

SPACE REEMERGING
FIVE SHORT REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPTS
"POSTMODERNITY" AND "GLOBALIZATION"

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It was in the Southern spring of 1988, if I remember correctly, that I had the honor of teaching a seminar on "Postmodernity" at the Pontificia Universidade Católica à Rio de Janeiro and, subsequently, at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. While, quite obviously, my classes were based on one and the same modest set of thoughts and notes, it would have been difficult to imagine the classroom discussions to develop into more divergent directions. On the one side, my Brazilian students and colleagues showed a true passion to apply the (then very trendy) concept of "postmodernity" to their own national culture and lifestyles. I can still remember the title of an interview that the *Jornal do Brasil* was kind enough to publish: "O Brasil – Pais Pós-Moderno." On the other (even more Southern) front, the Buenos Aires version of my seminar often turned into an intellectual trenchwar against what the participants must have experienced as a potentially dangerous conceptual infiltration. Everybody was eager (from my perspective: a little bit overeager) to prove that there was no use whatsoever for the notion of "postmodernity" in Argentina and, unsurprisingly, this defense was the flipside of an almost boundless enthusiasm for the concept of "modernity."

In today's retrospective, that very divergence seems to be less specifically Latin American than it is symptomatic of how Western intellectuals used to handle the notion of the "postmodern" a decade and a half ago – which also means that such memories help us understand how we do no longer use the concept today.

From a 1988 perspective, the words “postmodern” and “modern” marked two alternative possibilities of normative self-reference. We often acted as if we really had a choice between “being modern” and “being postmodern.” We were behaving as if these complex concepts functioned like different sets of colors and forms in the world of fashion. “Modernity” tended to be the fashion of those who were convinced that a certain (mostly unorthodox) style of being “of the Left” was still viable, whereas those who had doubts about a similar continuity expressed their deep regret – and opted for “postmodernity” as a self-descriptive concept.¹

“Globalization,” in contrast, was not yet a popular notion back in 1988, let alone a discursive site that produced tensions or debates. Those who allowed the word “global” to enter their discourses could be accused of deplorable intellectual naiveté – for they had given away that they still believed in the possibility of overarching abstractions and generalizations in the field of human culture, an assumption which then appeared unbearably outdated. Readers of Jean-François Lyotard’s *Condition Postmoderne* would not have failed to mention that the word “global” was typical of those “master narratives” (“*grands récits*”) against which the French philosopher had launched his own version of the concept “postmodern.” And with the reproach of naiveté for those unhappy few who were still sticking to “globalizing” categories, came the sinister suspicion that they might be proponents or even agents of “neoliberal economics”, a curse word which still felt quite fresh in those days.

Today, barely a decade and a half later, we experience the meanings of the words “globalization” and “postmodernity” as being intertwined in complex and interesting ways. At the same time, the debates of which they are part look both more analytical and, as a consequence, more concentrated than the discussions of the 1980s. One reason for this considerable semantic and pragmatic

¹See the volume of essays edited by Robert Weimann and myself: *Postmoderne – globale Differenz*. Frankfurt 1991, and my forthcoming entry on “Postmoderne” in: *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft*. Stuttgart 2003.

change may be that we are no longer optimistic enough to see in the distinction between “modern” and “postmodern” the offer of a collective and individual choice between two different versions of our present and future. Only to describe this present – which we experience as an imposed upon rather than a chosen environment – and to understand its genealogy, appears as an almost overwhelming task to us. It is in coping with this task that we continue to develop the notions “modernity” and “postmodernity,” and it is here that they productively converge with the concept of “globalization.” Meanwhile, the question of whether we “prefer” the one or the other of those concepts (to be more precise: whether we like or dislike them *a priori*) has nearly vanished. For certain, there are only few intellectuals today who approve of globalization as an economic or cultural phenomenon – which, taking into account that something like a “global” culture was the ultimate dream of Enlightenment, is not as trivial a development as it may look at first glance. Coming back, however, to a metaphor that I have used to characterize the intellectual style of 1988, one could perhaps say that, instead of dealing with self-reference as a fashion, we now address self-reference as if it were an unknown fate. We have become almost Hamletian in relation to our present. Therefore, the function of the concepts that we can use in trying to identify this present has nothing to do with personal or political preferences. In 2002, the value of these concepts quite strictly depends on our assessment of their analytical power.

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It is our changed epistemological frame-situation, then, which suggests that “postmodernity” is not simply the historical period (the “new fashion”) which follows “modernity” (the “fashion of the previous season”). The strongest analytical claim that the concept of “postmodernity” has to offer lies in the thesis that – independently of our own preferences or projects – we have now left the so called “process of Modernity” behind ourselves. Modernity was the process which, over several centuries, had made

Western culture so familiar with the rhythm of one historical period following the previous one in a logic of progress (or, sometimes, in a logic of decline) that this rhythm ended up appearing as the only way to live time. If we are today beginning to rediscover that there are alternative ways of living and of structuring time, this allows us to understand, firstly, that we are lacking concepts for the description of such alternative time-constructions and that, secondly, it is now possible to historicize the previously dominant time-construction(s). There is probably no contemporary historian who has produced more sophisticated results in taking up this task of historicizing what we used to call “historical time” (or “historical consciousness”) than Reinhart Koselleck.²

Koselleck identifies four main features in the chronotope that shaped Western culture from the Renaissance until the mid-twentieth century. Above all, he insists on an asymmetry between the perception of the past as a (complex but always limited) “space of experience” and the perception of the future as an (open) “horizon of expectations.” To describe the relation between past and future as asymmetrical means, secondly, that the future of historical time was always and necessarily different from the past – which made time appear to be an agent of unavoidable change. But it also implied, thirdly, that while past experience was not completely useless when we tried to imagine future scenarios, it could never provide any certainty in prognosticating the future. The only way to deal with the future, within historical time, was to choose among several possible hypotheses that we were projecting into the future while we were entering it. It is, above all, this very choice among scenarios for the future that the Western philosophical tradition has associated with the concepts of the “subject” and the subject’s “agency.” Fourthly and finally, being a mere moment of transition between the past and the future in the

² Until recently, *Future's Past* (Cambridge, MS, 1991) was the only collection available in English translation of Koselleck's essays about the historicization of historical time. In 2002, a more updated anthology appeared at Stanford Press under the title: *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*.

ever changing flow of historical time, the present was the place where this choice among different future scenarios was supposed to take place, over and again. This is why the concept of the “subject” was inseparably related to the specific concept of the present within historical time.

Now, having made available a basic historical description of historical time, and assuming that we have left this time construction behind ourselves, it becomes possible to point to some features in our new and still nameless chronotope (“postmodernity” was just a first and not very convincing attempt at baptizing it), features that are different from the most important features of “historical time.” What I experience to be a key contrast in this regard is the feeling that the future no longer presents itself as a horizon open to our multiple projections and anticipations. One way of living the new future is our fear of an unknown catastrophe of perhaps cosmic dimensions. This explains why we were not able to joyfully celebrate the crossing of the threshold toward the third millennium, and this also may have added to the uncanny resonance produced by the event of September 11, 2001. Another – not unrelated – new modality of seeing the future is to abandon all hope in prognostication and to replace prognostication through risk calculation.³ Meanwhile, our desire to fill the present with memories and even with artifacts from the past, and our technical possibilities to do so, have enormously grown. The past is no longer the dimension that we “leave behind” as we are approaching the future. Rather, between a future that we can no longer enter and a past that we don't want to leave behind, the present appears to become a slow and ever broadening present of simultaneities.⁴ This broadening present, finally, can no longer be the *habitat* of the traditional Western subject that was so proudly claiming agency for itself. Without postulating a causal relationship, I think it is safe to assume a connection between the transformation of the

³ See Niklas Luhmann: *Observations on Modernity*, pp. 44-62.

⁴ See my essay: Die Gegenwart wird (immer) breiter. In: *Merkur* 629/630 (2001), pp. 769-784.

present within the emerging new chronotope and our current impression that the subject is “weakening.”⁵

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For the moment being (that is, without being able yet to come up with genuinely new concepts for our new situation), I propose to subsume these features of our transformed time under the word “de-temporalization.” If we want to stick to (a complexified version of) the concept “postmodernity” in relation to the new cultural world (“cultural” in the largest possible sense of the word), then we can say that “de-temporalization” is but one of several dimensions that constitute postmodernity. In this paragraph then, I would like to describe, very briefly, some of those other dimensions of postmodernity. One of them we can call “de-referentialization.” I am referring here to the widely shared impression (an impression, indeed, that is widely shared not only among intellectuals) that we have lost touch with the things of the world. Even when, during increasingly short moments, we are not watching television, the world seems to present itself “on a screen,” giving us the feeling that we cannot be in physical contact with its objects. “De-classification” (implying the traditional sociological sense of the word “class”) appears to be a further feature of the present. While differences between individual income levels are exponentially growing today, the traditional symbolic hierarchy among different social classes seems to have largely disappeared. At the same time, this old hierarchy is being substituted by a much more dramatic binarism of truly global dimensions. On its one side, there is a new international “middle class” whose lifestyles are becoming increasingly similar, in spite of those ever more astounding financial differences. What today distinguishes a Silicon Valley billionaire from an average employee in Capetown (beside their income) is no longer their “higher” or “lower” cultural taste but the mildly paradoxical circumstance that the billionaire may prefer to keep his personal collection of Italian Renaissance

⁵ See Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Roatti (eds.): *Il pensiero debole*. Milan 1982.

paintings in the safe of a bank, whereas the employee can display (and enjoy) reproductions of the same artworks in his apartment. On the other side of the new social binarism, there is that growing proportion of people (estimated to be between one sixth and one third of the world population) who do not have the equivalent of a social security number and who are therefore in danger of disappearing from the screens of our political systems – and most probably also from the screens of our moral consciousness. Ignoring these poorest of the poor enables us to forget that the planet is far from producing sufficient food for the comfortable physical survival of all humans. These phenomena of “de-classification” go along with and are indirectly related to economic “de-distribution.” As technological innovations continue to make the investment of human labor more and more dispensable, the quantity of labor invested can no longer serve as a criterion (not even as a very basic criterion) for the distribution of wealth. It has been argued that the increasing willingness of the new international middle class to participate in the games of the stock market is a symptom for the replacement of labor (as a distributional criterion) by what can be perceived, at least from a subjective perspective, as a principle of randomness. Finally – “finally” at least within my open list of dimensions that characterize our cultural present – there is “de-totalization.” Counter to the observation that lifestyles are becoming more homogeneous within the emerging global middle class, Lyotard postulated that, under present day conditions, no single concept and no single discourse would ever be able to identify or to account for any “universal” features of human life. We are increasingly aware and, oftentimes, increasingly proud of local differences in the ways we lead our lives – and yet we can not completely exclude the possibility that future historians may describe our present as the most culturally homogeneous era in the history of humankind. While we make a mostly critical usage of “globalization” as a concept for the multiple convergences in the making of that new middle class, we intellectuals normally associate positive values with the word “heterotopology” – for it points to cultural differences whose impact we don’t want to see reduced.

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In contrast to the most widespread notion of “globalization” that claims to refer to a steady exportation and expansion of one dominant cultural style against our desire for heterotopology (and there are too few among us – despite the American trade balance – who manage to resist the smooth temptation of simply identifying globalization with the exportation and expansion of an “American way of life”), against this most widespread – and most trivial – understanding of globalization, I would like to launch a thought that combines the concepts of “globalization,” “heterotopology,” and “postmodernity.” I propose to understand heterotopology as the form of globalization, and I suggest to interpret a thus defined globalization as the form (that is, as the spatial distribution) of the new and ever broadening postmodern present. Now, if we define globalization as the form of postmodernity and heterotopology as the form of globalization, this means that globalization opens the possibility, for the complex cluster of cultural dimensions that we call “Postmodernity,” to emerge and to articulate itself, at any given moment and at any place on Earth, however non-contiguous and heterogeneous these places may be.

Postmodernity, in the complex meaning that I briefly evoked before, is not just a lifeform in some avantgarde Western cities like New York, London, or Sydney. De-temporalization, de-referentialization, de-classification, de-distribution, and de-totalization have also simultaneously emerged – or can simultaneously emerge at any given moment – at places like Bogotá, Lagos, Madras, Mexico City, or Shanghai. At the same time (and even in the same continents or countries), there are spaces that one would not easily associate with postmodernity (although it is probably premature to conclude that they “resist” postmodernity): think of Scandinavia, or of large parts of the Southern U.S.A, or of Lisbon. Seen from this angle, postmodernity is definitely not a concept of “global application” in the traditional sense of these words. Rather, we can – and we should – say that

globalization, in its heterotopological structure, is both an implication of the complex human condition that we call “postmodernity” and the form through which postmodernity articulates itself in space. But instead of covering a continuous space or of unfolding a continuous movement in space, postmodernity obviously is a condition that occurs in spatial discontinuity.

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We can now ask ourselves whether globalization as the form of postmodernity and heterotopology as the form of globalization are the converging reasons that explain why the dimension of space, after several centuries, is having such a strong comeback on the stage of present-day epistemology. Modernity, as the sequence of historical periods that began with the Renaissance and seems to come to an end in our present, had always privileged time over space – because it had always privileged the human mind over the human body. Descartes’ prioritization of the *res cogitans* over the *res extensa* was only the most visible moment of this tendency within the history of Western philosophy, whereas Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, was probably the first Western thinker who explicitly criticized this “forgetfulness” of space as a problematic ingredient of Modernity.

But why exactly do postmodernity, globalization, and heterotopology oblige us to reconsider the dimension of space? There are indeed many diverging answers to this question – and I am far from grasping them all and from even understanding how those answers that I can see may be related to each other. The most obvious reason why postmodernity makes our thinking return to the dimension of space is that postmodern culture never allows for an easy mapping. We had said that postmodernity was not the continuous spreading of a lifeform. If it is, on the contrary, the possibility for that complex lifeform to articulate itself at any place and at any given moment, then a mapping of postmodernity can

only be a sequence of mappings, each of them with a different and highly specific distributional profile. Decades ago, when everybody believed in the scenario of a continuous expansion of the Western lifeform (which was a utopia for some and a nightmare for others), we were relying on economy as the one driving force behind this process, whereas the military complex appeared to be an almost grotesque leftover from less civilized days. Meanwhile, we have learnt – and in particularly the economically powerful European nations had to learn it the hard and frustrating way – that military power is (perhaps more than ever) a necessary precondition for any serious agency within world politics. One may argue that this change would not have happened at all (or would at least have happened in a less dramatic way) if globalization was indeed as continuous and as predictable a process as the traditional use of the word has suggested. Heterotopology, in contrast, makes any future developments of the postmodern lifeforms highly unpredictable, which produces nervousness and sometimes even collective fear, and may thus invite (or even trigger) violence, that is the occupation or the blocking of spaces with bodies.

Finally, I have already tried to explain how the feeling of de-referentialization is making the things of the world, including the human body, into objects of desire. Now, if we take into account the basic insight of phenomenological philosophy according to which space is a dimension that unfolds around our bodies, then we understand that dereferentialization, too, is contributing to the reemergence of space, both on the existential and on the epistemological level. There may well be more than these three reasons (and symptoms) for the reemergence of space in present day epistemology and culture. For the moment being, however, it is enough of an intellectual challenge to begin to understand their mutual interaction and to assess their possible future consequences. This said, I want to emphasize that space is more than just the dimension upon which postmodernity obliges us to refocus. Space is also (and in a very fundamental way) the primary dimension in which postmodernity articulates itself – or, rather, the primary dimension through which we perceive and experience

postmodernity. And it may well be that, after centuries during which the West has been used to give intellectual priority to the dimension of time, we do not quite know yet what new (and what forgotten) ways of thinking this shift from time to space will oblige us to pursue. Perhaps we indeed have to learn to re-inhabit space – both in our everyday lives and in our epistemologies.