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Retelling the Tale: Modernity, Colonialism and Discourse about Roman Expansion

Remembering Rome

Rome is an ambiguous legacy… Reference to the Classical World, though a practice shared by a wide variety of societies in different periods, has been seen as a trait characteristic of a certain western historical experience. Its range of application is hard to summarize, ranging from aesthetic preferences to political projection. In particular, the latter is felt as a continuous recipient of this tradition, especially when dealing with the Roman example. Thus, the appropriation of the imperial image for the vindication of European monarchies and the reproduction of various aspects of the classical tradition within the Christian Church during the Middle Ages led to a reinvention of this tradition emerging during the secularization that began during the Renaissance. The increasing importance of the republican example as a model for worldly political projects came along with a ‘problematisation’ of the nature of power and government. Later on, the enlightened critical attitude towards authority assumed the republican and pagan images — also present in neoclassical aesthetics — promoting social transformation as a means to attain human happiness. De-Christianisation and the abolition of monarchy reflected this attitude during the French Revolution. The authoritarian consequences of this episode led to the rehabilitation of the imperial image, not only by the Napoleonic regime but also by the royalist restoration. In any case this was not the single contradictory effect of illuminated thought. The universal program of social transformation promoted by the enlightened thinkers, based on an ideological reproduction of the interests of the growing bourgeois class, condensed the particular customs and preferences of this latter social group into the notion of civilization. The universal projection of this phenomenon tended to affirm modern identity in contrast to social and cultural expressions exterior to its centres of ideological production. At the same time, the practical application of the civic formula within the state-frame of social organization inherited from the ancien régime imposed a national articulation of political transformations. Thus, much of the effect of the hegemonic French political agenda was counterbalanced by nationalistic expressions of Modernity throughout Europe. This new form of collective organization was expressed through a call for the formation of an imagined community of citizens. The evidence for its affirmation was usually sought through recourse to a historical deployment of its

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1 The modern critical attitude resulting from the problematization of power and government since the sixteenth century was signalled by Michel Foucault in a late series of contributions reviewing the legacy of the Enlightenment, cf. FOUCAULT 2006, 3-52.
2 BERMEJO 2003, 33-34.
3 This view of the notion of civilisation was firstly expressed by Norbert Elias, cf. ELIAS 1993, 83-87. For a socio-economic view of this process see HOBBSBAMM 1971, 26-53.
4 For an evaluation of the contradictory effects of the Enlightenment see HAZARD 1985.
essence, a biological metaphor initiated with an aboriginal antecedent being the most frequent narrative expression of this sublimation. So, the need for a particular ancestry which represented continuity from the origins of each community and opposition to the hegemonic and tragic appropriation of the Roman example by the French program, led at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the emergence of new patriotic expressions. As we see it, the main traits of these narratives were the constitution of an indigenist approach of identity reinforced by opposition to the Roman legacy which was seen as a cultural disturbance. One example is German Romanticism, where the reference to a *Volkgeist*, constitutive of its national identity, was assured by the not-Romanized nature of its language. In Spain, the French military presence and the resulting rehabilitation of the previous dynasty fomented a patriotic perception which secured native primacy by rehabilitating the traditional historiographical narrative, starting from biblical ancestry and complemented by a negative perception of Rome elusive. Here it is worth saying that, across the Atlantic, reaction to the political incidents in Spain favoured a nationalist insurgence from its colonies prompted mainly by educated elite. The historical basis for this attitude came from the inspiration of the Roman Republic, taken by the Creole Community as a patriotic model, previously experimented in the United States. All the preceding examples allow us to appreciate the degree of variability and opposition within the discursive appropriation of the Roman legacy. During recent years discursive analysis of the archaeological and historical narratives as ideological products of Modernity has focused on the implications of these constructions for European imperialist programs. In contrast with the samples given above, this intellectual revision has, perhaps, had a far too simple perception of the appropriation of Rome’s image. Thus, it is normally assumed that both English and French colonialist interventions went along with a defence of Roman expansion as an illustrative example for their own colonization, or as a prerogative for its justification. While claiming their respective nations as the true heir of the Roman Empire, intervention to restore this legacy was seen as legitimate. Also, neoclassical rehabilitation during the enlightenment assigned a great role to ancient categories and narratives in the elaboration of ethnic and geographic descriptions that preceded colonial practice as well as intra-European nationalistic affirmation. Certainly, many of these elements conditioned a certain state of affairs, but their discursive manifestations reflect very complex situations which should be taken into consideration to avoid idealism. Here, we will briefly present the situation accompanying the French colonial intervention in the Maghreb as an illustrative example, and conclude with some theoretical insights about these issues.

*Colonial Images*

Since the first French intervention in North Africa in 1830, military action was usually depicted as a *déjà vu*. Not only was the French army considered a kind of reincarnation of the Roman one but also local communities were seen as the grandchildren of those indomitable ones of ancient accounts. In this moment the War Minister consciously proceeded to encourage the study of Roman presence in North Africa for the benefit of French action, financing a scientific expedition that replicated the knowledge-power model initiated by the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt. But the preference for Rome expressed in this project, which would

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5 WULFF 2007, 19-21. See also WULFF 2003 for a detailed view of the Spanish historiographical tradition. To complete this picture we should also consider the simultaneous favourable integration of Rome’s image into some expressions of the German and Italian nationalistic movements and the hegemonic affirmation of French and British identity, which was opposed to by the former, cf. HINGLEY 1993 and 2005, 8.
6 MOLINO 2007.
8 In this respect it is important to acknowledge the influence of such ancient categories as barbarism or *humanitas* –and the tendency to dichotomy they provide- on the construction of modern identity, including the ethnographic categories of colonial representations and of European nationalistic exercises, e.g. in Spain, cf. JIMÉNEZ 2008a, 21-35.
9 This series of scientific expeditions following that model have been the subject of two international meetings and corresponding publications focusing on the relations of these missions with contemporary social and geographical Mediterranean categories, cf. BOURGUET ET AL. 1998 and 1999.
legitimize military intervention, was not the only outcome of this adventure. During the years between the expedition and the long period of study until its final publication, we observe a frequent opposition of ideas concerning the nature of Roman colonial intervention\textsuperscript{10}. Two interpretative paths followed. One shared the official opinion of the great and inspiring effect of Roman action; the other saw that intervention negatively. The latter was almost unanimously defended by the Saint-Simonian members of the expedition. Saint-Simoniansm, a kind of utopian movement, defended, through historical arguments and reference to a mystical communion between East and West, the creation of an area of free-trade and industrial development around the Mediterranean — with its centre in Paris — which would bring prosperity and civilization to all partners\textsuperscript{11}. The historical attitude expressed by the Saint-Simonians, as well as other members of the expeditionary force, was thus based on a negative portrayal of Rome and complemented by an indigenist view supported by the valorisation of Berber culture. In a way this model reversed the Napoleonic scheme based, as we have seen, on the appropriation of the legacy of the Roman Empire, which itself took forward the enlightened neoclassical attitude and was later on continued by conservative thought after Bonaparte’s abdication. Oddly enough, Algeria’s indigenist model also continued the Napoleonic scheme promoting references to brotherhood and the possibility of assimilation first rehearsed in the Egyptian expedition. The latter approach came through the enlightened transformation of the old colonial economy based on slave workforce into a “rational” exploitation theoretically supported by the incentives of civilization\textsuperscript{12}. In the Algerian expedition this attitude was present, but also included some peculiarities due to the increasing identification of a cultural substratum. This was defined upon its opposition to Arabo-Islamic cultural traits, following a classificatory practice that established not only differences but also analogies between metropolitan models and colonial examples. The romantic French valorisation of Celtic ancestry was also incorporated into this context to generate a comparative partner resulting in the idea of an original link between Berber and Celtic ethnicities. The suggestion of these connections also came from the ubiquitous presence of a modern classificatory grid which subjected all human manifestations to evaluation by civilizing models, which — contrary to their claim for universality — reproduced the interests and auto-representation of particular social groups even within metropolitan borders\textsuperscript{13}. This led to internal classification between European nations as well as of regions within them, pushing geographical or chronological areas which did not satisfy the modern criteria into an uncivilized periphery, open to comparison from a socio-evolutionist perspective with communities outside Europe\textsuperscript{14}. We should probably consider therefore a wider framework of analysis while studying these situations, given that the usual separation between modern colonial practice and the effects of social transformation within Europe impose the same kind of divide that we try to avoid by reviewing those issues\textsuperscript{15}. Thus, firstly we have to bear in mind that, at an early stage, the distribution of economically developed areas was much more heterogeneous from a global perspective than later on\textsuperscript{16}. The changes present in that moment can be interpreted as the

\textsuperscript{10} For a detailed study of the discursive implications of this expedition see CANETE 2006.

\textsuperscript{11} Now almost forgotten, this movement was highly influential during nineteenth century, being behind actions such as the Suez Canal or much of the foreign policy under Napoleon III. Its links with Napoleonic institutions and ideology seem clear if we acknowledge the massive representation of its members in imperial elite centres of education such as the Ecole Polytechnique. For a closer look see TEMIME 2002 and LORCIN 1995, 99-106.

\textsuperscript{12} DUCHET 1995.

\textsuperscript{13} One example of this was the hierarchical social and geographical ordering which came through the standardization of linguistic usages legitimated by privileged social fields and regions as a result of the extension of the modern program of transformation within France, cf. BOURDIEU 1991, 43-65.

\textsuperscript{14} This can be seen in the alienated status of the Provençe region in France and how this resulted in cultural comparisons with Maghreb, cf. NORDMA 1996. In addition, modern attitudes to Spain in Europe led to an impression of the Iberian Peninsula as a region exterior to the continent and close to Africa, an idea that shaped much anthropological thought including that of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, cf. KANT 2004, 259-260.

\textsuperscript{15} As the Moroccan historian Abdallah Laroui once wrote: “Dès lors, que peut-on dire de la colonisation qu’on ne pourrait dire de la guerre ou de la politique? N’est elle pas seulement un aspect de cette activité humaine qu’on appelle historique parce que les historiens la restituent, la commentent ou l’analysent?”, LAROU 2001, 161.

\textsuperscript{16} HOBBMAW 1989, 17-20.
general extension of Modernity, this being the reproduction of the interests and power relations of particular social groups dedicated to the administration of material and symbolic benefits created by the new socio-economic organization. Obviously, this situation rested on a century-old process of concentration of material and ideological elements which formed the basis of a teleological diffusionist narrative.\(^\text{17}\) \(^\text{18}\) In any case, the general extension of Modernity and its devices of social administration could be identified in the equal application of some elements (the Census, the Map and the Museum) in both colonial and metropolitan practices and representations, resulting in the construction of identities and hierarchies dependent upon the standard of particular social fields promoting Modernity. It seems clear that Europe too was being defined through that process, and that the classificatory practices affected not only the extra-European societies but also the powerless within Europe, in what has been described as a fruitful mechanism to maintain an unequal socio-economic system legitimated by continuous reference to equality.\(^\text{19}\)

Returning to Algeria, the appearance of an alternative indigenist model opposed to a previous state-fomented perspective, which saw the Roman legacy as the inspiration for interventionist action, is not surprising if we consider that, even if there was an official will matching central policies and scientific categories, power-structures and interests at the periphery usually modified the metropolitan scientific agenda.\(^\text{20}\) Variability in discursive manifestation can also be related here to the discontinuous and relational nature of power, producing multiple transcripts according to the polymorphous and dynamic scenario of the encounter.\(^\text{21}\) Also, both approaches — that of the appropriation of the Roman legacy, on the one hand, and the valorisation of the indigenous, on the other — could be considered as manifestations of the ambiguous nature of colonial discourse. They reflect the simultaneous reactions of assimilation and exclusion characteristic of encounters marked by domination. H. K. Bhabha has called attention to these issues, which could be interpreted as the contradictory effect of an interventionist action justified by the application of the principles of civilization to increase development but that at the same time needing to maintain the underlying distinctions, in order to make sense of the economic and symbolic apparatus of Modernity.\(^\text{24}\) The difficulty of inferring such an extensive process from the particularity of the French colonial intervention could be reduced if we integrate the experiences of British expansion where the same ambiguous appropriation of the Roman legacy has been described, resulting in contradictory expressions of identity and corresponding oppositional doctrines of colonization, including an assimilationist tendency related to a negative image of Rome.\(^\text{25}\)

In North Africa the French indigenist model favoured a correspondence between ethnographic description and colonial administration not as a result of a systematic and conscious exercise but as the product — and the basis for reproduction — of a process of representation usually described as a mythological framework.\(^\text{26}\) This particular perception of the indigenous has been thought to be behind much of French anthropological theory, especially that that led to the Durkheimian School.\(^\text{27}\) Also, some aspects of

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\(^\text{17}\) BLAUT 1993.  
\(^\text{18}\) Benedict Anderson in his 1991 revision of his work about the imagined communities signalled the application of these devices of modern administration (the Census, the Map and the Museum) as a key for the emergence of cultural identities, cf. ANDERSON 1991, 163 and 184.  
\(^\text{19}\) HOBBSPW 1977, 14.  
\(^\text{20}\) OSBORNE 2005.  
\(^\text{21}\) SCOTT 1990.  
\(^\text{22}\) A similar situation in antiquity was described a long time ago by Elias Bickerman on the basis of his study of classical accounts, where he identified a tendency in Greek literature to integrate foreign peoples into their mythical accounts, relating their origins with Greek cosmogonies, cf. BICKERMAN 1952.  
\(^\text{23}\) Bhabha 1994, 121-131.  
\(^\text{24}\) To integrate Bhabha’s colonial discursive panorama into a wider view of relations within the process of Modernity we resort to the notion of social distinction expressed by Bourdieu, cf. BOURDIEU 1979.  
\(^\text{27}\) A key figure in this intellectual transfer was Emile Masqueray with his reversal of Fustel de Coulanges’ evolutive model for the explanation of social cohesion, cf. GELLNER 1998 and DAKHLIA 1998.
this indigenism represented a particular reference to early socialist thought on the ancient economy. It is clear that socialist theorists were suspicious of a Roman economy based on slave-production. This perspective probably contributed to the anti-colonialist posture in Soviet thought, especially that of Lenin, even if this did not mean a lack of interventionist practices by this political power, implemented in addition as a program for social liberation.

In any case, the hegemony of the Roman model in French colonialist thought was a later result of intra-European conflicts. Increasing rivalry among European communities during the second half of the nineteenth century, supported by the hostile affirmation of national identities, manifested itself as a belligerent attitude. Competition in the colonialist race was encouraged by that conflict. The defeat of France by the emerging Germany in 1870 at Sedan marked the decline of the political hegemony of the Hexagon in this European match. Germanic reference to the decadence of the Latin races, confirmed by English representations, prompted a French reaction in support of its identity. The call for a coalition of Latin nations with Spain and Italy as adherents was one of its expressions. Another was the search for Roman traces in Algeria, seeking evidence for the Latin nature of its soil. The main support for the Roman perspective came along with this situation and, by the twentieth century, could be considered the most prominent reflection of the French historiographical approach to North Africa. Also, from this moment local opposition to colonial government increased, accompanying the global conflicts emerging from all this hostility. The quest for independence, preceded by narratives of resistance and affirmation, led to liberation movements. Here, natives educated in western institutions played a central role in elaborating the ideological foundations of this action, seen as an anti-imperialisitic route to emancipation, although it preserved the political organization and the geographical delimitations established by the metropolitan administration. This situation could be understood as the proliferation of the inner contradictions of a system of domination promoting the autonomy of a group self-identified through the dichotomies generated by the system’s own legitimating claims. The oppositional nature of this relation resulted in a situation commonly derived from this form of resistance: “an inversion to the dominant mode of discourse”, despite the dependence of any identity definition on the multiple and variable space of relations, and the nature of power as the symbiosis of dominance and resistance. Thus, antagonism led to the reversion of the historical manifestation of that discursive system, while the continuity of the old administrative and descriptive devices, as well as the appropriation of western nationalist doctrine, resulted in the appeal to an essentialist cultural identity. A claim for a decolonized history resulted then in an inversion of the features which had previously been dominant, including the relevance of the Roman Empire. The metropolitan and Roman images continued to be integrated through this narrative, reacting against both through the identification of emancipation movements with the indigenist perspective. Bénabou’s consideration of North African resistance to Romanization could be an expression of that situation, as suggested by Thébert in his review of Bénabou’s work where he also pointed out the possible reversal of categories that that approach implied. Anyhow, the effect of this counter-colonial vision was important, and the anti-Roman image could be considered central within the nationalist affirmation of identities as it once was for the European nationalists programs. Here the native essence opposing domination could be represented by the Berber cultural background or by the discursive disavowal of antiquity through the consolidation of the Islamic arrival. Oddly, as we have seen before, much of the image of these native cultural traits could be also identified as a product of previous colonial
discourse, with both Berber essentialism and Islamic exclusivity resulting from that indigenist colonial perspective. But we should also recall that the new situation followed the independence of the previously colonised territories, where the symbolic and material benefits derived from the management of the emancipation process formed the basis of the hegemonic distinction of particular social groups, legitimated by the administration of the novel national framework and identity. The new national scenario of power relations established by these cultural and political elites can be linked to the hegemonic situation of those counter-colonial historical narratives as the discursive manifestation of the interests of those groups affirmed by the appropriation and inversion of preceding colonial arguments.

Concluding Remarks

The great variety of ways in which arguments about the Roman past were brought to bear on those modern experiences leads us to consider the mechanisms from which this complex situation emerged and the blurred entity of the historical image they recall. From this perspective it seems necessary to endorse Barrett’s assertion that the “Roman Empire might be regarded as a construct which has been used to hold together and give a feeling of coherency to numerous experiences and thus establish the grounds for effective action”. This construct should not be simply considered as a result of the myriad of variable ways of experiencing and appropriating artefacts, customs or relations which could be taken into account as the basis for many different expressions of identity during antiquity. The analysis should also include the multiple ways in which the historiographical tradition has depicted such a unifying construction. This situation recalls the notion of a fictional narrative unity which has also been suggested as a key feature of both biographical and autobiographical imagination, granting the illusion of personal identity and destiny. This leads us to stress that these unifying entities “establish the grounds for effective action”, not only during the chronological boundaries assigned to each entity, but also — and most likely — as a result of historiographical experience through analogy or antagonism. Thus, unifying entities such as the Roman Empire, the Renaissance or the French Revolution are and will always be grounds for interpretative controversy since they are products of our historical experience which directly affects personal or social development, including our interpretive practices of the past.

The relationship between representation and action is far from being deterministic, a sort of discursive totalitarianism, and therefore it should not necessarily lead us to a narrow consideration of agency. Instead, it could be seen as a recursive process, in which the discursive structure is somewhat appropriated and re-modelled by structuring agents and vice versa. Once again the latter approach might be qualified if we consider that, even if these agents are usually identified with human actors, non-human actors play an important role within these processes, and that both build up relational networks for the negotiation of meaning. Thus historical experience manifested by a discursive practice of narration resulting from the interaction of human and non-human agents in relational networks, forms the basis of effective structuring action for those agents within that relational space of interaction. As we have seen before, appropriation of the Roman legacy, far from been homogeneous, appears as the discursive

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41 Mattingly 1997.
42 Bourdieu 2005.
43 Ankersmit 2004, 91-93.
45 An early expression of this integration of non-humans as actors within social and historical processes was made by Marshall McLuhan when describing the role of the printing press in modern discursive deployment, cf. McLuhan 1972. Another example in Walter Benjamin’s materialistic sketch of Paris during the nineteenth century, cf. Benjamin 2005. Lately, the French sociologist Bruno Latour could be considered as the leading figure demanding the incorporation of non-humans as agents in those relational networks; for a synthetic view of his ideas see Latour 1997. A recent proposal integrates this theoretical framework to the practice of archaeology, cf. González-Rubial 2007.
expression of relational situations, frequently antagonistic. A key factor for the explanation of these discursive interactions could be the power relations established on the basis of the extension and reproduction of relational networks. To consider these situations of dominance we should also include the affirmation of collectives through the opposition of hegemony or those benefited by the monopoly of new strategic features emerging from these circumstances. The Roman legacy as a polysemous construct during the last two centuries could be understood as the discursive manifestation of power relations which emerged through the process of the extension of Modernity. The defence of the Roman model by proselytizing universalism, the anti-Roman vision set by European nationalist antagonism or anti-colonial resistance, as well as the appropriation of this legacy by American movements in favour of emancipation or, again, opposition to this image by European social groups that emerged through the benefits of colonial practice based upon assimilation, are a few examples of this dynamic scenario. All of them are discursive manifestations of particular social groups emerged through the relational situations on-going during that process. In this context, identity definitions are the result of the strategic positions of each group within that relational constellation. An overly hasty identification of Rome’s image as a model for modern imperialistic actions simplifies this complex scenario. Moreover the replication within the debate about modern colonisation of cultural categories that emerged through that very process could conceal the dynamic of power relations, the specification of which sets the very value of that critique. The idealisation which these cultural classifications imply has largely been stated while signalling the complex scenario of hybridization and variability that characterizes the use and production of material culture within collective encounters. Hence the importance of the ‘Middle Ground’ to enter in that relational space, in which discursive manifestations emerge as a result of the dynamic process of strategic affirmation, showing explicitly the illusion of fixed identities or historical narratives attached to any group. Thus if ‘becoming Roman’ was a continuous process related to the permanent re-negotiation of identity, the appropriation or rejection of Rome’s image in modern times is also the result of those dynamic and relational processes from which collective identities emerge.

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46 “The value of retaining and developing colonialism as a comparative concept lies precisely therefore in making explicit what is being avoided by not using the term: power relations”, ROWLANDS 1998, 328.
47 VAN DOMMELEN 2006 and a practical example in VIVES-FERRÁNDIZ 2006.
48 JIMÉNEZ 2008a, 52.
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