

**TRACES:**  
**a multilingual journal of cultural  
theory and translation**

**SPECTERS OF THE WEST AND  
THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION**

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# INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Until recently the global circulation of academic and intellectual information has customarily been imagined to follow cartographic visions which map two distinct flows. The first is a centripetal flow of “raw” and particularistic factual data from peripheral sites to various metropolitan centers “in the West.” The second is a centrifugal flow of information about how to classify domains of knowledge, how to evaluate given empirical data, how to negotiate with the variety and incommensurability which is inherent in the body of empirical data from the peripheries, and how to render intelligible the details and trivia coming from particular peripheral sites to “a Western audience.” Academic information of this second kind is generally called “theory” and, in contrast to the particularistic nature of the first kind, it is believed to be universalistic and hostile to the presumption that only those who are involved in the locale can tell what it is that they are concerned with. This is to say, the second kind of knowledge, “theory,” does not seek its authorization in the assumption of the immediate comprehensibility of the raw datum in the original context at a particular locus. Instead, it claims to mediate the datum with general forms in such a way that it can be comprehensible to those who are outside the locus.

The production of such knowledge has largely occurred according to a historically specific division of intellectual labor in which “theory” is associated with that historical construct, “the West,” and moves from there to the Rest of the world. It goes without saying that

such a vision of the global circulation of academic information is a matter of imagination, but it is a powerful and effectual social imaginary on a global scale and prescribes, as a sort of regulative machinery, what the modern world must look like.

Against the background of such a cartographic imaginary of the globe, the essentially colonialist distinction between the West and the Rest of the world has been established and maintained for some time, albeit with constant vicissitudes. As Takeuchi Yoshimi, a sinologist specializing in modern Chinese literature, observed more than half a century ago, the East, which Takeuchi more or less took to be the representative of the Rest, arrived at its self-consciousness as a consequence of its defeat by the West or Europe.<sup>2</sup> Negativity, without which reflectivity essential for self-consciousness cannot be reached, never originated in the East, and the absence of reflectivity was certainly implied in Takeuchi's word "defeat (*haiboku*)."<sup>3</sup> The East could never be conscious of itself, he claimed, before it was invaded by Europe. Only through the acknowledgment of its lost autonomy, of its dependence upon the West—or only in the mirror of the West, so to say<sup>3</sup>—could the Rest reflectively acquire its civilizational, cultural, ethnic, and national identities.

Because of his uncompromising faith in the Enlightenment values of modernity which, he believed, could only be concretized in the institutions of the nation-state, however, Takeuchi could not envision the

future of Asia—and by implication, the future of the Rest—along historical trajectories other than that of historicism. Like many intellectuals of Asia and Europe who passed their formative years in the 1930s, Takeuchi had internalized modern historicism to such an extent that, for him, an effective struggle against the colonizing forces of the West could not bypass the creation of national subjectivity. His furtive loyalty to Hegel prevented him from conceiving of other historical trajectories than the historicist one in which the actualization and appropriation of modern values must first require a radical negation of external forces as well as of its internal heritage of a feudal past. To be modern for the East, therefore, meant appropriating the essence of Western modernity by resisting the West without and overcoming the reactionary heritage within. In other words, the East modernizes itself by negating the West and its own past. Where there was no resistance to, or negation of, the West, there was no prospect of modernity for the Rest. Where else, he would ask, if not in the midst of a struggle against colonial powers and the oppressive remnants of the past, could one possibly actualize the concrete and practical senses of liberty, equality, and fraternity?

One would not be able to apprehend Takeuchi's commitment to modernity without perceiving his profound shame over the Japanese imperialist maneuvers in Asia in the 1930s and early '40s, and his rage against the American imperialism which was about to

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take over the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere in the late 1940s. Hence, he diagnosed Japan's modern history as a case where genuine negativity was absent. This perhaps explains his excessive idealization of China which, he thought, unlike Japan which had imitated the West to the extent of reproducing its imperialism, would actualize a truly authentic modernity by negating the West's intervention as well as the remnants of the past. Yet the historical dialectic which he anticipated could not have made sense unless the externality of what the East should resist had been postulated. For peoples in the Rest, then, modernity was considered a sort of historical movement which consolidated the unity and substantiality of a political grouping called "the nation" spatially, by negating external forces, while at the same time temporally constituting itself as a subject, as an agent of self-determination, by continually overcoming its own past.

In a schematization such as was operating in his discussion of modernity, the unity of the nation depended upon the externality of what had to be resisted, which was more often than not mapped onto the cartographic plane. Just as with the Japanese invasion of China, that which must be resisted must come from the "outside" of the presumed integrity of the nation. A nation of the East, such as China, was located within the reach of the West, but the West itself was external to it. The externality of what had to be resisted was thus comprehended in terms of the geographic distance between Western Europe

and Asia. The possibility that the West could be inherent in the Rest was deliberately precluded. Although Takeuchi was unambiguously critical of the modernization theory, he could not avoid the cartographic imaginary of the globe upon which the modernization theory invariably depends. A critique of Takeuchi's historical consciousness, of an inherently historicist consciousness, therefore, should serve as our starting point for a new conception of modernity.

According to the conventional narrative of modernity, the massive social transformation in Western Europe which was accompanied by industrialization is thought to mark the beginning of modern society. One may trace the modernity of modern society back to a number of historical precedents: the signs of industrialization in England in the eighteenth century, the formation of bourgeois culture and the new sense of public and private, a series of political events which led to the establishment of polities legitimizing themselves in the name of the sovereignty—Subject as "the nation-state" which produces itself by representing itself to itself—and so forth. And all these precedents and the subsequent realization of modern societies are ascribed to an imagined cartographic area called "the West." Thereupon, it is claimed, more often than not, that these events which symbolize modernity all happened to have taken place within the West. Furthermore, the consequences, influences, and effects of this unitary process of social transformation, which are supposed to have occurred strictly

within “the West,” are said to be detected and observed in remote areas such as Africa, Latin America, Oceania, and of course in Asia.

What is overlooked in this narrative is not only the undeniable economic, social, cultural, ethnic, and religious heterogeneity which has continued to exist up to the present in the geographic areas imagined to constitute the West—mainly Western Europe in the nineteenth century, with North America being added later in the twentieth century. But also overlooked is the fact that the contour of the West itself is drawn by this historicist narrative of modernization.

Whereas the West was referred to as a unitary geographic site far away from the East, it was also supposed to expand and radiate towards the peripheries of the world. Consequently, modernity as a historical movement was represented as an emanative flow, just like the information of “theory” in the cartographic imaginary of the globe. Underlying the historicist apprehension of modernization was a certain vision of emanation without which the centeredness of Eurocentricity could never be retained. Undoubtedly, there is no room for a multiplicity of modernities in such a representation. What we have customarily comprehended in terms of modernity and “the West” must be called into question precisely because the historicist schema of the world collapses and reduces the multiple emergence of modernities to the single overarching process of homogenization, of modernization that is immediately taken to be Westernization. “The West” is given rise to

precisely because modernity has never managed to escape from its imprisonment, its seizure by the emanation model.

I maintain that the coming of modernity can be attributed to no single cause, process, or territory. The time of modernity is never unitary; it is always in multiplicity. Modernity always appears in multiple histories. Yet the multiplicity of modernity must not be understood to mean its plural origins which exist side by side in a homogeneous geographic space of the globe.

Although we are aware that modernization theory—a post-World War II appropriation of historicism serving the interests (economic, political, and even sexual in the psychoanalytic sense of national identity formation) of the United States—is hardly sustainable today, we are not entirely free of the binary structuring schemata which are constantly utilized by modernization theory within contemporary discussions of modernity. Because it reduces modernity to modernization, and equates modernization to Westernization, the representation of the world such schemata prescribe is hierarchically organized into the West and the Rest, the modern and its Others, the white and the colored. Worse still, these binaries are supposed to overlap! This being so, I must adhere to the imperative to find other ways to discuss global modernities.

The emanation model of modernity, which underlies any modernization theory, stems from a fundamental misconception of the basic element of modernity. Modernity is

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inconceivable unless there are occasions where many regions, people, industries, and polities are in contact with one another *despite* geographic, cultural, and social distances. Modernity, therefore, cannot be considered unless in reference to translation. In this respect, modernity is first of all a form whereby people transcend distances of many kinds in order to be in contact with one another. One would fail to understand the nature of modernity in misconceiving the fact of being in contact with others. Contact can never be construed as a one-way process of transmitting a doctrine or value from one party to another. Unless contact is a social relation, that is, unless it involves more than one party in some transaction affecting people involved in it, even the transmission of a doctrine or commodity exchange cannot take place. Thus contact is capable of transforming both parties involved in the transaction. If a social process of transforming, distorting, or destroying the way people are is called violence, contact is indubitably a violent event whose violence is from the outset a danger for both parties. Yet, in the emanation model of modernity, an economy prevails according to which the West is assumed active in affecting social transformation, while the Rest always remains passive. Accordingly, what may be regarded as the content of modernity, such as ideas, institutions, and the ways of life particular to the modern social formation, cannot be circulated other than in the one-way process of indoctrination. It is a vision of the civilizing mission which follows culturalism and

covertly posits the unity of the West as a transhistorical entity like the essentialized national culture. The representation of a contact according to the emanation model is, rather, a political and colonialist intervention before it is a description.

The global emergence of modernities has no doubt been accompanied by a drastically increased frequency of social encounters and commodity exchanges all over the world, but nonetheless it cannot be described one-sidedly as a process of homogenization. For while social encounter and commodity exchange respectively give rise to demands for transparency in communication and equivalence in value, they inevitably evoke the incommensurable in our sociality, and the excessive in equation. Yet the incommensurable and the excessive cannot be apprehended outside the contexts of contact. It is for this reason that we must not lose sight of the fact that the particularistic insistence upon the immutable ethnic and national cultures and traditions goes hand in hand with the universalism of historicism. The culturalist insistence upon the integrity of an ethnic and national culture in the Rest is always matched by the covert obsession with the culturalist uniformity of the putative unity of the West. The rhetoric of Asian values, for example, is the simple reversal of the Eurocentric culturalism.

Today, it is increasingly difficult to overlook the fact that the historicist disposition of "theory" and "culture" is both politically dubious and intellectually inadequate. This prevailing view of global academic exchange



is no longer acceptable, not only because its material conditions are in the process of being undermined, but also because we ought to refuse to view the relationships among many locations in the world according to the cartographic imaginary of historicism. Its definition of theory is obviously grossly inadequate in view of the academic conversation happening between various locations in the world.

Global modernity has accelerated cultural, economic, and political interchange between different regions and brought different forms of power-knowledge into more intense interaction. These forms of "theory," which are no longer merely "indigenous," make up the power-knowledge in everyday life, not only in the Euro-American world, but also in many parts of the world, including East and South East Asia. What once appeared exclusively European no longer belongs to the Euro-American world, and there are an increasing number of instances in which non-Euro-American loci are more "Western" than some aspects of North American and European life. This diversification of the West allows us to discover something fundamentally "Asian" and "African" in those people who fashion themselves as "Westerners," and to conceive of relations among people in many locations of the world in an order other than the racialized hierarchy of the Eurocentric world. After all, is not the West one of the most effective and affective culturalist imaginaries today? Racism being the institutionalized form of desire to naturalize

and dehistoricize social relations and identities, the notion of the West cannot be cleansed of its racist implications as long as culturalism is a most prevalent means of naturalizing and essentializing a person's social status and a social group's identity.

Can we continue to presume that the West is essentially a cartographic category? Can we continue to overlook the fact that the distinction between the West and the Rest is increasingly independent of geography, race, ethnic culture, or nationality but is, in fact, a matter of cultural capital shaping the individual's socio-economic status? Can we continue to ignore the economic and social conditions that allow some people to *afford* to be "Western" while others cannot?

The globality of theory calls for a genuinely comparative cultural theory. I believe that the journal *Traces* is a response to this demand. What is meant by "comparative cultural theory" is a form of theorizing which is attentive to the transnational connectedness and global traces within knowledge produced in geopolitically-specific locations, and which explores how theories are themselves transformed in their practical effects when they are performed in other sites. The idea of theorizing, which is advocated here, would never neglect the form of the act which gives rise out of differences to that which is commensurate and thereby brings heterogeneous items onto the plane of comparison. This act, which precedes comparison and makes comparison possible, is translation: therefore, our enterprise is indispensably organized around

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translation. This comparative enterprise is also political insofar as it seeks to examine the theoretical bases and conflicting desires at the heart of contemporary politics and forms of violence.

To demonstrate the scope of this enterprise in regard to the topoi—in the sense both of topic and place—of the West and translation is the guiding motive of this first and inaugural issue of *Traces*. The form of cultural and political criticism envisaged in the project of *Traces* is already being produced by many intellectuals and cultural workers firmly located in the South—Asia, Africa, and Latin America—as well as those from the North Atlantic who are concerned with the transformative dissemination and living-on of Euro-American ideas in non-Euro-American sites, as well as with the legacies and political futures of non-European theories in Northern locations. It is a form of criticism based on the acknowledgment of the traces of the other in a specifically local text.

The journal *Traces* aims to initiate a different circulation of academic conversation and debate, a different geopolitical economy of theory and empirical data, and a different representation of the global circulation of academic information. The current inaugural issue, entitled “Specters of the West and the Politics of Translation,” addresses the vexed questions of how knowledge production in the Humanities is still haunted by the West/Rest distinction, and how translation serves to create the senses of modernity. The second issue, “Race Panic and the Memory of Migra-

tion,” will explore racial memory and the global politics of immigration. Subsequent issues may address topics such as the impacts of modernity in many sites of the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Romantic aesthetics and the legacies of colonial injury in South and East Asia; the fate of modernist aesthetics and avant-garde arts today; and so on.

The distinctive orientation of our journal is in our eagerly seeking theory produced in other sites, sometimes in a curious hybrid reaction to North American or West European “theory,” as a result of the colonialism and quasi-colonialism of the last few centuries. The study of European philosophy by scholars in East and South Asia and Africa, for instance, will be welcomed positively. *Traces* will create and sustain an international space of theoretical exchange in a multilingual medium by regularly publishing issues in multiple language versions.

Every essay to be included in *Traces* will be available in all of the languages of this journal.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, to write for *Traces* is always to address oneself to readers in different languages. When one writes in one of the languages of the journal, one is simultaneously read in Korean, English, German, Japanese, one of the languages of China, and still others. Every contributor to this journal is expected to be fully aware that she or he is writing for and addressing a heterogeneous and multilingual audience: just like a local intellectual under a colonial regime, every contributor is, in a manner of speaking,

expected to speak in a forked tongue. This social space in which we argue and converse has very little in common with the space of national language, the national space of a homogeneous language medium. In this respect, *Traces* is an international journal. Yet, the international space which it generates and sustains, and to which contributors as well as readers are invited, is fundamentally different from that of an internationalism based on one major language's subjugation of other minor languages. Recognizing how difficult and even impossible it is to evade the subjugation of a minor language by a dominant language, since almost every language could be a major one in relation to a less dominant one, we are committed to establishing a social space where such an imperative is seriously implemented in terms of translation. This is a social space maintained by translation, and constituted in the conjunction of plural translational moves from one language to another.

It is impossible to conceive of translation as an operation by which to establish equivalence in signification of the same text between two versions in two languages. In other words, translation is not conceptualized according to the model of communication upon which the emanation model of modernity, for instance, is based. Instead, we understand translation as an operation which opens up possibilities for questioning and counter-questioning among people, and for doing so about the same text. Translation facilitates

conversation between people in different geographical and social loci who would otherwise never converse with one another; but it also provides them with a space where the appropriateness and validity of translation is constantly discussed and disputed. In this space, we acknowledge that we misunderstand and mistranslate one another; but we also recognize the urgent need to strive to understand and translate one another so that we can discover how we misunderstand and mistranslate. So translation itself always holds in dispute the very sameness of what is supposedly conveyed in translation. The international space for *Traces* is formed around this dispute enabled by translating the sameness of the message. To participate in the international space of *Traces* implies a commitment to the continuation of this dispute by translating others' words, and by questioning what has been taken for granted in academic and non-academic knowledge.

Those of us who have gathered together around this project will also sustain the possibility of our electronic conversation in multiple languages through the global networking of the Internet, and will secure access for our readership to the editorial collective by creating a World Wide Web site for our journal, while at the same time publishing *Traces* in the print medium. This is because we believe that genuine international collaboration is absolutely essential for the existence of *Traces*.

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### Endnotes

1—This article grew out of the prospectus for *Traces* which Thomas Lamarre, Pheng Cheah, and I co-authored. I would like to express my thanks to the co-authors. As goes without saying, however, responsibility for the content of this article rests with me.

2—Takeuchi Yoshimi, “*Chûgoku no kindai to nihon no kindai* (Chinese modernity and Japanese modernity)” (originally in 1947) in *Nihon to Ajia* (Tokyo:

Chikuma Shobô, 1993): 11–57 (also published with a different title “*Kindai towa nanika* [What is modernity?]” in 1948). For a discussion of universalism and particularism in modernity, see; Sakai, “Critique of Modernity: the Problem of Universalism and Particularism” in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 87.3 (Summer 1988), or its Japanese translation in *Gen-dai Shiso*, 15.15 (December 1987).

3—Takeuchi Yoshimi, “*Chûgoku no kindai*” 15-9.

4—In principle the editorial collective of *Traces* will abide by this rule. However, this rule does not apply where copyright arrangements do not allow for the translation and publication of an article at issue in different languages and markets. Neither does it apply in the cases of censorship imposed, beyond the control of *Traces* collectives, by the government of the country where a version of *Traces* is published.