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*On Spaces and Experiences:  
Modern Displacements, Interpretations and  
Universal Claims*

Aurea Mota

**Introduction**

THE TENDENCY TO spatially displace imaginaries of societies and their specific historical development is not new. The interpretation of a space based on geographical orientation has indeed seldom been based on any natural idea of what the space is (Gregory 1994; Garfield 2013). Recently, though, much attention has been devoted to the discussion of space as a political and historical entity. It has been rediscovered as a privileged object for the analysis of different historical processes largely crystallised in different parts of the globe.

As part of this volume, in which the reader will find a variety of issues related to how spatial categories can be taken as ‘useful’ concepts for the inquiry into problems of the social world, this chapter addresses a relatively unexplored aspect of modern experience with space. This aspect concerns the relation between displacements of people in different spaces and the production of knowledge/interpretation. It argues that the South, understood for now simply as a specific localisation of historical relations, has always been a space where general trans-regional theories and concepts have emerged. As with so-called ‘Northern theory’, ‘Southern theory’ shares similar pretensions of universality and also proceeds by exercising similar gestures of historical erasure. Hence, from this point of view, there is not a strong purely intellectual distinction that could split Northern and Southern thought.<sup>1</sup> However, an important aspect constituting what could be regarded as something that does split a Northern from a Southern intellectual tradition is that the former has departed from the idea of spatial neutrality as a condition for the production of theories, as Mignolo (2011) has shown; and the latter, on the contrary, has interpreted itself and its place in the world through what is called here a critical localisation of argument.

This critical localisation of discourse is done without any prejudice against the production of universal claims. Henceforth, this chapter highlights what could be an important difference detected between the 'Northern' and 'Southern' intellectual traditions, but argues in favour of the existence of similar claims of universality despite the location of knowledge/interpretation. That is probably due to the difficulty of clearly specifying *where* things happen in the modern world. It is so because of the argument, also developed in this chapter, that it is in the movement of people crossing spaces/times and the displacement of established societal self-understandings that modern thought has emerged and has distinguished itself. The aspects of the transformation on a larger scale of temporal and spatial orientation have been well explored. This chapter will raise some questions related to the problem of modern thought and the experience of space.

In this introduction, it is also worth summarising the arguments that the discussion below intends to call into question. There are two lines of argument. The first line refers to what could be a sort of essentialisation of spaces that involves a radical dualism and sometimes antagonism between different parts. In this view, space became historically crystallised into entities that are used as explanatory categories to think about the historical development of the world and the relations of its different parts. The representation of the relation between the West and the Orient can help us in elucidating the issue. During much of the early modern period (roughly from the 1500s to the 1800s), Western thought and art portrayed the Orient as an exotic realm to be experienced and explored (Said 1985; Behdad 1994). The metaphor of a wise but somewhat decadent West as the observer of a very intensive and novel but also ancient world suits this relation well. With a change of focus but retaining the same analytical perspective, in some contemporary approaches the South is seen as the place for the exercise of lively alternatives for the future (Santos 2009; Connell 2007). It seems like the South has replaced the Orient as the place in which creative innovations developed and imagined in whatever this socio-spatial category might be are more interesting and effective than modernisation perspectives and allied views could have expected. The difference is that now Southern actors have a voice and play a central role in such representation themselves. In both perspectives, however, the North is still portrayed as a sort of wealthy and powerful old man whose success can be easily attested, and whose examples could elucidate a lot of current problems, but whose uneven trajectory has produced more problems

than it has solved. This man is exhausted and not able to represent himself as a paradigm for the future. He has become the image of a past and remembered more for his mistakes than his glories.

This leads us to the second line of argument against which this chapter was developed. Following from the previous representation, it has been wisely attested that the main mistake of this man – the North in this image of world regions to which outstanding structural power has been attributed – was the development of colonial and neo-colonial global capitalism. The works that have recently appeared under the umbrella category of ‘Global South’ highlight the colonial structures of power as that which is responsible for the crystallisation of the North as the site of accumulation of capital and the South as the site of exploitation (for more about this topic, see Pinheiro in this volume). Geopolitical relations of power are taken as the focus of these approaches that mainly analyse the historical aspects of political and economic mutual and unequal dependency of centres, peripheries and semi-peripheries for the development of capitalism (Wallerstein 1974; Quijano 2005). The problem with this perspective does not reside in the assumption that the history of colonialism is the main causal factor in the consolidation of the world system as we find it today. The problem concerns the issue of attributing strong structural powers to places that act as rational actors.

The first line of argument above highlights more the aspect of the *representation* of a space by agents acting in specific cultural and historical scenarios. The second line could be regarded as based on a more *empirical conception of global history* and of economic development in the era of capitalism. In both accounts, however, the idea of antagonistic interests of spaces as historical entities predominates. Places, above all from the North, are understood as actors that exercise a large measure of control over the course of their actions by subjugation and/or imposition of their desire wherever they want. From an analytical point of view, those studies could not have been done by taking a long distance from what can be regarded as a classical sociological approach to talking about the other separated in time and space. In classical approaches, the localisation of the space occupied by different groups is not an explanatory factor in the analysis – as it appears in Durkheim’s work ([1912] 1995) about how the fundamental notions of thought found in the ‘simplest’ form of religious life could elucidate the way knowledge and theories are produced. Durkheim’s others were synchronically separated in time and space. But space in itself does

not appear as the main fact that explains the difference in the forms of social knowledge and of religious life. It is the different forms of organisation of systems of belief that determines their place in history. Pursuing a different argument, but retaining some lessons learned from such classical approaches, in this chapter we want to be able to show that subjects are not determined by their place of origin. As important as the determination of the milieu is the understanding of the diverse forms of displacement that mark a subject's life and thought.<sup>2</sup>

In order to show the limitations of the perspectives criticised above, we will develop an argument about the relation between, on the one hand, the specific character of modern displacements and, on the other, the interpretation and the consolidation of universal claims. For that, we will proceed as follows. In the next section, I provide a general overview of the discussion of space in modernity. A brief inquiry into the forms of representation of space and its relation to different historical developments will be also offered in order to understand the relation between displacement and knowledge in modernity. After this section, the focus will move to the discussion of two authors and intellectuals whose displacements share what we regard to be a critical localisation of universal discourse: Simón Rodríguez and Isabelle Eberhardt. They lived in different times and moved through different spaces. One is a man, the other a woman. The man was devoted to the human sciences, was involved in tremendous political activities, and made an impact on history; the woman had strong literary pretensions but had some difficulty in becoming recognised as a writer during her lifetime.<sup>3</sup> They both help us to elucidate the argument about the difficulty of splitting Northern and Southern thought in a very clear way when it comes to the absence of a pretension to universality and the absence of 'unavoidable' historical events. The discussion concludes with some remarks that summarise the proposal to look at space in the social sciences as conforming to no pre-established cartography in order to overcome the problems of essentialisation and of spatial determination.

### **Space, representation, displacement: reviewing ideas to build an alternative approach**

Space has been interpreted as a phenomenon related to the formation of nation states; it has been seen as a key concept for understanding the formation of the new modern *urbis* and the reproduction of old societal problems along with the creation of new ones in its spaces; it has also

been viewed as part of the formation of centres and peripheries in the global system (Anderson 1991; Mbembe 2000; Lefebvre 1991; Wallerstein 1974). The broad theoretical understanding that those approaches offer is the relation between space and the formation of capitalist and colonial societies, as it appears very clearly in the work of Harvey (1985). From this perspective, the issue of space in modernity has been mainly connected with places and territorial transformations, understood as the political and economic physical space determined by changeable boundaries and its uses. The nationalist reading of this process tended to crystallise the image of modern space as self-contained units that could be compared and hierarchised (Menon 2010).

Since the end of the twentieth century, space increasingly has been viewed as represented and interpreted according to the perspective that humans beings give to it and the recent revival of space can be seen as a new concern with this older approach (Gregory 1994; Massey 2005). As with the definition of societal borders, the nationalist conception of territories has been revised by the proposal for more interpretative cultural-historical categories such as 'world regions' (Lewis and Wigen 1997) that aims to emphasise the different paths found in larger geospatial categories of thought. Those approaches lose sight of at least two other different ways through which spaces are formed: the movement of people across space that creates new meaningful worlds that would not exist without the action (the movement) itself; and the analysis of how the imaginary representation of a space is a key variable for thinking about different historical trajectories of social, economic and political development. Most of the discussion about the 'South' in contemporary critical thought tends to emphasise empirical evidence that shows the consequences of unequal economic and social development for the constitution of the global order. In this chapter the argument is that space has been experienced and transformed by the action of human beings, not only by institutions or by the large territorial transformation of the modern state and the *urbis*. There are other societal movements that need to be regarded as productive forces in themselves.

In terms of spatial representation of societal imaginaries, it was only by the seventeenth century that geographical representations started to become less concerned about the display of a 'fantastic' picture of societies and more concerned about what places are in terms of their physical structure, form and politically determined spatial boundaries. However, there was still no scientific progress in cartographical

representation regarding the neutrality of perspective of the observer (Brotton 2013). This transformation was a product of the incorporation of so-called 'Oriental' knowledge, the development of new techniques of navigation and orientation over sea and earth, as well as the achievements of the polycentric sources that led to the scientific revolution of the Renaissance. In light of our argument, it should be said that the difference between the pre-seventeenth-century representation of the world and those that started to appear in this period was due not only to scientific advancement, but also to the increasing impulse for displacement and a desire to know, interpret and represent the unknown. It is this spatial and temporal discontinuity that gives form to the perspective of human beings moving across spaces and creating new epistemic orders of a new era. The development of new exploratory expeditions to Africa and America, the development of new routes to Asia and Oceania, and the participation of writers and scientists in those travels can be seen as the basis of this transformation in the early modern period. From the nineteenth century on, through different means, the movement of people, knowledge and the creation of a new imagined global order come to be even more important despite being little understood. That is what allows us to understand the difference between the increased significance that displacement has in the modern era if it is compared with, for instance, medieval travels, the Viking sagas and classical odysseys (Labarge 2005; Ross 2000).

Yet in the early modern period there was a major transformation in the way that spaces were represented in maps, globes and atlases. What remained unchanged from the sixteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century was how narratives based on the movement of people across the globe – as 'travels' and 'exploratory missions' – were positively welcomed in the literary and scientific world. In the early modern period, travel literature was a widespread and lively activity that became important also as a source of ethnographical materials (Talbot 2010). The vivacity and importance of travel writings in this period becomes even more important if one bears in mind that it was first recognised as a specific literary genre only in the eighteenth century (Cristóvão 1999). From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, travel writings were largely used as reliable material to inform different ways of interpreting and knowing the world(s). John Locke, for instance, was a prolific reader of travel literature, above all of authors who went to the New World – a space that empirically informed his political and philosophical approach (Mota 2015).

It also was in the early modern period that individual entrepreneurs and intellectuals started to travel for personal reasons. This whole process is not limited to overseas trips from Europe. The ideas of spatial displacement and the production of a representation of the other marked by a hierarchical structure of domination have been strongly emphasised by studies that associate modernity with the consolidation of the Western/coloniser perspective on the other and colonised subjects of the South and of the East/Orient (Said 1985; Behdad 1994; Pratt 2008). Those approaches try to understand the issue of the representation of the other mainly by analysing travel writings. However, the implications of the movement that they analyse should not be seen as a one-way process or something that was used only to impose the European perspective. Displacements of persons from other parts of the 'dominated' world to Europe also formed a not-yet-scrutinised colonised perspective on the structure of domination and their place in it. The claim that the 'natives did not travel' (Appadurai 1988) as well as the idea that the colonial perspective crystallised only in the perspective of the coloniser (Pratt 2008) both need to be strongly challenged. The same can be said about Euben's (2006) proposal to see travel as a 'necessary condition' for the production of theory, which is for her the main manifestation of knowledge. Her argument is not ultimately convincing because of a narrow conception of what knowledge is and a failure to see the spaces where people travel as a source of experience and knowledge per se. For us, the experience of foreign spaces and the interpretation of them in light of specific historical developments express the way that modernity has been understood as a phenomenon of universal significance in different times and places.

This spatial experience is possible only through movement (transformation) and imagination and it is one of the main sources of modernity in itself. The sociological and historical literature that focuses on travel writings and the object/subject represented in it have not paid attention to the fact that the movement from fiction to the sciences of the discourse on the other and us shows how knowledge started to be regarded in the modern world. That is why for us it was not by chance that social science stabilised itself at the same moment when travel literature began to be disregarded as a reliable source for an interpretation of the world(s). The fact that there was a considerable decrease in the generation and public relevance of travel writing in the nineteenth century can be interpreted as an expression of the new epistemic order that was created in modernity: the transition to



science as the legitimate field in which the discourse on the other and us should take place.

As modernity started to consolidate into a global imaginary, the desire to know and transform the world through displacement has changed with regard to the role of spatial displacement as a public condition for the production of knowledge and of modern space itself. Displacements that gave rise to scientific interpretations became hidden (or assumed as a secondary fact) for human knowledge to accomplish orders of universality in what has been regarded as Northern thought. In this space, this is the basis of the process of divergence between, on the one hand, a philosophy of experience, meaning and the subject and, on the other hand, a philosophy of knowledge, of reason and of concepts (Foucault 1985, 2001). However, as we will see in the following section with the discussion of Simón Rodríguez and Isabelle Eberhardt, which retain similar pretensions to universality, displacement and knowledge/interpretation occupy a very explicit place in what we can regard as Southern thought. It is exactly the explicitness in localisation of the discourse that makes us able to see a difference between 'Northern' and 'Southern' thought. Displacements, movements, disconnections and discontinuities in time and space made by human beings are an important force in the transformation of the modern world and reveal that its epistemic-spatial form is not easily crystallised in any unchangeable representation of spaces and of intellectual traditions. Before moving forward it is worth explicating better what modernity means in our approach.

Modernity in philosophical and sociological terms can be understood as the process of the acceleration of 'historical time' and by the idea of 'to be in one's own time' (Wagner 2008; Bayly 2002; Koselleck 2004). From this perspective, it is possible to see how difficult it is to relate modernity to a single temporal and political understanding. However, European authors did not have much problem in agreeing on the place of a specific revolutionary process that became an important point of reference for understanding the modern ruptures. In Koselleck (2004) this place and time is very clear. For him it was during the *Neuzeit* – understood as a 'new time' that emerged around the time of the French Revolution – that the idea of progress and the future became connected in a very specific form. What is important to bear in mind is Koselleck's idea that it was in light of the transformations of the *Neuzeit* that three aspects crucial for the understanding of modernity emerged: the idea of autonomy is connected with the

possibility of a positive transformation, the acceleration of time, and its increased separation from the space where life flows. The emphasis on the orientation of time – towards the future – is based on the ‘space of experience’ (Koselleck 2002). However, this space is not scrutinised deeply enough in this approach (Pickering 2010).

In a similar vein, for Giddens (1990), time and space distantiation is what distinguishes the rhythm of change in modern societies, making them different from traditional ones. Giddens sees the ‘pace of change’ of modernity as something that happened because of the separation of time and space and their recombination in forms that permit the precise ‘time-space zoning’ of social dynamics. For Giddens, what he sees as ‘pre-modern societies’, spaces and places tended to be the same.<sup>4</sup> In modern societies, on the contrary, spaces became detached from their locales. What he calls the ‘mechanisms of embedment’ are responsible for the reorganisation of social relations in a situation of large time-space distances in modern societies. It is due to this large separation that one of the consequences of modernity is the formation of an ‘empty space’ in which social life happens (Giddens 1990). In Giddens, modernity had its beginning in Europe from roughly the seventeenth century and then spread worldwide, a process accomplished in spite of the imposition of a European perspective on ways of representing the world. He very much believes that ‘the progressive charting of the globe that led to the creation of universal maps, in which perspective played little part in the representation of geographical position and form, established space as “independent” of any particular place or region’ (Giddens 1990: 19). In our view, this approach is based on a conception of the modern representation of the world as able to leave behind a privileged perspective of the representation of lived space and time. Thus in Giddens’s perspective, despite its European origins, modernity acquired the form of a non-local phenomenon because of the novelty that it possessed in terms of space and time separation. In doing so he is probably the first to unintentionally theorise the idea of spatial neutrality as a feature of modern Western thought.

Against the view that modernity and its specific representation of shared space as an equal globe have emerged in an insulated space – as the West – and spread later on throughout the world, it is sustained that the modern experience was made by the synthesis of practices, experiences and interpretations that cannot be easily reduced to the central areas of the North/Western world (Wagner 2012). The rise of a modern imaginary around the idea of the autonomy of human beings

as individuals and collective persons and in relation to the possibility of making changes in the world in the name of this imaginary is completely connected to the experiences of displacements of persons and thoughts from and to different parts of the globe. This idea challenges not only the notion that modernity emerged in an insulated area but also the idea of the 'emptiness' of the space where life flows.

To be sure, Mignolo (2011) has been theorising the modern/colonial space and offering an alternative approach to the established Northern perspective. His approach starts out from Schmitt's (2006) attempt to relate the geopolitics of the organisation of the world and the birth of European international law, and from Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems approach as a way to replace the traditional focus on nations and societies as almost closed entities. Mignolo (2002) tries to understand the modern space departing from, but going beyond, both approaches because in his view they do not address the issue of 'coloniality the power' – a phenomenon that was previously analysed by Quijano (1998). Mignolo (2011) highlights the fact that 'we are where we think', but only the European system of knowledge was built on the basic premise 'I think, therefore I am'. However, his thesis places too much emphasis on the establishment of a fundamental division between Europe and the non-European world. In his view, the new decolonial subject should be able to say, 'I am where I think,' and by doing so show the Europeans that they also are the same. The author is right when he says that 'I think, therefore I am' is a premise adopted by the modern European system of knowledge. However, he is wrong in saying that it is a prerogative of the modern European system. As in our perspective time and space are not absolute categories, we all think, therefore we are and where/when we have been and how we have imagined ourselves.

The focus on displacement, the transformation of social imaginaries and interpretation all point to another view of modern/colonial history. This view challenges proposals that address the issue of the modern global configuration based on crystallised geographical images that aim to explain *how places think* (see, for instance, Burawoy 2009; Connell 2007; Santos 2009). By saying that the spatial dimension of modernity is based on the experience of displacement and knowledge, I mean to indicate that to experience a different way of seeing the unknown or of seeing what it was already known with different eyes is a way that human beings can situate themselves in a world(s) that has become transformed because of their own action. It also makes it possible to

articulate modernity in terms of a meaningfully connected history of peoples and the concrete but also imagined routes they created in their movement.

### **Simon Rodríguez and Isabelle Eberhardt: different forms of critical localisation of universal claims**

This section analyses aspects of the life and work of two authors that lived in different spaces and times of the modern world: Simón Rodríguez (1769–1854) and Isabelle Eberhardt (1877–1904). By different means, they both express what can be understood in our argument as the critical localisation of universal claims that are very strongly connected to the displacements they undertook during their lifetimes and help us to discuss some aspects of what has here been called a modern experience with space. Analysing their life and intellectual contributions together is a way to challenge the idea both of spatial determination and of the necessary adoption of spatial neutrality for the production of universal ideas in modernity. By doing so, I also hope to elucidate the argument about displacement and modern thought and how we can understand it in relation to the discussion about Northern and Southern intellectual traditions. From the very beginning, it is important to notice that both authors adopted different names that would be used for them to insert themselves in the new environment in which they found themselves: Simón Rodríguez became Samuel Robinson and Isabelle Eberhardt became, along with a number of other names, Si Mahmoud Saadi. Simón Rodríguez remained a male with an English name; Isabelle Eberhardt became a male with an Arabic name. The use of pseudonyms and of assuming a different character meant for them to open doors that otherwise would have remained closed. The change in names was also a way to remind themselves that displacement means something more than only a spatial condition.

Simón Rodríguez is one of the main intellectuals and protagonists of the many groups that took part in the struggles for emancipation in America. He was closely linked to Simón Bolívar and other emancipators who fought in the struggles against the colonial system in Venezuela, Nueva Granada and in the Viceroyalty of Peru. Going into exile after he was appointed as one of the leaders of the *Conspiración de Gual y España* (1797–9), he left his home in Venezuela for Jamaica in 1797. From there he travelled to parts of the United States, Europe and Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Unlike his brother, Cayetano, who was regarded by

everyone close to them as the ‘good one’ and the ‘exemplary Catholic’ that had never left his home, Simón Rodríguez showed from an early age an interest in learning from experiences with different spaces and thoughts (Rumazo González 2006: 12).<sup>6</sup> He was already versed in philosophical and political texts from abroad when he left America. But it was when he lived in the Northern part of the world that Simón Rodríguez developed most of his ideas.<sup>7</sup> The main subject of his thought was how America would become free and constitute itself as a new and original political order in a world increasingly connected (Rodríguez 1840, [1830] 1971). To think about America, he based his approach on his own experience of getting to know domination in many parts of the world – he wrote about slavery in Turkey, Russia and Prussia; exclusion of Jews in many parts of Europe; and the marginalisation of manual workers, such as craftsmen and farmers, from political life (Rodríguez 1840: 6–7).

In his opinion, the new nations of America did not share with Europe and the East the addictions of being old political traditions based on a strong hierarchical conception of life in society. This was due to the fact that in America the political challenge was to create something anew, not to reform an older order as would be the case in the other civilisational forms of life he found in Europe. Despite this important historical difference, the formation of enlightened governments would show what is right for any society. It could be done in spite of historical contingencies, cultural orientations and civilisational backgrounds. For Rodríguez, in America it should be easier to develop an emancipated political life suitable for the new era emerging in the nineteenth century. But it would not be done if the vanguard of his time were not able to learn from the experiences of diverse parts of the world in an attempt of find the best solutions for solving the problems of social and political organisation. This is what he calls ‘competition of faculties’. For him, curiosity and knowledge would together create the conditions for any society to find a way out for problems related to the formation of modern republican political life (Rodríguez 1840: 15; Rumazo González 2006: 56). His idea of knowledge is one based on the idea that to know better you need to compare what you know with what others know about similar problems under different conditions. If this formula is followed, this sort of cosmopolitan imaginary developed by Rodríguez could be easily converted into institutional arrangements that could be applied everywhere (Mota 2012). For him, universal knowledge is possible by the incorporation of experiences of

any societal groups otherwise apart in time and space.<sup>8</sup>

America had a central role not only for the creation but also for the maintenance of the new political imaginary emerging in the nineteenth century (Rodríguez [1830] 1971). The struggle for emancipation in the United States of America, the successful Andean break with colonial ties, the revolution of black slaves in Haiti, and the formation of the Pan-Americanism movement of the beginning of the nineteenth century were events that attested to the political vivacity and desire to change the colonial condition in this part of the world. He also regarded the French Revolution, and even more importantly the experience of the *Les Enragés* for the consolidation of the 'utopian socialism' in Europe, as evidence of the desire for change everywhere. All of those experiences should be followed for the implementation of the ideals of rights of property, freedom, republican education<sup>9</sup> and knowledge to all (Rumazo González 2006).

At the time when Rodríguez was actively working, the division of the New World into North and South America and the formation of an idea of a successful North and the failed South did not exist as fully consolidated phenomena. The process of calling the America stopped in time by 'South America' and 'Latin America' is a production of a division within the New World that was happening at this moment (Mota 2015). Simón Rodríguez's main work, *American Societies*,<sup>10</sup> is a book that shows exactly how the continent was seen at that moment, as a place with similar problems and dilemmas but with different historical trajectories that were not strong enough to be regarded as something existing apart in time and space. The 'American divergence' of the nineteenth century and the formation in the New World of the meaningful idea of the North as the place where important developments are observed and the South as a place that did not get away from its past problems was understood through a process that might be called the *paradigmatisation of historical events* (Mota 2015). This is a process through which many revolutions, reforms and emancipatory movements do not play the same role as other similar events for the analysis of the formation and transformation of the modern world and the new emerging conception of space and time. Important intellectuals of this time, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, had become part of this process of divergence in America, of creation of a specific idea of North and South and its relation to modern developments. Simón Rodríguez died in 1854, probably too soon for him to be able to reflect on the consequences for Latin America of its historical creation.

Simón Rodríguez was concerned about the state of the political developments in Europe and America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But he did not try to reflect upon those developments and the relation between the New and Old Worlds using spatial ideas such as North and South to describe what he was experiencing. It seems that for him those categories could not establish anything of substance about the meaning of the relation between those parts of the world and their development in history. Unlike Simón Rodríguez, Isabelle Eberhardt used the reference point of the South as a meaningful category to represent her desired desert (the Maghreb), for her the projected space of liberty and self-realisation. In her *Visions du Moghreb*,<sup>11</sup> the South appears as another word to express a space 'without political boundaries' compared with the Western world, which is the place of imprisonment and of unescapably forced exile.<sup>12</sup> This is for her the main characteristic that split Europe, her birthplace, and the South, her chosen place of rebirth. From her writings it is quite clear that Eberhardt saw from a very early stage of her life that freedom could be realised only away from her cultural milieu (Abdel-Jaouad 1993).

The South appears in Eberhardt's writings as a space in which one can have a true experience of autonomous action – to decide to what or to whom one wants to be subjected. Going against what anyone would expect from a person that was born in a family with strong anarchist ties,<sup>13</sup> she decided to convert to Islam. It is because of her freedom that she felt she could choose to convert to a religion of submission. When she moved to Algeria<sup>14</sup> she joined a group of Sufist Muslims who placed great emphasis on the mystical experience between God and the believer. For Sufism, suffering and pain are not seen as negative feelings. They are part of the experience of a full submission of someone to God, enabling them to see the other as more important than oneself.

For her, the fact that the Maghreb was so close to Europe without Europeans knowing anything about it revealed Europe's self-imposed blindness. The Maghreb was geographically nearby but completely faraway when it came to the knowledge that the Western world had of it. It was a place that Europeans saw as fit only for exploitation and the imposition of an absolutely unfair way of ruling collective life. That is why she became obsessed with finding an Algeria that existed before colonisation. She wanted to experience a space that had remained untouched by the Western powers.<sup>15</sup> To think about Isabelle Eberhardt as an intellectual that helps us to elucidate the point about the South as a space of production of knowledge that shares similar pretensions

of universality to 'Northern' thought, as we have done with Simón Rodríguez, we need to understand her political struggle against the colonial structure developed in the North of Africa. For her, contact with Europeans meant the destruction of every form of non-Occidental life (Eberhardt 2000: x). That is the basis of the strong anti-colonial critique that appears in Eberhardt's works. Anticipating later postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, Eberhardt sees the development of modernity and of coloniality as a process of destruction of forms of non-European 'traditional life' by foreign Western forces.

We can look at Eberhardt's writings as a contribution to the critique of Western colonialism everywhere in the world, not only in the North of Africa (Eberhardt 2000, 2008). Abdel-Jaouad (1993: 102) observes this when she says that Eberhardt's work expounded a general sociology of 'colonialism and oppression' that in the Francophone world would only later be highlighted by the works of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi. She has immersed herself in the colonial world of North Africa, and it is from this specific locale in a specific time that she builds her universal critique of Western colonialism everywhere else. Her strategy of radical critique is built on the use of language(s) as tool for subversion of reality and she masters this tool in an outstanding way. She uses French as the main language of her writings, but uses her polyglotism<sup>16</sup> as a form of transgression of the French colonial world. The elements of her strategy of criticism can be summarised in the following extract:

By intertwining oral and written literary materials and incorporating indigenous ethnographical and anthropological elements into her fiction, Isabelle deterritorialized [. . .] the content of her writing completely and radically. She was the first to experiment and use polyglotism as a device to undermine the hegemony of 'monolanguage', one of the principal pillars of the colonial orders. She was the first to present the Maghrebian ethos from the inside, using consistently the Arabic name 'Maghreb' when the current and official term was North Africa, and first also to introduce indigenous words into the French language, beginning thus a long process of disenfranchisement of the dominant language. (Abdel-Jaouad 1993: 116)

In her texts one can easily discern that her refusal to translate key words that express feelings and experiences is connected to her critique of the imposition of monolanguage in the colonial world. Language



and gender were not fixed categories of Eberhardt's thought – they were means of displacement through different worlds she wanted to inhabit. They were the main means she used to deterritorialise herself and make her universal claims about the unfair relations established in the neo-colonial world.

According to Connell, the 'Northernness' of Northern social thought has been produced by the use of four basic textual moves: 'the claim of universality, reading from the center, gestures of exclusion, and grand erasure' (Connell 2006: 258). In this text, Connell analyses the work of three late-twentieth century authors, James S. Coleman, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, to show how they all proceed by the idea of producing theories that do not have a place of origin. They all come from the North, but try to present themselves as supporting 'Northern' intellectuals' claims to the eyes of the reader. Proceeding by a similar path of looking at how intellectuals have produced their ideas and what their ideas mean in terms of temporal and spatial orientation, we have taken authors that are not widely known that have transited between Southern and Northern spaces at specific moments of transition in modernity. What unite those different moments and spaces, however, is the struggle against colonialism and the creation of imaginaries of emancipation. Problematising the argument developed by Connell, I wanted to show that Southern thought shares at least two of these textual moves that she identifies as key structures of the Northern thought: one related to the argument's pretensions to universality, and the other related to the gesture of historical erasure.

Both Simón Rodríguez and Isabelle Eberhardt claim the universal relevance of their ideas, struggles and remedies for the problems of domination. They both also talk only about the history they know. In this way, they also have deleted for critical readers that know other histories equally important alternatives that should have figured in their proposals. Simón Rodríguez is clear when he creates the basis for the formation of a shared programme of universal political and social emancipation that could be applied everywhere. The history that he knows and talks about is the history of domination in America. Although he had long experience of living in Northern countries, this space and its histories appear in his analysis only when it comes to comparing similar examples of domination developed inside the North. He does not talk at all about what was going on in others parts of the world at the same time. Using literary means, Isabelle Eberhardt also offers us a strong critique of Western colonialism. She did not

have any pretensions to be recognised as a social scientist. However, even without sharing this idea of producing a general theory that should be free from personal impressions and fictional characters, she is able to make universal claims about how different forms of social life have been destroyed by the imposition of colonial monolingualism, religion and power structures. As with Simón Rodríguez, she did not incorporate what she knew about other realities into her writing. She constrained herself to what she wanted to let us know. Both intellectuals have kept everything they regarded as peripheral to their main idea away from the centre of their analysis.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter we challenged two mainstream ways of looking at how history and imaginaries of spaces merged together in the formation of the modern world. On the one hand, we tried to problematise the naturalisation of the idea of Northern – very often treated as a synonym for Western – societies and their role in the formation and consolidation of the modern world; on the other hand, we tried to understand some limitations of the self-proclaimed anti-Western traditions that attempt to construct a strong distinctive Southern tradition of thought. Simón Rodríguez and Isabelle Eberhardt were taken in this chapter as authors whose life and work cannot be easily analysed by the tools of these two available conceptions of how to think about the experience with space and of displacements, and the structure of knowledge and interpretation, in modernity.

In the social sciences, the only studies that combine empirical investigation with theoretical analysis about the life in displacement of intellectuals and the changes in their interpretations are offered by Offe (2005) and Scaff (2011). Both authors develop different approaches about how ‘America’ has played an important role in the work of some European thinkers. The focus of Offe’s (2005) study is how for three European authors – Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber and Theodor Adorno – who went to the United States in different periods, the European path to modernity would become comparable to (or overtaken by) the one developed along the North American path. However, Offe (2005) does not pay attention, first, to the fact that spatial displacement in itself was a source of knowledge for those intellectuals and, second, that the meaning of ‘America’ for each one of those authors is different because of the transformation historically brought about

in the 'New World' in its relation to the 'Old World' (Mota 2015). It is fair to make this criticism because of the prominent role played by those three individuals in forming an understanding of the making of modernity. It should be mentioned that Scaff (2011) has offered a very detailed and descriptive account of Max Weber in the United States. Nevertheless, as in Offe's approach, the author did not consider movement as part of the knowledge process, quite apart from almost ignoring the importance of Weber's companion Marianne Weber in this process. The cartography that marks the meaning of South and North America for that matter was also created by the movement of those intellectuals.

The argument that we have developed is built upon the idea of looking at the specific kinds of displacements that modern subjects have made themselves or displacements that they have been subjected to, to think about the constitution of modernity itself. The discussion about Isabelle Eberhardt and Simón Rodríguez has hopefully helped us to elucidate the space of action in modernity as something that cannot be taken as a pre-established cartography. The modern experience with space is instead one which links time and space by displacement in the following way: to think about where you are, you need to displace yourself to the unknown in time – to a future – and in space – out of one's own place. It is a temporal and spatial discontinuity that constitutes the way human beings experience societal transformations. The imaginary of emancipation in modernity emerges from this exercise of displacement. It does not refer only to spatial displacements but also to historical transformation that leaves in suspension our certainty about the social world. What remains as an open agenda to critical social sciences is the analysis of the modern 'need' to understand foreign spaces and to interpret them in light of specific historical experiences. In our argument, it is by such means that modernity has been understood as a phenomenon of universal significance in different times and places.

## Notes

1. As it appears, for instance, in the work of Santos (2009) and Connell (2006, 2007).
2. Displacement in this chapter means not only the concrete movement of someone from a point in space to another point. It also means the displacement of a societal imaginary that affects the way that societies can understand themselves. The American divergence of the nineteenth century that led to the creation of the idea of South and North America can be taken as an example of a displacement of a

- societal imaginary (Mota 2015).
3. Isabelle Eberhardt was an intellectual who started to write very early in her life – her first writings were published as *Visions du Moghreb* when she was eighteen years old. Following a strategy that became part of the way she constructed herself as a person and intellectual, she used a male pseudonym to publish it. As Abdel-Jaouad (1993: 106) observes, it is unlikely that *Visions du Moghreb* would have been published if she had not used her male pseudonym of Nicolas Podolinsky. This is so because, first, she was talking about a topic that in her time ‘concerned only men’ – French colonialism in the Maghreb – and second, because the text was very critical of French colonialism and was to be published in a journal quite enthusiastic about the ‘French mission’ in North Africa.
  4. For Giddens, spaces should be understood as the abstract sphere of physical relations and space as the area of social life.
  5. The places Simón Rodríguez visited during his exile are: 1797 Kingston, Jamaica – where he changed his name to Samuel Robinson; 1798 Baltimore; 1801 Bayonne and Paris (France); 1804 Vienna; 1805 Paris, Lyon, Chambéry, Milan, Venice, Ferrara, Bologna, Florence and Rome – where he made a famous oath with Simón Bolívar at the Monte Sacro on 15 August; 1806 Paris; 1807 Prussia, Poland, Russia and Paris; 1823 London and Cartagena, where he also readopted his name Simón Rodríguez (Rumazo González 2006: 137–9). After coming back to America he kept travelling, fighting and working in different places. He moved around until the very end of his life, but he did not leave America again.
  6. Before he went into exile, Simón Rodríguez worked as a mentor for young students and he wrote a book about public education and political emancipation in America. In his first book he started to develop his method of education and writing, which would be regarded later as his main working approach: first ‘criticism’ and then ‘creation’ (Grases 1954: 5–27).
  7. Nonetheless, his writings start to appear just after he returned to America, especially by 1828. As has been argued by his main commentator, his thought cannot be located in any specific time or space. It was unsystematically produced, in many parts of the world and in different times (Rumazo González 2006).
  8. The author exemplifies the change in thought that is created by contact and movement with a personal analogy: ‘The fortune of my compatriots brought me to patriotism; patriotism brought me to Europe and Napoleon; Napoleon brought me to Bolívar [Simón Rodríguez met Simón Bolívar in France]; Bolívar brought me to Venezuela [thinking about his homeland again]; from there I started to see America, and in America I found the republics that torment me’ (Rodríguez 1840: 16).
  9. Republican education means to Simón Rodríguez that which produces a public authority and not a personal one. It is based on the principle of popular sovereignty and opposed to the idea of personal desire (Rodríguez 1840: 88).
  10. The first edition is from 1828, but the book was published in other important editions in the course of the 1830s.
  11. One of Eberhardt’s first writings – see note 2 for more details.
  12. Isabelle Eberhardt was born in Geneva as a Russian *Heimatlose*, a stateless refugee. This condition marked her earlier life with the impression of being a stateless refugee from a country in which Russian emigrants were seen as ‘suspicious’ (Abdel-Jaouad 1993: 95). In one of her first writings, a short story published

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- using the male pseudonym of Nicolas Podolinsky in the *Nouvelle Revue Moderne*, she expresses her condition of being *Heimatlose* in Europe and projected a vision of the Maghreb as a place of autonomy and self-realisation.
13. According to Ortega (2008), Eberhardt's tutor, who is regarded as being her real father, Alexander Trophimvsky, was a personal friend of Bakunin. He was a philosopher who had escaped from Russia because of his ideas and lived in exile with Eberhardt's mother and brothers. In their place close to Geneva, a house called *La Villa Neuve*, many people who escaped Russian Czarisms for political reasons found shelter. Isabelle Eberhardt was raised in this milieu, which strongly marked her view about exile, political boundaries, and the role of displacement and thought in the human imaginary.
  14. In 1888 Augustin de Moërder, Isabelle's brother, joined the French Mission in Algeria. By this time Isabelle had become increasingly interested in Arabic culture. In 1897 she went to North Africa with her mother Nathalie Moërder – she adopted a male name and male clothes to insert herself as she wanted into the Maghreb. Her mother died in Algeria. Isabelle came back to Europe when her economic situation deteriorated in North Africa. In 1900 she would go back to Algeria again but had to leave in 1901 because of her involvement in political activities against colonial rule. She returned to Algeria one year later, after marrying Slimane Ehnni, an Algerian man to whom she had been a partner for a long time.
  15. One could also take the view that Eberhardt wished to do as Durkheim did in his search for a place where religion had been experienced in its most pure form. Following this approach, one would be able to look at her displacement to the Maghreb and her conversion to Islam as a sort of anthropological strategy of immersion to know the other and to be able to make herself part of the object of analysis.
  16. She was fluent in French, Russian, German, Italian and Arabic. She could also read Latin and Greek.

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