

Chapter 7

We, the Non-Europeans: Derrida with Said

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If in fact the crisis of Europe is more fundamental than the current crisis that engulfs it, then how do we diagnose that fundamental crisis? How do we address the question 'What is called Europe?'. The question is made even more challenging when we further ask what the referent 'Europe' refers to and what the forces are that use that referent. When, in May 1990, Derrida delivered his lecture on 'the other heading' during a colloquium in Turin on European cultural identity he was in many ways responding to these questions and outlining possible ways of approaching them. But Derrida's problem of Europe is much older than that. Europe had been a 'problem' for Derrida – at least philosophically – from the moment he encountered Edmund Husserl and engaged with a cluster of problems that Husserl had articulated as 'the crisis of Europe', a cluster which gave also rise to various thoughts on Europe by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas. So there is a danger in beginning with 'the other heading' and forgetting that Derrida's ethical and political problem of Europe had exercised him practically all his public life.

There are other scholars, especially Rodolphe Gasché (2009), who attend to the problem of Europe as Derrida's problem. What I wish to address in this chapter is how Derrida's problem of Europe can be brought into sharper relief with Edward Said's problem of orientalism. Said too was exercised by the question of Europe or 'what is called Europe?', albeit from a different angle. Said's Europe was one which articulated itself through what Derrida would later call its 'wholly other'.

It is true that Derrida and Said rarely, if at all, are brought or read together. There are good reasons for this (Karavanta and Morgan 2008). Said himself reacted strongly to what he considered a 'crippling limitation in those varieties of deconstructive Derridean readings that

end (as they began) in undecidability and uncertainty' (Said 2004: 66). For Said, the readings that Derrida provides 'defer too long a declaration that the actuality of reading is, fundamentally, an act of perhaps modest human emancipation and enlightenment that changes and enhances one's knowledge for purposes other than reductiveness, cynicism, or fruitless standing aside' (Said 2004: 66).

How Said came to associate these attitudes with Derrida and to assume that Derrida would not recognise the demand that we as citizens 'enter into the text with responsibility and scrupulous care' remains a problem for me (see Spivak 2005). Its beginnings can be traced to an early essay where Said considered Derrida and Michel Foucault as occupying opposed positions on reading (Said 1978). Marzec (2008) and Radhakrishnan (2010) discuss Said's vexed relations to Derrida and Foucault respectively. However, these issues are not my concern here. I am not interested in consigning Derrida and Said to their separate posts – postcolonialism and poststructuralism. Nor am I really concerned with making Derrida and Said speak to each other. Rather, my aim is to selectively read, or at least invite you to read, Derrida with Said on the question of the non-European. In a nutshell, for both Derrida and Said the fundamental crisis of Europe is an inability to approach the non-European with the openness that is required. To put it differently, the question is not quite 'what is called Europe?' but 'what is called non-European?' This question is simultaneously an ethical, political, psychoanalytical and philosophical question, each aspect irreducible to the others and yet each complicating the others. Let me start with Said's reflections on Freud and the non-European, then discuss the problem of the non-European in Derrida and draw these readings together with Étienne Balibar to conclude the chapter.

Said begins with the observation that Sigmund Freud's knowledge of other cultures was deeply inflected by his education in Judaeo-Christian tradition, especially European humanism and scientism. Said says that Freud was not bothered much by the problem of the other. This may appear a strange statement since Freud can arguably be considered the classic figure in the invention of the other. Yet the other that preoccupied Freud, Said suggests, is a 'European' other (Said 2003: 14). According to Said,

Freud was deeply gripped by what stands outside the limits of reason, convention, and, of course, consciousness: his whole work in that sense is about the Other, but always about an Other recognisable mainly to readers who are well acquainted with the classics of Greco-Roman and Hebrew Antiquity and European languages. (Said 2003: 14)

Yet, in both *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 2001a) and *Moses and Monotheism* (Freud 2001b) Said detects a refusal by Freud to establish an insurmountable difference or gap between the European and the non-European (Said 2003: 19). It is this refusal, albeit implicit, that can be said to constitute Freud's ethics towards the non-European. Politically Freud goes even deeper and claims that the very fabric of the European is made up of non-European elements. Said notes, for example, that Freud was adamant about Moses's identity: 'Moses was an Egyptian, and was therefore different from the people who adopted him as their leader – people, that is, who became the Jews whom Moses seems to have later created as his people' (Said 2003: 35). What Said observes is not so much the historical accuracy of Freud's interpretation – in fact he remains unconvinced and unsatisfied – but its audacity given how aware Freud was of the dangers of his interpretation and how uncertain he was about it (Said 2003: 39). What Said highlights, and this is of utmost importance to us when we discuss Derrida's articulation of the question of non-Europeans, is that

in excavating the archaeology of Jewish identity, Freud insisted that it did not begin with itself but, rather, with other identities (Egyptian and Arabian) which his demonstration in *Moses and Monotheism* goes a great distance to discover, and thus restore to scrutiny. (Said 2003: 44)

Freud's audacity was to have argued that the founder of Jewish identity was himself a non-European Egyptian. Said concludes from this that 'identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed, because Moses was Egyptian' (Said 2003: 54).

It is this political stance that Derrida considers as the problem of the non-European. For both Said and, as I shall now discuss, Derrida, the European is always already the non-European. This is not a thesis of identity. It is not a claim that European is equivalent to non-European or that there is no difference between the European and the non-European. It is a thesis of impurity. It is the assertion of an impossibility of any social group – a people, a nation or a profession – being able to identify itself with itself without any relation or reference to the other.

As mentioned earlier, Gasché closely examines how Derrida approaches Europe. He will be my guide in what follows. Gasché illustrates how Derrida inherits a tradition in which Europe never figures as a geographic or political entity but is always something other, which has been called by various names. Husserl calls Europe an idea or concept.

Gasché (2009: 9) makes reference to other names such as ‘figure’, an image (Valéry), a category (Badiou), a schema (Guénoun), and ‘a little thing’ (Derrida); he could have also included a ‘vanishing mediator’ (Balibar).

If Europe is not merely an entity, what are its origins as an idea? As Gasché says, although ‘Europe’ as a name originates in the seventh century BC, it is doubtful that it meant the same thing in subsequent centuries. Arguably, the name was inherited by the Greeks from Asia, where its possible meaning – ‘dusk’ – designated the ‘land of evening’. Intriguingly, Gasché surmises, the Greeks may well have not thought of themselves as Europeans but those who were glancing towards dusk, looking towards the land of evening. Thus, in later centuries, by naming itself as Europe, Europe arguably constituted itself with a name that originated outside itself. In a very strong sense, and following Derrida, Gasché says this is perhaps the character of Europe: it calls itself by the name of the other (Gasché 2009: 10). Europe comes to name itself, is able to name itself, only through the other, or the name inherited from the other. It comes to itself from outside itself.

What the name Europe refers to is thus not primarily the proper name of a land but a name for a movement of separation and tearing (oneself) away in which everything proper has always already been left behind. It is thus an extension prior to all confinement within oneself, thus constituting an exposure to the foreign, the strange, the indeterminate. (Gasché 2009: 11)

‘Europe’ is not a proper name and the name comes to Europe from outside. The name ‘Europe’ designates an obscure part of the world where the sun sets. ‘The name itself names Europe’s origin in a movement of departure from everything native’ (Gasché 2009: 13). Europe always glances towards the distance, being always ahead of itself with the other (Gasché 2009: 14). Europe is, or rather stands for, a fundamental openness to the world.

To elicit the name Europe is not only to evoke the continent and its history – Europe as a geographical and political entity, as well as the history of its many accomplishments and its many failures – but something else as well (even though one does not know exactly what this is). (Gasché 2009: 16)

Perhaps unfairly, Gasché criticises postcolonial thought for creating a blind spot of Europe by assuming its unity and hegemony instead of articulating it as a question. But articulating Europe as a concept that takes its name from outside Gasché also provides a strong sense of the kind of project Europe is (Gasché 2009: 17). This sense is clearly

indebted to Derrida, as Gasché readily admits, but it also locates Derrida within a project, or rather, as belonging to a project, or better still, as inheriting a task, a task that is Europe.

Derrida himself intimated this with his emphasis on the relationship between inheritance and responsibility, or rather, inheritance as responsibility. For Derrida, being European means taking responsibility for the heritage of thought that reflects upon what Europe is. This is not a responsibility that is chosen. It imposes itself upon us. For Derrida, being what we are is first of all this inheritance and this inheritance is our task (Gasché 2009: 265). Derrida goes as far as to say that 'we are insofar as we inherit' (Derrida 1994: 68). Taking responsibility for this inheritance means keeping the openness of the concept of Europe through its relation to the other, non-Europe. The task consists in a double movement of being faithful to the concept of Europe and remaining committed to its openness (Gasché 2009: 266). It requires recognising that Europe is the name of an identity involving conflicting demands and that it produces a mode of being that is infinitely open to what is other than itself. It is in this sense that Europe is a project that is yet to come (Gasché 2009: 286).

It is also in this sense that Europe is a question of non-Europeans. We, the non-Europeans, are a problem for Europe, Derrida (of Algerian-French and Jewish upbringing) and Said (of Arab-Christian and Palestinian upbringing) seem to announce, only in so far as Europeans are already contaminated by non-Europeans. It is also in this significant sense that 'the question of Europe is not merely one question among others' (Gasché 2009: 287). It is a question that projects itself beyond its boundaries and beyond its limits, especially those of a geographical, political and cultural nature. The question of Europe is always 'at once a chance and a danger' (Gasché 2009: 287). To capture this aspect of Europe as a concept it is never adequate to recall the question as a question of crisis. To begin with 'crisis', Gasché says, would suggest that Europe as a concept and idea was once stable or intact and that now it is destabilised. As a starting point for reflecting on Europe, the trope of crisis is equivalent to the idea that Europe is identical with itself.

The starting point of reflecting on Europe cannot be its ostensible unity or stability. If the starting point, its originary promise, is its openness, or rather, its commitment to openness, defining itself with other than what it is, placing itself always under question, then the name of this task is at once Europe and non-Europe. The question is not about Europeans as such but Europeans as non-Europeans. Europe is that name which signifies the commitment to place itself under question regarding what

it itself is not. That is why Europe is not a geography, a polity, a culture or even a civilisation, but stands for the radical openness of that space which took as its name as the name of the other. That is also why we, the non-Europeans, are a historical problem of Europeans.

Derrida therefore insists that it is 'essential to study and take seriously into account . . . beginning with the Greece of Plato and Aristotle, of Hellenism and Neoplatonism, what gets passed on, transferred, translated from Europe by pre- and post-Koranic Arabic, as well as by Rome' (Derrida 2005: 31). Derrida declared that he had neither the competence nor the time to undertake such a study. Yet

we feel strongly the seriousness of the question of whether philosophy was born in Greece or not, whether it is European or not, whether one can speak of Chinese philosophy, whether one can speak of African philosophy, or whether the destination of philosophy is marked by a singular source, thus by a singular language or a network of singular languages. (Derrida 1995: 377)

For Derrida, then, the fact that Europe's origin is not identical to itself should lead to a historical understanding of the multiple sources of its identity. Derrida was convinced that it is wholly inappropriate to regard the identity of Europeans historically as solely Greek, with some additional Jewish, Christian and Islamic elements. Rather, Europeans are all these things and these things are all open to them at once.

The openness that Said anticipates in his reflections on Freud and the way Derrida approaches Europe as an open project (Derrida 1992b) are radical in the sense that they place demands on us Europeans and non-Europeans alike to reconfigure our relations with our multiple sources of identity and identifications. For Europeans the urgency of this reconfiguration becomes immediately apparent with regard to the ancient Greeks.

For major European philosophers Europe always comes into existence with the ancient Greeks. The birth certificate of Europe as philosophy is staged as inescapably Greek (Gasché 2009: 291). Derrida complicates this relationship with Greece as Europe's birth certificate. It is not that he disowns that originary moment. It is that he multiplies the sources of Europe as philosophy. Derrida accepts that what we rigorously recognise as philosophy as such does not exist elsewhere than Greece. Philosophy, as thought of as being and existence, was born in Greece. To make this recognition requires neither orientalism (or occidentalism depending on the point of view of evaluation) nor historicism. But it means also to recognise that it will have traces of non-Europeans in it.

A year after his Turin lecture Derrida was invited to respond to two contributions by Éric Alliez and Francis Wolff, who had discussed the relations of Derrida, Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to ancient Greeks during a colloquium organised by Barbara Cassin. His oral response was subsequently published as 'Nous autres Grecs' (Derrida 1992a) and has been recently translated into English as 'We Other Greeks' (Derrida 2010). As the translators note, the phrase Derrida uses in the original title can mean 'we who are Greek', but can also mean 'we too are Greeks', as an affirmation, or 'we Greeks of another kind', as a claim of difference (Derrida 2010: 17, n1). As the editor notes, this is perhaps the most extensive if not the most explicit of Derrida's reflections on his relationship to ancient Greeks (Derrida 2010: 17).

This piece clearly illustrates that the Greek question for Derrida is just that, a question. When addressing that question we are inevitably in the presence of

an intrusion of the other, of the wholly other, who forces the limits of identification and the relationship of language, the corpus, or the system to itself. It is thus a question of locating the traces of this intrusion (traumas, inclusion of the excluded, introjection, incorporation, mourning, and so on) rather than defining some essence or self-identity of the 'Greek', the originary truth of a language, corpus, or system. (Derrida 2010: 19, n2)

Derrida welcomes the efforts to see resonances and resemblances within contemporary thought to identify a configuration or a generation of approaches to the Greek question but also declares that this is not enough. 'We and the Greeks' as a question is too fractured and impure to enable the shaping of a configuration or generation. For Derrida it is urgent to recognise the limits of these resonances and analogies (Derrida 2010: 21). By saying that he has his own Greeks, followed with a pun, 'to each according to his Greeks', Derrida, in my view, signals the impossibility of a configuration that will delimit all the resonances and analogies (Derrida 2010: 19–20). He notes, for example, his difficult relationship to the way Nietzsche or Heidegger relates to the 'Greek thing'. He then wonders why in the twentieth century many scholars have chosen Greek words to name historical formations such as 'epoche' (Heidegger), 'paradigm' (Kuhn), 'episteme' (Foucault) and 'themata' (Holton) (Derrida 2010: 22, n11). He argues that this usage indicates or evokes three powers at once:

(1) the invention of the new, namely, a concept that is irreducible to those circulating in everyday language; (2) the supposed invention of the new as archaeological rediscovery: restoration, reactivation, or liberation of an

occluded or even a forbidden memory; (3) finally, the authority attached to the use of rare words or of ancient languages considered to be learned languages. (Derrida 2010: 22, n11)

All three are gestures that, despite their claims to discontinuity, establish continuity with the Greeks as their source of authority. As for his own Greeks, Derrida resolutely and emphatically asserts:

It is not only the non-Greek that attracted me in/to (*chez*) the Greek (it's a question of knowing in short what *chez* means), not only the other of the Greek (the Egyptian, the Barbarian, or whoever is determined by the Greek as his other, and so is excluded-included, posed as opposable), but the wholly other of the Greek, of his language and his *logos*, this figure of a wholly other that is unfigurable by him. This wholly other haunts every one of the essays I have devoted to 'Greek' things and it often irrupts within them: under different names, for it perhaps has no proper name. (Derrida 2010: 25)

Derrida insists that we must resist an either/or injunction where we as Europeans are obligated to announce ourselves as Greeks by an automatic inheritance or as having broken with them by a law of liberation. 'If we are still or already Greeks, we ourselves, we others (*nous autres*), we also inherit that which made them already other than themselves, and more or less than they themselves believed' (Derrida 2010: 27). It follows that

if the legacy of the thought (of truth, of being) in which we are inscribed is not only, not fundamentally, not originarily, Greek, it is no doubt because of other convergent and heterogeneous foliations, other languages, other identities that are not simply added on like secondary attributes (the Jew, the Arab, the Christian, the Roman, the German, and so on); it is no doubt because European history has not simply unfolded what was handed down to it by the Greek; it is especially because the Greek himself never gathered himself or identified with himself. (Derrida 2010: 31)

Approaching it from another angle, Said articulates this openness well. He says:

If you know in advance that the African or Iranian or Chinese or Jewish or German experience is fundamentally integral, coherent, separate, and therefore comprehensible only to Africans, Iranians, Chinese, Jews, or Germans, you first of all posit as essential something which, I believe, is both historically created and the result of interpretation – namely the existence of Africanness, Jewishness, or Germanness, or for that matter Orientalism and Occidentalism. (Said 1994: 31)

Moreover,

you are likely as a consequence to defend the essence or experience itself rather than promote full knowledge of it and its entanglements and dependencies on other knowledges. As a result, you will demote the different experience of others to a lesser status. (Said 1994: 31–2)

I mentioned earlier that for both Derrida and Said the fundamental crisis of Europe is the inability to approach the non-Europeans with the openness it demands. This may have sounded like a call for hospitality. Yet, notwithstanding Derrida's work on hospitality, Derrida's call, with Said's, is in my view more radical than that gesture. Calling attention to the fundamental crisis of Europe is no less than re-evaluating the multiple origins that constitute Europeans and their relationships to non-Europeans. It requires not only revisiting the 'Greek thing' and the inheritance that it implies but also re-evaluating a whole series of ostensible differences that have been put into play especially over the last few decades. It also requires exposing a whole series of differences that have been concealed within Europe as the question of others within Europe.

The infinite task of Europe is infinite not because it is over the horizon beckoning us to orient ourselves towards it. It is infinite because many contemporary problems are rooted in the fundamental crisis of Europe's inability to approach the non-European with the openness it demands. I have already mentioned the problem of others within Europe and the problems of non-Europeans as being distinct but related problems of this fundamental crisis. The symptoms of these problems are all around us.

One such symptom, for example, is the way in which European social and political thought always begins with its distinctiveness as the originary place of democracy, liberty, rights and citizenship. European thought has been unable to open itself up to the possibility that such fundamental institutions are not originary but connected with non-European histories, or rather, originate from dialogical relations between European and non-European histories. European social and political thought has not been able to approach non-European forms of thought with the openness they demand because it has created an insular aura about its origins and distinctiveness, and even (and this is something that Said has taught us) superiority. Examples from its history are many but the contemporary difficulty of creating at least a modicum of comparative political thought, for example, attests to its continuing hold on the life of the European mind (Freeden and Vincent 2013).

When this insularity and closeness persists in European social and

political thought it is not surprising to find xenophobia not as prejudice against non-Europeans both within Europe and without but as an endemic condition of relatedness (Bonjour et al. 2011). Today differences among Europeans generate responses that are just as xenophobic and interlaced with resentment as responses to non-Europeans (El-Tayeb 2011). From the acrimony surrounding the accession of Turkey to the European Union to utterly ignorant and disingenuous approaches to China and India, and from disparaging statements about Greek, Italian, Spanish or Portuguese political cultures to the treatment of the Roma and Sinti peoples in Germany, France and elsewhere, yet again the contemporary symptoms of the fundamental crisis of Europe that Derrida and Said invite us to see are clearly visible.

How do we respond to this task? How do we assume responsibility for it despite its immense challenge? Let me conclude with Balibar's idea of Europe as a vanishing mediator. I will translate it into a demand of 'us, the non-Europeans'. Balibar proposes the idea of Europe as a vanishing mediator – apparently belatedly inspired by Fredric Jameson (1973) – to mean a figure that enables an imaginary of the new during the process of transformation of a society, as the old gradually fades away (Balibar 2004: 233). It is an imaginary of the moment between no longer and not yet. Balibar thinks that this idea of the vanishing mediator is not much different from the process of translation of ideas from one idiom to another.

For Europeans – Balibar now speaks as belonging to 'us, the people of Europe' – this might well constitute the exceptional character of Europe, as translator or mediator of cultures. He admits that Europe is not the only space in the world to translate cultures from one language to another, but argues that 'nowhere – not even in India or in China – was it necessary to organise to the same degree the political and pedagogical conditions of linguistic exchanges' (Balibar 2004: 234). Let us leave aside the question of whether finding an exceptional character for Europe brings back the spectre that haunts European thought, which Derrida and Said warned against. What Balibar has in mind points towards the openness that the fundamental crisis of Europe demands. For Balibar, the practice of translation is European but it cannot be enclosed within the borders of Europe since these languages can never remain within the national cultures of Europe. Balibar expands this task of Europe as vanishing mediator in two ways. First, it can be broadened to include Arabic, Turkic, Urdu and other languages that are already spoken within Europe. It can also be expanded by stretching the idea of translation from language to culture. For this utopia or myth – for

Balibar admits its enigmatic character and its impossibilities – Europe can become an interpreter of the world, translating cultures and languages in all directions (Balibar 2004: 235).

Both Derrida and Said were attentive to the questions of linguistic and cultural translation and offered significant insights on relays of translation between the European and the non-European. That each performed these insights as a non-European makes them especially European in the sense we have seen in this chapter. Derrida (1992b: 7) called himself an over-colonised European hybrid and Said (1999: 295) described his life as always out of place with dissonances. Throughout this chapter, you will have noticed, I alternated between their voices as Europeans and non-Europeans. While Balibar calls this multidirectional linguistic and cultural translation a utopia or a myth, to indicate perhaps the impossibility of the task, it also places urgent and immediate demands on both Europeans and non-Europeans. For those intellectuals practising in social sciences and humanities especially, the demand is no less than to re-evaluate many of the central concepts with which we perform ourselves as Europeans and others as non-Europeans: democracy, rights, citizenship, law, territory and state. Tracing the impure histories of these concepts, the ways in which they traversed different cultures and spaces, and the ways which each rationalised and justified pure origins while masking other differences is now a responsibility.

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