

The Humanities in the Face of Postcoloniality

Stefan Jonsson

As the title of my intervention, I have chosen “The Humanities in the Face of Postcoloniality.” You will notice in due course that I could also have chosen “The Humanities in the Face of the Other,” or “The Humanities in the Face of the Subaltern,” or “The Humanities in the Face of the Masses.” But I could also have chosen what apparently would seem like the opposite title: “The Humanities Facing Themselves.”

Indeed, this will turn out to be my proposition this afternoon. It is partly through postcolonial theories and methods that humanist scholars and intellectuals have discovered the critical relation of humanist knowledge to peoples, bodies, objects, and ideas that have had to be excluded in order for this body of knowledge to constitute itself. In what follows, I will argue that this discovery is also a rediscovery, that the critical relation at issue forms part of the legacy of the humanities, though one that is often repressed, and thus also one in need of constant resurrection. This also amounts to saying that postcoloniality now serves as the vehicle for the self-reflexive moment in the humanities. True, it is not the only such vehicle, but it is perhaps the main one.

In order to enter this argument, I want to cite four characteristic passages.

The first one comes from Indian historian Ranajit Guha: “Bourgeois culture hits an insuperable limit in colonialism.”¹

The second one is from Indian-American literary scholar and cultural theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: “Check out your theoretical presuppo-

¹ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 67.

sitions by testing them in areas as unlike the institution of learning/certification/validation/ information retrieval as possible.”²

My third quote is from Indian political theorist and historian Partha Chatterjee: “If the day comes when the vast storehouse of Indian social history will become comprehensible to the scientific consciousness, we will have achieved along the way a fundamental restructuring of the edifice of European social philosophy as it exists today.”³

Finally, here is Walter Mignolo; Latin American intellectual historian: “Border gnosis as knowledge from a subaltern perspective is knowledge conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system, and border gnoseology as a discourse about colonial knowledge is conceived at the conflictive intersection of the knowledge produced from the perspective of modern colonialisms (rhetoric, philosophy, science) and knowledge produced from the perspective of colonial modernities in Asia, Africa, and the Americas/Caribbean.”⁴

As you can gather, all four statements are made in support of the post-colonial perspective. Notice that the first two speak about how institutionalized knowledge, with all its ensuing claims of universality, reaches a limit in the colony, beyond which it loses its validity. The last two, by contrast, assert the possibility of new knowledge or – to use Mignolo’s word (which he in turn appropriates from Valentin Mudimbe) – of a *gnosis* being produced in precisely that beyond, on the border or at the exterior of what all four would define as the European humanist tradition.

It is rightly argued that postcolonial theory has served the humanities in at least three ways. As representatives of formerly colonized societies have emerged as custodians and narrators of their own histories, they have not only shed light on peoples, artefacts, and ideas long ignored by the dominant humanities. They have also interrogated the reasons for that ignorance and located those reasons within the epistemological presuppositions of the humanities. Finally, they have suggested new epistemologies, and in this endeavour they have joined forces with anti-humanist thinkers from the European tradition (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud et al.). According to these new epistemologies, the site of the production of knowledge is no longer a “sub-

² Sara Danius and Stefan Jonsson, “An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,” *boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (1993): 25.

³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993), 169.

⁴ Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, 2000), 11.

ject,” “institution,” or “centre” – in relation to which what is known emerges as “object,” “field,” or “periphery.” Rather, the site of knowledge production here emerges as “relation,” “borderland,” “conflict,” “encounter,” or some other modality of “in-betweeness.”

The consequences of this shift in perspective are vast indeed. The point is, for instance, to see the text or the writer, the work of art or the artist, not as based in a subject, an institution, a tradition, a milieu, or an intention, but as shaped by a relation or conflict that it remains for the humanist scholar to historically reconstruct.

I will now digress in order to explain why this perspective may be crucial for the future of the humanities – yes, crucial in Sweden too. I will do so by relating the dominant trends in the current humanities to the process of cultural globalization. We may identify four tendencies at work in the globalization of culture.⁵ First, US-based popular commercial culture continues its conquest of the globe. Second, Western “high culture” is becoming part of elite lifestyles not only in Paris and Washington, but in Beijing and Buenos Aires, as well. From each global city on the planet there now emanates a sponsored noise of Pavarotti, Bach and Eric Satie, and in just about every city you visit you will find a major exhibit of Dutch landscape painting, Russian icons, van Gogh, or Andy Warhol, just as you will find a prestigious film festival or a biennale of contemporary art.

We could spend the rest of the afternoon enumerating further examples of these tendencies in various sectors of the arts and media, but there is not time for this. Both have as their condition of possibility the establishment of universal equivalents, or “value-forms,” which make it possible to rank the “value” of different news stories, cultural products, works of art, knowledge, events, ethical behaviour, and political systems, regardless of their cultural origin and contexts. For our purposes, it is interesting to note that both tendencies have their counterparts in two dominant ideas about which direction the humanities ought to take, in order to get out of its alleged crisis. To the first tendency, the globalization of popular commercial culture, there corresponds the idea that the humanities should be transformed into some kind of global cultural studies, with a view to analyze and critique the now planetary flow of messages and images. To the second tendency, the globalization of Western high-culture, with its touring mega-exhibitions, concert

⁵ This argument is developed in Stefan Jonsson, *Världen i vitögat: Tre essäer om västerländsk kultur* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2005).

programmes, film festivals, and art biennales, there is present an equally global network of intellectual communities consisting of various centers for advanced research and high-ranking elite universities. In this perspective, the humanities can best save themselves by tapping into and supporting the erection of an international circuit of centers of excellence, where a cosmopolitan class of scholars reflect on universal problems, in universal ways.

Now the third tendency, of course, consists of all the reactions to this standardization of elite and popular culture. Here we find all the local, ethnic or national movements that aim to resist the globalization of culture. Face to face with the new, global norms, people – be they Persian or Québécois or Swedes – are “discovering” that they have a cultural identity and that it is under threat and needs to be defended. They thus maintain that their values cannot be uprooted from their cultural context and equalized according to some universal standard. Here too, it’s easy to identify the expressions of this tendency in the humanities. The debate on the canon, on the language of publication, on the importance of national research topics vis-à-vis European or international ones all have their place here.

All intellectual work today is carried out in a field of tension between these three tendencies. The debate on the crisis of the humanities may be interpreted as a debate about which of these should take priority as we seek to make the humanities relevant for tomorrow. The first choice is one of *immersion* into the various spaces of cultural postmodernity; the second option is that of *rarification* through competition, that skims off a self-proclaimed elite of researchers and the third one is the alternative of employing the humanities in a project of *consolidation* of heritage and tradition.

As I think you have gathered, I believe the humanities should opt for none of these, because the humanities are already profoundly, and inevitably, caught up in and marked by all three projects. Instead, as an alternative strategy, the humanities should place itself “in the face of postcoloniality.” Why? Because it seems to be the only way to fulfil the fundamental idea of humanist scholarship: self-knowledge and universality.

Let me now return to what I said above: that it is in great part through post-colonial theories that we today have *re-discovered* the critical relation of humanist knowledge to all the peoples, bodies, objects, and ideas that have had to be excluded in order for this knowledge to come into being. I went on to say that, for this reason, postcoloniality serves as the vehicle for the self-reflexive moment in the humanities. This implies that postcoloniality, as my *fourth tendency*, is not so much a brand new invention, but the actu-

alization of a certain legacy and idea of humanist scholarship, which it thus remains for us to rediscover and re-employ.

You remember my four quotes above. Once I started to ponder them and then related them to one of my own areas of research – a study of the fantasy of the masses in modern European culture – I realized that, with slight alterations, they apply to an event that has already taken place once, within the confines of the Western humanities and social sciences. Here's Guha: "Bourgeois culture hits an insuperable limit in colonialism."⁶ Eighty years ago, several thinkers said the same, but about the masses: "Bourgeois culture hits an insuperable limit in the masses." What they meant was that "the mass," according to the then-dominant social theories, designated uncharted social terrain, a part of reality characterized by sheer negativity and lack, the pure negation of all the criteria – organization, consciousness, deliberation, individuality, reason – by which the thinkers of that era defined social structure and human action. Indeed, the mass was the big *internal* other of German sociology of the 1920s. In an analogous way, the sister discipline of anthropology devoted itself to the study of the *external* other, designated as "the savage."⁷ Like the savage, the mass was wholly rejected as a backward life-form by the social scientist, and yet tacitly folded back into his or her system as a model of negativity against which the sociologist and anthropologist could assert the superiority of his own reason and culture. Theodor Geiger, for one, described the mass as "pure agent of destruction"⁸ Leopold von Wiese argued that the mass was to the elite as flesh was to spirit: "Die Masse ist stets vorwiegend Fleisch. [...] Sie verteidigt Muskeln, Rückenmark und Bauch gegen das Gehirn."⁹

As intellectual historians have shown, it was only by questioning the epistemological presuppositions of the social sciences and the humanities that intellectuals were able to bring the mass into the field of analysis and representation, at which point, of course, they ceased to be a "mass" and turned into ordinary men and women, groups and collectives, each with their own rationality.¹⁰ We thus see how Chatterjee's statement, slightly

⁶ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony*, 67.

⁷ See Patricia Lorenzoni, *Att färdas under dödens tecken: Frazer, imperiet och den försvinnande vilden* (Göteborg: Glänta Produktion, 2008).

⁸ Theodor Geiger, *Die Masse und ihre Aktion: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie der Revolution* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1926), 151.

⁹ Leopold von Wiese, *System der Allgemeinen Soziologie* (2d ed. Munich and Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker and Humblot, 1933), 443-444.

¹⁰ For two crucial early contributions to this issue, see George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1948*. 1964. 2d ed.

altered, applies in this context too: "If the day comes when the vast storehouse of the European social history of the masses will become comprehensible to the scientific consciousness, we will have achieved along the way a fundamental restructuring of the edifice of European social philosophy as it exists today."¹¹

This is precisely what happened. European social philosophy was fundamentally restructured once scholars gave up the idea of the masses as a specific sociological and cultural category.

There is more to be said about this process, and additional parallels between the European subalterns called the masses and the non-European subalterns once called savages and natives. For it can also be shown that many of the cherished ideas of individuality, civilization, society, art, and culture of the nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century humanities were shaped precisely by the critical relation to these others who were called masses. One of the first to discover this was Walter Benjamin. Unlike the scholars who sought to insert the mass as a category in their hierarchic sociological and civilizational theories, Benjamin argued that these theories were developed in order to prevent the masses – or rather the men and women subsumed under that category – from intruding upon their life world and political arena. This is to say that most if not all ideas about individuality, culture, civilization, art, and knowledge developed in this period were secretly shaped by the pressure of an external force, which the thinkers of that time designated as the mass and which served as the unacknowledged yet necessary condition of possibility for the knowledge, literature, or art they produced. Benjamin's canonical statement on this issue is found in one of his essays on Baudelaire. He writes: "Die Masse ist Baudelaire derart innerlich, dass man ihre Schilderung bei ihm vergebens sucht."¹² In English: "The mass has become so much an internal part of Baudelaire that one seeks in vain for any descriptions of it in his work."¹³ A page or so further on, Benjamin remarks about Baudelaire's sonnet "A une passante" that – "the crowd is nowhere named in either word or phrase. And yet the whole hap-

1981. London, 1995; and Leo Bramson, *The Political Context of Sociology*. Princeton, 1961.

¹¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993), 169.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," in *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main, 1977), 198.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, [1973] 1983), 122.

pening hinges on it, just as the progress of a sailing-boat depends on the wind."¹⁴

This was Benjamin's discovery: the mass, nowhere named or described, yet omnipresent in the culture of modernity, to the extent that it could be posited as the first obsession and primary content of that culture. To phrase this differently, this was Benjamin's discovery of the critical relation of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century thinking to its exterior. Crucially, it was a dialectical relation, in so far as what appeared to be a relation to an external phenomenon was in fact an internal tension within that thinking in itself: the mass was internal to Baudelaire's work.

Today, I think few would contest Benjamin on this point. We have accustomed ourselves to the view that the sociological and humanist knowledge of that era was shot through by a fear of the masses, as it claimed to save civilization from death by drowning in the rising tide of mass society.

Far more numerable, however, are those who still contest the related point: that the notions of Empire, imperialism, colonialism, European supremacy, or racism are internal to our history of art, literature, and ideas: that the sails of the humanities are filled with the winds of Empire. Many people in the humanities still tend to think of such matters as external to their own enterprises. Their enterprises will therefore remain less relevant, but also and more difficult to defend as against more immediate utilities such as technology and medical science, until its practitioners, that is, we ourselves, realize that all the urgent problems and horrors of the past and of the contemporary world – including terrorism, warfare, torture, and neo-colonial subjugation – have always been internal to the humanities, just as the oppressed masses were the force that set Baudelaire's poetry in motion, and that the humanities therefore have important things to say about such critical issues. Today, as I said, postcolonial theories offer the possibility of re-discovering this critical relation of the humanities to the phenomena that it has exteriorized, then rejected, and finally forgotten. This is why I submit that the humanities should place themselves in the face of postcoloniality, in order to eventually face themselves.

¹⁴ Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 124.