The Voice of Sustainment: Design, the Other and the Ethical

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Tony Fry is the main contributing editor to *Design Philosophy Papers*.

I want to thank Samar Akkach for the questions and problems he poses and for the honesty of his engagement with 'Design and the Question of Eurocentrism' in the previous issue of DPP. The issues he raises are certainly too important to overlook, hence six reflections on what he had to say are offered.

1.

In the initial moment of the global emergence of modernity, Eurocentrism was a project of spatial and metaphysical imperial-cultural conquest. Force was exercised and justified politically, theologically and philosophical in this moment. This enterprise was followed, complimented and partially superseded by another more contemporary modernity that, via an increasingly sophisticated capitalism, aimed to bring 'the world' into a uniform state of economic development – in fact in this era (commencing in the later 1940s) 'modernisation theory' constituted and projected the world as divided into four levels of development: the First World (the already developed); the Second World (the Communist block with its other path to 'the modern');

the Third World (the undeveloped becoming the underdeveloped *en route* to the developing); and, the Fourth World (the world of the dispossessed, poor, powerless and abject).

As we are now fully aware, this politico-spatial, flawed structure did not hold – labour became mobile, the Second World crumbled; the idealism of the emancipation of the poor of the world by modernisation was abandoned with economic pragmatism taking its place. Yet as recent history has demonstrated, while the desires for an ever expanding galaxy of material and immaterial commodities is constantly promoted and nurtured; and although the dream of wealth buying utopia has become universalised, violence is still mobilised against enemies of the modern.

While it is true that the old spatial geometry of Eurocentrism no longer holds, it is equally the case that its metaphysical grip has not only strengthened but also became reified in objectified forms that are both organisational and technological (technology, as we are now familiar with it, embodies the historicity of Western scientistic modes of mind and manufacture).

To be modern was not just a matter of appearances – it meant thinking with the foundations of thought of the European Enlightenment. To be modern meant adopting the rational-scientific discourses of this thinking as the means to make 'the world' present and knowable. Conversely, to lack modern thought, and its associated practices, was to be designated as being backward and Other. For instance, the claim that the Chinese lacked experimental science was central to it being classified by the West as unable to become modern.[1] Eurocentrism, against this backdrop, needs to be understood as neither a matter of place, culture, disposition, expertise nor spatially bound consciousness, but rather the naming of a naturalised way of ordering, thinking, hearing and seeing of the One and an Other. Within this understanding, sameness and difference are perceptual constructions, rather than constants that bridge time and cultural classification from the emergence of mercantile capitalism to the fracture-zones of the postmodern.

Eurocentrism has been manifested in exercising the power to name, and then bringing the named into a disciplinary order of control. Historically this has occurred in many ways: via the application of direct force; through overt and subtle forms of social control; via economic imposition; and via ethnocidal erasure. In its pursuit of the same, Eurocentrism continually created difference. The power to name is of course directly linked to the 'language of presence' through which beings bring Being before themselves. This 'logocentric' quality of Eurocentrism, and the metaphysics it constituted, has been a major figure of critical inquiry – a figure not least engaged by Jacques Derrida. Metaphysics so positioned is described by Derrida as "the white mythology which resembles and reflects the culture of the West".[2] Derrida points out that *mythos* was fused with *logos* to become reason – so rather than reason being

an intrinsic quality of mind it is actually a constructed discourse with a particular geo-cultural historicity.[3] Reason, metaphysics, logocentrism and Eurocentrism are thus all interlocutors that re-express difference – difference that is predicated upon the operation of language rather than just the result of an ontological contrast. Moreover, rather than this observation being a product of the terminal moment of philosophical modernity, it was present in its formative moments – thus Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz concluded at the end of the 17th century that language is not a vehicle of thought but its determining medium.[4]

Such thinking of difference has a profound significance for not just how knowledge, appearance, reality and the relation between beings and Being are all understood but *who has the power to rule what is true and what is false* and *who is numbered among the same* (the One) and *designated as the Other*. Certainly, this way of thinking difference is in stark contrast to the reduction of difference to supposed empirical characteristics possessed by an Other.

It follows that difference should not be regarded simply as something to be searched for, or as that expressed by the exotic and evidenced by 'the different'. Rather it is a far more fundamental facticity which exists within and between cultures, and divides 'that which is' (the ontic) from 'that which is made to appear' via word, image and idea (what metaphysics makes present). As indicated, questions of difference conflate with questions of truth. Likewise, difference has to be embraced as that which constitutes the One which is "I" – the One cannot become such without an Other from which it is different.[5] In its complexity, idea and facticity, difference stands in opposition to an imposed notion of the 'core of humanity'. To assert this 'common core' is to impose an essence of being that is human – which is to refuse acknowledgement of the many historical examples of 'this being' constituting itself as otherwise than human).

2.

Samer Akkach suggests that one of the attractions of the West's engagement with the assumed Other and their Otherness, as made 'available' via the Eurocentric metaphysic, is the possibility of exposing other ways of being in the face of 'defuturing'. Crudely, the Other is posed as a potential source of salvation for a doomed West. Positioning the Other/Otherness in this way is predicated upon posing difference as something that is embodied and able to be appropriated. While this echoes a familiar way of thinking difference, it is, as indicated, thinking in error. Equally, while the West is deeply inscribed in economic, cultural and environmental patterns of conduct that do defuture, there is but a very small minority of people prepared to acknowledge this. Additionally, rather than designating the Other as possessing something to be valued, with the ability to save the West, 'it' is dominantly ethnocentrically

viewed. In this way the Other is hereby brought into the frame of the same (e.g., multiculturalism), romanticised (e.g., ethnic aesthetics) and thereafter ignored, or reviled (e.g., the anti-Western terrorist lacking humanity).

It is important to grasp that the West is not a managed self-conscious project. While there are various economic and political programs, there is not an overall project – nobody is in the driving seat and defuturing *is* in the saddle! In fact to move against defuturing is to produce oneself as another kind of Other.

3.

Among other things, the question of globalisation is a question of the extension of the Same. While lacking the idealism of modernisation (the emancipation of the Second and Third world) globalisation pragmatically and aggressively pursues economic and cultural hegemony as a functional condition of the operation of 'a new world order' (or what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call 'Empire'[6]). Like all structures of power, it creates the powerful and the powerless, it includes and excludes and produces the Same and Others, but not within the spatiality of a modern cultural geography. The functionality of globalisation in fact aims to create a mono-cultural world of goods, immaterial commodities, labour and knowledge. It 'enframes' (stamps on) every economic and cultural operational modality, this so that all other systems, conducts and consciousnesses are either incorporated or expelled. Like any mono-cultural project, it is fundamentally unsustainable – its pursuit negates the social and biophysical diversity that sustainment depends upon (uniform values and products have contributed to a reduction of biodiverse ecologies).

While technocentricity, speed of change, movement of capital and labour and the immaterial bias of the Western appearances of globalisation get characterised as a post-industrial victory of the virtual, one has to continually remind oneself that the materiality of dirty work has been displaced to the 'newly-industrialising world'.

More than this, the defuturing consequences of globalisation widen the reach of the forces of unsustainability (be this in the impacts of the rise of mega-cities; the volume of emissions from constantly increasing utilisation of non-renewable energy; or the failure of agricultural systems by the consequences of climate change (it has now been estimated that the volume of environmental refugees now exceeds those created by wars). Additionally, the global traffic in people, animals, goods, food stuffs and materials, as Hardt and Negri point out, has created a condition of universal contagion: diseases have never had the ability to move at such speed. Inseparable from this particular face of unsustainability, is the spread infectious dreams – dreams that prompt desires whose realisation have destructive consequences.

Arguments that imply that the West has no ethical right to deny Others what it itself has are facile.

Undeniably, the material circumstances of the World's poor have to improve, and for this to happen conditions of redistributive justice have to be created (which means the unsustainable standards of living of the West, and of the new elites of 'newly industrialising nations' have to fall). Here the common interest of sustainment overarches the needs of all peoples, but it can only be realised by different means and ways, according to circumstances. This is not about saving Western privilege, but rather, the future as the imminence of 'our' plural becoming. Social and economic justice is thus not separate from sustainment but central to it. Currently there is no international organisation in existence able to confront and engage this issue. Even more significant, no affirmative models of being otherwise for sustainment are in circulation – examples from the past are discredited, examples for the future have yet to transcend lukewarm make-overs of the forms of community projected by 'green utopianism').

4.

In relation to globalisation, Samer rhetorically asks a series of questions about Eurocentricity that still nevertheless beg comment. He asks: "Facing the thrust of the current globalising tendencies, what is our orientation when we invoke the question?" Clearly 'we' are not one, thus orientation is a matter of the situatedness and perspective defining the localised, globalised subject in relation to the psycho-cultural, economic and environmental impacts of globalisation – it follows that there are no general answers to the question. "Are we trying to work with globalisation to find all-inclusive, universalised approaches wherein differences are fairly represented and democratically shared among societies, who are no longer expected to remain attached to, claim ownership of, and live their differences?" As already indicated, differences are not available in mobile and reified forms – they are ontologically and hermeneutically embedded. Whenever cultural forms, claimed as signs of difference, are appropriated and commodified they undergo fundamental transformations which rupture them from their situated meaning and socio-cultural functions (while also positing them in completely different discourses from their culture of origin, as exemplified by e.g., – Aboriginal art, African architecture, tattoo in Japan or head dress in Polynesia).

Additionally, even if 'difference' could be authentically captured as an object of exchange, globalisation is not a force of democratisation, fairness, or distributive justice. Then he asks, "or are we trying to engage in the struggle against globalisation, to promote, protect and nourish the other's differences?" As said earlier, in relation to the One we are always the Other. And in relation to the notion of struggle, the struggle to conserve what we value, to act to secure

the freedom to be otherwise and to resist the destruction of the future can only take-on situated forms. Comprehending the nature of struggle and its relation to negation (the struggle against) and creation (the struggle for) is an extraordinary complex exercise. Certainly, it is the case historically that idealised, moralistic and unlocated struggles (like the struggle against globalisation and for the rights of others) fold into gesturalism that simply extends Eurocentric liberalism. Or, as Samer asks, "are we indeed lost somewhere in between, since both targets seem unattainable?" Again, we are not one, and this question also opens into the much larger issue of the relation between *being* and *place.*

5.

Samer also remarks on how design culture appeared to him as universal. However, the rise of 'universal design culture' has itself been a product of Eurocentrism and is now naturalised as inscribed professional practices. As such, this design culture exists as a constructed history and assemblage of ideas that underpin the operation of institutions now in the service of global(ising) functionalism.

6.

A cultural totalisation is posed through an argument that asserts that because the Eurocentric model of development has been shown by 'Western experts' to be flawed (because it 'defutures'), and so demands the creation of alternatives, this action in fact reinstates the dominance of the West, and in so doing maintains the subordinate position of the non-Western.

While it is possible to see how this point of view is reached it has little purchase on actuality.

A consensual Western alternative perspective is just not being presented, and certainly not one that embraces the notion of 'defuturing'. Moreover, as said, to name 'defuturing' positions the speaker as Other, be they viewed from mainstreams of the East or West. To identify that anthropocentric beings, and many other forms of being, require the creation of 'a being Otherwise' enfolds questions that do not imply a singular mode of being – 'sustainability' does not 'consume the desire for, or even necessity of difference'. Rather, the futuring of being (sustainment) demands a 'directional commonality in difference' (a diversity that is the very obverse of the universality that globalisation strives to install). What is at stake is not the survival of the planet. Notions like 'ecological crisis' are merely symptomatic of 'defuturing humanity' – the causal force of the problem.[7] What sustainment names is the responsibility of all peoples to dwell Otherwise in almost all current circumstances of dwelling.

It follows that finding solutions to defuturing (unsustainability) has nothing to do with adopting high ideals, being noble or exercising

altruism. What it actually requires is a pragmatism that *combines* a modesty of material demands made by populations upon whatever environment they occupy and produce within; and then how they live with equity (because wealth-as-excessive surplus and poverty-as-consumption-without-renewal both defuture). Attaining fundamental solutions may be assisted technologically, but what is essentially needed are political, economic and cultural changes that embrace a fundamental rethinking and relearning of self-interest, modes of exchange and worldly occupation. These changes ask major questions of the past of non-Western Others, but not on the basis of them having some 'golden age' (as the basis of their Otherness). Rather, what needs to be understood is that the past contains futures, critical knowledge, error – all of which beg to be learnt. Sustainment is therefore predicated on the making of an Other 'ecology of mind' – one that recognises what needs to be learnt, how knowledge travels and that differentiates knowledge from 'information'. This imperative of critical inquiry and exchange is antithetical to globalisation, world-shaping binary polarisations (including of East/West) as well as abstracted 'quests for difference'.

Against this backdrop one cannot pose the events of a fractious world, not least its wars and structurally inscribed forms of violence and injustice, as events that displace the visibility and momentary 'urgency' of sustainability, but, as Samer acknowledges, the reverse. They are overt expressions of unsustainability – as I have written elsewhere 'nothing defutures like war' (it wastes life across the biological spectrum, as well as environments, materials and minds).

Notes

1. G.E.R. Lloyd (1996) *Adversaries and authorities: Investigations into ancient Greek and Chinese science* Cambridge. CUP.
2. Jacques Derrida (1982) *Margins of Philosophy* (trans Alan Bass) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 213.
3. Ibid.
4. On this observation see the elaboration by James A. Boon (1982) Other Tribes, Other Scribes Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 24.
5. This idea is developed in detail, and in relation to the face, by Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (trans Alphonso Lingis) Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
6. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri *Empire* Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press, 2001.
7. If one could occupy and voice the planet's perspective it would undoubtedly say that it would be 'better off without us'.