

What is a Theoretical Terrain?

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A theoretical terrain is the result of an historical process. Presented to us by history, emerging from history's motion, a theoretical terrain is determined by class struggle. Therefore, a given body of theory does not come into existence without struggle. Those responsible for expressing the terrain and its boundaries, after all, are embedded in concrete social and historical circumstances: they are not pure Hegelian souls; their ideas, when organized, form the topography of a given theoretical terrain and are bound to their lived, social/historical activity.

A theoretical terrain is an organized body of conceptual thought that attempts to make sense of reality. A theoretical terrain may also contain sub-terrains, or provinces, that possess their own boundaries. Provinces can be apprehended as their own theoretical terrains, when necessary and for the sake of coherence, which is why it is possible to speak of the theoretical terrain of "religion" and the theoretical terrain of "christianity" although it is also true that the latter is a province of the former. What matters is the coherence of the boundaries: a theoretical terrain is that which is understood, and has been historically presented to us, as a body of theory with a comprehensible identity.

Being an organized body of theory that attempts to make sense of reality, a theoretical terrain could be religious or scientific, idealist or materialist, irrational or rational, and anything that passes for a coherent body of theory. Theoretical terrains that are scientific (and thus materialist) are the most important because they make sense of reality in a manner that other theoretical terrains, regardless of their aspirations, are incapable of providing. And yet scientific terrains are the most difficult to grasp because the nature of scientific truth is *procedural*—it is always open to the future, mediated by historical production—and so the boundaries of such terrains, while possessing general characteristics that appear the same, are always in flux. To be fair, the exteriority of most theoretical terrains, scientific or not, are in flux because they are historical constructs and history is change. Scientific terrains, however, openly recognize that change is immanent.

Most importantly, a theoretical terrain that is demonstrably scientific concerns the process of truth and proves this concern through its historical affects. No other type of theoretical terrain possesses the same claim to truth; those terrains that set themselves up in opposition to science are either religious, idealist, or a terrain consisting of *theory-for-the-sake-of-theory* that, by itself, lacks any truth value (and is sometimes proud of this lack).

Above all, a theoretical terrain is a metaphor imagined for the sake of philosophical clarity.

To practice philosophy is to engage in cartography—to explore and map the geography of a given terrain. This practice always involves fidelity, conscious or unconscious, to one or more theoretical terrains that might not be the terrain under investigation. Take, for example, philosophical interventions on the terrain of medical science that are driven by a post-modern suspicion of science in general: such a mapping will transpose the geography of another terrain upon the one that is being explored in order to make sense of the latter.

Hence, the practice of philosophy results in the drawing and redrawing of multiple routes within a given terrain. Moreover, philosophy is that which attempts to demarcate a terrain's boundaries as well as the boundaries of its sub-terrains, or what even counts as a province in the first place. All philosophical demarcations and routes lack neutrality; like the theoretical terrains themselves, these interventions are conditioned by the motion of history—class struggle—and this declaration, it needs to be admitted, is a declaration that *also* lacks neutrality. But presupposing a truth, even if it is the pithy claim that “there is no truth”, is not a neutral activity; the category of truth, by definition, cannot be neutral. Truth is that which excludes.

The only condition for philosophy, as with a theoretical terrain, is the motion of history. Here we definitely part with Badiou who, rejecting “historicism”, has argued that philosophy's conditions are science, art, politics, and love. But these conditions are the composition of various theoretical terrains, and every theoretical terrain is the product of history's motion. A theoretical terrain is presented to us but this presentation is not eternal: it is the product of real people producing in concrete historical circumstances.

Mapping a theoretical terrain involves declaring what does or does not belong to its landscape according to the logic of its boundaries. What provinces and topographical elements are an organic part of the terrain; what provinces are occupying colonies, invasions that need to be defeated; what elements produce famines of thought and conceptual contagions. Some terrains need to be metaphorically decolonized, or at least properly re/articulated.

Philosophical line struggle is thus the drawing of lines within a given terrain so as to respond to enemy lines of demarcation. Lines are first drawn through the terrain's exterior boundaries, so as to apprehend the general meaning, and then drawn as routes and interior

boundaries: the topography and geography is reconceptualized. If the terrain is scientific then this philosophical line struggle must wage war on all attempts to distort the exterior boundaries and, in this distortion, the mapping of terrible routes and provinces that deform the geography as a whole.

We know of the distortions that were thankfully defeated in other scientific terrains by those who were able to correctly apprehend the boundaries and, following this apprehension, mark the appropriate routes of truth's procession. In the terrain of physics we were once faced with the divergent mappings of the Newtonian or Leibnizian paradigm; the militant struggle in this terrain of science, however, transformed the former paradigm into a province at the expense of the latter. Correctly apprehending a terrain's boundaries, as they have been presented by history, is necessary: theorists developing these terrains do so on a regular basis; philosophers, who are often lagging behind, tend to declare their allegiance to a particular theorist or theoretical province and, in this declaration, clarify a given terrain according to this allegiance so as to end up on the right or wrong side of history.

Thus a theoretical terrain develops with or without the intervention of philosophy. In the drawing of routes and boundaries philosophy attempts to provide clarity, but it might provide clarity for an archaic topography, a geographic structure relegated to the past by the logic of the terrain's boundaries. And yet philosophy can play an important role in providing this clarity: the drawing of routes, of demarcating lines, forces meaning.

Indeed, this exercise in constructing an extended metaphor of a *terrain* is itself an example of the practice of philosophy. Imagining a *theoretical terrain* is nothing more than a useful model of reality designed to make sense of (to clarify, to force meaning) theory and philosophy's relationship to theory. Hence, this is not a theory about theory—after all, theory does not exist as a concrete assemblage of geography in the real world—but an exercise that is meant to demonstrate the practical function of philosophy. Since it is a model intended to demonstrate philosophy's function, it should not be treated as a meta-theoretical truth; like most analogies, its use is in its ability to force meaning but is not meaning in and of itself.

Obviously this model of the *theoretical terrain* is conditioned by my own fidelity to marxism. But I have already admitted to this conditioning and, most importantly, I have argued that all philosophical interventions within a given terrain can never be neutral. We can imagine

another narration of this model in which the narrator is not a marxist, and thus does not develop the argument in order to address the problematic of the marxist terrain; but within this imaginary, subtracting the points conditioned by historical materialism, the metaphor would still hold. That is, this is a model that describes the practice of philosophy and the only reason I have described this practice according to historical materialist categories—even beginning by arguing that theoretical terrains are the reflection of class struggle—is because neutrality is impossible. Theoretical fidelity is already proscribed in the description of philosophical practice.

To be conditioned by one's political fidelity, however, is to also be conditioned by history since our ideology is the affect of the social and historical position(s) we occupy. Our relationship to a theoretical terrain, is derived from our position in class struggle and how we interpret the meaning of this positionality: what classes and relations of force we align ourselves with, what ideology determines our consciousness.

The practice of philosophy, the intervention on a given theoretical terrain, is not found in an ahistorical box containing unconditioned tools that, once applied to the terrain in question, will produce the same answers if utilized correctly. Even the instruments of formal logic, that some positivists once imagined to be purely unconditioned, cannot achieve perfect consensus when applied to the same theoretical terrain—which is why analytic philosophers have been arguing over the smallest regions in theoretical terrains for decades without reaching the kind of agreement that a set of platonic instruments should produce. Hence the infinite debates over normative ethics where each philosopher utilizes precisely the same tools and accuse the others of faulty reasoning to the point that all or none are guilty of using their tools poorly.

None of this is to make the dubious claim that there is no such thing as the truth but only that all attempts to apprehend the process of truth in a specific terrain are conditioned by the motion of history which is itself an unavoidable truth. The philosopher, however, cannot assume that s/he can somehow transcend hir historical circumstances simply because of hir disciplinary training. Rather, philosophers are simply engaged in drawing routes with recourse to the tool box that they have inherited which may in fact be a terrain in and of itself.

Therefore, since philosophy is the only discipline capable of taking itself as an object (for if any other terrain took itself as its own object it would immediately be performing, by the very definition of this act, philosophy), we can also speak of a moment where philosophy itself becomes a theoretical terrain. In becoming a theoretical terrain in its own right, however,

philosophy is no longer philosophy-qua-philosophy but simply a reflection of philosophical practice that has ossified into a potential theory so as to allow for further philosophical practice. Take, for example, formal logic which is meant to be a methodology of political practice, used to draw routes in a given terrain; once it is treated as a terrain in itself it becomes something that is presented by the motion of history, a complex geography that *is*, and the same methodology that is used to trace second order routes across this terrain, which might at first seem recursive, is the act of philosophy.

Perhaps a creative way of interpreting Wittgenstein's conclusion in the *Tractatus*— “[w]hat we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”¹—is as an illustration of theoretical terrains and the lines of demarcation marked by philosophy. For if philosophy is nothing more than the tracing of routes through a given theoretical terrain, its authority to speak is limited: the tracing is often a silent *passing over* that leaves lines of demarcation; when we must speak it is only in fidelity to what has already been presented but what we have come to recognize as integral to the terrain we are exploring. And, in any case, only the theoretical terrain “speaks” in presenting us with a body of knowledge that we are led to investigate and, in investigating, force further moments of “speaking”.

When it comes to the terrain of marxism, as with every theoretical terrain, we find a complex palimpsest of routes, provinces, and landscapes which are all defended according to the purported logic of this terrain's boundaries. The role of the philosopher of marxism (as with the philosopher of physics) is to chart a coherent route through this treacherous terrain. Better yet, to use this route and this mapping as the basis for a theoretical people's war upon those elements that might be grasped as sites of occupation.

In the history of real-world cartography just as there were those who developed this skill in order to make sense of the geographies in which they lived or to which they possessed fidelity, there were also those whose drawing of boundaries and routes was in the service of conquest, imperialism, and the division of peoples. The former group intended their mapping to produce clarification for both themselves and others who shared or enjoyed the geography they were attempting to illuminate. The latter group, prominent in the period of modern colonialism, was

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §7

interested in only illuminating routes of conquest so as to ultimately disarticulate the terrain they were mapping.

Thus there are philosophers who have mapped the marxist terrain who, lacking fidelity to this terrain's boundaries, are similar to the colonial cartographer. The routes they have left demonstrate loyalty to hostile, or at the very least suspicious, theoretical terrains. Hence, as with the religious mystic's attempt to chart the terrains of "natural" science, these philosophical interventions produce confusion; their affects need to be apprehended, combatted, or erased.

At the same time, however, belonging to the school of cartography that possesses fidelity to the terrain under investigation does not guarantee precision: one can be a terrible cartographer who, despite his intentions, provides confusing and misleading maps. So there are also marxist philosophers who map this terrain in a divergent manner: competing provinces are declared, various routes are emphasized at the expense of others, the characteristics of the terrain's landscape are debated. Sometimes, even these routes that are mapped in fidelity to the terrain's boundaries echo hostile cartographies—hence those marxist delineations of the provincial geography of "Stalinism" that is amplified only to be effaced, but according to a delineation previously performed by imperial cartographers.

Those of us who believe, against current academic fashion, that the terrain of marxism is a *scientific* terrain are further forced to militantly defend these boundaries according to the concept of scientific truth. Like the militants of other scientific terrains and provinces that have fought to prove their historical veracity, philosophical intervention on the terrain of marxism necessarily struggles against dogmatism and revisionism. For every scientific terrain produces its own variants and combinations of dogmatism and revisionism: there will be those who refuse to recognize developing provinces, new sub-terrains, within their field because it calls all of their assumptions into question; there will be those who want to invent new provinces that contradict the overall terrain's boundaries; there will be those who desire to reprogram the entire terrain based on a mythical purity of its logic and, in so doing, refuse to recognize that a scientific terrain, by virtue of being scientific, is open to the future—a dogmatism that is also a revisionism because it rejects the logic of the terrain's exterior boundaries.

Conceptualizing marxism as a theoretical terrain that is also scientific, however, produces a level of coherence that is missing from all other conceptualizations of marxism. For to act under the assumption that marxism is not scientific is to concede that every province and route is

correct as long as it maintains the most banal fidelity to the exterior boundaries: along with the likes of Paul Hirst and Barry Hindess we could say that the theoretical terrain of marxism lacks definitive boundaries altogether and is thus open to every revisionist mapping that names itself *marxist*. Since the philosopher of a scientific terrain that takes science seriously would never make such a claim about physics, biology, chemistry, etc.—and thus begins his intervention from the position that there is something that makes these terrains distinct and that this something determines the terrain’s evolution—to assert that marxism is also a scientific terrain is to subtract the attempted interventions of those who would render it incoherent.

Moreover, apprehending marxism as a scientific terrain allows for a level of clarity that would otherwise be non-existent. If we argue that the exterior boundaries of the marxist terrain are scientific boundaries then we are immediately concerned with the procedure of truth that will affect all of our interior demarcations. As with any science, we are forced to establish the truth process that is particular to this terrain and such an establishment provides further clarity: marxism, or *historical materialism*, is the science of history/society which asserts that class revolution is the motive force of history/society. If we are to map interior routes and boundaries according to this exterior demarcation, then we will be forced to concede that class revolution is the foundational logic of our cartography. All routes and provinces should only be drawn according to the logic of this science; everything that is not a result of world historical revolutions and the revolutionary movements produced by these singular moments should be deleted from our mapping.

Hence the singularity of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism: three provinces, terrains in and of themselves, that exist according to the scientific logic of the general terrain’s boundaries. If the boundaries of the marxist theoretical terrain are understood as scientific, and this science of history is taken seriously, this can be the only result of a philosophical intervention that proceeds from such premises. The truth procedure of the terrain has produced these sub-terrains according to its exterior logic; only if we reject this terrain’s scientific status can we argue otherwise.²

² Indeed, the main reason I was drawn to maoism was because of a philosophical investigation of the terrain of marxism that took its core conception of “science” seriously. My reason for conceptualizing theory in terms of the metaphor of *terrain* is, admittedly, also an attempt to reconstruct how I ended up recognizing that Marxism-Leninism-Maoism was unavoidable and logically necessitated by the truth procedure promised by historical materialism.

Such a mapping provides a coherence, according to the boundaries, that is otherwise lost in the innumerable and often myopic attempts to explore this terrain. Fidelity to this coherence necessitates a metaphorical people's war within the terrain, a philosophical militancy that is aimed at erasing and effacing those routes and boundaries that are alien to the overall logic. Inversely, fidelity to an incoherent interpretation of the terrain's boundaries places the philosophy of marxism in a position of dogmatism, revisionism, or a combination of these two categories: routes and boundaries that defy the scientific logic of the terrain's exteriority will be drawn in a defiant act of colonial cartography.

And yet even with this general rearticulation of the terrain's geography there is still much that needs to be investigated: the distinction between these three general provinces, the meaning of the most recent province, the relation between the three that is both continuous and discontinuous, and the possibility of further provincial emergences. If anything, the model of the *terrain* should help us understand how these provincial moments in the overall theoretical terrain can and should be investigated as (sub)terrains in and of themselves.

As with any terrain, there will be mappings of marxism that forget they are only mappings, and thus pretend they are producing the terrain itself. Philosophical intervention does not produce theory; the terrain's development is not the result of a those interventions that act as if they are presenting the landscape's truth procedure simply by proclaiming that an overwriting of the terrain is correct simply by the act of marking routes. In the history of literal map-making, after all, there are innumerable examples of false cartographies that have attempted to proclaim a terrain's existence by recourse to an imaginary model: maps to El Dorado, of the kingdom of Prester John, and other fevered colonial fantasies that simulated real terrains.

A terrain emerges and develops through an historical process that philosophy must apprehend; the terrain of marxism is presented to us, ready to map, by a succession of revolutions, specifically world historical revolutions, in which a geography is concretized. It is the business of philosophy to make sense of this emergence and development, to work with what is already presented, rather than pretend it is engaged in forcing this emergence and development. The primary thing that is forced through the drawing of routes and boundaries is clarity and a choice of meaning, not the theoretical terrain itself. The question philosophers of marxism should be trying to answer is: *what is the interior meaning of this terrain, at this*

historical juncture, and what choices does it present us with? Not: what is the geography that we can create within a set of boundaries that we can also imagine? Whereas the former question allows for honest philosophical investigation and intervention, the latter question results in academic eclecticism and the simulation of marxism's truth process.

More than simply being a misleading act of cartography, this simulating type of intervention tends to resemble the hostile route drawing of the colonial cartographer in that it tends to deform the geography and neutralize its truth procedure. Imagine, here, the well-intentioned philosopher of mathematics who, despite not being a mathematician, attempts to tell mathematicians the meaning of their terrain and, confusing philosophical investigation with science itself, acting as if s/he can determine the foundational meaning of the terrain, the basis of mathematics itself... If any mathematician took such a philosopher seriously then the science itself would be hampered and confined by the intervention—which is why it is a good thing that most mathematicians did not pay attention to Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*.

Unfortunately, many marxist militants are often distracted by the musings of marxist philosophers who pretend, though separated from what produces their theoretical terrain, that they can provide this terrain with its foundations. Just as mathematics is better off without the direction of philosophers of math, marxism is better off without the direction of philosophers of marxism. Both can be *served*, however, by these same philosophers as long as they understand that their proper role is to draw routes and boundaries through what is already presented.

In the end, the practice of philosophy should be properly understood as an act of service to the theoretical terrain in which philosophy is being enacted. The faithful cartographer has always placed himself in service to the geography s/he is attempting to illuminate. Being faithful to this geography should mean the rejection of any fidelity to a project that intends to deform a theoretical terrain: we must remember that colonial cartographers were faithful first and foremost to colonialism above the project of cartography—this historical fact should guide our understanding of the metaphor of the theoretical terrain.

Therefore, to ask the question *what is a theoretical terrain?* is to also ask the question *what is philosophy?* and, in this asking, to force a connection between these two moments of inquiry. A theoretical terrain is presented to us through the momentum of history; philosophy investigates this terrain as an act of service. There should be no aggrandization of the latter at the expense of the former.