

Globalization II

Dispute over the World: Discourses of the Tropics and the Tropes of the Discourses on World-wide Expansion

Worlds on This Side and That Side of the Tropic Circles

Over the course of the first phase of accelerated globalization, a new world had emerged between the tropic circles over the span of a few decades. In just a few years, the tropes of the early modern era had overgrown those notions from antiquity, (which certainly still exerted their influence in many myths) of tropical *anoekumene*. The “new” tropes of the early modern era are figures of movement that—closely tied to the cartographical registration of the globe—interweave climatological and geological, economic and agricultural, epidemiological and epistemological, sociological and mythological, philosophical and literary aspects in a dynamic way. The irreversibility of this process, that at this point in time was accelerating tremendously, is every bit as clear to us today as the double character of treasure and trap was to the people of that time.

Antoine-Joseph Pernety dealt with many aspects of this early-modern-era view of the tropics in his 1769 *Journal historique*, published in French in Berlin, and in which, as the title page proudly states, the “Membre de l’Académie Royale des Sciences & Belles-Lettres de Prusse” and “Bibliothécaire de Sa Majesté le Roy de Prusse” reports on his voyage as ship’s chaplain under the leadership of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville to the tropical coasts of what is today Brazil, the Falkland Islands, and to the southern point of the American continent.¹ In his *Journal*, Pernety describes over the course of almost twenty pages the crossing of the equator on November 10, 1763, and the scene that was observed in an identical or comparable form on all French, and indeed, all European vessels that passed over the equatorial line, the central region of the tropical belt. In these detailed passages from the *Journal historique*, the discourses of the tropics overlap with the tropes of discourses in a travel-literary place which, in European travel literature, demarcates the entrance into a “New World.”

¹ C.f. Antoine-Joseph Pernety: *Journal historique d’un Voyage aux Iles Malouïnes en 1763 & 1764, pour le reconnoiter & y former un établissement; et de deux Voyages au Détroit de Magellan, avec une Relation sur les Patagons*. 2 vols. Berlin: Etienne de Bourdeaux 1769.

Pernety's detailed depiction of the equatorial baptism, the "Baptême de la ligne,"² preserves in rich detail the ceremonial and ritualistic character of this scene. It began, the midday heat still blazing on the deck of the French ship, with the placing of a basin of seawater, a throne for the "Lord Governor of the Line" as well as seating for his "chancellor" and his "vicar," and a general muster of the entire crew and all passengers.³ The carnivalesque elements of the ceremony are obvious; the first to take to the stage—with the approval of Captain Bougainville, of course—is a painted sailor, seconded by six cabin boys and wrapped in a sheepskin. His costume and the transformation it completes are described in precise detail⁴ before the *Bon-homme de la Ligne* his gracious self, likewise clad in sheep skin and surrounded by his garish royal retinue, takes command of the vessel. The crossing of the equatorial line turns the hierarchy on its head; it produces, or stages, a *monde à l'envers* that seeks to connect, and seems to connect, the carnivalesque element to the idea of the antipodes—a world whose inhabitants stand on their heads, so to speak, and where the trees grow downward.

Though the intriguingly structured scene cannot be reproduced here in all detail, it still underscores that the staging of an opposite order that goes into effect for one day between the tropic circles introduces those turns and transformations which represent the tropics, as opposed to Europe, as an *other* world within the influence of the equatorial line. To what extent this other order is projected from a (for it) unavoidable patriarchal perspective on the "other" race may be proved by the following quotation of the captain's copious "promises":

Things being thus arranged, the vicar said to M. de Bougainville "In order to be accepted into the noble & mighty society of the Lord Governor of the Line, it is first necessary to commit to certain duties which you must promise to take upon yourself. The aims of these duties are in all cases reasonable." "Very well," responded M. de Bougainville. "Do you then promise," asked the vicar, "to be a good citizen, & that to this end you will work for the sake of population & thus not leave the girls alone, should a felicitous opportunity toward this work present itself?" "I do promise it."⁵

The series of promises, concluded with an oath and a ritualized scene of baptism in which there is always, from the Christian perspective, the symbolism of another life, opens a succession of further festivities, a vital part of which are

² Ibid. vol. I, p. 95.

³ Ibid. p. 96

⁴ Ibid. p. 98 f.

⁵ Ibid. p. 107 f.

two paradisiacal *Demoiselles Acadiennes*⁶ and all manner of whimsical games, which are played out one after another on Bougainville's frigate, under the command of the *Bon-homme de la Ligne*. They are such scenes as are still played out, in either the same or comparable form, on European ships today—even on those British warships that took part in the absurd war for the Malvinas, or Falkland Islands, in 1982.

On *her* way to the Malouines (as they are named in French for St. Malo), between the Cape Verdes and the Brazilian coast, the frigate thus not only crossed the equator, but symbolically entered with her passengers and crew into a different world, into a new life. Granted, in the context to be discussed here, the fact that the forms of the baptism differ from nation to nation and even from ship to ship is not of decisive importance; much more crucial is the fact that this *baptême* is always carried out on board and represents a certified right of the crew.⁷ At this beginning of a *Vita Nova*, the baptism is not tied above all to the crossing of the equator but to the entrance into the zone of the tropics, as Pernety conclusively explains in the account of his travels:

If the ship in its course does not cross the equator, but only the tropic circle (*tropique*), then those crewmembers who have crossed it and do not wish to lose their right to receive the payment of tribute have devised the means of designating the line of the tropic as the *eldest son of the Bon-homme de la Ligne and the presumptive heir of the rights he possesses*. And so, upon crossing the tropical line, they stage the same farce as do the others at the equator.⁸

The fact that this scene was indeed subsequently carried over to other “borderlines” and—as the ritual “polar baptism” on board the German research vessel *Polarstern* can show us even now—is also celebrated in our day on board many research vessels in no way diminishes the symbolic meaning of the movement figure of the tropics, which becomes recognizable by means of these *rites de passage*. Indeed, this illustrates even more that the *tropiques* are still configured as a migratory space that can be formed either through tropisms (*tropismes*), through small, virtually unnoticeable movements of border-shifting, or through actual leaps. At least from the European perspective, the tropics cannot really be imagined without the tropes of transformation, of metamorphosis, of the entrance into the laws of a different world—regardless of whether these are in the guise of metonymy or metaphor, of synecdoche or of irony.

⁶ Ibid. p. 109.

⁷ Ibid. p. 111.

⁸ Ibid. p. 112.