Book Review | Methanastasis

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The advance of modernity and technology has brought many benefits and challenges. Although, times and efforts to collate information have been accelerated over years, the veil of ignorance and dispersion of knowledge is wreaking havoc in the academy. One thing is the efficiency in understanding events, and the others the capacity of disseminating information.

On this conjuncture, Methanastasis seems to be a clear exemption of postmodern ignorance. Joaquin Meabe, philosopher, and Eduardo Saguier, a well-known Argentine historian, do not need presentation; their works and vast trajectory in academic research is synonymous of excellence. Their attachment to classical texts and an erudite education can be found in their new book Methanastatis. In this insightful bilingual work (Spanish-English), authors examine painstakingly the evolution of empires, their surface and consequent fall, to present an innovative view-point of the issue. From Levi-Strauss onwards, there would be not an all-encompassing model to understand the roots of identity and imperialism. Certainly, readers who open this book will find a master-full research based on history of empires ranging from 1700 to date.

Basically, Saguier and Meabe explain there were eight methanatasical waves, each one representing the authority and power of a defined Empire. This begs a more than interesting point: what does ‘methanastasis’ mean? This term was originally coined by the Greek philosopher Thucydides. Unearthed centuries later by Leo Strauss and Edward Gibbon, this philosophical tradition indicates that the process of war and peace are eternally balanced by means of cycles. At time a period is over, past events are constructed according to the imposition of a founding text, a great tale that bespeaks of the problems and situation of first
dwellers. The rupture and accommodation of empires are adjusted to cyclical processes. In the present, Empires vindicate for themselves the rights of other more glorious old structures. If Spain copied the tactics of military presence of Rome, United States, according to the archetype of England, expanded its frontiers by means of liberty and trade. These imperial tactics (based on pseudo-events) not only work as institutive laws, but also help reducing the uncertainty in times of crises. Any institutive order seems to be determined by the balance of powers, Saguier and Meabe adds. Unfortunately, few scholars have delved into the connection of legitimacy distribution and the right of strongest. In perspective, Thucydides found many centuries ago that orientation of ideologies depended on the dialectic of formation and disintegration of human groups. To put this brutally, “this disintegration shaped the adaptation and successive reproduction of the political obligation and its institutional forms and the related obligations and prerogatives in the new states that emerged starting with each revolution and/or world war” (p. 241).

The old problems of peace and warfare establish times of disorder which are adjusted into new political structures, which is cloned the previous opposite regime. Any great tale has seminal values which are replicated over decades, while other peripheral cultural values are negotiated. However, this does not respond to the question as it has been formulated above. An Empire is built after an intestine conflict or war. The apparatus of state is not only based upon ideological transmission, which are done by means of art and science, but also by the orchestration of discourse about otherness. What is beyond the boundaries is described according to the opposite of the proper values.

As the previous argument given, this book offers a good an alternative explanation about how human groups institutionalize the authority of past (history). In so doing, fabricated habits reconstruct expectation. To a greater or lesser degree, each empire is unique in its constitution, but if we pay the necessary attention of the metanastasis process four indicator arises:

a) The ideological dissemination of a proclaimed superiority over other folks.
b) A mythic imaginary of greatness based on past times.
c) A process of infra-valuation or discrimination respecting to old enemies.
d) The fear to the progressive loss of virtue and the corruption of human habits, as a result of progress.

Any imperial history has these components, and this constitutes the seminal contribution of Saguier and Meabe in illustrating how the formation and disintegration of founding institutive orders evolve. This brilliant work explores a “cultural matrix” which serves as legitimizing tale to take connection between individual experiences and a broader invented
The hard core dimension of this investigation is the specific review of the different periods in which the evolutionary sequences falls into disorder, paying attention in each case to the detailed disaggregation of the disciplinary task of the institutive social imaginary that has played a clear legitimating function”. (p. 248).

Even though they are not equivalent, the six empires’ crises (French, Iberian, Ottoman, Chinese, Tsarist and Austrian) refer to a combination of trade privilege, confrontation and decline. These permanent states of conflict are challenged in forms of sum-zero games where the power organizes the elements of Empires: territory, wealth, communication, and ethnicity. A long methanastasis process facilitates the surface and decline of these structures, because at a first glance it allows a decomposition of groups in contexts of complete antagonism. These events are not oriented into a total rupture with other structures, but a reconstruction, or in other terms, a reformulation centered on a new founding myth. From this process eight methanastic waves took room in diverse geographical locations and times.

1) First wave (1793-1803); second wave (1808-1830); third wave (1848-1880); fourth wave (1911-1918), fifth wave (1922-1945), sixth wave (1945-1952), seventh wave (1960-1970), eight wave (1989-2008). The main thesis in this project not only is that war vs. pace periods alternate, but the correlation of this process liberates the structural basis for Empires. Any social founding imagination seems to be determined by organizing and disorganizing forces where the institutive order plays a pivotal role. This is the reason why inter-empires resemblances remain. To be honest, Saguier/Meabe’s development exhibits an erudite conceptual framework, a seminal contribution to the history of war and empires, but not only this, it represents a vivid example that after all the rigorous research has not died. Methanastasis becomes in a more than recommendable investigation, which undoubtedly, will resist the passing of time.