

THE CATEGORY OF “MÉTISSAGE”: *Status quaestionis*

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As a process of encounter and fusion of different cultures, métissage has always accompanied human history. In this history of blendings there have been, obviously, some crucial moments: the discovery of the New World and - more generally, the time of colonialism is undoubtedly emblematic. In spite of all paranoid delusions of purity, the fact of métissage demonstrates that persons and cultures are originally and intrinsically mixed. Are we then destined to an anarchic fusion of differences, to an infinite patchwork of identities? How can métissages contribute to democratic cohabitation?

Key Words: Métissage; Migration; Democratic iterations

Globalization

The movement of cultures has always represented a constant in the human way of inhabiting the world¹: no civilisation is thinkable without considering an articulate process of contact and interpenetration among different peoples, taking place throughout thousands of years of migrations. To make just one example, the ancient Greeks, for all their pride, regarded Egypt and the Middle East as their cultural ancestors, to the point that it seems plausible to speak about a black Athens.² India, on the other hand, did not remain insensitive to interaction with Hellenism: a totally Indian figure such as the Buddha sometimes appears portrayed according to Mediterranean canons.³

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¹ STEARNS, Peter N. *Atlante delle culture in movimento*.

² BERNAL, Martin. *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*.

³ SEDLAR, Jean. *India and the Greek World*.

Compared with the past, the difference is that today the "mixing" phenomenon has reached global proportions. The increased rapidity and spread of the migratory flows has resulted in a globalisation of cultural encounters and cultural conflicts. This first fact requires an analytical effort, since it represents our reference context. Globalisation, in other words, is the epochal circumstance determining the specificity of the métissage processes we deal with today. I am not going to address here the issue of the contrast between the "continuist argument" (globalisation is a process which has always accompanied human, not just Western, history)⁴ and the "discontinuist" argument (globalization is the advent of a global era which breaks with the modern era)⁵. Certainly we have been experiencing an epochal transition⁶, perfectly encapsulated, I think, in Paul Valéry's prophetic words of 1928:

The political phenomena of our times are accompanied and complicated by an unprecedented change of scale, or rather by a change in the order of things; the world in which we, people and nations, begin to belong is nothing but an image resembling the world that was familiar to us. The system of causes which governs the destiny of each of us, now stretched to cover the totality of the globe, causes all of it to rebound at every shock; no issue is ever settled, though it may appear to be so at one point.⁷

Now, this complex interweaving of global and local, that is, this novel phenomenon of "glocalisation" - as it has been aptly defined⁸ -, represents the challenge of our times:

- on one hand, the internal boundaries of groups and societies no longer coincide with geographical boundaries (this, among other things, is one of the reasons whereby métissage cannot be based on ethnicity, if by ethnicity we mean a natural and unchangeable coding that overrides any other type of belonging;

- on the other hand, an unbridgeable gap has formed between the global dimension - egemonised by the market and the new communication technologies

- and the routine practices of a political structure still bound to the old territorial paradigm.

⁴ SEN, Amartya. *Globalizzazione e libertà*.

⁵ ALBROW, Martin. *The Global Age. State and Society beyond Modernity*.

⁶ MARRAMAO, Giacomo. *Passaggio a Occidente. Filosofia e globalizzazione*.

⁷ VALÉRY, Paul. "Regards sur le monde actuel", p. 36.

⁸ ROBERTSON, Roland. *Globalization. Social Theory and Global Culture*; BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *Globalization. The Human Consequences*.

In short, there exist some fundamental *disjunctions* between economy, culture and politics on which we have only just started to reflect. Arjun Appadurai certainly stands in the breach of this reflection. His theory of *global cultural fluxes*⁹ is a highly sophisticated model designed to fathom the depth of these disjunctions. Without going into this kind of details, I would nevertheless like to illustrate the theoretical importance of this theory, since it represents, in my opinion, an interesting attempt to understand how *métissages* actually take place. According to Appadurai, the fluid, changing world in which we live is not only characterised by panoramas of peoples in movement (*ethnoscapes*); equally fast and elusive is the ability to produce and spread information (*mediascapes*), technology (*technoscapes*), global capital (*financescapes*) and, finally, the very political ideas of liberty, welfare, rights, democracy (*ideoscapes*).

Reference to these 5 panoramas (*-scapes*) seems useful to me for at least two reasons:

a) the image that any given human group creates of its own culture and of the other's culture depends on the interweaving of these fluxes;

b) by looking at the disjunction of these fluxes we can try to understand the crucial issue of violence and terrorism in the time of globalisation: if, in fact, global cultural fluxes blur the boundaries between "us" and "them", we have the conditions for the unleashing of a new cultural purification movement¹⁰.

The idea of culture

In 1983, speaking at the World Congress of Philosophy at Montréal, Lévinas said that culture is based on knowledge and knowledge is "the relationship between man and the outside world, the relationship between the Self and the Other where the Other is finally stripped of its otherness, enters my knowledge, its transcendence becomes immanence"¹¹.

What Lévinas criticises is the symptom of an anthropological disease which Michel De Certeau would call the "need to be identical"¹². Now, this identity obsession is another situation which the *métissage* process must confront today. It is clear, in fact, that if the evidence of inter-cultural contact is an indisputable datum it makes no sense to think in terms of an identical

⁹ APPADURAI, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*.

¹⁰ *Idem*. *Sicuri da morire. La violenza nell'epoca della globalizzazione*; SEN, Amartya. *Identity and Violence*.

¹¹ LEVINAS, Emmanuel. "Détermination philosophique de l'idée de culture", p. 214.

¹² DE CERTEAU, Michel. *L'Étranger ou l'union dans la différence*, p. 179.

identity or a closed-circuit culture. This battle for a new idea of culture, that is, a non-homologating culture, one that is open to meeting the other is an urgent task. One of the most advanced workshops exploring this issue was certainly the interdisciplinary seminar on identity directed by Lévi-Strauss in 1974¹³, attended by, among others, Michel Serres, who is regarded as one of the main theoreticians on métissage¹⁴. It was Serres who proposed the argument, fundamental to us, that a culture is not an unchangeable, homogenous block but rather a history of intersections -- provisional and subject to revision -- of spaces, images and experiences. Now, what differentiates cultures -- according to Serres -- is certainly the fact that the historical elements forming each of them are connected in different ways; but what all these cultures have in common is the actual connective operation. There emerges a fundamental anthropological figure, which Serres defines through the image of the "weaver", that is, one who "ties, knots together, makes bridges, routes, relays between spaces that are radically different. [One who] says what happens between them. [One who] *inter-venes* [comes between]"¹⁵.

I believe that here we have the conditions for thinking of an authentic inter-culturalism, just as I believe it useful to think of the *mestizo* as this "weaver": as Serres explains, if the cultures are circumscribed, homogenous blocks, *between* them there can only exist a useless transitory void, that is, incommunicability. For space - that is, an encounter - to be there, we have to consider the *between* category (a category borrowed from mathematical topology, as Serres reminds us by referring to Jacques Lacan) understood as structural to the cultures themselves: in other words, it is because the cultures are *per se* made of links and connections that it is possible to create inter-cultural métissages. The question can be viewed from a different angle, as suggested by Merleau-Ponty: if a culture is judged by its level of *transparence*, by its awareness of itself and other cultures, it is true that there always exists a "blind spot", a "wild region" - says Merleau-Ponty - within each culture, which never allows completion of its ultimate possession of itself and the truth. This means that a culture is never *complete*, it always misses something for it to be able to tell the reality of its own history. This gap is precisely what makes each culture intrinsically *etero-referred*, that is, structurally exposed to otherness.¹⁶

The Migrant

The men and women who migrate are the protagonists of métissage:

¹³ LEVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *L'identité*.

¹⁴ Cfr. SERRES, Michel. *Le Tiers-Instruit*.

¹⁵ SERRES, Michel. "Discurso e percurso", p. 31.

¹⁶ MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice. *Signes*, p. 181.

they are those who pay its price. I would just like to present an image taken, this time, from Todorov¹⁷: the migrant subject always is - to obviously different extents - a displaced subject, as he or she has to face a different and not always hospitable reality. At the same time, those who migrate - says Todorov - are also, and always, displacing, in the sense of the Freudian *Unheimlich*: they upset the idea of a closed, homogenous culture revealing that need to be identical which often pushes us to want to tame the other person at all costs. Therefore the migrant, together with his/her host, has the ethical task to find the political forms of connection between their respective histories.

The words of métissage

Such a debate would very ample indeed. I shall therefore limit myself to providing a few etymological indications on the origin and meaning of the term *métissage* and its possible semantic connections. This is no academic digression, as the term is loaded with connotations to be taken into account in order to understand its usage in today's debate.

The most ancient documentation is found in St Jerome, who uses *mixtīciu(m)* to translate the Greek *sýmmiktos* of the LXX. *Mixtīciu(m)*, which means "of mixed race" comes from *mīxtu(m)* "mixed". Generally, however, the term is understood as deriving from the Spanish *mestizo*, which dates from the European colonial domination of the Americas and means "born of the interbreeding of different ethnic groups"¹⁸. This political connotation seems - in some sense - indelible, even when the term enters the scientific vocabulary of cultural anthropology: it cannot be forgotten that the so-called "applied" anthropology has developed together with the spread of European interest towards other peoples¹⁹ and that, at least initially, there was a strong connection between colonial interest and (especially British) anthropological endeavours²⁰ directed towards the analysis of the impact of Western civilisation on indigenous political systems.

Closely related to the same semantic area is the word "hybrid". It is true that the keenest *métissage* supporters tend to actually oppose the two terms: while "*métissage*" is, according to them, a never-ending process, a continual contamination, "hybridisation" would signify, rather,

¹⁷ TODOROV, Tzvetan. *L'homme dépaycé*.

¹⁸ *Dictionnaire Culturel en Langue Française*, edited by A. Rey, Le Robert 2005

¹⁹ MALIGHETTI Roberto. *Antropologia applicata. Dal nativo che cambia al mondo ibrido*.

²⁰ Cfr. MALINOWSKI, Bronislaw. "Practical Anthropology".

an acquired status, the result of a fusion leading to a *tertium quid*²¹. Having said this, *hybrid* is actually the term used by Anglo-saxon scholars to translate *métissage* (*mixity* being less widely used²². Also *hybrid*, however, clearly exposes the *biological* and *political* meaning of cross-breeding. As shown by R. Young, the term *hybrid* is at the centre of a long debate going back to the option between poly-genesis and mono-genesis²³; from this viewpoint, *hybrid* can therefore either support the arguments on *amalgamation* and *melting pot* of different races belonging to the same species; or become the stigma of cultures considered inferior because belonging to different species²⁴.

Another interesting debate could take place around the term "creole". In this case too we are dealing with a term coined in the sixteenth century during the great European colonial expansion. "Creole" was initially applied to the people of European origin born in the colonies, to distinguish them from the upper-class immigrants born in Europe. Later, it became an attribute of the languages originated from complex mixtures of different idioms. Here I shall only hint at the fact that *métissage* studies intermingle, in this case, with those on compared literature and linguistics²⁵.

Today, the "colonial" origin and biological significance of these terms look like questions of the past: both *métissage* and *hybridization*, as well as *creolisation*²⁶ are used mainly *metaphorically*, to indicate the transforming contact between different cultures and civilisations²⁷. Normally, the eulogy of *métissage* is equated, in the debate, to the *hard* versions of multiculturalism: to both a differential fragmentation (different, isolated cultures) and an homologating fusion (a dominant culture that incorporates and assimilates differences). Before these anti-*métissage* logics, there is a tendency to put forward anti-identity images related to the semantic area of *métissage*, although ideologically overexposed: nomadism, diaspora, *rhizome* (cultures have neither a centre nor an origin²⁸, *trickster* (the *mestizo* ridicules boundaries and identities, using cultures as "stage costumes"²⁹.

²¹ LAPLANTINE, François; NOUSS, Alexis. *Le métissage*.

²² GRILLO, Ralph. "Mixity and contemporary european cities".

²³ YOUNG, Robert. *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*.

²⁴ See, eg., GOBINEAU, Joseph-Arthur. *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*.

²⁵ Cfr. GNISCI, Armando. *Creoli, meticci, migranti, clandestini e ribelli*.

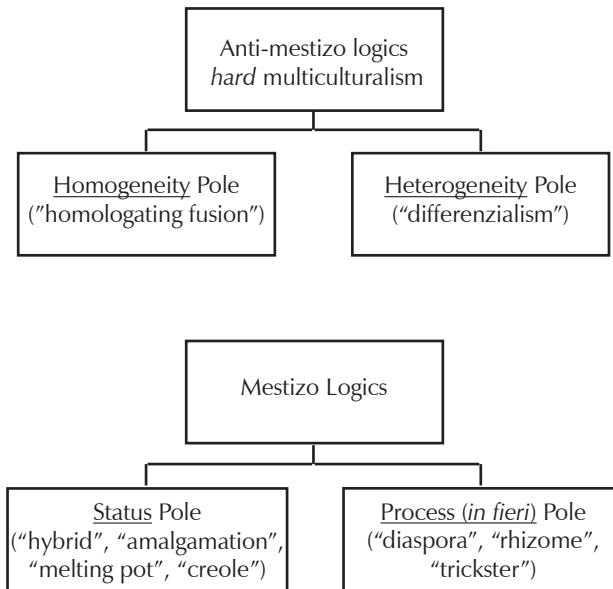
²⁶ GLISSANT, Edouard. *Introduction à une poétique du divers*.

²⁷ CANCLINI, Nestor Garcia. *Culture ibride. Strategie per entrare e uscire dalla modernità*; HANNERZ, Ulf. *Cultural Complexity*; GUIDIERI, Remo. *Voci da Babele. Saggi di critica dell'antropologia*.

²⁸ DELEUZE, Gilles; GUATTARI, Félix. *Millepiani. Capitalismo e schizofrenia*.

²⁹ RADIN, Paul; KERENY KARL; JUNG, Carl G. *Il briccone divino*.

Semantic map:



The ideology of métissage

By this digression on the metaphorical uses of the term I have already introduced the most delicate question: today the category of métissage is systematically used in the so-called post-colonial studies, placed at the confluence of different postmodern currents of contemporary social theory. It is not by chance that these studies should be post-colonial: against the mainly “epistemic” violence³⁰ of Western colonialism (knowledge which incorporates and destroys differences) the strategy of post-colonial discourses is to multiply differentiations in order to prevent the formation of ideological stereotypes which, wherever originated, always serve the dominant powers. In such a way, métissage becomes the protest banner of the world’s underdogs, the password of an “activist” political philosophy which accuses and protests against the current situation of global inequality and continues, in a different form, the anti-colonial fights of the past³¹.

³⁰ SPIVAK, Gayatri C. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

³¹ YOUNG, Robert. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*.

Conclusion: the métissage in question

The difficulty of detaching the term métissage from its colonial and post-colonial ideological spin-offs, the biological connotation, still heavily felt despite the metaphorisation have led Jean-Loup Amselle, author of the famous *Logiques métisses*³², to abandon the term and opt for a metaphor that, according to him, is less laden with bad associations: instead of talking about métissage, we should talk about connections between cultures³³. Leaving aside the question of understanding whether the new term is really a better solution, it seems to me that Amselle's choice represents a symptom to be explored. What are the actual implications of the metaphor? Certainly, métissage describes a real and irreversible contamination situation. But it cannot be said that this is a necessary outcome of the contact between different cultures, an outcome liable to be anticipated and directed (what sense would a "policy of métissages" have?). Rather, this is a possible but contingent outcome (in the actual sense of *cum-tangere*, as Michel Serres explains: "there is contingency when two varieties touch each other"³⁴). In this sense, I do not believe that the aim is to view métissage as a static common denominator to outdetermine politically, but rather a dynamic plurality of points of contact between different cultures, between different experiences of good and evil. Such an interpretation of métissage comes close to the Gadamerian idea of the fusion of interpretative horizons. It is precisely in this sense that Michel De Certeau, at the beginning of the 'eighties, talked about "cultural métissage", defining it as "a free space of word and manifestation", not replaceable by the State, in which cultures represent themselves and offer themselves to each other [and] to knowledge³⁵.

If, then, métissage can be understood as one of the non-programmable outcomes of the historical dialectic between different narrative practices, then cultural métissage and even biological métissage do not appear incompatible with what Seyla Benhabib calls "democratic iterations"³⁶: a set of deliberative processes through which individual and collective identities make distinctions between citizens and foreigners, us and them, fluid and negotiable, continually re-discussing the principles of inclusion. Which, besides, re-enforces the fundamental idea that democracy always is *ad-venire*, as - today more than ever - it cannot

³² AMSELLE, Jean-Loup. *Logiques métisses*.

³³ *Idem*. *Branchements. Antropologie de l'universalité des cultures*.

³⁴ SERRES, Michel. *Hermès V. Le passage du Nord-Ouest*, p. 105.

³⁵ DE CERTEAU, Michel. *L'ordinaire de la communication*, p. 184.

³⁶ BENHABIB, Seyla. *The Rights of Others. Aliens, Residents and Citizens*.

yield to the utopia of an absolute transparency if it only wants to keep together, in an irresoluble tension, the rigour of form and the openness to welcome “unexpected guests”³⁷.

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³⁷ MARRAMAO, Giacomo, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

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Resumo

A categoria da miscigenação: o status questionis

A miscigenação sempre acompanhou a história humana, sendo ela um processo de encontro e fusão de diferentes culturas. Nesta história de misturas, há obviamente alguns momentos cruciais: o descobrimento do Novo Mundo e – de modo mais geral, a época do colonialismo é, sem dúvidas, emblemático. Ao invés de todos os delírios paranóicos de pureza, o fato da miscigenação demonstra que pessoas e culturas são original e intrinsecamente misturadas. Estamos então destinados a uma fusão anárquica das diferenças, a uma infinita multiplicidade de identidades? Como a miscigenação pode contribuir para uma convivência democrática?

Palavras-chave: *Miscigenação; Migrações; Interações democráticas*

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