

# The Indebted Creditors: Colonialism, Underdevelopment and the Invaluable Value of the Historic Debt

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**Abstract:** This paper examines four different approaches to the historic debt that developed countries owe to underdeveloped countries. It is shown how this debt has been disregarded by the cultural explanations of underdevelopment; how it was explained and condemned by Andre Gunder Frank, Ruy Mauro Marini, Theotonio dos Santos and other exponents of dependency theory; how it has been negated by the right-wing French intellectuals Max Gallo, Daniel Lefeuvre and Pascal Bruckner; and how it can still be recognized and problematized following Jacques Lacan's ideas. The Lacanian theory, together with Alain Badiou's critique of Sarkozism, is also used to criticize the denial of the debt by Gallo, Lefeuvre and Bruckner.

**Keywords:** Historic debt, underdevelopment, colonialism, capitalism, Sarkozism, dependency theory, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou.

There exist at least four different attitudes regarding the historic debt of developed countries vis-à-vis underdeveloped countries that were previously colonies. This debt can be overlooked, denounced, negated or problematized. Its problematization, which presupposes its recognition, will be the final outcome of this paper.

What will be problematized here is not the unquestionable actuality of the historic debt, but its usual conceptions, its consequences and the ways in which its debtors and creditors may address it. We will discuss, following Jacques Lacan, why ex-colonial powers forget the debt while the former colonies assume it and tend to pay again and again what they have lost. The historic debt, understood as a symbolic debt, thus proves problematic as it reverses the positions of the debtors and the creditors.

Before problematizing the historic debt, we will examine: firstly, how the debt is overlooked in the cultural explanations of underdevelopment; secondly, how it was denounced by Andre Gunder Frank, Ruy Mauro Marini, Theotonio dos Santos and other exponents of dependency theory; and thirdly, how it has been negated by Max Gallo, Daniel Lefevre and Pascal Bruckner. The discursive resources used by these three right-wing French intellectuals, as well as their shared ideological perspective, will be criticized through the Lacanian theory of discourse and Alain Badiou's account of Sarkozism.

## **Explaining Underdevelopment: The Cultural Hypothesis**

It seems that there are currently at least two kinds of countries that were historically European colonies. The "white" nations, like the United States and Australia, tended to exclude miscegenation, were mainly constituted through settler colonialism, replaced indigenous cultures and populations with Western ones and, finally, became what could be described as prolongations of Europe outside Europe.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, the "non-white" African, Asian and Latin-American countries were formed mainly through exploitation colonialism, did not necessarily exclude miscegenation and featured constitutions that entailed not always replacements of indigenous cultures and populations, but, rather, characterized by either their external utilization, as in Africa, or their internal fusion or composition with the cultures and populations from Europe, as in Latin-America.<sup>2</sup>

These two kinds of former European colonies have had opposite destinies. While the white nations have become part of the first world, the non-white ones tend to still be developing or are underdeveloped. How can these diverging paths be explained?

The easiest explanation, which is not, indeed, an explanation, presumes a

developmental incapacity intrinsic to certain cultures. This cultural hypothesis can take Eurocentric, discriminatory and even racist forms when it assumes, from a typical, modern point of view, that economic development is the higher accomplishment of culture or, at least, something that is essentially positive or desirable for itself.<sup>3</sup> However, according to other forms of the cultural hypothesis, which can be found in postmodern perspectives ranging from the degrowth and post-development approaches to radical environmentalism and the anti-globalization movement, the same economic development can also be questioned and even deplored as a cultural disease, perversion or aberration. Such approaches suggest that developed white countries should cure themselves, turn back and rectify their destructive choices, sometimes by learning from the non-white wisdom of underdeveloped countries.<sup>4</sup>

In both modern and postmodern interpretations, the cultural hypothesis usually underestimates the historical origin of the differentiation between developed and underdeveloped nations. This differentiation is historically explained, not at the level of the real economic separation between poor and rich countries, but, rather, at the level at which the given real separation is either supposedly created by culture<sup>5</sup> or expressed in the ideological terms of development.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, especially in the postmodern interpretation of the cultural hypothesis, underdevelopment is often conceived via the romanticized modalities of simplicity, rurality, closeness to nature and harmony with the environment. However, as we know, these modalities are either disappearing or becoming negligible or marginal in the industrialized or developing underdeveloped world, while they are expanding in some developed countries due to deindustrialization and such postmodern movements as ecovillages and back-to-the-land.

It is as if many developed regions of the first world are voluntarily renouncing development and opting, instead, for underdevelopment, without impoverishing themselves or renouncing the fruits of development. Parallel to this, rather than simplicity or closeness to nature, the underdevelopment of the third world, as paradoxical as it may seem, increasingly involves development and its most negative effects: the destruction of nature, deforestation, pollution, industrialization, overpopulation, mountains of garbage, urban overcrowding and massive chemical intoxication. The former pathological privileges of the first world, such as high rates of cancer, obesity, stress and suicide, are now spreading throughout the third world, but without supplanting the evils of underdevelopment, such as diseases of poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, high infant mortality and low life expectancy.

It might be said that the underdeveloped countries are not, indeed, truly underdeveloped. Or, rather, their underdevelopment may be said to

be a combination of development and underdevelopment: of the worst shortcomings of underdevelopment and the worst excesses of development. Given this understanding, how can we still cling to the cultural hypothesis of a developmental incapacity of underdeveloped countries?

## **Dependency Theories: Causal Connection between Colonialism and Underdevelopment**

There is an accumulation of old and new evils in those underdeveloped non-white countries that were historically colonies. The question remains: How can we explain such evils and the condition of underdevelopment itself? However, the answer is difficult to identify, as it must give an explanation without overlooking history, without recourse to the easy cultural hypothesis, without falling into the modern inferiorization or the postmodern idealization of underdeveloped countries. The explanation must not assume, in other words, the existence of a regrettable or enviable developmental incapacity intrinsic to the culture of non-white ex-colonies.

Now, if we discard the cultural hypothesis, how can we explain the historical underdevelopment of the African, Asian and Latin-American countries that suffered exploitation colonialism in the past? The answer to this question seems to be included in the question itself: If colonially exploited countries became underdeveloped countries, it is certainly because exploitation colonialism produced their current underdevelopment. It cannot simply be a coincidence that most underdeveloped countries—in fact, practically all of them—were previously exploited colonies.

The causal connection between exploitation colonialism and underdevelopment has been especially emphasized by the proponents of the dependency theory. The American Marxist Paul A. Baran was one of the first to show how underdevelopment originated from the colonial imperialist global expansion of capitalism and its systematic export of economic surplus from the backward to the advanced countries.<sup>7</sup> The underdeveloped condition of former colonies revealed, for Baran, that “the capitalist system, once a mighty engine of economic development, has turned into a no less formidable hurdle to human advancement”.<sup>8</sup>

Baran’s idea contradicts the simplistic view relating capitalism with development and explaining underdevelopment by the insufficient assimilation of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> Far from being isolated from capital, underdeveloped countries, as demonstrated in Baran’s work, are well integrated into the global capitalist system: They are parts of this system and, indeed, of capitalism itself, which produces both their underdevelopment and the development of other nations.

Actually, from Baran's point of view, there is a systemic relationship between developed and underdeveloped countries. Their economic situation is only an effect of their position and function in the capitalist system. It is this system which impoverishes the ex-colonies and enriches the former colonial powers. Baran shows how development and underdevelopment are the front and back of the same functioning of capitalism. This perspective was well put by one of the most important representatives of the dependency theory: Andre Gunder Frank, who said that "underdevelopment has been and still is generated by the very same historical process that also generated economic development: the development of capitalism itself".<sup>10</sup> This process, as conceived by Frank, is organized by the "colonial structure" of "metropolis-satellite relations".<sup>11</sup> Colonialism is inseparable from capitalism. In Frank's description of the capitalist system, the underdeveloped countries are still, in a way, colonies of the developed nations.

The colonial condition of underdeveloped countries is questioned by other exponents of dependency theory. This is the case of Ruy Mauro Marini and Theotonio Dos Santos. Although conceding that underdevelopment has its origins in colonialism, Marini insists that "the colonial situation is not the same as the dependent situation" of contemporary underdeveloped countries.<sup>12</sup> There is, thus, "continuity" without "homogeneity" between the two situations.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Dos Santos differentiates between old colonialism and current dependency. He also deepens the idea that the former is a determinant for the latter. In his own words: "traces of the colonial regime give the parameters of 'liberated' Latin America", not only because "an important part of our surplus is stolen", but "mainly for the reason that our economic-social structures were dependent, and the basis of these structures were not transformed by the liberating revolutions, dominated as they were by the oligarchy".<sup>14</sup> It is, therefore, as if independence never took place.

Taking ideas from Latin American dependency theorists, the Guyanese Marxist Walter Rodney, in his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, showed how Africa has been exploited, impoverished and, thus, mired in underdevelopment by European imperialism.<sup>15</sup> This provocative book became extremely influential in Africa, Europe and North America during the 1970s. Meanwhile, in Latin America, dependency theory acquired such influence that it shaped the economic policies of several progressive governments, such as those of Juan Velasco in Peru and Salvador Allende in Chile. It is difficult to assess how successful these policies were, as their implementing governments were interrupted too soon by the intervention of national oligarchies, often supported by transnational companies and the United States government.

Both Velasco and Allende were overthrown by military coups. These

coups, like others during the same period in Latin America, paved the way to neoliberalism and prevented the implementation of any economic policy inspired by the dependency theory. The theory was also repressed in the academic field. Its teaching was forbidden, and its leading exponents were exiled. Following the military coup against Allende in 1973, for instance, the three authors quoted before—Andre Gunder Frank, Ruy Mauro Marini and Theotonio Dos Santos—were exiled from Chile: Frank returned to Europe, while Marini and Dos Santos went to Mexico. A few years later, in 1980, Walter Rodney was killed by a bomb in his car. These events marked the end of the heyday of the dependency theory. It can, thus, be said that the theory was refuted by military coups, by shots and bombs, by prohibitions and by forced exiles, and not by good reasons—at least, not in the theoretical field.

### **Guaicaipuro Cuauhtémoc: The Historic Debt of the Former Colonial Powers**

Regardless of their differences, all advocates of the dependency theory agree, either explicitly or implicitly, that underdevelopment is a historic result of exploitation colonialism. They all consider that the colonial exploitative structures of capitalism continue to empower and enrich the former colonial countries at the cost of subduing and impoverishing the ex-colonies and, thus, generating the evils associated with the dependent and underdeveloped condition, including poverty, subordination, hunger, enslavement, low life expectancy and a lack of sovereignty. Such miseries are the price of the prosperities of the developed countries. Wealth is, again, the result of exploitation.

The ex-colonies, according to dependency theory and similar approaches, are still paying, with their misfortunes, for the fortune of the developed countries. Now, if this is so, perhaps, then, the First World, which still benefits from colonialism, is, in a way, *historically indebted* to the Third World, which is still devastated by the same colonialism. There must be, in other words, a *historic debt* of Western civilization, including its “white” prolongations outside Europe, vis-à-vis those cultures and peoples that have suffered and still suffer external control over their resources and markets, as well as slavery, exploitation, pillaging, inferiorization and impoverishment. These injustices have never been fully compensated; the debt is still valid.

In general, according to the hypothesis of the historic debt, this debt is, in fact, owed and still valid because Western civilization has never paid back the wealth stolen from its colonies: the wealth on which it built its own prosperity. Moreover, the historic debt continues to grow because of unfair trade and

other indebteding processes inherent to the exploitative structures of the global economic system inherited from colonial times. One of these processes is the overuse of planetary resources by developed countries, which leads to the exhaustion of these resources, pollution, drought, environmental degradation, climate change and other negative effects, which are suffered not only by the beneficiaries of development, but also by underdeveloped countries. Once again, the price of development is, paradoxically, paid by underdeveloped countries. Today, as in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, these countries continue to pay the accounts of Europe and its tentacles. The historic debt continues to grow.

This idea of the *historic debt*, which is widespread in Latin America, was brilliantly summarized by the Venezuelan writer Luis Britto García through a humorous text that stages an imaginary discourse through the fictional indigenous character Guaicaipuro Cuauhtémoc. Recalling that, between 1503 and 1660 alone, 185 thousand kilos of gold and 16 million kilos of silver arrived from America to the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda in Spain, Guaicaipuro discards the idea that the taking of this gold was a looting, as “that would drive to think that our Christian brothers broke their Seventh Commandment”, and concludes that it was “the first of several American friendly credits” for the “development” and “reconstruction” of “the barbaric Europe, ruined by its deplorable wars”.<sup>16</sup> In other words, if they do not wish to be robbers, Europeans must resign themselves to be debtors. Their acceptance of exoneration from the charge of robbery forces them to admit their historic debt to their ex-colonies in Latin America.

The recognition of the historic debt is posited by Guaicaipuro as the only means for retroactively suppressing the past crimes of Europe. If the apparent looting was, in reality, a loan, then Europe is not guilty; however, it must pay the loan. Assuming that Europe is willing to pay the price of its innocence, is it able to do so? Is it wealthy enough? What happened to all of the wealth Europe obtained from its colonies?

The Europeans, according to Guaicaipuro, did not make “a rational, responsible or at least productive use of the resources so generously advanced by the International Indo-American Fund”; instead, they “squandered those resources in Lepanto battles, in invincible armies, in third Reichs and other forms of mutual extermination”, and they have been incapable, “after a moratorium of 500 years”, of “either reimbursing the principal capital and its interest, or getting the independence from the net revenues, raw materials and cheap energy supplied to them from the Third World”.<sup>17</sup> All this, combined with Milton Friedman’s thesis that “a subsidized economy can never work well”, leads Guaicaipuro to decide that Latin America must claim the payment of the debt, not charging “our European brothers the vile and bloodthirsty interest rates of

20 to 30 percent that they charge to Third World peoples”, but demanding only “the return of the precious metals advanced, plus a modest fixed 10 percent, accumulated only during the last 300 years, with 200 years of grace”.<sup>18</sup> On this basis, speaking on behalf of the people of Latin America, Guaicaipuro demands “the signing of a Letter of Intent to discipline the debtors of the Old World” and enforce them to “fulfil their commitment by an early privatization or restructuring of Europe, allowing them to give the whole of it to us, as the first historical debt payment”.<sup>19</sup>

Guaicaipuro’s conclusion is far-reaching: *Europe is worth less than its historic debt*. Notably, this conclusion comprises only the gold and silver transferred from Latin America to Europe between 1503 and 1660. Guaicaipuro’s estimation of Europe’s debt does not include the gold and silver transferred between 1601 and 1820, nor does it comprise the other treasures stolen from the New World from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Britto García’s short story also excludes debts owed due to new forms of colonialism and dependency: unfair trade, inherited colonial structures and the wealth transferred since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, it excludes the ecological debt and other phenomena that should be subsumed under a broad notion of historic debt. It is impossible, of course, to give an accurate estimation of this debt, when all its implications and consequences are considered. We can only recognize the existence of a debt: an incalculable, inconceivable, unpayable debt, but a debt nonetheless.

### **French Negationism in 2006: Gallo, Lefevre, Bruckner and their Negation of the Historic Debt**

Instead of being recognized, the historic debt has often been denied by its debtors, especially in right-wing circles. Three examples of such denials can be found in France during the year 2006, when three books were published that condemned the bad conscience for both the colonial past and the present prosperity of France and the Western world. The books’ titles are eloquent and revealing: *Proud of Being French* [*Fier d’être français*], by Max Gallo; *To Put an End to Colonial Repentance* [*Pour en finir avec la repentance coloniale*], by Daniel Lefevre; and *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism* [*La tyrannie de la pénitence. Essai sur le masochisme occidental*], by Pascal Bruckner.

There is no place here to discuss these three books in detail; however, a few points must be mentioned. It must first be stressed that the three books are rather conformist and reactionary, tend to defend the current state of global affairs, revalue Western civilization, react against its critical self-examination, reject any feeling of guilt or shame among the people of Europe or France,

endorse a revision of the past and share an implicit or explicit negationist approach to the historic debt. However, this negationism takes a completely different form in each book: Specifically, there are significant differences between Gallo's *unsophisticated cynicism*, Lefevre's *biased economism* and Bruckner's *tricky psychologism*.

The simplest negationism is that of Gallo. His book is nothing more than a tantrum of a spoiled French patriot who cannot accept the vanishing of his nation's glory. With the loss of its celebrated colonial empire, France has fallen, according to Gallo, into a state of self-abasement and self-humiliation. The nation is so disheartened and depressed that it is not even able to protect itself from looming dangers, especially its "disintegration", its "balkanization" and its "destruction".<sup>20</sup> The only way for France to defend against such dangers, the only "remedy for the evils suffered by the nation", resides in the "preservation of the French identity", the "love for the nation", and the "pride rendered to the word *France*". These all require, as a *sine qua non*, one "to be proud" of French history, including, of course, colonialism.<sup>21</sup> Gallo becomes offensively cynical when he lets us see his pride for colonialism and explains how France's modern cultural "crisis" stems from the way the "colonial Empire broke up with humiliation" and "with the abandonment of our people, the Harkis and the Pieds-Noirs".<sup>22</sup> In other words, the only problem of colonialism—the reason colonialism caused the French cultural crisis—is the end of colonialism. The problem is not, of course, colonialism itself. There is nothing essentially problematic in the glorious *French Empire* (with capitals), in its bloody colonial wars or its in its brutal oppression, its pitiless exploitation or the resulting cultural erosion and social collapse of the countries of Africa and Asia. These crimes are things of which the French people should be proud, and their pride should exclude any feeling of debt. The French people have no reason to feel indebted, since everything in their history is wonderful and since they receive only the glory and the wealth that they deserve for their great merits and efforts. This is precisely why the French should be proud of being French!

This pride evaporates in the second negationism: that of Lefevre, who seems to be rather ashamed of colonialism. However, his shame is not for all the evil done to the colonies, but for the evil that France has foolishly done to itself through colonialism. The colonial adventure, as described by Lefevre, was shameful because it was too expensive, unprofitable, unsuccessful, non-paying and even loss-making. His main point is that there was no looting. This looting, the basis for the "colonial repentance", is founded only, according to Lefevre, on an "artificial memory".<sup>23</sup> The numbers are clear. For instance, colonial products were bought at a fair price and even above market price,<sup>24</sup> the accounts of the colonies were generally "in the red", and the "commercial balance with

the colonies was in surplus only one of every three years”.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, since 1952, the year of the approval of the Labour Code, the colonies became very expensive due to the social contributions of the metropole.<sup>26</sup> The problem with all of these data, as was brilliantly demonstrated by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, lies in its one-sided oversimplification, its tendentious selection and interpretation, and its unfair and abusive generalization of what happened in the last years of colonialism in Algeria.<sup>27</sup> However, even if the estimations were not arbitrary and biased, the problem of the reduction of the colonial question to quantitative economic data would remain. In other words, the problem of Lefeuve’s *biased economism* is its economism and not only its biased character. By considering only economic data and sidestepping the personal, social, cultural and ecological effects of colonialism, it is difficult to both understand the meaning and assess the weight of the historic debt. In fact, once the perspective of economism is adopted, we need only a dose of partiality and bad faith to turn everything upside down and persuade naïve readers, including far-right nationalists, racists and xenophobes, that the only historic debt is that which all former French colonies owe to their generous and even prodigal metropole!

The third negationism, lauded by Bruckner, chooses to ignore the past and concentrate on the psychological dimension of the present. What matters to Bruckner is the sensation of guilt, the need of penitence and the feeling of being indebted, rather than the debt itself. In a tricky psychologism, the historic debt evaporates and becomes a psychological debt, an imaginary debt, and an unreal debt. It is nothing but a state of mind. Its causes are not economic and historical, but mental, spiritual and emotional. They are found in the soul of Europe: its inner world, as it appears inside each European citizen. Therefore, they and the psychological debt they imply are not the business of non-Europeans; they concern only Europe and its relation with itself. In fact, as conceived by Bruckner, Europe not only relates to itself, but is also reduced to this reflexive ideal relation. At the height of this idealism and solipsism, “Europe is the critical thought”, the “self-reflexion” that abolishes all idols, traditions and authorities.<sup>28</sup> It is as if the rest of the world, including, especially, the former colonies, as the Hegelian slave, were only conscious mediations in the self-consciousness of the European master. Furthermore, this self-reflection, this “self-examination”, has become the condition for “the survival of humanity”, and, so, is the “best gift that Europe could give to the world”.<sup>29</sup> Only Europe can save humanity! Yet, for this to be possible, Europe must recover its “universalism” and its “civilizational capacities”, instead of plunging into “guilt”, which is “the alibi” of its “abdication”.<sup>30</sup> Thus, according to Bruckner, Europe is too depressed and too tired to continue to guide and colonize the rest of the world, and *this* is why it has given up its mission, justifying the renunciation through self-critique

and such ideas as the historic debt. The evils of colonialism and the resulting debt are only European excuses to not act in a colonial way to save humanity. Bruckner appears to forget that humanity is endangered precisely by the Western world, the European civilization, its colonial-imperialist globalization and, specifically, the global imposition of its models of society, economic development and relation with the natural environment. All this is irrelevant for Bruckner. He is interested only in history as a mental notion. The only world, for him, is the European inner world; there is nothing outside. The rest of the world is just a conceptualization of Europe!

### **Division of Labour and Construction of the Wall: The Discourses of Negationism and their Ideological Perspectives**

It is difficult to believe that Bruckner, Lefevre and Gallo were leftist in their youth; yet, it is true. Gallo and Lefevre were both communists, members of the French Communist Party (PCF), while Bruckner was close to left libertarian movements, Maoist groups and the Unified Socialist Party (PSU). When the wind of history changed direction, the three changed their minds. Either involuntarily, like Lefevre, or voluntarily, like Gallo and Bruckner, all became organic intellectuals of the sordid French New Right.

Bruckner, Lefevre and Gallo serve the same groups, the same class and the same State. They share the same ideological perspective and the same negationism regarding the historic debts of Europe and France. This is, perhaps, why their discourses give the impression of being internally connected. Actually, though the discourses are completely different, they are also perfectly complementary. French people can be proud (Gallo) of both their generosity toward their former colonies (Lefevre) and their unique European capacity for self-reflection and self-examination (Bruckner). Unfortunately, this capacity may lead to an excessive, pathological, masochist self-critique (Bruckner), involving a feeling of shame, an unjustified repentance (Bruckner), a sense of indignity and a dangerous crisis of identity (Gallo). Now, Europe and France must learn to love what they are (Gallo), their colonial past (Lefevre) and their unique mental and reflexive aptitudes (Bruckner). This will allow them to continue their colonial adventure of civilizing the world (Bruckner), as they have done in the past (Lefevre), during the glorious history of the Empire (Gallo). Here, the past is not a source of regret. It is not the origin of an unpayable historic debt. This debt simply does not exist. It literally has no place, whether in the absolute pride of Gallo's unsophisticated cynicism, in the mean accounts of Lefevre's biased economism or in the inner world of Bruckner's tricky psychologism.

The complementarities among the discourses of Bruckner, Lefevre and

Gallo reveal the system that structures their shared ideological perspective. This system appears to organize the internal connections that underlie the complementarities. Therefore, the three complementary discourses are not independent, despite achieving separate tasks within their ideological system. Their separation and division of labour allow for the complex operation of a system whose different discursive operations, both separate and interdependent, may be illuminatingly described in the terms of the theory of discourse developed by Jacques Lacan between 1969 and 1970.<sup>31</sup>

The system requires the signifier of the French or European identity (S1) to be enthroned and proudly flaunted by the authoritarian discourse of the master (Gallo), but also covertly or surreptitiously obeyed by an allegedly neutral and objective university discourse (Lefevre) and intimately recognized, addressed, interrogated and encouraged through the questioning inherent in the discourse of the hysteric (Bruckner). Meanwhile, the knowledge of what it means to be French or European (S2) is negatively produced by elimination in the hysterical self-reflection (Bruckner), sanctioned and overtly displayed by scientific manipulation (Lefevre) and exploited by the prejudiced mastery (Gallo). This convinced mastery of the French or European identity (Gallo) masks the same division and uncertainty of the subject (\$) that is both provoked and excluded as something inassimilable to the discourse of historic science (Lefevre), as well as revalued, raised and foregrounded as the unique hysterical identity of Europeans, with their privilege of critical thought, self-examination and self-reflection (Bruckner). The self-reflexive turn, however, fails to reveal its own truth: the object of the historic debt (*a*), which cannot be apprehended by any kind of self-consciousness, especially when this self-consciousness becomes Bruckner's tricky psychologism based on the mirroring omission of the radical exteriority of its debt. It goes without saying that the same object of the historic debt cannot be either eliminated due to being despised and rejected by Gallo's unsophisticated cynicism or seized and exhausted through the calculations of quantitative knowledge in Lefevre's biased economism.

The three discourses of Gallo, Lefevre and Bruckner maintain the same ideological perspective and the same negationism with respect to three different societal fronts. Many of the simplest and naivest patriots of the traditional popular classes will submit themselves to Gallo's irrational chauvinistic discourse, while the rationalist version of nationalism, as found in Lefevre's discourse, will likely make more sense to and be more convincing for the modern, well-educated middle classes. At the same time, perhaps, disenchanted middle and upper classes, as well as younger and trendier individuals, will prefer the cool postmodern Europeanism found in Bruckner's hysterical discourse. Thus, different social groups are addressed by dissimilar kinds of renegade leftists with

distinct discursive devices appropriate for encouraging each group to adopt the same ideological perspective.

In addition to sharing both the enunciation position of renegade leftists and the rightist ideological perspective, with its negation of the historic debt, the discourses of Bruckner, Lefeuve and Gallo also share a historic moment in France: that of 2006, characterized by the rise of the right-wing politician Nicolas Sarkozy, who was Minister of the Interior in 2006 and became president of France in 2007. Here, the important thing, of course, is not Sarkozy himself, but what his name stands for. This point was well elucidated by Alain Badiou in a book exploring the different aspects of Sarkozism, including its ideological perspective, which is also that of Bruckner, Lefeuve and Gallo. This perspective is, in fact, one of the best expressions of the “unclean thing of which the little Sarkozy is the servant”.<sup>32</sup>

Badiou calls Sarkozy the “Rat Man”, referring not only to Freud’s case of obsessional neurosis, but also to such renegade leftists as Bruckner, Lefeuve and Gallo, who are metaphorically characterized as rats leaving the sinking ship of socialism and communism, “deserters of the left who run towards Sarkozism”, who “rush towards the existing duration” instead of “creating another duration”.<sup>33</sup> In actuality, these rats, like their rat man, respond to the “historic nostalgia”, the “nostalgic element” of the “depressive” feelings regarding the current “insignificance” of France and the end of the “old world”, as well as the loss of hope in a “glorious” future and the resulting “conservative and crepuscular fear” of those “dominators and privileged” individuals whose domination is “wavering” and whose privileges are “relative and threatened”.<sup>34</sup>

The fear focuses on the “traditional scapegoats: foreigners, poor people, distant countries we don’t want to look like”.<sup>35</sup> The result is the elevation of a wall between “the capitalist North and the devastated South”, between the “enjoyment [*jouissance*] of the rich and the desire of the poor”, and between “the world” and “the other world”.<sup>36</sup> The justifications for this wall derive from the same ideological perspective as that of Bruckner, Lefeuve and Gallo: There is no historic debt, the poverty of people in the other world is “their fault”, and France “does not need to receive lessons from anyone”, since everything it did “was always good”.<sup>37</sup>

## **Behind the Wall: The Exteriority of the Unconscious and the Object of the Historic Debt**

Is there not something suspect in the justifications for the wall? Why should there be a need for such a wall if everything France did was always good? In fact, has its building of such a wall also been good? Is it good to consider

poverty the fault of the poor and to confine it behind a barrier? Is this the kind of good thing we are discussing?

Even without calling into question the definition of what is good, is it even possible for all French deeds to have always been good? Is it possible for a nation to be so perfect? If this is the case, then it is understandable that such a nation does not need to receive lessons from anyone; however, why, then, are there lessons? Why are they described as “lessons” precisely by those who do not need to receive lessons from anyone? And why are these same individuals—the rat man and the rats—so concerned and irritated by both the lessons and the poverty of the poor? Why are the poor and the lesson-givers so impetuously rejected?

It is as if something related to the poverty of the poor and the lessons of the other is intolerable, insufferable and perhaps unbearable, and that it should remain, for that very reason, inaudible and invisible, out of sight and *behind the wall*. It is as if the wall is used to protect not only the First World’s booty against the Third World’s hunger, but also the First World’s consciousness against a kind of bad conscience: a more distressing interpretation of the always good deeds, the notion of the historic debt and other ideas related to the meaning of poverty and the content of the other’s lessons. These ideas are not alien to us, of course. They are understandable, thinkable and even though in our developed and globalised world. They are *our* ideas. If they were not our ideas, perhaps we would not need to protect ourselves against them; they would be unintelligible, and perhaps would not even be “ideas” in the proper sense of the term. However, they are, in fact, ours; they are in our minds and they are “ideas”. This is, perhaps, why we cannot suffer them.

Our insufferable ideas, the insistent thoughts of our bad conscience, can be retained behind the wall, but they remain ours. They are on the other side of the wall that divides not only our globalized world, but also our minds. Our thinking has always existed beyond borders that cannot always be crossed by illegal migrants. While other people stay beyond the wall, our ideas, like our commodities, cannot stop circulating. They are thought everywhere around the world. This reality is also a result of colonialism: Our thoughts are everywhere in the exteriority of the unconscious and are not only here in our consciousness. Our ideas can be found on both sides of the wall; yet, as suggested before, sometimes, the other side’s ideas are there and not here because they remind us of our historic debt. If we believe the aforementioned story by Luis Britto García, this debt cannot easily be recognized, as it is greater than the value of *everything, our world, our globalized European civilization*.

How can we think of something that is more significant than anything and everything we could think of? The whole cannot effortlessly embrace a part that

is greater or, rather, heavier or weightier. This was well reflected by Lacan in his 10<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> seminars, during which he addressed the question of the relationship between the symbolic universe and its impossible remainder, between language and the rest of the real and between “the Other” and “the objet (petit) *a*”.<sup>38</sup> This object, which allowed Lacan to represent the real price of the symbolic debt of language, may now help us conceive of the value of the historic debt of our Western civilization by referring to something elusive that cannot be either expressed by language or exhausted by calculation and, thus, can only be surrounded and obliquely designated through such allusive discourses as Britto García’s story.

The story of Guaicaipuro and the theories of dependence suggest only the existence of something that must be considered, in Lacanian terms, as symbolic as real: something radically unsymbolizable, of course, but also continuously symbolized by fictional or theoretical discourses. Perhaps this double real/symbolic nature is precisely why the *invaluable value* of the historic debt is an object so emphatically affirmed by Paul A. Baran, Andre Gunder Frank, Ruy Mauro Marini and Theotonio dos Santos, and, at the same time, so completely ignored or categorically negated by Max Gallo, Daniel Lefevre and Pascal Bruckner. In both cases, the object seems to both escape and insist. Again and again, it is enunciated without being enunciated. It “does not stop not being written”.<sup>39</sup> It is incessantly calculated, quantified and expressed as a surplus-value, but is also intrinsically incalculable, unquantifiable, inexpressible and, therefore, unpayable, thus corresponding to what Lacan designates as surplus-enjoyment, or *plus-de-jouir*.

### **The Privilege of the Poor: The Creditors becoming the Debtors**

The object of the historic debt cannot be paid because it cannot be calculated or valued. This is, in part, because its value belongs to another civilization and cannot be translated or recognized by the Western symbolic system of values. Our colonial system cannot know what has been lost because of colonization. The object in question may be precisely defined as something that became *real*, inaccessible and impossible, when it was lost due to the symbolic process of colonization. This definition is perfectly consistent with the Lacanian conceptualization of the object of the symbolic debt: that is, the objet (petit) *a* as something real that has been lost due to symbolization. In reality, just like the object of the symbolic debt in Lacan, the object of the historic debt has been lost not by the creditor, but, rather, by the one who, paradoxically, became a debtor for the very fact of losing the object.

Colonization transforms creditors into debtors not only through external

economic debt, but also through their transformation into citizens of the indebted Western world. In other words, many colonized people have turned into Westerners and, thus, debtors of everything they have lost as a result of colonization. Or, rather, they have been historically indebted by via signifiers imposed at the expense of the object of historic debt.

People from the former colonies lose their culture and now must pay for it. This could justify even the cultural hypothesis concerning underdevelopment: Developmental incapacity might stem from a continuous payment of what has been lost. It might reflect the self-punishment of a victim who cannot stop self-victimizing. It might also be a way of sacrificing oneself for having self-sacrificed. It produces, as in the Lacanian account of the symbolic debt and its neurotic ceremonious disbursement, “an always renewed payment, an insatiable barrel of the Danaids, something that is never equalled”.<sup>40</sup> Thus, like the Freudian Super-Ego, which demands more the more it receives, the historic debt is greater the more it is recognized and paid.

Thanks to their closeness to what has been lost, former colonies tend to recognize the historic debt more easily than people from former colonial powers. Furthermore, given their closeness to the destroyed cultures and their exterior or peripheral situation in the symbolic system of Western civilization, former colonies are usually conceived of by Europeans as either monopolizing the object of the debt or as being responsible for the historic debt and the loss of the object. Lacan brilliantly exposed all of this when he showed how “the Westerners” see other people as “heartless” and guilty of the symbolic “debt” of language.<sup>41</sup>

It seems that the symbolic debt of language cannot express itself as the historic debt of Western civilization without indebting the victims of this civilization. Such was the case of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany. Such is also the case of Palestinians in Israel, of Africans in Europe and of Mexicans and Central-Americans in United States.

All people behind the wall are deemed guilty for the wall, for being on the other side of the wall, for their exclusion, their exploitation, their dependency, their colonization and their underdevelopment. They are also accused of everything that happens in the developed countries. The problems with the symbolic are logically attributed to what is perceived as the real. This is why, according to Donald Trump, Mexicans must build the wall: They must pay, he argues, everything the United States has stolen from them through the unfair trade and the exploitation of their labour force. This logic can also be unravelled in the negationist discourse of Lefeuve, who assumed that French former colonies should be grateful and indebted for everything they lost to France. In addition to turning creditors into debtors, the historic debt ironically turns

the symbolic system of our Western civilization—the debtor—into the creditor of peoples and cultures it has impoverished. Likewise, for Lacan, the “debt of language” produces a situation in which “something must be paid” to the Other that “has introduced its sign”.<sup>42</sup> The Other, or the debtor, then becomes the creditor.

We let ourselves be exploited by the Other of language, capitalism and Western civilization because we must pay everything that the Other owes us. It is in this way that development and underdevelopment are mutually dependent. Lacan is well aware of this when he establishes that “underdevelopment is precisely the condition of capitalist progress” and is, by the same token, “produced, as everybody knows, by the expansion of the capitalist realm”.<sup>43</sup> Lacan ultimately reaches the conclusion of dependency theory. For him, as for the authors quoted in the beginning, underdevelopment is inseparable from development. It is produced, rather than solved, by development. However, Lacan suggests a positive revaluation of underdevelopment. The underdeveloped perspective gives access to a truth impossible to reach using developed approaches. This is perfectly consonant with the Lacanian reading of the way in which Marxism describes the proletarians whose lack of knowledge [*savoir*] is the very condition of their knowledge [*connaissance*] of the truth. The same holds true for the wisdom assigned to primitive tribes.

Something is lost with development and preserved in underdevelopment. Perhaps the underdeveloped condition is the price that must ultimately be paid for this, or perhaps the payment is what must be compensated by the privilege of the poor. However, it might also be that this is only a way of justifying what is absolutely unjustifiable.

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