



In Praise of Bastards

Michael Roes, 03 September 2014

“Why do we busy ourselves in foreign countries?” is one of the central questions asked in all the debates on neo-colonialism. By “we,” panellists usually think of the ‘West,’ or the ‘Occident.’ And as “foreign” they preferably designate all non-European and North American countries. – And, of course, the anti-neo-colonialist’s answer to these questions is a strident “For no reason whatsoever!” Such debates tend to provoke polarising contributions, or else we wouldn’t enjoy them so much. The reason why the debate on neo-colonialism particularly excites me is that it is almost always conducted in such a controversial and emotional manner. Any form of intercultural exchange is likely to fall under the general suspicion of merely serving the economic and political interests of the West. But while the agenda of political and economic hegemony is relatively easy to discover (at least, one would think that it is), intercultural communication is of a more intricate nature. First of all, the demand that the West must *in every respect* refrain from interfering with other continents’ affairs takes for granted the long-obsolete concept of locally defined cultures. As though (except for its purpose as an ideological battle cry) there had ever been such a thing as a ‘pure’ culture removed from the influence of nomadic, infectious thoughts, ideas and corruptions!

Further, a dramatic change is taking place in what is strange and what is close to us: concepts such as ‘home,’ ‘community,’ ‘region’ are no longer defined topographically but socially or, more precisely, *communicatively*. The international community of artists and scholars might be closer to me than the people from my immediate urban neighbourhood. My set of friends may predominantly include people living on all continents, and only a few from my hometown. The people and things I consider close to me need no longer be geographically close, nor is it only my own culture that can be familiar to me. The curiosity that we all have in common knows no geographical bounds. These thoughts occur to me because they persistently accompanied, inspired and also paralysed us during a German-Moroccan theatre workshop. Is an art project initiated by “us” in itself an act of neo-colonialism? If answered in the positive, then what implications does this have on our image of ‘the others’ who, after all, is letting himself in for this experiment with enthusiasm and excitement? Do we think them so ignorant or naive as not to realise what hidden, factual or suspected manipulations are lurking behind the pretence of art, and what infections their innocent souls and their pristine culture(s) are being exposed to? And what

about us? Do we think we are spared from the commonly reciprocal potential of infections? Does the alleged superiority of our psyche and culture consist in this general immunity or resistance against all viruses and excitations rampant in the foreign 'field?' Despite all attempts to denounce knowledge, education and art as sub-strategies of these processes, one must, after all, not transfer the simple truth that science and politics create, and might always have created, relations of dependency and exploitation, to intercultural encounters in general without taking into account the specificity of the context in question. For what is taking place is always a dialogue across borders and differences. And yet we always also encounter something familiar in the other because, our respective cultural belongings apart, the things that unite us as human beings are far more encompassing than those separating us. Ideally, the outcome of such a project is a collective work, but even in case of failure there is a *surplus* – of experience and new knowledge – which could materialise only in the encounter.

History is always a history of hybridity. "Pure" – that is to say, "cold" – cultures (in Mario Erdheim's understanding) are, by definition, ahistorical. Their development potential remains untapped. Both outwardly and inwardly, they are sealed off from change. Instead of theatre and the arts, strict rituals obtain. Bastards, or bastardisation, are considered the worst threats to the idea of purity. In 2000, I went to the Arabian Peninsula to shoot a Yemeni version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with tribal warriors. At the time I was not aware of the fact that *Hamlet* had already been performed on the Yemeni island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden as early as in 1608 – even before the first German staging of a play by Shakespeare. And now I am taking Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* and a handful of Berlin students to Tangier in Morocco, infecting the cultural field with a Western subject matter and European ideas of theatre. But the contamination is mutual. The young Moroccan participants in the theatre project challenge us no less than we challenge them. We push each other to our limits, that is to say, to the point where learning begins. Theatre is the form of art that makes the most comprehensive demands on us and in which all our senses are compelled to pay attention. Thus, its participants – that is to say, actors and audience – are involved in a totality that no other art genre is capable of producing. The same is true for the participants in this intercultural encounter. The aim is a collective work. But the 'collective' producing this work has yet to be found. Searching for, and working on, this collective creates an ever-growing distance from what we had previously taken for granted. And permanently operating at our limits as well as transcending them (two processes that I call 'learning') is precisely what, in the eyes of the guardians of purity, makes us look so threatening. But the guardians of purity are always also the guardians of the status quo, of power relations. As long as art manages to be perceived as a threat to the status quo it retains its most important legitimacy. Our project

was a risky venture right from the start. But it is the kind of risk involved in any change, the risk of a new perspective, of a new – previously unimaginable – cooperation and, of course, the risk of failure.

I am looking through the footage recorded during our rehearsals and performances. Once again, I am reminded of the growing feeling of insecurity shared by all participants in this theatre project, which led to a deep crisis and almost to the disbanding of the group. Then, having reached the low point of exhaustion, we all made a second, conscious decision to continue the joint project and work towards a public performance. And as though this crisis had been necessary, there is – and this is even visible in the ‘clinical’ (as it were) video – a new, very palpable community spirit. From where does it emerge? Especially from the capacity for compromise, i.e. from the capacity to put one’s own expectations and demands aside in favour of the success of the collective work, and to allow the other, the strange and the foreign to exist, even if it is not always immediately understood. And then, to our great surprise, the two worlds, the two cultures merge to create something new, hybrid, border-crossing, which, once it has found its unique shape, we call ‘art.’

And there is yet another thing that strikes me while I am sitting here at the editing table. The characters differentiate themselves no longer in terms of cultural backgrounds or other factors such as gender, education, social background and class. Instead, the individual personalities become crucial. It is an encounter not of cultures but of a handful of individuals, whose proximity or distance has its own specific context. Perhaps what is already misleading is the concept of an ‘intercultural’ encounter itself, not to mention that of a “clash of cultures.” On closer inspection I perceive young women and men who have their own idiosyncratic notions of their personal authenticity and integrity – and who are no longer willing to be classified in terms of a specific, pure and strictly limited cultural space but are striving into the open, into the venture.

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