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Modernity and the Other

In the realm of theology in Western Europe, the problems we face today—and especially the ways in which we face these problems—have developed in the period since the XVth century. Although we might still use older terms or concepts or might refer to previous sources, our approach remains modern. Even anti-modern attitudes arise in opposition to modern thinking and are therefore dependent upon modern discourse remaining hegemonic.

This discourse was born at that very moment in which the European powers started to exercise their influence and control over enormous areas of land and foreign peoples. It is the outward-reaching tendency to supersede and to suppress the Other which started with the reconquista in Spain and then was prolonged in the conquista of the Americas.

At the same time, within the Western world the ideological Other developed out of the split between Protestants (Reichstag of Augsburg, 1530) and Roman Catholics (Council of Trent, 1545), the competition of equally powerful doctrines (in political terms) within one framework of philosophy.

Behind this split lay the development of a new economic power located in the merchant cities and requiring new ways of ideological expression for the changed experience of society and life. Meanwhile the Inquisition and the hunting of women as witches ensured that the internal Other of the patriarchy, women, were kept under control.

None of the patterns of superiority, especially in the realm of the ideological superstructure of philosophy and theology, are necessarily new; rather, they have taken root in Western European thought from before the XVth century. Still, there must be a new quality added to these older patterns which allows for the development of the gradually achieved global dominance of the Western world.

It is the consequence of this new quality and the combination of different patterns that led to the huge number of victims and destruction of livelihoods in this century, at the turn of which we discover the end of the cultural monopoly, both illusory and real. This demise is today termed “post-modern” or “pluralist.”

I. At the Beginning

In his article about theology in the project of Modernity, Jürgen MOLTSMANN examines the birth, vitality and congenital defect of the modern age.¹ We will follow his argument here, adding some thoughts relevant to the question of the Other and otherness.

1 MOLTSMANN Jürgen, *Theologie im Projekt der Moderne*. Evangelische Theologie 1995/5. 402–415.



The modern era has two centres of origin: first, the *conquista*, the discovery and conquest of the Americas since 1492; and second, the scientific-technological seizure of power (*Machtergreifung*) of man (sic) over nature.

In both cases it signified the beginning of a process in which Europe, which was at that time as a cultural entity quite peripheral and insignificant, started to define and develop itself as the centre of the global environment.

This development was endorsed by a Christian impulse and hope of a chiliastic origin, which is why MOLTSMANN describes it as the birth of the modern world out of the spirit of Messianic hope.²

1. Conquista

The people of Europe, first the Portuguese and Spaniards, and later the British, Dutch and French in the Americas, and the Russians in Siberia, Alaska and the Caucasus, started in 1492 to discover for themselves a *new world*.

To *discover*, however, meant in their case more than finding something previously hidden; it meant the acquisition of the unknown and the Other. *America* is an invention of the discoverers; the *Conquistadores* found what they were looking for because they invented it.³

For Christopher COLUMBUS, the names of places in the language of the indigenous people were unimportant, as was their culture. He gave the places he *discovered* new, *Christian* names: naming was thereby an act of claiming possession of the land.

He also interpreted their culture and language according to his expectations—according to what he knew he would find.⁴ The myth of a *no man's land* and of *wilderness* served to legalise the robbery, colonisation and settlement of Europeans in these countries.

With the conquest of the Americas, Western European Christendom also embarked upon the domination of the world. The conquest of souls was, however, not motivated by a desire to promote the *Good News*, but to expand *Christian empires*.⁵

Since the Pope gave the newly discovered countries to *Christian emperors* in order to fulfil the task of *Christianising* their inhabitants (insofar as they were regarded as human), the acceptance of the Christian faith was only possible together with submission to European rule.

2. Power over Nature

The other source of Modernity is the seizure of power over nature by the development of scientific-technological knowledge. In the era from Nicholas COPERNICUS to Isaac NEWTON, the world became disenchanting—what had been the realm of divine mystery became the area of human control.

“The natural sciences bring *mother nature with her daughters* to the human, who

² See MOLTSMANN. 403–407.

³ For the term and the problem of *inventing America*: DUSSEL Enrique, *Von der Erfindung Amerikas zur Entdeckung des Anderen: Ein Projekt der Transmoderne*. Düsseldorf, 1993. There one can also find important non-Eurocentric perspectives on the development of modernity.

⁴ See MOLTSMANN. 403.

⁵ See MOLTSMANN. 404.

must be male, in order to make him her *Lord and Master*, as it is expressed in the sexist language of Francis BACON and Rene DESCARTES.⁶

Also in the realm of natural sciences there were *discoveries* made, which are named by their discoverers. And again that *discovery* not only overcomes our ignorance; it is also supposed to place the objects under our power and make us the subjects.

The reason of the natural sciences is always *instrumental reason*: reason with a vested interest that informs its findings (*erkenntnisleitendes Interesse*), the interest of utility and domination.⁷

According to Immanuel KANT's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the modern mind only accepts what it produces itself by its own design. It forces nature to answer its questions. This forcing of nature is called *experiment*, and it has been often compared to the interrogation under torture of the Inquisition.

The natural sciences and technology enabled Europe to obtain that kind of *legislature* that sanctioned the extraction of resources from the *colonised* countries. This exploitation allowed the development of the global network of civilisation, which continues to claim the right of universal validity for its ethos and shape. It is this universal claim that is in question today.⁸

Being the ideological framework of the society that produced such knowledge, Western Christianity assumed its position of claiming to be the religion of the victorious God. Some scientists did it in *exploring* nature, hundreds of workers producing the surplus to finance the science, and even more women and men sacrificing their lives and strength to guarantee the survival of those exploited to deliver the material basis for *progress*.

The dominant, victorious, expanding Western civilisation called its world the *Christian world* and the age of its biggest success in the XIXth century the *Christian century*.⁹ Although the XXth century has seen the secularisation and atheistic reinterpretation of *Christian values*, the Christian origins of the glorification of progress are worth more examination in order to understand the close symbiosis of bourgeois society in its exploitative ignorance towards the Others, and the Christian theology of hope and liberation.

MOLTMANN claims that it was the vision of a *New World* that motivated European expansion into the world. COLUMBUS' motivation to sail to the West was to raise the money needed in order to send Spanish troops to conquer Jerusalem, since Jerusalem was the chiliastic capital of the thousand-year reign of the saints with Christ (*Tausendjähriges Reich*).

The *new world* was seen in the context of the new Heaven and the new Earth of the apocalypse and the coming Messianic age. It is the vision of the *new age*:

"The mobilising and orientating framework of interpretation for the multiple seizure of power by Europe over the world lies in the chiliastic expectation that the saints will

6 See MOLTMANN. 404. „Die Naturwissenschaften bringen 'Mutter Natur mit ihren Töchtern' zum Menschen, der ein Mann sein muß, um diesen zu ihrem 'Herrn und Eigentümer' zu machen, wie es in der sexistischen Sprache Francis BACONS und René DESCARTES heißt."

7 For the philosophical concept behind this: HORKHEIMER Max – ADORNO Theodor W., *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (tr. CUMMING John). London–New York, 1995.

8 For an early critique of the attempt to adapt philosophy to the standard and method of natural sciences, see Max HORKHEIMER in his critique of pragmatism and positivism: HORKHEIMER Max, *Eclipse of Reason*. New York, 1974. 3–57.

9 See MOLTMANN. 404.

reign with Christ, when he comes, for a thousand years and judge the peoples and that this empire of Christ will be the last and golden age of humankind before the end of the world.”¹⁰

The Messianic and chiliastic hopes of Christianity have always existed, but with the beginning of the modern age these took on a new quality: the time is *now*; the process of world history is complete, the new and the last age has come.

Through technology and science man (sic) regained what he (sic) had lost with original sin: dominion over the Earth. Now the emancipation of humankind became possible. In the Enlightenment, humans were able to leave behind their mental immaturity and become morally good again.

The reason for this is that in the last millennium, evil is bound so that the good can spread unhindered. The general belief in reason is possible, since in this age humans understand the true and good even without the mediation of the Church, simply because it is the good and true.¹¹

The religious question for KANT is simply: What may I hope for?¹² It is the future that makes sense of all life in the present, as well as all of history. And it is this future for which it is legitimate and reasonable to sacrifice the lives of present generations. The future that is hoped for is a new paradigm for modernity: the paradigm of transcendence.

Although there is this *success story* from the point of view of the Western European or the later so-called *Western world* (including North America, Australia and New Zealand), there is the similar excessive history of suffering for all the victims of modernity: there is the history of *sub-modernity*.¹³

The European Messianic upper side of history has its apocalyptic nether side for all the non-male, non-Europeans who happen to be those whose lives and identity would be sacrificed for the transcendent future and for the new and golden age of Christian dominance.

The development of the culture of reason also brought with it the culture of submission of the body, feelings and senses of modern humans. The Other was not accepted in its otherness; it either *conformed* to the prevailing worldview, or it was subjugated.

In short, for the Other the Messianic departure meant apocalyptic destruction. It is the Messianic departure that, in a sense, legitimised the tendency of the *makers* of modernity to assimilate everyone.

The reason for this is that in the final, eschatological age, the only thing that matters is belonging to the saints, to the saved ones, to those who reign with Christ or with HEGEL's world spirit.

Since it is the future that counts, the present, including all the suffering and alienation, is not of real relevance; it is not even real at all, compared to what is hoped for in the transcendent future.

10 „Der mobilisierende und orientierende Deutungsrahmen für die mehrfache Machtergreifung Europas über die Welt liegt in der chiliastischen Erwartung, daß die Heiligen mit Christus, wenn er kommt, für tausend Jahre herrschen und die Völker richten werden und daß dieses Imperium Christi das letzte und goldene Zeitalter der Menschheit vor dem Ende der Welt sein werde.“ MOLTSMANN. 405.

11 See MOLTSMANN. 404.

12 See KANT Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*. A804: “All interest of my reason (the speculative as well as the practical) unites itself in the following three questions: 1. What am I able to know? 2. What shall I do? 3. What may I hope for?” Quoted in MOLTSMANN. 407.

13 See MOLTSMANN. 407–411.

The overriding of the otherness of the Other is not only a phenomenon that is directed at the outsider; it also signifies the overcoming and disappearance of the individual within the framework of enlightenment.

II. Objectifying the Other

In turning to the work of Max HORKHEIMER and Theodor W. ADORNO in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, one can find an illustration of the way in which the individual reacts to the alienation brought about in the enlightenment process.

In analysing the phenomenon of worldwide anti-Semitism, and in particular the Holocaust of National-Socialist Germany at that time, they show the rationale behind, and the process of annihilation of, the Other: The urge to dominate nature provides the epistemological and cultural components of anti-Semitism.

HORKHEIMER and ADORNO claim that all “anti-Semitism is based on false projection.”¹⁴ Epistemologically, the quest for knowledge firstly forces the objects of knowledge into categories, thus violently reducing them to nature, the raw material of dominance.

Consciousness of this projection is achieved by the process of reflection. Recognition makes it possible to neutralise this projection. Failure to reflect results in paranoia, necessitating the reduction of everything to that which the *I* already knows or expects, without allowing room for otherness and difference.

At the heart of anti-Semitic thinking is this kind of semi-knowledge, which does not recognise the projection, but takes it already for knowledge. The Other remains trapped, reduced to nature, to the very thing that is dangerous and has to be controlled.

“The morbid aspect of anti-Semitism is not projective behaviour as such, but the absence from it of reflection. When the subject is no longer able to return to the object what he has received from it, he becomes poorer rather than richer. He loses the reflection in both directions: since he no longer reflects the object, he ceases to reflect upon himself, and loses the ability to differentiate.”¹⁵

In his attitude towards the Jew as the Other, the anti-Semite appeals to *idiosyncrasy*.¹⁶ It is this spontaneous repulsion, which is a natural reflex, which reminds the *I* that she or he has repressed her or his human nature in the course of civilisation.

Civilisation has ceased to deliver to human beings the promised freedom to live according to their natural requirements. By *natural requirements* HORKHEIMER and ADORNO do not mean an unlimited exercise of instincts and sexual urges, but rather they envisage a condition of life where false instincts would be reclaimed and have their place in communal life.

The repressed subject recognises her or his own natural elements in the oppressed Other. This acts as a reminder of the lost aim of civilisation, which cannot be acknowledged because it highlights our own repression and failure. This is the reason for the rage in which she or he tortures the Other.

The masses “must suppress the very possibility and idea of that happiness, the more

¹⁴ See HORKHEIMER Max – ADORNO Theodor W. 187–200.

¹⁵ See HORKHEIMER Max – ADORNO Theodor W. 189.

¹⁶ See HORKHEIMER Max – ADORNO Theodor W. 179–187. In the German usage, “idiosyncrasy” means the spontaneous reaction of aversion towards something, which seems exaggerated, without rational justification, and ignorant of conscious reflection.

relevant it becomes. Wherever it seems to have been achieved despite its fundamental denial, they must repeat the suppression of their own longing. Everything which gives occasion for such repetition, however unhappy it may be in itself, draws upon itself that destructive lust of the civilized person who could never fulfil the process of civilisation. Those who spasmodically dominate nature see in a tormented nature a provocative image of powerless happiness. The thought of *happiness without power* is unbearable, because it would then be *true happiness*.¹⁷

It is this prolonging of the own suppression that leads the masses to pursue the Other, be it the Jew, the non-European, the unsubjected woman. The Shoa is but the most recent mass genocide in European history.

The seeds of anti-Semitism, racism and misogyny are still dominant in the European and Western world. The deadly consequences of the intellectual attitude towards the Other display the full impact of this failure to engage in reflection.

III. The Others Speak up

There is a widespread discussion regarding the end of modernity, or post-modern times. The discussion centres on the shortfalls and congenital defects of modern development. Especially within the feminist movements, the discussions have highlighted the deficits of patriarchal modernity in their reflection on patriarchal practice, thereby furthering their analysis of the system.

Today the deficiencies are clearly exposed. Feminist discourse has been consequently ignored within the established circles of science and society, except when the movement was able to amass the power to make its voice heard.

Within the established structures of the academy, the development of the *linguistic turn* and the deconstructivist practice of philosophy, commonly called the *post-modern*, has emerged as a critique. Their discourse is likewise seen as a threat, but one which comes from within rather than from the outside.

Discussing the common and the different aims of feminists and post-modernists, Craig OWENS identifies the cause of the crisis of modernity: it is the discourse of the others.¹⁸ Following Paul RICCEUR, OWENS equates the end of the modern project with the loss of Western sovereignty.

In an encounter with real pluralism, we realise that the Others are not the only *others*, but that we ourselves are *others* among *others*. So in the encounter with different cultural concepts, we risk the loss of identity.

“What is at stake, then, is not only the hegemony of Western culture, but also (our sense of) our identity as a culture. These two stakes, however, are so inextricably intertwined (as Michel FOUCAULT has taught us, the positing of an Other is a necessary moment in the consolidation, the incorporation of any cultural body) that it is possible to speculate that what has toppled our claims to sovereignty is actually the realization that our culture is neither as homogeneous nor as monolithic as we once believed it to be.”¹⁹

17 See HORKHEIMER Max – ADORNO Theodor W. 179.

18 See OWENS Craig, *The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism*. In FOSTER Hal (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*. London–Sydney, 1985, 57–82.

19 See OWENS Craig, 58.

Where before the *master narratives* (LYOTARD's *grands récits*) of modernity have governed and explained to our culture the reasons for its dominance and legitimised it, there is today a growing awareness that these master narratives are not shared by all peoples and are not necessarily shared within our own culture, since they exclude most women and other groups usually labelled as minorities.

OWENS shows that the critique of master narratives and the acceptance of many cultures are discussed in relation to the issue of the loss of power. Master narratives are the expression of those concepts that were developed "to legitimize Western man's self-appointed mission of transforming the entire planet in his own image."²⁰ In telling a story of liberation, knowledge or reason from any other historical perspective, it is claimed that whatever actions are in line with the respective narrative are justifiable.

But it is not only the telling of a governing story, it is also the process of representation that is at the root of modernity. Drawing on Martin HEIDEGGER, OWENS shows that the modern condition is "that everything that exists does so only in and through representation. To claim this is also to claim that the world exists only in and through a *subject* who believes that she or he is producing the world in producing its representation."²¹

This perspective makes possible the mastery of the world which is reduced to something produced and determined by the subject. Here the critique by HORKHEIMER and ADORNO concurs with HEIDEGGER's observations.

LYOTARD²² draws attention to history in a similar manner. He claims that the first-person singular narrative chosen by René DESCARTES in the *cogito* is one of the key signs of modernity (concerning the Other).

It is the attempt of the *ego* to master every datum—including itself—in the movement towards emancipation, in order to integrate the Other into the *We*. In the discourse of philosophy the *I* develops the narrative towards a potential *You*.

Any third party—that is, all those outside the discourse—has to be included under the concept of *We*, which essentially consists only of the *I* and the *You*. Thus the *Other* is overcome, integrated and mastered.

Even the narratives of emancipation and liberation have this tendency to *speak for the Other* and thereby are themselves dominating master narratives. With the impulse for the emancipation narrative, however, the impulse also comes out of that by which the master narrative will later be overcome.

In the words of Craig OWENS, the modern project today is in a condition "which is experienced everywhere today as a tremendous loss of mastery. It is clear that what has been lost is not primarily a cultural mastery, but an economic, technical, and political one. For what if not the emergence of Third-World nations, the 'revolt of nature' and the women's movement, that is, the voices of the conquered, has challenged the West's desire for ever-greater domination and control?"²³

It seems that the discourse of the Others simultaneously includes the voices having

20 OWENS Craig, 64–70.

21 OWENS Craig, 66.

22 See LYOTARD Jean-François, *Universal History and Cultural Differences*. In BENJAMIN Andrew (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader*. Oxford–Cambridge, 1989. 314–323.

23 OWENS Craig, 66.

been excluded for centuries (feminist discourse), while deconstructing the very positions and assumptions which legitimated the exclusion of the Others (post-modern discourse).

Particularly the feminist discourses emphasise the importance of refusing to speak for others, unlike many modern emancipation movements.²⁴ They criticise the attempts to silence those already silenced by others speaking for them,²⁵ which opens up new perspectives on the totalising aspects of even liberating projects.

This rough overview of some examples analysing the modern project shows several elements of the way in which the Other is perceived and why it is so. It is the tendency of the male *Ego* to approach the Other according to his own system of representation, which only allows him to know the Other insofar as she or he corresponds to that code.

The particularity of the Other becomes levelled to uniformity, and she or he is objectified as an exchangeable abstract category. In the struggle to exercise sovereignty over nature (everything external to the *I*, who also becomes himself objectified: in the abstract and generalised *I*) the basis of the relationship is mastery, power, exploitation and utility.

Even in the attempt to emancipate, the Other comes into view as someone who must be spoken for, who cannot speak for herself or himself. It seems obvious that the Messianic motivation at the outset of the modern era has led to the alienation of the single human person, which is in direct contradiction to the telling of the Biblical narratives about Jesus Christ or the Reign of God.

Suggested Reading

- ASMUS Sören, *I is an Other: Dialogue as First Theology, Emmanuel Levinas and Henning Luther as Sources for Ecumenical Theology*. Dublin, 1996. (unpublished).
- ASMUS Sören, *Sinn und Geschmack für den Anderen: Dialog als Ausgangspunkt der Theologie*. In ASMUS Sören –SCHULZE Manfred (eds.), *Wir haben doch alle denselben Gott: Eintracht, Zwietracht und die Vielfalt der Religionen*. Neukirchen-Vlyun, 2006. 147–186.
- ASMUS Sören –SCHULZE Manfred (eds.), *Wir haben doch alle denselben Gott: Eintracht, Zwietracht und die Vielfalt der Religionen*. Neukirchen-Vlyun, 2006.
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- MOLTMANN Jürgen, *Theologie im Projekt der Moderne*. Evangelische Theologie 1995/5. 402–415.
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²⁴ See LYOTARD. 315.

²⁵ OWENS gives several examples from the area of arts and their theoretical underpinning. See OWENS. 70–77.

