Review of John Hutnyk's Bad Marxism: Capitalism and Cultural Studies (2004, London: Pluto)
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Bad Marxism is the third major work of John Hutnyk focusing on the problems of representation in the culture industry, and largely inspired by the writings of Marx, Adorno, and Spivak, among others. The book follows The Rumour of Calcutta (1996), in which Hutnyk highlighted the problem of representation in ethnography, and the Critique of Exotica (2000) on the political ambiguity of the notion of 'hybridity' in culture. With Bad Marxism, Hutnyk responds to his two previous books by articulating a sense of political urgency for activism during and after fieldwork in both anthropology and cultural studies.

Bad Marxism begins by underlying the power of travel in colonial and post-colonial times in a critique of ethnography and anthropology. Hutnyk associates the impact of travel with the violence inflicted on slaves during and after their displacement, and imaginatively connects travel and slavery with contemporary ethnographic tourism. In this context, he argues, both Malinowski and Clifford are members of the same 'colonial project… this time glossed as globalisation by neoliberal ideology' (2004, p.10).

In illustrating his point, Hutnyk is suspicious of Clifford's 'alarming' tone about the rising of the Asian market (Ibid, p.39) arguing that Clifford, like his predecessor, 'offer awe frustrated travel tales and stalled research projects' (p. 49), which support the status quo of their respective time: the colonial aggression of Malinowski's world, and the aggression of the free market in Clifford's time. In another ethnographic reference, Hutnyk underlines Clifford's indifference to the political struggle of the Zapatistas against the corrupted Mexican government in the latter's ethnography of Chiapas. He then, rightly wonders:

How useful are even 'historical' and 'political' juxtapositions without thinking politically about what to do with them? And what does this mean for anthropology? (Hutnyk, 2004, p.p. 32-33)

But the first part of Bad Marxism is not intended to be a criticism of Clifford. Rather, the book is a general critique of the anthropological discourse as a whole, and the rise of cultural studies as its natural product. In the heart of Bad Marxism lies Hutnyk's critique of Clifford's (and anthropology's for the same reasons) concept of the ethnographic claim for 'heterogeneity' at fieldwork in the representation of selected ethnographic material in the form of 'collage' (a word suspiciously close to 'college'). It is though this problematic idea of 'heterogeneity' that Hutnyk investigates Derrida's political ideas on the urgent need for 'multiplication of forms of media', a topic that Hutnyk has

already examined before in relation to Derrida's writings on the silencing of alternative voices by the dominant culture (2000: 230-1).

Back in his Critique of Exotica (2000), Hutnyk highlighted the political urgency in Derrida's calling for 'political vigilance before the media', quoting, however, that this does not mean '"a protest against the media generally"' (2000, p.230). Derrida by underlying the endless possibilities of 'hybridity' in terms of 'multiplication' of voices gives a political spin to the Humanitarian disciplines, such as anthropology and cultural studies, manifested by an urgent feeling for social change. Political urgency is a vivid feeling that also runs throughout Bad Marxism in the need for a future dynamic development of 'culture' as a form of both resistance and inclusion. However, for Hutnyk, capitalist society (including education and research) stands still in a state of 'paralysis'. He overdramatic writes:

The world is fucked up. Conditions of despair; prospects appear slim (p.80)… What is it that allows this silencing of the Third World and class politics of the First World Modernity? …It amounts to class struggle without class, or class analysis without struggle …Derrida writes of contemporary capitalist society in a way that seems again to homogenize and simplify –and lead to paralysis- at the very time that he wants to warn against these things (2004, p.103)

At times, Hutnyk's own phrases, such as 'the system of colonial plunder' that is 'isolating and dividing' national markets (p.89), or the aggression of 'direct foreign investment' within 'the context of superexploitation' (p.106), are often used by nationalist, or 'traditionalist' movements, such as the indigenous movements of Latin America, or the nationalist-religious groups in sectarian Europe -from the Balkans to Ireland. This kind of language tends to regard national identity as threatened by an imagined 'evil capitalist Modernity', if such a monster really exists.

Still, Hutnyk's observations on the power of speed in the process of producing, circulating, and reproducing information, as well as his criticism of the assumed worldwide 'free access' to the Internet (2004, p.p.63-4), return to the Critique of Exotica and his question on the connection of 'hybridising capitalism that sells culture and technology' to the colonialism of the so-called 'Third world' (2000: 218-9). The point is that the so-called 'free-access' to the Internet is a privilege of the 'developed' countries: the more a country is economically 'developed' and expanded in the world market, the cheapest and easier access to the Internet it provides to its citizens.

Thus, the Internet is another commodity that separates 'developed' from 'semi-developed' and 'Third World' countries. It is not a human right which would ideally confirm the freedom of the individual in terms of choice and movement, because simply you do need money to connect to the 'global world', in the same way you need money to travel and do anthropology: neither are free, nor bohemian, as romantic notions of anthropology tend to

be. In Hutnyk, the discourse of contemporary anthropological method is strictly a matter of business, and the anthropological and cultural package sold in the university market has the aesthetic form of Clifford's self-reflexive fieldwork.

In Critique of Exotica, Hutnyk draws a sharp parallel line between the work of NGOs on the one hand, and the 'cultural development of Madonna or Kula Shaker' on the other, as both morally based on 'well-meaning but naïve notions of solidarity' (2000, p.219). In Bad Marxism he continues his investigation on multiplicity, solidarity, and hybridity, this time in the context of the Empire (2000) by Hardt and Negri.

By comparing the writings of Hardt and Negri in the Empire with Marx's Notes On Indian History (1947) Hutnyk focuses on the Indian Rebellion of 1857: he notes that Hardt and Negri depict the intervention of the British government as a "direct response"(!) (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 36) to the rebellion. However, as Hutnyk points out, Marx read the Indian rebellion of 1857 through the wider historical context of a number of rebellions against the British Empire. Hardt and Negri, instead, overemphasize on Marx's assertion that the future of India was determined by Europe (Hutnyk, 2004: 124), ignoring the fact, always according to the writer, that Marx's assertion was consistent with political activism and should be understood as such.

Hutnyk offers three suggestions in resolving the above problem of historical representation in anthropology: first, a return to the history of anti-colonial movements for our better understanding of historical 'transitions' (p.137). Second, in response to the cultural relativism of our times, he offers for once more 'organization' as the means to move forward:

Organization matters, but it must actually be organized not simply named… Organized how is the issue… the question of organization that must necessarily be asked in terms of what is required for any 'revolutionary consciousness' to succeed against oppression (Hutnyk, 2004, p.p. 136-7, 143)

For Hutnyk, political action presupposes 'organization': his reading of Spivak's method of 'learning to learn from below' (p.p.145-51) comes to life when he conceptualises it into Maoism! Shockingly to a European reader liker me, Hutnyk wonders: 'What would be part of a return to Mao today?' (p.146), and even more controversially, that 'learning to learn from below perhaps could be a credo for rereading Mao in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies today' (p.147). Hutnyk argues that 'learning to learn' should never be a 'neutral method' but always has to be a politicised act.

In illustrating his point, Hutnyk offers another fascinating critical note on the writings of Bhabha regarding the latter's 'displacement' of the word 'dialectics' with an ahistorical notion of 'hybridity', a notion already presented in Bad Marxism as a commodity through Hutnyk's reading of the Empire. In this

context ‘hybridity’ clearly becomes an ideological weapon in the hands of the elites. ‘Hybridity’, similar to Durkheim’s notion of the ‘sacred’ in religion, has mystifying powers. Hutnyk argues that just as Bhabha replaces the word ‘dialectics’ with ‘hybridity’, the ‘replacement of the Third Worldist solidarity work and internationalist politics with a cosmopolitan “postcolonial elite” politics’ (p.150) also takes place.

The solidarity of the proletariat is a theme running throughout Hutnyk’s latest work, and in particular the increasing alienated conditions of work and indifference of the individual for the wider social interest. In Bad Marxism there is a feeling that hybridity threatens solidarity:

The advent of hybridity theory is the displacement of an anti-imperial political organization into the glamour of the leftist publishing sector. Mao becomes as much a t-shirt slogan as complexity and ambivalence become buzzwords… The Raj is still red, white and blue, the stripes just run a different angle (2004, p.151)

Hutnyk’s urgency for political activism is strongly associated to his ideas of an increasing divided and alienated proletariat force, the elimination of solidarity among the workers, and the exploitation by the global market of historical figures who used to be representatives of alternative politics to capitalism. It is in this neoliberal ‘postmodern’ cultural fascism, in which each ‘Revolution’ (Mayday demonstrations, Che, Chomski, the Asian Dub Foundation, eco-living, and so on) becomes a fragmented, and thus, weak force, divided in endless and ever-increasing numbers of “incommunable” “singular” (p.132) events, which are isolated from each other remaining unconscious of the wider historical picture of the world. Conversely, the mystical words of ‘proletariat solidarity’ instead of being a realistic aim, it becomes a working class’ legendary but also pointless ideal. Hutnyk’s position in a moral sense is not much different from Durkheim’s own ideals of ‘social solidarity’ and ‘collective consciousness’, which were produced and defined as moral oppositions to the increasing individualism of his time (1893). Still, obviously Hutnyk looks at social organization in its dynamic potentiality for political, economic, and historical change, rather than in structural terms as Durkheim did.

In an anthropological context, Hutnyk’s deep idealism shouts that the time is now for ‘learning to learn how to do sociology and activism, anthropology and solidarity, Marxism and Revolutionary politics, together’ (p.151). How to actually do that? This question leads us to the final and arguably best part of Bad Marxism: Bataille’s war on war in his library.

The final part of Bad Marxism focuses on Bataille’s life and his notion of ‘expenditure’. It is centralized around the question of ‘how useful an experiment would it be to try to ‘apply’ Bataille’s notion of expenditure to politics today’ (p.177). The chapter is divided in four parts sketching four different aspects of Bataille: the first part, entitled ‘Librarian’, focuses on

Bataille's double life and his surreal aesthetics in relation to his strong anti-war sentiment. I feel that Hutnyk at times idealizes Bataille forgetting for a moment that Bataille was himself part of the greater group of artists and intellectuals who sprang out of two World Wars. From this perspective, Bataille is not so special. Already from the beginning of the Twentieth Century a number of scholars had urgently pointed to the institutionalisation of violence through academic education, Virginia Woolf among them:

What reason is there to think that a university education makes the educated against the War? Again, if we help an educated man's wife go to Cambridge are we not forcing her to think not about education but about war?"
(Woolf, V. in Room of One's Own View/Three Guineas, Oxford: Penguin, 1992, p.195)

Following Bataille's anti-war sentiment, Hutnyk looks at the 'librarian' in Bataille's third role as the 'Activist'. Hutnyk emphasizes on Bataille's absolute denial of any form of authority and/or categorization, as well as total moral freedom. Bataille has described as 'appalling' thought (p.168) the possibility of any patronization by a political party, agency, or enterprise. It is through this kind of surreal realism that the fourth face of Bataille, that of the 'Anthropologist', breaks through the limits of participant observation in sociology and anthropology: Bataille's analysis of Mauss's classic study of The Gift (1926), and particularly the idea that 'a gift is never a gift', leads to Bataille's apocalyptic vision of 'a world in ruins' (p.180) described in terms of 'excess of growth', self-destruction, and apocalyptic war. Hutnyk functionally applies Bataille's 'growth of expenditure' theory in the world today 'in a period of capitalist slump, crisis of credit, overextended market, defaulted debt, and threatening collapse, the strategy of war looms large' (p.178). In this way, Hutnyk draws his own world of contemporary hell.

Hutnyk concludes that 'the massive accumulation that is the excess of an arms trade', as well as 'May day marches', 'fashionista style wars' and 'Beckham haircuts' are all expenditures in a system that wastes itself. However, where is the 'playful' (p.161) side of Bataille that Hutnyk is talking about I can't really see. Still, this is as much a provocative, as well as poetically modern reading of Bataille's work in relation to his personal double life, and with the emphasis on the individual, rather than on vague suffocating moral ideas of 'community'. Bad Marxism represents Bataille as a lonely hero-librarian, and an activist, who makes war on war from his archives.

Conclusions

A book is a bus stop on the way from here to there and the destinations are not foretold. Or at least the ticket is an all-day pass… Through Clifford's travelling theory and routed predicaments, Derrida's ten-point telegram, Hardt and Negri's Empire and Bataille's library. There is an accumulation of trinkets arranged in a way that I believe amounts to a –Bad Marxism- analysis of

where we are now. This is never conclusive and always open."
(Hutnyk, 2004, p.21)

Since Hutnyk labels himself a 'bad Marxist' (p.p.189-92), Bad Marxism is in itself a satire of contemporary self-reflexive anthropological writing and cultural studies. In the same way Malinowski used 'polyphonic heteroglossia' (p.33) in describing his experiences at fieldwork, and in a similar way to Clifford's multi-vocal ethnography, or Bataille's journeys, which 'so often seemed to stall' (p.158), Hutnyk's Bad Marxism is the result of a contribution of many different thinkers, anthropologists with different backgrounds, and students, who are acknowledged in the opening pages of the book. Hutnyk's method, if there is one, is not much different from his predecessors. The difference, according to Hutnyk's reading of Bataille at the end of the book, is that Hutnyk, similar to Bataille, is conscious of his position and thus, politically active:

Being bad at Marxism means our ideas cannot be immediately deployed into the kind of project that institutes something that will not be able to budge... yet, let us at least insist on this, that Bad Marxism must always be directed to a critique of Marxism in the interests of a better Marxism. Dialectically.
(Hutnyk, 2004: 192)

This is self-reflexive anthropology. At times Hutnyk's admirable idealism sounds desperate to move anthropology forward. However, the more he fails to move forward the more interesting the book becomes, and that is because the book is in itself a reflection of the anthropology of the past and present. Bad Marxism is in itself a 'reactionary product' of the contemporary academic industry, published in London. Therefore, it is also part of the 'flirtation' of information through the 'ideology of transnational corporate enterprises' (p.38). Hutnyk consciously takes us through his own glasses to a historical trip from anthropology to cultural studies, in order to demonstrate the lapses of the ethnographic method at fieldwork (with serious political and economic implications), which has been unquestionably inherited from Malinowski to Clifford, and is 'now packaged in fee-paying postgraduate courses' (p.6), such as mine. But Hutnyk also asks: 'Can anthropology become something better than it has been?' (2004, p.34)

Certainly this book does not have the answer. Hutnyk's marriage of self-reflexive ethnography of travelling (Clifford) with activism (Marx) is to say the least vague, if not meaningless, cruelly summed up by his superfluous dialectic sentence: 'Clifford plus Marx, travel plus a political project' (p.50), and probably part of the whole new 'package' of 'anthropological discourse'. The writer would be the first to admit that the ticket for the bus he is referring to in the above quote might be a 'day-pass' but the destination is nowhere. Instead, this is a humorous, and at times overdramatic critique of the problems of representation in ethnographic work and cultural studies, in perfect continuation with The Rumours of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity and the Poverty

of representation (1996), and Critique of Exotica (2000). With Bad Marxism Hutnyk establishes himself as one of the most original and radical contemporary thinkers of cultural studies, specializing on the problem of representation, colonialism, and the culture industry. The book's relentless pace and sharp sarcasm is certainly a deeply political outtake on the history of anthropology and the birth of cultural studies, offering a much-needed criticism of the construction of Humanities on the basis of fieldwork, as well as questioning the future of the discipline.

References

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