

A PLENITUDE OF QUESTIONS

ASIXOXE – LET’S TALK: COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE LOCAL CENTRE OF GLOBAL STUDIES, INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY, CZECH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, PRAGUE, 18-19 JUNE 2018

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I limit myself to attending and addressing a single academic conference a year, and this is because of the extreme reification of what an everyday person understands to be reality, until a parallel universe has been constructed – with wormholes to the real –in which extreme issues such as poverty and death are rendered clinical, are rendered – as it were – philosophical. I don’t object to this. I think myself to be quite good at it. It is entertainment and intellectual exercise. I am uneasy, however, when the exercise is directed to what we (quite clinically) call the “Other,” especially the African Other, and render the African subject a mere object in our contemplations. We re-nativise him and her as a distant object in what becomes an intellectual colonialism. We construct the Foucauldian African, for instance – without understanding the languages and living conditions of his or her own discourse. But how can we understand 2,000 languages from 55 (or 54, depending how we count) states – to most of which most researchers have never been, or been briefly on what we call “fieldwork” that makes a brevity of the older anthropological methods.

So I received the invitation to deliver the opening keynote of the Asixoxe conference in Prague with hesitation. But the invitation came from my colleague at SOAS, Alena Rettova, and from Albert Kasanda. And it was in Prague; and, from my time as the George Soros Chair in Budapest, I had decided I quite like cities with bridges. But I forewarned Alena and Albert that, in order to refuse a clinical philosophical approach, I would tell stories. Everyone says, “let’s tell stories,” and then proceeds to theorise mightily the idea and forms of a story, sometimes analyzing stories from great literature, but

never telling an original story. I said that my paper would be one of original stories, drawn from my decades of warzones, slums, and high government offices throughout Africa – and in Beijing, negotiating on the side of African delegations with bemused Chinese officials immersed in their own objectifications and discursive constructions on the nature and meaning (and uses) of Africa.

I was very pleasantly surprised and impressed by this conference. On the subject of China and Africa, Marek Hrubec presented a paper of great density, describing the state of relationships and negotiations. It could have been used to brief any government delegation anywhere on earth. But the more philosophical papers were the ones I had anticipated with the forebodings I have described above.

Such forebodings certainly do not preclude an appreciation of what is scintillating. And that is precisely the word to describe the debate between Marek Hrubec and Anke Graness on schools of theory and appropriate theorists to use in the study of Africa. But, if there is a wide range of choice in such matters, then the question becomes one of how many chosen are themselves African. Dubrota Pucherova was the first to speak of Afropolitanism, a theme taken up by Albert Kasanda and by Anke Graness – who talked about Ubuntu. Kasanda's paper traced an interesting genealogy from French thought to a largely Francophonic Afropolitanism. But then the further question arises to do with, firstly an acknowledgement of e.g. French influence on African thought, and then whether there is an African influence on French thought. It may be early days, yet I should have thought the success or otherwise of a term like Afropolitanism is not simply a subjective sense – oneself in a world of influences and embracing different ones – but an intellectual exercise susceptible to at least a rough objective measure that there is something like or something approaching equal measures, equal influence, and equal weight in global debate. That time has not yet come – leading to a further question as to whether the term “Afropolitanism” is not a defensive one – hoorah, a bit of Africa has crept into the global metropole – for one does not speak for instance of a Sinopolitanism, a Hindupolitanism. In China and India it is possible, no matter how conditionally, to speak of a new metropolitan thought that will sweep the formerly imperial world.

The imagination of that future world is a difficult one. For this reason, I especially admired Michelle Clarke's paper on African science fiction. And why not imagine a new world that arises from the present one and transcends its limitations and inequalities?

How we get to that point requires some sense of how Africa is emerging from the intellectual genealogies that led it to the present point. Noemi Steuer, Alena Rettova and Stephanie Rudwick all spoke on aspects of this. I enjoyed Hana Horakova's paper on racialized discourse on South African democracy – a paper clearly conceived from deep immersion in South Africa itself – just as Cristina Nicolini's paper on HIV and Swahili drama drew from immersion in East Africa.

The comings and goings of achieving a politanism of any sort, i.e. via the messy business in today's work of migration, was dealt with by Zuzana Uhde's paper.

It was, altogether, an illuminating and enjoyable conference, with high moments of resonance and inspiration. All papers were of a high academic standard. One observation, however:

Although I know the Centre for Global Studies goes out of its way to involve, often at great expense, African presenters in its conferences, they were this time noticeable by their absence. The exception, Albert Kasanda, works for the Centre. But many African people were encountered on the streets of Prague – a city not yet as degenerated by the hostile racisms of a rival like Budapest – and they were tourists, waiters, hawkers, students; all in their various ways, whether legally or illegally, being or becoming cosmopolitan/Czechopolitan. The stories of their migrations north from Africa, and possibly east and west across Europe as they sought a hospitable cosmopolitanism, are not told in conferences in the metropole and the suburbs of the metropole. And of course my last sentence begs the obvious question as to whether hospitality forms an inescapable core of any real cosmopolitanism. In Prague, the great city of philosophy, the modern city of democracy in velvet, this remains a question on behalf at least of Central and Eastern Europe begging an answer.

And it is not just a question to be addressed in a single direction. My own paper asked about China/Africa relations and who is made welcome by whom, for what reasons and under what rubric of

exploitation, gain, or generosity. But I gave the example of my own encounter in 1980, in the not-always-observed ceasefire that marked the end of the liberation war in Zimbabwe as the country edged towards elections and independence. I was responsible for liaison, in quite a fair chunk of the country, between the warring armies and the Commonwealth Observer Group. One day I was scheduled to meet my counterparts from Robert Mugabe's guerrillas in the salient for which I was responsible. Two nervous young men emerged and, seeing I was Chinese, burst into smiles and a certain laughter of relief. Then they pulled chopsticks out of their military vests. They kept them there alongside their ammunition. "Your countrymen helped us when no one else in the world would. So tonight we will cook for you in the way we were taught by our Chinese military trainers." And we did indeed eat Chinese that night. And we did indeed laugh for reasons other than relief that, for one night at least, we could escape the tangible tension that afflicted us all those three months of fraught transition.

That is my final question of course: is not true cosmopolitanism forged, and tested as it is forged, under conditions of stress? It withstands siege. It says we, Africans and Europeans, even Chinese, are part of any kind of politanism you want to call it, provided it is the politanism of equals who borrow equally from one another – whether cuisine or philosophy.