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Toward a Global Critical Theory: Our Sisyphean Task

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A Review of Eduardo Mendieta, 2008. *Global Fragments. Globalizations, Latinamericanisms, and Critical Theory*. Albany: SUNY Press, 226 pp. ISBN: 978-0791472583 (paperback; a hardcover edition was published in 2007).

- 1 Eduardo Mendieta's *Global Fragments* is guided by the Theodor W. Adorno-inspired assumption that "there can be no total perspective on the global world" (3). Why not? I would like to ask. In fact, there have been many attempts to marshal such a perspective on the globalizing world. Kenichi Ohmae's books from the pre-Seattle days of global theorizing are a case in point. A renowned Japanese business strategist and former McKinsey director, MIT-educated Ohmae allowed only one process – globalization – and cited only one writer – himself. Such certainty may be rare, but it is not impossible. Karl Marx employed an encompassing perspective of global history, and even Adorno had one, although it was rendered in the most skeptical epistemological terms.
- 2 It would be safer to say that one cannot hold a total perspective on the global world that is both comprehensive and true. For that reason, Mendieta rightly argues that all "theories of globalization are at best epistemological fragments."(Ibid.) This is not a novel point, however. Friedrich Nietzsche suggested already that any perspective is a slanted snapshot of the world, an ideology that begs for corrective attacks. Hence, we know what to expect from the Potemkin village of a totalized perspective: half-truths and false claims to grasp the entire social world with objectivity.
- 3 So far so good. Now I am wondering why the subtitle of Mendieta's book – *Latinamericanisms, Globalizations, and Critical Theory* –

shifts from the plural to the singular. Does Mendieta envision a global critical theory in the singular? Alternatively, does he reach for a critical theory that would unify the philosophical and social insights of *Global Fragments*? Is he counterbalancing his postmodern embrace of the fragment with a universal theory? Not at all. The tension between the potential singularity of a global critical theory and the actual plurality of the theoretical fragments in Mendieta's book remains unresolved.

- 4 Like Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966/1973), Mendieta's work is divided into three parts: "epistemological fragments" (*Globalizations*), "geohistorical-political fragments" (*Latinamericanisms*), and "biotheoretical fragments" (*Critical Theory*). In Mendieta's purview, globalizations are plural. Implying the existence of various Latinamericanisms, as well as Africanisms, Asianisms, and Europeanisms, the author presents Jürgen Habermas (1929-), Enrique Dussel (1934-), and Cornel West (1953-) as "pivotal centers of thought in a new constellation of critical thought for the twenty-first century in the age of globalization and global fragments" (7).
- 5 *Global Fragments* should have been subtitled *Latinamericanisms, Globalizations, and Critical Theories*. Mendieta's impressive Latin American, European, and African-American troika of Dussel, Habermas, and West is a progressive constellation of critical theorists. Yet these "titans of thought" (5) remain Mendieta-selected "centers of thought" amid potential others in the universe of ideas. Their works are discussed in *Global Fragments*, but not synthesized into a global critical theory. What has prevented the author from using the plural (critical theories)? Mendieta readily admits that his book "is made up of fragments" (3), but he does not explain why the section about the "three public intellectuals who have influenced, guided, and inspired my thought" (5) is titled "Critical Theory" in the singular and not critical theories in the plural.
- 6 In the waning 1970s, when I was absorbing the postmodern critique of all things universal and singular, I thought that pluralizing critical theory would be the way to go. The early Frankfurt School of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, its later incarnation in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Habermas' version taken together showed more political and theoretical differences than unity. At that time, I was working with two researchers mentioned in Mendieta's book, Klaus Eder and Rainer Döbert, at a Max-Planck-Institute in Starnberg (also clumsily known as the MPI for the Study of the Life Conditions of the Scientific-Technical Life World) that was founded by the late Carl-Friedrich von Weizsäcker, who co-directed it with Jürgen Habermas. (For the benefit of Mendieta's "bio-historical" (4), the actual lives lived, a small correction: we were not Habermas' "colleagues" (157), but staff that had been hired and could be fired.)
- 7 Mendieta's reception of Dussel and West combines the German Jewish heritage of the Frankfurt School with other critical theories and non-Eurocentric traditions. Moving effectively to an array of critical theories, Mendieta creates a combination of theoretical interventions that includes "the underside of globalization and modernity" (Dussel; 6), "the enlightenment to come and the power of discursive-communicative reason" (Habermas; *ibid.*), and "a political

pragmatism that gives primacy to the empowerment of society's downtrodden" (West; 7). Noting the partial nature of global understanding, uneven human existence, and yearning for social justice, the author forcefully argues that globalization must be thought "fragmentarily and by way of fragments" (17). The fragment is the centerpiece of Mendieta's eclectic philosophy — "we will trade in fragments" (18). Contrary to the subtitle of *Global Fragments*, Mendieta does not, cannot, and will not envision a global critical theory in the singular.

- 8 In the remainder of this review, I will outline three arguments with a broad brush. First, that humanity has eternally been fragmented; second, that humanity is moving toward defragmentation; and third, that critical thinking in the global age must strive for a singular global critical theory.

We have always been fragmented

- 9 No grand narrative of global history can avoid the transition from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens* on the one hand, and the walking of hunters and gatherers into all habitable environments of the planet, i.e., the globalization of modern humans on the other. Paleoanthropologists are still debating these milestones of our development, with most backing the African origin of modern humans, but some advocating a multiregional alternative. However, even if it is found to be true that we were once a singular community, born to an African mother, it would be hard to deny that the human species has diversified and pluralized itself in myriad non-biological ways ever since. Hence the conclusion: humanity has long been fragmented on largely isolated continents and islands and by layers upon layers of social and cultural plurality.
- 10 Mendieta would probably grant that fragmentation is not new, but assert that globalization has increased fragmentation to a significant degree. "Under globalization," he notes, "the world has become more fragmented as economic inequality shears continents and societies from each other" (2). This result dominates the negative column on Mendieta's ledger. On the positive side, he credits globalization with "the cosmopolitan dimension of its political, ethical, and moral values." (Ibid.) Cosmopolitanism appears in the positive column as the light that has allowed feminism, ecological movements, and religious tolerance to develop. I have doubts about the growth of religious tolerance and wish Mendieta's balance sheet would provide supporting data. Given that the author does not quantify his assertions, one has to weigh them without the help of a comparative scale. To what extent have religious tolerance or intolerance increased with globalization? Have they grown symmetrically or asymmetrically, more in some regions than others, equally or unequally among economic groups? The scholarly question of how to turn qualitative impressions into evidence remains wide open.
- 11 Mendieta may be right about a strong correlation between globalization and fragmentation, but, using the same uncorroborated style, I say that I believe otherwise. Qualitative assessments of this kind have heuristic value. Still, we have to do the numbers to prove or disprove our general beliefs and perceptions. However, let me continue with my opposite hunch. Global consciousness has exploded

in the last fifty years. People are currently grasping the uneven (fragmented) material, social, cultural, and political conditions on this planet in real time. Information about the global human condition has become ubiquitous. Yet the proliferating availability of information about such fragmentation does not prove that we have become more fragmented. The actual situation is presumably not as new as the information about it or our awareness of it. I think that humanity has been highly fragmented since the Neolithic Revolution. The recent information revolution has only removed the veil that was covering our ignorance.

- 12 Nevertheless, Mendieta is certainly right to approach mega-urbanization and such things with alarm about their potential to multiply human misery and inequality on a global scale. Mike Davis has driven that concern home in *Planet of Slums* (2006) and I have explored that theme in “[The Uneven Globality of Children](#)” (2005). Yet the novelty is not that globalization spawns fragmentation (even if it does), but rather that it boosts technologies that outwit national border controls and other limitations with relentless rivers of information and communication about virtually anything, including the fragmented human condition. An unintended consequence of this subversive distribution of intelligence may very well be the global “defragmentation” of hitherto isolated (fragmented) local consciousnesses.

Humanity is turning toward defragmentation

- 13 The global fragmentation of human rights, environmental quality of life, and other vital affairs has put global defragmentation on the historical agenda. Maintaining the planet and attaining a healthy world society requires ecological and socioeconomic defragmentation. Humanity is learning that global health is linked to defragmentation. Of course, humanity wields no simple analogue to the defragger that tries to keep the hard drive of a computer healthy, but humanity’s toolbox is not empty. UN regimes, treaties, and protocols, like the Kyoto Protocol from 1997 (currently signed and ratified by 183 states out of 192 UN member states), are the equivalent defragmentation tools with which humanity is trying to avoid disaster and redirect the course of history.
- 14 Humans used to be a minority, scattered among the interdependent commonwealths of plants and animals. This changed dramatically after the Industrial Revolution. In the last two hundred years, the planet has fallen prey to human hands. Now all flora and fauna live precariously in the planetary empire ruled by humankind. The well-being of the planet’s non-human life forms has become humanity’s problem. Humans must manage the earth’s welfare and their own simultaneously. This notion has become common knowledge. Thus, humanity is beginning to realize its responsibility for the global whole. However, humanity is not a superorganism with open eyes and global consciousness, ready to overcome all obstacles. We — individuals, societies, social movements, corporations, organizations, countries, and regions — are still pulling in countless different directions, but we are also pulling together. Global fragmentation and defragmentation are now battling each other for better or worse.
- 15 International organizations, such as the UN (active since 1945), have

taken sustained action against human and biospheric injury in conjunction with progressive state agencies and globally-oriented civic organizations like Amnesty International (1961), World Wildlife Fund (1961), Greenpeace (1971), and Doctors without Borders (Médecins sans Frontières, 1971). Fighting for decades against the local and global ills of ruinous or negligent human power, these actors have managed to expand governmental as well as non-governmental organizations and the networks of civil society from the local to the supranational. Combating a rising multitude of local/global risks, they have imbued humanity with accountability. Forcing communities, countries, and corporations to face a huge systemic problem like global climate change, they have made headway from fragmentation to defragmentation.

- 16 It would be naïve to think that the turn toward defragmentation will not create its own problems. New and ugly challenges are to be expected. For instance, defragmentation could lead to cultural homogenization. The globalization debates that have tried to tackle this issue since Benjamin Barber's "Jihad vs. McWorld" (1992) have been inconclusive. Let me ask, therefore, what would it take to settle a globalization headache like homogenization versus diversification? Shall we strive for a global critical theory in the singular?

We must strive for a singular global critical theory

- 17 Mendieta's salient points of diversity, plurality, hope, and critique require that all humans can speak their mind freely; yet controversial issues will never be settled conclusively if all voices are equal. Falling back on theories in the plural will settle nothing; yet never settling anything is allowing everything, including abominations. Abominations, however, require a conclusive settlement, which is not likely if all flowers of opinion bloom. A global critical theory that brings closure to knotty problems is therefore as necessary as it is improbable. This is our discursive conundrum.
- 18 To convince an ardent fragmentarist like Mendieta, a global critical theory would have to incorporate the core elements of Adorno's philosophy. First, it would have to respect the particular (*das Besondere*) and not crush it with the universal. Second, it would have to listen to the non-categorizable (*das Unbegriffliche*) and not overwhelm it with the categorized. Third, it would have to honor the non-identical (*das Nicht-identische*) and not only the identical. Fourth, it would have to appreciate the negative (*das Negative*) and not only embrace the positive. Finally, it would have to apply these sublime requirements to the entire global spectrum of social, cultural, political, and environmental worldviews.
- 19 The task of forging a theory for the all-encompassing problems of the twenty-first century cannot be accomplished individually. The old masters of comprehensive theoretical integration — world spirit (*Weltgeist*) philosophers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and world historians like Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee — have been deconstructed as dead white European males, spurious unifiers of a deeply fragmented world. Albert Camus' Sisyphus, who bravely returns to the foot of the mountain to roll his rock back up again, captures the absurd heroism of the lone global thinker who knows that a singular global critical theory is impossible to reach single-

handedly.

- 20 A global critical theory has to develop as a collective social science. The fragmentation of the socionatural world is shrinking and its defragmentation growing. But humanity is also advancing its technical capability to destroy itself and all higher life on this planet. Given this potential calamity of the whole, a plethora of critical theories becomes counterproductive and fragmentary thinking (thinking by way of fragments) turns into negligent thinking. Having learned from the humanities that critical thinking cannot be value-neutral, a global critical theory must combine symptomatic local/global analysis with compassionate systemic corrections, leave disciplinary confines behind, and develop effective research strategies similar to those of the natural sciences. Mendieta's reflections on "transdisciplinarity" (106) point in this direction. Let us hope that the haunting specter of our ultimate negation will focus the global mind.

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