To Be or Not to Be Modern?

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Summary

Contemporary French philosophers typically characterise modern Western thought as an egocentric assimilation of the Other by the Self. Similar to Western thought's reductive relationship towards alterity, the relationship between Europe and Africa is, more often than not, seen as an asymmetric one of Europeanisation. The ethical dilemma being addressed in this essay concerns a possible way of interacting with the Other without necessarily violating or reducing its alterity. An ethical appeal demands a response, for ignoring the appeal and remaining silent amounts to "murdering" the Other. However, a response necessarily amounts to a violation. A critical analysis of two discourses on postcolonial Africa is conducted to address this dilemma: a political and urbanistic discourse. The first is that of the South African president, Thabo Mbeki's briefing on the implementation of the *Millennium Africa Renaissance Programme* (MAP) at the World Economic Forum held on 28 January 2001. The urbanistic discourse is a study on the Nigerian city of Lagos performed by "The Harvard Design School Project" (HPC). Using a "comparative methodology" these two discourses are critically analysed in an effort to find an alternative African modernity, an ethical alternative that leaves the alterity of the Other intact.

Opsomming

Kontemporêre Franse filosowe tipeer moderne Westerse denke as 'n egosentriese beweging waarin die Self die Ander assimileer. Soortgelyk aan Westerse denke se reduserende verhouding tot andersheid, word die verhouding tussen Europa en Afrika meestal beskou as 'n asimmetriese betrekking waarin Afrika geëuropeaniseer word. Die etiese dilemma wat in hierdie essay aangespreek word het betrekking op 'n moontlike wyse waarop die Self kan omgaan met die Ander sonder die noodwendige geweldpleging teen andersheid of verskraling van verskil. 'n Etiese beroep vereis 'n antwoord, want om die beroep te ignoreer en stil te bly beteken om die Ander te "vermoor". Terselfdertyd kom 'n antwoord noodwendig altyd neer op 'n geweldpleging. Om hierdie dilemma aan te spreek word 'n kritiese analise van twee diskoerse oor postkoloniale Afrika uitgevoer: 'n politieke en urbanistiese diskoers. Eersgenoemde is die Suid-Afrikaanse president, Thabo Mbeki, se voorligting oor die implementering van die *Millennium Africa Renaissance Programme* (MAP), gelewer op die Wêreld Ekonomiese Forum, op 28 Januarie 2001. Die urbanistiese diskoers is 'n studie oor die Nigeriese stad, Lagos, uitgevoer deur "The Harvard Design School Project" (HPC). Met behulp van 'n "vergelykende metodologie" word hierdie twee diskoerse krities geanaliseer ten einde 'n alternatiewe moderniteit vir Afrika te probeer vind, 'n etiese alternatief wat die andersheid van die Ander ongedeerd laat.

> Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! ... I know: nobody ever arrested me. Nor are they ever likely to. Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?[1]
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> (Rushdie 1984: 23)

1 Introduction: Sketching the Scenario and Situating the Ethical Dilemma

Africa can be conceived of as a *heterotopia* – a heterotopia par excellence. The heterotopia is, after all, the site of violence and transgression where disparate elements can coexist as difference (Foucault [1967]1998).[2] According to Foucault, a heterotopia has the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are, in themselves, incompatible (p. 181). It is a site where we can speak of the possibility of the impossibility of convergence, because a confrontation with the other necessarily means being violated. The mere awareness of the other is a violation of its alterity. And Africa has been violated. Even as we write on Africa now – as Europeans – Africa is *being* violated (and, as in the above quotation taken from Rushdie's *Shame*, we are reminded of our disputable ability to speak at all ...). But before we address the ethical dilemma at the heart of this paper, we should first attempt to construct an image of postcolonial Africa today.

1.1 Today: Envisioning an "African Renaissance"

The stage is set by the South African president, Thabo Mbeki's briefing on the implementation of the Millennium Africa Renaissance Programme (MAP) at the World Economic Forum held on 28 January 2001. According to him, "MAP is a declaration of a firm commitment by African leaders to take ownership and responsibility for the sustainable *economic* development of the continent".[3] Furthermore, MAP's starting point is a critical examination of *Africa's post independence experience* and acceptance that things have to be done *differently* to achieve meaningful socio-economic progress. Accordingly, this programme contains a vision for the *redevelopment* of Africa. These development projects are going to be negotiated with their partners in Africa *as well as* with the rest of the world. This partnership with the rest of the world is presented as a crucial prerequisite – especially developed countries, multilateral institutions and (global and national) private sector players are to be addressed. MAP has already, according to Mbeki, engaged Western political leaders and they feel confident with regards to their goodwill and commitment to this programme which primarily aims at countering the *erroneous legacy of Afropessimism*.

Furthermore, MAP proposes a Global Partnership for Africa's development and inclusion in the world. In Mbeki's words,

> this poses a challenge and an *opportunity* to all countries of the world. The *continued marginalisation of Africa from the globalisation process*, and the *social exclusion* of the vast majority of our people constitute a serious *threat* to global social stability. Implementation of our programme will not only be a major step forward in developing effective global governance but also make a profound contribution to the future welfare of the entire globe.
>
> http://www.africafinancereview.com/archive/2001/02/leader.asp

By ways of problematising Mbeki's discourse, we would like to make four preliminary remarks:

1. In the very first instance Africa could be seen as a continent in dire need, and it looks towards "developed" countries for assistance. Mbeki's discourse is primarily phrased in terms of the *economic*. But he resorts to a very astute rhetoric wherein he simultaneously refrains from presenting Africa as an indigent continent while evoking developed countries' (as former colonisers') culpability for Africa's predicament. For example, he admits that African countries ("for a range of complex reasons") have *weak states*. Yet he is quick to add that the focus of the programme is not increased aid, but increased *investments* in viable infrastructure. The fact remains, however, that postcolonial Africa is now a "postindependent" continent.

2. This is closely related to our second remark, namely that great emphasis is put on *globalisation.* Africa wants to be inscribed in the global capitalistic economy as equal partner, i.e. without sacrificing its independence and (one could add) without falling prey to yet another form of colonisation by the West. But does capitalism not, by its very nature, function by melting everything that is solid into thin air, by alienating every identity and every independence? Does Africa's thirst for inclusion in the global market not undermine its intended renaissance?

3. This brings us to our third remark: Mbeki makes no explicit reference to an *African cultural identity* as such. What is at stake is a revival or a rebirth of Africa, but it is significant and not merely coincidental, (as he explicitly points out in his opening remarks) that his briefing on the implementation of MAP is presented at the World Economic Forum meeting. A wide variety of issues is dealt with: socio-economic progress; the development of an industrial strategy, of infrastructure and of a financing mechanism; investment in information and communication

technology, etc.. But nowhere is there any mention of the re-establishment of an authentic African identity. It was back in 1996 when Mbeki made his famous "I am an African" speech to the South African parliament which set the basis of a new social movement to promote pride in being African and to catapult the continent's economic development. This suggests that the issue of an African identity is part and parcel of the renaissance dream, but which is deliberately omitted when presented to an international audience (as opposed to his "home crowd"). Might this be the indication of an underlying trauma? A trauma concerning the colonial violation of African identity, not made manifest for fear of making vulnerable that which has only very recently been regained. In this light the so-called "African Renaissance" now appears to be less of a renewal than mere scar tissue precariously covering its desecration by a European rationality that had to unmake "savage" Africa to remake and to eventually discard the African colonies.

4. And in the final instance, how should the "developed" countries respond? Now that Africa is attempting a phoenix-like ecstasis out of its colonial ashes, is not Europe once again pushed into the role of a deus ex machina to offer an alternative to the remnants of a European modernity with which Africa is saddled? A European modernity from which it cannot rid itself without being left with nothing. But can Europe, on the one hand, offer a non-reductive alternative without falling into precisely the position that was to be problematised (colonialism); and on the other hand, can it remain silent *and* remain ethical at the same time?

1.2 The Philosophical Context of the Ethical Dilemma

The question at hand is by no means being asked for the first time. A pattern has emerged in the French philosophy of the generation running roughly from the mid to late sixties up to the present. It is the generation associated with the terms "post-structuralism" and "postmodernism" and the names Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-François Lyotard, amongst others. The pattern concerns difference and its valorisation. The Same and the Other and their interaction or relation towards each other can be conceptualised in different ways. Broadly speaking the Same could be defined as that which is known, familiar or ordered, and the Other as that mysterious unexplained "something" that lies outside and defines the limits of the known, that which is exterior and foreign. The relationship between the Same and the Other is an important one because, as Althusser points out, identity or consciousness, whether it is individual or social, cannot accede to the Real through its own internal development but only

"by the radical discovery of what is *other than itself*" (Althusser 1965: 144). However, this conception relates to our ethical dilemma only indirectly, and might, in the first instance, be misleading. More relevant is the most common "postmodernist" criticism levelled against the egocentric (Eurocentric) assimilation of the Other (Africa) by the Self (Europe), which, according to Levinas, has characterised the Western metaphysical tradition, a legacy passed onto us from Plato to Hegel. According to Levinas's reading of the history of Western thought, the Other has generally been regarded as something provisionally separate from the Same (or the Self), but ultimately reconcilable with it. Otherness, or alterity, appears as a temporary interruption to be eliminated as it is incorporated into or reduced to sameness (Davis 1996: 3). Derrida reiterates the same idea in "Violence and Metaphysics", in which he scrutinises Levinas's critique of totalising thought: Western thought is characterised by its neutralising effect on the Other, by the fact that it nullifies the Other by converting or transforming it into the Same. It is responsible for a conversion or reformation – a proselytisation of the Other, to the Same/Self. Thus Derrida adds that the prevailing rationality has the same effect as oppression (Derrida 1976).

Postmodern thought can therefore, roughly speaking, be characterised as that thought which refuses to turn the Other into the Same. Postmodern thought also recognises, however, that the Other can never speak for itself *as* the Other. Simon During defines postcolonialism as the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts or images (During in Milner, Thomson & Worth 1990: 114). Accordingly, postcolonialism might derive hope and legitimation from postmodern thought's refusal to turn the Other into the Same. On the other hand, postmodernity's concomitant refusal to acknowledge the plausibility of a return to "uncontaminated" origins or identities unequivocally undermines the possibility of postcolonial identity. But let us look more closely at the (historical) context of the ethical dilemma at play here.

1.3 The Historical Context of the Ethical Dilemma

Similar to Western thought's reductive relationship towards alterity, the relationship between Europe and Africa has more often than not been an asymmetric one of Europeanisation (Ritter 1969).[4] Europe has directed its violating gaze to Africa – panoptic[5] and asymmetric: "to see without being seen" (Foucault 1977). In this Europe was not driven by curiosity for the other to transgress its borders time and again – it just wanted more of the same, it wanted to meet itself *in* the other. Which is why Africa has actually remained absent. Europe's goal was never accommodation, but assimilation: it forced African reality into the straitjacket of existing opinions. Instead of objectively

recording reality, Europe sought to obtain representations which answered already existing European stereotypes and needs. This European image of Africa is simultaneously a representation and a misrepresentation: we saw what we wanted to see, what we were able to see (Visker 2000).

The violence inherent to colonisation is unmistakable, transparent even. African states were imprisoned as almost so many European colonies, and the prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked state, in its most excessive form, and where it is justified as moral force (Bouchard 1977: 210). The ethical status of colonisation as a form of imprisonment is of course, today, seen retrospectively, contentious and highly questionable. Present-day Europeanisation, however, is still practised under the guise of moral rehabilitation. After all, Africa is *dysfunctional;* it is in dire straits and turning its needy gaze towards its former saviour-enslaver, Europe. Wars are raging, governmental structures are crumbling, economies are failing and people are starving. Africa's quandary is that it has fallen prey to the sad paradigm of the terror brought on by thinking in terms of binary oppositions such as that between savagery and culture. According to this point of view, the loss of culture bears with it the inevitable onslaught of savage anarchy.

However, the postcolonial African predicament is more complex. Having lost its "innocence", after being violated by European colonisers, Africa's original "wildness" has been tamed and drained – it can no longer sustain Africa. Not that we hereby suggest some sort of noble (mythical) point of pre-European origin to which it can no longer return. There might not have been any pure Hobbesian state of nature before Europe sunk its claws into Africa, but it did function in some way or other – independently, and more importantly, independent of Europe's value judgements: it didn't *have* to do well according to Europe's standards.

So now it lives amidst the large-scale fragmentation of previously held systems of orientation or frames of meaning-giving reference. It is left with mere fragments, the debris of an Afro-European tradition – unwilling to subject itself to its ever-receding claims to authority, and uncertain as to what awaits it in its rejection thereof. "Original" African culture has been contaminated – dispirited and enfeebled. Europe has extracted itself from its African colonies. As violator, it has disengaged itself only to paradoxically re-engage in African affairs as "saviour", as bearer of the dubious torch of enlightening reason. The same torch that lit the original flame of a modernity which we now seek an alternative for, an alternative which would, per definition, be yet another European alternative, yet another form of Europeanisation. It might also be added that postcolonial Africa is left with an *economic* predicament and by turning towards "developed" countries, as Mbeki proposes, it actively participates in its own re-enslavement or violation. We shall return to the economic aspect later.

The question, which presents itself, is whether or not Europe has anything to offer Africa apart from a violation of its alterity. And if Europe is capable of being other than violating; if it can conjure up a voice that speaks not as a representative consciousness articulating the stifled truth of the collectivity from on high, what possible form can this other discourse take? What, after all, is Europe's stake in its involvement in Africa? Why bother to speak at all? Is it to purge itself from its own inherited collective debt that it voices an enlightened protest against colonisation, domination, racism, discrimination, etc. (which seems inevitably to result in a kind of reprise of the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" – in an autocolonisation, as Visker points out)? Or is it in an effort to civilise that wild element in our Western culture that it offers its generous contributions towards taming Africa? On the other hand, can it remain silent in the face of the other? Can it evade the appeal of the Other which (as Levinas has shown) is an *ethical* obligation?

1.4 Going Beyond the *Violence-silence* Dilemma: A Possible Third Position

Accordingly there seems to be three possible responses, two of which turn out to be, upon closer investigation, mere academic options, rather than desirable alternatives. In the face of its ethical obligation towards Africa, Europe cannot possibly resort to yet another form of violation nor can it turn a blind eye. What course of action is left? What possible third position can Europe take towards Africa? The deconstructivist would see an ideal opportunity in our seemingly insurmountable dilemma – he would advise us to place the terms in which the dilemma is posed under suspicion: does this binary opposition between self and other reflect our problematic accurately? It would lead us to explore a possible alienation of both the identity of the self and the alterity of the other. In following this train of thought, the self and the other might no longer fit the rigid oppositional structure of a binary logic. This course of action might not serve to dissolve our dilemma, but we harbour no such pretensions. Rather we shall attempt a tentative transgressive act: a working on the limits of modern thought. "For modern thought", as Foucault writes, "no morality is possible .... Thought ... is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions it becomes ... a perilous act" (Foucault 1970: 328).

Does this imply that an alternative African modernity ought to be phrased in terms other than that of modern thought, and is this at all possible? Whether or not this approach opens the way towards an ethical response which does not "break", "dissociate", or "enslave" as soon as it is articulated, remains to be seen.

Towards a critical assessment of another response we shall turn to an urbanistic discourse on postcolonial Africa. But why do we turn to urbanism to

deconstruct the terms of an "ethical" dilemma? One of the advantages urban theory offers is its somewhat hybrid character between practice and theory: it takes material constructs, actual movements of people and goods, the (trans)-formations of territory and space, etc., as its object of study and orders them by using theoretical paradigms. Another point is that the scope of the study we shall use also includes socio-political aspects, demographics as well as global, cultural, and economical phenomena. It is not limited to urbanism in the strict sense of the word. But how do urbanists write on Africa? Rather positively, as we shall see.

> We are resisting the notion that Lagos represents an African city en route to becoming modern. Or, in a more politically correct idiom, that it is becoming modern in a valid, "African" way. Rather, we think it possible to argue that Lagos represents a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalising modernity.
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> (Koolhaas, Boeri, Kwinter, Tazi & Fabricius 2001: 653)

2 An Urbanistic Discourse on Postcolonial Africa: "The Harvard Design School Project" on the City (HPC) of Lagos

A study on the Nigerian city of Lagos performed by "The Harvard Design School Project" (HPC) provides us with the source material for our reading of an urbanistic genre in postcolonial Africa. It has recently appeared in the collaborative volume entitled *Mutations* (Koolhaas et al. 2001: 653) which incorporates a wide variety of studies, analyses and texts on the theme of urban-architectural mutations as it is found evolving around the globe. These essentially urbanistic studies and texts serve as a platform upon which a wide variety of elements are brought into play.

In looking at the African city of Lagos, HPC certainly does not attempt to return to some mythical starting-point of noble pre-European origin. Its critique of developed countries and economies (by way of Lagos) does not proceed from a primitive, unvarnished perspective, or from the romanticised (Western) vision of a naively native Africa. It is not precolonial Africa that is offered as critical yardstick against which Western capitalistic organisations are measured. For Lagos criticises the first-world on its own level, i.e. of economic (urban) functionality and efficiency, and offers alternative capitalistic, institutional and urban scenarios and strategies. In what follows, we shall investigate this more closely.

2.1 The Microeconomics of Lagos: Dysfunctionality Generating Greater Efficiency

According to HPC, the fundamental conundrum of Lagos can be contributed to its *continued, productive, even exuberant existence* in spite of the near-complete absence of those infrastructures, systems, organisations, and amenities that define the word "city" in terms of Western planning methodology. In short, and in whichever way, it is a city that "works". Its shortcomings have generated ingenious, critical alternative systems which demand a redefinition of certain canonical concepts in the fields of urban planning and related social sciences. The operation of Lagos megalopolis, according to HPC, illustrates the large-scale efficacy of systems and agents considered marginal, liminal, informal, or illegal according to traditional understandings of the city.

To illustrate the efficiency of these marginal systems HPC refers to the "traffic jam" or "bottleneck" which in Lagos has become an opportunity for entre-preneurial activity: the incomplete road or constricted intersection has become less of a dysfunctional condition than a place of thriving economies. "Jam-space", the totally negotiable, usually illegal and hugely productive space of the traffic jam, is no longer something to fix, solve, or even rationalise. As roads jam, their traffic spills into surrounding areas, expanding motorable terrain by default. The detour redirects the infrastructure's patrons to underserved commercial districts. Jams and detours thus allow more of the city to be accessed more of the time. In short, Lagos has discovered a way of taking advantage of the traffic jam.

Another telling example is Oshodi, Lagos's most vibrant marketplace. It has transformed existing sites of the city's transport infrastructure – an incomplete on-ramp and an almost defunct railway (the last remaining but dying colonial institution). At the juncture where Oshodi is situated one finds construction mechanisms failing to connect closing segments, a cloverleaf intersection with only two-and-a-half leaves. The dysfunctional off-ramps, otherwise impediments to circulation, have been recuperated as an enormously functional intersection: this non-place of congestion has been turned into destination. Oshodi's "incomplete" layout in many ways increases the number of things that it can do. Taking advantage of the interplay of different traffic patterns, many services and amenities have colonised the off-ramps and roundabouts. Furthermore, Oshodi sustains itself in a state of flux – it continually remakes and replenishes itself through the accumulated exchanges of naira (Nigerian currency) and goods and by the movements of its individual mobile traders. In short, Oshodi succeeded in transforming a defunct remnant of colonial rule into a focal point of economic activity; it is literally "marketing" an unfinished cloverleaf.

2.2 Lagos's Microeconomics at the Forefront of Globalising Modernity

HPC focuses on the seemingly dysfunctional elements, the extreme cases as they are found in the urbanscape of Lagos. Upon closer investigation such extremity is shown to be a very rational response (or correction) to keep, what is considered to be a dysfunctional scenario in Western terms from collapsing. HPC, however, is not just interested in showing how Lagos cleverly utilises the structural "left-overs" of its colonial past. HPC also shows how, in the here and now, Lagos acts out alternative modernities, in a more affirmative way. HPC even goes so far as to call Lagos "at the forefront of globalising modernity" (Koolhaas et al. 2001: 653).

Therein HPC is actually turning the traditional tables: no longer should Africa look toward developed countries for guidance and aid, but developed countries should look toward Africa to learn from its ingenious mutations born of its shortcomings. Lagos's mutations are presented here as foreshadowing the next stage in the development of capitalism.

Approximately half of the study is devoted to a case study to illustrate the latter. This is done by ways of an analysis of an electronics market in Lagos (pp. 702-716). This market is presented as a paradigmatic case study of the most recent, advanced structures, methods and strategies in global market capitalism. HPC is literally hereby saying "that Lagos [Africa] is not catching up with us [Europe]", but that "we may be catching up with Lagos" (p. 653).

Even though (and in spite of the fact that) Lagos does not conform to Western standards or methodologies, it functions more efficiently without them. So not only does HPC urge us to go beyond "first-world" standards, but it also argues that Lagos effectively questions the actuality and effectivity of these standards. Once we succeed in ridding ourselves of our own (logocentric) standards, Lagos succeeds in uncovering the loopholes and dysfunctionality of these standards and effectively offers an alternative to them. But how does HPC give these bold assertions substance and credibility? How does HPC conceive of this city – considered to be a "third-world" city by the Western world – as a highly advanced node in the network of globalising modernity? Let us look more closely at their study of Alaba.

As mentioned above, Alaba is an electronics market in Lagos, also known as "little Japan" since it accounts for seventy-five per cent of the electronics trade in West Africa. HPC also refers to it as "the largest electronics market on the continent" (p. 703). HPC shows how it is connected with other electronics markets all around the globe: Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Italy, Spain and the United Arab Emirates. The "Alabans" import their materials and products from these markets: mostly used goods, or off-sales, parts as well as end products. Once in Alaba, they are either immediately sold,

distributed or reassembled. According to HPC, Alaba's operating formula is based on "circumvention of traditional supply chains" (p. 702).

HPC also uses terms such as "sector-straddling", and "fusion" (pp. 702, 708), referring to Alaba's being between sectors, between the official and the unofficial, the formal and the informal (or illegal). According to them, the temporary fusion between informal processes and "mature" institutions might even be read as a blueprint for progressive urban strategies (p. 708). The equidistance of Alaba Market from the (official) Apapa Port and the (unofficial) Benin border town of Seme, for instance, enabled Alaba to straddle the two sectors which in turn "maximized the market's responsiveness to supply-side opportunities" (p. 703).

Alaba also parasitises upon other sector-straddling markets in Southeast Asia, Russia, and, most recently, the Middle East. Mimesis or imitative technology is part of the Alaba formula: Mercantile prospectors (or "boy scouts") are sent to the various "free market walhallas" – to Taipei, Moscow, Singapore, Mexico City, Sao Paolo and Dubai ("the Klondike of free market success") – to "take notes" (p. 709).

At this point it might appear as if Alaba Market, by "making do" with the "secondary and tertiary material cycles" of the modern world is merely a free-loader riding on the back of the first-world global economy, albeit a clever one. This, however, would be to miss HPC's point. For HPC, it is precisely this ability to be "the intelligent parasite" that has become the very paradigm of "post-/late-capitalism" and which puts Alaba at the forefront of global capitalism. HPC alludes to "the Japanese experience in imitative technology" (p. 709), and indeed, it is precisely industrial espionage that has enabled the Japanese to make the same (high-tech, high-quality) goods as their American and European counterparts more cost-effectively. By just copying their know-how, the Japanese avoid the high costs associated with primary market- and related research. And this is an injunction right from the top – HPC quotes former Nigerian secretary of Finance, Allison Ayida: "Our laws on patents and copyrights are premature. We should, with a sense of urgency, encourage and condone industrial espionage and piracy" (p. 709). Again we should not interpret this indelicate statement negatively. For HPC informal markets, such as Alaba are not doomed to archaic inefficiencies (as Clifford Geertz suggests), but are at the forefront of the "globalisation regime" – a regime characterised by speed, incessant signification, unimpeded capital flows, the hyperreality of credit and fiscality, and the amplification of microdynamics as keys to profit (p. 715).

2.3 Connecting Globalising Modernity and the African "Urban" Condition

Up until this point we have mainly talked economics. Since we are essentially dealing with an urbanistic study, it is crucial to see how HPC links these global capitalistic phenomena with the urban. We could summarise HPC's project as exploring urban forms and phenomena generated by global, capitalistic processes. According to HPC, the greatest potentials for new urbanisms can be found in the Lagosian winning combination of post-/late-capitalism and informal, marginal and even illegal elements. At this point it is important to stress that HPC understands "urban" in the broadest sense of the word – it also includes social, political and cultural aspects. You could say that they conceive of the urban in terms of the Greek *polis*, which refers to a political, judicial, economic, as well as an urban, territorial entity. HPC shows how an essentially economic entity, Alaba market, generates mutations on all levels including the urban, social, judicial and political level. Alaba market actually "built a town around itself" (p. 703).

It has organised its own civic councils, banks, security organisations, telecom-network, its own provision of churches, its own brand of democracy and even its own form of justice (p. 703).

Of course, it has also organised its own spatial logic and features: landscape rather than city without well-defined streets; organised underdetermined stretches in which materials, goods and peoples circulate and communicate in un-identifiable fashion.

Moreover, not only do the post-/late-capitalistic processes, based on the intelligent straddling and fusing of the formal and informal, produce radical urbanities (in the broadest sense of the word). The inverse is also true: African cities form the ideal terrain for these global mechanisms:

> Globalisation has provided a vast new range of opportunities for economic and political actors to operate outside increasingly outmoded laws and regulatory systems, as well as to spawn new relationships among them. African cities exude an availability to these opportunities precisely because they appear outside of effective control, and thus anything could happen.
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> (Simone in Koolhaas et al. 2001: 715)

The question of course is what exactly makes African cities such an ideal host for these post-/late-capitalistic logics? Could it be located in their flexibility to change regardless of fixed, preconceived urban models that determine what a city ought to be, and how it should work, rather than – in the case of Alaba – in how it works in reality? From HPC's repeated testimony that "Lagos works" (p. 652)? We might deduce that its essence lies in its functioning, in the fact

that it works. Lagos harbours no theoretical ideals or utopian conceptualisations such as could be said of the modern city – it just works, it is a practice or even more: "a form of collective research, conducted by a team of eight-to-twenty-five million" (p. 719).

This incipient working and functioning independently of ideological constructs, identified by HPC, would then make it an ideal terrain for hosting the free-flows of global capital. At the end of the analyses globalising modernity seems to fuse into the "African condition". If Alaba market is a paradigmatic example of late-/post-capitalistic logic, its urban scape and processes could be said to be *posturban*.

2.4 Uncovering HPC's Presuppositions

Crucial to our argument is the fact that HPC considers Lagos to be at the forefront of *globalising modernity*. More specifically this could be understood to mean the *overcoming* of isolated existing mechanisms and structures and the *progress* towards a global network by means of connective capitalistic processes. This idea is primarily Western in origin, but is rapidly enveloping the entire globe. Taking globalising modernity as their point of departure, HPC aims to lay bare those mutative effects caused by global capital and culture around the globe, including those found in so-called third-world countries, and to connect them with the mutations found in so-called first-world countries. In their own words:

> The fact that many of the trends of modern, Western cities can be seen in hyperbolic guise in Lagos suggests that to write about the African city is to write about the terminal condition of Chicago, London, or Los Angeles. It is to examine the city elsewhere, in the developing world. It is to reconsider the modern city and to suggest a paradigm for its future.
>
> (Koolhaas et al. 2001: 653)

This is illustrated, for example, by a case study investigating the desertion of the CBD of Chicago. It has become almost completely abandoned due to a complex series of factors: the flexibility of suburbia for investors; suburban "mall" culture; the exodus of the wealthier inhabitants to gated communities transforming the centre into a zone of social implosion and high-crime. This phenomenon can be connected to the globalisation of capital, to the way in which territories have become disconnected from their historical functions and programmes, indeed, with the most radical urban mutations: the CBD as local consolidation of business has fallen prey to the dislocating forces of global money-streams.

However, if we have stressed that HPC should be defined as globally oriented

urbanists which also perhaps makes them *neo-modernists*, how do we make sense of their subversive "postmodern" sensibility for the mutations (or transgressions) of modern (Western) urban theories and concepts; and how, might we ask, do they position themselves toward the alienating side of global capital? In the case of Lagos, they never evaluate these alienations negatively since they see in them "progressive urban strategies", and they still consider these mutations as part of globalising modernity itself, and even more: "at the forefront", and speak of "catching up" and "more advanced". Still it is not unimportant to stress that this position (taking globalising modernity as their point of departure) also creates a gap, which in a way is put outside the question or "questioning". HPC still seems to focus on the difference *within* the global, which excludes a problematisation of the difference *without* or *extrinsic to* globalising modernity.

3 A "Comparative Methodology": HPC Versus Mbeki

One thing that the HPC study does do, is to perform a discourse on Lagos and by extension, on the "African condition". As "Europeans" (or globalists rather, since HPC itself is already critical of modern European urban phenomena) confronted by Africa, they do not remain silent but attempt, at least tentatively, to speak without reducing Africa to "European" standards. (We refer to "European", but in the preceding part we have already shown how HPC, in their criticism of the West, have melted the former oppositions between Europe and Africa into a global modernity, into an economic, social, cultural and urban complex whose identity lies in its constant mutation and redefinition.) How does this discourse, as writing on the Other, compare to Mbeki's writing on the Self? Does either one succeed in offering us an alternative African modernity, an ethical alternative that leaves the alterity of the Other intact? Is that at all possible or merely another "modern" utopian ideal? What do we hope to gain by precariously comparing discourses and entities?

In this essay we have attempted to follow a "comparative methodology" similar to that used by Rudi Visker (2000) in *Truth and Singularity*. According to him comparative studies only become interesting when we uncover a certain "unthought" which, in attaching itself to a thought, has rendered it to a certain extent *inaccessible* and *unrepeatable* for those who come "after" it. The respective authors (being compared) thus find themselves being dispossessed by that which, in withdrawing, allows them to think. In our attempt to understand what is being said or sketched we have to take into account what the author had to leave out of the picture in order to draw it at all. In other words, in our address directed towards the other, our communication (and violation) unfolds on two levels: apart from the content ("thought"), we also

unknowingly, but inevitably impart an implicit "unthought" at the level of form. Accordingly, a confrontation between two authors only becomes interesting at that extreme point where the insurmountable gap in their respective discourses is brought to communicate. The real encounter would then amount to a confrontation with that "formal unthought" in the other's discourse, both unknowable to him and irreducible to the unthought implicit to our own discourse.

Our essay presents the same comparative logic. We commenced with a rather crude comparison between Africa (Other) and Europe (Self); in the second part we redefined and refined the terms of the comparison by broadening our rather outdated conception of a European rationality to include "globalising modernity". In the third part, Lagos, as third-world city is compared to Western first-world cities (in HPC's study), and finally, HPC's discourse, as "Europeans" writing on Africa is compared to Mbeki's discourse which, in turn, represents an African writing on Africa addressing a first-world audience. At first sight, it might appear as if HPC follows a method similar to Visker's: HPC explicitly states how precisely in the extremity of Lagos's conditions – as an urban constellation which is constantly at its limit and reformulating that limit, and therefore in its extreme point of self-alienation – it communicates with the West. HPC does not write about the (pure) identity of the other as such, it analyses the mutations in the other. And if we interpret mutation as a form of alienation (the mutated as an alienation of an original condition) we can say that it analyses the alienated other, the other insofar as she/he is essentially alienated from her/his identity. HPC's study uncovers the various ways in which global capital has mutated Lagos's urban, political and social identity. Finally it is this mutated (self-alienated) Lagos that is put in communication with Europe, not Lagos as an urban phenomenon fully coinciding with itself, i.e. not Lagos as a pure alterity. This is what is meant when they write that they resist the notion that Lagos represents an African city en route to becoming modern "in a valid, 'African' way".

By proceeding in such a way, HPC *seems to* reach beyond the "pure" identity, towards that region of inherent lack or alienation which forms the condition for the possibility of authentic, non-reductive and mutually respectful communication. This is what Mbeki's discourse on the African Renaissance seems to lack. Although he never explicitly touches upon the question of an authentic African socio-cultural identity, his temperance in this regard implicitly communicates a nostalgia for that lost origin or identity. And so he fails to reach beyond the region of "pure" identity and so too fails to address Europe without falling into precisely the position that was to be problematised – without committing an act of inverse violation by confronting the other with an unwavering identity that cannot but reduce his/her alterity to the terms of the self.

So superficially we find the same thematics, present in Mbeki's briefing and in HPC's study – both focus on the economic and on globalisation. Upon closer investigation, however, the differences become apparent: HPC proceeds by high-lighting the economic mutations in Lagos, and attributes Lagos's progressiveness regarding globalisation to these very structural deviations. Mbeki, on the other hand, maintains that Africa has continuously been marginalised from the globalisation process and attributes Africa's economic backlog to this exclusion. Mbeki laments the fact that Africa has weak states, whereas HPC sees Africa as the ideal site for globalistic processes precisely because of the greater institutional freedom still to be found there. In an article which appeared in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 15 February 1999, Anton Christen comments on Mbeki's dream of an African Renaissance: "Behind that phrase is the effort to generate a positive African self-image as a prerequisite to mastering the continent's economic and political crises".[6]

Mbeki's European audience seems to deduce that he wants to found an African Renaissance upon the preservation of an African identity. So Mbeki approaches his Western audience with a proposition, a request even – unthreateningly he approaches as a wolf in sheep's clothing, since he brings with him an identity equally capable of violation.

HPC, on the other hand, goes so far as to put the identity of the Self at stake by a confrontation with the Other. According to them, the African city forces the reconceptualisation of the traditional Western city itself. The mutations identified in Lagos are compared with the mutations found in the greater Western urban landscape. HPC understands that non-reductive communication between first- and third-world cities is only possible when extreme regions of alienation are compared. The confrontation with the alterity of the Other forces the Self to work on its limits and eventually to transgress them. In this way, HPC's analysis of the hyperbolic conditions of Lagos leads to a transgression of the traditional urban identity. HPC clearly considers the contemporary West African condition sufficiently other "to warrant a new round of postcolonial 'exploration', with different intentions and a more intensive methodology than the 19th century campaign prosecuted on the same turf" (Koolhaas et al. 2001: 718).

HPC stresses that the African city has the ability to mutate more uninhibitedly or authentically whereas Europe, despite and apart from mutable economic undercurrents (global capitalistic processes), still seems to hold fast to the bygone traditional concept of the city. The traditional city stands, as it were, steadfast and immutable (or almost) amidst the economic flux which manages to erode every other bastion of tradition. Lagos's urban, architectural, social, judicial and political structures, on the other hand, seem to mutate coextensively with global economic processes.

HPC is thus very well aware of (and mostly interested in) the fact that global

capitalism effects mutations and visible changes in other domains whereas Mbeki seems to think that Africa can celebrate its renaissance, if and only if, it can remain "uncontaminated", with the African identity intact.

4 Conclusion

We have come a long way towards an ethical *problematisation* of the search for an alternative African modernity for European modernity and postmodernity. Have we, in the preceding part, actually succeeded in thinking differently? Foucault shows that the question of knowing if you can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and thinking at all (Foucault 1992: 8). We certainly have not found solutions, but we have gained new perspective by rereading various discourses and the practices upon which they are founded. Our study has amounted to successive fragments, analyses of the "*problematisations* through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought – and the *practices* on the basis of which these problematisations are formed" (Foucault 1992: 11). But let us retrace our steps and try and reconstruct the problematisation.

We proceeded by ways of the critical analysis of two specific discourses, respectively that of Thabo Mbeki on the so-called African Renaissance, and HPC's urbanistic analysis of the Nigerian city, Lagos. Both illustrate how easily modern thought can become a perilous act.[7] Each discourse outlines a certain interaction or proposed interaction between Africa and the Western world by ways of global capitalism. What we are interested in, philosophically speaking, is how this translates into different interactions between the Self and the Other, and with that we inevitably arrive at our ethical question: How does non-reductive communication between the Self and the Other become possible? In following Levinas we have started with the premise that when confronted by the Other we are *ethically obligated* to respond, but a response invariably amounts to a violation of his/her alterity. We found ourselves facing an insurmountable dilemma: both silence and response amount to violence. At this critical juncture we – gropingly, and tentatively – attempted to deconstruct the two poles of our binary opposition, with the hope of going, with Nietzsche, beyond the proverbial "good and evil" duality. This deconstruction was done with the aid of an urbanistic study – a practice which takes the alienation of both self and other as their point of departure.

Following this course has brought us to the actual *problematisation* of the identity of the Self and the alterity of the Other in the third part of our paper. In this we have hoped to localise those remote regions of alienation at the heart of both which would finally be able to communicate in a non-reductive and mutually respectful way. But what have we been able to deduce from the two discourses?

Mbeki wants to found an African Renaissance upon the preservation of the African identity, whereas HPC embraces the mutative effects of global capitalism and therein localises its strength. Mbeki does not seem to have come to terms with the inevitable alienation caused by Africa's colonial past and fortified by its global capitalist future.

HPC, on the other hand, selectively focuses on the "positive" mutations. Its research is based on nonrepresentative samples which cannot be said to represent the general population or the entire continent. (The many wars raging chronically in Africa immediately come to mind, in part driven by ethnic, religious, cultural fervours that are more difficult to explain solely in terms of mutations induced by something like a globalising modernity.) But then again, the aim of HPC is not the accurate representation or reflection of a reality that can only amount to the joining of the general chorus of lament over Africa's seemingly endless wars and crises. That HPC leaves to CNN. Instead their aim is to offer innovative alternatives or "new scenarios" for a newly fashioned urbanism, by exploring the intensities and mutations produced by a global capitalistic culture. HPC stressed the "positive" phenomena in Africa because only these phenomena can indicate the way towards change.

HPC, however, views Lagos as being at the forefront of "globalising modernity". And this is a very problematic assumption in the light of the fact that, as Foucault reminds us, for modern thought no morality is possible – it proceeds by ways of a violent logocentric rationality swallowing all difference in its path. Instead of offering an alternative modernity for Africa, they are in fact only preaching the extension or globalisation of European modernity with its two corollary notions of progress and overcoming.

In the light of this last remark, we might ask ourselves of course, how it is possible to critically overcome European thought and the culture of modernity. Nietzsche and Heidegger have shown that the concept of "overcoming" belongs to that same system, and must therefore also be rejected. It is impossible, they suggest, for us to think our way out of modernity with the philosophical system of thought and the language supplied by modernity; yet no system that has "overcome" the errors of modernity and "progressed" beyond them is currently available to us, and there is no choice but to continue to use the existing system. This leaves us, along with Nietzsche and Heidegger with a quandary – but it is a quandary that for Gianni Vattimo defines postmodernity itself as a "peculiar 'critical' relationship with Western modern thought" (Vattimo 1988: 3) that works to dissolve the culture of modernity, while prolonging it by continuing to depend upon its philosophical system. Even though HPC emphasises the

mutations of modern constructs and thereby are postmodernist in their analyses, this interest does not serve to dissolve the culture of modernity, but is founded upon the modernist belief in progress and overcoming.

If we wish to take seriously the Heideggerian notion of the "unthought" we have to stop congratulating ourselves for having made these two discourses accessible. They are in fact still not accessible to the audience at which they are directed. On the surface it might seem that we no longer have the feeling that we fail to understand what the Other says or fail to see what she/he is trying to show us. However the distance between her/him (Other) and us (Self) is greater than it was before, simply because in trying to understand her/him we also had to take into account what she/he had to leave out of the picture to be able to depict it at all. To be sure, we can share everything with an author (be it Mbeki or HPC) – except her/his way of being dispossessed by that which, in withdrawing, allows her/him to think. For Mbeki this is the question of an African identity and for HPC it is the fundamental assumption of a "globalising modernity". These issues at the heart of their respective discourse both form the condition for their possibility of communicating or believing in anything at all, *and* the condition for the impossibility of their nonviolent communication.

The possibility of authentic, non-reductive and mutually respectful communication now seems to be less of a possibility than an impossibility. This notion of "non-reductive communication" should not be mistaken for a utopian dialogue without violence – for that is impossible. Rather it should be understood in terms of the Greek *agon* – as an agonistic combat or interplay of corporeal forces where the opponents are continuously being transformed by each other, where the struggle never solidifies into domination. Despite this qualification, the transcendental condition for the impossibility of non-reductive communication still holds. There is always a primary violence inherent to communicating with the other – a primary violence of which we too are not exempt. Mere communication amounts to violence therein that it is accompanied with an

> unavoidable duality ... both exterior to him and indispensable to him ... an inexhaustible double that presents itself to reflection as the blurred projection of what man is in his truth, but that also plays the role of a preliminary ground upon which man must collect himself and recall himself in order to attain his truth.
>
> (Foucault 1994: 326)

We cannot speak without our violating "unthought", but we cannot remain silent either. Silence does not even allow the ethical relation to come into play, since it tries to eliminate the unthought, as the precondition for the possibility of ethics, from occurring at all. Paradoxically, it does so in an attempt to be ethical by avoiding the pre-ethical violence of the unthought. So we must speak

with a certain degree of obstinacy and a certain degree of awareness of the unthought by continuously transgressing the boundaries of the self towards that region of alterity within. So even though nonviolent communication is impossible, there are degrees of violation and some discourses, such as that of HPC, that could be said to be less violating; whereas other discourses, such as ours, could be said to be more violating. Because even as we write now, the unthought has spoken along, saying more than articulated, violating even, or precisely, *in* rationalising. We cannot rely upon a postmodern ethics to safeguard ourselves or the other from being violated. Still how else could we have spoken at all?

Notes

1. This is a dialogue across the internal divide which separates the postcolonised from the postcolonisers.

2. This lecture, "Des espace autres" was presented to the Architectural Studies Circle on 14 March 1967; it was first published in 1984. (See *Architecture, mouvement, continuité 5* [October, 1984], pp. 46-49), translated by Robert Hurley.

3. See http://www.africafinancereview.com/archive/2001/02/leader.asp

4. Joachim Ritter describes Europeanisation as "the process in which non-European peoples detach themselves from their deep-rooted forms of life, take on the European forms of social production, education and state institutions, and spontaneously and actively make all this their own (Ritter 1969: 324).

5. The Panopticon is an architectural apparatus first introduced by Jeremy Bentham at the end of the eighteenth century and later thoroughly analysed by Michel Foucault in his work on power, *Discipline and Power* (1977). Foucault discusses the Panopticon as a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it. Accordingly it assures the automatic functioning of power: surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action.

6. See 9/background9902/bg990215south_africa.html

7. Although Mbeki comes across as being more postcolonial and HPC more post-modernist in their respective discourses, neither succeeds in talking about the modern phenomenon of global capitalism in something other than a modern discourse; and modern thought proceeds by ways of a violent logocentric rationality swallowing all difference in its path.

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