



Interior of Oba's compound burnt during siege of Benin City (present day Nigeria), with bronze plaques in the foreground and three British soldiers of the Benin Punitive Expedition 9–18 February 1897. Photographer Reginald Granville. (zdroj Wikimedia Commons, možné přiřadit ke kapitole o kradeži artefaktů)

Right from the outset of this editorial, I would like to alert the reader to the fact that many of the texts in previous editions of *Artalk Revue* have touched upon the topic of colonialism or the neocolonial and neoliberal practices of late capitalism. This attests to the omnipresent nature of this topic in art and theory, in contemporary politics and economics, and in our everyday lives. These five new contributions consider this problem from other, new perspectives, searching for and examining the foundations of current demands for decolonisation.

Although the term “decolonisation” first appeared in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it only really entered into usage after the Second World War, in works by European and American scholars and politicians, mostly in reference to the process by which former European colonies gained their territorial sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> At this time, decolonisation also referred to a number of other terms used to describe the situation in European overseas colonies, such as national liberation, the end of empire, or the transfer of power.<sup>2</sup> The term first gained traction in French in connection to the Algerian war of liberation in the late 1950s. One of the most significant proponents of decolonisation at this time was the revolutionary thinker and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, a member of the Algerian National Liberation Front. A number of contemporary theorists working on this topic are still developing his ideas today.

Nowadays, the term – now an oft-used imperative – is applied generally to a broad spectrum of human (and non-human) activities. It is used not only to refer to the struggle of the indigenous population for expropriated land, natural resources, and

1 See Todd Shepard, *Voices of Decolonization: A Brief History with Documents*, Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014, pp. 8–9.

2 Although there are still a few European overseas colonies/territories, the end of the long “decolonisation era” is usually dated as 1997, when the United Kingdom returned Hong Kong to China. Recent events in the region and contemporary decolonisation discourse make this fact particularly symptomatic.

rights that were taken from them, but also in relation to various necessary structural changes to institutions, both educational (schools and universities) and cultural (museums and galleries), in the former metropolises. It refers to the very form of thought and operation of the Western – Euro-American – world, formed over centuries by the conquering/exploiting/racist/supremacist approach of the imperial and colonial powers. Decolonisation has become an issue of urgent need – an instrument of change but also a metaphor that is applied perhaps a little too easily.<sup>3</sup>

One of the aims of this issue will be to alert the reader to the constant presence of imperialism/colonialism as a form of structural violence that manifests itself in various forms, influencing the present. Through the selected texts, we will attempt to show how these forms reveal themselves in contemporary societies and suggest how we might fight against them. We will ask whether it is possible to make amends and repair what has been done. The turn from postcolonial thinking and practice to decolonial will be reflected upon as one of the present symptoms that needs to be subjected to inquiry.

3 In this context, I would like to refer the readers to a critical article titled “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor”, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277992187\\_Decolonization\\_Is\\_Not\\_a\\_Metaphor](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277992187_Decolonization_Is_Not_a_Metaphor), accessed 2.1.2020, in which Eva Tuck and K. Wayne Yang highlight the problematic aspects of the “metaphorisation”, which takes part in the blurring of boundaries, the camouflaging of wrongdoings by the principal participants of both the colonial past and the neocolonial present.



Ryan Coogler, *Black Panther*, 2018, film stills. Courtesy: Marvel Studios  
(source <http://www.blacklivesmatterberlin.de/event/kritische-fuehrung-durch-die-afrika-ausstellung-im-bode-museum/> and <https://frieze.com/article/where-do-we-go-here-coffee-care-and-black-panther>)

## Decolonisation in the Czech Republic

The current debates on decolonisation have gradually and carefully made their way into Czech cultural and academic institutions, while the Czech political representation continues to reject any refugees. Until recently, the government's position on climate change was equally dismissive. It is these two parallel “crises” – climate and refugee – that are the pressing problems we face as inhabitants of planet Earth. We consider (global) capitalism to be their source, along with imperialism and colonialism, both intimately connected with capitalism.

Until recently, colonialism was mostly overlooked in the Czech Republic, the topic itself considered marginal and unimportant, often dismissed with the laconic sentence “It doesn't concern us because we had no colonies”. In the present situation, however, such arguments simply will not hold. In the geopolitical and discursive context between Central and Eastern Europe, the issue of decolonisation represents a very specific type of political act.



Spectral-White  
The Appearance of Colonial-Era Europeans, Nov 1, 2019 – Jan 6, 2020  
Installation view © Silke Briel / HKW

Why, how, and what we should decolonise in the Czech context is the topic of the contribution by political theorist Pavel Barša. He describes specific movements on the East–West and North–South axes that took place in Czech political discourse from the 1980s to the present. He describes the “perverse consequences” generated by the official rhetoric and politics on the one hand and the dissidents’ thinking on the other, which tended towards the simple logic of “sympathising with the enemies of our enemy”. Barša accurately analyses the process by which the previous regime’s propagandistic self-legitimation – founded on an emphasis on the polarity between the imperialist, racist West, and the oppressed, exploited South – was simply replaced by a new polarity, this time between the imperialist East and colonised Central Europe. The oppressed South (also referred to as “the Third World” or “the periphery”) was simply left out of this equation. According to the author, the West, or rather the project of returning to Europe, became the final horizon of the self-centred foreign policy of the post-communist governments of the 1990s. It is now, after our successful return to Europe, when we have finally “assumed our desired place among the former

colonists and thus also lost the alibi of the colonised”, that Barša sees the ideal moment to begin the decolonisation of our thinking.

4 Benedict Anderson, *The Age of Globalization: Anarchists and the Anticolonial Imagination*, New York/London: Verso, 2005.

### **The unexpected trajectories of solidarity**

The text by artist Ladislava Gažiová is an accurate study of our colonial past. Gažiová takes us back to the 1880s, the time of the first anti-imperial uprisings. She focuses on the friendship between José Rizal, the Filipino doctor, writer, national hero, and founder of the reformist movement known as the Philippine League (La Liga Filipina), and Ferdinand Blumentritt, a high school teacher in the Czech city of Litoměřice and a leading 19th-century Filipinist. The author focuses on a factual account of this unusual long-term collaboration, using selected quotations to demonstrate the complexity of anti-colonial struggles, and emphasising the part played by solidarity.

The friendship between these two men was recently also used as a set piece in order to cement new business partnerships: last year, the governors of the national banks of both countries ceremonially unveiled a bronze bust of Rizal in the hall of the Czech National Bank. We can find testimony to the often unsatisfactory balance between entrepreneurial and cultural relationships in the fact that very few of us know that one of the first Non-European anticolonial novels in world literature, written by José Rizal, devoted to the Litoměřice native Ferdinand Blumentritt. The novel, *El filibusterismo*, is an exceptional work in many respects, and so it comes as no surprise that Benedict Anderson devotes a number of pages to it in his book on anarchism and the anti-colonial imagination.<sup>4</sup> The title of one of the most dramatic chapters of the novel is also the title of Gažiová's contribution, which aims primarily to actualise a neglected example of mutual cooperation and cohesiveness displayed by two protagonists of anti-colonial history, encouraging us to explore the archives of solidarity.

### **Perverse decolonization**

I interviewed the Polish sociologist Jan Sowa about “Perverse Decolonization”, a research project he has been working on for the last two years, initiated by the Akademie der Künste der Welt in Cologne. According to Sowa, the project focuses on “the parallel phenomenon of the right-wing capture of left-wing intellectual tools and the left-wing turn to identity politics”, which diverts attention from the economic and material aspects of the problems faced by societies today. Looking for the causes of these processes, he names “post-structuralist episteme” in combination with “neoliberal economic policy”, which together lead to a conservative-populist uprising based on resuscitating primordial identities and confirming diverse particularisms. Postcolonial studies play an important part in this context, and the project also criticises this field. Furthermore, Sowa points out the specific weaknesses of postcolonial studies, as well as the ways in which right-wing politicians in Poland have misused the field. According to him, we are now witness (in contrast to the assumptions of some 20th-century theorists of modernization) to an upending of the basic advances of modernity, with the centres looking more and more like the peripheries. He sees potential for a struggle against dominant and globally unified capital in overcoming identity politics and cultural differences, i.e. diverse particularisms on the one hand and the search for new “universalisms” defined on the

basis of equality on the other, for example “universal taxation”, “universal dependence on the ecosystem”, and the like.

After this historical excursion into the political and sociological considerations anchoring the space and context of the former Eastern Europe into broader geopolitical coordinates, we turn our attention to contemporary symptomatic movements in the field of cultural and institutional politics. This editorial is therefore complemented by two further chapters in which I attempt to capture the trajectories of these politics.



Spectral-White  
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Installation view © Silke Briel / HKW

## The Return of the Looted “Artefacts”

The current debate on decolonisation in the institutional context of culture takes many forms. One direction that attracts considerable political and media attention is the question of the return of looted “artefacts”, which accelerated in November 2017 as a result of a promise made by French president Emmanuel Macron at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso.<sup>5</sup> This promise first took shape a year later with the publication of the Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage,<sup>6</sup> which Macron commissioned from the Senegalese economist and writer Felwine Sarr and French art historian Bénédicte Savoy. Among other things, this document recommended the return of about 90 000 objects from French museums to their countries of origin, mostly located in sub-Saharan Africa. To date, no artefacts have been returned – not even the 26 ceremonial statues from Benin stolen by the French army in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and now located in the collections of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, the return of which Macron had promised immediately upon receipt of the report.<sup>7</sup> Instead of quickly returning the objects to their countries of origin, in July 2019 France offered Benin a loan of 20 million euros to build a new museum in Abomey where the statues could be shown. It remains only to ask how favourable the terms of such a loan from the French development agency will be for Benin, and to hope that the process of “decolonisation” in European museums does not become an interminable farce. While we could fill many pages listing similar affairs or requests for the return of various artefacts that get no response for decades, I would suggest that we look at the topic from a different perspective. The return of objects acquired in the former colonies through the use of

5 Negotiations about the return of artefacts stolen by European colonisers in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century started a decade earlier, in 2007, with article 11 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. That same year, a consortium of European museums – the Benin Dialogue Group – was also established.

6 The diplomatic language used is symptomatic of the entire discussion: we hear the word “restitution” far more often than “repatriation” or “return” of stolen artefacts (violently acquired cultural objects whose acquisition was qualified as a colonial crime against the original owners/indigenous communities).

7 In order for the artefacts really to be returned from France (rather than simply figuring as a promise or rhetorical figure in a political speech), a legislative framework has to be created and implemented (after confirmation by the French parliament). We impatiently await these steps to be taken by the French state.

violence and other methods that are legally or otherwise unjustifiable today is a moral obligation, and we can only be amazed at the fact that we have waited so long. However, it is now taking place concurrently with the refugee crisis, so we can observe that while borders are becoming permeable for once-stolen objects in one direction, they are being fortified with barbed wire in the other. While we follow the efforts to return objects stolen in the past to people from the former colonies, we also see being turned away those who have fled from these countries where, through transnational corporations, toxic infrastructure, and newly created tools and technologies – including our consumer habits old and new – we support the continuing exploitation of people and natural resources. We thus cement old inequalities while generating new ones.

In “Plundering, Objects, Art, and Law”, a chapter of her recently published book, theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay emphasises that colonial thefts cannot be seen only as the “the mere appropriation of discrete objects”.<sup>8</sup> She thus draws attention to the fact that this plundering crucially established the destruction of the political and material world inhabited by the colonised, a world that was then degraded through the imperial powers’ professional procedures and protocols (museums, galleries, art history), which turned these objects into works of art. According to Azoulay, their newly gained status and identity as art objects has to be recalled in order for us to recognise the rights inscribed in the stolen objects: “Once recognized, these rights can become the basis for providing the victims of mass looting a place – not just an “asylum” – close to their objects, or enabling them to unite with these objects under various arrangements.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The loose canons, the inclusion of perspectives, and the redress of cultural institutions**

Current attempts at reform in cultural institutions at all levels<sup>10</sup> also relate to changing approaches to the creation of programmes and the presentation of their own collections. Cultural policy in some European countries thus includes the creation of new institutions, programmes, and exhibitions presenting new critical narratives, which allow for a deeper reflection on the imperial and colonial past. One of the many examples of this shift is the programme of the Global Museum, realised by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, which has instigated many exhibitions in a number of institutions aimed at redefining the presentation of their own collections from “non-Western perspectives”.<sup>11</sup> In “Loose Canons”, an article published in 2017 in *Frieze* magazine, Ana Teixeira Pinto reflects on the Global Museum, pointing out the problematic moments of this new conception and contemporary museum regulation of cultural difference. She sees within the politics of inclusion (of voices, narratives, and perspectives) an attempt to redress the Eurocentric approach, as well as a certain atonement for the history of subjugation and colonialism. However, she also points out that the exploitation of non-European indigenous societies can continue even in the cultural appraisal of their heritage. The problem of violence – both symbolic and real – cannot simply be undone through inclusion and recontextualisation. It is also necessary to subject the conceptual and normative categories on which the Western canon is based to thorough re-examination.

### **Decolonising art!**

The problem of decolonising art is explored in more depth in a contribution by Françoise Vergès. Her text was originally part of a publication, *Décolonisons les arts!* (*Decolonise the Arts!*), put out in 2018 by an eponymous collective of three editors and fifteen artists.

8 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, New York/London: Verso, 2019.

9 Ibid., p. 65.

10 On the structural level, this involves problematic mechanisms of operation but also funding, and in some cases even the very *raison d'être* of their existence. The discussions take place internally: the professionals and employees organising themselves, like the Museum Detox group, for instance, established in Britain in 2016, or – and this is much more common – thanks to publicised external pressure from activists in newly established initiatives such as Decolonize This Place or NotAnAlternative.

11 I would like to mention several exhibitions realised as part of this programme: *A Tale of Two Worlds at the MMK in Frankfurt* (2017–2018), *Microhistories of Ex-centric Modernism* at K20 in Düsseldorf (2018–2019), *Global Resonances at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof* (2016), and exhibitions created under the heading of the *Kanon-Fragen* project in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, also in Berlin.

In this article, the French theorist and feminist begins her analysis with examples of problematic behaviour on the part of cultural and educational institutions that have as yet not undergone the necessary transformation. As proof, she cites the fact that these institutions still lack colonial history and critical theories of visual and postcolonial studies. Vergès points out the deep roots of the racial structuralisation of mentalities and representations, the processes of erasure and silencing that often took place covertly and was based on “achievements which made forgetting natural”. It returns us to the beginnings of the slave trade, whose existence manifested the “entirely fictional character of universal human rights”. Vergès considers a knowledge of the vast “archive of colonisation” essential and ignoring it “wilful ignorance”. She further emphasises the difficulties inherent in the process of decolonisation, and its complex and many-sided nature. This process begins with the capacity and willingness to unlearn and give up certain privileges. The result is then the possibility to learn to see things differently again, and to “stop seeing the world, which is created by economic and political regimes, as something natural”. As a feminist and activist, she emphasises the indispensability of intersectionality and the need to overcome internal disputes. And it is from these positions that she posits an aim to overcome the “fragmentarisation” imposed by the patriarchy, sexism, racism, and capitalism.<sup>12</sup> In place of a conclusion, Vergès offers a list of specific points of debate that can also find their application in our local context.

In addition to the decolonisation of art and decolonial feminism, Vergès also address the impact of the climate collapse on the inhabitants of the global South. In her essays, she refers particularly to its deep roots in colonialism and capitalism, calling their contemporary constellation the “racial Capitalocene”.<sup>13</sup> She also points out that the inhabitants of the global South and minorities are not just the primary victims of ecological catastrophes caused by corporate colonialism, but that they also crucially took part in analysing colonialism and searching for new ways of resisting racialised environmental policies (environmental racism). It is no coincidence that, according to many commentators, the 2019 global climate conference in Madrid was marked particularly by clearly rising animosities between countries of the global South and North. The climate crisis and related issues of climate justice are certainly today’s burning questions.<sup>14</sup> In this issue, these questions are among those explored by theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva.

### **The crisis of European imagination**

Under the umbrella term “crises of European imagination”, Ferreira da Silva diagnoses the insufficient capacities necessary for the ethical resolution of the two interlinked and concurrent crises – the refugee crisis and the climate crisis. The author defines both as colonial, created and driven by the extractivist logic of global capital. She goes on to demonstrate how coloniality and raciality currently operate as two key tools of global politics, resolutely refusing as solutions to the refugee crisis both dusted-off humanist concepts such as Kant’s cosmopolitanism/world citizenship or Derrida’s absolute hospitality. In order to adequately respond to the current crises, she claims, we need an entirely new description of the world, one that requires a redefinition of epistemological and ethical orders on which the present colonial extractivist infrastructure relies. In the demand for decolonisation made by the racial others of Europe, she sees “the end of the world as we know it”.

In a chapter aptly titled “Calor and Labor”, Ferreira da Silva further speculates on the causes of climate change. Inspired by the law of conservation of energy, the philosophy of Empedocles, and the theory of fractals, she sees in the accumulated

12 For a stimulating article on this topic, based in the fields of postcolonial feminist theory, disability studies, queer theory, and black feminism, see Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, “On Colonial Unknowing”, in *Theory and Event*, 19(4) (2016).

13 See Françoise Vergès, “Racial Capitalocene: Is the Anthropocene

14 As the author herself mentions in the spirit of the radical conception of the strike as developed by Alex Gourevitch, see *ibid.* p. 157 and <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/07/right-to-strike-freedom-civil-liberties-oppression>, accessed 2. 1. 2020

greenhouse gases that cause the warming of our planet a global threat in the shape of transformed energies extracted principally from labour and resources acquired in the colonies. She sees violence as a neglected topic in discussions about the climate crisis, and as one of the foundations of the crisis. And the solution is then the anti-colonial approach to global capital, which requires the restoration/reconversion of energies extracted from the land and bodies of the “others of Europe”.

### **Imagining the strike as a form of care**

We can consider repeatedly directing our attention back to the causes of imperial and colonial exploitation, to oppression, expropriation and the inequalities they cause, to their economic and political background, and to the violence that is at their essence one of the aims and tasks of the present debate on decolonisation. Another pressing task is the search for repair and solutions to the present situations, when a dark and unresolved past has come back to haunt us while the future looks darker by the minute.

An important part in this process is played by various forms of solidarity and alliance. These will be necessary to overcome all forms of oppression and exploitation and policies maintaining the toxic accumulation of capital, and necessary for us to learn to resolve both the refugee and climate crises together, fairly, and ethically. At present, we can see how these solidarities and alliances are created and develop in diverse protests, on public squares, in the streets, and in institutions around the world, or during the global strikes that the newly established climate movements use as an effective tool. The idea of strikes expressly designed for those of us operating within the art world is developed by Azoulay in the volume mentioned above. On the differently coloured pages of her book, which is printed on grey paper, she provokes our imagination with suggestions for potential strikes by professionals from the world of art, by theoreticians and practitioners, by workers at museums, galleries, archives, and academies, and by visitors to these institutions. Azoulay derives the right to strike from the right to resist oppression,<sup>15</sup> but she also sees it as a possibility to care for the world we share. To care by refusing to take part in its destruction.

Let us conclude, then, with her words: “...if one’s work is conceived as a form of being-in-the- world, work stoppage cannot be conceived only in terms of the goals of the protest. One should consider the strike a modality of being in the world that takes place precisely by way of renunciation and avoidance, when one’s work is perceived as harming the shared world and the condition of sharing it. In a world conditioned by imperial power, a collective strike is an opportunity to unlearn imperialism with and among others even though it has been naturalized into one’s professional life. Going on strike is to claim one’s right not to engage with destructive practices, not to be an oppressor and perpetrator, not to act according to norms and protocols whose goals were defined to reproduce imperial and racial capitalist structures.”

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Piyasiri Gunaratna, *Winter in Czechoslovakia*, 1964. © Studio FAMU. The film was presented at *Biafra of Spirit*.  
*Third World Students in Czechoslovakia* in National Gallery Prague, 2017–2018, curators: Tereza Stejskalová in collaboration with Zbyněk Baladrán.

I spent the first half of my life in communist Czechoslovakia, where we only rarely encountered non-Europeans. In a university city – such as my home, Brno – these were mostly university students from “friendly states” in the Third World. Black men were popular in the pubs we used to frequent as students in the early 1980s. There were rumours – and some of these men claimed so themselves – that they had no problem establishing relations with Czech girls. They were few in number, so ordinary Czechs probably saw them as providing variety rather than as posing a threat. Those who started families and settled down here nevertheless complained about racism: their exotic origins and the colour of their skin – often seen positively in non-problematic situations – would become the butt of jokes or worse at the first sign of conflict. Among the students, however, I rarely encountered racism against black people.

Arabs had it worse. It’s hard to say why. Islam wasn’t quite the bogeyman it is today – after all, a number of the black students were also from Muslim countries. Some of the “Arabáci”, as they were derogatorily referred to, would provoke people with their fashionable Western clothing, which was not available to ordinary Czechs. The prevailing view was that they spent their nights in bars picking up Czech girls with foreign currency. Some friends of mine, with whom I shared a critical stance towards the communist regime, connected an aversion to Arabs with sympathy for their Middle Eastern enemy – the Israelis.

This support was further strengthened by the opposing view that the regime took of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Our hatred of the regime led many of us to love its enemies. We tended to consider as false anything that the regime presented as the truth. Its forced solidarity with the struggle of the Third World against American imperialism and Zionism put us on the side of America and Israel. In Western Europe, photos of Palestinian boys throwing stones at heavily armed Israeli soldiers would cause moral outrage and protests. The same pictures, printed on the front page of *Red Justice*, the regime's mouthpiece newspaper, made us suspicious of propagandistic manipulation. If *Red Justice* said it was so, then it had to be a lie. Our sympathies were with the enemy of our enemy.

The regime's criticism of American or South African racism had a similarly perverse effect. The fact that it was communists celebrated by the regime who stood on the front lines of the struggle against racism (for example, Angela Davis in the United States and Joe Slovo in South Africa) shifted us towards the right, which saw the fight against South African and American racism as a tool of propaganda and proof of the Soviet Union's ambitions to dominate the world. Those of us who wanted to free ourselves from the grip of the Soviet regime had no reason to sympathise with the victims of its enemies.

The more or less compulsory collections for "solidarity funds" aimed at supporting the peoples of the Third World, which the communist regime implemented in Czech workplaces, high schools, and universities, discredited both pan-human solidarity and anti-colonialism. As part of its propagandistic self-legitimation, the regime forced upon us a key to understanding the world: the evil, racist West against the virtuous, oppressed South. In our attempts at delegitimising this worldview, we trampled on it by dividing the world into the evil, imperialist East and Central Europe, which was colonised by the East. The idea of a "kidnapping" by the Eurasian empire, as presented in Milan Kundera's 1983 essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe", expressed the feelings of a large number of anti-communist Czechs of my generation. In place of solidarity with the suffering of non-European victims of the West – imposed on us by the East – we, as victims, called for solidarity from the West. We asked the West to pay attention to us as Europeans, just as the Western left became conscious of the need to atone for the suffering the West had inflicted upon non-Europeans. Kundera's appraisal of the colonial crimes of the Soviet East thus came into competition with an appraisal of the colonial crimes of the liberal West. The West had to decide between two moral appeals: helping the victims of the former and compensating the victims of the latter. The former arose from an allegiance to European civilisation, the latter from an allegiance to the human race.

According to some left-wing postcolonial historians,<sup>1</sup> the Central European insistence on a shared cultural identity with the West manifested the presumption of European racial superiority over non-Europeans. But can we consider a society to be white supremacist if the vast majority of its inhabitants have encountered a non-European only a few times in their life, if at all? In the 1980s, most of my liberal-minded anti-communist friends did not feel that whites were superior to non-whites, but their worldview was consistently Eurocentric. To put it in Lenin's terms, this subjective self-centredness had objectively racist implications. Focusing exclusively on one's portion of humanity within the context of humanity's progressively greater interconnectedness meant implicitly attributing a smaller value to the life and suffering of those who did not belong in this group. Even so, within the triumphant atmosphere of the 1990s, and even within the mainstream left in the West, the illusion prevailed that human rights, democracy, and prosperity (to which Central Europe had opened its doors in 1989) would also gradually spread to the nations of the global South. In hindsight, it seems that Boutros Boutros-Ghali, UN Secretary-General from 1992 to 1996, was closer to

1 James Mark, Quinn Slobodian, *Eastern Europe in the Global History of Decolonization*, <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198713197.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198713197-e-20> (accessed January 5<sup>th</sup> 2020).

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Námět, scénář a režie  
**VISHWANATH**

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY

Krishna Vishwanath, *Black and white*, 1968. © Studio FAMU. The film was presented at *Biafra of Spirit*.  
*Third World Students in Czechoslovakia in National Gallery Prague*, 2017–2018, curators: Tereza Stejskalová in collaboration with Zbyněk Baladrán.

the truth when he claimed that the abolition of the East–West border only strengthened the North–West border.

After the Cold War ended, the two parts of the global North, which had previously used incentives to compete for the favour of the Southern countries, could concentrate their attention and resources on overcoming the gap between them. For the West, however, this was only relatively true; winning the Cold War also pushed it in the opposite direction. As it increased in importance and power, the West's responsibility in some regions of the South (e.g. France in Francophone Africa or the US in the Middle East) also increased. Some Soviet East countries completely turned their attention away from the South. While the final horizon of the foreign policy of Central European communist countries had been the entire world, for their post-communist successors in the 1990s this horizon narrowed to include only the West: in a feverish struggle to become part of the Western “core”, they did all they could to burn the bridges that connected them to the former Eastern “core” (Russia) and the “periphery” (the South).

Hiding under the universalist rhetoric of the 1989 Central European revolutions lay a particularist project: a return to Europe. Havel's human rights discourse might have sounded global and inclusive, but in reality it identified the planetary reach of human rights with the planetary rule of the United States. This identification had an exclusionary effect on the human rights of those who found themselves on the subjugated side of American power or who were enemies of American regional representatives. So, in fact, the seemingly universal horizon of pan-human values had clearly defined borders, which were identical with the borders of particular American power, supposedly aimed at disseminating these values around the world. Havel's discourse did not apply to the human rights of those who were in conflict with American power (or its clients). In the last years of his life, Havel defended Israel against those who criticised it for continuing with the occupation and the trampling of the human rights of the Palestinians.

Havel, who in some of his essays written at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s masterfully deconstructed the traps of the Manichaeian bipolarity of the Cold War, fell into these traps himself after the conflict ended. His identification of the universal with the particular – pan-human moral principles with the special interests of America or the “Euro-Atlantic” civilisation – corresponded to the ways in which many anti-communist liberals of my generation experienced their entry into the world, which had been kept from them by a closely guarded border until November 1989. Subjectively, we felt like cosmopolitan people finally released from our communist prison. We set off for the Western metropolises. Some of us were unpleasantly surprised to find that these were full of non-white immigrants from the former colonies. We lacked the historical context to understand their struggle for recognition and against discrimination. After all, for many of us, Western colonialism was propaganda invented by the Soviet Union to draw attention away from its own colonialism and its victims (us).

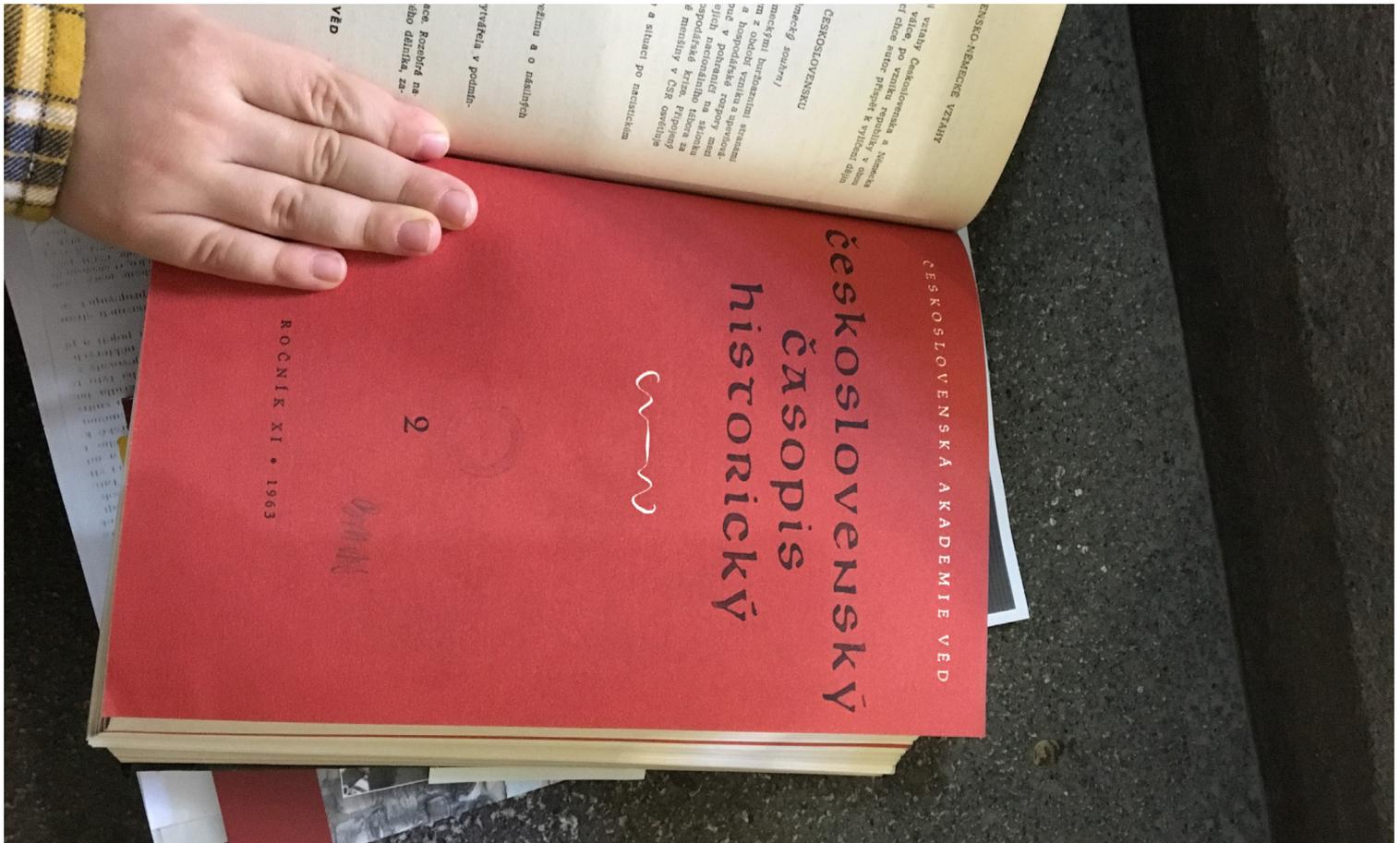
During the 2015 refugee crisis, the states of the Visegrád Four (V4) refused to fulfil their international humanitarian commitments and to participate in the acceptance and distribution of non-European refugees. Some Western statesmen responded with surprise, as if these states had disowned the universal values of human rights and pan-human solidarity to which they had claimed allegiance in 1989. But only those who had forgotten the Eurocentric motivations of those revolutions could truly be surprised. The Central Europeans were returning to “their” Western civilisation, which, by allowing them to return, confirmed that it was the centre of the world. The rest of the planet and humanity was considered peripheral, and the Central Europeans did not want to belong to the periphery: the necessity to assimilate Western norms and adopt neoliberalism was often justified as essential to avoid slipping down to the level of a “developing country”. The former Second World was to be divided into those who managed to join the First World and those who were demoted to the Third World. The primary objective of the Central European nations was to secure their place in the first group and avoid slipping into the third group at all costs.

Refusing entry to non-European refugees in 2015 was therefore certainly not a negation of the legacy of 1989; quite the contrary, it was a continuation of this legacy within a new historical situation. In September 2015, when the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, tried to arouse a feeling of moral obligation towards non-European refugees in the V4 countries by reminding them that Western Europe had accepted Cold War refugees with open arms, he encountered a solid wall of incomprehension: from the Central European perspective, Western Europeans had a duty towards these refugees as members of the European civilisation, which is incomparable to the much smaller duty (if any) we have towards the refugees of an Islamic civilisation.

In 2015, then, Eurocentrism finally came centre stage after hiding behind a universalist rhetoric since 1989. An ordinary nationalist and civilisational xenophobia appeared under the noble humanist façade. This took place after our 1989 dream of belonging to the West came true. If we now partake in the huge advantages that Europe gained from centuries of direct and indirect dominion over non-European peoples, we cannot avoid our commitments to these peoples. By taking our sought-after place among the former colonists, we have lost the alibi of the colonised. The decolonisation of our thought can finally begin.

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English translation: Ian Mikyska and Alfred LeMaitre



Czechoslovak historical magazine. Photo: Ladislava Gažiová

During one of my night-time finger-wading map searches of general geopolitical knowledge, I came across the name Salud Algabre. I have never heard of this female revolutionary from the Philippines. The hour is late, so I leave Algabre for tomorrow's googling and I quickly search Wikipedia to get a closer look at the political and social developments in the Philippines. I come across quite surprising information about a Czech friend of the Filipino national hero José Rizal. His name was Ferdinand Blumentritt.

The next day, I read a text by Jindřich Tomas, a historian who has long been involved with Blumentritt.<sup>1</sup> I find that Ferdinand Blumentritt was a high school teacher living in Litoměřice and also a well-known filipinologist who played an important role in the history of Filipino liberation struggles. In the Czech context, his name is not well known. At the same time, I was intrigued that the man hadn't left Central Europe in his entire life.

Nowadays, it is often discussed that interest in post-colonial thinking in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is still in early stages of development.. Therefore, it is not surprising that important actors of anti-colonial history remain neglected. But Ferdinand Blumentritt is undoubtedly one of the most interesting personalities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Known for his open stances against anti-Semitism of the era, he was a keen supporter of a number of Filipino fighters against the colonial rule of Spain and, subsequently, the United States.

1 Jindřich Tomas, Litoměřický profesor Ferdinand Blumentritt a jeho styky s Filipínami, zvláště s José Rizalem, in: Litoměřicko-vlastivědný sborník, Litoměřice 1977, p. 96–114.

In addition to Blumentritt's closest friend, José Rizal, Isabel de los Reyes – one of the great characters of the liberation history of the Philippines and the author of the famous folklore works written “from the viewpoint of the other side” – must also be mentioned.<sup>2</sup> But, in this paper, I am going to look at the relationship between Blumentritt and Rizal because their correspondence is so voluminous that one could say without exaggeration that, apart from their thoughts, it contains a detailed description of all social events in the Philippines at that time. An important moment that captivated me with Rizal is his authorship of the historically first novel written from the position of the colonized and critical of colonial practices. All these findings led me to visit the modest Blumentritt and Rizal Museum in Litoměřice, dedicated to the Philippines and the friendship of the two men. The museum, several articles, books and documents helped me shed some light on the story, which I will outline here.

### How Ferdinand Blumentritt and José Rizal met

Ferdinand Blumentritt was born in Prague in 1853 and lived all his life in Litoměřice, where he taught history and geography at secondary schools, later becoming the director of the Litoměřice grammar school. He was interested in the history of Latin America and the Philippines all his life, spoke several European languages and was active in publishing, contributing to numerous geographical and ethnographic magazines around the world. He gathered a specialized library of 900 volumes, a collection of scholarly documents on Philippines and, since the 1870s, has been in constant correspondence with ethnographers and geographers in Germany, Spain and the Philippines.

Blumentritt's first work that attracted broader attention dealt with the general system of governance of the Philippine indigenous population under the Spanish rule. Similar interest in the social situation in a country so far away was a rare phenomenon at the time. At that time, Blumentritt also worked on a dictionary of Spanish terms proper to the Philippines, but he probably never heard the language for real.<sup>3</sup> After the original population of Mindanao rose, Blumentritt published an article based on the explanations and rhetoric of the colonizers and its spokesmen. He commented skeptically on the rebellion and described the indigenous Moros (i.e. Muslim tribes) in the spirit of European missionaries.

He received an unexpected answer from doctor José Rizal, in a German letter in which he pointed out to Blumentritt that his knowledge of the Philippines came from books written by monks, Spaniards and their friends: “You write it upside down! If you were born and raised like me in the middle of our villages, and heard what our peasants believe, say, think and suffer, then you would surely think otherwise of Catholicism in the Philippines...” Rizal pessimistically assumed Blumentritt to act as others who “write according to their favored assumptions and comfort,”<sup>4</sup> but it was not the case. Blumentritt immediately wrote to Rizal and the connection lasted until Rizal's death in front of a firing squad.

José Rizal was born in 1861 in Calamba on the island of Luzon, in an area inhabited by the Tagala tribe. Rizal's family belonged to the country's small bourgeoisie; his father was a tenant of land owned by a Dominican monastery with whom he was in constant dispute.

Rizal studied medicine at the University of Manila, graduated in Madrid, and in 1885 completed his studies of philosophy. Among other things, he had literary ambitions, devoted himself to fine arts, mastered several Asian and European languages, he was interested in zoology, ethnography, history, education issues

2 Or by the colonized. *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (1889) is one of the most famous ethnographic works of Isabel de los Reyes. Ferdinand Blumentritt translated the first three chapters of this publication into German.

3 The term “armchair anthropologist” is used for similar scientific practices of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This term defines an anthropologist who circumvented consistent scientific procedures (e.g. field research), based his/her judgments on the testimonies and experiences of colonizers/missionaries, often using his/her own imagination. Similar practices have led to problematic conclusions encouraging reasoning in racist stereotyped categories.

4 Josef Polišenský, F. Blumentritt a Filipíny mezi španělským kolonialismem a americkým imperialismem, in: *Československý časopis historický*, Prague 1963, p. 148.



Blumentritt and Rizal's bastion in Litoměřice. Photo: Ladislava Gažiová

(theoretically and practically), engineering and agriculture. In 1885 Rizal wrote his first novel, *Noli me tangere* (Touch me not). As I mentioned earlier, this novel was one of the first criticism of colonialism written from the standpoint of the colonized and it was translated into several world languages.

The very first European anti-colonial novel was *Max Havelaar* by the Dutch author Eduard Douwes Dekker (better known by his pen name *Multatuli*), published in 1860. Rizal read the aforementioned novel and wrote to Blumentritt: “Multatuli’s book, which I will send you as soon as I can obtain a copy, is extraordinarily exciting. Without a doubt, it is far superior to my own. Still, because the author is himself a Dutchman, his attacks are not as powerful as mine. Yet the book is much more artistic, far more elegant than my own, although it only exposes one aspect of Dutch life on Java.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The situation in the Philippines is getting worse**

*Noli me Tangere*, the book boldly criticizing clerical feudal order in the Philippines, was published in Berlin and met with great acclaim. It caught the attention of the Spanish-Filipino bourgeois opposition in Barcelona and Madrid, aroused the interest of emigrants in Paris and London, but also met with hateful reactions of the colonial regime, for which Rizal himself and his family also paid a price later on. The novel was a breakthrough act for the Philippines and Rizal became the announcer of the revolution. When he returned home from his studies in Europe, he stopped off in Litoměřice, where he spent several days. He gave one copy of the novel to his friend Blumentritt, who attempted to translate it into German shortly afterwards. After Rizal’s return to the Philippines, negative reactions to his novel escalated, while anonymous letters and newspaper articles threatened death to the “German agent”, a “heretic” raging against the Catholic Church and wishing to break ties with the “mother country.” For these reasons Rizal soon left for London via Hong Kong, Japan and the United States.

While writing the novel, Rizal, like most of his companions, made a clear distinction between the Spanish government and the religious orders present in the Philippines. But following several events that came just after the publication

of the novel, he began to radicalize politically. His attitude was changed mainly by mass evictions, arrests and deportations of the local population (including his family members) in Calamba, but also by demonstrations in 1888, when the governor of Manila received a public petition requesting the expulsion of the bishops from the Philippines. Historically, this petition, fueled by Rizal's novel, is considered the first civic response.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the Madrid Senate declared the petition subversive and had the signatories arrested affected Rizal, who wrote an indignant letter to Blumentritt from London on June 23, 1888: "I believe that it is already late; the majority of the Filipinos have already lost the hope they have pinned on Spain! Now, we await our fate from God and from ourselves, but never any more from any Government!"<sup>7</sup>

At that time, Blumentritt was already very active in commenting on the political situation in the Philippines, which he consistently discussed in various magazines. For example, he has worked with *La Solidaridad*,<sup>8</sup> where in his contributions he defended criticism of Spanish philippinologists and, above all, defended Rizal and his so-called



130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of José Rizal's arrival in Litoměřice, May 13th 2017. Photo: Jana Plihalová

filibusterism.<sup>9</sup> Blumentritt's articles provoked a fierce response in Manila, as was the case with his text on history and geography at some European schools, which indirectly and overwhelmingly criticized the Spanish and Philippine school systems. It caused a wave of outrage and insults to which he responded, inter alia, by giving up honorary membership in the various societies he had previously earned.

In his preface to the book on the history of discoveries in the Philippines, published as *Events on the Philippine Islands*,<sup>10</sup> Blumentritt declared in 1890 that Rizal's main "fault" was primarily that it was not of European origin. He also elaborated on the dangers of the racial interpretation of the superiority of the "Spanish masters" over the "natives" who are treated as either large children or "sleeping beasts."<sup>11</sup> The topic of race and its biased interpretation was addressed by Blumentritt under the influence of Rizal, who saw in the doctrine of racial and racial superiority the ideological guise of the exploitative colonial regime.

In 1891, Rizal's second novel *El Filibusterismo* was published in Gent and its storyline revolved around the troubles of the wealthy jeweler Simoun. In one of the chapters, there is an interesting discussion of a planned assassination. Bomb hidden in a pomegranate-shaped lamp is directed to the ranks of the Manila bourgeoisie from which Rizal himself came. This suicidal criticism, which appears in the book, is a very

6 Floro Quibuyen, *Towards a Radical Rizal*, in: *Philippine Studies*, Manila 1998, s. 161.

7 Benedict Anderson, *The Age of Globalization. Anarchists and the Anticolonial Imagination*. London/New York: Verso, 2005, p. 45.

8 *La Solidaridad* was an organization founded in 1888 by Filipino exiles who studied in Europe and later published their own magazine of the same name.

9 Filibustero, originally a Spanish term for "pirate" in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was later used to refer to those involved in rebel nationalist battles in Latin America, the Caribbean, and other Spanish colonies.

10 The book is *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* written by Antonio de Morga in Mexico in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Rizal newly published the book with a preface by Blumentritt.

11 Josef Polišenský (footnote 4), p. 153.



130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of José Rizal's arrival in Litoměřice, May 13<sup>th</sup> 2017. Photo: Jana Píhalová

12 José Rizal, *El Filibusterismo*. Gent 1891. The Estate fund of F. Blumentritt in the Jihočeské muzeum library in České Budějovice (FB 64.). Dedicated on September 28, 1891: „Dem größten Vertheidiger den Philippinischen Rechte. Sein Freund und Bruder. José Rizal.“

13 José Rizal, *El Filibusterismo*, Makati City 1996, p. 1.

14 Josef Polišenský (footnote 4), p. 154.

15 Ibidem, s. 155.

16 Floro Quibuyen (footnote 6), p. 156–157.

powerful and admirable moment. The whole edition of this book was confiscated in the Philippines and one copy, which is now part of the estate of Ferdinand Blumentritt in České Budějovice, is extremely rare. In this specimen, Rizal wrote a dedication to Blumentritt: “To the greatest defender of the rights of the Filipinos. His friend and brother.”<sup>12</sup> This book is presented by Blumentritt’s words: “It is easy to assume that a filibuster has bewitched in secret the league of friars and reactionaries, so that following unconsciously his inspirations they would favor and promote that policy which only aspires to one aim: to spread the ideas of subversion throughout the entire country and to convince the last Filipino that no other salvation exists outside of separation from the Motherland.”<sup>13</sup>

### Rizal returns to the Philippines

In late September 1891, Rizal wrote to Blumentritt that he must return to the Philippines. “Life becomes a burden, I must set an example, I must not fear death... I’m going to meet my destiny. If I die, you will remain. But for me, life in Europe is impossible. Better to die than to live miserably!”<sup>14</sup> After returning to the Philippines, Rizal was greeted by Tagalese bourgeoisie and intelligence for his proclaimed nonviolent “assimilation”, while the wider popular strata of towns and villages saw in Rizal primarily the intrepid “filibuster” proclaiming the inevitable struggle with the Spaniards.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, Rizal and his collaborators developed a strategy that outwardly presented rather moderate reformist attitudes, but in fact they were much more radical. Thus, they pursued a “double” strategy of reform and separatism.<sup>16</sup> In a letter dated January 30, 1892, Blumentritt warned Rizal: “Above all, I beg you not to get involved in revolutionary agitation! For he who stages a revolution should at the least have before him the likelihood of success, if he does not wish to have his conscience burdened with useless bloodshed. Whenever a people has rebelled against another people dominating it, [or] a colony against the Motherland, the revolution has never succeeded solely on the basis of its own strength. The American Union became free because France, Spain and the Netherlands allied with it. The Spanish republics became free because civil war raged in the Motherland, and England and North America provided



130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of José Rizal's arrival in Litoměřice, May 13<sup>th</sup> 2017. Photo: Jana Plihalová

money and guns. The Greeks became free because England, France and Russia offered their support. The Rumanians, Serbs and Bulgarians were liberated by Russia. The Italians were liberated thanks to France and Prussia, and the Belgians thanks to England and France. Everywhere, those peoples who relied solely on their own strength were crushed by the soldiery of Legitimacy: the Italians in 1830, 1848, and 1849; the Poles in 1831, 1845, and 1863, the Hungarians in 1848 and 1849, and the Cretans in 1868.”<sup>17</sup> Blumentritt further argued strategically that the revolution would stand a chance of success only if “(1) the enemy army and navy were part of the rebellion, (2) the homeland were at war with another nation (3) money and weapons were well prepared in advance, (4) and if a foreign power officially or secretly supported the uprising.” To which Blumentritt noted “none of these conditions [today] has been met in the Philippines.

In 1892 Rizal founded the Liga Filipina, but before the Liga was able to build a network of branches, Rizal was arrested and expelled to Dapitan, on the north coast of Mindanao. On the same day (July 7, 1892), when his expulsion was published, another political organization was established in the suburbs of Manila – the secret society Katipunan (Association of the Sons of the People). Andrés Bonifacio, a member of the Liga Filipina, was the driving force behind it. Katipunan was more successful than the Liga in terms of the number of members and the scale of the branch network, and they even published the secret magazine *Kalayaan* (Freedom) in Manila. The Katipunan program followed the Liga, but was more radical. It proclaimed the necessity of separating the Philippines from Spain in a revolutionary way.

At a time when there was a real armed uprising in the Philippines, Blumentritt published a series of optimistic articles on the alleged power of Filipino separatists in *Espanola en Filipinas*. After armed clashes with the police, revolutionary forces headed by Andrés Bonifacio and other Rizal's “pupil” Emilia Aguinald occupied the central part of Luzon and the province of Cavite. Spain subsequently sent military reinforcements to suppress the rebellion. José Rizal was brought before a military court and was sentenced in a show trial to death for participating in the organization of the rebellion. On the morning of December 30, 1896, he was publicly executed on Manila's Luneta promenade by a bullet.

The night before his execution, Rizal wrote two letters, one to his mother and the other to Blumentritt, assuring him that “I am not to blame for the uprising and I die with a clear conscience.”<sup>18</sup> Blumentritt did not have enough information after Rizal’s death and he was unable to follow the rapid development of the events in the Philippines. At the same time, his other acquaintances are dying in the Philippines and Madrid, and Blumentritt began publishing under a pseudonym. In the meantime, the Philippine rebellion has outgrown its initial phase, the need arose to reorganize the Katipunan, resulting in an internal struggle in the revolutionary camp, during which Andrés Bonifacio was executed.

On November 1, 1897, the Constitution was proclaimed declaring the independence of the Philippines based on bourgeois democratic freedoms. People’s demands were no longer the topic. The year after the destruction of the Spanish fleet by the US fleet in the Bay of Manila, independence of the Philippines was declared again – this time by the Americans – and after signing the so-called Paris Peace, The United States bought the Philippines from Spain for \$20 million. The first clashes between Filipinos and US troops occurred in February 1899. A number of American writers and politicians who convened in Chicago for the so-called Anti-Imperialist Congress in the same year protested against the American crackdown in the Philippines and Cuba. In the aftermath of the aforementioned congress, Blumentritt turned his criticism against the imperialist policy of the United States, which he sharply articulated in his article *Uncle Sam in the Philippines*.<sup>19</sup>

Partially preserved is another Blumentritt’s work: a voluminous manuscript (over 500 double sheets) with the working title *America*, whose central theme is the effort to trace the connection between capitalism and Catholicism. He describes the interconnection of the Church with the richest social classes and politics as the “cancer of the state and social life in the United States”. In 1911, Blumentritt began publishing in the Hong Kong magazine *The Philippine Republic*, published by a group of Filipino emigrants headed by Vicente Sotto, with whom he actively communicated. Until the end of his life, Blumentritt was interested in the socialist movement in the Philippines and corresponded with Isabel de los Reyes, who was the founder of the first Philippine workers’ organization Unión Obrera Democrática. Blumentritt died on September 20, 1913. His last article was published in Hong Kong after his death under the title *His Last Words*.

## Conclusion

The leader of the Sakdal uprising on the Philippine island of Luzon – Salud Algabre – stated in her famous statement of 1935: “We did what we ourselves (Filipino working people) had decided upon—as free people, and power resides in the people. What we did was our heritage...We decided to rebel, to rise up and strike down the sources of power. I said, ‘We are Sakdals! We want immediate, complete, and absolute independence.´...No uprising fails. Each one is a step in the right direction.”<sup>20</sup>

Neither José Rizal nor Ferdinand Blumentritt were direct actors of the revolutionary events, yet their ideas and actions inspired both the emergence of the revolutionary Katipunan and the Sakdalist movement. Their work has become that “step in the right direction”. Blumentritt, through his ability to be aware of his own mistakes and to listen, has gone from the time of a conventional ethnologist to a socially minded critic of imperialism and colonialism. His work can thus be a testament to human ability to overcome the boundaries of cultures, prejudice or (now refuted) the concept of race, despite the fact that he has never visited his country of interest – the Philippines.

18 Josef Polišenský (footnote 4), p. 157.

19 Ferdinand Blumentritt, Onkel Sam auf den Philippinen, in: Ost-Asien, 1900, p. 546–549.

20 Salud Algabre (1894–1979) was a member of Sakdal, a Philippine peasant organization founded by Bening Ramos in 1930. The organization was actively opposed to the mainstream nationalist policy pursued by President Manuel Quezon. Algabre was strongly involved in the rebellion organized by the Sakdalists on May 2, 1935 in Cabuyao, where she led a group of insurgents that blocked the railroad, cut the telegraph lines, and took control of the highway. Salud Algabre was arrested and brought to justice. She was sentenced to six to ten years in prison for membership in an illegal organization, but was released early after less than two years. After World War II, Salud continued to fight the landowner’s policy until her death at the age of 85. Salud Algabre’s quote comes from an interview with David Sturtevant published in: E. San Juan Jr., Toward Filipino Self-Determination: Beyond Transnational Globalization, Albany 2009, p. 1.

I would like to end this text with a statement by José Rizal, who sums up his thinking and work most aptly: "... races exist only for anthropologists, for the observer of national life only social classes exist."<sup>21</sup>

21 Resil B. Mojares, Jose Rizal in the World of German Anthropology, in: Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society, University of San Carlos Publications 2013, p.177

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Translation from Czech: Petr Kovařík



J. J. Grandville, *La revanche, ou les Français au Missouri*, 1829. Zdroj: Akademie der Künste der Welt [website](https://www.akademie-der-kuenste.de/).

**Vjera Borozan:** You are currently writing a text for a publication that will be the result of a research project entitled “Perverse Decolonization”. First, I would like to ask you to briefly introduce us to the project and to the topic of your contribution.

Jan Sowa: The project addresses the parallel phenomenon of the right-wing capture of left-wing intellectual tools and the left-wing turn towards identity politics, in which questions related to one’s identity – be it gender, ethnicity, or race – completely overshadow other concerns, especially those related to class position and the material forces shaping contemporary societies and economies.

A particularly important area of our research has been postcolonial theory and its bizarre yet symptomatic fate in Central-Eastern Europe, where it has become a tool to articulate right-wing resentment, affirming the region’s specific identity and refusal of the Enlightenment. It is closely linked with the conceptual framework of poststructuralism and its conservative design, which equates the Enlightenment with oppression, reason with domination, and modernity with colonialism. None of us would like to defend oppression, domination, or colonialism, nor to deny the suffering of subjugated classes, whether in the West/North or in the postcolonial global South; however, I believe that the poststructuralist framework – very much against the intentions of its main protagonists – has provided an uncanny basis for defending what one can only call obscurantism: the religious fundamentalism, exclusion of

difference, and disdain for science that we can see in climate change denial or the anti-vaccination movement; obscurantism is treated as “a valuable part of local traditions”, and its defence presented as a sort of “epistemic justice”, to use the term dear to poststructuralist theorists.

**The crisis of postcolonial studies and identity politics, or their misuse by the new right-wing populist and nationalist movements, is a key symptom for the diagnosis of the present. We can observe this phenomenon on a global scale, and it does not concern only us in post-communist Eastern Europe. Would you describe its causes?**

It is a complicated combination of neoliberal economic policies and the basic coordinates of poststructuralist *episteme*. There is a general backlash against liberal individualism, which has never been an attractive subjective position for those who could not enjoy the benefits of being members of the middle class within Western welfare states. People facing various kinds of threat in the contemporary world – precarisation, unemployment, lack of social stability, uncomfortable labour relations, etc. – are striving to find support and comfort in collective identities. In an unfortunate way, a marriage of neoliberal ideology and poststructuralist narratives has destroyed any form of progressive collective identity and institutions, mainly class and trade union. Whether it was intended or not, Marxism has been a major enemy for both neoliberals and poststructuralists. However, for different reasons, of course, intentions are far less important than consequences. And the major consequence of that harmful conjuncture has been the revival of primordial identities, namely religion, nation and family – the only ones to survive that assault. In the intellectual climate that followed, it has been far easier to defend one’s cultural traditions than universal claims for social justice. Universal as such has been put into the category of forbidden phallogocentrism. Is it surprising that the founding moment of the populist revolt is an affirmation of all sorts of particularisms, especially religious and ethnic identities pitched against any attempts at enlightenment? This is, for example, the logic of Polish right-wingers who deny the rights of women or gays, claiming that these rights are not part of “our cultural traditions”, and that attempts at introducing them in Poland are part of the colonization of Polish culture by the European Union, in itself treated by the Polish right as a colonial project. How can you argue with that in a sense-making way if you are a poststructuralist deconstructionist? You cannot.

**How do you perceive the relationship between postcolonialism and post-communism? Specifically, to narrow this very general question, I will give an example from a local context in which the internationalism, cultural exchange, and solidarity of socialist Czechoslovakia with the Third World were replaced in the 1990s by a new, rather marginal theoretical perspective of often ambivalently applied postcolonial studies. Can this trajectory be traced in Poland, and in what direction are current postcolonial studies headed there?**

As I said above, Polish postcolonial studies have been dominated by the right wing, and I believe this to be a result of their basic flaws. What was dubbed by Gayatri Spivak “strategic essentialism” has turned into an essential strategic failure. One could say that the chief Polish postcolonial theorist today is Jarosław Kaczyński, who accuses the Germans of using the European Union as a disguise for European domination and encourages Poles to defend “our way of life” against foreign influence.

I have to say that I do not agree with the notion of “post-communism” if it is understood as an attempt at explaining the condition of the region through the legacy

of the Soviet period. It is an incarnation of modernization theory, which interpreted the fall of the Soviet bloc as a proof of an ongoing global convergence. As a matter of fact, in many important respects it was rather a divergence. The GDP of post-Soviet countries may now be closer to that of the West than was the case 40 years ago; however, when it comes to the secular state or women's rights, we are farther apart. In fact, I believe that the so-called communist legacy explains very little of the contemporary situation. Populism is a global phenomenon fed by neoliberal austerity rather than by any historical ideologies or events – unless somebody thinks Donald Trump won the US presidency in 2016 because Stalin ruled Eastern Europe in the 1950s. It would be very difficult to argue with such a position in any rational way, however.

**In the mid-1990s the Bulgarian theoretician Alexander Kiossev came up with the term “self-colonization”, already applied to cultures that were not really colonized but were subject to the cultural power of Europe and the West. What is your opinion of this concept, which is often applied to the countries of the former Eastern bloc?**

I think Kiossev is correct in the assumptions that led to his coining the concept of “self-colonization”. Central-Eastern Europe is not remote and independent enough to resist the influence of dominant societies, too close to them to comfortably retain its own particularism, but also too strong and distinct to be fully absorbed. It puts it in a peculiar relation to the Western Universal that is very different from much of the postcolonial world, which is too weak to promote itself into the position of universalism but remote and autonomous enough from the dominating centers to retain its particularism and to self-define (for example, the societies of the Muslim world or sub-Saharan Africa). Where I do not agree with Kiossev's position is in his poststructuralist denial of the material and economic dimension of world domination. It does not seem to be random that some countries succeed in making their values gain the position of the Universal and others fail. It is not difficult to prove that what is universalized are the values – aesthetic, ethical, social, and other – of the strong ones, and the strong ones are those who are rich. When the economy is thrown out the door, it comes back in through the window.

**Returning to the Perverse Decolonization project, the adjective “perverse” refers, inter alia, to the moment of the reversal of perspectives, resulting in a new and different view of the world, showing the “periphery/semi-periphery” as “perverse avant-gardes” and/or the future of “centres”. Basically, as you put it in your Prague lecture in autumn of 2018, today's Budapest or Moscow are basically the London or New York of the future. Could you explain and illustrate these theses with specific examples?**

Yes, I believe we can see such a reversal, which is pushing us in a direction opposite to the one advanced by modernization theorists in the 20th century. The centre was supposed to lead the way, while the peripheries would follow after a delay of a couple of decades. This was how Daniel Lerner saw the modernization of the Middle East in the 1950s, and how Francis Fukuyama saw the post-Soviet world in the 1990s. The same was presumed to be true of internal social evolution, in which everyone was supposed to follow the example of the individualistic middle class of the Western countries, who occupied a hegemonic position in their respective societies. What we see today is rather the opposite: the conservative-populist revolution is invading the centre from the peripheries, both externally – Central Europe, India, the

Philippines, etc. – and internally in terms of the revolt of the lower classes, for example the *gilets jaunes* movement in France. Just look at the electoral geography of Germany and the advance of the AfD from the east, or the class distribution of support for Brexit in the UK. It is a complex and under-researched phenomenon, but the basic force behind it is, I believe, the toxic results of the accumulation of capital. Populism is just a dark reverse of neoliberalism, a revolt of those who were supposed to be obedient cannon fodder for the accumulation process, both at home (the lower classes) and abroad (the peripheries/colonial world). The latter lacked the protection of the welfare state, which softened class antagonisms in the West/North and thus postponed the revolt. Once neoliberalism destroyed it, the shit hit the fan, to put it in the simplest terms.

Populism is just one, maybe the most important, example. There are others, such as the decline of secularism. France seems to be more like Turkey today, not the other way around, as one of the hottest political issues is the headscarf – a central question of Turkish politics since Atatürk but hardly a problem in France until the 1990s. Or look at the evolution of Western/Northern cities and their slow drift towards the realities of the postcolonial/peripheric South: not without reason has London been called “Lagos on Thames”. The decline of social services, such as the sorry state of Britain’s railways – which resemble India more than they did four decades ago – or the crisis of the NHS, makes Britain more similar to poor African countries than to the standard of the so-called developed world. Or consider the precarisation of labour relations in the Western world, which was dubbed “latinoamericanization” by Ulrich Beck in the 1990s. All this may be treated as a reversal of the basic advances of modernity that make the centre look more and more like the periphery.

**Cameroonian philosopher and theoretician Achille Mbembe also reaches similar conclusions. In his latest book, *Critique of Black Reason*, he describes, among other things, how the contemporary “imperialism of disorganization” has created a new form of planetary existence, which he describes as the “Becoming Black of the world”. In your opinion, what do these processes and facts lead to?**

I think it is a very similar phenomenon to what I propose to call “de-modernization” and prefer to describe in structural terms, not referring to identity (race or skin colour). What I find sad is that identity politics has turned the grievances of different groups into kinds of private property. It is very difficult to relate one struggle to another without risking accusations of cultural appropriation or even worse. In 2017, the art world was shocked by the attack of a black artist, Hannah Black, on the Whitney Biennial, provoked by the fact that a white painter, Dana Schutz, had represented the open casket of Emmet Till, a black teenager murdered in 1955. Black claimed that the gesture of the open casket was done “for the black community to see” the injustice and violence done to blacks in the US, while a member of Till’s family affirmed, in the discussion that followed, that Emmet’s mother had decided to open the casket “for the world to see” what had been done to her son. It is a very symptomatic difference – actually, “the world” seems to be politically incorrect as a category, because it implies a certain wholeness, and the latter is treated as an oppressive and violent notion in the poststructuralist conceptual framework. It is a deeply political problem. I would say that “Becoming Black of the world” coincides with “Un-becoming of the world as such” and its shattering into a myriad of incommensurate particularities. At the same time, capital is globally unified and dominant as never before. How are we supposed to struggle against it in such a fragmented political environment?

**One of the starting points of the Perverse Decolonization project is the critique of postcolonial studies from the perspective of Vivek Chibber, professor of sociology and your collaborator. In his analysis of Edward Said's renowned *Orientalism*, Chibber links the success of the book with the turn of the intellectual elites of the era to "culturalism", which allowed colonialism to no longer be linked with capitalism and the problem of class struggle. This disconnection, he said, permitted the analysis of colonialism as a separate form of dominance. Nations, races, and civilizations as cultural carriers became key actors, instead of classes. Nowadays, colonialism is understood as the product of the "cognitive orientation of the West" or "Western rationality", rather than of capitalism, as was the case in the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Chibber also took a critical stance towards Walter Dignolo's "decolonial theory" (and of other authors such as A. Quijano and E. Dussel), based on the "colonial difference(s)", emphasizing the other side's perspective, which used to be silenced by Eurocentric discourses favouring the concepts of modernity, postmodernity, and Western civilization. What is your view of Chibber's criticism, specifically of its friction with decolonial theory, which, among other things, has a significant resonance in the field of contemporary art?**

I think it is functional for the art world to deny the class-material aspect and to affirm the cultural one, as by this operation it puts itself in a much better position. If economy and class are not the problem, you can stop questioning the global art market, art-world jet set and corporate sponsorships – let's just do some politically correct and socially committed exhibition with funding from the Sackler family or BP! It is particularly relevant in the US context, as the US lacks public funding for art.

I think Chibber is correct in his critique of postcolonial studies and identity politics. We are again facing the problem I talked about at the beginning: "culture" is also a term favoured by neoliberal pundits who talk about the need for "cultural adjustments", about the "culture of poverty", or about the "cultural roots of wealth and success". It is not exploitation that made the West rich, it is rather its cultural superiority – its rationalism, its work ethic, its entrepreneurialism, etc. We can see again a dangerous conceptual convergence between neoliberalism and poststructuralism, for which Marxism seems to be the main villain.

**According to Vivek Chibber, we are currently seeing that capitalism has become not only global but also universal. To be able to face the new forms of capitalism and the acute global problems related to them effectively, according to the conclusions articulated in your discussions, our current task is to co-create new universal platforms, new universal horizons. What do you think these should look like, so that we avoid the mistakes related to universalist projects of the past and also avoid remaining on the level of abstraction?**

This is a difficult task, maybe the most difficult of all. Maybe we should redefine universalism in class terms and stop thinking all the time about cultural differences. When you take the Middle East, for example, the real threat that emanates from there is not Islam – however dangerous and terrifying Islamic fundamentalism may be – but the oil industry, which is not Islamic but capitalist. Within the Western/Northern countries the only really dangerous and problematic minority are the rich. The fact that the elites do whatever they can to avoid taxation is much more harmful to the general society than all the teachings of all radical imams residing in these countries. So, instead of debating how to force Muslim women not to wear the headscarf, we should be attempting to force the rich – be they Muslim or Christian – to pay taxes and contribute

to social welfare in the same way as everyone else. Another dimension of the same problem is the climate emergency. It is said that we are living in the Anthropocene era, which is defined by the permanent, material influence of human beings on the planet. Yet the poorest billion people could disappear right now and nothing would change in terms of climate processes; these people just consume and produce so little that their ecological footprint is negligible. Aren't they human too? The challenge is not how to make these people accept Western rationality, but how to stop the affluent Northern classes from ruining the planet and thus making it uninhabitable for everyone, including themselves – after all, we all need to breathe and drink water uncontaminated by plastic. So, I'd say we should struggle for the universal, as in “universal suffrage”, “universal taxation”, “universal biological needs”, or “universal dependence on ecosystem”, not “universal religion”, “universal language” or “universal rationality”. In this sense, the political name of this universal is “equality”.

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# Let's decolonise the arts! A long, difficult, and passionate struggle

Françoise Vergès



I do not only place this Kingdom at the beginning of my life. I also place it at the end. In general, I would say that the ultimate goal of man's activities is to recreate the Kingdom of Childhood.  
Léopold Sédar Senghor<sup>1</sup>

Kader Attia, from the series *Following the Modern Genealogy*, 2012–2018. Collages. Photographs, vintage documents, photocopies on cardboard. 77×102 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Krinzinger and Galerie Nagel Draxler

Personally, I started to hate the word ‘integrate’. All my childhood, I had been integrated into France and its Western values, without choosing to be, at the wish of my parents. I needed to discover Aimé Césaire and Blackness in order to recognise my origins and to distance myself from my colonial heritage.

– Maryse Condé<sup>1</sup>

The dominant media don't want women, particularly white women, to react against racism. They want us to accept racism as an immutable fact of our existence, like the sunset or hay fever.

– Audre Lorde<sup>2</sup>

The worst thing about this kind of prejudice is that at the same time as you feel wounded and angry and all the rest, it nourishes self-doubt inside you. You start to think: maybe I'm not good enough.

– Nina Simone.

<sup>1</sup> Maryse Condé, *La vie sans fards*, Paris: JC Lattès, 2012, p. 101–102.

<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde, *De l'usage de la colère. La réponse des femmes au racisme*. Available at [http://infokiosques.net/imprimersans2.php?id\\_article=387](http://infokiosques.net/imprimersans2.php?id_article=387).

Some years ago, just out of curiosity, I visited the Marine Museum in Paris. Its purpose was to “make the sea and the adventure of the sea interesting to all French people” by telling “stories of the sea and seafarers, both ancient and contemporary”.<sup>3</sup> I saw the impressive and splendid figures from ships’ prows (generally allegorical female figures), magnificent models of ships from all over the world, and evocations of the great French maritime companies and ocean liners from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nowhere was mention made of the role of ships in the treatment of blacks in the history of colonialism, capitalism, or imperialism. One left the museum in total ignorance of the links between progress in shipping and navigation and the slave trade, between maritime history and colonial conquests, between maritime history and colonial wars. Nonetheless, without boats there would have been no slaves and thus no tobacco, no sugar, no coffee, no cotton. One finds the same phenomenon in other museums, where nothing is totally false, but the story is riddled with blind spots, resulting in mutilated history and cartography. This is how things get erased. Erasure works not by being noisy, but through a pedagogical discourse that tells a story which is not inexact per se, but which rests on certain things being covered up and thus forever forgotten. One does not see any more because has taught oneself not to. To decolonise means to learn to see again – transversally and intersectionally. To de-naturalise the world where we evolve, created by human beings and by economic and political regimes. It means to learn to place all the pieces into the puzzle and to study relationships, circulation, and intermingling. Thus new cartographies emerge, questioning the European narrative and making evident regionalisations and globalisations that do not exclusively obey the logic of North and South.<sup>4</sup> It means understanding the world around us while neglecting neither the large nor the small, exploring the faults, the conflicts, the betrayals, and all the forms of complicity, solidarity, solitude, and resistance. To decolonise means to inevitably begin with colonial exploitation and slavery, both constructed like something as natural as the day and the night. The church, the state, culture, and law justify them. The slaves were the first to tear the curtain of lies, of this naturalisation which served to cover the rejection of their humanity, the most brutal exploitation, the greediness of the European powers and the fiction of universal human rights. The slaves accepted any risk when they wanted to make known their humanity. Their strategies for surviving, living, and creating preserved, reinterpreted, invented, and transmitted art and culture which expresses resistance to being wiped out. Anti-slavery and anti-colonial revolts and insurrections proposed to decolonise images and narratives, putting forth new histories and new forms of expression. Maroon communities – places of liberty in the midst of a world which denied that the principal of liberty was universal – created languages, art, and culture. They remain a powerful element in the imagination of the formerly-enslaved peoples of the Caribbean, Brasil, and the Indian Ocean.<sup>5</sup> Post-slavery colonisation did just as much ravaging, sacking, pillaging, dispossessing, and stealing. European museums amassed, in the course of these centuries of iron and blood, millions of objects wrenched away from their owners. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, between 1945 and the 1970s, the stage of decolonisation which led to the dismantlement of the great European colonial empires and to the reconquest of sovereignty pursued this work of cultural decolonisation. It was necessary to undo the white masks; in fact, to “consider oneself from a vantage point outside of oneself.”<sup>6</sup> An entire generation of artists, film-makers, musicians, and researchers renewed the process of decolonising languages, art, and images, because until then “the illustrious mirror of the imagination was located in Europe, and the entirety of the universe – its history, geography, and culture – was inevitably organised from this centre.”<sup>7</sup> All fields – art, literature, poetry, photography, dance, cinema, music, theatre, museums, design, crafts – were re-explored, and a vast library of works, images, sounds, and archives was built up all around the world. This history and this vast

3 See <http://www.musee-marine.fr/content/musee-en-renovation>.

4 See e.g. at [merchantmarine.co.uk](http://merchantmarine.co.uk) the map of medieval trade routes from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries created by reddit user martinjanmansson which shows the relations between Africa, Europe, and Asia, linking Constantinople to Liangzhou, and the city-state of Kilwa in East Africa with the Far East.

5 See Timothy J. Lockley, *Maroon Communities in South Carolina*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009; Sally Price, Richard Price, *Les arts marrons*, La Roque d’Anthéron 2005, available at: <http://www.une-saison-en-guyane.com/n03/arts-marrons-focus-sur-lart-tembe/>; music: *Drums of Defiance: Maroon Music from the earliest Black Communities of Jamaica*, 1993; Flavio dos Santos Gomes, *Freedom by a Thread: The History of Quilombos in Brazil*, New York 2016.

6 Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Décoloniser l’esprit*, Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2011, s. 41.

7 Ibidem.

archive of the decolonisation of the arts are accessible, and knowledge of this corpus is indispensable. Not everything begins with Europe or revolves around Europe.

The processes of wiping history out have not ceased, however. They find new forms or use old ones like censorship, lack of funding, denial of visas, theft, and appropriation. For many years now, without changing their structure, organisations have gradually taken it upon themselves to organise conferences, debates, and expositions about the notions of diversity, hybridisation, creolisation, and decolonisation. Should we not be happy about this? Some progress has certainly been made. Africa has become a fascinating new space for “discovery” in the art market, which means that some artists have seen their works acquire value and have been able to obtain substantial financial support. But to admit that these things have happened does not mean, as far as we are concerned, that there has been a *decolonisation*. On one hand, there is often a bowdlerisation of the works, emptying some of all radical content; on the other hand, the structural organisation of those institutions and the economy of production and distribution of works have not been transformed.

8 Rabindranath Tagore, „My school“, lecture delivered in America and published in *Personality* London 1933. Full text available: [http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/tagore\\_myschool.html](http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/tagore_myschool.html).



Exhibition view “Kader Attia: Modern Genealogy”, Gallery VI PER, Prague, 2019–2020. Photo: Zdeněk Porcal (Studio Flusser). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Krinzinger and Galerie Nagel Draxler

Decolonisation of the arts starts with understanding the phenomena and processes being used to wipe people out. As we have mentioned, these can often advance in disguise. Decolonisation demands a huge effort, because one must first unlearn in order to learn. One must develop a form of curiosity which always asks how, who, why, and for whom. Education teaches us not to be curious but to disconnect ourselves from our world and the world in general. This reminds me of an anecdote told by Rabindranath Tagore, where he tells the following story: at a school, one of his young friends climbs a tree during recess and goes out on a branch to read. The schoolmaster scolds him and makes him come down from the tree, but this same schoolmaster encourages him to learn botany. Tagore remarks that the schoolmaster “believed in impersonal knowledge of the tree, but not personal experience”.<sup>8</sup>

Who does not remember how, as a child, one was asked to stop asking so many questions because they tire out the adults? This is even more pronounced for non-white children. Everything that constitutes their world is excluded from being represented, not a single street name carries the name of a hero or heroine that looks like them, and the world as presented to them conveys a deformed image of

their origins, religions, memories, and history. And it is not only their curiosity which is presented as a defect; no, they must be integrated “without having chosen, into Western values”.<sup>9</sup> It is thus only at a great cost that lost traditions can be recovered. “To make oneself autonomous and construct for oneself a niche of resistance, then, as best one can, to connect it with other niches of resistance....and to free oneself from the yoke of the great national, official narrative so as to re-appropriate and write one’s own narrative, to exhibit one’s own vision of things,”<sup>10</sup> says Kader Attia. One must unlearn in order to learn anew, to re-educate all of one’s senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell – which have been damaged, but one must also re-learn silence.

In the hegemonic narrative, the term “rupture” (in art, cinema, theatre, dance) is only applied to ruptures caused by whites who are writing a linear narrative. But the narrative of decolonisation cannot be linear because “decolonisation is a historical process”,<sup>11</sup> a multiple and complex process which cannot follow only one path. It is multi-territorial, it seeks to answer a multitude of memories which sometimes conflict with other, it has to admit different genders and sexualities, and many spaces intermingle. At the heart of decolonisation lies attention to colonial history and to its contemporary parallels in all their forms. The centuries of colonisation – during slavery and afterwards – have left traces, fragments, prohibitions, images, and vocabulary contaminated by racism. In France, moral condemnation of racism after World War II created the fiction that racism would no longer be anything but a wrong-headed opinion, an attitude revealing an ethical fault. Even now, the acceptance of the fact that there is no such thing as human races has not stopped the progress of a cultural racism – a racism without races<sup>12</sup>. Racism without races and racists who are not racist (who are nothing new, by the way) have taken the upper hand, thanks to a political situation where French citizenship has become a token of identity (implying a certain “civilisation”, certain “values”, and a fundamentalist approach to the idea of a “secular state”). Not a day passes without a declaration, a piece of publicity, a performance aimed at the “blacks”, the “Asians”, the “North Africans”, and “Muslims”. Comedians invent an “accent” for them, mock their cuisine and clothing, and the cinema portrays them in a racist way. This feedback effect of colonialism/racism, as described by Aimé Césaire in *Discours sur le colonialisme*, has affected the artistic and cultural world because<sup>13</sup> “just as nobody colonises innocently, nobody colonises without paying the price; a nation that colonises, a civilisation that justifies colonisation – and thus violence – is already a sick civilisation, a civilisation morally corrupted which, irresistibly, from one consequence to another, from one denial to another, calls forth its Hitler, I mean its own punishment”. Although it was written in 1950, Césaire’s analysis remains unknown in the artistic world. The racial structure of mentalities and representations develops over a very long time: take, for example, the antisemitic tropes that have been common in Europe since the Middle Ages, or those stigmatising blacks, which spread starting in the 19th century, or the journals of European travellers separating the world into civilised and non-civilised, into human zoos, or colonial literature, or images spread by photography and cinema in order to sustain racist, colonial ideology, to misogynist and homophobic images, all of which nourished and continue to nourish our mental image bank and our actions. And in spite of the treatises, studies, and theses written about this long development, the French cultural castes still strongly oppose their own decolonisation. The evidence for this opposition is everywhere. From refusals to consider projects because “it won’t interest the public” to remarks about skin colour, a name, a real or supposed origin, a real or supposed religion.<sup>14</sup> From the assignment of mostly negative roles to blacks, Asians, and North Africans<sup>15</sup> to the assumption that white actors can play any role. From the certainty that white artists can draw on colonial images in complete freedom to cultural appropriation.<sup>16</sup> From the absence of non-white persons in management posts in artistic and cultural institutions to the

9 Maryse Condé (footnote 1).

10 Available at: <http://www.lofficiel.com/art/kader-attia-macval-palais-de-tokyo>.

11 Frantz Fanon, „De la violence“, *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), in *Œuvres*, Paris 2011, p. 451–452.

12 On the development of racism without race, see Etienne Balibar in *Race, Classe, Nation*, La Découverte, 1988, written together with Immanuel Wallerstein.

13 Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, 1950.

14 On colour, see the personal experiences of the collective, *Noire n’est pas nom mon métier*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2018.

15 See the studies from the Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel, [www.csa.fr](http://www.csa.fr).

16 Cultural appropriation has nothing to do with the circulation, borrowing, intermingling, and other forms of hybridization that have occurred. It describes the process whereby a dominant culture seizes and reproduces the codes of a minority culture for profit, blocking any discussion of the history of oppression and the asymmetry which exists in the conditions of production and distribution which give the advantage to the white Western world.

absence of colonial history. Or the absence of critical, postcolonial theories of the visual arts in French art schools.<sup>17</sup> Or the cartels in museums who either hide the past with euphemisms or try to wipe it clean, omitting African, Asian, or North African works in French cities. The list is long, examples occur daily, and the discrimination is proven.

17 Their teaching depends on the desire and will of a few teachers in art schools and universities; there is no curriculum requiring courses on colonial history and the representations that it imposes, nor any programme of affirmative action for recruiting non-white teachers, researchers, or students. The distinction between male/female is paramount.



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Photo: Zdeněk Porcal (Studio Flusser). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Krinzinger and Galerie Nagel Draxler

Racialized persons are, meanwhile, asked every day to explain that racism and discrimination exist. They are required to prove at all times their allegiance to an abstract discourse about rights – abstract because it takes no account of differences of class or gender, inherited from a patriarchal, misogynist, and colonial history – while their right to equality is regularly denied. Their freedom to create is denied. At DLA (*Décolonisons les arts*, in English "Let's decolonise the arts"), we defend this right. But we are also in favour of *liberation*, that collective action which concerns not just individual creativity but the liberation of creative energy in society at large. While inequality between men and women in the artistic world is now recognised, and official declarations are made in order to reduce it, there is still indifference or condescension towards the accumulation of inequality when the victims are racialized persons. This phenomenon is described by the notion of intersectionality, which insists on the fact that people can simultaneously suffer multiple forms of domination or discrimination. At an institutional level, greater value is put on male/female equality precisely because it permits one to ignore demands for equality based on an intersectional analysis, and white bourgeois feminism – a feminism which refuses to analyse the links between the formation of the "white woman" (innocent, beautiful, maternal, gentle, needing protection) and the invention of the "black woman" (Jezebel, lacking femininity or a maternal instinct, indifferent to pain) – thus becomes a formidable ally in the fight against equality for all. This white bourgeois feminism becomes a valuable card in the neoliberal offensive at a time when other cards – the superiority of "Western civilisation", the superiority of European democracy, or the superiority of art from Europe – have lost their power. The rights of women, seen as an extension of individual rights in a world structured by capitalism, threaten the patriarchy, which rejects any non-gendered form of capitalism but can accept this white bourgeois feminism. The development of state feminism, femonationalism and femoimperialism shows that the

category “women”, taken as a whole, is a construction which refuses to account for social differences and processes of racialisation.

Indifference and condescension depend on a kind of intentional ignorance – intentional because it holds up regardless of the evidence which accumulates against it, intentional because the alternative would mean educating oneself and engaging in a process of decolonisation oneself, something which would mean renouncing privileges which rest not on any genius or innate talent, nor on any competence, aptitude, or disposition associated by nature with being European, but rather on the results of a history of theft, pillaging, and exploitation, and on a process of racialisation (antisemitism, negrophobia, islamophobia, romophobia), as well as on misogyny and all forms of transphobia.



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In France, society has learned to neglect the personal experiences of racialized women, to demean them, to reject them by putting them into categories such as ‘victimisation’ or ‘communitarianism’, often without taking the time to see or read the works inspired by those experiences. These experiences are – a priori – illegitimate, denied validity, or assigned validity in pre-determined narratives such as victim, terrorist, drug-dealer. Let us not kid ourselves: if these works ever find a place in our artistic world, it is thanks to individual favours or because of mass protests.

One undeniable fact is that for years now, racialized artists have been taking control of their personal experiences, digging in archives, rediscovering forgotten narratives and figures, exhuming memories, returning to objects the story of their wanderings and transformations. For these artists, this is not about responding face to face to Europe and its obsession with the west, but rather about liberating themselves from Europe’s grip and exploring other image banks, timeframes, spaces, and spiritualities. It is not about writing history, strictly speaking, but about inspiring, revising, or reinterpreting narratives, images, sounds; it is about investigating the victim but also the executioner. A list of these achievements would never be complete, but to cite just a few examples, let us consider works which deal with colonial exploitation and slavery; reawaken memories buried in colonial wars (Madagascar, Cameroun, Vietnam, Algeria) or the massacres and repression since 1962 (the revolt of May 1967 in Guadeloupe, the dead of Ouvea, the children deported from Reunion); rediscover important figures in struggles for independence and anticolonial movements; break

the silence surrounding the victims of October 17, 1961 (when the prefect of Paris, Maurice Papon, encouraged the police to kill Algerians protesting against the curfew), naming them and bringing attention to the youngest victim (Fatima Bedar); explore the manifestations of misogyny and hatred of black women, racism, sexism, islamophobia, negrophobia, romophobia, homophobia, and transphobia; plumb the depths of contemporary catastrophes – terrorism, the war on migrants, pollution, the consequences of nuclear tests; examine dominant ideas about beauty, the factory of genders, and sexuality. Nothing should be taboo. Faced with this movement, an offensive has coalesced around a point of convergence between the extreme right and a left and a feminism that find (as Sara Farris has shown in her analysis) their roots in racist stereotypes and economic interests,<sup>18</sup> offering to the Western European imagination would-be universal representations and conceptualisations that are, in reality, very particular. Under the cover of defending “values”, the attraction of which has been exhausted in a world which is shaking off centuries of Western supremacy, these forces attack anything and everything which, in their eyes, threatens their hegemony. While those forces seek to impose their order, which is only a different disorder against the background of the world’s variety, we wish to understand how the contemporary world comes to be, a world which is chaotic, disturbed, troubled, and full of danger but also of hope. Faced with conservative and reactionary forces, with racist nationalisms, we do not believe that an appeal to some abstract universalism or to easily-trampled-on principles is enough. To combat racism is not to combat prejudices but to fight for social justice and against the destructiveness of capitalism.

We take into account the deep psychological wounds left by racism, which affect nations and individuals. A remark by the great African-American singer Paul Robeson illustrates the depth of these wounds: “Even when he demonstrates that he is your equal (and this demonstration has to include a performance which is better than what would normally be expected), the black man must never put in doubt, in any way, white superiority. You can climb the social ladder, but stay modest. Always show that you are grateful. And above all, don’t do anything that could scare them, because the hand of oppression, which sometimes relaxes a bit, will not fail to crush you.”<sup>19</sup> From racialized artists, from Billie Holliday, who when asked by a friend on an avenue in New York “How is Lady Day”, responded “Well, you know, I’m still black”, from those who declared in 2018 that “Black is not my profession”, and from actors, students, directors, and racialized artists who tell us their personal stories when we receive them at DLA, the realisation is always the same: in order to be listened to, you have to calm down and not show any anger, or otherwise accept being dirtied as described by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*: “every white had the right to take your whole person whether you said yes or no. Not just to make you work, kill you, or mutilate you, but to make you dirty. Make you so dirty that from then on it would be impossible for anyone to love you. Make you so dirty that you would forget who you were and could never remember.”<sup>20</sup>

Decolonisation is liberating oneself from this dirtiness, emancipating oneself from mental slavery. *Emancipate yourself from mental slavery*, sang Bob Marley, because nobody but you can liberate your spirit. “We will weave the burial shroud of the old world”, sang the Lyonnais silk workers in 1844, a shroud that evokes the weaving done by the hands of those used to the task, the miserable hands of anonymous women and men without whom the beauties of the world would not exist, invisible architects of wonders.

18 Sara Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

19 Quoting Jim Sparrow in *No Way but This. In Search of Paul Robeson*, Melbourne: Scribe Publication, 2017.

20 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1987.

No difference in this sweet France  
between my past, my present, and my suffering  
to be at the bottom of the precipice or on the surface  
but in any case on the scene and hated excessively  
my scars are full of stress  
full of racist stories that oppress me  
of bruises, cysts, pains, and thick chains  
for the indigenous people at the origin of their riches  
they attack us so we attack them

they beat the black men, raped the black women  
so my sores are big and my skull puts on  
anguish and demotivation in my blockhaus  
it's the blockage in our lives, too  
they signal our pedigree on our CV  
how do you expect me to calm my anger  
when the colon is as cruel as the SS?<sup>21</sup>

Casey<sup>22</sup>

At DLA, we do not separate the decolonisation of the arts from the scandal of unpunished crimes by the police, from the criminalisation of solidarity, from laws that weaken social protections, or from injustice, inequality, racism, and environmental destruction in France and across the seas. Since racism is indistinguishable in our eyes from sexism, misogyny, or ethno-nationalism (in fact they act in symbiosis), as militant anti-racists we are particularly concerned now. We observe the ravages of neoliberalism and individualism, which lead to attacks on movements involving decolonisers, women, trans people, queers, or indigenous people. We are aware that it is necessary to distinguish between worry and malignant attacks, between a request for explanation and an accusation.

For those who want to understand: can we admit to you our fatigue at your constant demand that we become educators when information (on the French translation of blackface, for example) is already readily available? Why do you accept that anyone can decide that they are an expert on slavery, colonialism, or the current forms of colonialism, without even looking for information about their long and complex history? Why do you participate in the fairy tale that pretends that colonialism ended in 1962? Why do you never ask yourselves how your privileges were given to you? Do not just be content to read a black writer or to go and see an artist of colour. Your culpability does not bring any benefit, save the fragility of your tears, they do not bring any benefit either, neither for you nor us. Accept that you are troubled and disturbed, and take the time to reflect. We are the first to admit that nothing is ever final as far as knowledge is concerned, and that we too can have prejudices, that decolonisation is not thing to be acquired, but rather a process.

To our allies and friends, we say that we know how difficult it is to construct a collective path, but nevertheless it is important to construct it. Listening, attention, and solidarity are fundamental, just as is working on our disagreements so that common ground can be found anew each time. Let's decolonise the arts will be a painful and tedious movement, joyful and happy, because it affects me as an individual and also the collective. You do not have to be afraid of our anger, because just as Audre Lorde wrote, "to exteriorise anger, to transform it into action in the service of our vision and our future, is an act of clarification that liberates us and gives us strength, because it is via this painful process of putting theory into practice that we

21 Aucune différence dans cette douce France / Entre mon passé, mon présent et ma souffrance / Être au fond du précipice ou en surface / Mais en tout cas sur place et haï à outrance / Mes cicatrices sont plaines de stress / Pleines de rengaines racistes qui m'oppressent / De bleus, de kystes, de peines et de chaînes épaisses / Pour les indigènes à l'origine de leur richesse / On nous agresse donc on agresse / Ils ont battu des nègres, violé des négresses / Donc nos plaies sont grosses et mon crâne endosse / Angoisse et moral en baisse dans mon blockhaus / C'est le blocus sur nos vies en plus / On signale nos pedigree dans nos cursus / Comment veux-tu que ma colère cesse / Quand le colon est cruel comme le SS?

22 Extracted from *Dans nos histoires*, available at: <http://genius.com/Casey-dans-nos-histoires-lyrics>.

find out who are our allies, with whom we may have serious differences, and who are our real enemies.”

To the others, who defend at all cost their little square of terrain, all the while pretending to defend the universal: your universalism hides your particularism, the transformation of your singular culture into universal culture, and your refusal to analyse the current forms of racism. Your antiracism is moral, which means that it does not seek to detect how racism has insinuated itself into the practices and institutions of the state. When shown concrete examples of racism, you counter with grand abstract principles. When you pretend to act as a foil to the United States, this serves to reinforce the image of France as fairer, more egalitarian. But we know that in both cases, if any modest progress was made it was because you were pushed by our struggle, not by your principles. You accuse the United States of being puritan, of menacing French gallantry, of being much more racist (e.g. segregation, lynching). But here, in France, we have created the laws for blacks (Code noir) and the code for indigenous people (Code de l'indigénat); here was decreed the dispossession of colonised peoples; here we decided in favour of bloody wars in Madagascar, Indochina, Cameroon, and Algeria; here, we welcomed dictators to whom we sold arms; here, the highest authorities of the state have welcomed an identity movement which violently pronounced itself opposed to marriage for everybody. Here, a harmless manual about gender equality was recalled; here, conferences have been prohibited under pressure from the far right; here, militants have been banned from speaking at universities; here, militant antiracists have been denounced and named in reports broadcast by government ministries. Those of you who refuse a true humanism which cannot but take the form of a concrete, political antiracism, know that our determination is real. It is not your job to tell us which past is important, and your injunctions are but minor obstacles to our producing more complex and jarring narratives. Our adversaries should get used to our cumbersome presence, joyful and bothersome.

And to ourselves, to those of us involved in decolonising the arts, know that our path will be long, difficult, and exciting. We will have to decolonise our own spirits, overcome divisions inside ourselves, interrogate our own prejudices, and to make a constant effort to go beyond the fragmentation caused the patriarchy, sexism, racism, and capitalism. But let us feel free to choose the forms that we want to develop. Let us refuse to be assigned to certain topics, problems, or forms. Let us deliver ourselves from the politics of respectability, from the desire to be accepted at the cost of compromises that would destroy us. In a world made of obstacles, uncertainty, and arbitrariness, let us develop a methodological and epistemological critique of colonialism and let us decolonise the arts in order to overcome the de-humanisation which has always been at the heart of the modernity which now has hegemony.

We do not prohibit ourselves from tackling any topic, and we will have our opinion on the restitution of stolen African objects in French museums just like we will have an opinion on the intellectual cannibalism that absorbs our ideas and content while preserving the dominance of certain institutions and their programming. We engage ourselves to combat racism, because as we see it the decolonisation of the arts contributes to the decolonisation of French society. We believe that our voices, our narrations, our stories, our forms of expression and representation deserve to be recognised as well as to be criticised. We will not be fooled by token attempts at recuperation. We reserve the right to disturb and overturn, as well as the right to make mistakes.

In conclusion, temporary as this may be, here are some concrete proposals for debate:

- Bring to wider attention all initiatives, actions, experiences, and practices developed in art schools and cultural centres by artists, students, and teachers that contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge and methods; teach colonial history in art schools – obviously this teaching is necessary in all schools, but our goal here is to pose the following question: is it possible to an artist, whatever topics and forms I want to adopt or explore, if I am ignorant of what has contributed to constructing the world I live in – slavery, colonialism, racism, sexism?
- A programme of affirmative action to transform selection committees, commissions, and boards of directors of cultural, artistic, film, and media institutions in order to go beyond male/female parity or the appointment of a few tokens of diversity, and to institute a bit more transparency. In order to reinforce this programme, to publish each year a report studying the forms of intersection of discrimination in the world or art and culture.
- An examination of the cartels in our museums.
- The development of exhibitions based on a de-colonial methodology, shifting one's viewpoint and not positioning itself face to face with the West.
- The elaboration of a museography focused on slavery/colonisation which will question the linear narratives and the centrality of the object, and will seek to visualise and make understood the catastrophe, deportation, the construction of racist gender and sexual stereotypes, the economy of exploitation, multiple modes of resistance, the critique of modernity and its representations, their multiple timeframes and spaces.
- Sustainable venues in France and abroad where one can organise debates, meetings, expositions, and reflection on the process of decolonising the arts.

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Translation from French: Adriano Hundhausen



Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, *4 Waters: Deep Implicancy*, 2018, video stills.  
Courtesy of the authors.

Examined more closely, this determination of End lies just as much in the Notion of the thing, that of being in its own self an End. That is to say, it preserves itself; i.e. it is at one and the same time its nature to conceal the necessity, and to exhibit it in the form of a contingent relation. [...] The organism shows itself to be a being that preserves itself, that returns and has returned into itself. But this observing consciousness does not recognise in this being the Notion of End or that the Notion of End exists just here and in the form of a Thing, and not elsewhere in some other intelligence. It makes a distinction between the Notion of End and being-for-self and self-preservation, a distinction which is none. That it is in fact no distinction is something of which this consciousness is not aware; on the contrary, the making of the distinction appears to it as a contingent act having no essential connection with what is brought by that act; and the unity which links the two together, viz. the said act and the End, falls asunder for this consciousness.

– Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Natural history has a principle on which to reason, which is peculiar to it, and which it employs advantageously on many occasions; it is that of the conditions of existence, commonly termed final causes. As nothing can exist without concurrence of those conditions which render its existence possible, the component parts of each must be so arranged as to render possible the whole living being, not only with regard to itself, but to its surrounding relations, and the analysis of these conditions frequently

1 A very short version of the argument presented at the end of this piece was published, with the title “On Heat,” in *Canadian Art*, Fall 2018 (<https://canadianart.ca/issues/fall-2018-climates/>)

conducts to general laws, as demonstrable as those which are derived from calculation and experiment. It is only when the laws of general physics, and those which result from the conditions of existence are exhausted, that we are reduced to the simple laws of observation.

– Cuvier, *The Animal Kingdom*

Which crises? About four years ago we learned that over one million people mostly from Syria but also from conflict-torn, mostly resource rich and geo-economically strategic key areas had arrived in Europe, from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan, hundreds of thousands of displaced people, reached Turkey, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain, or Greece from where they hoped to make their way into central Europe or perhaps the UK. Though the attention concentrated and continues to concentrate on those fleeing the devastation of their means of economic subsistence caused by war and/or neoliberal reforms, a significant number of them were fleeing another devastation – indeed, another European crisis, provoked by global capital – the environmental catastrophes caused by global warming. What I offer here is not a critical commentary on the ‘refugee crisis,’ in which I try to spell out its many factors. Instead, I’ll be commenting on the general incapacity to respond ethically to both crises, the one to which much attention has been given (the refugees) and the one which seems to escape our capacity to comprehend (the climate).



Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, *4 Waters: Deep Implicancy*, 2018, video stills. Courtesy of the authors.

When considering this European crisis elsewhere I focus on the security infrastructure and highlighted the indistinction between refugee protection and Europe’s border protection. Europe’s response, I argue, exemplifies how raciality, the symbolic refiguring of coloniality, operates as a global political device. These have taken two directions: on the one hand, I have addressed the scene of law directly, and commented on how the tools of raciality delimits the reach of notions such as universality and cosmopolitanism and, on the other hand, I comment on the growth of the apparatus of self-protection as a feature of this new arrangement of global state capital. Here I also comment on raciality’s work but by a slightly different route. After a brief mapping of the modern ethical scene, in which I highlight the significance of the

concept of Life, in the writings of the transparent subject (the figuring of Man said to be original to the European space), I take off into some speculation. This what-if exercise considers global warming by attending to coloniality, raciality, and the notion of Life and directing them towards another point of departure and trajectory for thinking. My hope is that this exercise brings attention to the ethical demand that neither cosmopolitanism nor hospitality address, because neither approach how coloniality and raciality operate in these recent European crises, once again allowing global state capital the kind of profits that only extraction can deliver.

### The Scenes of Life: The Historic and the Organic

In both Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>2</sup> and Cuvier's *The Animal Kingdom*,<sup>3</sup> the transparent 'I', the post-Enlightenment figuring of Man that finally reconciled freedom and reason, guides descriptions of the world as History or Nature, that is, as evidence of its final causes or formal tools. These are distinct presentations of the figure at the core of modern representation – respectively, Human Being (as a name for the Man, as a thing of interiority and temporality) and Human Species (as a name for Man, as a thing of exteriority and spatiality) – are referents of Life and comprehend the ethical primacy it has been given since early texts of modern political philosophy.<sup>4</sup> But they differ. A closer reading of Hegel's passage on observing consciousness quoted above captures his description of the organic, of Life itself, as having an ethical import going beyond the human alone. For Hegel, however, this is an early moment of reason's development. Now, lamenting that natural history's objects were numerous, various and fragile, and that this did not allow for "rigorous calculation," in the passage quoted, Cuvier celebrates precisely that which Hegel found lacking in deployment of reason, which is that observation and analysis of the parts and movements of the living bodies in nature, and the analysis of their conditions of existence "frequently conducts to general laws, as demonstrable as those which are derived from calculation and experiment".

Both versions of life would inform post-Enlightenment thinking, in particular the scientific projects assembled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as the sciences of man and society. In fact, in what could be read as an exploration of that which in Kant appears as hope, Hegel and Cuvier provide elaborations of the notion of the Human (Being or Species) as a collective entity, which unfolds in time, in the historical transcendent theological time of Spirit of a nation, and in the scientific immanent finite time of the body of the human species. Existing in time, these two figurings of the human differ from the Kantian formal presentation of the Human (as partly rational being) in his figuring of Humanity. What I want to highlight here, in considering these two as versions of the Ethical, as a scene of Life (as opposed to Kant's version as the scene of Form) is precisely how the historical (Hegel's) and the scientific (Cuvier's) version present the human as an immanent unity of a multiplicity: Hegel's nation, Spirit, is a collective yet particular moment of the development of Spirit in its trajectory which is human history, while Cuvier's human species, the one whose organs and functions are mapped by comparative anatomy and revolution, are placed at the apex and become the coda for knowing everything else in the living world. As I argue elsewhere, both statements render the assembling necessary of the arsenal of raciality both possible and inevitable. Hegel's development of the theory of World History opened the possibility that the difference between Europe and the West would eventually dissipate as Spirit followed its self-actualizing trajectory, while Cuvier's Science of Life finally articulated a concept, that of life itself, that allowed for the deployment of scientific reason in the production of knowledge of human conditions, something Kant did not find necessary or desirable.

2 G. W. F. Hegel [1807] 1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3 Georges Cuvier 1863. *The Animal Kingdom Arranged according to Its Organization*. London: Henry G. Bohn.

4 Here I have in mind how Locke, Hobbes and others placed protection as the main cause for the rational thing's decision to relinquish *his* freedom and to submit to the determination of a body politics.

My point is: the organic names both the human in the world and the human itself. Each names the human, as a collective, on the one hand the historic rendering of life as an articulated notion of nation, using proper names and referring to other places, languages, modes of lives, which would correspond to the words that Derrida finds in his juridical-political notion of hospitality. On the other hand, the scientific rendering of life articulated in the tools of raciality also yields proper names in the form of categories; black, African, European, white, Indian, American, Asian, etc. which do not correspond to the names which Derrida finds in the juridical-political notion of hospitality. More importantly, this turn names other human collectives, whose cultural (moral and intellectual) traits are explained as determined (caused) by the *forms* bodies (racial difference) and of their societies (cultural difference), which renders them neither of the absolute order, nor as neighbours or as relatives by European descendants in the Americas, the Pacific, and elsewhere. For this reason, neither of the figurings of hospitality Derrida proposed adequately describe the ethical demand from the 'racial other' of Europe. Named by the authority of the tools of European scientific knowledge of life, these foreigners blamed for this latest European crisis pose a different question. A question which neither Kant's Humanity (which is presupposed in Derrida's call), nor Hegel's Human Being, and much less Cuvier's Human Species can comprehend because, in their particular mode of figuring *Man*, each renders the 'racial other' of Europe foreign before the bodies and territories said to play the leading role in the Scene of Life, in which raciality does the work of descriptions that do not presuppose, predict or reproduce the Scene of Violence, in which, the affectable "others of Europe" play the leading role.

## Calor & Labor

What the world and its human and more-than-human inhabitants are facing now is a European crisis, actually, two European crises, both of them colonial in their genesis: global warming and population displacement. Both crises reflect the mode of thinking and the attendant description of the world, described above; both of which have been assembled with and have supported extraction. If we are to respond adequately to both European crises, we need a description of the world that does not presuppose or rehearse the Scene of Life, in either the historical or scientific versions discussed above. The task must address both the modern epistemological and ethical as it is ordered. Undermining the infrastructure of thinking that supports the colonial (economic and juridic) infrastructure of extraction of labour and lands, however, requires attention to be paid to the ethical demand made by the racial others of Europe, that is, the end of the world as we *know* it, or decolonization.

Let me focus here on the crisis which modern thinking is poorly equipped to address. Here the image of the end of the world is unmissable as the rise in the Earth's average temperature will make the planet unsuitable for the human and other living things. Talk of global warming has mostly about the human, about how human actions are leading to a temperature rise that can/will cause the extinction of Life on Earth. Both the food that we eat and the fossil fuels we consume in our vehicles have been named culprits in this deadly flow. Finite human (linear) time, inheres statements about the Anthropocene as the geological age,<sup>5</sup> in which the dominance of the human has created the conditions that have brought about global warming, or climate change. Never acknowledged is how finite human organic time already maps the surface of the earth. Let's see. Earth's age is calculated to be about 4.6 billion years. Of these, the first 600 million years are not yet officially named precisely because of the lack of evidence of Life (a mark of a living thing), which allowed the

5 By now there are numerous writings on the Anthropocene – and perhaps fewer on the Capitalocene. I read most of it and this piece is very much informed by many of them. Because of its style, it seems a bit forced to cite each one. Let me then just mention the one that triggered this piece as a response, which is Donna Haraway. "Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene." *E-Flux* # 75, September 2016.

official naming of Earth's 600 million and 1<sup>st</sup> "birthday", that is, the layer where/when microfossils of bacteria began producing oxygen roughly 4 billion years ago. The very tools, methods, and terms used in the description of the planet occupy (comprehend) it with Cuvier's and Charles Darwin's versions of the Science of Life. Two consequences of this deployment are relevant here. First, which I have already mentioned: the classificatory system designed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century already presumed that the human organism form governs, that it is the model and the "most perfect" living formation by the understanding of the forms and functions of other living things. Second, and consequently that when used by geologists it does so mapping the human formation onto the surface of the earth.

When critics of the Anthropocene charge "Anthropocentrism!" – well, I'm afraid it's too late. More importantly, it falls short of the roots of the problem. The roots of the problem are the onto-epistemological pillars – separability, determinacy and sequentiality<sup>6</sup> – that require and reproduce the separation of what is known, through a deployment of two kinds of causes, namely efficient causes (observable appearance of change) and formal causes (intrinsic causes of specific properties) of an existent or event. Hence the unofficial phases or layers of the planet are so because they cannot be separated according to its specific living things, which in turn is knowable because the particular degree of complexity of its organism, which in turn would allow for the determination of its genus and species etc. On its turn, this allows for, especially after Cuvier's Comparative Anatomy combined with Darwin's Theory of Evolution, the establishing of their place in a temporal sequence which charts the development of life, which as a figuring of Hegel's Spirit are both deficient in a final cause that can account for the particularity of the parts and movements of living things. Towards releasing our thinking from these shackles of transcendental reason, I move to invite us to take global warming as an opportunity to experiment with thinking that attends to a most crucial juridico-economic process of the global present, which is the extraction of lands and resources and its role in the displacement, dispossession and death that forces the racial others of Europe to come and be blamed for that other European crisis. My proposal here is that instead of focusing on the Human-Antropos as the efficient cause of global warming, we could highlight extraction, coloniality and raciality, respectively the juridical and symbolic as modes of deployment of force that facilitate it.

Perhaps because it is so obvious, most of us do not think much about how global warming is really a matter of heat. Heat or transfer of the internal energy generated by collisions of the basic constituents of a given existent. Heat is the flow from molecule to molecule by contact, radiation, or mediation. Every existent emits electromagnetic radiation as long as its temperature is greater than absolute zero (a temperature which, as far as I know, has only been achieved by scientists in the lab). Heat – internal kinetic energy – which depends on mass and speed like any other form of energy, can be transformed into other forms of energy. There are several kinds of energy – potential, kinetic, thermal, nuclear, elastic, and many others. Energy, as we know cannot be created or destroyed, it is transferred and transformed. Framed this way, "scientifically," with a reference to thermodynamics, the transformation of energy takes some authority (and recalls some very bad moves, such as Herbert Spencer's social dynamics) from post-Enlightenment scientific projects about the human and its existence. Unfortunately, I cannot spell out here how far away my approach here is from Spencer's and others. Let me just say that my appropriation of transformation and transference of energy here is inspired by Empedocles's postulate that all that exists is but a re-composition of the four classic elements (air, fire, water, and earth) figuring in pre-Socratic Greek, Hindu, Chinese, Native American, and African philosophies, which is how it interests me. I am interested in thinking that begins and stays with the elemental, as it figures in these philosophies and in particle physics.

6 For an elaboration on the se pillars see Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," *32<sup>nd</sup> Bienal de São Paulo – Incerteza Viva. Catalogue*. Edited by Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças. São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

We know the basics of global warming. Excessive emissions and the accumulation of greenhouse gases – carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide – has raised the temperature of the troposphere (lower layer of the Earth’s atmosphere). This increase results from these gases being absorbed and the emission of infrared radiation. True,



Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, *4 Waters: Deep Implicancy*, 2018, video stills. Courtesy of the authors.

as the writers on the Anthropocene or Capitocene say, this is due to agricultural and industrial production; true, it is also about extensive and intensive extraction of the Earth’s solid and liquid matter, as fossil fuels or soil nutrients to feed crops and livestock. Very few, though, attend to how extraction and the expropriation of labor and land necessary for access to fossil fuels and soil, are deeply implicated with the accumulation of gases in the Earth’s troposphere: that is, how excessive concentration of the means of production and of access to raw materials corresponds to the excess of greenhouse gases. The operating modern political forces here, coloniality (juridical architecture) and raciality (symbolic arsenal), support extraction with a mode of governance that relies on total violence to ensure the extraction of the (potential or kinetic) energy of lands and bodies. Put differently, this accumulation of gases also expresses the extent and intensity of the expropriation of internal kinetic energy, facilitated by coloniality and juridical-economic mechanisms that state capital has deployed in the past two centuries or so. As indicated by the ‘facts’ of concentration of wealth, such as the levels of dispossession found in the Global South promoted by neoliberal austerity policies, the never-ending wars (colonial conflicts which do not interfere with the extraction of natural resources) on the African continent and the Middle East, like in Afghanistan, and the low intensity conflicts in Latin America – which, along with global warming, account for the current high levels of population displacement.

What is my proposal for thinking these European crises? What if we abandoned the onto-epistemological pillars which only re-inscribe the human as the supreme efficient and formal cause of the world? Taking the elements as descriptors of matter, I propose a fractal description of global warming, that is, one that describes the world and each thing of it as singular re/de/compositions that express everything else in a unique way. Each of the classic elements, I propose, correspond to a mode of appearance of such composition, not as discrete but in a manner similar to the four typical phases of matter that is solid, liquid, gas, plasma. For instance, the

carbon monoxide emitted by our car engines and synthesized by plants is a (gaseous) recomposition of the plankton that constitute petroleum; nitrous oxide emitted by the sugar plantations of the colonial period and the soya plantations (for biofuel) in today's Brazil is a (gaseous) recomposition of the form of the potential and kinetic energy of soil constituted by the bodies of yesterday's slaves and today's day labourers, and yesterday's natives.

Heat figures fractal thinking precisely because it names the transfer of internal energy without suggesting that something becomes something else in the process or loses some of its attributes in the process. Heat is the mechanism, the transformation of what has been extracted from mineral or oil into gasoline in to money into cars into vacations and so on. Whatever shape it takes/has taken/will take will be solid/liquid/gas/plasma. That which has been extracted through colonial force – the internal energy, for instance, of Native Americans and African slaves – energy conservation



Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman, *4 Waters: Deep Implicancy*, 2018, video stills. Courtesy of the authors.

and quantum physics remind us that they remain in/as global capital and the means of production and raw materials it uses for self-reproduction, that is for accumulation. Several things follow from there, including a shift from concern with destruction to a concern with conversion, that is, with how accumulation (of capital and of greenhouse gases) registers the conversation of (other forms) energy expropriated from native lands, slave bodies, and fossil fuels. Also, instead of talking about extinction we could focus on extraction, and on the mechanisms of power (coloniality and raciality) that facilitate the accumulated wealth refigured in global warming. Focusing on violence would shift our conversation about climate change and the arrival of refugees in a few ways. The most important one would be to center an anticolonial approach to global state capital in support of the demands for the restoration: the reconversion of the kinetic (calor) and potential (labor) energy extracted from the lands and bodies of the “others of Europe” who would then no longer require your hospitality.

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