

Theorizing a Global Perspective

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

Michel-Rolph Trouillot often contributes to the questions behind the profiles published in Crosscurrents. Today, he is on the other side, engaged in a reflection prompted by various questions from colleagues and students.

Had I stayed in Haiti or moved on to France, I would probably hold a degree in philosophy or perhaps in history. I have a penchant-almost esthetic-for theoretical reflection grounded in historical concreteness, regardless of discipline or persuasion. I view theory as that which emerges in the back and forth movement between concepts and history, as in Hegel and Marx, as in Eliade, Levi-Strauss or Foucault. But this updated and disparate list suggests my dilemma back in the early 1970s: my intellectual horizon was European, yet unforeseen events had thrown me into the United States.

The year 1969 was the worst of the Duvaliers' dictatorship. The Haitian exile community in New York provided a sanctuary where I combined artistic and intellectual pursuits with political activism.

That apprenticeship reinforced earlier propensities: a desire to reach an audience not defined by academic membership; a conviction that an intellectual is so much more than a mere academic and the member of multiple overlapping communities. I had absorbed these beliefs growing up within the so-called intellectual elite so closely tied to the state in Haiti. Political activism in New York turned this heredity into conscious choices.

The most lasting product of these choices is my first book, *Ti dife boule sou istoua Ayiti*, a history of the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804. This was a natural evolution: my father and my uncle both wrote history. In a deeper sense, it was going against class origins and attitudes. *Ti dife* questions the "great men" tradition of Haitian historiography. More important, it is also the first non-fiction book written in Haitian. Haitian intellectuals write books in French, except a handful of poets and even fewer novelists.

With a book and an undergraduate degree in hand, access to graduate school was relatively easy. Yet what to do and where to do it remained serious questions. Cultural Studies and Comp Lit had not yet discovered "theory" or gained the legitimacy they now enjoy.

Luckily, Sidney Mintz had just helped to found the anthropology department at Hopkins. The special character of the department, its interdisciplinary take on the profession, and its ties to history and what was then the Atlantic Program tipped the balance toward anthropology.

I remember Mintz asking me: "Of course, were you to come here, you would want to work on Haiti?" "Of course not," I said, unknowingly eluding a gentle trap. Haiti was in me—the work of a lifetime. I needed something else from graduate school. I went on to live among the peasants on the island of Dominica. Some of my best insights on slavery and on world peasantries owe much to that fieldwork, its preparation and its aftermath.

Dominica made me feel the Caribbean and its diversity and touch firsthand a resilience that I knew only through its intellectual echoes. Dominica was also a methodological threshold. I became convinced that the study of peasant dependency that I was following could not be told or understood fully from within the present of the island. So I followed the story to England and the Netherlands. The resulting book, *Peasants and Capital*, ties global and crossdisciplinary perspectives.

The book is divided in three parts: The Nation, The World, and The Village. Each part privileges a particular disciplinary lens: historiography, political economy, and ethnography. As Columbus discovered, when you look for the Caribbean you find the world. My research now expands to such "European" topics as the cultural underpinnings of the first Atlantic empires in the Renaissance.

Some people would say: is this anthropology? I would reply: it's in the best tradition of Hopkins anthropology. Now that I serve as chair of the department, I am more than ever aware of its unique position in the North American intellectual landscape. This uniqueness comes from the combination of three major traits: a sensitivity to world history best expressed as a search to integrate the local and the global; a serious concern for sociocultural theory grounded in empirical research; and a particular relationship to the Atlantic world.

That latter relationship has much to do with the history of Hopkins in the last twenty-five years and the research interests of colleagues, notably in history, as Jack Greene and Sidney Mintz noted in an earlier issue of *Crosscurrents*. Given its small size, this university has produced an extraordinary proportion of Ph.D.'s on Africa and the Afro-Americas in the last two decades. That track record, with its international reach, has special value for search committees and many graduate students.

We could do better at the undergraduate level. Today, the Homewood campus has more faculty working on Africa and the African Diaspora than on Latin America and Asia combined, with at least six scholars with expertise on slavery. Yet while we have undergraduate programs in East Asian and Latin American Studies, we have no single umbrella for students interested in Africa or the African Diaspora.

The relation between faculty interests and undergraduate programs is changing at all research universities. This has to do with global trends that affect the relationship between institutions of higher learning and society in the entire North Atlantic. In the United States, the low level of accountability that recently characterized academia is becoming untenable.

That is not necessarily a bad thing. It is not unfair to ask that universities maintain a more articulate dialogue with the society that feeds them. The real issue is who is to set the terms of this dialogue and how. Should faculty have a say in the public mission of academia? In the absence of greater faculty involvement, the impulses of donors or the changing tastes of undergraduates who are increasingly treated as mere clients may affect intellectual programming much more than they should.

I think we can make a case for who we are and what we do. That case need not be made with linear connections as in "art history is good for you because it will make you a better physician or the best manager at IBM." I am not sure I can quantify what I gained from six years of Latin and five years of Greek in high school. Nor do I want to do so. Yet I believe that a case can be made for the space that intellectual research occupies in society and for what happens in that space when scholars share their professional views with graduate and undergraduate students alike.

We can make a case for integrating undergraduates in a community of inquiry rather than treating them as consumers of education. That case requires, however, a public defense of intellectual work. It requires the acknowledgment that part of that work is to disturb mental habits, including rules of discourse. It requires the realization that an intellectual has a deeper ethical base and a wider conceptual frame than the most competent academic. Indeed, if successful, we may contribute to the reemergence in American life of public intellectuals outside academia.

The relative isolation of academia has perverse effects. We are often blamed for sins we do not commit. Take race. The outside perception is that universities are at the vanguard of the fight against racism in the U.S. That's true as far as speech codes and the publicity about Ethnic Studies are concerned. But many recent studies debunk such myths as the relative advantage of minority Ph.D.'s in the academic market. In fact, a comprehensive survey suggests that nearly 91% of university faculty in

the United States is white. Professionally, we are less diversified than the insurance industry or the top brass of the U.S. Marine Corps!

Thus while academia may be a bastion of liberal speech-at some cost, indeed, to itself and society-its politics, measured by their results, are less progressive than they seem. And I do want to distinguish between liberals and progressives, as much as I want to distinguish between academics and intellectuals on grounds of purpose, reach and effectiveness.

These distinctions are inevitably rooted in a *morale politique*, but they are not narrowly political. Further, they are intellectually significant. In my case, they allow me to understand the ambiguous relationship between the Caribbean and the West it helped to create.

Foucault suggests that one draws from the past to write the history of the present because of what one finds intolerable (morally, politically) in that present. My moral turn to history may begin with this extraordinary capacity of liberals since at least the Enlightenment to feel good about themselves while history goes on its merry bloody way.

If we bracket the liberal discourse and look freshly at the results, we can see old problems in new light. Again, take diversity. Part of the problem with diversity is that most academics-liberals or not-do not really believe in its *intellectual* value. They back diversity-when they do-for social and political reasons, some noble, some suspicious. They view it mainly in terms of physical attributes-one skirt here, one dark skin there, necessary diversions on their way to matters of essence: let's hear the black or the female viewpoint and move along.

Thus, beyond paying a reluctant homage to the often unfortunate politics of identity, the social sciences and the humanities have yet to theorize the experience of the world outside the North Atlantic. Hype about post-colonial gaze notwithstanding, most humanists see the historical experience of the majority of humankind only as an avatar of something of which the true face can be seen only in what we now call the West. Theory is done at the center; color comes from the margins.

Global Studies should help us go beyond this theoretical ethnocentrism intellectually more perverse than the racism of *The Bell Curve*. The historicization of the West-its practices and its concepts, its assumptions, its claims and its genealogies- is a central theoretical challenge of our times.

That historicization requires a global perspective. It cannot be reduced to an empirical focus on the successive geographical areas or populations (Greece, Rome, Latin Christendom, or the North Atlantic) that the West

now claims in its genealogies. To limit the investigation to the physical West would be to accept naively the West's own genealogies and forget that the current challenge comes to the human sciences in part because of changes in the globalization process.

The global village is now a cliché. But those of us who work on the Caribbean know that the world was global since at least 1492. Europe became Europe, in part through severing itself from what lay south of the Mediterranean, but in part also through a Westward move that made the Atlantic the center of the first truly global empires.

What is new today is not globalization as such—we are too late for that. Rather, what is unique to our times is the widespread awareness of global processes among increasingly fragmented populations. That awareness grows everywhere, largely because of the increase in both the size and the velocity of global flows. Capital, populations and information move in much greater mass and at increasing speed. At the same time, most human beings continue to act locally.

Thus, we are witnessing the rise of what I call "a fragmented globality." World histories and local histories are at once becoming both increasingly intertwined and increasingly contradictory. The twenty-first century is likely to be marked by the speed and brutality of these contradictions.

Theoretical ethnocentrism is not intellectually equipped to face that situation. Nor are the marginal responses, such as Afrocentrism, that this ethnocentrism provokes. Nor can Ethnic Studies, legitimate in their own terms, fill that void—unless we are willing to argue that North American minorities can serve as historical proxies for the vast chunks of humankind abandoned by the Latin and Teutonic canons.

In short, while parochialism leads to obvious dead ends, centrisms of all kinds—including the renewed search for universalist paradigms, such as rational choice theory—now convince mostly the believers. The human sciences are going through what historian Jacques Revel calls a time of "epistemological anarchy" in part because of the greater empirical base available for theory.

Yet this anarchy is also an opportunity for new conversations that take into account the entire historical experience of the world, with the various sensibilities and viewpoints that this experience implies. I see Global Studies as a space for theoretical developments based on this new empirical richness, a space for both tough talk and hope inasmuch as it seizes the current contradictions as a starting point to imagine a new world. Here at the Institute, such a space is being built in the ebb and flow of three overlapping theoretical movements:

- a) a back and forth movement between the global and the local;
- b) a back and forth movement between economic and political structures and expressive forms, which itself parallels
- c) a continuous exchange between the social sciences and the humanities.

I am gratified to contribute to these conversations.

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