FROM THE EUROPEAN SOUTH 17 (2025) 113–118
https://www.fesjournal.eu

Thinking the Unthinkable through the Mediterranean

Gennaro Ascione

Università di Napoli L'Orientale

Iain Chambers, *Lampedusa/Gaza. L'orologio coloniale e i linguaggi interrotti*. Naples: Orthotes, 2025 (187 pp.)

ABSTRACT

This contribution introduces the reader to the book *Lampedusa/Gaza. L'orologio coloniale e i linguaggi interrotti* by Iain Chambers. The review presents the book's main topics and proposes a path to navigate the text, which grasps the inner argumentative logic holding together the manifold dimensions of contemporary Mediterranean crises, through critical theory, arts and postcolonial discourse.

Keywords

Mediterranean, postcolonialism, genocide, migration, decolonization

Silence. Silence as absence of acoustic activity. Silence as the absence of sonic presences, which paralyzes airwaves. The absence of air movement creates a pneumatic *vacuum* that swallows the loud voice of the self-constituted western subject into the whirlpools of history, throwing its presumed moral authority into the abysses of time. In his latest book in Italian, which holds together several important reflections in critical thinking written recently, Iain Chambers gently but resolutely invites the reader on such an abyssal journey. The map he provides is perforated by the blind spots of the European collective (un)consciousness. The modern western subject is built upon the auto-biography of racial and technological superiority in the form of a civilizational *bildungsroman*. The legitimacy of its own identity relies upon the possibility of a stable chronology reiterated through the ritualization of a selective collective memory: from the so-called discovery of the Americas to the Shoah. The latter being the only genocide allowed to enter the official almanac of the public sphere, forgetting that the celebrated former event marks the beginning of the extermination of millions of natives.

Such a deadly cyclical movement inscribed within the capitalist social relations that underpin the temporal structure of modernity would certainly include the catastrophes produced by mass migration and by Zionism in the Mediterranean, if the cogency of the uni-linearity of time could be radically suspended. In fact, beneath the surface of the apparently

obvious reassertion of the nexus between past, present and future, there hides a more complex structure of class, gender and racial power able to transform anthropological difference into naturalized hierarchies of power. When chronology becomes an objective social fact, it endows colonial power with the ability to establish who has the right to control the life-and-death of the others. Chambers delegitimizes this necropolitical architecture. By questioning the taken-for-granted chronological architecture of modernity, he disarticulates the backbone of the colonizer, its secure posture against the colonized, the marginal, the subaltern, and the disempowered.

Chambers' book incites us to depart from our sleep-like rationale as well as emotional state of mind in the current condition of planetary affairs. It provokes us to awake from the dream of a just and affluent society that the Enlightenment installed in our common sense. This entails passing through the living nightmare of the migratory and genocidal catastrophes that are constitutive of western domination. It is to take a voluntary step towards the reconfiguration of a collective critical self, no longer trapped within the experiential territory delimited by indifference and sense of guilt. And there to approach the shore where the realm of possibility for material constituency of feeling, understanding, awareness and responsibility, eventually translates into hope for better times to come.

The more the reader is able to keep their eyes staring at the human landscapes that the chiming "orologio colonial" (*the colonial clock*) shows, the more the "linguaggi interrotti" (*interrupted languages*) of modernity become the deafening screams of existing bodies. In the process, the *vacuum* becomes filled with the ghosts of agonizing non-white humans of whatever age, gender, and physical constitution.

Chambers denounces how the entire apparatus of colonial knowledges and imperialist structures for the extraction of value, supported by the mass media, attempt to save our hypnotized (un)consciousness from collapsing. What Edward Said called the hallucinatory effect of lucidity performs its ability to transform suffering humans into something alien to our systems of perception. Either by dehumanizing the presumed enemy, as the Israeli propaganda does with Palestinians, or by reducing migrants' humanity to a metaphysical blob made of indistinguishable bloody black flesh, as the mediatic saga of invasion narrates.

Chambers is not afraid of using writing as the ancient magical art of evocation across the historical, poetic and analytical registers of an experimental semantics that re-present the abysses he has intellectually seen, perceived, imagined. This movement is not a free fall nor a floating drift: Chambers anchors time to space, by means of the theoretical constitution of two distinctive yet intertwined spacetimes: Lampedusa and Gaza. Here, Lampedusa and Gaza are simultaneously existing geohistorical locations, extended borders of asymmetrical co-habitation, and symbolic metonymies for the contradictions of capitalism.

Lampedusa stands as the cosmic frontier of human movement.

I migranti di oggi, vivi e morti al confine tra Messico e Stati Uniti, nel Mediterraneo e nei Balcani, mettono a fuoco un mondo che va oltre le categorie che noi occidentali abbiamo preparato per loro, un mondo in cui il nostro riconoscimento li sottopone sempre alla subalternità, persino alla morte prematura. Sono soggetti inaspettati, provenienti dal mare e dal deserto, che scuotono il nostro terra-centrismo e mettono in discussione un'appartenenza che sembra garantita dal sangue e dal suolo. (Chambers 2025, 26)

Gaza, as the black hole of inhuman sclerosis.

Oggi a Gaza non ci sono uccelli. C'è solo il silenzio dell'annientamento. L'abitare umano è stato cancellato. Una delle campagne di bombardamento più brutali della storia moderna ha sradicato questo agglomerato urbano un tempo densamente abitato. Sono stati eliminati gli edifici, i campi, il bestiame e le forniture d'acqua. Qualsiasi forma di vita che sopravvive si trova tra le macerie di un genocidio e di un disastro ecologico. A questo punto, la Palestina diventa il nome di qualcosa di più di un luogo fisico. (Chambers 2025, 126)

Lampedusa/Gaza then becomes a single lemma thanks to the use of the slash instead of the hyphen: rather than conceiving a single conceptual entity, this lemma is made up by the juxtaposition of the two names, in order to create the specific relation that Stuart Hall defined in terms of reciprocal articulation/disarticulation: independence and/or inter-dependence. In its unity-and-difference, *Lampedusa/Gaza* expresses the alien condition on planet Earth that the existence *in se* of both Lampedusa and Gaza in the Mediterranean inoculates into the living tissue of our global connected lives. Therefore, it reaffirms the epistemological centrality of the Mediterranean as one of the innumerable sites of enunciation for critical thinking, rather than a geo-epistemic centre from which theory irradiates. The contemporary Mediterranean stands as the prism through which to radically question the exhausted mantra of western liberal democracy and its specular projection of its own authoritarian and totalitarian tensions into an undistinctive "elsewhere." This political stance immediately calls theory into question: from unthinking the familiar categories deployed by the western hegemonic human and social sciences to think the unthinkable.

Come ha detto acutamente James Baldwin: «Proprio nel momento in cui inizi a sviluppare una coscienza, devi trovarti in guerra con la tua società». Mi piace pensare che questo sia un riassunto preciso di quello che è il lavoro critico e analitico. È anche il momento in cui si devono tracciare dei collegamenti impensabili, ora che la cortina di fumo liberale evapora e assistiamo all'esercizio brutale del potere nudo, tra il campo di sterminio di Gaza e l'esecuzione giuridica dei migranti nel Mediterraneo. (Chambers 2025, 111)

Thus, the question arises: is it possible to think the unthinkable entirely from within the critical western tradition? The answer that Chambers reasserts is unequivocable: *no, it is not*. The pathway he traces from the unthinkable to a new critical thinking proceeds through four moves.

The first move consists in the exercise of listening, which follows up from the acceptance of the inadequacy of the lexicon at our disposal. This move embodies the will to

dwell among the ruins of western crumbling authority, where a remnant of dignity can emerge from the unilateral choice of silence. So conceived, listening stands as the first act of responsibility to establish the possibility of dialogue with those who until now have been unilaterally silenced. Along the pages and chapters of the book, the effort of listening operates as an active force that anticipates the second move.

This second move consists in giving voice to the subjects whose life has been threatened or stolen by war, ethnic cleansing, ecological devastation, famine, displacement, and over-exploitation. Instead of speaking in the name of, Chambers chooses to let these voices enter the theoretical as well as polemical space he unfolds and shapes. Chambers establishes an open alliance with these doomed-to-death subjects where his own figure of influential western, white, public intellectual and academic is possessed by the spectres of the poor, the murdered, the starved, the unburied, the drowned, the evicted. Therefore, a new epistemological and political third space materializes. An in-betweenness that part-takes both in the ethics of conspiracy and in the poetics of confabulation, without being reducible to either.

Yet, this condition would remain *in se* if Chambers did not make a further, third step, which consists in actively responding to the preoccupation with the ever-present condition of untranslatability from the language of life to that of theory. To what extent are we, as listeners, able to give linguistic shape to the feeling and rationalities that those unheard voices and unseen bodies as they potentially rise into our now-transforming (un)consciousness? We need the intermediation of postcolonial language for thoughts to which Chambers has given a crucial contribution during the last thirty years. We are induced to learn from those thinkers and activists whose practices were forged within the lived experience of anticolonial movements and the decolonization of knowledges that came after the end of formal dependence from the metropoles. People who gauged in the uncomfortable social and historical role of cultivating dissent against white colonial power all over the world. This is the tool we have, in order to by-pass the walls of prejudices, the force of mental manipulation, the inertia of comfortable structures of feeling, and of inurement that the protracted exposition to the conjunct action of colonial knowledge and mass-mediatization of catastrophes produce.

Césaire, Hall, Gilroy, Baldwin, Bhabha, Mbembe, Ferreira Da Silva, Amirah Silmi, Tuhiwai Smith, Ranjana Khanna are some of the protagonists of the dramatic construction of a dialogue with white western critical theorists. A dialogue for which the pages of this book provide planks for the stage that materially supports the possibility of a cathartic *mise-en-scène.* For the real underlying conflicts and negotiations involve historical protagonists that remain anonymous, unlettered, excluded, alien persons whose issues and claims could never reach the contiguous reality of the multiverse wherein intellectual struggle takes place.

The entanglement between these contiguous realities in the multiverse, which co-exist in worlds often reciprocally isolated, becomes possible thanks to an alternative conception of spacetime. Such an alternative spacetime assumes discontinuity as a possibility: a kind of quantum leap for which no science can produce a working time-machine. The only way available to interrupt chronology-as-continuity consists in the obliquus, narrow, experiential passage that art can provide.

This is why the fourth move consists in taking art seriously from a theoretical and argumentative point of view: art as an intervention in life and thinking. This does not mean to focus on art in terms of a variety or individual by-product of a single-minded genius. Rather, it means to go through artistic practices as collective processes of engagement with creativity as well as urges of expression. Conditions that are historically-determined by production, circulation, and consumption, yet entail the transformative power to evoke the outer-worldly, alien, entities Gramsci-Guha called the subaltern-worlds.

In this regard, Chambers reports and takes issue with the experience of the art exhibition *Documenta 15*. He provides the reader with novel devices of understanding, which he does not elaborate simply by looking at works of art from the standpoint of *technical* critiques. Rather he proposes its collective recodification through his own lived experience of participation in the performing as well as the afterlife of the art exhibition. An event which became the occasion for radical contestation against the ontological foundations of the art system: individualism, market-oriented pressures, imperialism, censorship. The same onto-logical foundations of modern colonial capitalism.

Nonetheless, this is still not enough. From visual and performing art, Chambers' attention extends to the realm of music. Here, his direct engagement with music-as-history instead of history-of-music as a discipline gives the reader a more unmediated mode of appropriating the possibility of questioning the chronological architecture of uni-linear historical time. In the shadow of the global entertainment industry driven exclusively by profit, original musical seeds blow in from the Mediterranean. These blossom to merge traditional instruments with electronic devices and multiple non-dominant idioms propose a spacetime which has never succumbed to a unilateral modernity. The persistence of these unauthorized fragments in music makes the past present, connects the present to its retro-futuristic roots, and transforms the future into visible alternative paths that the contemporary listener/thinker can explore. Music from the scattered postcolonial spacetime of the Mediterranean engages with senses and sensibility, shifting the very meaning of the word 'methodology' to include cut-up techniques as a way of thinking rather than simply creating:

> Tornare alla costruzione storica della prospettiva, all'elaborazione tecnologica dell'inquadratura, all'investimento culturale nell'immagine, significa proprio riaprire questo spazio critico caratterizzato dalla violenza lineare di una storia unica e il suo monopolio sulla narrazione del tempo. Si tratta di riportarlo in frammenti coevi ma multipli di racconto e di comprensione (Chambers 2025, 161).

Così, *Black Athena*, come proposto nella ricerca speculativa e probabilmente imprecisa di Martin Bernal o come cantato dal gruppo dub napoletano Almamegretta, non riguarda forse tanto il corretto recupero di storie dimenticate, quanto piuttosto un ingresso perturbante che ci avvicina al preciso potenziale di risposta a riconfigurazioni non autorizzate di un Mediterraneo ancora da venire (Chambers 2025, 173).

La musica ci invita a viaggiare. I suoni circolano liberamente, estendendo e trasformando le rivendicazioni delle comunità locali, linguistiche e nazionali. Sono saturi di tempo storico e di tensioni culturali. Contro il positivismo mascherato del "progresso" e le sue disposizioni fideistiche, la musica distribuisce una partitura storica più sottile. Sospeso nel suono, il passato non è né finito né pronto per essere consegnato al canone, al museo o al libro di testo (Chambers 2025, 52).

By taking music in its seemingly non-material form, Chambers registers a fracture between artistic languages and discursive practices. The former enable us to reconfigure time and space; the latter encapsulate us within pre-existing structures of control. The persistence of this fracture, though, interrogates the ultimate meaning of writing in front of the brutality perpetrated in Gaza/Lampedusa. It is with words as sites of resistance that Iain Chambers' book reconciles the reader. Like a coming back home, which is not a simple return to language as such, but rather a novel horizon of justice that learns from the Palestinian struggle for the right to inhabit the land inhabited before the Nakba. The battle to give linguistic form to the crimes against humanity occurring in Gaza reaffirms the importance of filling with revolutionary meaning even juridical definitions such as "genocide". By assuming meanings as fields of contestation where social contradictions materialize, the relation between colonial power and the world order it created appears in its constitutive nature as a transitional, and not timeless and permanent, mode of organizing global human society. If, as Gramsci elucidated, hegemony is based upon the acceptance of certain shared cultural meanings that the dominant group uses to convince all the others that what is good for it is convenient for all, then the cracks in those meanings are the fissures in the geological crust of the era of human history we keep calling—by approximation—*modernity*.

Gennaro Ascione teaches "Sociologia e Studi Culturali e Postcoloniali del Mediterraneo" at the University of Naples "L'Orientale." He is a Research Fellow at the Center for Global Studies at the University of Cambridge, Directeur d'Etudes Associes at the Fondation Maison de Sciences de l'Homme in Paris, and affiliated with the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies. His research interests focus mainly on Global Studies, capitalism, the relationship between modernity and science, non-Western concepts and knowledge, and, more generally, historical sociology. He has written several articles and edited volumes and is the author of four monographs: *A sud di nessun Sud: Postcolonialismo, movimenti anti-sistemici e studi decoloniali* (Odoya, 2009); *Science and the Decolonization of Social Theory: Unthinking Modernity* (Palgrave, 2016); *Concept Formation in Global Studies: Post-Western Approaches to Critical Human Knowledge* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2024); *Napoli balla. Dancefloor sottoculture nella città postcoloniale* (Tamu, 2025). Email: gascione@unior.it