



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### The 'Who' of the Longue Durée – or – Critique as Coalitional

Valdés Olmos, T.

**Publication date**

2019

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Position Papers 2019

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Valdés Olmos, T. (2019). The 'Who' of the *Longue Durée* – or – Critique as Coalitional. In *Position Papers 2019: Core Group Meeting July 2019* Terra Critica. [http://terracritica.net/wp-content/uploads/pospaper\\_Valdes-Olmos\\_London2019.pdf](http://terracritica.net/wp-content/uploads/pospaper_Valdes-Olmos_London2019.pdf)

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

The 'Who' of the *Longue Durée* – or – Critique as Coalitional  
Tjalling Valdés Olmos (University of Amsterdam)

This year's Terra Critica meeting asks the question: whose society does critique engage with today? In the following pages I want to write towards addressing two aspects of this question, the 'who' and the 'today', and the relation they hold to one another in defining 'society'. Both these elements feature in Hall's "The Meaning of New Times" (1988), where he identifies the lack of the question 'whose society is critique engaging?' among his contemporaries, and in turn shows critique's frequent inability to address someone, if anyone at all. The 'who' importantly determines where we turn to in critique, the modes we use, and the potential it holds. The 'today' (the 'whenwhere?') also seems particularly important to me, as critique, whether directly or indirectly, engages a *socia*<sup>1</sup> (i.e. companions, allies) that is no longer here and has yet to come.

In "The Meaning of New Times," one of Hall's observations is the complexity (and absurdity) surrounding the notion of 'new times.' These new times are not so new, after all. Not in Hall's present, writing towards the end of the 1980s, nor in the 'today' that I am writing. Hall recognizes that Thatcherism, in that late moment of the 1970s, was able to "harness and bend ... circumstances which were not of its making, which have a much longer history and trajectory, and which do not necessarily have a 'new right' political agenda inscribed in them" ([1988] 2017, 249). Hall approaches these 'new times' from the perspective of its "longer *durée*" (258), and holds this particular perspective as significant to opening up the analytical gap that exists between attempts to analyze contemporary shifts to the political (far) right and the deep history of what we might call the systemic interweaving of European colonialism, (hetero)patriarchy, and capitalism (i.e. CPC).<sup>2</sup> It is particularly this perspective on the *longue durée* that informs Hall's answer to the question 'whose society does critique engage with today?'. A question answered with the positional, a mode of engaging with the world and 'new times' that Hall situates in the locality and experience of "marginalized groups" (264); Hall's essay mentions for example feminists, the black diaspora, and the environment/non-human as those belonging to the margin.

The notion of positionality implies then, in my reading of Hall, that the experience of the margin/al and the articulation of that experience in relation to the *longue durée* of CPC is what can contribute to a "map of how these power relations connect and of their resistances" (261). And Hall is precise in his essay when he emphasizes that a prescriptive structural or systemic approach to CPC leads nowhere. The messiness of the scales on which CPC unfurls itself and enfolds us is what should call for an attentiveness in critique to not merely focus on the

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Socia' as the neutral *nominative plural* instead of the masculine 'socius'.

<sup>2</sup> Here I am drawing on the work coming out of Terra Critica's ReadingRoom practice (<http://terracritica.net/readingroom/>), where the term 'CPC' is used to refer to the entangled nexus of colonialism-patriarchy-capitalism in order emphasize the necessity to un/think (by way of Boaventura de Sousa Santos) these three vectors as *always already in conjunction*.

structural as totalitarian. It is an attention to positionality, and speaking and creating from the particularities of that marginal-fugitive position that brings to the fore both the ways in which we are embedded in the structural and yet also capable of (partial) resistance and escape. But, to echo author and critic Barbara Christian in "The Race for Theory" ([1987] 1988), the question remains: for whom are we doing what we are doing when we do critique?

For this I want to stay with the notion of the margin/al for a bit. The margin/al as always already fugitive. When and if critique concerns itself with the margin/al of society, because of the margin/al's ability to map from its particular positionality the oppressive messiness of CPC and how to hide within and move across its limits, the margin/al cannot be conceptualized as operating within a binaric/dualistic system of center and periphery that haunts many contemporary conceptions of society. The margin/al engaged through identity but not in the sense of a fixed, always binary-informed oppressed societal position. The margin/al cannot (solely) be approached through the logic and practice of the hegemony. A logic and praxis that is informed by the idealizing constructs of center and periphery that "reveal that tendency to want to make the world less complex by organizing it" (Christian, 75) around the dualistic principles of CPC.

That is not to say that the margin/al is not related to identity. For example, in the US context feminists of color have insisted that it is the experience of particular positions within "the global distribution of power" (Hall, 264) from which they speak and which provides both a sense of belonging as well as coordinates and strategies for survival, resistance, and potential freedom. Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the black feminist Combahee River Collective (CRC), reflects on the theorization of 'identity politics' that the CRC put forth in their 1977 statement: "What we were saying [with the terminology of identity politics] is that we are people who embody all of these identities [female, black, lesbian, working class], and we have a right to build and define political theory and practice based upon that reality" (Smith 2017, 61). Thus a margin/al (identity) as a way of creating space in the world to imagine, speak, and *practice* our/selves differently. A practice that stems from a desire for empowerment and not as an attempt to role-reverse dualistic and hierarchical power relations that are characteristic of 'new times.'

This focus on the *doing* of the margin/al changes the sense of society that critique engages. In "The Blur and Breathe Books" (2017) Fred Moten reflects on *margin/al practice*, rather than (only) identity, by way of engaging Charles Gaines' *The Theater of Refusal*:

[Gaines] shows us that the marginal is misunderstood to be in opposition to the mainstream rather than to the (in/divi)dualized limit; that it is in opposition to the mainstream rather than to an identity; that it is our task *to make an alternative practice*, not form an alternative identity. (Moten 2017, 261; emphasis mine)

By way of Moten I read margin/al, articulated through a blackqueer experience, as showing the existence of a non-dualized society that undoes Thatcher's (and for that matter other tyrants'<sup>3</sup>) exclusionary ideal that there are only "[in/divi]dualized] men and women and there are families<sup>4</sup>". Critique can, and must, preoccupy itself with a society that constitutes those who engage in the praxis of the margin/al as a way of surviving within the ever-changing dynamics of CPC and simultaneously imagine and live an alternative practice of society. Attention to the particularity of the position/experience from which that margin/al is enacted remains paramount (so as to remain critically aware of the risks of co-optation). But as the margin/al is also in opposition to dualized limits, another aim that my practice of critique has is to understand the coalitional society that the margin/al imagines and involves.

In my practice of critique I, in part, try to follow the lines in which the margin/al entangles, or potentially entangles, with itself on a variety of temporal/geographic scales. In other words, to show the manners in which CPC enfolds us all while remaining conscious of the specificity of how that enfolding (and subsequent resistance) works out. I find this when I read Barbara Smith speaking on the necessity of coalitional work in reference to the seminal 1981 feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*:

"[That notion of] "If I don't have a particular identity, I'm not allowed to work on a particular issue"—that sounds to me like an excuse. That sounds to me like Okay, so that's what somebody decides if they're not really willing to go there, and go through the struggle of *crossing boundaries* and *working across differences*" (2017, 64; emphasis mine).

Margin/al praxis: the struggle of crossing temporal and positional differences and boundaries. This is what I attempt to understand (and do) when I practice critique, even when sometimes these crossings are perhaps not possible. But my critique remains informed by a recognition of the entangled and yet particular ways in which margin/al praxis shows the possibility of coalitional society (on a transnational scale). Furthermore, attention to the *longue durée* forces critique to engage with the work of mourning, to be attentive to how margin/al praxis imagines its companionship with the dead. In so doing it ensures an engagement with society that includes the many past lives and articulations (threatened to be) lost under the violent and messy logic of CPC, for without a continual commitment to the dead our 'today' and tomorrow are all the less safe. Critique is to sense the "blur" that Moten invokes by way of José Esteban Muñoz' queer phenomenology: a way of interrupting the paradoxically "glacial" (Hall, 258) and fast enfolding of CPC, and through its messiness and mistiness attempt to organize facts and make of those facts a fictional representation that underlines the need of political unity and ethical coalitions (Muñoz in Moten 2017, 268). Although there are many ways of doing so,

---

<sup>3</sup> Tyrant: an unjust and oppressive exerciser of authority.

<sup>4</sup> Family, in this case, meaning a heteropatriarchal unit of capitalist (re)productive value.

critique engages the society of those whose alternative practice of being brings (unlived) lives into coalition.

### **Bibliography**

Christian, Barbara ([1987] 1988). "The Race for Theory," in *Feminist Studies* 14:1.

Hall, Stuart ([1989] 2017). "The Meaning of New Times," in Sally Davison et al (eds.) *Stuart Hall: Selected Political Writings – The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*. Durham: Duke University Press; pp. 248-265.

Moten, Fred (2017). "The Blur and Breathe Books," in *Black and Blur*. Durham: Duke University Press; pp. 245-269.

Smith, Barbara & Keeange-Yamahtta Taylor (2017). "Interview with Barbara Smith," in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (ed.) *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books; pp. 29-69.