
Review

Anticolonial eruptions: racial hubris and the cunning of resistance

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Nature has often been opposed to politics in the history of western political thought. For Aristotle and many subsequent thinkers it has signified the realm of necessity shared by all living beings. Politics, in this view, is grounded in the distinctly human capacity for action and freedom. However, from slave revolts to the recent George Floyd protests, anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance has been articulated through natural metaphors such as volcanic eruptions, tempests, earthquakes and tsunamis. Geo Maher argues that this nature-like rendering of resistance discloses the core of colonial logic, particularly its weak points: racial and colonial systems of oppression are built on a fundamental blindness and dehumanization, which generates explosive resistance akin to natural disasters.

Anticolonial Eruptions argues that oppression is never total, for the very conditions generated by the oppressors are constantly brewing resistance in the ‘subterranean’ zones of ‘nonbeing’ to which the oppressed are relegated. Maher reverses the received paradigm, which typically opposes human agency to the naturalization inherent to systems of hierarchy. For him, the resistance of the weak constitutes a nature-like force that shocks the oppressors out of their wits precisely because, in rendering others’ humanity invisible in the process of naturalizing their power, they have become blind ‘to the inevitability of resistance from below’ (p. 18). The system plants the seeds of its own destruction.

One would think that Maher is embracing the classic Hegelian dialectic here. But he is at pains to differentiate his account from Hegel’s, which he thinks is irredeemably mired in ‘a God’s-eye view from above’ assuming a ‘teleology of knowing where history is inevitably headed’ (pp. 16–17; 100). Maher seeks to decouple inevitability of resistance—‘the stubborn resolve to always fight for liberation no matter what’ (p. 100)—from any teleological presuppositions by reinterpreting the concept of ‘cunning’. He extricates the cunning of reason from an overarching logic of history and renders it as ‘perspectival’ knowledge accessible



to colonized and racially subordinated subjects. In other words, ‘decolonial cunning’ is a special kind of sight which ‘exceeds vision and furnishes the oppressed with an entire arsenal of strategic advantages and practical weapons’ (p. 51).

Sifting through a vast range of sources, including the writings of anti-colonial actors, historical scholarship and literary pieces, Maher illustrates the striking frequency of references to Native Americans, Blacks, women and colonized peoples as ‘shrewd’ and ‘cunning’. This characterization reveals the contradictory reality of racial and colonial oppression: dehumanization combined with an acknowledgement that the peoples they subjugated were human after all. For a slave master to deem his slaves ‘cunning’ was to defy his own conceit of their inhumanity, or of their being content with the conditions of enslavement. This crack in the white supremacist logic was exploited by the subjugated throughout the history of colonialism to launch what he calls a ‘decolonial ambush’. Weaponizing their own invisibility and dehumanization, the oppressed generated new skills and built underground sub-cultures and dialects, which were cunningly put to use for the purpose of liberation. From the ‘house slaves’ in Confederate households who stealthily helped the Union during the Civil War, exploiting their inside knowledge and invisibility, to the Vietnamese guerilla forces fighting from hidden trenches and tunnels against the French and the Americans, the oppressed have always turned their own condemnation to the cloak of invisibility against their oppressors. Regardless of the intensity and scale of oppression, the cunning of the weak wins out in the end.

But if there is no *telos* to decolonial cunning, then what explains the inevitability of resistance, and that too of explosive eruptions, for the purpose (*telos*?) of freedom? And why has so much of anti-colonial and socialist thought concerned itself with the problem of organizing and mobilizing the oppressed, of counter-acting the docility, individualism and defeatism which conditions of constant oppression often breed? This is where I would have liked more elaborate theorization from Maher. To attempt to decipher the logic of resistance in Maher’s argument, it is helpful to see him as wavering between a more prominent Hegelian and a somewhat obscure Foucauldian view of resistance, both of which are conflated in the book. From a Foucauldian standpoint, resistance is something inherent to the operation of power, which must always and everywhere reproduce itself. That the supposed omniscience of drone warfare is ultimately blind to possible ‘subterranean warfare’, due to its flattening of the depth of the underground (p. 92), and that Central American migrants are able to dodge and evade militarized ‘border apartheid’ by relying on networks of ‘subterranean knowledge’ (pp. 94–95), express this Foucauldian view of resistance. This approach points to an inherent insufficiency of any system of control, rather than a path towards a necessary overthrow of that system.



In the Hegelian framework, on the contrary, negation is enfolded within a logic that points to the suppression of the whole oppositional relation. Maher's critique of Afro-pessimism is a good example of this Hegelian strand in the book. Maher writes that Afro-pessimism 'views the world as wholly and inescapably anti-Black because of the reduction of Blackness to pure negativity' such that 'a situation not of conflict but of absolute antagonism' exists (p. 20). 'Decolonial cunning', he says, 'responds to this diagnosis by insisting that it is precisely *from* the shadows of negation that resistance so often erupts' (p. 20, Maher's italics). Colonialism's expulsion of the colonized from humanity, through this very dehumanization and invisibilization, creates the conditions for the destruction of the oppressive order and for 'something radically different' (p. 24).

The conflation of these two readings of decolonial cunning is further complicated by Maher's own purported disavowal of Hegel. It is perhaps telling that Maher makes extensive use of the concept of *hubris* as signifying colonizers' pretense of 'total visibility and impenetrability' (p. 91) without invoking the corresponding concept of *nemesis*. Famously summoned by Du Bois (2014, p. 195) in his *Black Reconstruction*, Nemesis names the principle of retribution in Greek tragedy which visits wrath upon those guilty of *hubris* (insolence) to restore moral balance to the universe. Maher's anxiety about an overarching narrative, in the absence of other explanations, undermines his attempt to provide a sound foundation for his contention that a universal called 'freedom' is embodied in the actions of John Brown, Toussaint Louverture, the cross-border smugglers defying colonial borders, and the enslaved women who secretly poisoned their masters.

In the end, it is Maher's reading of Fanon which seems to supply the theoretical backbone to his argument. In his response to Afro-pessimism, Maher takes recourse to Fanon's alleged view that from within the 'zone of nonbeing' to which the colonized are relegated, from within the 'sterility and aridity of nonbeing', a new future might emerge (p. 20). The sentence that Maher relies upon to make this argument comes from the early pages of *Black Skins, White Masks*. Fanon (2008, p. xii) says: 'There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge'.

But read the next sentence: 'In most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell'. Contrary to Maher's reading, Fanon here is saying that the Black man *cannot* have access to the zone of nonbeing where the seeds of a new departure can be found. What could this possibly mean? Fanon is relying upon Sartre's (1992, p. 58) existential philosophy which defines freedom as nothingness or non-being, which allows a dissociation 'from the causal series which constitutes being'. In man's freedom, in other words, his essence is suspended. For Fanon, blackness and whiteness were both colonial constructs which fixated man's essence: this is why a 'black man', just as a 'white man', was a contradiction in terms for Fanon, and this is why Hegelian logic couldn't resolve



the colonial dilemma, where all parties were severed from the desolate emptiness called freedom, or nonbeing, which alone can make possible a genuine departure.

Maher's misreading of Fanon touches upon the very heart of the political matter. If the struggle against colonialism is a struggle for humanization, as Maher himself believes, then volcanic eruptions might not help. At one point in the book, Maher asks, when detailing the contradictory worldview of white slaveholders: 'If slaves were not capable of rational or moral judgement, as white supremacy insisted, how could they be responsible for their actions? You can't subpoena a volcano...' (p. 39). Human freedom cannot be captured by natural phenomena. While Maher's attempt to draw revolutionary optimism from seismic metaphors is welcome, nature cannot rescue us from politics, which is a burdensome, laborious and often desolate affair. To give up on this human, political task is perhaps the ultimate form of pessimism.

References

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