Subversive Archaism from Greece to Thailand: A Conversation with Michael Herzfeld

Michael Herzfeld

Our conversation was originally featured as an episode of The Channel. In the following excerpt, Herzfeld describes subversive archaism and some related concepts to explore their utility for contemporary cultural theory.

The new book is Subversive Archaism: Troubling Traditionalists and the Politics of National Heritage (Duke University Press, 2022). You introduce a whole bunch of fertile concepts in the book, but I think it’s probably best to start with the titular phrase. What is subversive archaism? It is, essentially, looking at some sympathetic phenomena of bureaucracies, especially those who are caught in the lower orders of their systems. But to get back to the subversive archaists, these people, for a variety of reasons, have come to conceive of themselves as representing national culture without the apparatus of state. So for them, there is a separation between the state (for which they either have contempt or which they think of as an obstacle) and the nation which they either have contempt or which they think of as hostile (and the nation is important. The real post-colonies, the ones that are unambiguously postcolonial – Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, the Congo – have no problem identifying a point of rupture with the colonial past. Now think about Greece and Thailand.

In the book, you’re really clear to say that subversive archaism is not exactly left-wing or right-wing in the way that we traditionally think of those terms, and it’s also not exactly populism. In what way does it relate to subversive archaism? One of the first conversations we ever had was about the phrase “crypto-colonialism.” What is this term, and how does it relate to subversive archaism? Countries that have been humiliated but not actually militarily invaded are claiming that they never actually were under the colonial yoke. To cut to the chase, for me, crypto-colonialism is a condition in which a country claims to be independent but has had to make sometimes humiliating sacrifices in order to maintain that independence. That relationship can only be maintained if a local establishment is willing, essentially, to provide the sort of governmental, if you will, that assures the colonial powers that it’s not advantageous for them to invade. The diagnostic feature of “crypto-colonialism” is the battle cry, “We were never under colonialism!” I want to emphasize that I don’t develop these terms in order to use them in some kind of dictatorial manner. For example, “Is China a crypto-colony or not? Is Greece? Is Thailand?” These essentialist questions are getting us nowhere. The question I would like to ask is, “What do we gain by thinking of a country as a crypto-colony?” I think that what we gain is a better appreciation of the extent to which culture can actually be used as a tool. It’s not soft power at all. It’s a form of structural violence that can sometimes damage a country in very humilitating ways. Here is the other feature that is important. The real post-colonies, the ones that are unambiguously postcolonial – Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, the Congo – have no problem identifying a point of rupture with the colonial past. Now think about Greece and Thailand.

The follow-up question is, “How would you characterize the politics of subversive archaism and these kinds of appeals to the past?” I don’t think that it fits any of these labels. I’ve also tried to distinguish it from James Holston’s “Insurgent citizenship” and from “social bonding” in Edward Said’s “Orientalism.” I think it is a new category. Again, I don’t want to be absolutist about this: all of these things should be understood as overlapping. You can probably find quite fascist versions of subversive archaism, but what strikes me about these two communities is that they are actually inclusive in ways in which the state often is not. So in Zoniana, I didn’t see any hostility to migrants, and they think of the right attitude to migrants as being their value of hospitality, on which they place a great deal of emphasis. More impressively, perhaps, in Pom Mahakan, after the tsunami in 2004, the community member made a speech in which she exhorted the residents to raise money with an auction of old clothes. Remember, this is a community of really poor people now being asked to raise money. But the president said, “We are in a community of suffering. That’s what we have in common. So we shouldn’t be looking at whether these people are Thai or foreign. We shouldn’t be looking at whether they’re Buddhist or Muslim. We share with them the experience of suffering.” That’s one reason why I would certainly distinguish subversive archaism, as I’ve encountered it, from right-wing populism. Again, to be very clear, these are categories for use, not for imposition. I think it’s useful to talk about subversive archaism because what it points out is a paradox: that, sometimes, people can play the state at its own game and especially use the state’s own language of culture to push back at the state. That’s really what this is about in both cases.