



# Through the Great Isolation: *Sans-colonial*

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The one world system that we already are today, demands new means and new ends because it is made up of both old and new components which are not comprehended by colonialism but by something else. *Its new components and their connections are sans colonial.* They are comprehended by something else whose silhouette may not be visible to us since we have not yet imagined it collectively, but it will be visible to the future generations when they look back on this era of the Great Isolation. Our imagination in theory and politics has therefore to become *sans-colonial* in every sense.

## The Great Isolation



hat we are undergoing today will be remembered by the coming generations as the Great Isolation. And we have to pass through it. It is the “*through*” and the “*isolation*” that we must collectively think, now more than ever. Because now, with this world-wide lockdown we are in the Great Isolation.

This world-wide confinement, this lockdown, is a situation whose effects have exceeded the scales and the locus of those past events baptized as *great* – the great war in Europe in 1914, the great depression in the 1930s, the great migration of African-Americans between 1916 and 1970, the great famine (which is in fact the name given to three separate famines in Ireland between 1845 and 1849, in British India between 1876 and 1878, and in China between 1959 and 1961).

Although, different countries, and even provinces and urban zones, are locked down to varying extents, the locus of the isolation is the whole world. The world has been locked down. This is because the pandemic of COVID19 has affected everything. We have been, for some time now, integrated into and as the whole world *through* the channels of interconnected economies, the channels of global transport and communications, and the channels of migration. All these pathways have integrated us into one world system of reciprocal relations of actions at distances and mobile effects. And these reciprocal relations are, at the same time, distributed over immense inequalities and prejudices. *These are the years and the walls and the door* of our Bedlam, our great isolation.

At first, *isolation* suggests physical confinement and solitariness. But we know that many kinds of isolation are a regular feature of our world – sweatshops, ghettos, gated residential complexes, detention centres, refugee camps, prisons as well as private islands. Each of these forms of isolations is a regularity, that is, *a set of actions and processes that repeat in a regular manner*. Nation-states themselves with their securitizing of borders, their criteria of national identity, their ceremonies and myths of affiliation, are isolations. And even larger regions of the world have been functionally isolated; some are considered the lungs of the planet, others are considered the mines, others the factories of the world, and yet others were considered the policemen of the world, and so on.

Through regularities, men and things are held in material relations of means and ends under forms that enable specific functions. That is, men

and things undergo an isolation of their multiple possible functions into just a few possibilities, and they forego the realisation of all other functions for that duration. In this sense, the regularities that comprise our societies – the economy, the health care systems, education, employments, culture, sports – these are all functional isolations of men, women and things. E.g., today medical staff are those people who are functionally isolated such that they cannot practice physical distancing.

However, there is no strict correspondence between form and function.

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In certain cases, the same form can be constructed to perform more than one function, while in others cases, the same function can be performed by more than one form. For instance, regularities which have diverse forms – sweatshops, prison labour, detention centres, labour in mining operations – nevertheless isolate the human animal into nearly the same function. As a result, thing can be structured as an element in more than one regularity, and one regularity can become a component of a greater regularity.

Some components have a greater degree of freedom from functional isolation. That is, they can host diverse functions at once, while others cannot. E.g. a novelist can also be a politician, an academic can also be a musician; whereas a sweatshop worker in a garment factory can be little more than a tight regularity of repetitive limbic motions for the whole of her waking day. A coal miner cannot also be an amateur athlete. An encamped refugee cannot also be a flaneur or an ambassador for universal child education. A region that is isolated as the sweatshop of the world suffers more economic hardship from the lockdown than another. In each of these instances, a person is functionally isolated into the component of a larger system. These regularities are components co-articulated within a complex arrangement, which is more or less stable, and which is specified by a comprehending law. The degrees of freedom from functional isolation depend on how components are co-articulated in an arrangement by the comprehending law. The creation of new freedoms will need from us that we begin to think and act in relation to the constructability of things and their co-articulations, including ourselves, and to do so without illusions.

Then we must become intimate with the power for such modifications and inventions: Everything has its range of constructability, that is, its span, which varies from one thing to another. But a thing can override its span by means of co-articulation with another thing within a new regularity and a new functional isolation. The new freedom that it thus acquires to take on new forms and new functions, is not infinite but rather it has the range opened by the comprehending law of the particular system that regulates this new co-articulation.

Then, it is important to understand the relation of functional isolation to freedom. This is a freedom that arises from polynomia, that is, the impossibility of there being one law. Polynomia is the power of thinking to legislate different regularities in the same object, and thus to invent new forms and functions. Functions can be isolated only in something that is capable of receiving many forms of regularities and is capable of changing from one form to another. Polynomia ensures the modification of bodies for new regularities which resist and break through the established functional isolations. And at the same time, functional isolations which set into the rhythms of new regularities resist the dreams of polynomia.

**the opposite of pure polynomia is the *permanent* functional isolation of all our powers. It would immure our polynomic powers once and for all into one function – a single functional isolation which is the dispersal of all future isolations. Like a sepulchre, it would be a permanent confinement of pure repetition.**

This means that polynomia can be activated only *through* functional isolates of more or less duration. As Heidegger explained in his essay “The Anaximander Fragment,” “usage, enjoining order, and so limiting what is present distributes boundaries (for a while).” (1) Freedom lies in imagining and materializing the passage from one isolate to another.

There are two errors we must be cautious against with respect to polynomia and functional isolation: In pure polynomia or a permanent freedom from functional isolation, our powers would become like dead embryonic cells, dreaming of everything but realizing nothing. We would abide in a permanent expectation that invents no form, materializes no function, not even the conditions for its own existence.

On the other hand, the opposite of pure polynomia is the *permanent* functional isolation of all our powers. It would immure our polynomic powers once and for all into one function – a single functional isolation which is the dispersal of all future isolations. Like a sepulchre, it would be a permanent confinement of pure repetition. A final function would become the sepulchre of our polynomia.

In the confusing talk of free will and destiny, of individual freedom and group autonomy, there is something else with which we should urgently become intimate: the polynomia of our imagination and the errors in our thinking with respect to it. The freedom with respect to form and function is also a freedom with respect to means and ends. A means for achieving a particular end can be reassigned to a very different end, and an end itself can become the means for a new end. It is the power we have

of imagining ends, since the human animal is not pre-programmed with its origin and end, rather it is forsaken by origins and ends, and in this lies our freedom which simultaneously reveals itself as our great responsibility. Therefore, an increase in freedom demands our attention to the whole arrangement that presently comprehends us.

This epoch of the Great isolation, this pandemic, has revealed precisely this – the whole world is integrated into one complex arrangement, and now it is in a crisis that we have entered together, we from all parts of the world each in our own different way. It is the ill-preparedness of the world faced with an entirely predictable calamity, that led to the lockdown as the only resort. The desire as well as the hesitation with respect to lockdowns tell us that this world-wide confinement is a *functional isolation* of the whole world into a single function: to *bide the crisis*. This great isolation should be only a transitory isolation.

### ...through: sans-colonial

The viral infection may have spread in different regions to differing extents. But the effects on health, on livelihood, on production, on the availability of things and on the mobility of people, have spread everywhere through the channels that interconnect all components and all regions of the world.



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It is through the pre-existing arrangement of these channels that epidemics as well as health flow. Outside them, we cannot think of health or sickness in itself – for instance, we cannot think of sustainability as planetary health, or mankind as planetary sickness. If we thought in this way, we would have nothing at which to aim our transformative efforts. Just as Kant commenced philosophizing with the recognition that there is no thing in itself, similarly there is no sickness-in-itself, there is no *pathos noumenon*. Things are related to each other, and reach out to each other through their isolations.

*Through* derives etymologically from the speculative root “\*tere,” which means to *cross over, to go beyond*. It lends itself to such other terms as “serai”, which in Persian means a traveller’s inn, a trench that cuts places into the soil, and trans- which designates the very vocation of going across and beyond, as in transgender. Functional isolation is the logic of invention and artifice that constructs on given regularities, passing through them and transforming them into new regularities and their new combinations.



The trajectories of migrating people which ceaselessly shaped human history were multiple movements through functional isolations, from one to another, by means of one to the other. These movements activated the polynomial power of our imagination to invent new technologies, new institutions, new tastes, new values, new ideas, new loves, new bodies. It is a vocation for invention of new forms and functions that cannot be contained in the ethnocentric myths that seek to immure our memories of our own imagination. On this character of myth, Jean-Luc Nancy had commented in *Being Singular Plural*: “Not only does myth identify, it identifies itself... Myth is the sense that is its own subject, the proper name as the idiolect of an idiolect.” (2) Then, how is it that today the idea of mobility of people, their great flights across oceans, continents, and civilizational epochs is being made dangerous and uncertain, a punished transgression?

Thus, to debate the false problem of whether work should resume or the confinement should continue is to omit to ask *under what conditions could either of the two be better?* The devastating effects of the pandemic on life and livelihood would have arisen (perhaps with different patterns) even if there were no confinement. Some say (to our consternation!) that a few Covid deaths, perhaps of older and weaker citizens, is a lesser evil than a prolonged confinement. We can equally imagine some others thinking more silently that a few workers dying on the job through Covid is an affordable loss.

Speculation on these comparative figures of death is becoming a way for governments and corporations to hide from our view the truly questionable aspects of the arrangement of components in our world –

Why the deficient health care systems in almost all countries?

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Why the inability to give food to the millions of poor who were confined in starving conditions although there is more than enough food in the world?

Why the persecution of minorities, and of the subjugated and exploited majority populations even in the lockdown?

Why the neglect of research on a known family of viruses;

Why the zeal for regional competitions and wrangles when world cooperation is needed more than ever, be it for pandemic or for the environment?

We realize that this great isolation is and should be *only* a transitory functional isolation, that is, an interregnum.

For that, the world has to preserve the polynomia of thinking, the collective faculty of imagination. False problems are themselves an isolation of our polynomic power of thought. The functional isolation of thought which is operative today is a confused and ambiguous framework called "Globalization." By using a post-colonial perspective, this framework ambiguously designates at once the family tree of evil supposed to originate in the 15th century and comprised of trade expansion, colonialization and industrialization, and the more specific contemporary processes of techno-capitalism. Through its ambiguities, the term "globalization" encourages the establishment of an anti-globalization moral stance in favour of local self-sufficiency, closed borders, local self-assertions, and hypophysical justifications of ethnocentrism, even though we know that there is no return from the one world system to an isolated regional existence. This moral stance is now the locus of a stunning convergence between the left and the right. The left had been seeking for some time to oppose globalization and promote "locality." But to which regional location would each one of us return and isolate oneself? The far right had been deepening and extending its century old talk of blood and soil. Today we can discern the paths by which the consequences of these two discourses are converging, such that in it the locality assigned to each person will be determined by their ethnicity and racialized identity. As we can see, all the sympathies for migrants and refugees have not actually saved the Mexican families interned and separated in American border detention centres, drowned of Lampedusa, the suffocated human cargos in trucks at European borders, the wandering Rohingyas, not to mention the so-called internal migrants, like the labourers trekking home within India as we speak, and which form the larger proportion the world's migratory flows. Last year it was in France that the far right raised the slogan of localism, and this year it is the Hindu Far right in India that as asking us to "be vocal for the local".

Is this Gandhian dream of minimised living really possible? Is the postcolonialist dream of regionally confined living, of return to tradition



and regionality in a self-sufficient and therefore highly disciplinary form really possible? Or are we being lured into our regions and into ethnocentric identities only to avert our eyes from the real processes of world integration that will continue? Perhaps this is the sign of an even greater isolation than the lockdown, our isolation into false fights such that we are excluded from the real fights of our world, in other words we are excluded from politics.

We have passively witnessed a global agreement on most economic processes, technological protocols, and standards; and there are global institutions dictating terms to national governments. Meanwhile, the tendencies of competitive regionalism, ethnocentrism and nationalism, which persisted even before the pandemic, have now been augmented in many countries. They are now endangering medical workers, journalists, activists, refugees, minorities. Each postcolonial region is encouraged to identify itself in its past and *on this basis* to make demands for itself. These little rooms painted by postcolonialist theories will immure us into permanent functional isolates who will conduct discursive disputes over regional claims, while the whole world itself is being shaped in an uncontested manner by technological and economic decisions that our regionally isolated minds will neither understand nor contest. The postcolonialist nationalist discourse is helping far right parties grow by dominating over their constituencies, without attending to people's contemporary problems and needs. It is, as Simone Weil would say, "a reversal of the relation between means and ends." For example, the caste order in India oppresses 90 percent of its population which is lower caste, including the migrant workers who are now stranded in the lockdown. How should we fight this social isolation which is a form of racism and apartheid that is both older than colonialism and has tenaciously and oppressively survived India's formal decolonization?

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Then, our collective responsibility now is to imagine the passage through our great functional isolations today, both the physical lockdown of the pandemic and the lockdown of our thinking by the post-colonial. This is the time to make demands not merely for this or that region determined by a past, but for the whole world in which all regions have become co-implicated in their well-being and all problems have become co-articulated.

The one world system that we already are today, demands new means and new ends because it is made up of both old and new components which



are not comprehended by colonialism but by something else. *Its new components and their connections are sans colonial.* They are comprehended by something else whose silhouette may not be visible to us since we have not yet imagined it collectively, but it will be visible to the future generations when they look back on this era of the Great Isolation. Our imagination in theory and politics has therefore to become *sans-colonial* in every sense. *Sans* in French, *sans* in English and *sin* in Spanish means without; we have to not only end the vestiges of old colonialisms, but we have to go beyond referring all questions to “the colonial.” We have been preoccupied with tending the trauma of the colonial, but what we must urgently do is collectively imagine a new arrangement for the present and the future. We must insist on the democratic future of everyone, everywhere in the one world system – we must insist on world democracy, *sans-colonial*.

## NOTES

1. *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank Kapuzzi, New York: Harper Collins, 1984, p. 54; „Der Brauch aber, der, den Fug verfügend, das Anwesende be-endet, händigt Grenze aus und ist ... das, was ohne Grenze ist, insofern es darin west, die Grenze der Weile dem je-weilig Anwesenden zu schicken“; Martin Heidgger, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977, p. 368
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, p. 158.