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Barbarism/modernity: notes on barbarism

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'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'¹ Walter Benjamin's dictum from the 'Theses on the philosophy of history' has become a commonplace of critical theory, but the idea of barbarism remains obscure and unspecified. In its most general sense, the word signifies slavery, class exploitation or any other brutal system of social domination. Benjamin associates it with the 'horror' felt in contemplating 'cultural treasures' that 'owe their existence' not only to 'great minds and talents' but to the 'anonymous toil of their contemporaries'.² So general is his understanding of the term that he makes a transhistorical claim for its validity; all documents of civilization are documents of barbarism in all places and at all times. This article argues that such an observation can be made only from the standpoint of modernity. If Benjamin makes a universal claim for the *rapprochement* of barbarism and civilization it is a specifically modern claim. As such, it provides the starting point for my investigation, from a cultural perspective, of the work performed by barbarism in modernity.

As a category of Enlightenment 'universal history' barbarism occupies the middle position in the temporal-historical sequence: primitivism, barbarism, civilization. This scheme, as described in texts like Rousseau's 'Discourse on inequality' or Kant's 'Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose', provides both a classification of social structures and a narrative of human progress.³ A barbarous society has moved beyond the hunting and gathering economy of primitivism but has not yet developed the institutions of civil society (an elected government, a market economy, an independent judiciary, etc.). Understood in this context Benjamin's statement displays a tricky ambiguity. On the one hand, it yokes barbarism to civilization, excluding primitivism as a social system in which power is not exercised through state institutions. The operative distinction here would be between societies with a state and societies without a state, with primitivism occupying the non-state side of the division.⁴ On the other hand, the statement can be understood to group primitivism and barbarism against civilization. This would imply a split between pre-modern and modern societies, with the latter alone making (false) claims for equality and justice. It is this dual status of barbarism (its positioning in a perpetual tug-of-war between primitivism and civilization) that makes it a peculiarly unstable category. Benjamin's statement derives its force not so much from its comparison of two apparently discrete social systems but from its questioning of the progressive time scheme of 'universal history'. It is no accident that his

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in *Illuminations*, ed. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 256.

² *Ibid.*, p. 256.

³ Jean Jacques Rousseau, 'Discourse on inequality', in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (London: Dent, 1973). Immanuel Kant, 'Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose', in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴ On primitive societies as societies without the state see Pierre Clastres, *Society Without the State*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Urizen Books, 1977).

equation of barbarism with civilization occurs in the same study that introduces the idea of the *Jetztzeit*, an interruptive charge of Messianic time that breaks the continuity of history.

Since the pioneering work of E.B. Tylor in the late nineteenth century the question of modernity's relation to primitivism has been a central concern for scholars in literary and cultural studies. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* is often cited as the key text for the formulation of the anthropological conception of culture: culture understood as those systems of signification, representation and evaluation, and those social practices in which human communities find themselves enmeshed.⁵ The anthropological understanding of culture supplants the Enlightenment notion of *Kultur*, which describes a process of intellectual-spiritual formation specific to the symbolization of a people, usually considered as a homogeneous unity. Tylor uses the word 'culture' interchangeably with 'civilization', a term that in its Enlightenment sense (*Zivilization*) explicitly contrasts culture (*Kultur*) as the opposition between material and spiritual practices and values. In any case, the centrality of anthropology to twentieth-century debates about culture means that the idea of culture has experienced a privileged relation to primitivism. This has become particularly clear in recent critiques which claim that (traditional) anthropology constructs its object as a spatially distant and temporally prior 'other'.⁶ Attempts to think culture with respect to primitivism tend to rest on a fantasy of coherent, developmental time, even if they subscribe to the 'diffusionist' model by which primitive cultures are incapable of progress or exist as degenerate offshoots of higher civilizations. As Mariana Torgovnick writes in her *Gone Primitive*: 'Our interest in the primitive meshes thoroughly, in ways we have only begun to understand, with a passion for clearly marked and definable beginnings and endings that will make what comes between them coherent narrations.'⁷ By contrast, barbarism threatens to disrupt the successive temporality of Enlightenment progress, introducing an unpredictable disturbance to the 'coherent narrations' of modernity. As such, it generates a different set of fantasies, involving not projections of origin or closure but anxieties of violence and social upheaval.

While Enlightenment thinkers disagree as to the regenerative or degenerative capacities of primitivism, they display strong agreement on the violent and disruptive effects of barbarism. Rousseau is well known for his admiration of the 'noble savage', but he understands barbarism as a 'state of war', a social system based on 'dominion and slavery, or violence and rapine'.⁸ Kant considers primitivism to be a degenerate condition. Like Rousseau, however, he associates barbarism with violence and exploitation, describing it as a 'state of lawless freedom' that threatens to unleash a 'hell of evils' in even the most civilized societies.⁹ This negative assessment of barbarism persists into the twentieth century, contributing to the general understanding of the term as a signifier of brutality and domination. Consider Adorno's famous comments on culture 'after Auschwitz': 'Whoever pleads for the maintenance of this radically culpable and shabby culture becomes its accomplice, while the man who says no to culture is directly furthering the barbarism which our culture showed

⁵ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom* (London: Murray, 1871).

⁶ See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Fabian offers a critique of the temporality that constitutes anthropology as a discipline, arguing that traditional ethnographic practice assumes the non-contemporaneousness of geographically diverse cultures.

⁷ Mariana Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 245.

⁸ Rousseau, 'Discourse on inequality', pp. 87-8.

⁹ Kant, 'Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose', p. 48.

itself to be.¹⁰ Here barbarism stands for nothing so much as the unrepresentable terrors of the Nazi Holocaust, insofar as they reverse the Enlightenment values of reason and progress. Eric Hobsbawm expands upon Adorno's understanding of barbarism in an article entitled 'Barbarism: a user's guide'. Hobsbawm supplies a two-tiered definition of barbarism. First, he identifies it with 'the disruption and breakdown of the systems of rules and moral behaviour by which *all* societies regulate the relations among their members and, to a lesser extent, between their members and those of other societies'. Second, he understands barbarism more specifically as 'the reversal of what we may call the project of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, namely the establishment of a *universal* system of such rules and standards of moral behaviour, embodied in the institutions of states dedicated to the rational progress of humanity'.¹¹ Clearly, barbarism offers a challenge to the Enlightenment construction of European modernity, threatening to reverse or disrupt its central tenets of rationality, progress and universality.

The idea of modernity is one of the most problematic and indispensable in contemporary social and cultural theory. As Peter Osborne explains, the confusion surrounding the term derives from its use both as a category of historical periodization and as a means of describing a quality of sociocultural experience. The difficulty stems from 'a tension between the use of modernity as an empirical category of historical sociology and its inherent self-referentiality, whereby it necessarily denotes the time of its utterance'.¹² As a sociological category, it describes a broad range of transformations in the development of societies (from political, legal and economic forms, through religious and cultural organization, to the structure of the family, the relations between *sexes* and the psychological constitution of the individual). But the forms of temporality associated with these changes are rarely connected to the temporality implicit in the use of modernity as a periodizing category. One solution to this problem, as developed in the work of Jürgen Habermas, involves thinking about modernity as a 'project'. For Habermas, modernity is neither a historical period nor a shirting set of social experiences, but a world-historical 'project' that seeks to reconcile concrete social practices with the dictates of a universal public reason. This definition has the advantage of gathering all regional theories of modernity (economic, political, religious, aesthetic, sociological, etc.) under the unifying umbrella of Enlightenment reason (or what Habermas calls 'the philosophical discourse of modernity'). Yet it also faces the difficulty of accounting for the persistence of domination as well as freedom in the practical history of post-Enlightenment societies. It is for this reason that Habermas must grapple with barbarism and the threat it poses to the (supposedly) normative discourses of Enlightenment rationality.

Habermas engages this task most succinctly in 'Modernity — an incomplete project'. This short essay contends that modernity's affinity with barbarism derives from its 'time-consciousness'. By celebrating dynamism and ephemerality, Habermas claims, modern thinkers disclose 'a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present'.¹³ Nowhere is this more apparent than in Benjamin's concept of the *Jetztzeit*, which treats the present as a moment of revelation that interrupts the homogeneous flow of history. According to Habermas, this temporal framework allows Benjamin to explain the operations of cultural transmission in the context of barbarism. As the *Jetztzeit* explodes the continuum of history,

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 367.

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Barbarism: a user's guide', *New Left Review*, 206 (1994), p.45.

¹² Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 4.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity - an incomplete project', in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p. 5.

so modern civilization 'recognises itself in the barbaric, the wild and the primitive'.¹⁴ This collocation of 'the barbaric' and 'the primitive' follows the Kantian practice of opposing civilization to barbarism and primitivism. For Habermas, both barbarism and primitivism are aspects or moments of what Kant calls man's 'unsocial sociability' and, as such, they attest to the necessity of safeguarding the institutions of civil society. The point is that barbarism does not invalidate the Enlightenment programme of rational social amelioration. Rather it signals the incompleteness of this project, highlighting the need for a continued belief in the ability of rationality to contain social domination and violence.

Habermas aims to 'complete' the Enlightenment project by reworking its doctrine of universal rationality so as to question its repressive aspects (by replacing it with a model of 'intersubjective' or 'communicative' reason). Not surprisingly, his work attracts strong criticism from thinkers who claim that the persistence of social inequality and discrimination under modernity invalidates the emancipatory ideals of the Enlightenment. For example, Zygmunt Bauman, in his *Modernity and Ambivalence*, argues that only a rebellion against modernity can produce the peaceable traits (tolerance, human choice, the celebration of difference, etc.) that the Enlightenment has failed to deliver.¹⁵ Similarly, Paul Gilroy, who studies the modernity of the African diaspora in *The Black Atlantic*, returns to Hegel's master/slave dialectic to argue that social domination was always internal to Enlightenment rationality.¹⁶ In *The Barbarian Temperament*, Stjepan Mestrovic cites examples such as the Gulf War and 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia to claim that 'the fundamental basis of society is nonrational'.¹⁷ All these thinkers subscribe (in different ways) to what Gianni Vattimo calls 'the end of modernity', a phrase that describes not modernity's termination as a historical period but the philosophical dismantling of the Enlightenment project.¹⁸ Vattimo's claims for the 'end of modernity' are made in the context of readings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, but his emphasis on what he calls *pensiero debole* ('weak' or post-foundationalist thought) affirms a more general questioning of the Enlightenment's universalizing impulses. Nowhere is this post-foundationalism stronger than in the work of Jean-Francoise Lyotard, who has emerged as Habermas' most prominent critic in the international canons of postmodern theory (bracketing Niklas Luhmann's 'systems theory' which has been most influential within Germany). In *The Postmodern Condition* and *Just Gaming*, Lyotard argues that the Enlightenment ideal of universal reason provides a 'metanarrative' for emancipation, a totalizing scheme that reproduces the structures of domination it seeks to resist.¹⁹ By contrasting Habermas' theory of 'communicative reason' with his own model of incommensurable 'language games' (derived from Wittgenstein), he questions the possibility of a 'common measure' by which all social actions can be adequated. Lyotard's scepticism towards 'metanarratives' recalls an alternative meaning of the word 'barbarism' that resists easy conflation with notions of horror, evil or ethical reprehensibility.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Stjepan Mestrovic, *The Barbarian Temperament: Toward a Postmodern Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. xiv.

¹⁸ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). Vattimo draws on the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung* to describe the 'end of modernity' as a process of 'overcoming' or 'leave taking'.

¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

I have in mind the initial sense of the word as it derives from the ancient Greek βαρβαρος, meaning foreign, or literally 'stuttering', a name given by the Greeks to express the sound of foreign languages. While Lyotard is not interested in the question of interlingual translation *per se*, this understanding of barbarism complicates his division of contemporary life into incompatible spheres of meaning. Representing the speech of foreigners as distorted (repetitious and garbled) rather than as incomprehensible suggests a partial (or relative) commensuration between speech communities. As a trope for cultural difference, barbarism describes not a relation of irreducible 'otherness' but an iterative disturbance (*ba-ba*) that interrupts the linear passage of language in much the same way as Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* upsets the flow of history. This aspect of disturbance or distortion also troubles Habermas' concept of 'communicative competence' by which intersubjective meanings are determined on a universal horizon of arbitration. Barbarism, it might be said, displays a 'communicative incompetence' in analogy to the impaired speech of the stutterer. It questions both the Habermasian ideal of a free undistorted exchange of meaning and the view that there are only incommensurable language games, in which case distortion would not be possible.²⁰

The capacity of barbarism to generate reciprocal understanding and public consensus is insufficient to produce a rational standard of 'communicative action' but powerful enough to generate contingent relations that override the incommensurability of language games. This has important implications. If barbarism questions the inviolability of language games, then these apparently discrete spheres become susceptible to mutual infiltration and domination. Ultimately, barbarism cannot be understood in separation from power relations, and in particular the role of language in maintaining human inequality. In this respect, it recalls what Lyotard later names the *differend*, a situation where the 'regulation' of the conflict between two parties 'is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom'.²¹ Such a disparity of signification does not entail an absolute distinction between the parties in dispute. As a trope for the translatability of languages, barbarism questions the existence of a primordial, ontological gap between language games even as it relies upon the fiction of such a distinction to effect the workings of domination.²²

²⁰ On distortion see Ernesto Laclau, 'The death and resurrection of the theory of ideology', *Modern Language Notes*, 112 (1997), pp. 297-321. Laclau associates distortion with the notion of false representation that informs the classical Marxist critique of ideology. He argues that this critique of ideology, which is prolonged today in Habermas' regulative ideal of undistorted communication, makes sense only if one postulates access to a point from which reality can speak without discursive mediations. As soon as one denies the existence of such a metalinguistic level, and claims the irreducibility of the rhetorico-discursive operations of a text, there can be no extradiscursive ground from which to launch a critique of ideology. The argument against this classical Marxist position can proceed in two different directions, leading to contradictory results. One possibility is to dispense with the idea of distortion, claiming with Lyotard that there are only incommensurable language games. In this case, the notion of a 'full positivity' is transferred from an extradiscursive ground to the plurality of the discursive field. As Laclau writes, a 'naturalistic positivism' gives way to a 'semiotic' or 'phenomenological positivism'. The other possibility is to identify the notion of an extradiscursive closure as the 'ideological illusion *par excellence*'. This means not abandoning the idea of distortion but reformulating it so that it becomes the cornerstone for the dismantling of any metalinguistic operation. I have in mind a similar reworking of distortion for the theory of barbarism. The distortion at stake in barbarism is what Laclau calls a 'constitutive distortion', meaning not that an originary meaning appears in a false light but that the very possibility of extradiscursive closure is called into question.

²¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 9.

²² Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) distinguishes between 'heterolingual' and 'homolingual' translation; i.e. translation directed towards a mixed and linguistically heterogeneous community and translation between two separately

In this way, the etymology of barbarism provides a wider theoretical context in which to interrogate the term's usual implications of violence, exploitation and oppression.

Whatever utility it may possess, this conceptualization of barbarism cannot explain why relations of dominance and conflict exist between actual human communities. Lyotard's theory solves central problems in pragmatic philosophy, but it does not account for the formation of or interactions between modern social and cultural groups. What the idea of language games lacks when it comes to explaining such forms of social and cultural organization is a sense of what Benedict Anderson calls the 'imagined community'.²³ The precondition for this mode of belonging, which finds its apotheosis in nationalism, is the advent of modernity. Anderson claims that, due to an interplay between capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity, modern social and cultural groups cannot form discrete communities except imaginarily, as the projection of a homogeneous subjecthood that is never actually realized anywhere. For Anderson, the imagined community derives its sense of uniqueness from its relations with other communal groups, which, as in the case of imperialism, can be complicitous as well as hierarchical. While not describing the concrete details of these interactions, the concept of barbarism provides a way of asking why modernity produces relations of cultural difference as relations of cultural dominance. It thus disqualifies the identification of modernity with any single cultural formation (for example, Europe or the bourgeoisie) by showing the idea to depend on complex interconnections between (overlapping) social constituencies.

To delineate the shifting and contingent relations between imagined communities requires a thorough investigation of the factors (geographical, economic, historical, technological) that regulate their interactions. While such an empirical study is not the provenance of this article, these processes have clearly enabled the worldwide spread of modernity. Barbarism, under modernity, becomes a global phenomenon, describing the mutual misunderstandings and hierarchical relations that structure the disjunctive connections between communities. It thus becomes impossible to explain the re-emergence or persistence of barbarism, as does Habermas, simply in terms of modernity's 'time-consciousness'. Missing here is a consideration of the equally important dimension of space, especially as it bears upon issues of nationalism, territory and cultural difference. To understand the relations between modernity and barbarism, it is necessary to follow the 'spatial turn' in contemporary social and cultural theory.²⁴ This means approaching the social organization of culture and power as a spatial articulation in which 'history', as Michelet writes, is 'first of all geography'.²⁵

The spatial critique of modernity is one of the most highly developed discourses in postmodern theory, often articulated to a critique of European imperialism in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century variants. As this argument usually runs, the predominant ideologies of

constituted linguistic communities. Barbarism casts heterolingual translation as homolingual translation insofar as it posits two separate communities in an unequal relation of power. Yet such homolingualism is never watertight. The encounter of domination transforms both parties, giving rise to heterolingual effects that cannot be grounded in the binary logic that constructs the different as other.

²³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁴ See Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988) and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) for detailed accounts of the 'spatial turn' in social and cultural theory.

²⁵ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Flammarion, 1885), p. 161.

imperialism contrast modernity with its temporal precedent (the 'premodern') as the relation of the colonizing West to the colonized non-West.²⁶ The idea of modernity thus becomes a means of describing the dissemination and institutionalization throughout the world of (supposedly homogeneous) Western modes of social, economic and cultural organization. As such, the West imagines itself (mistakenly) as a unified and ubiquitous totality, providing a universal reference point in relation to which other cultures recognize themselves as particularities. From this perspective, Habermas' faith in the unfinished potential of the Enlightenment project appears as simply ethnocentric, since, as he writes, it 'implicitly connect[s] a claim to *universality* with our *Occidental understanding* of the world'.²⁷

While this argument highlights modernity's connection to the geopolitical configuration of the world, it does not explain the temporal disruption and repetition inherent in barbarism (as understood from the etymological perspective). More suited for this purpose are poststructuralist notions of language and temporality that are not immediately reconcilable with an emphasis on geographical space. In the founding text of contemporary spatial theory, *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre criticizes poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida, Kristeva and Barthes for 'promoting the basic sophistry whereby the philosophic epistemological notion of space is fetishized and the mental realm comes to envelop the social and physical ones'.²⁸ Lefebvre's primary difficulty is with what he understands as the privileging of language in poststructuralist theory, a feature it supposedly shares with its structuralist/Saussurean precedents. He argues that the linguistic sign enacts a 'violence', which substitutes the abstract space of language (*langue*) for the concrete space of everyday life. I believe that this (linguistic) violence acquires a radically different significance in the context of barbarism. By introducing an iterative disturbance to the workings of linguistic signification, barbarism fractures the abstract space of Saussurean *langue*, opening it up to social and physical modes of determination. Such a movement, which corresponds to the logic of *differance* in deconstructive theory, reconnects the production of social space to the deferred temporality of language. It thus suggests an alternative reading of Lefebvre, one which acknowledges the poststructuralist critique of linguistic signification and refuses to privilege material over metaphorical space.²⁹ My hope for deriving an understanding of barbarism that is sensitive to both Marxist notions of social space and the deconstructive emphasis on language and supplementation stems from the typology of social forms offered in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.

Deleuze and Guattari understand barbarism both as a mode of social domination and as a problem in the translatability of languages. For them, barbarism is a 'system of representation' that corresponds to the 'imperial formation' of the 'despotic state'. It exists not as a discrete mode of social organization (as in 'oriental despotism' or the 'Asiatic mode of production') but as a 'cerebral ideality that is added to, superimposed on the evolution of societies'.³⁰ As such, it becomes evident 'when one empire breaks away from a preceding empire; or . . . wherever

²⁶ For example, see Naoki Sakai, 'Modernity and its critique: the problem of universalism and particularism', in *Translation and Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and Cultural Nationalism*, pp. 153-76.

²⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of 'Communicative Action, Vol. 1*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984).

²⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. David Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 5.

²⁹ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other 'Real-and- Imagined' Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) offers such a reading of Lefebvre. Soja finds the idea of social space to describe a 'real-and-imagined' formation, which is both abstract and concrete, metaphorical and material, mental and physical.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 219.

temporal empires fall into decadence'.³¹ In the scheme developed in Chapter 3 of the *Anti-Oedipus*, barbarism provides the name of one of three social 'machines': the primitive (or savage), the barbarian (or despotic) and the civilized (or capitalist), each of which produces its own system of representation. "While Deleuze and Guattari clearly derive these classifications from the Enlightenment scheme of 'universal history', they do not arrange them along a progressive historical line. Rather they find them to coexist spatially, overlapping in concrete social circumstances. Their scheme accommodates Benjamin's views on the mutuality of barbarism and civilization, presenting barbarism not as a historical period that pre-dates civilization but as a representational system in which civilization becomes thinkable.

Because they deliberately avoid developing a notion of historical time, Deleuze and Guattari's work has proved attractive to theorists who participate in the spatial critique of modernity.³² Yet their characterization of primitivism, barbarism and civilization as social machines makes it difficult to understand their interest in space as an engagement with an extra-discursive reality. These machines describe modalities of production that problematize the traditional division between reality and representation. They produce representations that exist within reality while also registering the impossibility of accessing reality except through representation. At stake is not a signifying system that exists outside reality (by virtue of the distanciation implicit in representation) but a mode of production that organizes reality into identifiable representational strategies. Barbarism involves a shift in practices of representation and, as such, entails a reorganization of social reality. Paradoxically, this produces a certain disconnection between reality and representation. Like the civilized/capitalist machine that provides the focus of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis, the barbarian formation functions according to a deterritorializing impulse. This is to say that it involves the dissemination of signifying practices and their dissociation from any necessary material instantiation. The representational strategies of barbarism become ever more stratified and schematic, reorganizing the 'territorial alliances' of primitivism so they converge upon the 'direct filiation of the despot with the deity'.³³ Correlative to this process is the genesis of the state, a political form that, for Deleuze and Guattari, requires the technical underpinning of a writing system.

Conventional accounts of the state claim that it arises through an act of territorialization or the fixing of residence. By the argument of the *Anti-Oedipus*, the state is a principle of abstraction, which substitutes the earth for abstract signs of the earth by turning it into the object of ownership or property. With this 'writing of the earth' (or what I prefer to call *geography*) comes a shift in relations between the voice and writing. Under primitivism, the graphic system is independent of the voice, marked directly on the body (as in the practice of tattooing or scarification). Barbarian societies, on the other hand, possess a formal writing system. This means that 'the graphic system has . . . aligned itself on the voice, enabling it to extract from the voice a deterritorialized abstract flux that it retains and makes reverberate in the linear code of writing'.³⁴ Barbarism represents the first great movement of phonocentrism and logocentrism, inducing 'a mute voice from on high or from the beyond, a voice that

³¹ Ibid., p. 193.

³² For example, see Lawrence Grossberg, 'The space of culture, the power of space', in Ian Chambers and Lidia Curti (eds) *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 169-88.

³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 197.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 202.

begins to depend on graphism'.³⁵ Unlike capitalism, which involves an unfixed or 'decoded' axiom of signification, barbarism organizes signifying practices into hierarchic structures of domination and subordination. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this process as 'overcoding', a term that describes the means by which one language relegates another to the status of a simple signified, robbing it of meaning by coding it into completely phonetic elements. As in the initial (Greek) sense of the word, barbarism implies the unequal interaction of two languages. For if language itself does not presuppose conquest, the levelling operations [*les operations de rebattemeni*] that constitute written language indeed presuppose two inscriptions that do not speak the same language: two languages [*langages*], one of the masters, the other of slaves. Jean Nougayrol describes just such a situation:

'For the Sumerians, [a given sign] is water, the Sumerians read this sign *a*, which signifies water in Sumerian. An Akkadian comes along and asks his Sumerian master: what is this sign? The Sumerian replies: that's *a*, and on this point there is no longer any relationship between the sign and water, which in Akkadian is called *mu*... I believe that the presence of the Akkadians determined the phoneticization of the writing system . . . and that the contact of two peoples is almost necessary before the spark of a new writing can spring forth'.³⁶

At stake here is the substitution of a symbolic for an iconic mode of signification (to adopt the terms of C.S. Peirce). The Sumerian language overcodes the Akkadian language, leading to the phoneticization of the writing system. For the Sumerians, the Akkadian language is so much nonsense, but the presence of the Akkadian speech community determines the subordination of writing to the voice. At the same time, it motivates a transcendence of the signifier as the authorizing source of this voice, a divine decree that functions through the despot's desire. For Deleuze and Guattari, as for Lefebvre, 'the sign has the power of destruction because it has the power of abstraction'.³⁷ It is from this 'power of abstraction' that the state derives its 'overcoding unity'.³⁸ Barbarism functions by a collective drive that aims to gather the disparate elements of the social and physical environments into a transcendent whole. Yet this is constitutionally impossible, so the 'despotic state' (or *Urstaai*) remains an ideal, a limit that can never actually be reached. Deleuze and Guattari explain that under barbarism the state is an abstraction that is realized only as an abstraction, 'the cold monster that represents the way that history is in "the head", in the brain'.³⁹ Only in the civilized capitalist machine does the state assume an immanent concrete existence, becoming subordinated to a field of forces whose flows it coordinates and whose relations of domination it expresses. This is to say that barbarism 'tends to concretization under capitalism, where it fashions a whole that makes its law immanent'.⁴⁰ I suggest that this tendency to concretization describes precisely the relation of barbarism to modernity.

In their more famous discussion of capitalist representation, Deleuze and Guattari stress that the deterritorialization of capital flows is controlled by the 'reterritorializing' function of the state. 'One sometimes has the impression,' they write, 'that the flows of capital would willingly dispatch themselves to the moon if the capitalist State were not there to bring them

³⁵ Ibid., p. 202.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 208.

³⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 135.

³⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p. 220.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 221.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

back to earth.⁴¹ By contending that such reterritorialization represents the re-emergence of barbarism in modernity, I place myself in the difficult position of linking the reterritorialization of capitalism with the supposedly deterritorializing impulses of the barbarian formation. Yet such an association surely makes sense given that barbarism 'tends to concretization' in capitalism. Barbarism names the process by which capitalism once again encounters territory. Thus Deleuze and Guattari write that 'the fascist State has been without a doubt capitalism's most fantastic attempt at economic and political reterritorialization'.⁴² This statement confirms the sense in which Andrew Hewitt, in his recent book *Fascist Modernism*, adopts Deleuze and Guattari's concept of barbarism to describe a social and symbolic order that makes possible the coexistence of modernity, in a certain form, and fascism'.⁴³ Although brief, Hewitt's discussion of barbarism is extremely suggestive. In using the concept to explore 'the ideological nexus of fascism and the avant-garde', he finds it necessary to examine the territorial operations of imperialism.⁴⁴ For Hewitt, imperial expansion provides the political corollary to the avant-garde's programme of cultural transgression. In breaking the coding possibilities of the nation state (fracturing its borders at the demands of capital), imperialism enacts a project of deterritorialization. Yet it also involves a programme of reterritorialization, since it requires the physical seizure of land. This literal reassertion of territory in the act of decoding or deterritorialization means that imperialism represents 'the "becoming-barbarian" of civilization', and, as such, it provides a crucial moment in thinking the relation of fascism to modernity.⁴⁵ Let me expand upon the implications of Hewitt's argument since it announces a connection between fascism and imperialism that remains implicit in Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of barbarism.

In an earlier essay, Hewitt asserts that 'fascist modernism inaugurated what has subsequently become the debate on postmodernism' since it 'faced the challenge of a move "beyond" modernity that would not reinscribe itself in the transgressive logic of modernism'.⁴⁶ Such a statement makes explicit the connection between fascism and postmodernism implied in the work of thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer, Lyotard and Jameson.⁴⁷ Fascism attempts to overcome the progressive logic of modernity, failing because it imagines this movement as a process of restitution or return to a mythical past of national-racial purity. None the less, it opens a conceptual space in which it becomes possible to think modernity's decline. The difficulty with this argument as a genealogy for postmodernism is that it rests solely on the precedent of European fascism. Hewitt's later discussion of barbarism suggests that such an analysis must also take account of imperialism. It is no accident that postcolonial critics make similar claims for modernity with respect to colonial cultural formations. Homi Bhabha, for example, writes that 'there is a colonial contramodernity at work in the eighteenth and nineteenth century matrices of Western modernity that, if acknowledged, would question the historicism that analogically links, in a linear narrative, late capitalism and the fragmentary,

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 258.

⁴² Ibid., p. 258.

⁴³ Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 92.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁶ Andrew Hewitt, 'Fascist modernism, futurism, and post-modernity', in Richard J. Goslan (ed.) *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture* (Hanover and London: New England University Press, 1992), p. 55.

⁴⁷ Important precedents here are Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979); Jean-François Lyotard, 'The sublime and the avant-garde', trans. Lisa Liebmann, Geoff Bennington and Marian Hobson, *Paragraph*, 6 (1985), pp.1-18; and Frederic Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

simulacral, pastiche symptoms of postmodernity'.⁴⁸ Drawing on Benjamin's idea of *the Jetztzeit* and Derrida's critique of the linguistic sign, Bhabha contends that this 'contramodernity' produces a 'time-lag' that unsettles the progressive narrative of modernity. This deferred temporal movement, which describes the gap separating the metropolitan centre from peripheries that cannot (or will not) catch up, problematizes the argument by which postmodernity results from a crisis in Western capitalism. For Bhabha, it is necessary to understand the modern/postmodern divide in a postcolonial context, studying the processes of (mis) translation and (performative) enunciation by which contemporary cultures are perpetually dislocated and hybridized. What are we to make of these conflicting claims by which fascism and imperialism respectively provide the cultural triggers for modernity's end?

I want to suggest that the idea of barbarism allows a reconciliation between these rival stories about modernity; that, as Nicos Poulantzas writes (adapting a phrase from Horkheimer), she 'who does not wish to discuss *imperialism* should stay silent on the subject of fascism' and vice versa.⁴⁹ I should make it clear that I understand fascism and imperialism not as fixed historical phenomena but as imaginary constructs that emerge in theoretical and literary discourses about modernity's end. These formations register an anxiety about fixing or representing historical phenomena, standing as signs for unrepresentable experiences that disrupt or overturn the Enlightenment myth of rational progress. Far from naming historical episodes that represent the unrepresentable (as does 'Auschwitz' for Lyotard), the idea of barbarism provides a means of assessing the mutually implicated (but not substitutable) roles of fascism and imperialism in the genealogy of postmodernity. Such a double movement is already implied in the *Anti-Oedipus*, which places a rhetorical stress upon fascism as the reterritorializing agent of capitalism but simultaneously identifies barbarism as a system of 'imperial' representation. Following the implications of Deleuze and Guattari's argument means studying barbarism's consequences for modernity without relying on evidence that privileges European fascism above colonial precedent or vice versa.

If the idea of barbarism has been central to intellectual debate about fascism it has played a lesser role in the study of imperialism. To simplify, fascism appropriates barbarism to challenge a perceived enervation of European culture. Deriving its force from Nietzsche's famous question in *The Will to Power*- '[W]here are the barbarians of the twentieth century?'—barbarism provides a means both for fascism to characterize its own (failed) rebellion against modernity and for fascism's enemies to describe the modes of domination and genocide specific to totalitarian regimes.⁵⁰ Imperialism, on the other hand, casts the colonial 'native' as a barbarian in order to justify a 'civilizing mission' that itself enacts the violence and oppression of barbarism. For instance, in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the barbarians are a group of nomadic tent-dwellers who wage war against an imperial outpost. At the same time, the novel characterizes the colonialists, who subject these people to torture and eradication, as 'the new barbarians'.⁵¹ Only the central character, a magistrate who is 'opposed to civilisation' insofar as it entails 'the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people', resists these efforts, and is, in turn, publicly tortured as a barbarian.⁵² Coetzee's novel attests barbarism's centrality to both imperial and

⁴⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of 'Culture'* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 173.

⁴⁹ Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship* (London: Verso, 1974), p. 17.

⁵⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 465.

⁵¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (New York: Penguin, 1982), p. 78.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

anti-imperial discourses, but there has been little attention to this kind of rhetoric in postcolonial studies. Recently, however, Robert Young has sought to supplement postcolonial theory with a reading of the *Anti-Oedipus* that recalls the analysis of barbarism that I have offered above.

In his *Colonial Desire*, Young argues that the *Anti-Oedipus* highlights two important points that are often overlooked in postcolonial theory: the 'role of capitalism as the determining motor of colonialism, and the material violence involved in the process of colonisation'.⁵³ He focuses on Deleuze and Guattari's metaphors of territorialization, claiming they remind us that imperialism involves the physical seizure of land; a point also stressed in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* but understated in the more discursive schemes of critics like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha.⁵⁴ Such a reading has the beneficial effect of rejoining postcolonial theory to political economy, encouraging critics in this field to think more clearly (and more concretely) about the relations between postcolonial processes and capitalist globalization. Yet it also has the (perhaps unintended) effect of linking postcolonial theory to the analysis of barbarism. Young's emphasis on the geographical basis of imperialism (the physical seizure of land) draws attention to the reterritorializing operations of capital that, for Deleuze and Guattari, constitute the concretization of barbarism. His analysis thus corroborates Hewitt's understanding of imperialism as the 'becoming-barbarian' of civilization, a correspondence that opens a space for theorizing the (dual) relations of imperialism and fascism to modernity. Without forgetting the social and cultural differences that distinguish historical manifestations of imperialism and fascism, such an understanding of barbarism might account for what can be called 'the fascism in imperialism' and 'the imperialism in fascism'. This means studying the violence implicit in the reterritorializing operations of the state, both as it generates material struggles over social space and as it structures the overcoding practices of language. To put it simply, barbarism names the point at which material (bodily) violence and discursive (linguistic) violence become indistinguishable.

The strength of this approach is also the source of its weakness. Barbarism makes it possible to think the relations of fascism and imperialism to modernity at the same time. Yet it does this at a level of abstraction that cannot do justice to the way in which cultures interact, degenerate and develop over time in relation to each other. Any general theory of barbarism risks reproducing the violence implicit in barbarism itself, glossing over social differences and moralizing divergent strategies of oppression into a shared, homogeneous victimization. But this is precisely the point. Barbarism returns to haunt its theorists, attesting the limits of theoretical speculation as a means of acquiring (or producing) knowledge. As such, it functions between two poles. The first represents the persistence of binary thought (master/slave, white/black, male/female, voice/writing, etc.) and of the material processes of domination that support this dichotomous logic. The second stands for the ambivalent processes of discursive slippage, the repetitions and doublings, that the articulation of binaries can never completely close up. Barbarism allows us to think the overwhelming power of the binary (which repeatedly survives its theoretical deconstruction) while registering the openings, ambivalences and dislocations that problematize this inexorable logic of overcoding. An analysis that encompasses only one of these approaches cannot do justice to the complex intercultural processes that establish and maintain relations of cultural

⁵³ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 167.

⁵⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopff, 1993).

dominance. Only by asking how barbarism reconciles the spatial logic of reterritorialization with the temporal slippages of linguistic difference is it possible to account for the persistence of subordination, oppression and domination in a supposedly postmodern world.