboriginal languages subjected to the policies of a single state)—save perhaps for the 225 languages that enjoy official recognition by the various member States[1]. 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 aim to understand. Just as techno-science is creating, accidentally or not, the unwitting elimination of biodiversity, globalization is accelerating the well-documented disappearance of linguistic difference—understood in ethnic 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 not normally associated with translation: total catastrophe. In an era when the prospect of accident (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 defensive preservation? Ever since the advent of wholesale global deterritorialization, language and culture have been tied together in a kind of immune-response system designed to induce post-catastrophic reterritorialization. The price of such reterritorialization, as epitomized by the nation-State, has been the progressive elimination of linguistic variation through the device of standardized national language. As the relation between catastrophe and regionality undergoes a new crisis in the age of globalization, to what extent can the previous response to catastrophe—forced reterritorialization—be effective? 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" (Virilio) 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 "*bio*cultural" 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 communication[3], the challenges to thinking about translation through 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 asymmentry 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.

**Bacterial Culture and Viral Sociality**

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 submit by way of conclusion a working hypothesis that the biopolitics of translation can be usefully understood through the metaphors of virus and bacteria.

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. This move not only shows us that "culture" is not only a relationship between outside and inside, it also describes an implicit link between two very 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 have been differentually 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. Undoubtedly, this form of the generic holds, as does the virus, generative potential for the reinvention of "regions".

In the transition from bacterial cultures and civilizations to viral networked societies we are now undergoing, it seems likely that translation will continue to play a crucial role. Under the bacterial regime, translation was a means of germinating culture. Translation studies in this mould emphasize above all the questions of transplanted influence. Under the viral regime, translation is increasingly seen as a means of mutation. Translation studies in this mode—which are only just beginning to emerge—emphasize genetic invention. It seems futile to ask now whether we nostalgically prefer the bacterial logic of cultural or civilizational regions to the viral logic of postmodern networks. The biopolitical solution is to be found in recognizing the possibilities inherent in each and the disjuncture between the two—especially since they are likely to co-exist simultaneously rather succeed each other in strict temporal succession. The lamentable damage to biocultural diversity we are seeing today is an integral part of the more or less violent history of linguistic transformation ushered in under the

auspices of the nation-State. The viral logic of networks not only accelerates this process, it also changes and deforms the scale.

## Beyond "clash" and "dialogue": whatsoever regions still-to-come

In lieu of a complete blueprint for the way in which a re-theorization of translation can contribute to the reinvention of "regions" beyond the tired categories of civilizational "clash" and/or "dialogue", we can offer this preliminary conclusion: translation, like all linguistic exchange, is as much a praxis of viral sociality as it is a process of bacterial culture (or *Bildung*, according to Antoine Berman's explanation of German Romanticism). As such, it is entirely possible to imagine that the generative power of translation, its generic power of mutation, can itself become the basis for a new kind of culture. In that sense, translation offers itself to us as the figure of the Common today. Although we cannot predict by any means what kind of region(s) will correspond to this model of translation, we can be sure that it/they would at least not be formed according to the destructive immunological model that sees the region as an "antidote" to the biopolitical problems of catastrophe.

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