

Actualism, denial of coevalness and geographical living fossils: social and spatial issues of geology

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Like any other sciences, geology is not neutral. But we usually think about it like an activity of scholars, simply studying the deep time of Earth's history, and analysing rock formations. However, history of the geological discipline itself shows us that this neutrality needs to be examined. In fact, in the past centuries, geology was not alien to colonial enterprise led by European imperialism : some rocks, but also some spaces and bodies – black, autochthonous – were exploited and appropriated. They had some properties, and became commodities and properties, like any other mineral resources. This history, where geology meets slavery and colonialism, remains little discussed, even at a time when environmental issues and debates on the Anthropocene have confronted social sciences with geological narratives (Yusoff 2018).

Nevertheless, following the work of Elizabeth Povinelli, social sciences began focusing on the inert, on the geological world. To really understand the different forms that power could take nowadays, the Australian anthropologist invites us to go beyond biopolitics. She tells us how these forms of power can also play on the distinction between life and non life. As a complement to biopower, this *geotopower* was and is crucial in some epistemic and colonial violences indigenous people have suffered and are still suffering (Povinelli 2016). Their universe, their ontologies and their humanity have been denied, relegated to the realm of the non-existent (Santos 2016). They were lifeless and appropriable entities with exploitable properties (Yusoff 2018).

However, if geology, as an activity of knowledge, has shaped our western ways of seeing the world around us, we should be able to deconstruct this *geological gaze*, here in Europe and in Switzerland. My intention is to focus on a very important principle in geology, often implicit in representations of the Earth's history to the public: actualism. This principle makes it possible to explain the geological past from phenomena that we observe today. A very powerful and useful tool in earth sciences, its use is not without posing some epistemological issues (Von Engelhardt & Zimmermann 1988). I think that these issues are not restricted to geology alone, but can also have social and spatial consequences.

Basically, my hypothesis is that the comparison between the present and the past that we wish to explain can, in some cases, freeze spaces and (non-) human populations in a particular space-time, different from that of Western modernity. In doing so, we reproduce a negation of contemporaneity between their spaces, these populations, and our western point of view (Santos 2016, 178). Because a landscape resembles Earth's past, it becomes a kind of geographical living fossil. Therefore, we reproduce a (colonial) spatialization of time, justified by geological knowledge itself (Yusoff 2018).

In recent years, issues of knowledge's and institution's decolonization have reached Switzerland, in human sciences but also in public and politic arenas. Specifically, these issues raised questions about, for example, the conditions in which we acquired some "exotic" objects, in a country without any colonies, or what this could have meant in the construction of the otherness in Switzerland (Étienne 2020). Although these debates are very important, they seem to relate mainly to institutions or museums of ethnography, art, human history and, to a lesser extent, natural history; basically, we are especially interested in everything that resonates with the life – cultural artefacts, human or animal remains, etc. –, while the realm of the non-life – rocks, minerals, fossils – does not appear in the debates. But with the geontological distinction between life and non-life, geology also took part in the construction of otherness (Povinelli 2016; Yusoff 2018). Therefore, through a study of actualism and its temporal and spatial mobilizations, it would be worthwhile to include geological narratives and there representations in these discussions.

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