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Haim Hazan, "Against Hybridity. Social Impasses in a Globalizing World." Cambridge: Polity, 2015, vii + 178 pp.

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Book Review

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Few notions – if any – have witnessed in recent years a success comparable to the conceptual cluster of hybrid, hybridity and hybridization. From anthropology to sociology; from political theory to science and technology studies; from cars to cyborgs; from zombies to electronic gadgets; from seeds to financial products; from gender to social mobilizations: our world and our time appear to be a world and time of boundary blurring, assemblage, liquidity, syncretism, creolization, becoming and transition, or transgression. All these features are legitimized and most often celebrated rather than blamed, feared and fought as happened until not long ago, when hybrids were regarded with contempt, unease or suspect.

In this situation it is inevitable that voices begin to rise to criticize the trope of hybridity, with its aura of left-wing progressiveness, affirmative emancipation and post-colonial correctness. Yet, the book written by Haim Hazan is much more than a polemic attack on a fashionable term. It is an inquiry into its “blind spots, pitfalls and drawbacks” [p. 3], and, with it, into the blind spots, pitfalls and drawbacks of current society.

In itself the notion of hybrid is hardly new. Its initial use dates back to Latin, recalls us Hazan. Yet, it has come to the forefront in the public sphere, as well as in the social sciences and humanities, quite recently. Why? As Hazan remarks, there is a close link between the rise of hybridity and two crucial features of the present historical condition: post-modernism and globalization. To be fair, this relation has already been noted and addressed by works such as Marwan Kraïdy’s *Hybridity: Or, the Cultural Logic of Globalization* [2005], which Hazan takes as a point of departure in his effort “to go beyond the all-engulfing discourse of hybridity, bringing back the power relations that hybridity always cover” [p. 19], as a deeply biopolitical notion. The interest of the book, then, lies to a remarkable extent in the topics on which it mostly focuses, hardly fashionable or immediately appealing: extreme old age, pain, and autism. What these issues share is that they exemplify “literal, here-and-now utterances of bare life [...] breaking the magic circle of self-affirmed cultural translatability” [p. 43]. Their lack of appeal is actually an indicator of the core question Hazan addresses. The feeling of unease that these issues bring with themselves is the signal of how a non-interactive, extra-cultural or culturally unnegotiable reality has disturbing effects on dominant narratives, institutional arrangements and social models that ceaselessly acclaim and perform hybridization, symbolic exchange and networking.

Non-hybrids, in other words, play today the same role as hybrids did in a world where stability and objectivism were most valuable features, and blurred entities were marginalized as “perpetrator[s] of moral panic and disorder” [p. 19]. If hybridity has long appeared the residual “other,” the same happens with non-hybridity in a globalized society afraid of “the absolutism of the pure” [p. 7]. If Latour denounced how modern strategies of purification hid and enabled an intense work of mediation, or “translation,” it is now time – tells us Hazan – to reflect on how such work has come to the forefront,

filling the discursive and institutional space, and how what resists it has become the target “of specific social strategies designed to distance, reject, stage, and (de)grade” [p. 3]. If the modern “anthropological machine” was committed to defining the human by contrast with non- or incomplete humanity (the animal, the primitive, the savage etc.), the new anthropological machine builds on hybridization and interactivity, sometimes even humanizing inanimate objects, yet relegating the non-hybrid and the non-interactive human to a de-humanized or inhuman realm.

Hazan’s approach stays firmly within the classic constructivist framework of anthropology, the discipline with which he mainly aims to converse and which – given its commitment to bringing the “native’s point of view” to light and to translating the “others” to “us” – finds for him the biggest problems in coming to terms with what defies communication and translation (sociology and other social sciences and humanities are in this respect on the same boat, I would say). Both hybridity and non-hybridity have for Hazan nothing to do with essential characters of things. Both are culturally manufactured features, the second signaling the presence of extra-cultural spaces that resist those metaphorization processes which in a globalized world ensure the proliferation of networks (and markets) and the dissolution of non-domesticable (hence illegitimate) otherness, with consequent flattening and assimilation of differences at the very moment in which these are celebrated. For the author, in other words, “in the realm of culture, everything is constructed, even essences, [though] physical essences per se loom behind culture and beyond social constructionism” [p. 21]. This traditional social constructionist outlook seemingly prevents Hazan from engaging with areas of debate where hybridity plays a major role without being drawn to a cultural construction. I shall return later to this point.

Hazan, in any event, is aware that his position is dangerously close to self-contradiction. He asks himself: “If everything is social construction, why do either hybrids or non-hybrid fundamentals exist?” The reply is: they do because we have constructed them differently, “either because there is a reality beyond social construction that keeps intruding; or because we wish to have these things in our symbolic classification for their specific (dis)functionality” [p. 21]. However, if both things are true, as he says, their link, distribution and impacts cannot be reduced (flattened?) to just a “never-ending dialectic.” The issues with which Hazan deals actually testify to this irreducibility: pain, autism and extreme aging are characterized precisely by the irruption of something that overflows any conceptual category, simultaneously affecting both individual life and social organization and meanings.

The book is comprised of three chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter offers an overview of the place and treatment of non-hybrids in current culture and in anthropology. The basic strategies followed to keep at bay non-hybridity are specified and addressed. These are of two types: either the non-hybrid is masked and denied, or it is staged, categorized and graded, often through medicalization, in order to build a gradient by which at least part of non-hybridity can be translated, mitigated and controlled. For example, old age is staged as a “third age” where the interactive capacities, the control of the body, the goals of a life deemed “meaningful” are preserved, and a further, “fourth” age, regarded as pathological, where the cognitive and physical capacities are severely deteriorating and the values, norms and motivations – including

responsibilization and the commitment to communication – that constitute the subject in its autonomy (and governability) weaken and dissolve. At the other end of the life course, the medicalization of pregnancy determines a transitional zone between conception and birth, where the attribute of personhood becomes moveable and contested. Similarly, autism is categorized as an extreme position along a spectrum of manifestations of “pervasive development disorder,” while the Holocaust – whose closure to sense-making is testified by both the victims’ reluctance or impossibility to narrate their experience and the deniers’ claims about the “human implausibility of the phenomenon” [p. 99] – is framed as an extreme variety of genocide, a notion that opens a space for reasoning and understanding, even forgiveness and redemption. Also death is reconfigured as an interactive realm: in “digital cemeteries” the gravestone acts as an interactive computer complete with photos and blogs of the dead. “All these substitutes for cultural voids qualify as their denial”, notes Hazan, implicitly acknowledging the “objectionable quiddity” [p. 99] of the phenomena they seek to hide or replace.

The second chapter is to me the most intriguing of the book. It focuses on the unmediated and unnegotiable otherness of extreme old age, a “selfless age” in which the body is increasingly dissociated from mind, intentionality and will. The very old, as the infant, is “at the cusp of culture displaying socially uncharted behaviors euphemistically branded as ‘human universals’” [p. 62]. The label of ‘Alzheimer’s’ is a way to medicalize a situation where the human being is “turned into ‘bare life’ or ‘living corpse’, [...] a metonymic representation of death [that] impedes the anthropological pursuit of otherness in forms that can be reconstructed, negotiated, revoked and re-inherited as one of ‘us’ humans” [p. 52]. The most extreme features of aging – frailty, dementia, Alzheimer’s and death – define an objective, unchangeable, unknowable otherness, an untamable savage condition, a raw materiality “verging on the inhuman” [p. 86]. This otherness stands in stark contrast with the manageable otherness of globalization, that works as “a measure for appraising the distance between sameness and difference, the familiar and the exotic” [p. 57]. It is to the irruption of a “reality beyond construction”, where “identity [becomes] a mystery” [p. 80], that are devoted some of the most involving pages of the book: as when excerpts of (non-)conversations with very old individuals are reported, which show a basic refusal, or impossibility, to communicate, a thorough disconnection between past and present, the display of a radical desubjectivation of the speakers, who summarize the story of their lives as total emptiness or nonsense. As Hazan notes, in these cases the terms “story”, “narrative” or “memory” should be replaced with the concept of “annals”: an ahistorical, atemporal archive of events, with “no emotional, logical, ethical, aesthetic, teleological, or causal connection between them” [p. 87].

The cases of autism and pain, to which most of the third chapter is devoted, provide further evidence of the disturbing presence of irreversible, incommensurable and untranslatable phenomena. Autism, Hazan remarks, represents a “cultural enigma.” It offers the “image of an indivisible discrete condition” [p. 108] which, following the usual strategy, is coped with by constructing a medicalized account of “a continuum of experience” that includes the Asperger syndrome and other unspecified pervasive developmental disorders. As for pain, it also appears to be a radical, “barbaric” otherness in its uncategorized, pre-reflective dimension; “a non-hybrid defying the modern project of disciplining and modifying nature” [p. 116]. Contrary to earlier times, when it was

celebrated (as with martyrdom and other forms of sacrificial offering) or accepted as inherent in life, pain today is seen to undermine human dignity. To the extent that it resists objectification in language, as a “totally universal and completely personal” experience, pain constitutes a further instance of the split between mind and body. The social reaction to this condition is once more an act of “concealment, sequestration and removal” [p. 118], as the expansion of medical treatment shows. To the extent that physical (and psychical) pain is verbalized and translated into “suffering,” it becomes socially recognizable and shareable, hence negotiable and manageable. Yet, as another touching, important testimony reported in the book indicates, accepting the inevitability of pain can lead to a “clarification” of what life is, what a human being is; a self-awareness that operates to recover, rather than undermine, the integrity of the subject in a society of liquidities and contingencies.

In the concluding chapter, as well as in various passages of the book, Hazan asks what anthropology (and by extension all the social sciences) should eventually do with the non-hybrid and the extra-cultural. Are we “to finally abandon the powerful notion that language, thought, and the world are all isomorphic,” or are we “to recognize that which is unsayable, that which cannot be put into words, and *come to terms with the nonsensical*” [p. 131, emphasis original], shifting from “the paradigm of language as representation to the paradigm of presentation of meaning as use” [p. 132]? Hazan believes that, in spite of all its problems and pitfalls, the second route is practicable. Hearing the silenced voices of radically, deadly, others is possible, provided however that we seek to perform a “true hybridization” [p. 134], that is, a transformation or transition (also) of ourselves; provided that we are able (and willing) to change our own terms of reference. This means acknowledging “our own limits” [p. 71], “tilt[ing] our worldview” [p. 134], and enhancing our capacity to actually listen to the voices that, in their own fragmented and “alien” terms, say something about themselves. Though resembling other cases for a “sound” hybridity, like Kraidy’s plea for multiple hybridity against the flattened, singular one of globalization, Hazan’s accent on listening and self-transforming gives his argument an individual tone, strengthened by the methodological implications he draws (and which I find a most interesting suggestion). True hybridization, he maintains, entails recourse to “seemingly positivistic” techniques, including a focus on “categories rather than individuals”, and “deep structures rather than surface rules” [p. 41], refraining from “participation” and “conversation,” with their assimilating, moralizing and domesticating implications, to keep a distance between subject and object of observation, which is what paradoxically allows an actual contact.

As I said, Hazan’s book is not the first to address the drawbacks of hybridity, yet it does it in an original, involving way, though relevant issues remain unaddressed. For example, the category of the *Muselmann* (German for Muslim, a death camp slang word for prisoners terminally ill or physically and mentally exhausted, who have surrendered to their fate) – which, as Hazan remarks, offers a template for non-hybridity as bare life immersed in a horizon of unmediated needs and goals – is obviously reminiscent of the figure of the clandestine migrant which increasingly populates the reality and imagery of affluent societies. However, this core biopolitical subject of the present is not discussed. Nor is it the figure of the fundamentalist, which again defies mediation, conversation and post-modern sense-making: it is only touched, similarly to the links

between hybridity, capitalism and neoliberal governmentality, evoked but then left in the background. More crucially for a book that aims to be first of all of social theory, there are no hints at an area of debate – the so-called “ontological turn” or “new materialism” – which in recent years and from a number of disciplinary perspectives (including anthropology) has been vastly expanding on hybridity, pointing however to a direction that cannot be intercepted by a critique internal to social constructivism, its leading theme being the overcoming of any duality of matter and cognition, thingness and language. This strand of thought has quickly become very fashionable, thus offering in principle an ideal terrain for Hazan’s critique – criticisms of new materialism are actually beginning to emerge [Braun 2014; Pellizzoni 2015, 2016]. Moreover, a critique of new materialist accounts of materiality *itself* as hybrid (an account to which Hazan seems to get close when he talks of “true hybridization,” though always from within a constructivist perspective) would be extremely interesting when applied to the topics discussed in the book, since the literature in the ontological turn is more committed to dealing with the affirmative practices of emergent social figures than with conditions of impairment and withdrawal. This could actually be the subject of a further step in Hazan’s reflection.

That said, the book stands as a welcome, individual and engaging journey into the realm of non-hybridity, showing the latter’s invaluable role in signaling the limits of “dialogue” and mediation; the blind spots and power games any case for translation and inclusion entails and enacts. A recommended reading for anyone interested in crucial aspects of current biopolitics and social theory.

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