

OTHERNESS AND OTHERS:

an Introduction to Comparative Studies

CSLC 503, 22076D, Mondays, 2:00-4:50 pm, VKC 110

In this course -- an introduction to comparative studies -- we will note from the start that the very idea and practice of comparison implies an acknowledgement of and an engagement with otherness. The question and the problem of the "Other", understood either as a category of thought or as an obstacle to categorical thinking, has been present at least since the beginnings of the discursive practice that we call philosophy. We find it, for instance, in Parmenides and Plato as the foil against which identity and totality -- "the Same", the "One" -- take shape; we find it playing a driving role in Heraclitus' antagonistic thinking and its desired "harmony of the opposites" (an insight that Hegelian dialectics would later build upon). However, it was only relatively recently that the question of the "Other" has come to the fore of theoretical debates as a central category: not simply as an obstacle to categorical thinking -- it is, of course, still that -- but also as a category and an object of thought itself. We will find it, for instance, partly as a disciplinary goal and partly as a disciplinary structural limitation, in anthropology and ethnography; we will find it, subordinated and struggling for recognition, in Marxism and post-Marxist developments (the entire field of Subaltern Studies is a case in point; but so is Jacques Rancière's conception of politics as dissensus, in which the framework of equality appears both as a necessary starting-point and as a counterfactual programmatic claim); we will find it, finally, whenever traditionally disengaged approaches (approaches premised on the separation of subject vs. object) decide to confront the question of ethics and interpersonal commitment, as in Emmanuel Levinas' ethics vis-à-vis phenomenology, or as in several attempts of post-structuralism to articulate and bring together critical distance and political action.



Through the lens of otherness -- and whether this phrase can be understood to mean "through the lens of the other" -- is one of the questions we will pursue -- we will take a critical look at the complex landscape of comparative studies, trying to map out its limits and possibilities as well as unearth some of its working assumptions. In this sense, our exploration of the landscape of comparative studies through otherness will be a genealogical and archeological one: we will approach otherness from different points of view, and in each case we will attempt to retrace the conceptual constellations at work, examining how each of these points of view operates within a larger configuration. We will examine otherness as subalternity (the struggle for recognition; the traps of political representation); otherness and transculturation/cannibalism (the consumption of the other by the self; the consumption of the self by the other, how cannibalism problematizes/enriches notions of identity), and the spatialization of otherness: topos (common places), utopias, heterotopias). Our corpus will be diverse both in origin and in kind, although given my own area of research an emphasis in Latin America will be discerned in the selection of materials. The corpus will include literary texts by Jorge Luis Borges, Juan José Saer, Machado de Assis, Clarice Lispector, Oswald de Andrade, Guimarães Rosa, and Dostoevsky; theoretical texts by Kant, Montaigne, Carl Schmitt, Jacques Rancière, Franz Fanon, Viveiros de Castro, Roberto Schwarz, Foucault, and Levinas; and films by Glauber Rocha, Pedro Costa, Eduardo Coutinho, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Gabriel Mascaro, and others.

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