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The Totalizing and Silencing Features of Meta-Narratives and Master Concepts

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My aim in this paper is to provide an account of the ways in which meta-narratives and master concepts lead to problematic *theoretical* outcomes. To carry out my analysis I will focus on three pieces of scholarship: Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's (2000) Preface and First Chapter of *Empire*; Ulrich Beck's (1999) *World Risk Society as Cosmopolitan Society?: Ecological Questions in a Framework of Manufactured Uncertainties*; and Barry Buzan's and Mathias Albert's (2010) *Differentiation: A sociological approach to international relations theory*. Specifically, in this paper I argue that the afore-mentioned pieces can be related in one specific manner: they all contain totalizing tendencies based on inescapable logics which lead to the silencing of the histories and realities of voices alien to their central narratives/concepts and the historical lineage of their knowledge practices. In this sense my approach should be taken as a critique of meta-narratives and master concepts as much as it is an argument about the specific contents of each individual work. It should be noted, however, that given the complexity of the articles analyzed here and the length of this paper, my critique will be limited to the most problematic aspects of each text. This, however, ought not to be interpreted as a statement about the intellectual worth of these pieces or the generality of their content. I believe that all of them constitute excellent pieces of scholarship that deserve further analysis and attention.

This paper is organized in the following way. First I deal with Hardt's and Negri's *Empire*; the second section of the paper focuses on Beck's *World Risk Society*; the third main section of this paper tackles the functional differentiation argument posed by Buzan and Albert. By way of conclusion, the final section of this paper briefly discusses alternatives to grand-narratives and master concepts. To illustrate one such alternative I briefly discuss Vendulka Kubáľková's (2000) *International Political Theology* approach. In

this section I contend that Kubáľková's approach provides a degree of flexibility and limitedness that enable it to escape some of the totalizing and silencing tendencies of the main pieces analyzed in this paper.

The Omnipresent and Resonant Voice of *Empire*

Empire is a complex and thorough academic accomplishment. No doubt. It seeks through an analysis of (post) modernity, power, class and politics to show that the contemporary world is a world of *Empire* – not imperialism, *Empire*. *Empire* is a force (a new form of sovereignty, a world order) that operates without a centre of power. Like Foucault's notion of power, the power of *Empire* does not rest in the hands of anyone state, individual, institution or group. *Empire* is a new world order that goes beyond the nation-state and the age of imperialism. An important feature of *Empire* is that it is imbued with biopolitical power which runs through the bodies of people and its field of operation, as Hardt and Negri put it is "life itself."

Overall Hardt's and Negri's their work can be characterized as a Marxist-Foucauldian analysis of power and advanced capitalism. However eclectic its theoretical sources may be *Empire* it can be said that *Empire* is a work of leftist politics that, at some point in its genealogy is heavily rooted in Marxism (after all Negri is a convinced Marxist activist and academic). The concept of *Empire* offers, among many other things, a sense of the deep problems in contemporary modernity (or postmodernity). More importantly, *Empire* offers a view of international power which is sweeping and hard to ignore. Considering this it would be pertinent to ask: Can *Empire* be escaped?

My contention here is that *Empire* cannot be escaped and is therefore a not only a limited analytical tool. The concept of *Empire* that Negri and Hardt embrace is rooted in a

totalizing sense of history, subjects and structures. Their analysis, furthermore, leads to silencing: silencing of voices outside *Empire* and voices that cannot find a voice within it. In this sense and even though Hardt and Negri are eager to explain that *Empire* and a theory of *Empire* are not to be equated with the concept and theory(ies) of imperialism, it is difficult to not to think of their own project as being, in a small (and however unintended) but significant sense as intellectually imperialistic. The fact that Hardt and Negri come from the political left does little to dissipate similarities with other efforts from the right at compartmentalizing world experience, like, for instance, Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*.

The sense of totality that is found in *Empire* is not inconspicuous. The Foucauldian logic of biopower is taken to its limits, and the empirical examples used to illustrate it and exemplify its forces must largely be taken on a leap of faith. The field of biopolitical power according to Hardt and Negri constitutes "life itself." While it is not entirely clear what they mean by "life itself", it is far from clear how the biopolitical can be a constitutive element of the whole of human life. Because little evidence is provided to sustain their claims one must only wonder how at the level of method they perceive and capture the biopolitical. Hardt and Negri are admittedly critical of the limits of biopower and of purely discursive approaches. However, their answer, bringing-Marxism-back-in, does little to dispel the questions posed above. Ultimately, an important problem of *Empire* is that it takes the notion of biopolitics too far.

Hardt's and Negri's method of making compatible Foucauldian philosophy with Marxist analysis is rather underspecified. The discussion of Deleuze, Guattari and Italian neo-Marxists in relation to the "real dynamics of production" and "mass intellectuality" and/or "immaterial labor" introduced on pages 28 and 29 does little to dispel the far reaching

consequences of extending the notion of biopower to the entire world (ignoring of course Foucault's historically and spatially rooted analyses of biopower). The power implications of *Empire*, at least theoretically, cannot be escaped with the introduction of neo-Marxist approaches, or at least not insofar as the biopolitical is one of the dominant forms of power in *Empire*. Their very brief discussion of how through a new theory of value we can reach a new theory of subjectivity is rather limited. There is no definition of subjectivity and no discussion of its constitutive parts; no discussion of the history of the subject, its ontology and its relationship to the "outside" world. It must be noted that Foucault's biopower and discursive power can be useful tools of analysis if and when applied to restricted historical and empirical spaces (as Foucault did); however, if taken to the global/universal scale, their limits are hard, if not impossible to establish. In this sense *Empire* is a totalizing force.

Empire is also totalizing, however, because it does not establish clear methodological grounds on which empirical evidence can be judged. One must remember that Hardt and Negri do not talk about an Empire as a discursive formation. According to the authors an Empire is out there, it is material, and it is real. In this sense, empirical observations of *Empire* are crucial in order to determine its existence. However, the theoretical and methodological basis of *Empire* provides no such grounds. In fact its method and theory are rather open ended. Ultimately, even the very writing of this paper or the World Cup of Soccer can be interpreted as manifestations of *Empire*. It could be argued, thus, that the reason Hardt and Negri provide no such methodological basis is because the logic of *Empire* and its relationship to biopolitics has no clear limits. Hence, no methodological solid ground on which to make claims about the "outside" world (about *Empire*) can be provided.

The totalizing force of *Empire* can be interpreted as an exercise of silencing. Despite rhetorical claims to the contrary, a concrete philosophical and theoretical basis for local struggles and every day forms of resistance (cf, Scott, 1985) are difficult to find in *Empire* (or at least in its first chapter). The only possible basis for struggle relates to a rather traditional Marxist analysis of class, labour and production in which politics of identity, spirituality (cf. Kubalkoba, 2000), gender and so on are difficult to justify. As mentioned above, the theoretical identity of *Empire* is restrictive because it is too open ended. It is at once difficult to find spaces for subjectivity and politics at the local level, and separate localized forms of resistance from the logic of Empire. What is clear is that categories such as immaterial labour are not universally valid and therefore not applicable to the realities of identity struggles of indigenous peoples or religious communities. I would argue that *Empire* offers no solution to the problems left by either Foucault or Marx, even though it seeks to offer a grand theory of global order that operates without an operator and that is ultimately rooted in labour and production. *Empire*, thus, speaks for the world and in doing so silences a big part of it.

Who is at Risk? Ulrich Beck and the *World Risk Society*

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper parallels can be drawn between Negri and Hardt and Beck. Beck, like Hardt and Negri writes a world-wide tale. Beck's story, not unlike Hardt's and Negri's is not necessarily uplifting. Beck's approach relates to Hardt's and Negri's to each other by the presence of an inescapable logic that silences and totalizes the wealth of human experience(es). In the case of Beck the logic that brings the world together is World Risk Society. Beck's scholarly contribution is no doubt important. Clearly, some of the potential dangers risks engendered by modern industrial societies, their

patterns and logic of production, institutions as well as their technologies are in a sense global and concern us all. Risk can be unifying in a global scale, Earth Hour being a good example of this. But is risk as important? Is risk *the* defining characteristic of a presumed world society? Who is at risk? Who is perceiving risk?

For Beck, the question of risk, ultimately brings a sense of unification to the life of the world's populations. Risk, its manufacturing and its management are for Beck an immanent component of the reality of the modern world. Risk in today's world is fundamentally different from previous epochs. Contemporary risk is global. Climate change and nuclear disasters know no borders. The risk of terrorism and the use of chemical and biological weapons are also a global and deterritorialized. Risk, that is the perception of potential harm is everywhere. Like power for Hardt and Negri, risk, for Beck, is a fundamental component in today's world. But unlike Hardt's and Negri's notion of *Empire* which does not necessitate of individual minds to apprehend the reality of *Empire*, Beck's risk society necessitates of subjects that understand, evaluate and are concerned with risk. In this sense Beck assumes a predefined subject that cares about risk. In this sense Beck presents an argument in which at the moment of perception risk is the same for everyone. But where is risk? Is it in the minds of people? How does Beck's concept of risk bring together the materiality of say Chernobyl and the discourse that creates risk?

The answers are not entirely clear. Like in *Empire* one finds in Beck's World Risk Society an amalgam of theoretical and philosophical approaches. Beck's analysis seems to be rooted in a combination of small doses of poststructuralism, a scent of Marxism and a big portion of Kantian-like philosophical principles. And ultimately it is hard to evaluate which of these views prevails. At once risk is constructed by discourse and perceived by the mind. Whose mind is perceiving risk? Is it the mind of the transcendental

subject/individual? Are there histories defining the perceiving subject? Why, why not? Is risk dependent on an ahistorical mind that apprehends it because it is “real”? Does culture mediate physical risks and our perception of them? Why? Why not? Beck offers no response to these questions. Instead he offers an account of the production of risk, of its constitutive discourses and its material sources. The other end of the risk-society namely people, are largely left untheorized. Theorizing about those perceiving risk is important. Is the perception of the risk of environmental disaster the same for those living in the slums of Mumbai or Rio than it is for those living in a suburb in Ottawa? In other words, while the risk of a nuclear explosion, or climate change is in a sense ‘global,’ the notion of risk, its appreciation, consequences, comprehension and response is by no means “global” and, therefore, it is not a cosmopolitan theory of risk that will address these issues. What will the risk of a nuclear blast mean for a group of disenfranchised gang members in Central America whose day-to-day lives is defined not by risk but by witnessing actual death?

But how is this approach totalizing and silencing? First and most obviously, it is totalizing because risk is portrayed as being everywhere and it is ultimately the same for everyone. Risk is defined in terms of its relationship to modernity but not all societies experience modernity in the same fashion. Modernity is not monolithic. Beck’s focus on modernity is problematic insofar as it silences risks that do not correspond to his particular understanding of the relationship between risk and the contemporary world. The risk of racism, elitism, patriarchy, gang-related deaths, which are more prominent in developing areas are put in the back burner by Beck’s analysis (although he does mention the issue of risk and poverty). A feminist account of climate change for example reveals the limitation of Beck’s analysis. According to feminists for example, climate change is real and we must all care about its implications. But climate change cannot be thought of independently of

gender. Climate change adaptation and mitigation has real gender implications – men and women will be affected differently by climate change. In other words, what feminists tell us is that portraying something as “global” based on the physical scale of its consequences risks portraying other, less visible, risks as less important. Moreover, Beck’s notion of risk also underplays (or silences) the concrete and real suffering, of vast numbers of people due to the actual consequences of capitalist expansion into the globe scale. Risk implies potential suffering and affliction, but there is a real sense of affliction due to real events like oil spills, labour camps, deforestation and so on. The reasons why Beck focuses on risk as opposed to real affliction are not clear.

One could argue that Beck’s shortcoming in this respect is largely due to his limited analysis of power. If Hardt and Negri overstretched “Foucauldian power,” Beck completely ignores its implications and its applications. Power simultaneously hides and reproduces itself in dominant discourses. A more thorough analysis of power would have enabled Beck to realize that the notion of the “global” has discursive power implications (as shown by the example of feminists above). The talk of “Global” necessarily silences the non-global. While it is undeniable that climate change is a problem that affects the whole of planet earth, one must be ware of how it is portrayed. Its global implications may entail that other “global” problems, like racism, are minimized and portrayed as local because they do not have the physical connotations that climate change does. What a Foucauldian analysis of power would enable Beck to see is that power hides in discourse, like the discourse of “global risk.” In short, speaking of a risk society in terms of its relationship to modernity’s (or postmodernity)-induced risks is totalizing and therefore silences the voices of the non-global, non-modern risks that are as global as climate change or biological weapons.

Finally, Beck's theory is totalizing and silencing in one additional respect: Its account of history. While his accounts of contemporary society, the reflexivity of modernity and the incalculability of risk are interesting, it is difficult to see how this epoch is more of a risk society than say colonial society in Latin America. While Beck would counter that colonial society had no climate change or nuclear weapons, mass media, or modern institutions, one could argue that the constitutive elements of a risk-society need not be defined and limited to such elements. Instead one could as easily posit that the production base (slave labour), the colonial structures of rule, the inquisitive power of the church produced more of a risk society than the one Beck talks about. While the swords and disease brought by Spaniards to Latin America were not able to kill hundreds of thousands of people in a matter of seconds, like the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki did, they nonetheless managed to exterminate tens of millions of indigenous peoples in a few centuries – if that is not a risk society, what is?

A Functional Circle: Buzan's and Albert's Functional Differentiation and IR

While the influences of *Empire* and Beck's Risk Society differ radically from those used by Buzan and Albert, they share the totalizing and silencing effect. Clearly Buzan and Albert come from different foundational, theoretical and methodological planes. Their main influence, Durkheim (and to a lesser degree Luhmann) and the theory of functional differentiation appreciate social forces in a different manner. Nonetheless, their master concept of differentiation shares some of the problematic, totalizing tendencies that the concepts of *Empire* and *World Risk Society* contain.

Functional differentiation is given a privileged position in Buzan's and Albert's analysis. Functional differentiation roughly refers to the complex differentiation of units in

a functional whole. The notion here is that through an analysis of differentiation one can create taxonomies and historical benchmarks upon which to evaluate international relations, its history and its contemporary realities. Buzan and Albert argue that bringing this sociological approach to IR can help the discipline to anchor its interpretations of international relations and the history of international relations under a single, unifying logic

The first problem with Buzan's and Albert's call is that any analysis of international and domestic society can be potentially subsumed under the logic of functional differentiation. Like Hardt's and Negri's logic of *Empire* Buzan and Albert establish no discernible methodological limits to the notion of differentiation, and, in particular, to the concept of functionality. If a system is understood through the notion of its functionality, then any part of the system can be rationalized in terms and in relation to its functionality (or disfunctionality) to the system. Moreover, the concept of functional differentiation assumes societies (and the international system in the case of Buzan and Albert) to be a systemic whole. However, why is the international world a systemic whole? As it is well known, conceiving IR as a system has attracted much criticism. Moreover, as mentioned by Buzan and Albert themselves, an approach rooted on functional differentiation is all encompassing: it focuses on politics, law religion, economics and so on (Buzan and Albert, 2010: 325). In other words, the logic of functional differentiation can account for everything that is social. Presumably anything, even speech acts can be rationalized (normalized?) as an expression, element or component of the big social whole that society (whether international or domestic) is supposed to represent. There is, therefore, a problem with the notion of functional differentiation: if pushed far enough it presents no discernable conceptual limits in terms of what it can or cannot claim to explain and/or understand. In

this sense, the concept and has a tendency to naturalize that which is not natural and therefore create a powerful discourse about the inevitability of certain processes, actors and institutions.

A different problem with functional differentiation that leads it to totalizing and silencing conclusions is that it is an approach based on the notion of evolutionary history. That is, it conceives societies through history according to evolutionary stages of complexity and differentiation. According to this theory more primitive social forms evolve into more complex ones until they reach functional differentiation. Buzan and Albert (2010: 319) talk about functional differentiation in IR as either potentially representing the current stage of globalization (Ibid: 318). Globalization, therefore, potentially represents a place quite close to the summit of the evolutionary ladder of differentiation.

As has likely become clear already, the portrayal of an evolutionary ladder can come dangerously close to producing an unfounded hierarchization of human experience. This portrayal of history also comes close to reproducing the discredited (and preoccupying) discourses that modernization theories produced in the past. Despite portraying differentiation as a neutral concept, Buzan and Albert commit to a sense of differentiation which is rooted on hierarchy. Take for instance the following quote:

This [Durkheim's] is a materialist theory claiming that as the numbers of people in a society increases, contact and interaction also increase, and the social structure moves from simple and segmentary to a more complex division of labour. As this movement occurs, the basis of social solidarity automatically shifts from mechanical (collective consciousness) to organic (functional differentiation) ... This type of thinking is particularly well developed in anthropology, which has many cases of failure (social collapse) to consider as well as evolutionary *successes* that move up the differentiation ladder (Buzan and Albert, 2010: 319, emphasis added).

Clearly, the notion of *evolutionary success* underlies the concept of functional differentiation, and, therefore, Buzan's and Albert's argument. At this point one could ask, can the current state of globalization be portrayed as a relative evolutionary success? Many, especially those at the losing end of globalization would disagree. It is in this sense that one can claim Buzan's and Albert's argument to be totalizing and silencing.

Conclusion: Theoretical Flexibility and Dialogue

To conclude I would like to take a moment to discuss possible alternative ways of theorizing that move beyond the totalizing and silencing effects of grand narratives and master concepts. To argue my point I will briefly engage with the work of Vendulka Kubalkoba (2000). Below I briefly argue that there are at least two crucial factors that make Kubalkoba's piece "Towards and International Political Theology" (2000) evade some of the problems with the pieces analyzed above: Kubalkoba's piece is flexible and limited.

Kubalkoba's approach, an International Political Theology (IPT) seeks theoretical flexibility in that it "has to consider agency, structure, material resources, all connected through rules, as an integral part of any analysis" (Kubalkoba, 2000: 689); moreover, IPT takes "the 'linguistic turn', but ... without in the process reducing reality to textuality"; moreover, IPT "is expressly post-positivist, but it is not postmodernist. It is not anti-foundationalist, therefore, noting the utility of empirical social science as a consequence (Ibid: 688).

Kubalkoba's approach is also limited in its reach. Kubalkoba's approach escapes the sometimes totalizing elements of structuralist and certain sociological approaches. Her approach not only gives credence to spiritual, emotional and affective factors, but looks for

relationships and asks who is interacting with whom, who is the agent, and what are the rules (Ibid: 689). It also looks for context in the situatedness of relationships.

While Kubalkoba's IPT can also be interpreted as a master concept, her sensitivity to the effects of grandiloquent theorizing and, above all, her attention to her own positioning and the nature of her theory as socially situated lends her work a higher degree of flexible openness that the works analyzed above lack.

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