



POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

Semester: 6 ; Group: C

Pr. GHOURDOU

THE RHETORIC OF EMPIRE (2) **by David Spurr**

6. **NEGATION**: areas of darkness

The rhetorical strategy of negation designates the other as absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death. The designation of unexplored territories is usually referred to as blank, an absence that is easily transformed into myths, imagination and desire. The temptation of nothingness and fantasy are subsumed under the desire to conquest, and the naming of an absence ultimately reveals itself as the presence of an ideological imperative. This negation first serves to reject the ambiguous object for which language and experience provide no adequate framework of interpretation, and second acts as a kind of provisional erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination and the pursuit of desire.

- **NEGATIVE SPACE**: the contemplation of unknown spaces fills the senses with the forbidden and the foreboding while at the same time displaces the space of the referent and transforms it into nothingness and blank which serves no longer as historical and geographical space but just a metaphysical ground. This metaphysical state is not only a spatial nullity of the land and peoples who become absent in terms of order, light, limit or spirit, but it also the necessary projection of the western mind on the non-westerners. Furthermore, this discourse of negation prepares the ground for the western colonial power to expand in the emptiness of the colonised lands as well as the birth of this land, its coming into being, from the state of nullity to the openness of the world. In the present time, the colonised land (Africa) is empty because it resists western technology and organisational methods.

- **NEGATIVE HISTORY**: not only is space negated but history too. Hegel referred to Africa as having no history because it has no political constitution, no movement or development to exhibit. History then is nullified as a result of the absence of writing which is essential in history itself and which implies a movement toward a certain destiny. The savage, thus, lives in a continual state of self-presence, unable to leave a trace which serves as difference, distinction, opposition and progress. Marx too denies history to some colonised spaces like India and Africa although different in interpreting this absence; he refers to them as a material basis for the building of history (the western history of course).

- **NEGATIVE LANGUAGE**: the lack of language is a sign of barbarism according to the Greeks. Languages are the sign of human development, skill, intellect and imagination. Rousseau validates the life and warmth of non-western languages like Arabic and Persian but ends up adjudging supremacy (of writing language) for European languages as sole preserving of science, understanding, industry and writing. The non-western peoples, if not babbling and stammering in an incomprehensible gibberish, are worse of all denied any cultural values by a negation of their linguistic capability and may be of communicating among themselves.

7. **AFFIRMATION**: the white man's burden

On the opposite side of negation, we have a constant stress on European superiority which Spurr describes as affirmation. The latter is epitomised by the presentation of the other as disintegrated and chaotic embodying nothingness and emptiness while highlighting the inner institutions of order and reaffirming self confidence and superiority. Affirmation (and self idealisation) manifests itself in different forms like civilisation, humanity, science, progress ... etc. and becomes a means of gaining power and mastery.

Affirmation of colonial powers came under the veil of sharing humanistic ideals of ethics, morale, social and spiritual values with all the other countries. This encompasses the respect of authority, sense of duty, self-restraint and order among the civilised nation while imposing the same rules on the non-civilised ones. For all the colonising nations, the other races (i.e. non-whites) are permanently inferior and thus deserve to enter under "la tutelle coloniale", an idea which supposes tutelage and guardianship along with affirmation of national traditions as a recurrent motif. The

versions of affirmation are connected by the uniform themes of solidarity, integrity and unity; they can be called performative acts (according to speech acts) which make themselves true by virtue of being uttered or written. This kind of discourse takes the form of what, in another context, Homi Bhabha has described as the fundamental ambivalence inherent in positions of a clear and fully present authority which would never find itself in a position having to defend itself; it needs no proof when a truth is sufficiently authoritative to be self-evident.

8. IDEALIZATION: strangers in paradise

The tradition of idealising the savage is as ancient as the European expansions and it takes the form of assuming that the primitive peoples live actually in an Edenic state of purity and simplicity. However, this paradisiacal image is only hypothetical and conditional as it just serves to provide ideal and symbolic values for the European social and political configurations. Thus, the primitive is conceived of in a space and time that may be sought in the orient or in the newly discovered islands of the pacific; this space and time is at the same time real but faraway (like a dream).

It is not surprising that this idealisation has gone side by side with western imperialism because it has added a new dimension to the occidental cultural production. It has always taken place in relation to western culture itself (serving to criticise or reinforcing it) and conceives an idea of the other that is readily incorporated into the fabric of western values. In fact, it only uses the savage and transforms him into a term of dialogue within its own (western) self.

Idealisation has also been accompanied by another concept: rationalisation which is the result of western expansion and continual touch with the worldwide economics and politics. The result is thus a demythologisation of the noble savage and the reduction of the idealisation of the exotic into a more banal and predictable cultural eccentricity. The existential metaphysical actuality serves as a containment strategy for the acute sense of imperialist penetration and furthermore buried into a superfluous void of myth. In fact, idealisation supplies the westerner with authority and power to get cheap labour and potential markets for mass consumption; it also serves as compensation for the political and economic process which has destroyed non-western traditional societies.

9. INSUBSTANTIALISATION: seeing as in dream

There is a tendency for Europeans towards a description of the colonized countries only as a backdrop for European voyages of inward discovery – a transformation of personal identity which the writer chooses to undergo. The European representation of Moorish urban space is generally tainted with an exotic dimension which removes physicality from the Other and the urban world of the Other becomes an inner journey and an unreal experience. David Spurr defines this approach as one of the controlling modes of authority used by colonial discourse and calls it insubstantialization or what he termed "seeing as in a dream".

What Spurr refers to as the "insubstantialisation" of the representation is an entire tradition of Western writing which makes the experience of the non-Western world into an inner journey, and in so doing renders that world insubstantial, as the backdrop of baseless fabric against which it played the drama of the writer's self. According to Spurr, the history of the West arises out of an orientation that understands the Orient as a space of disorientation. This insubstantialisation is close to the notion of aestheticisation (mentioned above) but differs from it in the sense that the latter orders the material unity and coherence of the aesthetic model, while the first represents the object as seen in an immaterial counterpart to the dissolving consciousness of the subject, a dissolution which can be joyful or profoundly disorienting. For Hegel, in describing India as an enchanted world and a land of fantasy, there is a self-oblivious dissolution that makes the Indian incapable of writing and creating a history, as we saw in chap. 6. this ontological instability of the orient serves antithetical purposes in the construction of knowledge and serves other writers as an escape from the Hegelian dialectic into the unexplored regions of the self. The latter are unfathomed dreams of hallucination and madness brought on by extreme conditions of the orient's atmosphere and witnessed by occidentals as a visionary experience and transformation which leads them to that remoteness of the self.

The westerner's movement into exotic geographical space is understood as an inner exploration of the boundaries of consciousness. It also designates a psychic disorientation and soul disintegration which is the result of outward reality characterised by irrationality and absence of objectivity. Thus, that voyage and the coming back from it is considered a prestige of having confronted the unknown and managing to come back to the world of order. The outcome is the improvement of one's own standing within that order.