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DECOLONIZING GLOBAL THEORIES TODAY

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Since the 1990s there has been an impetus to develop paradigms of theory that are global and energize us with possibilities for resistance. This essay argues that such theories confront us with a postcolonial unease because they are, like the tradition of colonial knowledge production, universalizing. The essay begins by briefly analysing the West-centered basis of the idea of inevitability in Hardt and Negri’s concept of empire and moves on to critiquing two universalizing concepts: Giorgio Agamben’s ‘bare life’ and Judith Butler’s ‘vulnerability’. Turning from theory to practice, the essay points out the problems of Eurocentrism in even so ostensibly radical and global an organization as the World Social Forum. The essay demonstrates the need, particularly in the imperial moment today, for a vigilance against the global theoretical projects being generated at present.

The opening of the barriers at Bornholmer Strasse on 9 November 1989 was not simply a moment that inaugurated the reunification of Germany or the end of the Cold War. Marked by the crowds of East Berliners as they poured onto
Bosebrucke Bridge into West Germany, this was also an event in the Zizekian sense that came to symbolize, in political and intellectual circles, a reunification of the ‘West’. Of course, this ‘West’ was imaginary, highly ideological, and in reality politically contested through bloodshed. Former Eastern European countries were (and still are) seen as outside the pale of ‘western’ civilization even as they adopted capitalist reforms (see Pocock 1997); migrants from the former third world increasingly questioned the coherence of the West; Turkey’s liminal status exposed the religious and ethnic fault lines of Europe; and, more recently, even the idea of a unified West seemed threatened by France’s decisive political break from the US in the preamble to the preemptive invasion of Iraq. Yet since the 1990s, continuing after 9/11 and the unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003, the idea of one world and past former divisions seems reproduced in a major intellectual impetus in Europe and the US: to produce paradigms of what I call global theory, based on the assumption that the contemporary moment calls for a resurgence of some form of universal theorizing. And while the particular form of this theorizing might vary from the search for a new humanism, to a critique of modern sovereignty, the assumptions and scope of these theories are universalist. Such a shift has been characterized as a movement away from the quagmire of micropolitics of radical theory of the 1960s to an embrace of the idea of emancipatory knowledge, the development, as Negri puts it, of a “new post-deconstructive ontology,” and a bold step beyond the negation of postmodernism (Negri 1999: 12; see also Passavant 2004: 4). This emphasis on a new ontology, the object of which is to energize us with new global possibilities for resistance, can be seen among others in the work of Hardt and Negri (Empire and Multitude), Giorgio Agamben (Homo Sacer, State of Exception, The Coming Community), and Alain Badiou (Ethics), and the new work of Judith Butler (Precarious Life). But if these new ontologies go beyond the circumscribed limits of postmodernism to offer us revolutionary or liberatory manifestoes and theories appropriate to the current moment, they are also theories that confront us with a postcolonial unease precisely because they are, like the tradition of colonial knowledge production, universalizing, albeit in different ways. Whereas the decolonization movements of the mid-twentieth century and the new social movements of the 1960s led to a Lyotardian postmodern suspicion of grand narratives, the contemporary intellectual moment seems to relish grand narratives.

In a section entitled ‘Back to the Eighteenth Century’ in Multitude, Hardt and Negri write:

What was indeed utopian and completely illusory in the eighteenth century was to repose the ancient form of democracy designed for the city-state as a model for the modern nation-state ... The challenge then was to reinvent the concept of democracy and create new institutions adequate to modern society and the national
space. It is useful to go back to the eighteenth century, finally, to appreciate what a radical innovation they accomplished. If they did it, then we can too! (Hardt and Negri 2004: 307)²

But if the contemporary intellectual moment is an exciting one, calling for a new theoretical project – dare one say a new Enlightenment – those of us who are wary of eighteenth-century Europe’s racial projects and colonial missions have reason to be extremely wary of these current projects in which a West-centered humanism parades as universalism.³ At stake in critiquing universalist theories today is the fact that the contemporary moment of hyper-imperialism and intense conflict between the global North and global South – as evidenced by US military occupations, the battles over scarce resources, the patenting of indigenous knowleges, and the continual building of walls (at the Israel-Palestine border, the US-Mexico border) that separate the West and its allies from the rest – requires an analysis sensitive to particular striations.

I suggest, therefore, that what I have called global theories can operate as colonizing forces which it is our ethical task to resist, to decolonize. Implicit in this formulation is the idea that colonial difference continues to be central in knowledge construction, particularly in theory. Colonial difference is operative not only in globalization theories which contest the very idea of imperialism, but also in (universalist) theories that address the imperial moment, as well as in what have been touted as radically new global movements. I will begin by briefly analysing the West-centred basis of the idea of inevitability in Hardt and Negri’s concept of empire, then move on to critiquing two universalizing concepts: Agamben’s bare life and Judith Butler’s vulnerability. I focus on these four major theorists because they have undoubtedly been the most influential in the humanities and because their works offer a range of theorizing from questions of globalization to those of sovereignty, and a feminist-based humanism. Turning from theory to practice, I will point out the problems of Eurocentrism in even so ostensibly radical and global an organization as the World Social Forum. My purpose is not to offer a new third worldist or global South theorization for the contemporary moment, but rather to demonstrate the need for vigilance against the global theoretical projects being generated today.

Irresistible and Irreversible: Empire

Hardt and Negri’s highly influential and controversial book, Empire (2000), builds upon the arguments of a networked and decentred world made by globalization theorists such as Appadurai and Castells and offers itself as
4 Appadurai postulated a decentred global cultural economy, operating through complex disjunctures between economy, culture and politics; the major features of this economy are deterritorialization and massive immigration to western metropoles. Media, migration, and the pleasures of cosmopolitanism and a modernity at large constitute features of this new globalized world. A less sanguine, though in some ways similar, view of the globalized world was offered by Manuel Castells in his three volumes of *The Information Age*, published between 1996 and 2000. Although Castells characterizes the contemporary world as an ‘Athenian democracy’ in which the affluent elite have access to tools of information while most of the world, like the masses in Greece, are switched off, he, like Appadurai, continues to characterize the information world as decentred. See Castells (1997: 351). Appadurai (2006: 21–31), like Hardt and Negri, argues that globalization has engendered new types of resistances and ‘terrorist’ a credo for the present (see Appadurai 1996: 27–47). Hardt and Negri argue that we live in a postmodern age of ‘empire’ which, although it converges around and derives its energy from the US, is not localizable (Hardt and Negri 2000: 134, xiv, 247). As opposed to imperialism, which was modernist, and which functioned through ideas of centre and margin, inside and outside, empire has no outside (127). The authors of *Empire* focus on the migrations from South to North as the loci for change and characterize empire as preeminently about information (212–13, 280). Although Hardt and Negri state that their relationship to empire is analogous to that of Marx’s to capitalism – that is, a brutal system that must be overthrown, but that which through its very structure breeds change and resistance – they also emphasize the non-coercive, fluid nature of empire (43). Using the Gulf War as an example of empire being called into being and functioning in the name of global right, Hardt and Negri suggest that empire is also participatory and called into being (180). In *Multitude* (2004), Hardt and Negri focus on resistances to empire. Emphasizing again the shift to immaterial labour and positing the Internet as a model for the multitude, they stress the possibilities for democracy in the figure of the multitude best exemplified in the Zapatistas (xv).

I do not intend to address here the West-centred focus on immaterial labour and the presumed pervasiveness of the Internet (when access to electricity is scarce for an enormous number of the South’s poor) or the equally western emphasis on migrations from South to North to the neglect of equally massive migrations within the South. Neither will I attempt to point out the obvious problem of conceiving a decentred world in the midst of the rise of the neo-cons or the inadequacy of explaining away US militarist imperialism through the idea of a global state of permanent warfare, as Hardt and Negri do in *Multitude* (2004: 32). My purpose here is to briefly point out the Eurocentrism present in their logic about the inevitability of empire. Hardt and Negri write:

*Empire is materializing* before our very eyes. Over the past several decades, as colonial regimes were overthrown and then precipitously after the Soviet barriers to the capitalist world market finally collapsed, we have witnessed an *irresistible* and *irreversible* globalization of economic and cultural exchanges. Along with the global market and global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a *new* logic and structure of rule – in short, a *new* form of sovereignty … Our basic hypothesis is that sovereignty has taken on a *new* form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This *new* global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire. (Hardt and Negri 2000: xi; my emphases)
networks. Appadurai distinguishes between vertebrate systems of nation-states and the cellular systems of global capital and explains the cellular nature of contemporary resistances.

5 For a critique of Empire as simply a left version of The Lexus and the Olive Tree, see Balakrishnan (2000). Many critics argued that 9/11 marked a decisive shift toward a US militarist imperialism. Chalmers Johnson (2004: 4) sees it as a shift from republic to empire, while David Harvey (2003: 31) sees the US’s aggressive militarism as a sign of its weakness.

These manifesto-like sentences from the very beginning of Empire speak through a language of inevitability about a radically reconfigured new world we all must recognize. Like other globalization theorists, the authors of Empire repeatedly use terms such as ‘irresistible’, ‘inevitable’ and ‘irreversible’, so that globalization as a scenario is presented with the certainty of religious belief (see Steger 2002: 54). As a consequence, every conflict or struggle gets deterministically viewed as part of the workings of empire. Empire simply is. Indeed, the cover of Empire, with a satellite photograph of the earth, points to the audaciously global nature of their project while simultaneously suggesting an Olympian distancing from smaller, presumably material details. Yet it is clear in this opening that a certain western periodizing and historical perspective is at stake: 1989 is taken to be the crucial moment, not simply for Europe, but for the world. It is the moment of intensified cultural and economic exchanges. The overthrow of colonial regimes, while a prelude to the end of an older system, is a question of the past, irrelevant to the contemporary moment. But the idea of a worldwide multitude of the dispossessed against an unlocatable empire, belies the significance of imperialist views of politically charged differences such as those between Western civilization and Arab/Muslim barbarity, touted by the likes of Samuel Huntington (1993: 22–49), and picked up by the Bush administration, that continue to be the source of major violence in the contemporary world. Despite the experiential absurdity of such binarisms, their ideological valence is significant.

For Hardt and Negri, empire as irresistible empirical reality is supported by a temporal logic that both privileges and appropriates the present. Empire, both in its oppressive machinery and liberatory potential, belongs to the present, while any call for the nation-state as a bulwark against global capital is ‘nostalgia’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: 43). And in this present network, all struggles since the 1990s are ‘new’ struggles of a multitude against the empire of global capital. But to maintain that the Palestinian Intifada and the Los Angeles riots, while ostensibly different, were similarly directed against the global order of empire and the post-Fordist regime of social control is to trivialize the continuing history of colonial violence and occupation of Palestine, as well as the racial dispossession of African-Americans in Los Angeles (54–5). While the Battle of Seattle against a putative ‘empire’ might involve Palestinian sympathizers, it is important to stress that the struggle against Palestinian occupation is of a different order from the protests against the G8. And even if 1989 is to be taken as a moment signalling the beginning of economic and cultural globalization and the free flows of capital, the US control of agencies like the IMF and World Bank needs to be acknowledged (see Stiglitz 2002: 9–20). Yet the binary temporal logic of Empire relegates imperialism, along with anti-colonial nationalist aspirations, to a misguided nostalgia for the past, while
the idea of a decentred and deterritorializing empire becomes the master narrative of the present. But even if we momentarily accept globalization as present reality, it would be useful to maintain a healthy anthropological scepticism of grand universals and recognize the particularity of the functionings of global capital in different spaces (Ong 2006: 122). Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong’s (2004: 4, 11) term global assemblage, which identifies the interaction of global forms with situated political regimes, is particularly useful here because it points to tensions between the whole and the partial, encompassing and situated, smooth and striated.6

Not only does Empire move through a western periodizing imperative that erases the specific concerns of much of the world’s South, it also presents the logic of empire and globalization as always already understood. R. Radhakrishnan’s critique of the logic of globalization theories applies well to Empire. Radhakrishnan writes:

The triumph of globality has to do with the fact that it seems to emanate from reality even as it speaks persuasively for that reality. As a fait accompli, globality presents itself both as reality and as a representation of that reality. It is as though the very essence of reality is global; therefore, any attempt at interrogating globality would be nothing short of discrediting reality itself. (Radhakrishnan 2003: 88)

However, the closing of this gap between representation and reality, the denial of this gap in the name of inevitability and irresistibility, can only be made in the name of those who do not need political representation or who can claim that their narratives are not representations. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that at the end of Empire, Hardt and Negri argue: “Today the militant cannot even pretend to be a representative” (413). Subaltern narratives such as ‘the wretched of the earth’, on the other hand, have presented themselves necessarily as strategic and chosen and many militants (e.g. the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, resistance groups like Hezbollah, or indigenous groups like the Maori) claim representation. But the rhetoric of messianic liberation that underlies Empire and Multitude is problematically geared towards a West-centred political amnesia. So when Hardt and Negri thunderously proclaim ‘never before has the restlessness for freedom and democracy been so widespread throughout the world’ one is compelled to ask how they would characterize the decolonization of most of Africa and Asia between the 1940s and 1970s (Hardt and Negri 2004: 353).7 What if, instead of 1989 as the magical date for global thinking, we substituted 18 April 1955, the beginning of the Bandung Conference, which involved meetings of leaders of the majority of the world’s population?

6 I do not, of course, mean to suggest that anthropology cannot participate in projects of colonialism. As an anonymous reader of this essay correctly pointed out, anthropology ‘continues to be seen as useful by the US security state, as indicated by suggestions that the CIA is trying to recruit “culture experts” to help American intelligence understand “other” cultures.’ However, the ways in which postcolonial anthropologists like Aihwa Ong are using situatedness to examine the complexities of the workings of neoliberalism, for instance, are particularly useful in checking impulses toward universalism and imperialism.

7 Lee Quinby (2004: 232, 233) also makes the powerful argument that Empire needs to be seen in the context of millenial and apocalyptic writing which homogenizes diversity and totalizes complexity through binary oppositions. She characterizes the grand narrative of empire as a ‘secular millenialism or millenial immanence’.
Unlike Hardt and Negri’s universalist rhetoric of empire, which accepts the premises of globalization theory, Agamben and Butler turn to the universal not as a philosophical ally of globalization, but rather as a means of theorizing in what they see as a clearly imperial moment. But precisely because they are offered as universalist analyses that critique imperialism, the status of the universal in these works demands attention. I begin with Agamben because his concept of bare life as well as the related state of exception have been so widely used by philosophers, sociologists, political theorists, and legal and cultural studies scholars that Agamben has become arguably one of the most influential of contemporary theorists. Slavoj Zizek (2002: 100), for instance, sees Agamben as demonstrating the fact that in today’s “post-politics”, the very democratic public space is a mask concealing the fact that, ultimately, we are all Homo sacer. Human rights theorists seek to explain terms of incarceration through the idea of people being reduced to bare life, an aspect that Judith Butler uses to understand the Bush administration’s use of indefinite detention at Guantanamo (see Jenkins 2004; Butler 2004: 67). The attractiveness of Agamben’s conceptualization of bare life lies in its potential to explain the everyday workings of power in contemporary liberal democracies, as well as in conditions of complete domination such as Guantanamo, and to demonstrate the links between the two. And yet the foundations of bare life rest upon a problematic Orientalism that has been unquestioningly accepted by the numerous scholars using Agamben.

Let us examine Agamben’s theorization of bare life, which he develops most extensively in Homo Sacer, an attempt to understand the nature of sovereignty in the West. Agamben derives his concept of bare life from the ancient Greek separation of life into zoe and bios. Zoe expresses the ‘simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)’ and bios, ‘the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group’ (Agamben 1998: 1). In the classical world, zoe or sheer living was excluded from the polis and relegated to the sphere of oikos or home (2). In contrast to Foucault, who distinguishes between biopolitical and sovereign power, Agamben argues that what has always constituted sovereignty in the West is the biopolitical production of bare life, of subjects who can be abandoned by the state, whose exclusion defines sovereign power. Agamben derives the concept of bare life from a figure from archaic Roman law: homo sacer or sacred man, who can be killed but not sacrificed, a figure produced from the sovereign power to decide what constitutes bare life, life between zoe and bios. What constitutes modernity is that the exception, bare life or the life of homo sacer, becomes the rule and starts to dwell in the political (9). And this bare life, as is seen in the idea of habeus corpus, becomes the basis for both
control and the idea of rights. Modern democracy therefore does not simply exclude bare life or the body of the *homo sacer*, but ‘shatters it and disseminates it into every individual body’ (124). Bare life thus becomes the hidden foundation for the political order. The most extreme example of this new biopolitical sovereignty is the Jew under Nazism who, as bare life, can be killed but not sacrificed (114). In camp, ‘the most absolute biopolitical space’, power and bare life confront each other without mediation and biopolitics becomes politics (171). Agamben argues that the camp is the *nomos* or the hidden model of the modern, dictating not only visible cases such as refugees but extending through society as a whole, making us all virtually *hominres sacri* (175). Elaborating further on the idea of bare life in *State of Exception*, Agamben suggests how Bush’s policy of indefinite detention produces the idea of bare life in its maximum state of indeterminacy, which reaches its end point in Guantanamo (Agamben 2005: 3-4).

Agamben’s articulation of the idea of bare life is powerful because it takes us from the tactics of power to their workings in specific situations and moves us, as he says, from the Foucauldian prison of penal law to the camp of absolute exception, from punishment to indefinite detention. And Agamben’s work is particularly attractive in its use of the ideas of bare life and sovereign exception to analyze contemporary manifestations of exceptions such as refugees or foreigners in Europe. However, what is most interesting in Agamben’s theorizations is the sheer absence of colonialism to considerations of western sovereignty. In the spirit of Agamben’s critique of Foucault, then, we can say that we need to move not only from prison to camp but also from prison and camp to colony. Such a move would not only illuminate the role of the exception of colonial difference to the construction of modern biopolitical power, but also help understand the construction of the western biopolitical subject. As postcolonial scholars have been pointing out for some time now, the very construction of the subject in the West cannot be separated from the construction of the Other in the colonies. Indeed, as Gauri Viswanathan persuasively argued in *Masks of Conquest*, the very instruments of culture used to create obedient and exemplary British subjects in public schools were first tried out in the colonies. Numerous studies of gender and domesticity have also established the intimate connections between metropolitan and colonial identities (e.g. Levine 2004; Stoler 2002).

Can we, therefore, think of bare life as formulated through the writ of *habeus corpus* in late seventeenth-century Europe without thinking of how the body in the West was itself being constructed through complex systems of identification and disidentification from the bodies of the natives in North America? More importantly, can we think about the sovereign right to determine bare life between *zoe* and *bios* without thinking about the systems...
of racial/human classification propounded by scientists such as Linnaeus, Buffon, and Blumenbach and which helped consolidate colonialism? Indeed, one only has to remember the constant construction of natives as children in need of rescue to realize the centrality of colonial exclusion to the construction of the western polis. My point is obviously not to fault Agamben for simply not having colonization as his subject matter, but rather for constructing, like Foucault, a West apart from the rest. Furthermore, if camp is an extreme manifestation of the production of bare life, a place where bare life confronts power without mediation, how does that explain whose bare life comes to be marked for a place such as the camp? Why was it particularly the Jew who was marked as bare life in Nazi camps and why are Middle Easterners being marked as bare life today? We might all be ‘virtually’ *hominæ sacrí*, but only some of us are marked to be in the permanent state of exception, a localization without order such as the camp (Agamben 1998: 175). The racial fracture at the core of modernity and colonialism, in other words, needs to be addressed if theory put at the service of addressing contemporary totalitarianism does not itself become imperial and universalizing.

Yet, on the other hand, in *Homo Sacer*, bare life is subjectified through a form of otherness. If camp violently and visibly actualized the figure of the *homo sacer* in the inmate, the most extreme figure of camp is the ‘Muselmann’, distinguished from other inmates by embodying the living dead. Agamben refers to Primo Levi’s description of this figure who in camp jargon was called ‘the Muslim’, *der Muselmann*, ‘a being from whom humiliation, horror, and fear had so taken away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic (hence the ironic name given to him)’ (185). What distinguishes him from other inmates is his complete severance from others and from his former selfhood. ‘Mute and absolutely alone, he has passed into another world without memory and without grief’ (185). Indeed, it would seem that the Muselmann is not even *zoe* because he is deprived even of animal instincts (see Abrams 2004). Agamben (1998) writes:

What is the life of the Muselmann? Can one say that it is pure *zoe*? Nothing ‘natural’ or ‘common’, however, is left in him; nothing animal or instinctual remains in his life … Antelme tells us that the camp inhabitant was no longer capable of distinguishing between pangs of cold and the ferocity of the SS. If we apply this statement to the Muselmann quite literally … then we can say that he moves in an absolute indistinction of fact and law, of life and juridical rule, and of nature and politics. (185)

Agamben presents this figure for absolute abjection, one we can argue is the ultimate manifestation of the *homo sacer* or perhaps defies even this category
to become the final illustration of exception. At the end of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben links this figure to contemporary cases of the instantiation of bare life. As such, this figure becomes central to thinking about bare life or the life of the *homo sacer*.

But why the Muselmann? What is the context of the Muselmann appearing as a figure for bare life or abjection? If, as Edward Said has argued, the Muslim or Arab, indistinguishable in the discourse on Orientalism, has been the Other of the West, we need to think about the context in which the word Muselmann appears in the language of camp. Yet Agamben does not address this issue at all in *Homo Sacer*, although he devotes an entire book to this figure, one which continues his meditations on the concept of bare life: *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Here, Agamben searches for a livable ethics through the figure of the Muselmann, the dehumanized figure for the paradox of a witness who cannot bear witness but who is the true witness. In *The Drowned and the Saved* Primo Levi describes Muselmaner as ‘submerged’ complete witnesses who, even if they had paper and pen, would not have testified because they were already dead (1989: 63–4; quoted in Agamben 1999: 33–4). Agamben, who relies heavily on Primo Levi, uses this figure to describe ‘The untestifiable, that to which no one has borne witness, has a name. In the jargon of the camp, it is der Muselmann, literally “the Muslim”’ (41). For Agamben, the Musselmann becomes a figure for a new kind of ethics, for a form of life without dignity, a bare life that conforms to nothing and is absolutely immanent (69). But while the idea of a form of life as immanent might be debatable, there is nothing immanent about the term Muselmann itself. Agamben is well aware of the cultural coordinates of the terms, but chooses to spend only two pages of *Remnants* interrogating the term itself.

Agamben begins by citing Ryn and Klodzinski’s 1987 study on the phenomenon of the Muselmann in the concentration camp: ‘They excluded themselves from all relations to their environment. If they could still move around, they did so in slow motion, without bending their knees.... Seeing them from afar, one had the impression of seeing Arabs praying. This image was the origin of the term used at Auschwitz for people dying of malnutrition: Muslims’ (43). He follows with Wolfgang Sofsky’s explanation of how the term Musleman, in common use in Auschwitz, spread to other camps as well. In Majdanek the living dead were termed ‘donkeys’, in Dachau they were ‘cretins’, in Stuthof ‘cripples’, in Buchenwald ‘tired sheikhs’ and in women’s camps Muselweiber/female muslims. (Agamben, 1999: 44). Agamben does not comment on these explanations but attempts to provide one of his own:

The most likely explanation of the term can be found in the literal meaning of the Arabic word muslim: the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God. It is

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9 For a critique of the idea of the Muselmann representing an immanent form of life, see Bernstein (2006: 44).
this meaning that lies at the origin of the legends concerning Islam’s supposed fatalism, legends of which are found in European culture starting with the Middle Ages (this deprecatory sense of the term is present in European languages, particularly in Italian). But while the Muslim’s resignation consists in the conviction that the will of Allah is at work every moment and in even the smallest events, the Muselmann of Auschwitz is instead defined by a loss of will and consciousness. (Agamben 1999: 45)

I cite this passage at length because it demonstrates Agamben’s contradictory awareness of, yet clear participation in, the discourse of Orientalism. He is cognizant of the overdetermined nature of western ideas about Islamic fatalism and the denigration of Muslims in the West, but the complication that the dehumanization of Muslims might introduce into the numerous theorizations about a post-Holocaust ethics does not concern Agamben. Instead of interrogating the idea of Islamic fatalism, Agamben reproduces it in the very attempt to distinguish between the Muslim’s resignation and that of the Muselmann of Auschwitz. In Agamben’s very certainty of what constitutes ‘the Muslim’s resignation’, the Muslim as multiply constituted subject is denied; instead, the Muslim is rendered as simply a fact, a stable object of knowledge, an ontological fact like the Orient.

What Agamben neglects to address, and what must be addressed, is how the very idea of the thingness of bare life, the unseakable, the ‘grey zone’ as Primo Levi calls it, is thought through a process of Othering. Why is the Muselmann as figure alone of no concern to Agamben? How does the Muselmann in the imaginary of Europe take such a central space that he gets deployed as the very limit of the human? Once we begin to undertake such an examination, it becomes clear that even the very idea of bare life, in its erasure of the Muselmann as anything but a figure, functions contradictorily to, on the one hand, metaphorize this Other out of existence (the Muselmann is simply the most abject camp prisoner) and to repeatedly semanticize the figure of the Arab praying or the look of the ‘oriental’ as a complete absence of will and feeling. And yet the numerous scholars using the idea of bare life and the Muselmann in fields as varied as sociology, philosophy, history, legal studies, and human rights activism have simply accepted the use of the term Muselmann along with its cultural coordinates (e.g. Bernstein 2006; McQuillan 2005; Norris 2000; Diken and Laustsen n.d.). Only Gil Anidjar in his groundbreaking study of the construction of the enemy pays attention to the use of the term Muselmann in camp. Anidjar’s reading demonstrates how Agamben’s analysis completely ignores, for instance, the insistent manner in which the inconsistently transliterated term Muselmann finds its way in camp jargon (Anidjar 2003: 140). Given the semanticide committed by the Nazis, their ability to decontextualize words completely, such an absence of inquiry is particularly troubling (139). Anidjar rightly refuses to
accept Primo Levi’s explanation that ‘Muslim’ is simply a term like ‘Canada’ or ‘Mexico’ – names given to certain buildings in camp – and which has no referential value and demonstrates instead how Montesquieu and Hegel see both Jews and Muslims partaking in religions that demand abjection (Anijdar 2003: 127–33).

Thus to accept the term Muselmann as non-referential or to claim that its connotations in camp literature have no relation with its usage in other contexts is to deny how Orientalism functions in the most unlikely of contexts, normalizing the dehumanization of the non-West. The very impossibility of naming the basest or liminal of human conditions without resort to the figure of the Muslim/Arab should give us pause. Indeed, the irony today is that the Muslim/Arab is used as a limit figure standing in-between the human and the non-human, a figure which in Guantanamo and in Palestine embodies the condition where life and law become indistinguishable and the killing machine becomes operative. This figure of bare life, concocted out of Orientalism, becomes the justification for conditions of indefinite detention, occupation, and ethnic cleansing.

**Whose Vulnerable Self? Butler**

While Agamben’s project in *Homo Sacer* and *Exceptional State* is to illustrate the workings of modern sovereignty till the contemporary moment, Judith Butler’s purpose in *Precarious Life* is to theorize an ethics of interdependence as the basis for a world without violence. Writing in the aftermath of 9/11, when the US was confronted with its own vulnerability, Butler attempts to articulate a positive ontology emanating from this sense of loss rather than one based on ‘violent acts of sovereignty’ (2004: xii). I will focus on the central chapter of *Precarious Life*, ‘Violence, Mourning, Politics’, in which Butler theorizes a subjectivity appropriate to 9/11 through the idea of vulnerability. Brilliant and bold, the chapter analogizes the functioning of individual subjectivity with that of the nation as subject and attempts to formulate an ethics and possibility for community on the basis of loss, vulnerability, and dependency as alternatives to the post-9/11 mood of narcissistic melancholia and retaliation against a defined Other. Butler writes:

Nations are not the same as individual psyches, but both can be described as ‘subjects’, albeit of different orders. When the United States acts, it establishes a conception of what it means to act as an American, establishes a norm by which that subject might be known. In recent months, a subject has been instated at the national level, a sovereign and extra-legal subject, a violent and self-centred subject; its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and
maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multilateral relations, its ties to the international community. It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability. (41)

Butler argues for a repudiation of this sovereign subject, based on postmodernist and feminist ideas of the relational self as well as on philosophical theorizations on recognition, and emphasizes the importance of apprehending a ‘common human vulnerability’ as the basis for a new community (30). Because we have all suffered losses and because our sense of self is always dependent upon some Other, a nurturing of this sense of incompletion/vulnerability can build a politics in which we can forge bonds with, rather than simply demonize, the Other. These bonds can then be the basis for progressive political action based on an intersubjective empathy rather than violence. A feminist conception of the self in which bodily vulnerability is protected, without being subjectively eradicated, is particularly useful for the current moment (42).

This vulnerability, Butler argues, is constituted and emphasized through recognition, a notion of subjectivity she derives from Hegel. Commenting on Hegelian recognition, Butler writes:

The struggle for recognition in the Hegelian sense ... means that ... we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition but are already involved in a reciprocal exchange, an exchange that dislocates us from our positions, our subject-positions, and allows us to see that community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition. (44)

‘To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation’ (44). To solicit recognition is to emphasize bonds with the Other instead of a violent and violence-causing separation. Butler further suggests that recognition involves more than simply validation, but rather an opportunity for growth. In envisioning a liberatory potential in the possibilities of Hegelian recognition, Butler follows a line of scholars like Alexandre Kojève (1989) and Charles Taylor (1995) who have seen Hegel’s theorization of recognition through the dialectic of the lord and bondsman in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) as a productive challenge to ideas of dominance and an articulation of the possibilities of progressive human relations (see also Honneth 1995). Hegel (1977: 111) writes: ‘Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.’ The master wishes to be recognized as master through the slave, but because the latter is a dependent consciousness, proper recognition cannot occur. The master is therefore ‘not certain of being-for-self as the truth of himself’ (111). Hegel’s
articulation thus suggests the mutual dependence of master and slave on each other for recognition and this is the Hegel that Butler uses to theorize a radical incompleteness at the heart of a subjectivity constituted through recognition. But if a radical human vulnerability, dependent upon recognition, is to be posited as the basis for a transformative ethical encounter, it is important to again ask whether this formulation of human vulnerability does not, in fact, depend on the erasure of unevenness that has been the basis for a West-centred humanism.

One of the best critiques of theories of subjectivity based on recognition came from Frantz Fanon, who in *Black Skin White Masks* radically reformulated both Hegel and Lacan by rethinking the concept of recognition from the perspective of the colonized and raced Other. Fanon argued that instead of a basic split at the heart of subjectivity, as theorized by Lacan, there is a fundamental difference for the black person who finds negative social value through the white colonist who acts as a social mirror.

‘Dirty Nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’ … Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others … But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the Other fixed me there. (Fanon 1967: 109)

For the black person, Fanon suggests, an apprehension of vulnerability and loss leads not to an empathetic subjectivity, but rather to an objecthood because the dominant culture denies him human recognition.10 To use Agamben’s terms here, we might say that the black person gets constructed as the limit of the human, as bare life. Fanon writes: ‘There is of course the moment of “being for others” of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society’ (Fanon 1967: 109). Critiquing Hegel’s exposition of the reciprocity of recognition between master and slave, Fanon emphasizes the significance of unequal power relations: ‘For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work’ (220).

Butler is well aware of the risks in postulating a common human vulnerability as the basis for a transformative ethics and politics and repeatedly acknowledges the impact of systemic inequalities to ideas of a universalized vulnerability. She writes:

I do not mean to deny that vulnerability is differentiated, that it is allocated differentially across the globe … I am referring to violence, vulnerability, and mourning, but there is a more general conception of the human with which I am trying to work here, one in which we are, from the start, given over to the other,
one in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, by virtue of bodily requirements, given over to some set of primary others. (Butler 2004: 31)

Here lies the source of Butler’s problematic humanism. It is the attempt to create a homology between the intimate and public spheres, the use of ahistorical and acontextual psychoanalytic structures as paradigms for the sociopolitical, the parallel between national policy as subject (mentioned earlier) and the ‘human’ subject.

In considering the raced Other, however, both Althusserian interpellation and Fanonian sociodiagnoses are more helpful. Althusser (1971: 176) insists that interpellation precedes birth, that familial ideological configurations create the child before birth as always-already a subject. Fanon eloquently argues that the crucial moment in the formation of subjectivity is not a basic human incompleteness but one of being marked as racially inferior in the eyes of the other. Indeed, Fanon overstates the case when he writes: ‘As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others’ (1967: 109). The point here is not that the subject ‘among his own’ is sovereign and complete, but rather that for the black person the moment of being racially constituted as Other is more significant than familial formations of subjecthood. And even if vulnerability, although recognized as highly circumscribed, becomes the basis for a progressive politics, we need to maintain some caution in thinking about the uses of vulnerability. If nations, like individuals, are dependent on others and hence vulnerable, a recognition of this vulnerability will not eliminate the problem that some vulnerabilities are more vulnerable than others, that some vulnerabilities matter more than others.11 Of course, vulnerability shouldn’t become a competitive sport, but it cannot simply be an equalizer either.

I am not suggesting that we throw out all possibility of human community, but that we maintain a vigilance about how we want to postulate that community so that it doesn’t reinscribe imperialism. Recognition, as some critics have warned, is necessarily caught within the logic of appropriation and there is no reason to think that a recognition based on vulnerability would simply sidestep appropriation (Yar 2001: 57). However, instead of closing off recognition completely as the Fanonian anti-political moment which freezes and shatters the Other, we might use it to refashion a moment of intersubjective recognition that recognizes inequality, questions the idea of a common human identity, opens a space for contestation and self-critique, and is always contingent (Schapp 2003: 12). A new humanism that doesn’t recognize the ongoing unequal history of humanism is susceptible, even in this post-postmodern moment, to forms of neo-Enlightenment humanism.12 The universalizing strains in the theories of Hardt and Negri, Agamben, and Butler suggest that colonial difference, the racial fracture at
the heart of modernity, is alive and well today. Consequently, as the problematic imperatives of thinking through a global ethics, a global politics, and a global subjectivity are sounded, we are going to be confronted with the spectre of the global becoming imperial. Even so seemingly benign and egalitarian a discourse such as human rights, as many critics have noted, can often be a latterday version of the language of nineteenth-century British imperialism, crassly used today to justify military intervention (Dahbour 2007: 105–32). To put it another way – in terms of Walter Mignolo’s (2000) superb formulation – all of us have local histories, but only for some of us can those local histories become global designs. This question of whose localisms become everyone’s globalisms is a crucial one for thinking not only about political power, but also about global resistances and global cultural practices. In order to demonstrate how resistance movements deemed as global are necessarily partial, I will briefly examine the workings of the World Social Forum, arguably the most visible voice for an international community clamouring for an alternative to global capitalism.

An/Other World is Possible

Many theorists argue that contemporary resistances to global capitalism have taken on radically new form, concretized in the Battle of Seattle in 1999. Unlike earlier left movements unified under a party ideology or the identity based new social movements of the 1960s, Seattle was the outcome of an informal worldwide network of people and groups opposed to the machines of structural readjustment – the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF. Meanwhile, protesters against the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, started preparing for an anti-Davos summit and on the heels of Seattle, came the World Social Forum (WSF) in 2001 in Porto Alegre with the slogan ‘Another World is Possible!’ The WSF was designed to bring together anti-globalization forces to coincide with the meeting of the World Economic Forum at Davos. Conceived as a non-hierarchical entity with a rhizomatic structure of networks, each linked to the other and irreducible to an overarching totality, it pitted itself against a rapacious neoliberal agenda. It pitched itself as the expanded space of civil society against economic globalization, corporatization and the sanctity of the market. Naomi Klein (2001) described this first WSF as the end of the end of history’. Hardt and Negri (2003: xvi) wrote: ‘The World Social Forum at Porto Allegre has already become a myth, one of those positive myths that define our political compass. It is the representation of a new democratic cosmopolitanism, a new anti-capitalist transnationalism, a new intellectual nomadism, a great movement of the multitude.’

13 Interestingly, Michael Hardt (2002) makes the bold claim that despite the fact that the majority of the representatives, including the Brazilian PT (Workers’ Party), at the forum argued for protecting national sovereignty (and therefore were like the leaders at Bandung) against capitalist globalization, the majority of the participants may well have occupied the non-sovereign position of the raucous multitude who will finally hold sway.
Yet the very absences and gaps within the WSF speak to the boundaries that mark the movement. The WSF, for instance, has refused to express opinions on Palestine, Venezuela, or Argentina, and has excluded participation by representatives of organizations such as the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) which though arguably anticorporatization, engage in armed resistance (Teivainen 2002: 625–6). In 2003 the council rejected demands to make statements about the invasion of Iraq. While this distancing from issues related to particular nations and from violence reflects the WSF’s Charter of Principles, which is geared toward avoiding political stances that would commit the diverse participating groups to a position, it also points to a perceived disjuncture between the machines of structural readjustment and the politics of colonialism and imperialism which is untenable at best.14 The WTO, IMF and World Bank are not simply engines of capitalist globalization, but also, more importantly, of western capitalist imperialism. The IMF and World Bank, always headed by Americans and Europeans, respectively, act, as Joseph Stiglitz (2002: 40) puts it, like colonial rulers. So to simply be ‘apolitical’ about the colonial occupation of Palestine, for instance, while exuberantly chanting slogans against the evil trio – the WTO, IMF and World Bank – is to deny the workings of colonialism in capitalist globalization and to engage in a far easier and less confrontational politics of global resistance.15

The WSF has also been criticized on the grounds of race. As many observers pointed out, the 2001 and 2002 WSF meetings were largely white events, without substantial participation from Asia and Africa. Even the Brazilians participating in the forum were, as a whole, whiter than the average Brazilian (Teivainen 2002: 626). To partly alleviate the problem of the parity of participation, the decision was made to host the 2004 meeting in Mumbai, India. In 2006 the forum was decentralized and met at three different locations: Caracas, Venezuela; Bamako, Mali; and Karachi, Pakistan. However, a more diverse racial participation has not meant that issues of racial oppression are of major significance for the forum. Indeed, the very terms privileged by the WSF – corporatization, economic globalization, neoliberalism – have invited criticism from various quarters, from people who contend that issues of self-determination, race and indigeneity get buried under the rhetoric privileged by the universalizing logic of the WSF. The question that these groups have taken up is the following: who is authorized to speak on behalf of a global civil society and who gets left out?16 Andile Mngxitama (2005: 4), a Johannesburg-based land rights activist, for instance, points to the indifference to concerns of race and the lack of prominence given to the black question in global resistance. Indeed, it was telling that by the time of the fourth WSF in Mumbai, many who felt that the particular concerns of race and peasantry were being ignored, organized to form Mumbai Resistance 2004.

14 Number 6 of the Charter of Principles states: ‘The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. No one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants.’ See Leite (2005: 10).

15 This does not mean, however, that activists participating at the meetings cannot hold demonstrations. In 2005, for instance, there were anti-US rallies protesting the invasion of Iraq.

16 Even in so decentred an organization as the WSF, the Charter of Principles operates as a voice articulating the principles that matter to a global civil society.
Others, like Aziz Choudry (2005: 1), argue that ‘The doomsday scenario of corporate rule, transnational plunder, environmental and social disaster which many opponents of the global free market economy warn of has long been everyday reality for many Indigenous Peoples.’ To make this critique is not to question the motivations of the organizers of the World Social Forum or to suggest that the issues raised in the forum are not integral to understanding and resisting a rapacious capitalism. But precisely because the WSF presents itself as a global resistance movement, we should be vigilant about what constitutes the global and what gets left out. Whose global resistance and for whom are questions we should continue to raise. What critics like Choudry suggest is that by downplaying the importance of movements for self-determination, these voices for global resistance fail to acknowledge longstanding injustices and the continued colonization of settler colonies, issues that ought to be central to a global civil society.

The end of the Cold War and the need to find theoretical paradigms useful for the post-9/11 world have created in the West an allure for different kinds of universal theories. Yet, as some critics have suggested, universalizing or globalizing theories need to recognize the limits of universalization at the outset. Thus, Etienne Balibar (1995) proffers a notion of ‘ambiguous universality’ by contending that no discussion about universality can proceed with a “univocal” concept of “the Universal”. Similarly, Zillah Eisenstein (2004: 29) reformulates humanism by suggesting possibilities for multiple ‘partial connections which are similarly different and differently similar’. Instead of universality, she posits the idea of ‘polyversality’. Such healthy scepticisms about global theory are necessary or theory can ominously parallel the dictates of neoliberal global capitalism and reflect, largely, the concerns of the West. It is therefore important to hold on to the postcolonial call to decolonize theory because – like Rey Chow (1992: 157) – I believe that the colonial in the term *postcolonial* is operative within global capitalism and global culture and perhaps even more so in global progressive intellectual culture in which the traces of western parochialism parading as universalism are so well masked. And yet I am not suggesting that the task of decolonization is ever complete. Cultural colonialism continues to reinvent itself in ways that are unpredictable, non-synchronous, non-linear, and unfamiliar. Decolonizing theory, if it has to mean anything, must be a continual process, a dialectical one of critique and self-critique, constantly alert to processes of recolonization.
References


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