

Introduction

After the Ruin of Thinking: From Locationalism to Infrapolitics

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Alberto Moreiras announced the exhaustion of the discourse of location as early as 1997. The thought of location, from/about/of, particularly as it came to Latinamericanism, had seemed to hold the promise of a new beginning: the possibility of thinking Latin America “under the geopolitical conditions of university discourse in the time of post-area studies;” but it had revealed itself as “a ruinous thinking, or a thinking in the ruins of thinking” (“Introduction: From Locational Thinking to Dirty Atopianism” vii). Moreiras had no problem with the idea of a ruinous thinking; the issue was the specific way in which locational-ism thought of itself as a translational or translative retrieval “of the historicity of resistance as itself a form of power,” which for him meant that it had denegated its ruinous situation in favor of a utopian possibility (vii). In it, nothing less than the total cancellation of colonial discourse, carried out by the subaltern negation, was at stake. This claim entailed a process of expropriation as well, since the intellectual work that would be carried out in the name of utopian restitution would become increasingly harder to distinguish from the work of the subaltern negation as such. This was University discourse doing what it does best, rhetorically knotting power and the production of a historical narrative in the name of a liberation that ultimately only ever means liberating the other from everything but his or her bare life, if that.

That was the era of post-area studies; the caricature it produced, put everyone involved in an impossible situation. Moreiras cast it in terms of a staged fight between wrestling jokers: the intellectual from the south, working on the south, and speaking from the south, versus his northern counterpart who wittingly or unwittingly was an impeccable representative of colonial domination in all its forms. These stereotypical images were a joke not only because what was at stake in the fight was far from the liberation of the subaltern, but also because in both instances what we find are subjects operating wholly under

university discourse in so far as both were Latinamericanists. Moreiras concluded that the fight was a false one: “A critical position is no authentic gift of commodified location” (vii).

Perhaps today it is easier to say that the time of the post-area studies university was in fact the beginning stages of a neoliberal university discourse. What changes when we look at it from that vantage point is not so much Moreiras’s position as it was set forth then, but the actual import of what locationalism intended to accomplish: the appropriation of the whole apparatus of expropriation for the benefit of those whose histories had been wholly on the losing side of that hellish machine for centuries. Leaving aside its most ardent dogmatists, who confuse the ideology for its affective power every time, what was brewing with the crisis of the Marxist narrative of armed revolution, immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, was not a more nuanced retrieval of the struggles of the past, one that did not answer to the grand narratives of the West; no, what was beginning then was the accommodation and adaptation, not of the discourse on Latin America, but of Latin America itself to the matrix of global capitalism. In other words, what we were witnessing was the shift from an uncomfortable and awkward process of formal subsumption to a phase in which all of that would finally find a smoother plane of real subsumption in which to make its folds (for more on the issue see Villalobos’s contribution to this dossier). We can call it socialism of the twenty-first century or the communist horizon (as García Linera understand it). It is the time when a high-ranking bureaucrat can cite a Marxian dictum, that socialism’s seeds lie in the development of your means of production, to a *Wall Street Journal* that is asking its readership to please understand that this is merely population control on the part of a very business-friendly government. Real subsumption means, in a very down-to-earth form, that you can have your cake and eat it too: that there is nothing that will impede the smooth functioning of global capitalism in the realm of ideas. You can be a perfect, Wall-Street-Journal-approved, self-proclaimed revolutionary government; so long as you are growing your economy.

As such, the critique of locationalism can no longer be limited to the specific instance that gave rise to it, that is, the politics of identity and the decolonial enterprise. Rather, it must also include a whole host of new options that have appeared recently as the new avatars of political correctness. Whether it is in the form of a renewed critique of the present, of the conjuncture, or of a renewal of materialisms, ranging from the return of philology, the valuation of the archive, all the way to the rehashing of yesteryear’s Marxian

economism and stageism—what is at stake remains the same: the discourse of the university attempting to magically kill the proverbial two birds with the single stone: the synthesis of the instrumentalized structure of the “efficient” neoliberal university with the good intentions of its progressive or conservative, as the case may be, militant-academics.

What does all of this have to do with Latinamericanism? One way of putting it would be to point out that what Moreiras was calling attention to in 1997 was that the entire apparatus of colonial domination had shifted in such a way that it no longer made useful distinctions between north and south, us and them, the way that it had done until the end of the Cold War. The upshot is that it is possible now to instrumentalize in the south, the north/south division so as to fold the narrative of liberation into that of modernization once again and in a form that can seem plausible from the progressive vantage point. As a result, now liberation means, in a dialectical turn of events that we thought was impossible after the postmodern fad took hold, becoming good managers of the local aspects of the global economy. The ideological battles that ensue can take any number of forms: so long as the question of power, the production of the narrative of history and the phantasm of liberation are tied together in a secure knot which we can call governability. From that point of view, a critique of the discourse of the university as part of a wider apparatus of expropriation cannot but seem suspect: for it fails to see how we can instrumentalize it, to the advantage of some abstract non-existent entity like the South, so as to make expropriation possible from a different location. That was the trap then as it is today.

If what we have been calling infrapolitics, thanks in great part to the work of Alberto Moreiras, has any bearing on the link between current patterns of global accumulation, the university, and the history of emancipatory thought, it is because it illuminates the situational complicity of the three today. That is, infrapolitics as a thinking seeks something more or other than simply pointing to the ruins of every *arché*; it is also the thinking of the impossibility of subtracting any institution from its own history, and, in this sense, it can be said that it takes seriously Marx’s observation that global capitalist society is that which admits history for everything but its own being. Infrapolitics, then, calls attention to the fact that no instrumentalization, convenient as it might be when explained as part of a teleological or prophetic narrative of emancipation, is ever anything other than another episode in the history of oppression, regardless of its means.

As the essays in this collection demonstrate, each in their own specific way, what is at issue for infrapolitics is not merely a critique of the present. For the thought of the being of historicity and of the historicity of being is an attempt to open the way for a kind of work that is not solely concerned with producing its own political credentials. Allow me to put it in more concrete and simpler terms. What does infrapolitics say when a militant asks what bearing can thinking the absence of foundations, the ontological difference, the structure of the question, the vigilance against the temporality of the present and of presence, what can any of this possibly have to offer to the group marching down the street protesting the real and massive injustices being carried out today at every level of existence? The answer is at least two.

First, it points out that the reaction against power remains as the thinking of the ruins, and should that ruination serve only to found a different order of power, then, the real aim of the negation was not the mechanism of power as such, but one of its specific forms. Infrapolitics says to the militant, whether it is the one in the street or in the halls of a university department, that the focus on politics runs the risk of blinding you to the problem of politics. Undoubtedly, the problem of politics is central to all of us. However, what if the problem of politics is that politics always entails an instrumentalization, an illegitimate appropriation that is presented as legitimate? And further, what if this problem is only exacerbated by confronting it only politically? It is not mere coincidence that the age of revolutions, still part of our common sense, and particularly after the resurrection of the hard Left in recent years, is also the age in which politics seems to be thinkable only in terms of the tragic form. The closer you come to achieving your end, the closer you get to your own undoing. Moreiras used a similar formulation to describe the failure of locationalism: “The maximum accomplishment of translational thinking is also its total defeat: an adequate integration into the circuits of conformity, when all further translation becomes unnecessary, when language no longer exists as such” (viii).

Secondly, infrapolitics suggests that there is a different path, which we have opted for calling posthegemonic infrapolitics, as the democratic practice of singularity beyond equivalence. But we would be remiss to propose that this is something that is readily available to us as things stand today. For it is clear that what that entails is still a matter for a theoretical practice that is underway, but which remains, for us, an open question. Thus, infrapolitics is also an attempt to break down the paralyzing distinction between some

putatively pure intellectual neutrality and a militant thinking that fashions itself as valet for “real” political actors. Infrapolitical thought/action begins by affirming that what goes under the heading of politics can be contested as such, and also that what the standard meaning of politics excludes from its own reduced sphere of “action” is more important in its politicity—even as this entails a retreat from politics in the business-as-usual sense of the term.

What went under the title of translation in the post-area studies moment prior to the return of revolutionary politics was not only a matter of literary or cultural texts; it was that, but it was also much more. For it was not simply a question of pointing out, then, that translation is not the final horizon of thinking, just as it would be insufficient to say, today, that decoding the text produced by real subsumption is the aim of our thinking. To my mind, the shift between the end of the 1990s and our current situation lies in the following fact. Then we could think, from the university, that emancipation entailed imparting knowledge to the other regarding his or her negation of the structure of colonial domination; and this at the same time that the other represented, structurally, a rest or residuum, which indicated the limit of the system. That would be one way to explain the overlap between university discourse and locationalism: the assumption that the other and the rest were one. Moreiras’s formulation concerning the total apparatus of domination, which no longer needed spatio-temporal demarcations because it could operate everywhere, and which entailed thinking the end or ruin of all the ideals that made it possible to think that the tradition itself came with a built-in freedom-clause (viable as a mode of resistance), correctly indicated that the rest was elsewhere, that it was the surplus or remainder of the signifying operation of the master himself. Today, and this would be the shift, we are no longer in a situation where this knowledge can serve any purpose. This unmasking that shows to us the hidden Masterly operation behind a putatively objective or neutral discourse of the university becomes inoperative when that discourse has morphed, in the most explicit manner, and become one with the inner workings of the emancipatory, and putatively, integral State of the South.

This shift does not necessarily have to be seen as an epochal change. It could well be that it never really mattered. However, I would argue that coming to terms with it as a fact determines certain possibilities for us. Namely, that any thinking that seeks to grapple with

cultural and political artifacts in the present without falling into complicity with the total apparatus of domination can no longer assume a number of things:

- 1) it is not longer possible to imagine that Latinamericanism exists as a field capable of immunizing itself against its own history, which has been the history of its instrumentalization for the benefit of power;
- 2) it is therefore no longer possible to assume that there is a benevolent side to university discourse, and certainly not under its neoliberal form;
- 3) any attempt to map out this field, which does not exist (but as a narrative projection of that which escapes symbolic representation, violently forced into a logic), is by definition a new form of the apparatus of expropriation—it is simply an attempt at presenting the project of expropriation as a logical and even benevolent necessity.

Thus, we are faced with the need to conceive of ways of thinking that uphold a rigorous encounter with reality, but with the caveat that reality is exactly what never gives way to its translative appropriation; that is, if we want to be rigorous, in the sense that this word implied for the old science (which today has lost all epistemic centrality just as all ideals have lost their eternal sheen), we must begin by setting the task of daring to stare directly into the abyss of the real above all others. This would mean assuming that we are at a loss. But also halting that programmed automatism that allows us to continue as if nothing was the matter and nothing had happened.

The stakes have never been higher. And the intense politicity of the infrapolitical proposal we are collectively making here, and elsewhere, should not be missed. Infrapolitics is not a politics otherwise. Yet it is a question that is posed regarding the path that we are taking when we opt for thinking that the solution to the problem of politics is more politics—we could also say: the path that we are taking whenever we say that the problem of technology is solved by technology itself. I am, of course, alluding to Heidegger's saying: the essence of technology is not itself technological; it requires instead prior considerations regarding the way in which we wish to live. Now, in Heidegger these considerations were still tied to a notion of social change that is absolutely incompatible with the infrapolitical proposal we are making. We do not have the luxury of believing that we can opt, or decide, for a more authentic way of life. There is no pure language of life or history. What we are facing, perhaps for the first time within a Latinamericanist genealogy, is the precarious condition of being out in the open, where there is no field, where there is no map, where

there is no presupposition regarding the conditions of a dialogue between opposing points of view, in which “when” and “where” we speak, as well as to whom and about what we speak have no presupposed legitimacy. For, when infrapolitics points to the lack of legitimacy at the heart of the expropriation ploy, it is also marking its own rejection of the discourse of the master masquerading as transparent truth or objective knowledge.

We are not interested in proposing an answer to a crisis. Our aim is not to offer yet another radical theory or methodology for reading texts. We reject any notion that this is yet another claim to the new or latest, the newest theoretical product for your radical needs—even as we are aware that in an academic marketplace ruled and reproduced by neoliberal subjects that can only see things in those terms, it will matter little that we repeatedly reject such an image of intellectual work. It is the rejection of that way of doing, literally, business, that we reject when we claim that our questioning, even in its most radical form as a question regarding the possibility of questioning itself, is post-academic: an orientation in thought that does not offer foundations for clear end result cannot by belong to a university that is still to come, a post-university. In a neoliberal university that is ever more concerned with quantification and indexation, a discourse that seeks to open questions can only occupy a paradoxical position. We accept the risks.

Works Cited

Moreiras, Alberto. "Introduction: From Locational Thinking to Dirty Atopianism."
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