



Decolonising postcolonial thinking: Ethnocentrism and sociocentrism as transideological and multiscalar phenomena

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Abstract

Radical intellectuals and researchers have become accustomed to a kind of ‘ideological comfort zone,’ based on the tacit assumption that there must necessarily be a correspondence between the convictions and critical and anticolonial values of scholars and activists, on the one hand, and their concrete behaviour as individuals, on the other hand. It would be great if that were so, of course; unfortunately, this is a naïve oversimplification.

This article contains reflections based on three decades of an intense interaction of a geographer born and based in a ‘semiperipheral’ country (Brazil) with numerous colleagues from his own country as well as many other countries (in the Americas, Europe and Africa). During this time, I have learned a lot about the permanence of subtle forms of colonialism even among ‘northern’ colleagues recognised by their peers as progressive. However, I have also observed many problems commonly credited to ‘colonialism’ also at the national and local level in my own country, and this experience has convinced me that the typical indignation on the part of ‘southern’ progressive intellectuals in the face of ‘northern’ Eurocentrism is legitimate but rather insufficient – and often a little hypocritical. There are deep-rooted, ‘structural’ contradictions, so that elements of ethnocentric and/or



sociocentric thinking can be often found even in the works and above all behaviour of ‘postcolonial,’ left-wing social scientists.

While geographers certainly cannot be excluded from this critical assessment, geography potentially offers some important tools for the analysis of the problem from a viewpoint broader than it is usually the case: the epistemological lenses of *multiscalarity* are particularly relevant here. Hence, I would like to provide with this paper a re-assessment of a problem that has been intensely discussed for several decades, but this time from a perspective that clearly benefits from a special attention devoted to spatiality, as perceived by a ‘southern’ researcher. Moreover, I am also interested in making my ethical-political point of view – the left-libertarian thought and praxis – very explicit, not only for the sake of intellectual honesty but also in order to explore the question about possible specificities of left-libertarians (anarchists, neo-anarchists and libertarian autonomists) vis-à-vis Marxists.

Keywords

Postcolonial studies; ethnocentrism; sociocentrism; multiscalarity

MIRANDA [*waking*]

The strangeness of your story put
Heaviness on me.

PROSPERO

Shake it off. Come on;
We’ll visit Caliban my slave, who never
Yields us kind answer.

MIRANDA

‘This a villain, sir,
I do not love to look on.

PROSPERO

But as ‘tis,
We cannot miss him: he does make our fire,
Fetch in our wood; and serves in offices
That profit us.— What, ho! Slave! Caliban!
Thou earth, thou! Speak!

(Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene II)

Nem tudo o que reluz é ouro.

(Popular saying, very common in Brazil,
but which possibly dates back to Aesop;

the English version ‘All that glitters is not gold’ became famous after Shakespeare used it in Act II, Scene VII of *The Merchant of Venice*)

Introduction: Beyond ideology?

On the one side, the conservative scholars: not only politically reactionary but also arrogant, intolerant and very often (quasi-)racist (= the bad guys); on the other side, the radical scholars: not only politically progressive and even revolutionary but also culturally open, socially tolerant and ethnically unbiased (= the good guys). Right? *Wrong* – at least in this oversimplified form. Reality is much more complex and contradictory than we usually think. We wish it could be that simple, but very often it is not.

The present reflections have been slowly developed by me for a long time. As a radical scholar based in a ‘semiperipheral,’ non-Anglophone country (Brazil), I have debated and cooperated with radical scholars (and scholars-activists) from many countries for almost three decades; during this time, I have learned a lot about the permanence of subtle forms of colonialism even among progressive people. But as a middle-class professor who originally came from a working-class milieu, I have well seen many problems commonly credited as colonialism also at the national and local level, so that I have learned that the typical indignation on the part of ‘southern’ progressive intellectuals in the face of ‘northern’ Eurocentrism is legitimate but rather insufficient – and often a little contradictory or hypocritical.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I am not intending to suggest that ‘postcolonial theory’ or ‘postcolonial studies’ are *generally* in need of ‘decolonisation’; I certainly do not ignore or fail to acknowledge that there have been not only brilliant (political-)intellectual achievements also in the realm of academe, but also many researchers and activists that behave in a basically comradely and constructive way, according to principles such as horizontality, tolerance and respect. I just want to argue that there are deep-rooted, ‘structural’ contradictions, so that elements (not only residual ones sometimes) of colonial (ethnocentric and/or sociocentric) thinking can be found even in the works and behaviour of ‘postcolonial,’ left-wing social scientists.

Geographers surely cannot be excluded from this critical assessment, but geography potentially offers some important tools for the analysis of the problem from a viewpoint broader than it is usually the case: above all the epistemological lenses of *multiscalarity*. Hence, I would like to provide with this paper a re-assessment of a problem that has been intensely discussed for several decades, but this time from a perspective that clearly benefits from a special attention devoted to spatiality, as perceived by a ‘southern’ researcher. Moreover, I am also interested in making my ethical-political point of view – the left-libertarian thought and praxis – very explicit, not only for the sake of intellectual honesty but also in order

to explore the question about possible specificities of left-libertarians (anarchists, neo-anarchists and libertarian autonomists in a Castoriadian sense) vis-à-vis Marxists.

I would like to argue that the appropriate answer to the question asked in the title of this introductory section is by no means a simplistic *yes*, and at the bottom it is actually a qualified *no*. Even if we understand the concept of ‘ideology’ in terms not as narrow as those proposed by orthodox Marxism (ideology as ‘false consciousness,’ so that ideology is always a [negative] attribute of the Other, of the enemies, and never something present in our own *Weltanschauung*, theories and hopes), ethnocentric and sociocentric values and prejudices do not go ‘beyond’ ideology in the sense that they are not related to ideological elements. Even if we take ‘ideology’ as a complex set of social explanations and values (somewhat stretching from philosophy to common sense) directly or indirectly related to power relations and that can be found in discourses produced within the framework of *all social classes, groups and relations*, ethnocentric and sociocentric values and prejudices are not only part of cultural matrixes but also of ideological discourses. However, if we consider that ethnocentric and sociocentric values and prejudices are not restricted to specific, explicit ideological discourses, and rather belong to a whole culture or (as Cornelius Castoriadis [1975] would say) ‘imaginary,’ in *this* sense we can accept that ethnocentrism and sociocentrism¹ go beyond explicit political philosophies and specific ideologies. Heteronomy is not reducible to what Cornelius Castoriadis termed *explicit power (pouvoir explicite)*: there is also what he called ‘infra-power’ (*infra-pouvoir*), the power dimension embodied in the ‘social imaginary significations’ themselves, which produce and reproduce, for instance, the notion that the ‘laws’ and ‘rules’ (the *nomos*, the *nomoi*) are generated by some transcendent force (God, the gods, nature...) (see Castoriadis, 1990:118-123). As far as ethnocentrism and sociocentrism are concerned, heteronomous infra-power constantly reproduces a certain sense of *superiority* as well as a certain sense of *inferiority*, since the ‘colonised’ and the ‘coloniser’ are generated simultaneously.

We live in a heteronomous world, and heteronomous ‘social imaginary significations’ not only surround us – they *permeate* us (*all* of us) to various

¹ While ethnocentrism means judging another culture (understood as a qualitatively specific cultural matrix in terms of language, customs, etc.) solely by the values and standards of one’s own culture, sociocentrism is the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one’s own social group within the framework of a given cultural matrix. Of course, the difference between ethnocentrism and sociocentrism is largely a matter of scale; in contrast to sociocentrism, which is usually related to class and group differences (and prejudices) within a concrete country or ‘society’ (though some use the term also to refer to a perspective biased by ‘national’ peculiarities and ideologies), ethnocentrism (especially in the form of Eurocentrism) is commonly related to prejudices at an intercontinental/hemispheric level.

degrees, according to concrete biographical and other circumstances. Hence, it is understandable that not many aspects of our life and personality (if altogether) can remain untouched by the politico-pedagogically negative influence of this heteronomous imaginary (or rather imaginaries). The only solution seems to lie in trying to be always aware of the contradiction that haunts us. This awareness is an essential part of emancipatory praxis; without it, emancipatory praxis is nothing – in fact it can turn into its opposite.

Although I do not claim any pioneering role for this paper in terms of advocating a kind of self-critique on the part of geographers devoted to postcolonial theory (Gilmartin and Berg's analysis [Gilmartin, Berg, 2007], in particular, has already largely set the tone in this regard, and I see my own contribution very much in line with theirs²), I would like nevertheless to stress three particularities that distinguish the present paper: 1) similarly to Gilmartin and Berg, I also see some "problematic neo-colonial impulses" (their words) in 'postcolonial theory,' but while they discuss them from a 'northern' perspective, I do it from a 'southern' and more specifically Brazilian viewpoint;³ 2) while they wanted to "(...) point to the limited ways in which many (but not all) British geographers have appropriated postcolonial theory in the construction of 'postcolonial geographies,'" and in doing so they wanted "(...) to suggest that much of what passes for postcolonial theory in British geography reinforces new forms of colonial epistemologies and colonial hierarchies, while destabilizing their older forms," I intend to deal with the problem of the persistence of 'colonial epistemologies and colonial hierarchies' inside postcolonial theory (and radical geography in general) at a much broader level; last but not least, 3) I want to do this along with a further provocation, namely the claim that a left-libertarian perspective is more apt to be sensitive towards the challenge of surpassing coloniality than a Marxist one (Marxism has been and still is hegemonic among

² Here I would like to subscribe their sentiment and intentions, as they wrote as follows: "[i]t is important to stress that we are not dismissive of postcolonial theory. Rather, it is because we embrace the possibilities suggested by a range of anti-colonial and postcolonial writers that we want to see an expansive notion of postcolonial geography." (Gilmartin, Berg, 2007:120) As a matter of justice, it must be mentioned that several other 'northern' geographers have raised similar concerns in recent years, as testified by the controversies around the RGS-IBG Chair's theme 'Decolonising geographical knowledges' during the Annual Conference 2017 (see for instance Esson *et al.*, 2017).

³ Just to exemplify what I mean by a specifically 'southern' point of view, let us consider Gilmartin and Berg's question "When did geography 'discover' postcolonialism?", and then their answer: "We're going to date this to the early 1990s, and the publication of a range of texts that started to engage with geography's colonial and imperial history." (Gilmartin, Berg, 2007:121). This is indeed a markedly 'northern' statement, as it does not consider that as early as in the 1940s and 1950s Brazilian physician and geographer Josué de Castro (to mention just one author) had already published two books with a clear anticolonial/decolonial tone, *Geography of Hunger* (Castro, 1946) and *Geopolitics of Hunger* (Castro, 1957) – both eventually became internationally acclaimed.

postcolonial theorists and radical geographers). In short, these are the aims of this paper.

The inertia of concrete biographies and its geographical embeddedness

Let us begin with a very brief digression on the interplay of culture, language and power, followed by another one on the difference between natural and social sciences and how it affects their ‘internationalisation.’

In fact, to speak about ‘culture *and* language’ is to commit a redundancy, since language is part of the culture – maybe its very core in some respects. To speak about ‘culture ⇔ language,’ however, not necessarily. The symbol ‘⇔’ means the following: although language belongs to the system of values and knowledge that corresponds to a specific culture, language is in a very strong and particular way a *mirror* of the whole culture but at the same time a *conditioning factor* of the creation of new meanings in a specific cultural context. The circumstance that the structure of each specific language influences its speakers’ way of thinking has been associated with the so-called ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’ but also stressed by authors as diverse as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Cornelius Castoriadis and Guy Deutscher.

Technological research and the natural sciences have been highly ‘internationalised’ since long: English has been for decades a *lingua franca* for mathematicians, physicists, medical researchers, and so on; international journals and symposia – mostly based or launched in the USA and Western Europe, but sometimes also in Latin American, Asian and African countries – are mostly and increasingly in English. And this does not seem to be a big problem for them neither in objective nor in subjective terms. The bigger the abstraction level (from geology and ecology to theoretical physics), the bigger the importance of mathematics as a kind of ‘language’ in itself and the lesser the relevance of natural language in terms of the way how research and local/regional knowledge are or could/should be connected to each other.⁴

Social sciences – including socio-spatial research – are becoming more and more ‘internationalised’ too, though to a much lesser extent. This extent varies from discipline to discipline, from economics to anthropology; the broad field of socio-spatial research seems to be somewhere in between. What are the concrete forms and possible consequences of this ‘internationalisation’? More or less similarly to what happens in the natural sciences, so-called ‘international journals’ in the social sciences are usually based in the USA and Western Europe, and they

⁴ For a biologist devoted to ecology, the local knowledge about species and processes can be crucially important, although he or she does not necessarily want to pay attention to it beyond the point of a purely instrumental use. For a mathematician or theoretical physicist, not even this use is relevant.

are mostly published in English. More or less similarly to the macro-field of natural sciences, Anglo-American human geographers, sociologists, etc. almost always tacitly assume that their mother tongue is *the* language of international communication.⁵ However, in contrast to the natural sciences:

- The way how a subject is ‘constructed’ and connected to a research agenda and to social priorities at different scale levels is intimately related to local, regional and national cultural specificities. The way how a research problem ‘emerges’ is (or should be) very strongly related to concrete, local, regional and/or national particularities, needs, traditions and priorities. That is, of course, particularly true regarding radical/critical thinking and research, which is supposed to be a *tool for emancipation*, and not a ‘Trojan horse’ serving purposes of domination from the outside and from above, in the wake of capital expansion/accumulation and increasing state-led socio-spatial control.

- From the above mentioned point follows a further one: if radical/critical socio-spatial research is supposed to be somehow committed to emancipatory *praxis*, and since praxis is (at least originally) embedded in concrete local, regional and national cultures and languages, the use or imposition of a sole language is *elitist, socially selective* and *a factor of asymmetry*. That is the reason why, for instance, too much optimism regarding ‘transnational activism’ reveals, in our present conditions, above all (though by no means exclusively) a *middle-class* and ‘northern’ (especially *Anglo-American*) viewpoint. (I will come back to the challenge of transnational activism and international solidarity in the next section.)

- Moreover, not only ‘local knowledge’ itself plays a crucial role, but also distinctive regional and national scientific/research traditions. From terminology to agenda setting, from methods and concepts to ways of reasoning, it is not plausible – from a truly radical/critical perspective, it goes without saying – to disconnect social science and scientific texts from the concrete cultural (and intensely *linguistic*) context in which it is supposed to be embedded.

Within the framework of socio-spatial research, in particular, and of social science, in general, ‘internationalisation’ on the basis of a sole language and according to a few ‘quality’ and ‘relevance’ parameters (as if these could be taken into account abstractly and disconnected from local, regional and national traditions, practices and problems) is a kind of *oppression* and of *symbolic violence*.

It is crucial to understand that while ideology is in itself basically a matter of *choice* – and therefore we can produce discourses which are *internally* coherent,

⁵ The role of language in the context of the problem of ‘Anglo-American hegemony’ in human geography has been addressed by many authors, eg Aalbers, 2004; Aalbers, Rossi, 2006; Schuermans *et al*, 2010; Aalbers, 2013; Kong, Qian, 2017; Hassink *et al.*, 2018.

regardless their meaning in terms of the coherence of our lives as a whole –, our biographies are conditioned by a multiplicity of factors that are largely *accidental*. We can adhere to a specific ideology, theory or philosophical programme in the context of a rational reflection (and debate), so that we can have the impression that we firmly walk on an ‘*ideological soil*’ that can be clearly and easily distinguished from alternative or rival positions (**Fig. 1**).

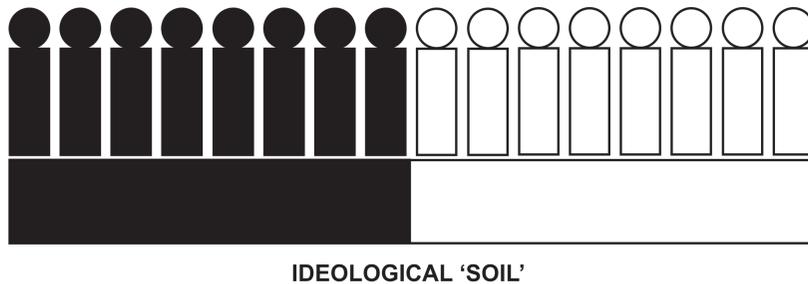


Figure 1

Life is much more complicated than this, however. The ‘*biographical atmosphere*’ that surrounds us is highly complex, full of contradictions. Being constantly aware of all of this is by no means a trivial task. Our situatedness in the context of concrete ‘biographical atmospheres’ leads to interesting phenomena such as various degrees of distance between conscious/rational adherence to specific ideologies (or theories or philosophical programmes), on the one hand, and our everyday life practices and emotions, on the other. Under the influence of the plethora of factors that belong to our ‘biographical atmospheres,’ the ‘black & white’ way of depiction of ideological, theoretical and philosophical debates (largely an illusion, sure, but an effective one anyway) is disturbed and ultimately replaced by many shades of grey, implying different degrees of political and ethical consistency (**Fig. 2**).

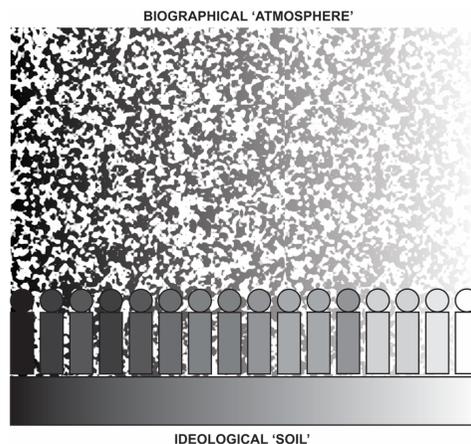


Figure 2

The multiscalarity of ethnocentrism and sociocentrism

At this juncture, one could ask: is this whole problem around ethnocentrism merely a matter of confrontation between '(Global) South' and '(Global) North'? *Not at all*. Things are much more complicated than this, as I hope to show in this section. In light of my criteria, it has been astonishing and frustrating for me to see how often 'post-colonially minded' scholars behave in a rather colonial way towards both the 'ordinary natives' and their colleagues from the so-called 'Global South'.⁶ But this problem is by no means a privilege of the 'North'/'South' divide.

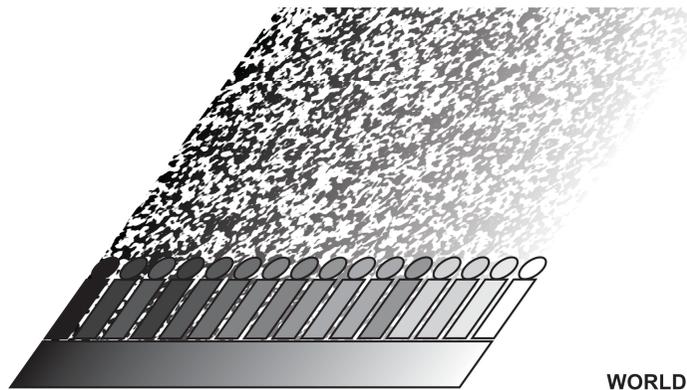
Ethnocentrism – or at least sociocentrism – can be found at several scale levels, although the 'North'/'South' divide is somewhat like a fundamental axis in two senses: first, it is most explicitly related to deep cultural (including linguistic) differences as well as to the reproduction of racism and xenophobia in their historically most 'paradigmatic' forms, so that the problems and patterns related to this level are very often taken as 'models' at the national level (even South Africa and the apartheid could not be fully understood if we would forget the long history of racism at the international level, including Nazism, anti-Semitism, and so on);⁷ second, patterns of racism and ethnocentrism imported by 'southern' elites (and scholars...) are often adapted and used to reinforce and legitimate power asymmetries at the national, regional and local level. The Brazilian or Mexican white, middle-class scholar who condemns ethnocentrism, racism and xenophobia at the international level is typically not aware of how ethnocentric, racist and xenophobic his or her behaviour (as a citizen and often even as a scholar) often is towards many of his or her fellow citizens: indigenous people, black shack dwellers living at the outskirts of cities, homeless people, landless land workers and have-nots in general – as well as academics based in so-called 'peripheral' regions of the same country sometimes.⁸

⁶ Frustrating not only for me, of course. A very interesting paper which expresses a similar frustration was published by Mustafa Dikeç a few years ago (Dikeç, 2010)

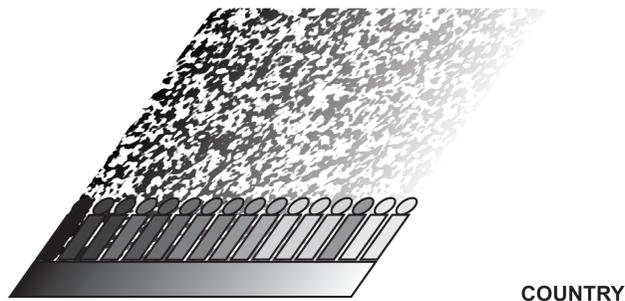
⁷ In fact, cultural and even linguistic differences inside many 'southern' countries should not be underestimated; otherwise, we would probably (and perhaps sometimes involuntarily) neglect the fact that in Latin American, African and Asian countries ethnically dominant elites often oppress a large portion (and more often than not the majority) of the population both politically and culturally (not to mention economic exploration). In Peru, nearly half of the country's population has either Quechua or Aymara (and not Spanish) as their mother tongue; in Bolivia, more than 55% of the population belong ethnically to Quechua and Aymara. In South Africa, more than 70% of the population do not have neither English nor Afrikaans as a mother tongue, but Zulu and other indigenous languages.

⁸ It is by no means unusual that scholars based in, say, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro – taking Brazil as an example – nurture feelings of superiority towards colleagues based in the Northeast or

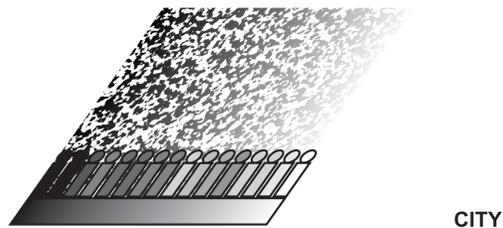
Therefore, at all scale levels we can see that the powerful principle proposed by Abahlali baseMojondolo's activists (Abahlali is South Africa's most important shack dwellers organisation) is very often not respected: "Talk *to* us, not *about* us."⁹ This is so because the complexity graphically expressed by **Fig. 2** reproduces itself at all levels, from local to global (something represented in a very simplified way by **Fig. 3**).



WORLD



COUNTRY



CITY

the Amazon, or even in southern Brazil. Interestingly, it is also not unusual that the same scholars extensively cite European and US-American researchers and philosophers (the knowledge of their works and the command on English, French or German are symbols of status), while they often ignore or despise the works published in their own country or continent – and I am *not* thinking only on conservative academics, but on many of the 'progressive' ones too.

⁹ See Pithouse (2007) and Ndabankulu, Nsibande, Ntseng (2009). Incidentally, there is a more complete variant of that slogan: 'Talk *to* us, not *about* us, not *for* us.'

Figure 3

I would never suggest that Abahlali's principle/slogan shall be understood as if it were anti-ethical to reflect on other people, other cultures, other countries and regions; and as far as I know Abahlali activists do not see that as a taboo themselves, as they usually and warmly welcome activists and even scholars from other countries to stay with them, provided the interaction happens on the basis of a true *dialogue* and *solidarity*. Actually it can be very useful for activists (and scholars!) to consider analyses and constructive criticisms made from perspectives other than those with which they are familiar. On the basis of a true dialogue and solidarity, however, 'talking about us'/'talking about them' is subordinated to 'talking to us'/'talking to them,' in a deep ethical and political sense. (And that is valid in relation to all scale levels, not only to the relationship between persons from different countries.) *This* is a 'talking about us'/'talking about them' that does not have anything in common with 'academic vampirism' (= exploitation of other people for the benefit of one's own academic career and structurally of the self-reproduction of a commodified and bureaucratised academe).

'Academic vampirism' and academic arrogance can often present themselves disguised as solidarity, however – and once again at all scale levels. Here I am not just talking about academics who fly to a foreign country or simply run into a *favela*, a ghetto, a *villa miseria*, a squatted building, a *bidonville* or a *barriada* to interview the 'natives' – often never coming back later to share some feedback of their research. I am also talking about the scholar who works for a NGO or who is a party member, and who wants help 'organising' the 'people on the ground' and 'improving [their] quality of life' according to the agenda and strategy of the NGO (by the way: who and where are the donors?...) or of the left-wing (or wannabe-left-wing) political party. This kind of academic (in a broader sense) arrogance is particularly damaging and hypocritical. The NGO functionary, being himself or herself somebody who has very often obtained an academic degree from some university and who often wants to become part of the academic establishment, more often than not criticises the universities much more for bad reasons – rivalry, envy – than for the good ones. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same reservations are valid in relation to political party militants too.

NGO functionaries with an academic background like to present themselves as activists; and members of a political party obviously perform some sort of activism. Both usually behave towards the 'people on the ground' in a hierarchical, 'vertical' way, and at the same time deal with the 'natives' and 'locals' often as if these were inferior human beings, unable to self-organising, self-management and autonomous production of strategically relevant, liberatory knowledge: on the basis of a prejudice that disqualifies the 'local knowledge' and sees the 'natives' more or less as 'barbarians,' both NGOs and political parties develop an approach to 'consciousness raising' and 'popular organising' ('empowerment') which

infantilises and *patronises* people. In fact, this is more than just ‘vampirism’: this is *usurpation* and *colonisation* to the highest degree. As authors such as Petras and Veltmeyer (2005) and Hallward (2008) have correctly pointed out, international NGOs have structurally much more to do with the reproduction of coloniality and heteronomy than with fostering emancipation and autonomy.¹⁰

At this juncture, I would like to briefly make two comments – considering two different scale levels – to make more explicit the problematic nature of the widespread expressions ‘Global South’ and ‘Global North’ themselves.

First, there is the obvious fact that to classify countries according to their ‘centrality’ or ‘peripherality’ vis a vis the dynamics of global capitalism using the terms ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ leads us to contradictions. The USA and Western Europe belong to the ‘Global North,’ of course; in fact, they constitute (along with Japan) the very core of the ‘Global North.’ But what about Australia and New Zealand? Do they belong to the ‘Global South’ (this would be an artificial interpretation, both in a geopolitical and in a geoeconomic sense but especially in broader socio-spatial terms) or to the ‘Global North’ (evidently a geographically absurd interpretation, and in broader socio-spatial terms a somewhat artificial one too)?

Second and more relevant for the purposes of this paper, the ‘Global North’/‘Global South’ divide corresponds to an oversimplification that masks important differences especially across the ‘South.’ To which extent belong white (and especially male), middle-class academics from some *semiperipheral* countries – I am thinking especially on South Africa, but it could also be Brazil, Argentina, and so on – to a typical ‘Global South’ framework?

Politically seen, the first point is perhaps of secondary importance, but the second one is surely more relevant than most scholars (including many radical/critical ones) are apparently prepared to accept. I am quite sure that many (most?) academics who are based in the so-called ‘Global South’ would feel honoured, for instance, in joining the international advisory board or editorial board of one of the ‘international’ journals (which are mostly based in Western Europe, especially in Britain, and in the USA, and which are mostly published in English). How many of them would be aware of the risk – not an inevitable one, however – of being *co-opted* and in some cases *tamed* in the course of their increasing ‘cultural integration’ or ‘cultural adjustment’? (And how many would care about this?...) By means of becoming increasingly ‘internationalised’ in this sense, they

¹⁰ An increasing body of literature has been produced about NGOs and their structural limitations; also geographers have devoted themselves to this issue in recent years. However, Peter Hallward’s book on Haiti, *Damming the Flood* (Hallward, 2008) is a particularly impressive and enlightening critical account on the problematic role of NGOs in the countries of the ‘Global South.’ On NGOs’ role, see also eg Pithouse, 2013 and Souza, 2013.

can very often play a powerful and at least at the national level influential role: namely that of '*privileged intermediaries*' between the academic centres in the USA/Western Europe and their own 'domestic' academic centres. They are often embedded in a cultural context that is to a very large extent still unique (ie not 'culturally pasteurised') yet, in spite of a high degree of 'globalisation' in some respects; but due to some kind of inferiority complex, the 'southern' academic context in which they are located is prone to see that kind of 'integration' as the ultimate *reward, merit parameter* and *legitimacy source* at the same time.¹¹ Due to the already existing complexity of their infrastructure of higher education and scientific research, such a situation is particularly intense and visible in semiperipheral countries.

The feeling of self-sufficiency that largely predominates in the Anglophone academic world – and which is intensely present among radical/critical scholars as well – is nothing but cultural autism: 'we [Anglophone academics] *are* the [academic] world.' In fact, many (most?) Anglophone colleagues apparently assume that what was not published in English 'does not exist,' because it 'does not count' anyway.¹² What is more: not many of them (or, more generally, of Western European and US-American researchers) seem to welcome challenges to the widespread prejudice and 'international division of academic labour' according to which scholars based in the 'Global South' would do better circumscribing themselves to empirical research about their own cities, regions and countries, leaving theory and philosophy to those who are supposedly the cosmopolitans *par excellence* – and therefore able to 'think about the world,' not only about the

¹¹ I have belonged myself to the editorial board of three of those academic journals which are based in the so-called 'Global North' and which are published in English (as well as to a fourth one, published in German). Is it a contradictory situation, in light of my previous analysis and arguments? I do not think so, because it has been possible for me to build or negotiate some basis for a true *dialogue* with my colleagues from the 'Global North.' Nonetheless, my own experience has shown that the challenge of being taken seriously as a scholar, and especially as one who is strongly interested in theory and philosophy, is a continuous, perhaps endless battle.

¹² Intellectual production from the so-called 'Global South' is by no means the sole 'victim' of Anglo-American 'cultural autism'; it is only the more traditional and most naturalised one. French and German (not to mention Italian) have been increasingly degraded to the condition of 'secondary languages' in the last decades – a situation which is experienced with stoicism and pragmatism by the Germans (generally friendly towards US-American culture since the 1950s) and with anguish by the French. As far as the 'Global South' is concerned, it is interesting to see how French (and to a much lesser extent German) intellectual and theoretical traditions in the social sciences still try to compete with the Anglo-American ones in order to retain supremacy there, a situation which is particularly clear in Latin America. On their part, 'southern' intellectuals and social scientists often behave as if they were true 'representatives' or 'ambassadors' of the culture/tradition/country in which she or he obtained her or his PhD degree or stayed as an academic visitor for a long period of time.

respective specific places in which they live and work.¹³ Is this kind of ‘invisibility’ something to be critically examined, challenged, and finally surpassed or at least attenuated, or should it be fatalistically or even cynically taken for inevitable, in the sense of a cheap ‘that’s life’-approach?... Is it possible that ethnocentrism is so deeply rooted in the hearts and minds that internationalist commitments have often become nothing but lip service?... Is contemporary radical/critical socio-spatial research really committed to talking to the whole world or to ‘understanding’ and influencing the world from a specific (= Anglo-American) perspective, inadvertently for the benefit of an ‘international’ academic elite as well as of a few powerful publishers?...

Especially these days, there is a number of things about academe in relation to which the word ‘disappointing’ could not be but an euphemism. But even more unfortunate is the fact that these things do not refer (only) to the ‘usual suspects’ (i.e. explicitly conservative scholars), but also to the behaviour of academics who belong to the ‘left,’ and who are therefore supposed to be radical, internationalist, and consistently committed to socio-spatial change and anti-colonialism.

In the context of an increasing commodification of knowledge and of a similarly increasing bureaucratisation of the universities throughout the world – from the UK to Brazil, from the USA to Mexico, from Germany to South Africa –, radical/critical intentions and wishes seem to become more and more disconnected from emancipatory praxis, i.e. from critically oriented socio-spatial change. One of the results of this situation is the artificiality (not to say poverty) of radical thinking nowadays, or more precisely: the artificiality of academic radical thinking. Radical academics who are not only genuine in their attempts but also powerful critical intellectuals obviously still exist, and they will probably always exist, but perhaps increasingly as remnants from a glorious past. Russel Jacoby’s books *The End of Utopia* (Jacoby 1999) and *The Last Intellectuals* (Jacoby 2000) are painfully enlightening in this respect, although his Marxist viewpoint prevents him of adequately valuing the enlarged room for manoeuvre for radical thinking and praxis generated precisely by the implosion of ‘bureaucratic socialism’ at the end of the 20th century.¹⁴

We must increasingly pay attention to non-academic contexts (organisations and networks of emancipatory social movements, for instance) if we want to find true creativity, thought-provoking and challenging ideas, not to

¹³ One among several evidences is the fact that, if one considers the ‘international advisory boards’ and especially the editorial boards of almost all ‘international’ journals, one can easily see the extent to which scholars from the USA, Canada, and Western Europe are over-represented. I dare to say that it would be too simplistic (and highly ethnocentric) to assume this situation simply as a mirror of differences in terms of quality and quantity of academic production.

¹⁴ Not to mention the fact that his tone is remarkably Eurocentric sometimes...

mention intellectual freshness and bravery. Nevertheless, emancipatory social movements and their organisations and activists have their own problems, from lack of money and time through the conditioning role played by survival-related priorities to criminalisation and persecution by the state apparatus. It would be unrealistic and unfair to treat them as a kind of *deus ex machina*, as if they could do much more than they currently already do.

A kind of synergy should emerge from the encounter between two worlds, in fact between two types of knowledge: on the one hand, *the world of formal, supposedly scientific knowledge* (i.e. a knowledge which is not always and not necessarily 'universal' or 'universally valid,' but which is at least grounded on the consideration of different scale levels, processes, agents, and types of agency); on the other hand, *the locally and regionally rooted world of common sense ('local knowledge')*, which comprises a diversified set of beliefs, technical skills, empirically accumulated experience and lifeworld immanent generalisations. However, several prejudices and concrete behavioural vices make this synergy difficult to achieve, though it has been attained many times in the past (it suffices to have a look at the cross-fertilisation between scientific work or philosophical reflections, on the one side, and the praxis of the workers movement, on the other, in the 19th century and early 20th century, from Marx and Engels to Rosa Luxemburg, and from Proudhon to Reclus and Kropotkin), regardless of the question of whether or not the intellectual and political outcome proved itself right or wrong.

Among those social scientists (from sociologists to geographers) who do not deliberately cultivate a simplistic 'overview perspective' based on a *'pensée de survol'*¹⁵ which considers human life and social interactions and spatiality only 'from above' (incidentally, the same perspective as that of the state apparatus...), and who cultivate a radical/critical viewpoint, we could expect that 'participatory observation' means something else than just a vague 'intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment.' Maybe there was a time in which this expectation was not very unrealistic (say, in the 1970s, perhaps even in the 1980s in some countries). However, that seems to belong largely to the past.

An increasingly 'productivist' academe, pushed by the system of 'publish or perish,' 'rating' etc. to an increasingly instrumental and more often than not even opportunistic approach to career, does not care very much about those researchers who behave as 'vampires' of social movements, cultures and lifeworlds, be it in a *villa miseria* in Buenos Aires or in a New Yorker ghetto. 'Social movement tourism' is practiced not only by young people looking for giving their own life a meaning in the middle of a largely 'meaningless' world, but

¹⁵ To employ an expression coined by M. Merleau-Ponty (see Merleau-Ponty, 2004), which literally means 'high altitude thinking' and designates the kind of objectivism that has been typically advocated by modern science.

also by scholars (from PhD candidates to professors) who often try to convince themselves and others that they are not exploiting anybody or treating their ‘subject’ more or less as objects in a ‘cabinet of curiosities.’ They even talk on ‘transnational activism’ sometimes (as a matter of fact, more and more frequently), often without paying attention to some fundamental obstacles and contradictions, such as the following ones:

- To which extent can we achieve a widespread network of ‘transnational activists’ if spatial mobility is so asymmetrically distributed between activists from Western Europe, the USA and Canada (and Japan), on the one side, and Latin America, Asia and Africa, on the other? Is it not clear that there is a problem of *over-representation* of the activists from Europe and the USA, as far as most activities are concerned? And is it not obvious that such an asymmetry inadvertently and as a tendency nourishes several types of dependency and subalternisation?

- Can we expect to have a truly *critical* transnationalism (or, to use the old term, internationalism) if one language – English – is usually uncritically assumed as the sole exchange language, as if there were no strong relations between language, on the one side, and worldview, culture and power, on the other?...¹⁶

In a nutshell: we experience a kind of increasing ‘structural hypocrisy’ on the part of academe, including in this the remaining, self-declared radical provinces of the social sciences. This hypocrisy is not a phenomenon which we could explain at a purely psychological and individual level, since it is historically related to systemic trends such as the commodification of scientific knowledge and the bureaucratisation of the academic world. That is precisely the reason why it is ‘structural.’ It is a *social* problem rather than an individual one.

To this kind of hypocrisy, to the ‘vampirism’ that was mentioned before, and to the exploitative character of participatory research in many cases, emancipatory social movements – the true potential protagonists of socio-spatial change towards more justice, equity and freedom – increasingly react in terms of mistrust, angry, bitterness and even hostility. At the end of the day, the price to pay is that the synergy mentioned above is becoming more and more difficult to obtain, at least in many countries and cities. That is not only intellectually a very

¹⁶ Very much has been published about the role of language (above all the hegemony of English) in relation to the problems of scientific exchange, including many works by progressive geographers (see for instance Aalbers, 2004). However, the crucial problem of power asymmetries between activists due to several types of inequality (including those related to ‘linguistic competence’) has been insufficiently explored by social movements theorists. One of the most important and intelligent books about ‘transnational activism’ was written by Sidney Tarrow (2005). By all its virtues, it can be given here as an example, because it clearly underestimates the above mentioned challenges, and in so doing it is far from addressing the problems in a convincing manner.

unfortunate situation; above all, it is a *political* tragedy. Such has been one of the consequences of ethnocentrism and sociocentrism in the long run.

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos challenged the standard talk about ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ (so deeply rooted in the left-wing vocabulary) a decade ago, in a series of speeches under the title ‘Neither centre nor periphery.’ To a very large extent, he is deeply right: ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ are often very bad terms. In his own words:

We think it is not just a matter of avoiding the traps and conceptions, theoretical and analytical in this case, which the centre poses and imposes on the periphery. Neither should we simply invert things in order to move the gravitational centre to the periphery, from where it could be possible to ‘irradiate’ towards the centre. We believe, in change, that this other theory, of which some general aspects have been presented here, should also make a break from that logic that has to do with centre and periphery, and anchor itself in the realities that erupt, emerge and clear new paths. (Marcos 2009)

As a matter of fact, we have the right to ask: ‘centre’ *for whom*, ‘periphery’ *for whom*? Ethically and culturally, considering someone’s place as ‘peripheral’ (that is, located ‘at the margins’) implies a devaluation of the knowledge, concerns, problems and even human beings related to that place. Despite the radical/critical intentions, there is often an ethnocentric or sociocentric bias in this kind of approach. As we know, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Moreover, there is very often some kind of ignorance, too. Many scholars from the USA and Western Europe, even many radical/critical ones, apparently do not know that many technical and technological innovations patented or improved in the so-called ‘Global North’ were actually tested or even developed in the ‘South,’ from fingerprints to torture techniques.¹⁷ The ‘Global South’ has not only imported innovations; be it as a test field for US-American, European or Japanese firms (or state institutions) or independently, many ‘southern’ countries have experienced the development of capitalist innovations and socio-spatial control technologies in their own territories.

Furthermore, ‘periphery’ in the sense of agrarian, ‘underdeveloped’ capitalist economies, is too much an inappropriate term to be used in relation to

¹⁷ One of the European scholars who is clearly aware of this ‘cross-fertilisation’ is the British geographer Stephen Graham, who develops and explores in his book *Cities under Siege* Michel Foucault’s vigorous insight regarding what the latter termed ‘boomerang effects’: “(...) while colonization, with its techniques and its political and juridical weapons, obviously transported European models to other continents, it also had a considerable boomerang effect on the mechanisms of power in the West, and on the apparatuses, institutions, and techniques of power.” (Foucault *apud* Graham, 2010: xvii) However, even Graham does not do entire justice to the complex role ‘southern’ countries play sometimes (see Souza, 2010).

countries such as Brazil, India, Mexico, or South Africa, which are largely industrialised, ‘modern’ in the capitalist sense, and economically and geopolitically influent – though they present huge inter-regional disparities and are socially very unequal and unjust.

Nevertheless, there is one crucial sense in which it is right to speak of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’: namely *in the sense that power asymmetries reflect themselves on space and manifest themselves through space (and are also exerted by means of spatial practices)*. And that is true in regard to several scale levels, from local to global. At all levels one can find a ‘centre’ and a ‘periphery’ in this sense – in the sense of *spatialised heteronomy*.

Academic ethnocentrism and sociocentrism reproduce the ‘logic’ that generates ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ all the time. Nothing could be more incongruent with the claim of being radical, critical and anti-capitalist than an approach which is so indebted to patterns of thinking and acting immanent to capital and the state apparatus.

Maybe the heteronomously biased ‘internationalisation’ of socio-spatial research and academic ‘structural hypocrisy’ cannot be overcome in our lifetime. ‘Bureaucratic socialism’ has failed and collapsed, and the more ‘horizontal’ and anti-authoritarian experiments that have flourished in recent decades (from Mexican Zapatistas to Argentine *piqueteros* to many other social movements worldwide) are delicate flowers whose politico-pedagogical long-term influence and effects are still difficult to assess and forecast. Perhaps autonomy and freedom will be largely eclipsed for a long time, and perhaps ‘barbarism’ (in the sense of more and more sophisticated forms of social control and extraction of relative surplus-value as well as the maintenance of brutal forms of extraction of absolute surplus-value in many countries, all this followed by increasing tensions, fear and violence) is inevitable. Be that as it may, we can expect from radical scholars that they *oppose* these trends *consistently*. They are not supposed to be *part of it*. It is not appropriate and fair to illustrate this critique with a handful of specific examples, as this would individualise a problem that is essentially structural; however, every time one inadvertently acts as if ‘the Other’ (a ‘southern’ colleague or student, an activist without any academic background, a *favela* dweller, an *indígena*...) were less capable of abstract, long-term or non-parochial thinking, or of expressing and defending ideas, goals and values that are as legitimate as one’s own – and every time one chooses to devalue the relevance of the asymmetries discussed here –, one is actively being part of the system that reproduces coloniality. The structural nature of the problem does not eliminate the fact that individual behaviour and choices have consequences.

Are left-libertarians different from Marxists?

In spite of the increasing relevance and visibility of left-libertarian (especially [neo-]anarchist) contributions to radical geographical research in the

last fifteen years or so, most reflections on postcolonialism among geographers still are inspired by Marxism. Considering the historical divergences between Marxists and left-libertarians, as well as their different sensibilities in relation to a number of subjects, I would like to speculate about a comparison between these political worldviews in terms of their ability to provide a solid basis to overcome ethnocentrism and sociocentrism, and hence coloniality.

At first glance, the tremendous diversity in terms of psychology, personality, etc. at the individual level seems to make any generalisation extremely difficult if not impossible. Individual biographies and individual modes of behaviour can be and actually are subjected to uncountable factors. However, despite the fact that those people self-identified or identifiable as ‘left-libertarians’ (or more specifically as anarchists or autonomists in a Castoriadian sense) and those self-identified or identifiable as ‘Marxists’ are very often exposed to similar ‘environmental’ influences, there are differences in the domain of theory and ideology that are surely interconnected with differences in terms of collective *ethos* – and probably also individual behaviour in many cases. In other words, despite the importance of a complex ‘biographical atmosphere’ as far as the persistence of some biases and prejudices of actual people are concerned, the specific ‘ideological soil’ surely matters.

Some differences seem too evident to be ignored, even if their concrete influence deserves to be followed up and explored in future:

- While anarchism lacks any consensual teleology of social ‘evolution’ (though many classical anarchists firmly believed in ‘social progress’ on the basis of their belief in human being’s improvable qualities and character), Marx’s schema of historical succession of modes of production introduced a determinism that seemed to justify prejudices and even atrocities in the name of ‘civilisation’ and the achievement of the ultimate goal of socialist and communist society: see, for instance, Marx’s analysis of the British oppression of India, or his many Eurocentric statements on non-European peoples. Precisely this circumstance led *négritude* poet and thinker Léopold Sédar Senghor to the conclusion that Marxism was a very problematic ideology from the perspective of African emancipation. It is certainly symptomatic that – to give only one example from the history of classical anarchism – Élisée Reclus’s use of the concept of ‘civilisation’ was not only very sophisticated but also critically minded and open to the task of relativising Europe’s glory and achievements; not accidentally, Reclus was much more critical than Marx about Europe’s ‘civilisational’ role and much more sympathetic to non-European cultures, even to the so-called ‘primitive’ ones (see Reclus, 1905-1908).

- Marxism’s economism more often than not degrades culture to a mere ‘ideology,’ and in so doing it does that *tacitly in the name of a specific culture*, namely the Western/European one (there is hardly a socially critical text as Eurocentric as the *Communist Manifesto*). In contrast to that, left-libertarians have

been typically very open to cultural diversity, and the anarchist *ethos* of ‘live and let live’ is much more compatible with respect for otherness. Élisée Reclus’s work (and life!) could be mentioned here again as one of the many convincingly examples in this regard.

- Left-libertarian commitment to radical territorial decentralisation is also much more compatible with cultural decentralisation, while the Marxist *ethos* – saturated with hierarchical thinking – tends to dismiss concerns about marginal cultures as ‘diversionistic’ or naïve; for Marxists, the ideological centrality of class struggle cannot be disputed, and other kinds of oppression and struggle (on the basis of ethnicity and ‘race,’ for instance) have typically been of secondary importance – in the best of all cases. Sure, heterodox Marxists have often tried in recent decades to overcome that kind of narrow-mindedness; however, in so doing what have they actually done if not an attempt to follow in the footsteps of left-libertarians, even if usually without giving due credit to the original sources?

- The fact that ‘nation-states’ and their borders (and ultimately the state apparatus as such) are much more radically criticised by left-libertarians than by Marxists surely also plays a role.

Be that as it may, there is something related to the recent ‘anarchist turn’ optimism (see e.g. Blumenfeld, Bottici, Critchley, 2013) that deserves to be critically addressed here. On the one side, anarchism has surely never been a purely European (or also US-American) phenomenon, in spite of the fact that modern anarchism was born in the context of a very strong connection with the 19th century workers’ movement in Europe; it suffices to pay due attention to Ricardo Flores Magón’s works and activism in revolutionary Mexico or to the importance of anarchist agitation, organising and culture (eg anarchist press) in countries such as Argentina (where Errico Malatesta and Diego Abad de Santillán lived for years), Brazil and Uruguay to see the relevance of anarchism in Latin America as early as at the beginning of the 20th century. On the other side, however, anarchism in the late 21st century is no longer primarily part of the political culture of the workers who live at the peripheries and *favelas*, *villas*, *barriadas*, etc. of cities such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Lima or Mexico-City, but above all a worldview more or less consistently embraced by students and portions of a radicalised, urban middle class.

At the same time, new radical experiences and movements have emerged and developed among the poor, from Mexican Zapatistas to a part of Argentine *piqueteros* to autonomous organisations of the Aymara people in Bolivia (as demonstrated during the ‘Water Wars’ of the last decade). All these movements possess a clearly left-libertarian *ethos*, as they are committed to values such as self-management and horizontality, and also in the sense that they embody a two-front war against capitalism (and the capitalist state) and ‘bureaucratic socialism’ (ultimately challenging Marxism itself, though more implicitly than explicitly). However, they commonly do not identify themselves as ‘anarchist,’ and it would

be very artificial to impose this label on them, regardless all affinities. Probably it is both intellectually and politically more reasonable to speak about a ‘(left-)libertarian turn’ (Souza, 2015). Blindness to the fact that we are not experiencing ‘anarchism everywhere’ could not be but a sign of the presence of Eurocentrism and middle-class sociocentrism (and of a certain dogmatism) among anarchists – not only in Europe and the United States, but also in Brazil, Argentina, and so on. That is one of the reasons why I think it is useful to acknowledge that the left-libertarian alternative to ‘bureaucratic socialism’ encompasses anarchism in a strict sense while being larger than it. In light of this, it can be better understood why the title of this section is not ‘Are anarchists different from Marxists?’.

Conclusion: Neither patronising nor romanticising – true dialogue is the way forward

Postcolonial thinking seems to be more a *project* than an established reality, even among ‘progressive’ scholars and activists. It is a perpetual challenge to all of us – everywhere. Some principles seem crucial here: 1) be always aware of the history and culture of the people (social movements or not) towards whom you cultivate empathy and solidarity; 2) remember what South African Abahlali baseMjondolo activists emphasise: do not speak ‘for them’ (or simply ‘about them’), but first and foremost *to them*; 3) be always cautious about your own interpretations about the meaning(s) of their struggle. There is no ‘recipe’ to be learned in order to avoid ethnocentrism and sociocentrism once and for all, and these suggested principles are nothing but some tentative pieces of orientation that I have tried to follow myself.

At the end of the day, the ‘moral of the story’ could be summarised as follows: there are subtle and unconscious ways to patronise and subalternise those whom we want to understand and help but whose culture and history (and/or social class) are different from ours, and it is precisely these subtle and unconscious ways – very much related to the influence of problematic ‘biographical atmospheres,’ and sometimes also to the insufficient immunisation provided by some ‘ideological soils’ – that generate problems of coherence among radical scholars. In order to avoid incoherence, we do not need to ‘romanticise’ those whom we show our solidarity and offer our support; after all, they are all fallible human beings, too. Moreover, true *dialogue* presupposes horizontality, and true horizontality – something not easy to be achieved – presupposes the right to disagree but at the same time the obligation to do so without arrogance.¹⁸ Otherwise we will be held hostages to cognitive dissonance.

¹⁸ The Germans have a precise word for what I mean by ‘arrogance’ here: *Besserwisserei*, or ‘know-it-all’ attitude.

Finally, as far as the comparison between left-libertarians and Marxists in terms of their ability to overcome ethnocentrism and sociocentrism on the basis of their respective worldviews is concerned (which was briefly examined in the last section), my hypothesis is, in a nutshell, as follows: left-libertarian thought *tends* to offer a more generous and coherent philosophical foundation for a consistently anticolonial/postcolonial/decolonial behaviour. Nonetheless, the complexities of each specific ‘biographical soil’ will even here always influence the degree of coherence of actual scholars and activists. No ‘ideological soil’ seems to provide any guarantee in this regard, not even the most decentralist, horizontal and autonomous one.

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