

## There is no “East”:

### Deconstructing the idea of Asia and rethinking the disciplines working on it

*Elisa Freschi*

This introduction summarises the steps which led the scholars grouped in the Coffee Break group to undertake the project and then accompanied them from the awareness of the need to deconstruct the idea of geographic boundaries and, consequently, of area studies such as “Indology” or “South Asian studies”, to the need to deconstruct disciplines such as “Philology” or “Literature” themselves, since they are also historically and culturally loaded and risk to tell one more about their subjects than about their alleged objects of study. This *pars destruens* is followed by a *pars construens* suggesting as an alternative a situated epistemology which refutes to essentialise the “Other” and, on a more practical level, by the constant implementation of team work.

#### 1. Prehistory of the debate: the previous CBCs

The Coffee Break project started in 2009 around a group of young researchers who were not (or no longer) feeling comfortable in their Areal Studies departments. They did not think they had so much to share with people working on the same area of the world, but on completely different topics, while being at the same time separated from colleagues working on similar phenomena only because these took place in a different area. Thus, they organised thematic panels focusing on themes (e.g., on Manuscript Studies, with contributions about Greek, Arabic, Tibetan, Indian and Japanese manuscripts) instead of areas (e.g., on South Asia, with contributions on Harappan archeology, anthropology of the Andaman people, Bollywood and Persian poetry at the Mughal court).<sup>1</sup>

With time, however, they had to acknowledge that the chief argument against areal studies — namely that geographic boundaries are far too often a recent and arbitrary construction, which has little to say about what happens within them — also applies to disciplines. These are also arbitrary and historically determined constructions, too often dependent on a Eurocentric perspective on what is worth of study (think for instance of the reappearance of Virtue Ethics as a legitimate field of Philosophy after a long eclipse).

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<sup>1</sup> For further details on the initial motivations, see E. Freschi’s introduction in the Proceedings of CBC 1 (Freschi 2011). The programs of the past editions of the CBC can be read online at the website <http://asiatica.wikispaces.com>

Moreover, the same rethinking process can be applied again and again. For instance, in the fourth edition of the CBC Giovanni Ciotti has shown how even emic disciplines (such as the Sanskrit disciplines linked with Grammar, Phonetics and Semantics) are often not much more than a post operam construction, superimposed on a much more fluid reality where scholars study complex phenomena using different tools. Similarly, during the final round table of the same conference several contributors (Barbara Benedetti, Susan Hawthorne, and Andrew Ollett among others) have raised the issue that Eurocentrism is not the only way of dominating the Other and that no progress is made if one abandons the one in favour of the other (e.g., by completely embracing the perspective of the dominant class/gender/ethnic group,<sup>2</sup> or by implicitly postulating the supremacy of one theory, or of our contemporary judgement as if it were the definitive one).<sup>3</sup>

This all implies that one can no longer assume that her perspective, methodology and sources are the “natural” and “right” ones. Similarly, if one were to contend that she has no perspective or methodology whatsoever, it would be easy to reply that she is just automatically conforming to the dominant one (as explained in Mary Fulbrook's *Historical Theory*, chapter 3, which has been the topic of a round table led by Mark Schneider during the CBC 2).

Does this imply that there is no room left for any intellectual enterprise which aims at acquiring and sharing knowledge which is not only useful for a certain group, but also generally valuable? Should we end up embracing relativism as the only possibility? Should we consequently abandon any attempt at universalising our studies and only focus on our own autobiography?

## 2. Pars construens

The final round table of the CBC 4 started from these considerations and attempted to define the Coffee Break Project's approach to this conundrum and to its possible solutions.

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<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Bianchi suggested the parallel risk of Japanocentrism in Japan, which excludes the study of Japanese literature (under the name of “National literature”) from the general field of Literature theory.

<sup>3</sup> A fascinating, and perhaps uncommon example has been evoked by Artemij Keidan, who mentioned the case of Paulus Potter. Potter is now a less known painter, but his painting *De Stier* used to be the main reason whence people visited the Gemeentemuseum, the museum in The Hague where paintings by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Rubens and Van Dyck are conserved (cf. the praise of *De Stier* by George James Welbore Agar Ellis, the author of the 1822 *Catalogue of the Principal Pictures in Flanders and Holland*). Still, when confronted with this information, one tends to smile at the taste of our forerunners, as if our judgement about Vermeer, etc., were the definitive judgement, the one which will never be overcome.

On the one hand, we join a debate that has already been discussed for several decades.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the alarming fact that, e.g., colleagues working on European materials still do not feel the need to address Asian sources makes us aware of the fact that the issue still needs to be tackled in practice in each of our studies. Likewise, many male scholars still do not feel the need to read feminist critiques even when they are in the same field. This phenomenon is what another participant to the 2013 CBC, Susan Hawthorne, calls “dominant culture stupidity” (Hawthorne 2002), in the sense that dominant cultures run the risk to take advantage of their dominant position to become lazy and avoid engaging with alternative perspectives, thus ending up with depriving themselves of vital stimuli. In order to avoid this risk, members of the dominant group, as are European scholars, need to be intentional in exposing themselves to other approaches.

On the other hand, disciplines do have several practical and technical advantages (as an example, one might think of the analysis of paper and ink discussed by Michela Clemente in one of the panels of the CBC 4) and it would be hard to deny this role and to start from scratch every time.

Thus, if we still want to make communicable knowledge, we need to:

- Refuse to essentialise the Other: there is no “East” which is an altogether different “Other”. If we think this exists, it is only because we have constructed it.<sup>5</sup>
- Collocate ourselves:<sup>6</sup> renounce the idea of a neutral ground from which we, omniscient gods, can judge about the others, and instead be explicit about our methodological standpoints. This (never-ending) process will have the double advantage of making ourselves and our readers more aware of our possible biases and of possible antidotes. The choice of the word “process” is meant to show that we are aware of the fact that such a task cannot be completely fulfilled. But this objection should not lead one to think that, then, there is no point in even undertaking it. A linguist should make clear that her sources are, e.g., only contemporary Western Germanic languages, although she may not be aware of the fact that her preferences for Flemish beer has also subtly biased her in her choices.

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<sup>4</sup> One is immediately led to think of Foucault's and Bruno Latour's analyses and, in the specific case of South Asia, one cannot avoid thinking of the polemics against Orientalism initiated by Edward Said and developed in the case of India by Inden, and of the whole new branch of subaltern studies.

<sup>5</sup> An interesting example from a scholar who cannot be blamed of being a post-modernist relativist is Toru Oga's remark, during the CBC 4, that “Asia”, seen from Japan, indicates the states of the ASEAN community only, or, at most, it includes South Asia.

<sup>6</sup> The hint at the feminist idea of positionality has been made explicit by Paola Cagna during the round table at the end of the first panel of the CBC 4.

- Be ready to question our approach, including the discipline it is situated in. In order to achieve this purpose, the encounter with an Other is of chief importance, be it historically, culturally or only geographically remote.

Why should we engage in this painstaking process, instead of just focusing on our pet topics? Why, e.g., adding a long methodological introduction to a technical study on metrics? Because no subject is a given datum, a “natural kind” and it is, thus, our epistemological duty to overcome our laziness.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, if we start seeking for comparanda we will have the additional bonus of finding new resources, either in the sense of answers to the questions we had, or in the sense of new tools to deal with them (e.g., a vocabulary which is more apt to describe a certain phenomenon).<sup>8</sup>

Last, a good antidote to the laziness which makes one remain in the comfortable status quo of Eurocentrism is one of the CB project's leading ideas, i.e., team work. If you cannot undertake yourself the study of other languages, cultures, ages, etc., try at least to collaborate with colleagues coming from these different perspectives.

Team work has a positive impact also on another issue, i.e., the problem of disciplinary research. As already hinted at (§ 1, Freschi 2011) disciplines are a rigid frame, one over-loaded with historical and accidental elements, so that the advantages they offer (a methodology shared by a group of people, shared background knowledge and the like) are often overshadowed by the limitations they involve. Do philosophers of language really want to avoid discussing with their colleagues in Linguistics? Can linguists endure being cut off from research on living or dead languages, just because they are done within a different framework (e.g., that of “philology”?) Can philological analyses of mathematical treatises be sound, if done by people lacking a mathematical training? And so on.

But what is the alternative to disciplinary/disciplinated research?

- Multidisciplinarity is the juxtaposition of several disciplinary perspectives, without aiming at constructing a broader framework. It is good for a first encounter of scholars working on different topics.

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<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Ciotti, during the final round table, made us for instance consider the claim that language is among the topics about which a universalistic theory can be plausibly construed. This claim seems now non-controversial, but only because of the success of Chomsky's influence on the Academia. Not so many scholars would have subscribed to it a few decades back.

<sup>8</sup> Not to speak of the advantage of having our own presuppositions shaken and new questions risen.

- Interdisciplinarity, by contrast, aims exactly at the construction of such a broader framework. The problem is that interdisciplinary frameworks (also called “Transdisciplines”) often crystallise into disciplines (cf. the case of “Structuralism” or “Marxism”).<sup>9</sup>

Instead, we aim at a dynamic encounter of scholars who are ready to question what they are doing while keeping on doing it. We would like, for instance, to do philosophical work on texts while critically editing them with the help of all linguistic and philological tools. To avoid a supermarket-like form of eclecticism, which would end up with the choice of just what fits with one's own preferences or implicit biases, this must be done within an open team of different people, so that the component of critical questioning is never appeased. This is the rationale of the Coffee Break Project and of its lack of a closed “editorial committee”.

## References

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<sup>9</sup> See also van den Besselaar and Heimeriks 2001.

Elisa Freschi (University of Vienna and Austrian Academy of Sciences) studied South Asian studies and Philosophy. She works on Indian Philosophy (especially Mīmāṃsā and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta) and on comparative philosophy, epistemology, philosophy of religion, philosophy of language, deontic logic and on the re-use of texts. She is a convinced upholder of reading Sanskrit philosophical texts within their history and understanding them through a philosophical approach. Among her publications: *Duty, language and exegesis in Prābhākara Mīmāṃsā* (2012), *Rule-extension strategies: Ritual, exegetical and linguistic considerations on the tantra- and prasaṅga-principles* (2013), *The reuse of texts in Indian philosophy* (2015, ed.) and *Adaptive Reuse: Aspects of Creativity in South Asian Cultural History* (2017, edited with Philipp A. Maas).