

# BORDERS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF DEMOCRACY

---

*Iain Chambers*

In these times of growing intellectual and cultural retrenchment, where we are continually being informed that 'our' culture, history and democratic values are under attack, being relativised, even refused, the discussion between Étienne Balibar and Sandro Mezzadra justly draws attention to the status of critical thinking as something that belongs to the uprooted territories of the border. For it is here that critical language travels along the lip between the known and the unknown; in transit between the familiar maps of a domestic interior and the hazy territories of the external world, between 'our' way of life and that which exceeds its comprehension. Of course, such Manichean distinctions are merely place holders, simplified referents that serve to orientate thinking before the intricacy of the world. They are not, despite all the political, cultural, military and legislative action they entail, necessarily real in any profound historical, epistemological or ontological sense. They may, in a superficial manner, point to differences and diversity in a now acknowledged planetary complexity, but not to absolute distinctions.

So, the borders are porous. The outcome of historical and cultural clash and compromise, borders are both transitory and zones of transit. They consistently draw our attention to the labour of translation: to both explaining the external and confronting the historical trauma of time refusing to solidify in the existing state of knowledge. In this sense, critical thought as a border discourse is consistently haunted and interpellated by the invisible, by what fails to enter the arena of representation, or simply falls off the rigid radar screens of a stolid consensus.

To stop at the border, rather than to dwell in its interrogative, that is, critical, space, only serves to insure the baggage we brought with us and brandish its credentials. After 9/11 this has become an increasingly popular and public practice not only amongst fixated politicians, but also within a high profile group of 'respected' journalists, critics, historians and political scientists. So, for example, that modern occidental obsession with oriental women and the veil, becomes invariably the opportunity to confirm our views and justifies our desire to remove it, rather than to consider it and its place (strategic, specific, historical) in a multiple planetary and Islamic modernity in which patriarchy, power and possible responses take many forms. This would be to suggest different ways of being in modernity which, in turn, leads to the disquieting prospect that this modernity, its histories, cultures and democracies, are not merely *our* property to control, direct and judge: 'never will this language be mine. And truth to tell, it never was'.<sup>1</sup> Here, too, the genealogical assurance of 'mother' tongues and 'father' lands, of blood and soil, turn out to be anchored in an altogether more fluid and flexible

1. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or The Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p2.

medium. To recognise the composite historical complexity that constitutes the making of planetary modernity since 1492 (the year that commemorates both the ‘discovery’ of the New World and the ethnic cleansing of Spain) is to enter a new political and cultural space. Here the rights and responsibilities of *citizenship* are required to respond to a residency in the making, rather than to the category of a stilled subjecthood and a seemingly inevitable inheritance.

Borders are patrolled. They inevitably reveal the essential violence upon which the modern state ultimately depends in order to secure its legitimacy. Once inside, at least in the First World, this dimension usually slides out of view and the more civil institutions of law courts, policing, education and the media circulation of ideology takes over. But the violence is always there, ready in exceptional moments to bloody and brutalise the tissues of everyday life. If the unwarranted police execution of a suspected terrorist in the London underground is the shocking signal of this paranoid patrolling exposing itself, then the militarisation of everyday life in the most border conscious nation in the world – Israel – is also the foretaste of our destiny.

Here, many of us feel, that there is something new emerging, a definitive sharpening in the rhetoric and tools of border control: perhaps also the symptom of a certain, nervous recognition of the exhaustion of the liberal repertoire to absorb and annul the stranger. Of course, the borders are not merely national or military, there exist altogether more subtle ones that run *inside* the polity; borders constituted by racism, by poverty, by gender, by dispossession and marginalisation. If Marx’s concept of class once served to indicate this nation within the nation, today the multiple articulation proposed by the Gramscian concept of the *subaltern*, subsequently reworked by postcolonial historians and critics, perhaps better serves to identify this constituency in both its immediate specificity and its global resonance.

It is the modern migrant who most acutely configures this constellation. Suspended in the intersections of economical, political and cultural dispossession, it is the migrant who carries modern borders within herself. If her body is directly inscribed in punitive legislation, her mobility exposes the instability of abstract distinctions and confines. The migrant is not merely a historical symptom of modernity, but rather the condensed interrogation of the very identity of the modern political subject. Her precariousness is also *ours*, exposing the coordinates of a worldly condition:

the dark stain  
spreading on maps whose shapes dissolve their frontiers  
(Derek Walcott, ‘The Migrants’)

In this perspective, race, racism, patriarchy and class are distilled into the *continuities* and *discontinuities* that are articulated within the clumsy movement of the modern nation as it pushes its way through the uneven and unjust complexities of modernity. Today’s xenophobia – increasingly concentrated

on the fear of militant Islam (once exotically evoked in Hollywood images of Berber warriors storming Charlton Heston's Christian Spain in *El Cid*, these days secured by tabloid photos of British passport holders attending a *madrasa* in present day Pakistan) – has much to do with the failure and unwillingness to work through a still largely unconscious European past in which colonialism and Empire were (and are) distilled into national configurations of 'identity', 'culture' and 'modernity'.

It is as though that history is a closed chapter, composed only of a series of documents to consign to the museum and the text book, and not a contemporary present moulding and modifying the horizon of possibilities. History, as Walter Benjamin insisted, is always 'now': the dead continue to speak and interrogate us. It is this disturbing presence that haunts and frightens the present, that interrogates it; but it is never confronted, it is never answered. We remain dumb and sightless, nestling, as Paul Gilroy puts it, in a state of 'postcolonial melancholy'. To confront all that unfinished business, to work through the trauma in order to receive a history that would sunder the present and chart new directions, requires stepping beyond the security proposed by the teleology of 'progress'. This leads to the introduction of the mortality of ends and beginnings: an ethics of limits designed to sabotage the infinity of reason that finds its contemporary correspondence in the infinity of capital.

To query a particular enframing of sense is to insist on the critical necessity not only to undo such an imposition, but also to exhume what it has historically marginalised and culturally excluded. This, to return to border criticism, to criticism as a border discourse, is to recover the hidden dependency of occidental modernity on what remains in the dark, over the border in the territories of alterity. It is to analyse, disturb, deviate and deconstruct a language and disposition of powers which unilaterally manages the 'world picture', deciding who gets to be represented and who does not.

An archaeology of the present, where the very powers that configured it via exclusion and negation, here becomes central. Antonio Gramsci insisted that the struggle or conflict lay not between *tradition* and *modernity*, but between the *subaltern* and *hegemony*. This historical and conceptual perspective radically alters the whole critical axis. It charts *within* modernity itself the political, cultural and historical complexities that compose the present. It is here, as another dissident Italian voice put it, that it becomes possible to separate 'progress' from 'development' (Pier Paolo Pasolini); that is, to uncouple them and set them in a critical relationship which strips them of their purely instrumental and economical logic, that denudes them of their metaphysical mission and brings them back to earth to be transformed into open-ended terms of political debate and inquiry.

In this archive of the negated and the denied, the very identity of modern 'Europe' emerges through a dependency on an alterity that is objectified in the absolute difference of the enemy, identified internally with the 'Jew' and externally with Islam (from the 'Saracens' to the 'Turks'). The history of this animosity is the flip side of conquest and the preservation of the purity of

2. Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab. A History of the Enemy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003, p53.

blood, propagated in the Spanish *riconquista*, and subsequently extended, via the rationalising protocols of both religion and science within the colonial enterprise, to the rest of the planet. If, at one end of the Mediterranean, the Arabs, the Jews and the Rom were expelled from Europe, at the other, with the conquest of Constantinople and the Balkans by the Ottoman Turks, the external enemy – Islam – once again became internal, integral. (It will also be the Ottoman empire that provided a home for the Sephardic diaspora.) This, as Gil Anidjar has brilliantly argued, brings us to ‘the image of Jews and Muslims *in* Europe, as the history, therefore, *of* Europe’.<sup>2</sup>

Now the critical appropriation of *that* history requires far more than the adoption of contemporary tolerance in the face of diversity. It requires precisely that *deconstruction* of being and becoming Europe that has been persistently proposed by a brilliant Jewish-Algerian philosopher from the African shore of the Mediterranean: Jacques Derrida. To critique the language that establishes its premises through a violent annihilation of alterity (this could equally be a definition of the modern European state or the modern, Cartesian subject), is, as Sandro Mezzadra rightly puts it, to address the ‘very definition of the European “we”’.

In other words, the critical appropriation of a historical heritage – Europe and its modernity – leads to the necessary abandonment of unilateralism. This is not to speak in terms of a simple re-mapping, but is to commence from the radical refusal to reduce the world and its differentiated specificities to the single, bi-dimensional space of controlled cartographies, whether economical, political, military or cultural. As such, it leads to changing the very terms of *citizenship*, and hence of ‘Europe’, through taking an apprenticeship in the Adornian condition of learning not to be at home at home. At its most banal, it can lead to appropriating the bureaucratic realities of monetary union and the European Constitution precisely in terms of opening up interstices, modifying and weakening inherited apparatuses and powers, rendering individual and collective belonging less distinct, more dispersive, mutable, hence debatable.

Although seemingly articulated along the borders between Europe and the rest of the world, it is ultimately impossible to restrict the terms of such a debate solely to the interior realm. They invest a planetary modernity. Our interiors, as Hannah Arendt pointed out many decades ago, are structurally and historically dependent upon an exterior that is colonial in origin and global in intent. So while, with Étienne Balibar, we willingly concentrate on the European specificity of racism and the internal surveillance of the institutional construction of ‘Europe’, it remains impossible to ignore the accelerated *contraction* and *concentration* of the world in the mediated space that is increasingly organised by ‘our’ culture under the labels of ‘violence’, ‘war’ and ‘terror’. In the cannibalisation of the world by the western media, the unrelenting ubiquity of the categories of war, violence and terror both reinforce and reverse the sense of Walter Benjamin’s affirmation that the historical emergency is permanent: it is apparently not the subaltern who are

under attack but hegemony itself that proclaims itself to be in an unrelieved state of siege.

This ushers in the paradoxical constancy of the 'exceptional state' (Giorgio Agamben), in which the walls separating the inside from the outside are raised to incomparable heights while simultaneously becoming increasingly impossible to maintain.<sup>3</sup> Here we dramatically make contact with what Mezzadra refers to as the 'non-democratic' character of democracy itself. In the exceptional state, 'terrorism', 'war' and 'justice' explicitly become shifting signifiers, able to slide rapidly into place to respond to the conjunctural needs of hegemony. War, as the militarisation of economical, political and cultural aggression, can be something that is both pre-emptive and non-declared. Increasingly it appears legitimate for the state to step outside the law in order to re-affirm its authority. It is where norms and their application become separated and superceded by the pure force and naked violence of a (suspended) law, or *law*.<sup>4</sup> Much of this increasingly occurs not across classical frontiers, but in a fluid 'no-man's land', in arbitrary border zones where the rule of law is suspended and individuals lose their identity, often their lives, certainly their rights. This might be Kosovo, Guantánamo or a platform on the London Underground.

The chilling conclusion of Agamben's argument is that 'the sharp opposition between democracy and dictatorship is misleading in any analysis of government practices that today prevail'.<sup>5</sup> The distinction itself – the 'rules have changed' as the British Prime Minister put after the London bombings in July 2005 – is deactivated by the state of emergency. This state of exception reveals the dread banality of power liberated from law. Democracy itself is dramatically over-exposed, its limits captured in a shocking register, its previous rhetoric reduced to questions of defence and the bottom line of life and death. The exceptional state represents 'the indeterminate threshold between democracy and absolutism'.<sup>6</sup>

As we know, the universalistic syntax of democracy has historically always depended upon its non-extension to others; our 'rights' have consistently been elaborated through the structural negation of the rights of others. This is the fundamental 'heart of darkness' of Europe, its modernity and hegemony. When in 1791, directly inspired by the events of 1789, the slave rebellion that was to give birth to the black republic of Haiti broke out in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, the demands of the 'Black Jacobins' led by Touissant L'Ouverture were rejected by the Parisian *Directoire*. A fledging democracy was not about to give up its richest overseas possession. Napoleon subsequently even sought to re-conquer the island. Touissant L'Ouverture took the pronouncements of democracy seriously. He paid a high price, dying in France as one of its prisoners. Overseas, seemingly external to the European theatre of modern nationalism and nation building, the example of Haiti concentrates a dark beam on a democracy that was structurally dependent on this negated alterity for its self-realisation. The chains of millions of black slaves mutate into the invisible chains that secure occidental modernity to a

3. Giorgio Agamben, *Stato di Eccezione*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003.

4. This, of course, is the crucial legal point theorised by the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt. I am here following Agamben's commentary on Schmitt via Jacques Derrida's 1989 conference at the Cardozo School of Law in New York: *Force de loi: le fondement mystique de l'autorité*

5. Giorgio Agamben, *op. cit.*, p63.

6. *Ibid.*, p11.

worldly condition that it consistently refuses to recognise.

Towards the end the discussion between Étienne Balibar and Sandro Mezzadra increasingly returns to certain limits and then begins to wander over the border towards the not yet representable. At this point, their talk touches what critical discourse may be unwilling or unable to contemplate. What Agamben calls the essential violence of the state, the very violence that both authorises and sustains the legitimacy of democracy, forces us to consign thinking to the borders. For thinking at the borders is ultimately to push thinking across the line that separates a seemingly defined 'territory' and 'belonging' from the unguaranteed condition of what the Milan-based urban agency Multiplicity justly call the Uncertain States of Europe (USE).