

CHAPTER 5 DEMOCRATIC COMBINATORIES: PERIPHERAL LEGACY

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Historicism is not the most cherished offspring of the 19th Century. Perhaps the least conspicuous relation among the enlightenment's abundant progeny, it discreetly insinuated itself in Turgot's fragmentary reflections on human affairs, and in Condorcet's erudite exhibitionism, which was not immune to fascination with the prospect of mathematizing social relations. Historicism would present itself in the guise of measured experimental caution, as with Adam Ferguson, or in the acerbic critical zeal of Edmund Burke, whose enthusiasm for the enlightenment was less than kind.

Underneath the vestments of ameliorative optimism, however, one could still make out the pale reminders of Greek discouragement at the turns of the wheel of fortune, beyond appeal in the constant evocation of cycles of birth, life, and death from Hesiod and Herodotus on through Plotinus, with interim endorsements from Plato and Aristotle along the way. During the 19th Century, Spengler and Weber, and Toynbee at the end of the 20th, are voices from the 18th century, their own particular chronologies notwithstanding.

Among the inventions of the 19th century was the notion that social time was irreversible. Surely no Classical Greek nor 18th century *philosopher* would have advocated the ingenuous historical redemption of sending men or facts back to their point of origin. Cycles of eternal return or periods datable in terms of their inauguration and demise referred to the repertory of styles of social architecture, rather than the personal touches of any particular architect, or the possible variants of distinct proportionalities in equilibrium. What remains beyond question is that passages from chaos to cosmos, and from the latter to disorder, form the immutable matrix for human vicissitudes. It is not inconceivable that, at some point in the show, in the beginning there had indeed been the light. But in any case, disorder designates the inevitable terminus from which one might yet again depart, if only to return to it once again. There is no contradiction in Nietzsche's dionysiac reactionary, nor in the melancholy resignation before the repetition of the same in Kierkegaard's futile rebelliousness.

With the 19th century the story-or more precisely, History-changes. Either it rests in *eternal repose*, or moves like an arrow along its inertial trajectory, in a universe within which it serves at once as elastic frontier and irreplaceable

center. At issue is not some sort of Hegelian teleology, since "*la folie humaine* belongs integrally to history" (I suspect that even this obvious code-shift is appropriate to the message at hand) but the recognition that that which is, although not having had to have been, is, in its very being, irreparable.

The historicism of the 19th century, fully developed in the 20th, is the historicism of the *impossible return*. Post-enlightenment historicists might take issue over the existence or not of procedural logic, but on the whole concur in the belief that moving backwards is impossible and that moving forward is inevitable. To explain the present in terms of the past would amount, from a historicist standpoint, to reveal the reasons for the incorruptible. Societies do not deteriorate save as the result of perfectly discernible mechanisms, which convert them in the preliminary stage of the shape of things to come, and never as a return ticket to a tidily restored *déjà vu*. Restorations are bluffs, ruses at passing off images of the past as the past itself.

Hence the grand irreversible passages: from status to contract, for Henry Maine, from organic to mechanical solidarity for Durkheim, from community to society for Tonnies, or in common speech—from traditional to modern. Once these passages have been achieved, only out of laziness might we presume that nothing will ever pass again. Otherwise, it would amount to nothing so much as the only wedding reception worth being invited to: the union of the unsettled with the unknown.

At mid-century (this one) it was discovered that dichotomies only forcibly surpass elementary conceptualities. Left and right make no allowance for the ambidextrous; good and evil exclude purgatory; beauty and ugliness ignore the charms of charm, while the human world, already so burdened with nuances, is systematically contrary to the principle of including middle ground. Nothing can quite exactly exist outside the thankless categories of being or nothingness. Fernando Pessoa—arguably the wisest of the lot—sneezed at the question and gathered its metaphysical implications into his handkerchief. Societies are physical histories of fuzzy sets. This landscape, however, is usually only revealed from the periphery.

It is proper for the central nations to establish coordinates for its historical compass and geography. In the meanwhile, little commentary is elicited by the geographical absurdity through which Japan was relocated to the West, following its defeat during the Second World War, coexisting harmoniously with alerts from the Huntingdon early-warning system on turbulence occasioned by shocks between the "West" and Turkey (among others), that multi-secular frontier separating Christendom from Islam. From the center, wherever it may be at any given time, one glances at the world; from the periphery, eyes turn toward the center.

"Centers" are numerous—London, Paris, Heidelberg, Rome, Boston. Aside from their number or location, what unites them is their self-invisibility, unless, of course, they cease to be centers. By definition, centers are narcissistically

self-defined. Whatever lies outside their purview is etymologically and symbolically eccentric. I would dare to guess that, for a Londoner, anyone else who doesn't happen to be one is more or less equally and regretfully peculiar. For Parisians, the Irish are distinct from the Berbers only for the fact that the latter have absorbed more sunlight.

I have made a point to overlook centric theoretical observations that in my view commit outrageously shortsighted mistakes. And I am inclined to prefer the fresh intellectual breeze from these open peripheral windows. From the outset, it would appear that narcissistic perception is rooted in the stratification of the rest of the world and that the desegregation of the periphery equally affects hitherto well-established "canters." Not even American intellectuals ignore the relative centrality of their status in the general order of things. Indeed, their initial suspicion is that, among all of their students, they are singularly the least clear-minded.

This attitude is not unjustified. The peripheral standpoint allows one to perceive similarities amidst what had otherwise been seen as singularities; heterogeneities among the homogenous; ruptures among continuities; traditions within novelty; extreme misery among what appears to be abundance. In matter as in spirit.

Consider, for example, the previously mentioned dichotomies and the hypotheses on irreversible states. When we look at the world from the periphery, it is not difficult to accept on principle the Aristotelian classification that there are governments by one, by few, or by many forms which are usually called autocracies, oligarchies, and democracies. It is particularly obvious, on the other hand, that by abandoning the pages in manuals one can arrive at least three kinds of production and distribution of goods and services: centralized, barter, and market. Thus, without effort, one obtains nine possible collectivities - a range which is rather more considerate to the world's diversity than the mentioned dualities.

What is even more interesting is the discovery that no society corresponds fully to any single classified type; rather, complex societies embrace nearly all of the types in their infra-national make-up. Reciprocal exchanges among oligarchic subsets are as frequent, for instance, as market equivalencies, transacted under autocratic auspices. *Centers contain, under the form of fractal complexes, all of the processes installed in the periphery, however only from the periphery is it possible to observe them in their combinatory variation.*

To explain this more closely, fractals are material identities morphologically self-reproductive on various scales of proportionality. Interacting societies represent replicas of one another. However, the combinatory constellation of one does not reproduce itself exactly within any of the others. Unlike material fractals, societies, although constituting aggregates of the same primordial elements, never duplicate themselves in exacting detail, and are even less capable of recasting combinatory relations in the same proportions. Although

social divisions of labor, interest groups, networks of relations and conflict, bureaucracies, parties, legitimate and illegitimate transactions are all to be found in every society, in no particular society will the aggregate combination correspond to that of another.

The result of rationally and teleologically guided micro-actions, the social aggregate converts them into gigantic institutional bric-a-brac, transcending any specific design. Thus, two consequences of evident relevance arise:

- a) the historical-material nature of society acquires objectivity, that is, resistance to the designs of their individual actors;
- b) because of the fractal uniqueness of each collectivity, central societies tend to interpret combinatory differences as differences in nature.

Interpreted from an ontological standpoint, the differences between combinatory fractals sustain the belief that they represent *stages*, properties of a totalizing subject inexorably marching forth in step with the teleological attraction of the central societies. It is for this reason that the *different* appears as the *strange*, the deviant, given the center's inability to recognize that they are indeed constituted by the same elements, aggregated in a fortuitous and chimerically distinct institutional bric-a-brac.

Power asymmetries among these historical-material aggregates societies-assures the diffusion of perceptual stances proper to the centers, and assures furthermore their adoption by peripheral subcollectivities, who then view as pathological all that is unique to them and to elaborate strategies for the effective transformation of peripheral societies in all which would allow them to resemble the central ones.

Not unlike the rituals of primitive witchcraft for their erroneous conception of operating systems of causality, "modernization" plans are incapable of avoiding failure in their efforts faithfully to reproduce the model-society. First, because the resulting bric-a-brac gives rise to unusual proportionalities and the combinatory fractal, which is materially objective and for this very reason uncontrollable, diverges widely from the original model. Secondly, because the original model itself never ceases to undergo recombinations, owing precisely to the sum-total of actions the *telos* of which is the reproduction of the status quo.

Ironically, it is in Engel's simpleminded and questionable examples that one finds, nonetheless, under the auspices of the "law" of transformation of quantity in quality, the perception of the phenomenon of self-transformation of the same, or, to state matters in somewhat more polished academic terms, the dialectics of endogenous mutation. Hence, the material-historical equivalent of punctuated equilibrium in paleobiology.

Punctuated equilibrium refers to mutations occurring in living totalities-whether organisms or societies-when the limits to variation of the phenomenon are surpassed, the parameters confining the singularity disappear, and a new combinatory grouping arises. On social ground, this

corresponds to previously unknown institutional bric-a-brac, which always maintains some resemblance to others, in isolated micro-processes, but irreducible to typologies except through sheerly formal means for its complex fractal singularity.

That the planet moves is a detail has not escaped the notice of peripheral countries, nor that they too move, and indeed move forward. It could not be otherwise, for each country is always on the threshold of its own future. According to the spatial allegories through which historical materiality gains shape in the imaginary, it is said that certain countries move ahead, which is correct, but it is also said that some countries are *behind* others, which is decidedly senseless.

Countries have different registers for GDP, proportions of economically active population, rates of infant mortality, levels of noise pollution, ownership of computers per capita, and so on, in an endless repertory of numbers, many of which are utterly meaningless. None however possesses the code to crack the shape of things to some. Not least because this particular topography cannot come into existence until it has itself been shaped by the countries in their respective and *simultaneous* paths. Nor for that matter can one speak of the existence of the *rear*, given that all countries, at any particular point in time are precisely in the same point in time. While there is no rearguard either in time or space, what remains are differences, unavoidably contemporary, resulting from bygone events. This, however, is History as description, rather than history as materiality.

From the recognition of differences to their measurement in material terms the distance is negligible. Hence the correct verification that peripheral countries are different, among other things, because they are poorer. To see the world through unfavorable comparisons is quite a different matter from not having anything to compare oneself to, which is the case with the wealthy countries, who themselves provide the only available yardstick. The narcissism of the rich arises from the absence of stratification above them; the heteronomy of the poor from the absence of significant stratification below. There is no great value attached in being x percent less miserable than one's neighbor and the despair is similar.

From the unfavorable comparison to heteronomy and thence to eclecticism. The permanent need to take stock of differences imposed upon us, denizens of the periphery-the ranks of which the Iberian peninsula joined during the 18th century-an unrelenting apprenticeship with outside experience and something else: the lesson that it is possible to stand face-to-face with unusual and unforeseen ways-of-being. Peripheral countries constitute a veritable oligopsony in the consumption of a rare article: the experience of being national and, at the same time, symbolically, being a New Yorker or a Berliner. We, from Portuguese America, feel utterly at ease among *Lisboetas* or *Madrilenos*. I won't venture to guess how the Portenos might feel about this, however, out

of my conviction that Borges was right when he stated that Argentines are Italians who speak Spanish and think they're English. On second thought, this is precisely what I wanted to say about the notion of an enriching eclecticism.

Pluralism is not an optional value for Iberians and their descendants. Instead it is a constitutive material element in our historical bric-a-brac. Three centuries do not amount to much in the human adventure and, after all, it was only in 1928 that women in Great Britain were granted the right to vote. This fractal legacy of passages through dictatorships and, having got rid of them, the incorporation of tolerant pluralism as a material ingredient in its combinatory, this legacy, I believe, is approaching the point where it will shortly bear fruit. I suspect, somewhat provocatively, that meaningful contributions to the theory and experience of democracy will, before too long, issue forth from the periphery. A democratic combinatory, bearing strong impact on historical materiality, is perfectly adequate to the language which will express the intermediate outcome of its trajectory and experience.

It is the task of the heirs of such complex experimentation to validate the hypothesis that relative material impoverishment in no way sterilizes the imagination, nor stifles the invention of as yet inexperienced forms of democratic conviviality. And so, onward to the peripheral fractal.

SECTION THREE CURRENT PERSPECTIVES AND THE OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE OF SOCIOLOGY IN THE LUSOPHONE COUNTRIES