

Article of the month: April, Ivy

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In the introduction of her book “Discourses of Vanishing. Modernity, Phantasm, Japan” Marilyn Ivy discusses her theoretical model for the analysis of the 20th century cultural-cum national identity construction in Japan. In the process, she elaborates a field of tension between several concepts put into an antagonistic relation. One field is geographically defined by the two opposites, the West and Japan. The second field of tension is related to universalizing modernity versus pre-modern cultural particularity which is strived for in Japan of 20th century. Ivy shows this through several theoretical issues, that she has elaborated through her empirical study.

In the course of modernization, whose origins are located in the West and the USA, most of the countries (Japan can be seen just as an example among many others) underwent a powerful cultural experience of being dislodged from “tradition”. This cultural displacement of the colonized (Japan) by the colonization (modernization) of the colonizers (USA, West), Ivy describes as a condition of cultural anxiety, which has invoked a typical *modernist nationalism*, i. e. imaginations of home, boundary, territory and roots. In other words the process of modernization, here associated with capitalism, electrical forms of production, urban energies etc, which implies concepts of *flux, change, movement, unpredictability* creates at the same time the endeavour for an articulation of a static territorially bound specificity called tradition, culture or nation.

Does Ivy subtly address also a critique to Karl Marx as probably the most aggressive universalizing theorist?

Within the worldly visions of modernity, by making universalist claims to world citizenship, based on the spectacular success of the Enlightenment, or the capitalism’s worldwide network of market, at the same time appear frames of ideal national sovereignty and nation-hood as a prevailing social form that renders this modernity self-conscious.

As a matter of fact, one could actually claim that despite the indefatigable search for home, and authenticity in defiance of the dismembering consequences of modernity, the Japanese

discourse remains within the common currency of the *modern* world, i. e. the nation-hood. In other words the attempted emancipation from Western modernity is not able to exceed the supra-discourse of this same modernity/West and USA/the colonizer, which Ivy describes in astonishing style as the hyphenation of “national” and “cultural”.¹

This simultaneity of modernity and discursively created tradition, here labelled also as Japanese modernity,² the author discovers also within a second concept which she explores, as the dialectic of the colonizer and the colonized. Similar to the concept of modernity versus tradition, it is again an attempt to affront the West this time as a colonizer present in the public sphere with an imagination of domestic, intimate, or again just Japanese.

Ivy ties here her idea to Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry in order to show again a failure to produce originality and to exceed the default discourse. “Fantasies of the West” presenting the “Japanese” testimonies, this is nothing else but the perpetual consummation of forms of imagery, already available by Europe and the USA. Even the Japanese imaginations must remain forever colonized. This shows Ivy on the example of the emperor who is domesticated within the embodiment of the “Japanese”, thus in fact it is an alien emblem.

In the second part of the article Ivy develops several ideas about the means of social memory production in Japan. Here she borrows already introduced modular like nostalgia for the absent and therefore desired tradition. Another grammar of articulating the traditional is given by the mourning, thus perceiving something as lost but at the same time giving it a voice unless in the shape of dialects, folktales etc. Those can be treated as techniques of narrating the nation, which appear in many national narration cases and seem to be universal, or again just Western?

Ivy’s article deserves every compliment. Her very complex style of writing reflects the complexity of the issue to be studied and theoretically grasped.

In relation to my own topic I doubt to be able to analogically impose the concept of post-colonial nation-building given the period which I am interested in. However, the issue of modernity and its consequences for collective identities will be at stake. In contrast to the antagonistic discourse towards modernity, which is according to Ivy the case in Japan, during the Communist period, modernization was rather perceived as a positive outcome of the new

¹ Ivy, pp. 3-4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

regime. It was presented and preached as the great achievement of socialism, thus producing the new working man. A perception of modernity as a colonial product of the West is definitely not present in my sources. Consequently, modernity as the eradicator of cultural within my subject of analysis is not strongly present

However, that fact that it is actually modernity that enables a *nation-wide* dissemination of the cultural and traditional and its content is one of my central issues in the thesis (this theoretical model however, has been presented also by Gellner et al.). For it, the study of Husnija Kamberovic "Prema modernom drustvu" serves as my secondary literature basis.

In addition to this, the *modi* of narrating and going forward into the past in forms of nostalgia and mourning as well as the concept of a singularized or standardized voice, which overshadows the plurality of voices, will serve me as an inspiration for the analysis of the national narration production in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

While I was reading Ivy, I was disturbed by her too dichotomous style of writing and putting her concepts into too antagonistic relations. Thus, what she perceives as the opposition between West and Japanese might in future be connected as a part of a whole, something probably called cosmopolitan. Thus, instead of taking those too individuated "cultures" (Western, Japanese, colonized, colonizer etc) as "quasi objects" of scientific discourse one might perhaps build another concept of analysis where they are more intertwined into a whole. Then, I think, the West would not any more appear as the centre that diffuses its culture of modernity but instead there would be many centres everywhere circumferences nowhere.

I am not sure, if this strand of thought is adequate here, but I hope that it is worth considering it also for our specific subjects of analysis in South-Eastern Europe.