Translating Futures

From Decolonization to Planetary Hospitality

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**Topic**

What does it mean to speak of, resist or appeal to a new beginning in the name of decolonization? What positionality and form of knowledge does the speaking of decolonization involve that allows distinguishing and moving between a colonized past and a decolonized future to come? How does this form of knowledge facilitate the necessary cognitive operations of commensuration, calculation of equivalence, and valuation? What is the ontological status of the *tertium comparationis* for these operations to work? Does the unavoidably implicit valuation mean a call for justice and accountability to the law that invokes a common humanity? In what sense can and for what reasons should this refer to a horizon of planetary hospitality?
Speaking of the planetary instead of the global redirects attention to a contemporary shift from a humanity struggling to control its environment to a humanity struggling to understand its entanglements with other-than-human beings and to lean into them. Speaking of hospitality here employs the sense given to this term by Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Michael Jackson and others in this genealogy: one’s own humanity can only be learned from the Other, by hosting the Other in a horizon of unconditional hospitality. These are questions that we wish to address in this workshop.¹

Decolonization here more narrowly means a particular view onto an ongoing process that translates legal structures such as nation states, the legal world order and transnational economic law as well as the attitudes toward those structures into a new planetary condition. We intend to inquire how far an ongoing process of decolonization translates into hospitality qua accountability toward the Other and the world. Those legal structures and especially people’s attitudes toward them remain heterogeneous and differ between various parts of the world, though they are strongly interconnected: In Eastern Europe, for instance, the nation state was interpreted as an instrument of liberation from the Ottoman, Russian, Austrian, and Soviet empires. In this genealogy nationalism is currently facing – in many different countries of the planet – an overwhelming revival that others find derailed and dangerous. Evolving mainly during the 19th century the nation-state as a political and legal structure – especially where it was translated during the violent encounters of the “colonizers” and the “colonized” and during the decolonization era – came as an instrument of extraction, exclusion, and racist arrogance. Nationalism is still sometimes cherished as a solution to the detriments of contemporary forms of financialized planetary capitalism, social mobility and migration. Another important dimension of contemporary discourses on decolonization is the still widespread European and Arab Islamic oblivion of the de-humanizing history of colonialization and enslavement of large parts of the world.

On a more abstract level, speaking of decolonization unavoidably invokes an epistemic positionality that transcends and at the same time distinguishes and moves between a colonized past and yet not part of a decolonized future that is yet to come. In a more pronounced performative idiom: it first distinguishes – pulls apart – two conditions only to make them comparable and thus translatable. To make comparable and translatable what was made distinct before requires the cognitive operations of commensuration, calculation of equivalence, and of valuation. This, in other words, necessitates a codification that bridges what was pulled apart before. In the case of decolonization, the codification, finally, entails a call for justice and accountability to a law that invokes a common humanity. Distinguishing and comparing two

¹ A succinct formulation for this we find in Derrida, Specters of Marx: “But to learn to live, to learn it from oneself and by oneself, all alone, to teach oneself to live (‘I would like to learn to live finally’), is that not impossible for a living being? Is it not what logic itself forbids? To live, by definition, is not something one learns. Not from oneself, it is not learned from life, taught by life. Only from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life.” (1994, xvii)
situations – here between being colonized and becoming decolonized – in this sense and for this cause thus implies a common codification that functions as *tertium comparationis*. To wit, as a trade language, a currency, a token – for the translation between the two. Moving on from here we want to problematize how far this translation can or should imply and/or foster planetary hospitality.

Framing the problem on this abstract level raises a fundamental issue. A positionality and its codification that claims to be independent of or standing above any particular situation is an onto-epistemological aporia. In fact, it can only operate as a meta-pragmatic and meta-indexical statement that is self-referential, i.e. indexical of itself. Its claim for objectivity is a heuristic move aware of its fallibility. This move is indispensable for translating between two previously distinguished realms. It facilitates commensuration, calculation of equivalence, and valuation, and it does so exactly by deploying a freely invented currency. In this sense to decolonize something suggests a particular form of translation that implies a meta-pragmatic and meta-indexical codification – i.e. going to a certain distance from inherited points of view – and a call for justice and accountability to the law that invokes a common humanity. To repeat: to do so, it has to heuristically claim to stand apart from a past condition of colonialism – and thus be able to critically see through it – and also stand apart from a future void of colonialism because this future is yet to come.

Decolonization conceived as translation does not make sense as a once and for all step or a unique historical achievement that can be preserved infinitely and ascribed to one epoch or to one major historical actor. Decolonization as translation can only be conceived as an ongoing endeavor and is never complete. It is always becoming and cannot be achieved in a bounded political site or in a particular historical epoch as it entails the humanity of the other, the past and the future. Spelled out more bluntly: every process of decolonization contains its own moments of new colonization and this dialectic is a matter of never ending negotiations.

Let us use this example to hint to one of the topics to discuss in this context: There are different views on whether it is intellectually helpful or more confusing to use this kind of paradoxical rhetoric, claiming that any attempt to convince someone is an act of colonization. The disputes between “continental” and “analytic” philosophers might appear as purely academic and provincial but they have an enormous impact because of their moral and political implications: Are the methods of logic a weapon to liberate human beings from the chains of dogma and arbitrary use of power or is logic itself an element of oppression, suggesting that there is an organon of methods to decide a priori which intellectual moves are allowed in rational discourse and which are not? In post-colonial and decolonizing discourses, most authors turn against those theories they have more or less contingently experienced as the theories of colonizers and use something they consider to be in opposition to them.
We think that it is important to give room to an open debate. Because in some post-colonial discourses, decolonization is currently framed in terms that radically question what in other discourses go as the achievements of humanity. The contentious point is that these achievements are often framed as being of Western origin – sometimes as having universal validity for this reason, and sometimes as lacking validity also because of the same reason. As part of the post-colonial thought we want to raise a specific issue and reinforce the same shift by hosting multiple directions. What if the claim of the so-called West to hold the intellectual property right over the universal achievements of humanity has always been illegitimate? What if these achievements belong to the humanity at large because they are the result of a very long genealogy of processes of accretion? What happens if one would challenge the intellectual property right before one begins to challenge some of the aspects that might not be universal but more limited to a place and a time or, if universal, do not owe this universality to a certain origin but to their capacities as possible solutions to planetary problems?

On all continents one can currently observe intellectual and political movements that can be conceived as attempts to unearth indigenous ontologies that were buried by European colonization. At the heart of Sumak Kawsay (Buen Vivir), uBuntu, Zoroastrian moral philosophy, and several Asian philosophies are radical challenges to the key assumptions of what is classified as Western believe in the power of the techno-sciences. When we want to draw attention to the fact that the ontological and epistemological commitments of “Western” techno-science were never unchallenged in the “West” – including the core distinction between subject and object already criticized by Hegel shortly after its “invention” in modern epistemology – we intend to highlight the contemporary momentum of indigenous and/or planetary ontologies. In other words, we find problematic the observation that there is a clearly identifiable entity such as “western epistemology and ontology” that is separable from other planetary ontologies, because there have been so many centuries of intellectual exchange. Along these lines we ask if the mentioned momentum could be strengthened by formulating the issue differently. One could formulate it less in terms of replacing young and derailed imported philosophies because of their false universal claims with old philosophies of authentic dignity. Instead, one could formulate it more in terms of starting a common search for answers that are very unlikely to be lying out there in the deep past of colonized peoples and more likely of not lying out anywhere at all. Answers that still need to be made up by the humanity at large in view of a planetary future and hospitality.

Decolonization is invoked in national, transnational, and international disputes and – what we want to inquire into – this entails references to concerns of the humanity at large. The invoked humanity – and this is the other issue we have in mind – is entangled in an ecology of human and other-than-human beings. Contemporary instances are for instance the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of Animal Rights, and other attempts to stop global warming, in/visible violence, pandemics, mass displacement, and genocidal violence that overwhelm the humanity of every individual human worldwide. As such decolonization as translation addresses...
the past in view of the future. It is at once a call for the opening of the past and invites to inquire into how far it transcends the idea of the nation-state and how far it aims toward a future of planetary hospitality.

We are aware of the dilemma that on the one hand we – or more precisely: some people – are struggling to overcome the limitations of the nation-state while on the other hand it is still one of the central providers of administrational competence to handle the translation process we are aiming at. The continuing engagement with the global post-coloniality, that can never be completed, and at the same time with political imaginaries of a unitary nation and state, that formed the contours of de/colonization, invite to welcome decolonization as a process of ongoing openings. Although the future ultimately withdraws from calculation it already implicates taking up the legal and ethical responsibility for shaping it – for becoming response-able to what lies ahead while it remains unknown to some degree. In this sense decolonization as translation entails openings and closures at the same time.

Decolonization therefore tries to use the impetus that is provided by the movement against the historical fact of colonization to fight and prevent irredeemable destructions and the unthinkable human cleansings, forced displacements and disappearances. As an ethical and juridico-political response following the forensic violence of colonization, mutual translation of common and of particular world views does not only claim onto-epistemological curiosity but also engages ethics of hospitality and justice without reducing what is necessary for our human relationship with one another and to the unforeseeable future to mere rational juridical calculations. The workshop, hence, does not dwell on the possibility of founding a world republic, even if it considers the possibility of something like a world citizenship without such a kind of state – a cosmopolis as it was conceived by the stoics. It rather inquires into how any engagement with decolonization implies translating futures. This is an engagement that no longer only hinges on nationality and national citizenship but one that also hinges on our everyday encounters with one another, with other beings and the immediacy of the planetary condition. In other words, opening up to the unknown futures invokes acts of hospitality that entangle the colonial past and its own moments of decolonizing, and the de-colonized future with its moments of unavoidable new colonization (if one wants to use this kind of metaphoric articulation).
Program

Thursday, 26th October (Melanchthonianum XX)

18:15-19:45  Keynote

Decolonizing the History of Philosophy

Souleymane Bachir Diagne
Department of Philosophy, Columbia University

20:00  Dinner

Friday, 27th October (Steintorcampus, Seminarraum 8)

10:15-12:45  Workshop

From decolonization to planetary hospitality

12:00  Lunch