

## Heterogeneity and post-modernity

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**W**hen the theme of post-modernity emerged a few decades ago within our political and philosophical horizon, it was associated with a variety of dimensions. In that sense, it was more the reflection of an epochal new perceptual field than a precise theoretical stand. Theoretical attempts at capturing its meaning did not however take long to come forth. They were many and greatly differ from each other, but one, however, had pride of place from the beginning: I am referring to what, in Lyotard's canonical approach to post-modernity was called 'the crisis of great narratives'. From the *Post-Modern Condition to the Différend* Lyotard elaborated a theoretical perspective whose central tenet was that, while the founding discourses of modernity had been centred in the postulation of a universal subject and in the notion of an ultimate ground of the social – as epitomized in the classical philosophies of history – the contemporary scene would be characterized by the breaking up of such a subject and such a ground and by the proliferation of a plurality of language games whose interconnections does not lead to any kind of mutual compatibility. *Ergo*: irreducible *différends* are at the very root of social interaction. Heterogeneity would thus be constitutive. The following reflections have been written in the conviction that, while the dialectic between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous is indeed far more complex than it was conceived in the past – and it is at

the root of the epochal change which we are referring to –, such a complexity is far from necessarily going in the direction of the pure disposition and multiplicity that main-stream post-modern approaches presuppose.<sup>1</sup> This means that such dispersion and multiplicity is only *one* of the developments that the break down of a fundamentalist grounding makes possible. I would even say that to conceive of such a break down in terms of a ‘crisis of the great narratives’ is extremely misleading and short-sighted. A widening of the theoretical horizon which makes other possibilities visible becomes necessary. This should break between ‘modernity’ and ‘post-modernity’, and even to ask oneself whether the movement from one to the other can still be conceived in terms of ‘break’. Let us start from a passage by Frantz Fanon that, *prima facie*, nobody would associate with post-modernism: ‘The *lumpenproletariat*, once it is constituted, brings all its forces to endanger the “security” of the town, and is the sign of the irrevocable decay, the gangrene ever present at the hear of colonial domination. So the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals ... throw themselves into the struggle like stout working men. These classless idlers will by militant and decisive action discover the path that leads to nationhood ... The prostitutes too, and the maids who are paid two pounds a month, all who turn in circles between suicide and madness, will recover their balance, once more go forward, and march proudly in the great procession of the awakened nation’.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, we are in the antipodes of anything resembling post-modernity. There is a strong revolutionary (anti-colonialist) appeal to a will supposed to be the absolute ground of the (new) nation; there is the postulation of a sharp frontier separating that nation from the colonial order; and there is the attempt at creating an absolute subject of the emancipatory project. And, however if we take a careful look at the discursive operations through which those effects are obtained, we immediately see that the worm of post-modernity is already silently eroding the certainties of classical modernity. For what we have in Fanon’s text is the attempt at reading emancipation *by other than the modern means*. There is, firstly, the appeal to an absolute exteriority vis-à-vis the colonial order. He is not appealing to the internal contradictions of colonialist society (to people whose antagonism would result from the *inside* of that society) but to *total* outsiders, to people who are *uncountable* within the order of the city. This means that between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ there is no common measure. So we have a

<sup>1</sup> These issues are more thoroughly discussed in my forthcoming book, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, 1968, p130

*différend* in Lyotard's sense. This shows a sharp differentiation between Fanon's discourse and the 'modern' attempts at conceiving antagonisms as subsumable under the category of 'contradiction', which proceeds through dialectical retrievals – eg. through the contradiction between forces and relations of production. For the latter there is no radical 'outside' (A is opposed to B, only to be reabsorbed in a new stage, C, in which the antagonism between A and B reveals to have been only the prelude to a higher positivity superseding both). History is here a purely internal affair. So we are within the most classical parameters of the 'modern' project. The true 'outsiders' – the 'peoples without history' of Hegel, the *lumpenproletariat* of Marx, can be ignored as being purely external to the main line of historical development.

For Fanon, on the contrary, to be a total outsider becomes the precondition for the emergence of a revolutionary subjectivity. This is the reason why the *lumpenproletariat*, unceremoniously brushed aside by Marx and Engels as agent of any possible radical change, becomes, for Fanon, the very axis of the revolutionary process. There are here two aspects worth underlining. The first concerns the very nature of the discursive operation in which Fanon is involved. In order to be a purely internal process, any succession of reversal and retrievals, if it is going to be truly dialectical, has to reduce the opposition between A and B to that between A and non-A, so that 1) the essence of B is exhausted in its being non-A, and 2) there is in the essence of A everything needed to explain its transition to B as its necessary opposite. Now, in Fanon's argument the opposition colonialism/anticolonialism has also the external form of a dialectical opposition A/not-A, but with this crucial difference: that there are not the internal contradictions of the colonial order – the inside of the colonial order – which explain the emergence of the anti-colonial subjects, but the total exteriority of the latter vis-à-vis the former. That is the reason why Fanon has to appeal to total outsiders (hooligans, prostitutes, petty criminals), whose lack of any *positive* location within the community puts them in a position of total heterogeneity in relation to the latter. For these subjects, being anti-colonialist is the alpha and omega of their social identity. Thus, this identity becomes fully political.

At this point we find a first sense of heterogeneity which is resolutely post-modern: B is heterogeneous vis-à-vis A, not because it is the dialectically (and so retrievable) opposite of A but because it is *irrepresentable* within A. Lacan's radically anti-Hegelian notion of the Real is, perhaps, the clearest

expression of the logic of this irrepresentability. (Recent attempts to edulcorate the Lacanian notion of the Real by domesticating it through Hegelian dialectics entirely miss the point.)

But these is a second aspect that we have to take into consideration. We have approached Fanon's discursive operation to Lyotard's *différend*. We cannot however do so without making clear that, in the case of Fanon, the radical character of the *différend* moves in directions which Lyotard would have never recognized as his own. For Lyotard, *différends* are sources of an irreducible plurality, while for Fanon the effect is exactly the opposite: that irreducibility is at the root of a sharp frontier separating the anti-colonial subjects from the colonial order. We are beyond modernity because there is no objective movement which reduces the two poles of the antagonism to a deeper homogeneous logic, but this does not lead to any simple separation between them but, on the contrary, to a close imbrication. This explains the meaning of our assertion, at the beginning of this essay, that the language games which it is possible to play out of the systematic de-grounding associated to the notion of 'post-modernity' are wider and more differentiated than what notions such as 'multiplicity' or 'dispersion' can capture. If there is something inherently post-modern is the displacement in the relation between homogeneity and heterogeneity, not the simple replacement of one by the other. And this displacement is perfectly compatible, as the example of Fanon shows, with the continuity of 'great narratives' of a different type. Homogeneity can be achieved, even at the level of global narratives, out of an original heterogeneity. What has changed is that the homogeneous has ceased to be a ground and has become the horizon of a social construction. That is why the notion of 'break' does not adequately apprehend the type of mutation which is involved in this substitution of paradigms.

This, however, explains as well why even the heterogeneization of the dialectical operation that Fanon performs cannot be the only game in town within the post-modern horizon. Fanon's rigid opposition can only maintain its sharpness as far as the relationship between the colonial order and the marginals located outside it is one of *total* exteriority. This, however, can only be achieved by exaggerating out of all proportion the degree of internal coherence of the colonial order. If such an order is, on the contrary, seen as criss-crossed by points of rupture and antagonisms of many types, an externality will emerge *within* that order, so that the anti-colonialist

struggle will not be limited to the total marginals (to the *lumpenproletariat* in the sense given by Fanon to this term). But something more will also happen: the internal fissures of the colonial order will put into question its ability to bring about 'order' *tout court*. In that case the anti-colonial movement will not only have a *confrontational* but also a *reconstructive* dimension. If we incorporate these two additions – expansion of the points of antagonism to the interior of the communitarian space and inherence of the reconstructive dimension to any project of radical change – into the picture, a consequence clearly follows: there is going to be a constitutive contamination between the internal and the external, between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous. Heterogeneity is constitutive as far as it is not a *natura naturata* emerging out of a homogeneous *natura naturans*, but the primary terrain within which homogeneizing logics operate. And the latter do not proceed from a terrain different than that of the heterogeneous: as this terrain is essentially uneven, some of the heterogeneous elements will be able, at some point, to carry out hegemonic/homogeneizing operations. So there is no fixed frontier dominated by an entirely stable opposition between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', but a displacement of frontiers which constantly renegotiates the relations between internality and externality – a 'war of position' in the Gramscian sense. My 'post-modernity' – providing that we want to stick to the term – is grounded in the constitutive character of this undecidable contaminating game. It rejects both the notion of a homogeneous foundation and its symmetrical opposite: an uncontaminated heterogeneity.

The perspective concerning heterogeneity which we have just outlined has also important consequences for the way we approach the question of the discursive apprehension of collective identities. We can say that, while modernity privileged a predominantly *conceptual* grasping of the social, we are today moving towards an alternative vision, one that privileges the moment of *singularity* as that which resists universality and which, thus, cannot be captured by purely conceptual means. The reason for this is clear: conceptual thought moves itself within the terrain of the homogeneous, of that which reduces diversity to an underlying unity. It is important to realise that homogeneization, conceived in this way, is not incompatible with particularism: the only requirement is that the transition between particularities takes place through purely conceptual means, that is that particularities be conceived as part of a wider whole which explains and

gives sense to all of them. The terrain of homogeneization presupposes, from this point of view, the presence of a unique field of representation. What is specific of essentialism is not uniformity but universal representability through conceptual means. This is the reason why 'singularity' means something entirely different from 'particularism'.

Where does this difference lie? In the simple fact that, while the differences constituting particularities can still be conceptually represented as expressions of a universal ground, this does not happen in the case of a true heterogeneity. The heterogeneous demands constituting a chain of equivalences opposed to a repressive power do not spontaneously tend – without a political construction – to coalesce with each other; they are not the expression of an aprioristic ground constituting and giving meaning to all of them. Here we have something crucially important: in the same way that true particularism is not incompatible with an essentialist grounding, true heterogeneity is not incompatible with some forms of political totalization. The only thing that the latter requires is that, being the heterogeneous constitutive and irreducible, such a totalization cannot function as a necessary ground. In other terms: the empty signifiers – to use our terminology – which totalize and give hegemonic universality to an equivalential chain, cannot consist in a minimal formal content shared by all the links of that chain, a content which, although minimal, would still be conceptually representable. So if it entirely escapes the conceptual, in what does it consist? The answer is: in a *name*. *The name as the ground of the thing, this is the precondition of a true singularity.*

It is here that contemporary thought has made considerable advances. Let us give one example. For analytic philosophy in its early stages, a name refers to a thing only through the conceptual mediation represented by the descriptive features associated to that name. This is the descriptivist approach to be found, in its most classical expression, in the work of Bertrand Russell. This approach has been decisively undermined in recent years by the anti-descriptivist school led by Saul Kripke. Names do not refer to objects through conceptual mediation but constitute primal baptisms. So in naming we are dealing with true singularities. If we are, however, going to associate singularity and heterogeneity, one more step had to be taken, and it was actually taken by Lacan, for whom the unity of the object (of the primal baptism) is only the retroactive effect of the act of naming it. At this point singularity and heterogeneity come together: the name becomes the ground

of the thing. The equivalential chain is still heterogeneous, but the act of unification is compatible with such a heterogeneity, because it is of a nominal and not of a conceptual nature. The essentialism of the discourse of modernity starts being left behind, but what replaces it is not mere dispersion and fragmentation, but a reconstitution of collective identities as singularities. And this singularity is not incompatible with a universalism of a hegemonic type, for which universality is not a ground but a horizon.

This transition can be seen clearly reflected, among other traditions, in the history of Marxism. At the beginning, the discourse asserting homogeneity is overwhelmingly dominant. The simplification of social structure under capitalism would eliminate all heterogeneity, and the final act of history would be a simple showdown between the capitalist class and the proletariat. On top of that, the general laws of capitalism and the stages associated with them will be repeated in all essential respects in every society. Any singularity is reduced to the epiphenomenal expression of a process which, in all its essential determinations, is fully universal and conceptually apprehensible. The lowest ebb in this curb was the Marxism of the Second International and its two most characteristic thinkers: Kantsky and Plekhanov. Very soon, however, a series of dislocations within this model of historical change started tarnishing its neat outlines: the difficult articulation between workers' political and economic struggles; the evident fact that social structure under capitalism, far from becoming more homogeneous through proletarianization was becoming more heterogeneous and complex every day: and, especially, the phenomena association with combined and uneven development, which made possible all kinds of non-orthodox combinations between agents, stages and political tasks. This leads to consequences for which all our previous analysis has prepared us to understand: any kind of emancipatory subject, being the combination of a heterogeneity of antagonistic positions which no logic of history can explain, has to result from a political articulation and not from an aprioristic objective process preceding and explaining it. That is, that those subjects are *singularities*, in the sense that we have given to that term. That is why Gramsci gave such a central role to the category of 'hegemony' and spoke of 'collective wills' rather than 'classes' as objective locations. Both Mao and Togliatti called themselves 'communists'. Their obvious political differences, however, should be explained by the fact that the chains of equivalences that the signifier 'communist' tried to unify were entirely

different in both cases. Thus, the signifier 'communist' does not express a common conceptual content underlying both projects, but functions instead as a name – ie. it constitutes a historical singularity. While the traditional notion of an 'international' – either socialist or communist – was still very much dominated by a 'modern' outlook, the actual history of socialism is nothing but the history of the breaking up of that postulated uniformity in which the various local parties were conceived as sections of a homogeneous international army. The irruption of this irreducible moment of heterogeneity follows point by point the transition from modernity to post-modernity as we have described it. Needless to say, the proliferation of points of rupture and antagonism in a globalized world, makes the heterogeneous nature of social actors even more visible, and also makes any kind of link existing between them increasingly dependent on political articulations.

There is another dimension, however, which is important to incorporate into our analysis. Privileging the constitutive nature of heterogeneity and presenting homogenizing logics as always operating within that primary heterogeneous terrain has led us to invert the traditional relations of priority between concept and name. The name is not the transparent medium through which the concept shows itself but, instead, any concept is only an abstract determination within the more fundamental homogenization of the heterogeneous that the name brings about. This, however, presents a new problem: which, among the heterogeneous elements, is going to function as the name of the equivalential series? For if we said that it is transcendently predetermined which this element is going to be, we would be reintroducing through the window what we had expelled through the door: the homogeneous would still be functioning as a ground. If the heterogeneous is really constitutive, the unifying operation carried out by naming can only proceed from the very interiority of the heterogeneous field. This is the point where psychoanalysis shows all its ontological potential. Let us consider the Freudian category of 'overdetermination'. In a process of condensation one element expresses a chain of associations with other elements which are absolutely heterogeneous between themselves. And there is no aprioristic determination of which this element is going to be, only a purely personal history determines it. So we are in the terrain of singularity and naming.

In what does this process of (unconscious) privileging one element as the overdetermined/overdetermining one consist? Freud's answer is clear: in the process of investment that he calls *cathexis*. But *cathexis* is something



belonging to the order of the *affect*. I will describe in a moment how this logic of cathexis/investment operates. Before that, however, we should stress the important point that what we have just stated involves that affect is not derivative but constitutive. If the decision giving the overdetermining role to a particular element would be taken a priori, the affective dimension would be entirely derivative: it would not constitute the object but would be a secondary aspect accompanying something which had been fully constituted outside the cathectic investment. But if we assert that cathexis is constitutive, it necessarily determines the very identity of the object. So we have a second inversion of the priorities. The first was that between concept and name; now we have a second, displaying affect from the secondary position to which rationalistic essentialism had relegated it. Both inversions are, actually, dimensions of the same process through which heterogeneity becomes ontologically primary.

The psychoanalytic exploration of effect leads us to the same blending of universalism and particularism that we had found in our discussion of the relationship homogeneity/heterogeneity. This can be seen at its most clear in the Lacanian conception of the *objet petit a*.<sup>3</sup> As is well known, the aim of every drive is, for Freud, death, in the sense of a return to a mythical earlier state of inanimation or inertia conceived, by psychoanalysis, in terms of the primordial mother/child dyad. This, however, does not lead to destruction due to the fact, in Copjec's words: '(1) That there is no simple, complete drive, only partial drives, and thus *no realizable will to destruction*; and (2) the second paradox of the drive, which states that the drive inhibits, as part of its very activity, the achievement of its aim. Some inherent obstacle – the *objet* of the drive – simultaneously *brakes* the drive and *breaks it up*, curbs it, thus preventing it from reaching its aim, and divides it into partial drives'.<sup>4</sup> So a certain partial object is invested with the role of representing an impossible totality – impossible because it is no more than a retroactive assumption. In other of her essays<sup>5</sup> Copjec relates the logic of the object *a* to that of the close-up in film: the latter is not a part which could simply be added to other parts, but a part which is the whole – ie. It functions as the name of the totality, in the sense in which we have used before the category of name. This point is crucial: not only is affect constitutive of the object – without which we would only have a mere dispersion of heterogeneous elements – but we also find that the homogenizing role that affect plays operates through a very specific pattern: the investment of an

<sup>3</sup> I have discussed this matter in chapter 4 of my previously mentioned book. My discussion is largely inspired by Joan Copjec's book, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> J Copjec, *op cit*, p34

<sup>5</sup> 'Narcissism, Approach Obliquely', *op cit*, pp48-82

object with the role of representing the totality. To put it in Lacan's terms: sublimation consists in elevating an object to the dignity of the Thing. It does not take long to realise that this is what, in political analysis, we have called hegemony: a relation by which a partiality becomes the name of a totality with which it is entirely incommensurable. So the privileging of naming and the relation object *a*/hegemony constitute two fundamental displacements in the transition from modernity (grounded in the transparency of the conceptual medium and in the fullness of being) to a certain post-modernity. For the latter, the failure of totality in its process of self-constitution does not open the way to mere multiplicity, but to a different way of articulating the particular and the universal – what we have called singularity – by which the totality is very much present as that which is absent, and only shows itself through partial objects which become its actual *names*.

Various other displacements dominate the transition, that we are discussing, but there is one in particular that we should refer to: the elevation of Rhetoric, from the marginal and subordinated role that it occupied within the traditional classification of humanistic disciplines, to a constitutive role within the terrain of a general ontology. The condition for this displacement is the increasing recognition of what, in psychoanalytic terms, has been called the *materiality of the signifier* and the concomitant enlargement of the field of operation of the figural at the expense of the literal. Our discussion on naming already preannounces this displacement. Let us consider the matter carefully. Materiality of the signifier does not mean privileging the phonic over the conceptual substance, simply because linguistic analysis is concerned with form and not with substance. Materiality of the signifier means the interruption of the one to one relationship between signifier and signified and, as a result, the emergence of something which is constitutively unrepresentable within the process of signification. This can happen at various levels: through incompatible equivalential chains which exercise structural pressure on the same signifier and thus cuts its links with any precise signified; through contradictory associative chains operating at the level of what traditionally has been called the signified; through the unevenness of the investments that cathect the various links of the signifying chain, etc. In all cases materiality of the signifier means subversion of the symbolic by the real. Let us just consider the investment involved in the object *a*. Being the object 'elevated to the dignity of the Thing' and being the 'Thing' only a retrospective illusion, the investment cannot be considered

as a 'normal' process of representation, in which the identities of both representative and represented have a direct form of expression. (Whether there is any process of representation which follows this transparent pattern is something we could doubt, but the discussion of this issue would take us too far away from the main topic of this essay.) The investment of the object *a* is one in which what is invested is a non-existing fullness, and so the object becomes the name of an absence. In that case, however, what we have is a figural meaning which occupies the place of a non-existing literality. This figural meaning is well known in classical rhetoric: it was called *catachresis*. Once we reach the conclusion that the logic of the object *a* – and, in politics, that of hegemony, which is identical – is not a marginal one but is the very condition of objectivity, we immediately see that the categories of a fundamental ontology have necessarily to be rhetorical.

This contamination between rhetoric and ontology cannot, of course proceed without producing internal displacements within the categories which had traditionally defined their respective terrains. From the point of view of ontology its 'rhetorization' necessarily puts into question any notion of a hard transcendental – ie. any sharp division between the transcendental and the empirical. What we have said about heterogeneity and naming already makes this crystal clear. The necessary steps, in this change of perspective are, first, the enlargement of the notion of discourse to cover the whole field of objectivity – movement which is possible once linguistic formalism had broken the necessary links of linguistics with the conceptual and phonic substances. The second is the 'ontologization' of the linguistic categories – ie. their generalization as a pure relational logic. The third is the analysis of how the emergence of the unrepresentable within the field of representation alters the system of those relations. This is the point where, finally, ontology meets rhetoric, not as an external addition but as something required by the very logic of the ontological categories. Rhetoric, however, in order to be equal to the task, has also to change its internal structure. To give just one example: if the representation of the unrepresentable is constitutive of objectivity, *catachresis* cannot be one figure among others, but becomes synonymous with the very principle of rhetoricity. And many other displacements within the rhetorical field become equally necessary.

I hope that my argument in this essay makes clear how I see the relationship between modernity and a possible post-modernity: not in terms

of a break with the past, but as an enlargement of the terrain within which that past operated. Very few – if any – of the categories of modernity have to be simply abandoned. The task as I see it today is not one of dismissal but of redefining fields of operation. Democracy as conceived within the modern outlook, for instance, should not be dismissed but seen as one among many other forms of democratic arrangement which we see today as possible within our globalized world. Several of the categories of modern metaphysics could be maintained, although their status should be redefined: they no longer function as grounds but as horizons. And, as should be clear, this essay is an argument against any radical opposition between universalism and particularism, although the forms of their combination that we are advocating clearly transcend the horizon of modernity. To put it briefly: a transition governed by displacements, not a sharp cut in which we would function as the gravediggers of modernity.