

*Languages* English

# Intellectual Masturbation?

Denisa Tomkova



The *Enigmatic Majorities* exhibition with the film still in the background by Anand Patwardhan (*You Can Destroy the Body*). Credit: The Akademie der Kuenste der Welt, Koln, Germany. Photographer: Roel Weenink

"We can't keep criticizing the neoliberal system while continuing to retain superficial visions of solidarity without striving for a more in-depth understanding." Clelia O. Rodríguez

In the previous blog post I interviewed Mike van Graan who pointed out: "Solving Europe's problems then are linked to solving problems in other parts of the world."<sup>1</sup> To follow up on this, I would like to stress the colonialist approach of the *Extreme Centre* symposium discussion on Global politics, which tackled the current wars and refugee crisis but did not include any other but white Western voices. This single-sided conversation can never be beneficial or useful except to serve as pure intellectual masturbation. I consider myself part of the group I am criticizing here and I believe it is important for all of us to pause from time to time and reflect. I would like to draw on Clelia O. Rodríguez's text *How Academia Uses Poverty, Oppression and Pain for Intellectual Masturbation*. She addresses the issue of discrepancy between the act of decolonization and the mere use of the phrase by academics. She stresses that: "We can't keep criticizing the neoliberal system while continuing to retain superficial visions of solidarity without striving for a more in-depth understanding."<sup>2</sup> She also very importantly points out that: "You too

can participate in academic dialogues about poverty and labour rights as you pass by an undocumented cleaner who will make your bed while you go to the main conference room to talk about her struggles."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Ágnes Heller several times during the symposium stated that "when philosophers tell people how to do things, it is always the catastrophe". Therefore, I believe that we need to start to engage in a dialogue *with* 'other(s)' rather than just talk *about* them as 'other(s)'. What I mean here, is that to be able to achieve any change in the world, the Global North needs to create dialogues *with* the South rather than *about* them. They need to be invited to discussions as the equal partners. Similarly, Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* sees the solution in pedagogy, however as he explains: "pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or people) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity."<sup>4</sup> For example, during the symposium Saskia Sassen presented community involvement as a solution. She suggested producing food and coffee locally and to create co-ops. Sassen used as an example the coffee shop run by her students in New York where she advised them to get furniture made by the immigrants in the community rather than buying it from IKEA. However, it appears to me a very naïve and problematic solution because, first of all, coffee cannot be produced locally, it has to be imported from the Global South. Secondly, suggesting that immigrants are good only for making your furniture is degrading and to keep labelling someone as an 'immigrant' reinforces their 'othering'. I am an Eastern European immigrant living, working and completing my PhD in the UK and the 'immigration' label means something very complicated to me. Let me once again refer to Rodríguez here: "Decolonization sounds and means different things to me, a woman of colour, than to a white person. And why does this matter? ... Is it because in these 'decolonizing' practices we are being colonized once again?"<sup>5</sup> The struggles we are facing today are not easily turned into practical solutions, policies or real actions; they will require lots of energy, respectful dialogues and learning from each other to avoid performing power relations and prevent the 'othering' or labelling of people.

1 — Denisa Tomkova, *In conversation with Mike van Graan*, L'Internationaleonline.



The *Extreme Centre* symposium discussion. From the left: Saskia Sassen, Srećko Horvat and Ágnes Heller. Credit: The Akademie der Kuenste der Welt, Koln, Germany. Photographer: Roel Weenink

2 — Clelia O. Rodríguez, *How Academia Uses Poverty, Oppression and Pain for Intellectual Masturbation*, RaceBaitR.

3 — Clelia O. Rodríguez, *How Academia Uses Poverty, Oppression and Pain for Intellectual Masturbation*, RaceBaitR.

4 — Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, The Continuum Publishing, Penguin Classics 1970, 2017, p.22.

5 — Clelia O. Rodríguez, *How Academia Uses Poverty, Oppression and Pain for Intellectual Masturbation*, RaceBaitR.

Posted 17 July 2017

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