

NewLiberalSpeak

Notes on the new planetary vulgate

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Within a matter of a few years, in all the advanced societies, employers, international officials, high-ranking civil servants, media intellectuals and high-flying journalists have all started to voice a strange Newspeak. Its vocabulary, which seems to have sprung out of nowhere, is now on everyone's lips: 'globalization' and 'flexibility', 'governance' and 'employability', 'underclass' and 'exclusion', 'new economy' and 'zero tolerance', 'communitarianism' and 'multi-culturalism', not to mention their so-called postmodern cousins, 'minority', 'ethnicity', 'identity', 'fragmentation', and so on. The diffusion of this new planetary vulgate – from which the terms 'capitalism', 'class', 'exploitation', 'domination' and 'inequality' are conspicuous by their absence, having been peremptorily dismissed under the pretext that they are obsolete and non-pertinent – is the result of a new type of imperialism. Its effects are all the more powerful and pernicious in that it is promoted not only by the partisans of the neoliberal revolution who, under cover of 'modernization', intend to remake the world by sweeping away the social and economic conquests of a century of social struggles, henceforth depicted as so many archaisms and obstacles to the emergent new order, but also by cultural producers (researchers, writers and artists) and left-wing activists, the vast majority of whom still think of themselves as progressives.

Like ethnic or gender domination, cultural imperialism is a form of *symbolic violence* that relies on a relationship of constrained communication to extort submission. In the case at hand, its particularity consists in universalizing the particularisms bound up with a singular historical experience. Thus, just as, in the nineteenth century, a number of so-called philosophical questions that were debated throughout Europe, such as Spengler's theme of 'decadence' or Dilthey's dichotomy between explanation and understanding, originated, as historian Fritz Ringer has demonstrated, in the historical predicaments and conflicts specific to the peculiar world of German universities, so today many topics directly issued from the particularities and particularisms of US society and universities have been imposed upon the whole planet under apparently dehistoricized guises. These commonplaces (in the Aristotelian sense of notions or theses *with* which one argues but *over* which there is no argument), these undiscussed presuppositions of the discussion owe most of their power to convince to the prestige of the place whence they emanate, and to the fact that, circulating in continuous flow from Berlin to Buenos Aires and from London to Lisbon, they are everywhere powerfully relayed by supposedly neutral agencies ranging from major international organizations (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Commission and OECD), conservative think-tanks (the Manhattan Institute in New York City, the Adam Smith Institute in London, the Fondation Saint-Simon in Paris, and the

Deutsche Bank Foundation in Frankfurt) and philanthropic foundations, to the schools of power (Science-Po in France, the London School of Economics in England, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government in America, etc.).

In addition to the automatic effect of the international circulation of ideas, which tends, by its very logic, to conceal their original conditions of production and signification, the play of preliminary definitions and scholastic deductions replaces the contingency of denegated sociological necessities with the appearance of logical necessity and tends to mask the historical roots of a whole set of questions and notions: the 'efficiency' of the (free) market, the need for the recognition of (cultural) 'identities' or the celebratory reassertion of (individual) 'responsibility'. These will be said to be philosophical, sociological, economic or political, depending on the place and moment of reception. Thus 'planetarized', or globalized in the strictly geographical sense of the term, by this uprooting and, at the same time, departicularized as a result of the illusory break effected by conceptualization, these commonplaces, which the perpetual media repetition has gradually transformed into a universal common sense, succeed in making us forget that, in many cases, they do nothing but express, in a truncated and unrecognizable form (including to those who are promoting it), the complex and contested realities of a particular historical society, tacitly constituted into the model



and measure of all things: the American society of the post-Fordist and post-Keynesian era, the world's only super-power and symbolic Mecca. This is a society characterized by the deliberate dismantling of the social state and the correlative hypertrophy of the penal state, the crushing of trade unions and the dictatorship of the 'shareholder-value' conception of the firm, and their sociological effects: the generalization of precarious wage labour and social insecurity, turned into the privileged engine of economic activity.

The fuzzy and muddy debate about 'multiculturalism' is a paradigmatic example. The term was recently imported into Europe to describe cultural pluralism in the civic sphere, whereas in the United States it refers, in the very movement which obfuscates it, to the continued ostracization of Blacks and to the crisis of the national mythology of the 'American dream' of 'equal opportunity for all', correlative of the bankruptcy of public education at the very time when competition for cultural capital is intensifying and class inequalities are growing at a dizzying pace. The locution 'multicultural' conceals this crisis by artificially restricting it to the university microcosm and by expressing it on an ostensibly 'ethnic' register, when what is really at stake is not the incorporation of marginalized cultures in the academic canon but access to the instruments of (re)production of the middle and upper classes, chief among them the university, in the context of active and massive disengagement by the state. North American 'multiculturalism' is neither a concept nor a theory, nor a social or political movement – even though it claims to be all those things at the same time. It is a *screen discourse*, whose intellectual status is the product of a gigantic effect of national and international *allodoxia*, which deceives both those who are party to it and those who are not. It is

also a North *American* discourse, even though it thinks of itself and presents itself as a universal discourse, to the extent that it expresses the contradictions specific to the predicament of US academics. Cut off from the public sphere and subjected to a high degree of competitive differentiation in their professional milieu, US professors have nowhere to invest their political libido but in campus squabbles dressed up as conceptual battles royal.

The same demonstration could be made about the highly polysemic notion of ‘globalization’, whose upshot – if not function – is to dress up the effects of American imperialism in the trappings of cultural oecumenicism or economic fatalism and to make a transnational relation of economic power appear like a natural necessity. Through a symbolic reversal based on the naturalization of the schemata of neoliberal thought, the reshaping of social relations and cultural practices after the US template, which has been forced upon advanced societies through the pauperization of the state, the commodification of public goods and the generalization of job insecurity, is nowadays accepted with resignation as the inevitable outcome of national evolution, when it is not celebrated with sheep-like enthusiasm. An empirical analysis of the trajectory of the advanced economies over the *longue durée* suggests, in contrast, that ‘globalization’ is not a new phase of capitalism, but a ‘rhetoric’ invoked by governments in order to justify their voluntary surrender to the financial markets and their conversion to a fiduciary conception of the firm. Far from being – as we are constantly told – the inevitable result of the growth of foreign trade, deindustrialization, growing inequality and the retrenchment of social policies are the result of *domestic political decisions* that reflect the tipping of the balance of class forces in favour of the owners of capital.

By imposing on the rest of the world categories of perception homologous to its social structures, the USA is refashioning the entire world in its image: the mental colonization that operates through the dissemination of these concepts can only lead to a sort of generalized and even spontaneous ‘Washington consensus’, as one can readily observe in the sphere of economics, philanthropy or management training. Indeed, this double discourse which, although founded on *belief*, mimics science by superimposing the appearance of reason – and especially economic or political reason – on the social fantasies of the dominant, is endowed with the performative power to bring into being the very realities it claims to describe, according to the principle of the self-fulfilling prophecy: lodged in the minds of political or economic decision-makers and their publics, it is used as an instrument of construction of public and private policies and at the same time to evaluate those very policies. Like the mythologies of the age of science, the new planetary vulgate rests on a series of oppositions and equivalences which support and reinforce one another to depict the contemporary transformations advanced societies are undergoing – economic disinvestment by the state and reinforcement of its police and penal components, deregulation of financial flows and relaxation of administrative controls on the employment market, reduction of social protection and moralizing celebration of ‘individual responsibility’ – as in turn benign, necessary, ineluctable or desirable, according to the oppositions set out in the following ideological schema:

state	→ [globalization] →	market
constraint		freedom
closed		open
rigid		flexible
immobile, fossilized		dynamic, moving, self-transforming
past, outdated		future, novelty
stasis		growth
group, lobby, holism, collectivism		individual, individualism
uniformity, artificiality		diversity, authenticity
autocratic (‘totalitarian’)		democratic

The imperialism of neoliberal reason finds its supreme intellectual accomplishment in two new figures of the cultural producer that are increasingly crowding the autonomous and critical intellectual born of the Enlightenment tradition out of the public scene. One is the *expert* who, in the shadowy corridors of ministries or company headquarters, or in the isolation of think-tanks, prepares highly technical documents, preferably couched in economic or mathematical language, used to justify policy choices made on decidedly non-technical grounds. (The perfect example being plans to 'save' retirement schemes from the supposed threat posed by the increase in life expectancy, where demographic demonstrations are used to railroad privatization plans that consecrate the power of shareholders and shift risk to wage-earners through pensions funds). The other is the *communication consultant to the prince* – a defector from the academic world entered into the service of the dominant, whose mission is to give an academic veneer to the political projects of the new state and business nobility. Its planetary prototype is without contest the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, Director of the London School of Economics, and father of 'structuration theory', a scholastic synthesis of various sociological and philosophical traditions decisively wrenched out of their context and thus ideally suited to the task of academicized sociodicy.

One may see the perfect illustration of the cunning of imperialist reason in the fact that it is England – which, for historical, cultural and linguistic reasons, stands in an intermediary, neutral position (in the etymological sense of 'neither/nor' or 'either/or') between the United States and continental Europe – that has supplied the world with a bicephalous Trojan horse, with one political and one intellectual head, in the dual persona of Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens. On the strength of his ties to politicians, Giddens has emerged as the globe-trotting apostle of a 'Third Way' which, in his own words – which must here be cited from the catalogue of textbook-style definitions of his theories and political views in the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section of his London School of Economics website, <www.lse.ac.uk/Giddens/FAQs.htm> – 'takes a positive attitude towards globalization'; 'tries [*sic*] to respond to changing patterns of inequality', but begins by warning that 'the poor today are not the same as the poor of the past', and that, 'likewise, the rich are not the same as they used to be'; accepts the idea that 'existing social welfare systems, and the broader structure of the State, are the source of problems, not only the means of resolving them'; 'emphasizes that social and economic policy are intrinsically connected', in order better to assert that 'social spending has to be assessed in terms of its consequences for the economy as a whole'; and, finally 'concerns itself with mechanisms of exclusion at the bottom and the top [*sic*]', convinced as it is that 'redefining inequality in relation to exclusion at both levels is consistent with a dynamic conception of inequality'. The masters of the economy, and the other 'excluded at the top', can sleep in peace: they have found their Pangloss.

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