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On Not Seeing the Forest for the Trees

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One salient point Marx makes in his *Rheinische Zeitung* articles from 1842 about the law concerning the theft of wood is that the Provincial Assembly, despite its focus on the forest as a newly forged property, proved unable to see the forest or wood for the trees (or, more accurately, for the parts of the trees whose removal, off the tree or even off the ground, they were trying to enshrine in law as subject to theft by pesky peasants). Marx notes

how by voting on paragraphs that were apparently unconnected and very remote from one another, one provision after another was surreptitiously *slipped through*; and how, once the first has been put through in this way, subsequent provisions could be accepted without even the *semblance* of the condition required for the first. (94-95)

Each provision – each tree or part of a tree – is considered apart from the others, with a view to making up an incongruous magical capitalist forest where theft incurs profit for the forest owner, while those gathering wood to survive are utterly dispossessed (or repossessed, by the forest owner):

Thus, we see that §4 should have been impossible because of §14, §14 because of §15, §15 because of §19, and §19 itself is simply impossible and should have made impossible the entire principle of punishment, precisely because in it all the depravity of this principle is revealed. (96)

The refusal to consider provisions in each other's light is not haphazard, but deliberate, made explicit in what, in the Assembly's own papers, quoted by Marx, is called "an eternally memorable reply" by an unidentified author. This reply countered the objection to §19 (stipulating that "the infringer of forest regulations is handed over completely to the forest owner, for whom he has to perform *forest labor*" – a near-homonym of *forced labor*) brought forward by "an urban deputy" that such a stipulation would be particularly dangerous "in the case of persons of the other sex" (94).

It is here, where for the first and only time a woman appears in the mystifying forest of documents on the basis of which – in the absence of a draft of the law itself – Marx is making his initial forays into considering "so-called material interests" (qtd. in Nichols xv), that any clear (over)view of the forest is precluded by an exclusive focus on individual trees, as "after this [reply], the paragraph [§19] was adopted *without opposition*" (94). The enclosure of the

commons of the forest, thus, is enacted through the enclosing upon itself of every tree, dispossessing all peasants, but doubly dispossessing those of “the other sex” – not represented in the Assembly, not able to be forest owners. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Marx does not treat this gender-based objection any differently than the other overruled objections he cites; for his purposes, gender is immaterial.

What is also, ultimately, immaterial for Marx, is the actual forest in its materiality; he, too, does not really see it in its own materiality. This becomes clear when he protests the way “the rights of human beings give way to those of young trees” in the definition of taking wood from a tree as theft (61). In this passage, the actual tree in the forest is first reduced to a metaphor clarifying the injustice done to the purported “thieves,” as Marx argues that “after the adoption of the paragraph, it is inevitable that many people of a noncriminal disposition are cut off from the green tree of morality and, like fallen wood, are cast into the hell of crime, infamy, and misery.”¹ Subsequently, the tree’s vitality and the damage done to it by wood gathering are minimized: “upon rejecting the paragraph, there is the possibility of the maltreatment of *some young trees*” (here, Marx ignores how wood from older trees is in fact preferred as it is more robust and less prone to rotting). And, finally, the tree is again dematerialized to become a sacrilegious object of human worship – a false idol – that is simultaneously assigned the capacity to sacrifice humans: “it needs hardly be said that human sacrifices will fall to victorious wooden idols!” (61). These figurations render invisible what trees actually provide – and what is endangered, besides peasant livelihoods and communities, by turning them into property. While the push towards criminalizing wood gathering in the Assembly was certainly not driven by environmental concerns, Marx’s blindness to enclosure’s (and, to an extent, feudalism’s) effects on the forest itself, on the trees as trees and the wood as wood, as also offering habitats for other-than-human life forms, contrasts with Daniel Bensaïd’s discussion of “inappropriable common goods of humanity” (47) – and even there, the “of humanity” needs further probing.

In addition, as Robert Nichols notes in his foreword to *The Dispossessed*, in both Bensaïd’s and Marx’s texts “there is little sense given ... of how to relate different temporal-spatial conjunctures of capital and empire” (xix). Colonialism is mentioned by Marx only to make the – in light of Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, wholly unconvincing – point that reducing prison rations to bread and water would be “an idea that a Dutch plantation owner would hardly dare to entertain” (100). Like the trees before, enslaved peoples here are just figures used to drive home the degree of the peasants’ dispossession; their actual status as property, which makes them not just potential thieves like the peasants but potential stolen goods, and which thus aligns them much more closely with the wood of the forest, as a fungible good, than the peasants, is not broached.

¹ The idea that peasants are being reduced to wood and instrumentalized like it is taken even further later on, when Marx wryly notes: “We are only surprised that the forest owner is not allowed to heat his stove with the wood thieves” (94).

Today, the extended temporal scope of colonialism seems less contested than its spatial reach, which, as Williams makes clear when he calls imperialism “one of the last models of ‘city and country’” (279), comprises the urban centers of imperial power, the rural hinterlands in the colonies where this power was exercised, not least on and in forests, but also urban parts of the colonies and rural parts of imperial nations. Perhaps the reluctance to acknowledge the full extent of this spatial reach is due to the fact that one way for those who continue to benefit from coloniality to deny the afterlives of colonial violences is by relegating them, or at least the worst of them, to an *elsewhere*: legacies of colonialism may linger but *not here, or more so there than here*. It is vital to counter this disavowal (a term I use deliberately to indicate an active stance, in opposition to the oft-used metaphors of colonial amnesia or aphasia, which imply a passively suffered affliction) by focusing attention on those places that have not yet or barely been recognized as inscribed by colonial violences, which are found not just on and in land, but also on and in the water of oceans, seas, lakes and rivers, on and in the ice of the Poles, on and in the air within the Earth’s atmosphere, and even on and in the particles and matter of outer space. On land, as Mishuana Goeman also makes clear, more recognition is needed of the ways the lives and afterlives of colonialism have (re)shaped rural areas (and not just those that harbored plantations), as well as expanses of “wilderness” and “nature” (designations that in and of themselves are deeply entwined with colonial endeavors).

James Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village” emphatically incorporates the rural into the world of modernity-coloniality, writing of the villagers of Leukerbad, Switzerland:

These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine ... Go back a few centuries they are in their full glory—but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.

In “Black Body,” Teju Cole follows in Baldwin’s footsteps by visiting Leukerbad in 2014, suggesting that the village has “grown considerably” since the 1950s, not just geographically but also morally, as its racism is now no worse than that experienced by Cole in world cities like Zürich or New York (5). This, Cole asserts, is because

the children and grandchildren of those children [who considered Baldwin not human but a living wonder] are connected to the world in a different way. Maybe some xenophobia or racism is part of their lives, but part of their lives, too, are Beyoncé, Drake and Meek Mill, the music I hear pulsing from Swiss clubs on Friday nights. (6)

After citing Baldwin’s words about the Leukerbad villagers, moreover, Cole states:

It would not occur to me to think that, centuries ago, I was “in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.” But I suspect that for Baldwin this is, in part, a piece of oratory, a grim cadence on which to end a paragraph. (9-10)

What this, and Cole's insistence that he, in fact, does feel himself to be related to Dante, glosses over is Baldwin's stipulation "from the point of view of power"; it is not that no Black man can ever appreciate Western culture, but that, from the point of view of colonial power (the point of view of the forest, not that of the trees), the Black man's part in the world cannot include appreciating Dante – just like from the point of view of patriarchy, a woman cannot be forest owner and cannot have forest labor exclude sexual servitude. The 1950s Leukerbad villagers, on the other hand, despite their ostensible unworldliness, are able to be at home in all of the modern world (something their dancing to Beyoncé in 2014 underlines). By contending that the modern world, in every part, is the villagers', and of their making, even if they have never left Leukerbad, Baldwin is, in effect, making clear that the entire world is of coloniality, and that places like Leukerbad – and, we may add, rural Rhineland and Veenhuizen – were and are as steeped in coloniality as the cities that were the main nodes of colonial trade like Amsterdam.

While Baldwin shines a different light on Marx's peasants, conversely reading Baldwin through Marx raises the question what the Leukerbader, especially the "most illiterate" one, of centuries past "in their full glory" lived like: aligned, certainly, with the conquerors arriving in Africa, but also subject to changing powers: before enclosure, participating in a feudal commoners that, Bensaïd stresses, should not be an object of naïve nostalgia, and after enclosure, increasingly dispossessed. Only by thinking the intertwined histories of capitalism and colonialism in their specific moments and places, including less obvious, out-of-the-way places, and in its specific subjects, including non-human ones, can we truly see the forest (the world wrought by capitalism-colonialism) through the trees and the pieces of wood already fallen to the ground, and imagine other, better futures than the dispiriting one currently on the horizon.