



For Couze: on *Occidentalism: modernity and subjectivity* (2000)

Ashwani Sharma¹

Published online: 18 March 2020
© Springer Nature Limited 2020

Mourning is an ongoing conversation with the dead.

I met Couze when I started in the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of East London (UEL) in 1993. My abiding memory of Couze in those years, probably for many of us, was meeting a passionate and generous thinker. We always seemed to be in protracted conversations, whether in a teaching context, department meeting, seminar or over a coffee. The conversations moved imperceptibly across numerous interests—the place of the diasporic and exiled thinker, geo-politics, race, culture as well as theory.

We started to put together a course on postcolonial culture, which in the end he did not teach—he left UEL in 1998. But the traces of our discussions and plans continue to inform my teaching and writing even now. Couze is a spectral presence whose ideas require me to think harder, to see the world in all its complexities. I learnt so much from Couze, not just about critical thought, but about the political urgency of criticism in everyday sociality, in the here and now. He embodied the value of intellectual work, and how to do it without being egotistical—a rare feat.

With Couze it was always a dialogic, open conversation, he listened as much as he spoke, always attentive to new ideas and thinking, even my owned half-baked ones to think the popular with the philosophical. Couze's writings are a conversation with others—theories and thinkers. But also with himself—an internal conversation. His writings lay bare his working through in meticulous detail the anatomy of his thinking. He brings into critical proximity disparate fields of study, to offer us routes through the discursive terrain. As Couze said referencing Stuart Hall, the postcolonial is 'thinking at the limits'. A formulation that exemplifies Couze's work.

Occidentalism brings into dialogue the then contemporary work on modernity and its crisis of postmodernity, with postcolonial theory and studies. His sustained argument in the book is that colonial space was historically and

This text is part of a series of short tributes to the late Prof. Couze Venn and they will be part of a forthcoming special issue

✉ Ashwani Sharma
a.sharma@lcc.arts.ac.uk

¹ London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, London, England



discursively necessary for the establishment of modernity and the modern form of the subject. The unfolding of this argument is one Couze had been working through for many years, perhaps always to the present. He also anticipates the future in the conceptualisation of the historical present.

Recently while sorting out my sprawling library I refound a booklet that Couze had written, 'Occidentalism and its Discontents' for the 'New Ethnicities Unit' at UEL led by Phil Cohen, published in 1993. I am tempted to say that even in this earlier extended essay all the elements, the problematic of Couze's corpus developed from *Changing the Subject*, to *Occidentalism*, and publications to follow, are already in play.

The last few of sentences from the 1993 booklet:

'... the co-articulation of capitalism, colonialism and subject-centred philosophies does not express a necessarily epochal rupture engendering modernity but is an event, doubtless overdetermined, yet indeterminate, open to chance and probabilities. The space of this co-articulation is the ideological and epistemological space in which modernity and the modern form of subjectivity are enacted. I call occidentalism the discursive network which maps that space.' (Venn 1993, p. 56)

A characteristically Couze formulation that condenses and articulates multiple critical registers.

What is singularly striking about his work is his attempt to counter the violence and injustices of the world through an ethico-political register, which demands new forms of subjectivity and being. In *Occidentalism* he conceives the ethical—reworking the ideas of Levinas, Derrida and Ricoeur—as a responsibility and gift in terms of a temporality open to the radical alterity of the other to come. Time for him must not be a property belonging to anyone, but an opening to the future:

'...a promise arising from the recognition of injustice and the communality of suffering...' (2000, p. 11), and later on '...inseparable from the recognition that we exist as beings in time, conscious of temporality and of the inevitably of finitude...' (2000, p. 41)

Couze's work continues to demand of us to think with him, together. Rereading *Occidentalism* now, I am really struck how the book, while embedded in the theoretical debates of its time, also speaks to our moment, enacting a critique as hope in a time of despair. Counter to the anti-intellectual tendencies of the contemporary university, he presents us with the tools to think our postcolonial present. In the recent surge of interest in the decolonial, and given the state of the world, we would do no better than to think with Couze, to carry on the conversation. His time is always to come.

When my father died very suddenly in 1996, Couze gave me a book of poems by Seamus Heaney. I would like to offer my gift to him by reading a Heaney (2006) poem:

Quitting Time

The hosed-down chamfered concrete pleases him.



He'll wait a while before he kills the light
On the cleaned up yard, its pails and far-rowing crate,
And the cast-iron pump immobile as a herm
Upstanding elsewhere, in another time.
More and more this last look at the wet
Shine of the place is what means most to him—
And to repeat the phrase "My head is light,"
Because it often is as he reaches back
And switches off, a home-based man at home
In the end with little. Except this same
Night after nightness, redding up the work,
The song of a tubular steel gate in the dark
As he pulls it to and starts his uphill trek.

References

- Cohen, P. (ed.). 1999. *New Ethnicities, Old Racisms?*. London: Zed Books.
Heaney, S. 2006. 'Quitting Times' in *District and Circle*, 126–127. London: Faber and Faber.
Venn, C. 1993. *Occidentalism and Its Discontents*, London: New Ethnicities Unit, University of East London. [Also available in Cohen, 1999, pp. 37–62]
Venn, C. 2000. *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity*. London: Sage Press.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

