

The Un-Certainty of the Global

Vikramaditya Prakash

Is a non-homogenous global possible, the global as something that is neither unitary nor fractal, and also not a fragmented landscape of ever divisible individualities? In other words, is it possible to know and think our narratives of inhabitation – our pasts, presents and futures – on this our planet earth in a modality, a narrative geography, that is neither, in one guise or another, universalized, made common to all humanity; or atomized, in a desperate attempt to de-universalize, to the extent that it seeks location and origination in a shifting boundary of singularity – identitarian or body-ontological; political or epistemological? In still other words, if it were so that the local-universal binary was itself the modality of the non-global, which is to say if it were a yet another self-serving Hegelianist sublation, what might be that other modality, that alt-epistemic geography, by which one could, or rather should - for is it not a question of ethics and empathy? - begin to articulate, but perhaps even before one articulates, to begin to know or apprehend, the non-binary, 'global' world?

More specifically: Is the assemblage of teaching lectures and modules that is GAHTC, something of this order? Does it, via its digital library, offer anything like a pathway to apprehend this alt-episteme?

For me, the global architectural historiographical project began as a contribution to the ongoing project of decolonizing architectural history. When I came to US to grad school, I burnt with the passion to more fairly represent Indian modernism in the parliament of modernism, not as a derivative secondary construct, but as a distinct variant of its own, simultaneously local and global, particular and universal. Having grown up and gone to architecture school in Chandigarh, the (in)famous postcolonial modernist capital

authored conjointly by the Le Corbusier-Jawaharlal Nehru combine, I smarted at modern architecture's claimed identity as being "western" in origin. Chandigarh, for me, was a project of the Nehruvian nation-state that staged, as in 'used', the Le Corbusian idiom to further its own narrative, and not vice versa.¹ Establishing modern architecture as a global movement, with its own semi-autonomous origination in postcolonial India was one of my early goals, echoing and amplifying the ideological positions of the Indian mainstream nationalists who critiqued the Euro-colonial project, and its claims to be the path of progress, on the ethics of its constitutive contradictions – universal/European; natural/civilizational; self-evident/needing education.²

This was my colonial framing of the postcolonial problem – seeking admittance into modernity as an equal member, with adequate reparation for the inequities of colonial exploitation.³ There is a certain 'chafing' – a binding desire that is also an enslavement - that characterizes those of us who claim to speak from the margins – from the postcolonies, as from the alt-genders and sexual identities, the people of colors, those from the global south, the transients, the travelers, the gypsies, the criminals, the ill, the unspecified... - that powers the insatiable urge to be heard, to be represented in the theatres of power. Irresistible; it is however an ambivalent urge, a classic double-bind, for it seeks simultaneously to be present in the dark centers of power and stand outside of it distinct and different, only to find that difference is constituted as difference from the center and as such yet again inescapably beholden to it.

So, if the postcolonial dilemma was to try and escape from this double-bind, its objectives seemed doubly hapless in contrast to the self-determined West that seemed

¹ Thus the main title of my first academic book announced it project as being "Chandigarh's Le Corbusier" rather than the other way around. See Prakash, V. (2002). *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier : The struggle for modernity in postcolonial India (Studies in modernity and national identity)*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

² On this question see Dipesh Chakrabarty's foundational work, in particular the idea of the "waiting room of history" in Chakrabarty, Dipesh. (2007). *Provincializing Europe (Princeton studies in culture/power/history)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

³ Though not an important part of my self-consciousness as a graduate student, I am adding this idea of reparations into this present narrative in response to the writings of high-Nehruvian scholar's such Shashi Tharoor. See in particular his book Tharoor, Shashi. (2018). *Inglorious Empire*. Brunswick, Victoria: Scribe Publications.

self-assured. The West, so we thought, knew itself and its histories, even if via negation. In particular, the West's claim to modernism, as *its* legacy and gift to the rest of the world, felt particularly othering to us, precisely because we fought to claim some slice of it as our own. That is how they taught it to us, even in the best history of modernism courses in graduate school, and in the course books. None of the finest postmodern polemics on Le Corbusier, ever constituted it as anything other than the well bounded if contested legacy of the West.

This postcolonialist double-bind was unsettled for me by the radical claim emanating out of postcolonial theories of the late 1980s that that it is not just the postcolonies, but the whole world that is postcolonial. With its beginnings in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the idea that the West as such, was also fictionally constituted via an othering relationship to an equivalently fictionalized 'Orient' was a small crack in the foundation of the West, that quickly yawned into a chasm.⁴ That modernism, that the West, that the foundations of reason, science and rationality were in themselves not self-sustaining, that inherent within them were contradictions that made them irreconcilable rather than absolute, and that this West thus knows itself as only in differentiation to the its other-ed non-west – all these were, for my generation, revelations that opened the door into the possibility of another conceptualization of the world, that offered to liberate not only those of us from the postcolonies from the struggles of the double-bind but also the hapless apologists of the West who were otherwise doomed to hold up the fortress of Eurocentrism on foundations embedded in quicksand.

In other words, the project of undoing Eurocentrism is not the task of better global self-representation, nor is that of just giving voice to the unrepresented in the parliament of voices; rather it is the task of reinventing that parliament and requires the labors and voices of the whole (post)colonial world. This is the sense in which GAHTC is first and

⁴ Said's *Orientalism* needs no introduction, but I would here underscore the importance of his later book Said, Edward W. (2012). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. See also my conversation with Nasser Rabat on this question in my ArchitectureTalk podcast V. Prakash "71. AITC: Politics and Pandemics with Nasser Rabbat" <https://www.architecturetalk.org/home/71rabbat>, accessed June 21, 2021.

foremost a post-postcolonial project, in that it is not constituted as voicing of the so-called non-West, but as the reimagining of the architectural history of the whole world, the entire survey.

This task, however, was and remains hard-work, for the hegemonic construction of the world, and its architectural narratives, is not easily undone, or stepped outside of. Let us name this project, provisionally for we are architects, but not just because, the project of the global as the effort to de-link history from the 'city', from civilized forms of knowledge, or the knowledge of 'civi-lizations'; from, in particular, civitas.

This is not easily done because civitas, precisely, in the magnanimity of its inclusions, subsumes alterities into its civilizing embraces. Hegemony after all is not just instituted ideology, it is also internalized self-construction. Early in our work we found that the greatest resistance to preparing the materials for GAHTC came from the projected fear of the unfamiliar, the othered. Individual faculty were always happy to contribute material that was in their area of specialization, or material that they had long taught – Western or non-Western - but were generally very reluctant to prepare and submit lectures on topics that were outside their expertise. This is how institutionalization functions – via the fear of castigation, dissuading 'experts' from travelling far from their stated 'expertise'.

So, the agency that we pushed hard, and not always successfully, in GAHTC was to embrace unfamiliarity, to walk boldly into incomprehension. We fielded the contention that it is precisely when we encounter materials and contentions that are incomprehensible, that do not immediately fit into our internalized 'expertise', that we should become alert to the possibility that a door to an engagement with our 'others' may be available. This was a difficult sell. Most faculty preferred to submit materials that they felt self-assured about. Many, however, took on the challenge and ventured beyond their comfort zones.

We encounter this problem of 'expertise' not only from established scholars of the normatized 'West', but also from the protective custodians of the 'rest'. Not only did

scholars of the, say, non-West tend to be insistent on othered distinctness of their topics as critical to their self-identity, they also generally insisted that the right to representation be adjudicated via clearly established affiliation – such as birth, gender, race, publication record, etc – which is to say ‘expertise’ in another register. This was an entitlement that was more difficult to challenge and deny. And to a certain extent, this right to claim marginality - however ‘impossible’ the claim – was one that we generally acceded to. Our accession, at least as far as I was concerned, was provisional, valid only until unnecessary.

Ultimately, the GAHTC does have many fine contributions from many a teaching faculty producing and presenting material that is outside their realm of expertise. These are tentative engagements with their ‘others’, and as such, they are sites of vulnerability. One of the great advantages of the classroom, as selected by the GAHTC as its site of engagement, is that the lecture is not a summarized presentation of the authoritative discourse. Rather, given its circumscribed ‘oral’ character, it is a site where tentative, and approximate knowledges can be tried and essayed – brushed out in broad strokes in the interests of opening up eyes and minds, more than transferring a canon. The greatest strength of the GAHTC is that we see the survey as not the matter of introducing and examining competence of a larger ‘truth’, but the more emotional and cathartic process of changing hearts and minds and redirecting the affirmative gaze of the student.

This does not of course mean that the aspiration for the stability of “authentic” knowledge disappears.

The thing about provisionality, or the *essai*, is that its provisionality has to be predicated on certainty, whether it is the blindness necessary to make a contingent claim in the moment, or the expectation that the provisionality will necessarily become certainty *in the unknown future*. The aspiration of the truth is the necessary motor that drives the engine of historiography, even when it is, and particularly when it is, collagistic and provisional. Uncertain knowledge, if it is to have value and coherence, in other words, must necessarily traffic in the economies of certainty.

GAHTC in this sense perforce remains “unsettled,” volatile. It is not like building a fine mansion on a stable foundation from finished blueprints. It is like a start up, or better like the assembling of an informal settlement that is causal and determined in its operations and protocols even if without destination.

And as such, thus, our global project is un-certainly wedded to the project of progress. Which is not say that it is a necessarily incomplete project, incomplete not in that it still requires more modules with more and better representation - which it does - but incomplete for it works in service of an ongoing post-postcolonial future that has only partially arrived. The GAHTC is not its predicted future; but the aspiration that that future cannot possibly arrive without it, wherein arriving is not a certain destination but an anticipation, an object of desire.

So, is a non-homogenous global possible? In this sense that I have argued above, the agency of the global in the GAHTC is the movement not of wish-fulfillment or easy empowerment, but of desire: the *harkat* or the aesthetic movement of knowing as becoming that requires recognition of the constitutive impossibility of the fulfillment of its ambitions. This is not to make the purpose of the GAHTC project pointless; rather it is to underscore the path ahead. The GAHTC is not here to “sell” a well-packaged ‘global’, but to advance the task of decolonization. As such, then, the GAHTC is the project of heading towards the unseen but desired and anticipated. It is a project, a work, a path towards the *l’avenir*, the unknown but expected future, or what Maliq calls “eventualities”. “While it is not evident what will eventually happen, the eventuality itself is what is at stake and staked on.” It is an investment, in other words, in the logics and equations of uncertainty.