

# Creolization of politics, Politics of Creolization: thinking of an “unthought” in the work of Edouard Glissant

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## Article abstract

Cet article cherche à montrer en quoi la créolisation laisse pendante la question de l'organisation politique d'une société créole ou du monde créole à venir. C'est dire qu'il y a là quelque chose d'heuristique que suscite la pensée de Glissant. Nous ne ferons qu'esquisser les problèmes d'ordre politique que fait naître la créolisation. Nous ne nous préoccupons pas de répondre aux questions qui seront formulées. L'intérêt de ce travail est dans le fait unique de souligner l'impasse politique à laquelle nous conduit la pensée glissantienne de la créolisation au regard de certains concepts de la politique qui, quoiqu'on dise, ne cesse d'être opérationnelle : ceux de l'Etat, de l'Etat-Nation, de la Terre ou de la Patrie, ceux de la Culture et de l'identité. Quant à cette dernière, on dit qu'elle ne se commande pas ; c'est dire aussi que sa vie est dure, sa durée est vitale.

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# Creolization of politics, Politics of Creolization: thinking of an “unthought” in the work of Edouard Glissant

Edelyn Dorismond

According to Glissant:

"Creolization says [that] cultural elements brought together must be "equivalents in value" for this creolization to actually take effect. This means that if in the cultural elements some of which are underrepresented compared to others, creolization does not really evolve. It happens, but on a hybrid mode and in an unjust manner."<sup>1</sup>

This definition has the idea that creolization seeks to manifest a "relationship", sharing, or cultural exchange. Equality, in this case, is one of the prerequisites for creolization : it is shaping as it also leads to a "community of equals which we refer to as the "Creole community"". However, this is complicated : we clearly understand that a community of equals is simultaneously a community of unequals, an unequal community. Indeed, Glissant acknowledges that a form of relationship in inequality or in domination can be established between cultures leading to a hybrid mode of creolization. Hybrid creolization, unjust creolization, in that it embodies "injustice" just as non creolized. Furthermore, equality is not the only element involved in defining creolization. Note that equality is the relationship formed between two equal agents, sharing, equally, heritages and cultural and intellectual properties, they hold for letting the creolization happen. The sharing then becomes an initiative to generate something "unpredictable" belonging to each of the creolized partners, to the Creoles and to none, in particular. Understood in these terms, creolization comes to pervert that is, driving beyond the roots, beyond the origins, destroying all traditional authorities whose being is the "hierarchy" in favour of the equality of origins, of beginnings. Creolization appears to ruin the "authority" and maintain the "power" and "domination" without creolizing them. It is about these things in the history that do not creolize and survive despite the noise and fury of advertisements to the future of the Creole countries, of the world. The paradox of creolization is manifested in the form of an unequal community of "equal" agents without origin(s), without tradition(s).

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<sup>1</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 17.

The assumption that we will support in this article is to show how creolization leaves hanging the question of the political organization of a future Creole society or the future Creole countries. This means that there is something heuristic, which generates the thought of Glissant. We will only outline the political problems that lead to creolization. We will not be concerned with answering the questions that will be formulated. The interest of this work is by concentrating only on underlining the political impasse, which leads us to Glissant's thought of creolization regarding certain concepts of politics, which, whatever one may say, continues to be operational : those of the State, of the Nation-State, the Earth or the Country, those of Culture and identity. On the latter, we say that it is not imposed ; furthermore, its life is hard, its duration is vital.

To make our process more understandable and coherent, we will have to involve an apparent dimension in the given definition of creolization by Glissant. We need to extend the creolization of a phenomenon of the colonial world – it started from the colonial slave plantations – to a phenomenon of the world, a global phenomenon. From this point of view, we are taking up this alternative definition of Glissant : "I refer to creolization as the meeting, the interference, the shock, the harmony and the disharmony between cultures, throughout the world-earth."<sup>2</sup>. The progress we are making through this additional definition involves allowing us to move from an event connected with certain specific parts of the world, of an event that concerned only, until then, particular cultures, the Caribbean cultures, to become 'everybody's business, the business of the world, the business-world. Creolization is the business-world that reflects in an incredible resonance of interweaving cultures. This extension, intensification of creolization is due to the technological development narrowing the temporal and spatial distances. By this rapid development of means of communication, cultures affirm each other while entering a long dynamic of *translation* and "inter-valorisation". A contact, a relationship that is also growing along with the intensification of communications. Therefore, "cultures" begin by losing their "roots"; their "origin". By dint of contacts, they are becoming perverted by losing the legitimacy of the origin. The world that is creolized is through the arrival of "composite" cultures, that is, cultures composed of several contributions of equal values making any superiority of origin impossible over another, erasing *the originality* itself. Being from various cultural backgrounds, the composite culture is nothing, and cannot claim from any of them, but from all identifiable cultural backgrounds.

"Cultures which I shall refer to as composite, whose creolization is somehow happening before our eyes. These cultures do not generate from Creation of the world, they do not consider the foundation myth of a Genesis."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 195.

Finally, creolization will allow invalidating the great myths through which colonization campaigns were engaged in history. Should we merely consider creolization as the meeting of cultures without questioning ourselves on how this meeting happens? How do cultures meet each other? This question brings us back to several answers each depending on the sense that would be laid out or prioritized. The modality of meetings between cultures may relate to the meeting itself or about how the meetings can happen. If we look at the means of meetings, we might think of the television, the internet that represents the advanced forms of "mediating", sharing what is specific and what is already. The internet and the television are forms of translatability through which the translation, as a condition of Creole, is set up. The tourists, immigrants, the "stateless persons" or the pariahs also participate in this sharing ; they are agents of the meeting, therefore, of creolization. Glissant pays little attention to immigration. This could be due to the clear distinction that the author establishes between creolization and globalization. If we understand immigration as an outgrowth of globalization, it is becoming clear that the immigration has nothing to do with a cultural relationship ; it is the economic consequence of the economic expansion, which is globalization. Yet it is in the light of this figure that we have to raise the question concerning us here.

"What we call Globalisation, which is therefore harmonisation to the bottom, the reign of multinationals, the standardization, the uncontrolled ultraliberalism in global markets (a Corporation advantageously relocating its factories in a distant country, a patient does not have the right to buy drugs for the best value in a neighbouring country), and so on, everyone can appreciate, this is the procession of common places rehashed by all, and we repeat endlessly, but also, all that is the negative side of a wonderful reality that I call Globality."<sup>4</sup>

Globalization is the opposite of creolization or globality, as it promotes harmonisation, a levelling upwards of cultures, a standardization of cultures that puts creolization in difficulty. The domination that is active in globalization contravenes the advent of the Creole countries. Either the world becomes globalized or it creolizes. To fully understand the position of Glissant faced with globalization, and especially referring us to the work being done in the social sciences for developing globalization processes, it becomes apparent to argue that creolization is not, it is evolving, it is *approaching* as is always publicised, never happened. How do we save creolization from "globalization, conceived as dismissal" that would lead to a "standardized dilution"? Firstly, we must remember that creolization is possible in the very move towards globalization. However, an essential concession is to be made : we must admit that creolization, half-baked or hybrid, can

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<sup>4</sup> Edouard Glissant, *La cohée du Lamentin. Poétique V*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 15.

happen in an unequal relationship, and hence creolization arises from globalization. This is what it seems, Glissant gave in to the uneven encounter when he recognizes that :

"In countries that are creolized like the Caribbean or Brazil, where cultural elements have been brought together by the settlement pattern that was trafficking in Africans, the African and black cultural components were routinely inferiorized. Creolization still exists in these circumstances, but leaving a bitter, uncontrollable residue. And almost everywhere in New America, it was necessary to restore the balance between the elements brought together, first by upgrading the African heritage, this is the so-called Haitian indigenism..."<sup>5</sup>

Creolization is what results from the uneven contact of cultures. In this case, the basic concept is the contact or the relationship that is built between cultures. This contact is also active in the movement of immigrants; also involved in creolization because it is mainly due to them than through the television or the internet those real contacts are made. And this, according to the fact highlighted by Glissant when he thinks that he who resists globalization is the "trace". "But for all of us, the trace that goes from its place to the world and returns and still goes and still returns indicates the only permanence."<sup>6</sup> Creolization or globality follows the globalisation trend, by resisting it ; by bringing with it the "trace", we bring what allows to steer itself away from standardizing globalization. We resist attempts to create *atavistic* identities, because globalization, by denying the other in its specificity, also denies its trace, its history, its memory that is stubborn, that is resistant. The mode of resisting globalization takes the form of imagination and "poetics". It is through imagination that we must start to begin a new Creole world, a new Creole world. Hence, globality will have to thrive more on "poetics" than on politics. Poetics is a new way of entering the "new region of the world". A new region marked by the "trembling", the world-chaos, the opacity: it is called *All the World*. Globality requires a *thought of the trembling*, a thought of the relationship of all regions across the world without hierarchical scheduling or overbearing. Globality is the world-chaos, the world without scheduling universalizing the world as much as it ceases to be the place of domination and hierarchization. Finally, it is the community of equal cultures drawn from uneven contacts. The relationships are intersecting. What works is not a story or a memory that gathers stories about the origin, the *atavistic identities* or the identity substances, but creative meetings with stories, memories (which would become "Creole"). The world with no origin, it becomes the uncertain space, it is for this reason that it is trembling. The thought of the trembling world is of a world that is losing its origin to disintegrate into a chaotic, turbulent "present". The companies cease supporting a common ancestry, an identity supported

<sup>5</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 196.

by this linear genealogy : everything has to be read in the oblique, in the broken line, in "the vanishing lines"<sup>7</sup>.

This way of understanding the world corresponds with what we mean by utopia, a happy place but the yet to be achieved fraternity experienced in the Creole translatability of cultures. What the author would give us accepting that the utopia is what is lacking in the world. Furthermore, that the utopia is absent from the world, Glissant to tell us little about it, what matters to us is what it provides us as a means to achieve this dismissal, the good place? How do we adapt the creolization to the globalization outside any utopia? How in place of or next to a poetics is it possible to imagine a globality politics or a political globality?

We take the immigrant as a figure of this movement, which is the condition of globality. We recognize that the term is not fundamental to Glissant. But we believe that the immigrant as much as he is the figure of the changing world deserves to be reflected in an issue relating to the movement and the meeting as conditions to the loss of origins. This is only a pretext for confronting creolization with the logic of politics, which is primarily that of managing companies with respect to the unity<sup>8</sup> understood in the sense of an ontological category of modern politics. How do we achieve one of the multiple? If creolization is the modality of the multiple, especially the "diverse", the "diversal" as opposed to the uni-versal, if it does not generate its own politics, we have the right to exploit its heuristic capacity, by confronting the politics whose passion is achieving one. How can creolization exist in a political space? The question presupposes that politics is dealing with Creoles, people who met, so, who do not fulfil the conditions of nationalities and cultures. So, this entails thinking about the Creole way of living together. Because the political or religious authority is linked to a "beginning", an "origin" or the power of reason to establish, how can we establish a Creole authority? Having no precedence or precedent the Creoles are they

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<sup>7</sup> It is clear that this way of thinking about creolization covers the points of the deterritorialization philosophy of Deleuze, which, incidentally, is quoted by Edouard Glissant. Even if he denies the importance of the way, Deleuze thinks about the relational dynamics of things from the "rhizome".

<sup>8</sup> Let us quote some passages of Gérard Mairet in the text : *Le principe de souveraineté. Histoire et fondements du pouvoir moderne*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997. First, he defines politics as "the human activity whose true purpose is to integrate and glue the individuals of a historically defined human community." Then, he goes on to state that politics is what is *common to individuals*. So "politics is about being common people." But what ontologically bases this politics, what it has to achieve ? "Being common modern has the dual legal and ontological meaning of this word, within a relationship of one and of the multiple. And the nature of this being is to be one. This means that modern politics abhors the multiple. The variety, the number, in a word, the multitude, which is the multiplicity of individuals, for each of them and for all, its passions, its desires, its strengths and its powers, is divisive. Rather, the one, the oneness is a factor conducive to unity. (...) In the Western tradition, the political principle seems to be permanently installed on the foundations of an ontology of the one." (pages 185-187).

not condemned to each be their own authority, their own standard<sup>9</sup> bearers? In fact, our questioning makes sense as the "stateless person", the immigrant or the undocumented migrant. The immigrant is also a *stateless person*, unwelcome, homeless, any being that national laws grant a status of exceptionality, with whom it is possible to build "naked" relationships (see Giorgio Agamben)<sup>10</sup>. Because he is not naturalized, citizen or *native*, the immigrant status suggests the original meaning of the nation related to the birth and to the land, which also is the source of state power. Nation and land, two concepts originating from presupposition. The land, from a phenomenological<sup>11</sup> perspective, is the original power, mother earth of human existence where our belonging is rooted. And the birth reflects our advent of the origin, our occurrence in the origin.

What creolization has led to, understood as the trembling of the world is what we see as a loss of the origin, an occultation of the beginning that benefits the *spread*, of the impossible origin, of the absolute obliteration of the root. In a political perspective or about the organization of living together, this way of taking leave of the origin or the beginning has very severe consequences. We recognize that politics, such as practice of living together draws its legitimacy from a certain authority. Political authority is the ability of a body as being able to live together while maintaining the unity of society. This means that the authority is the fundamental concept of politics. What about the authority, itself? The concept of authority interests us as it allows us to link the beginning, the origin with politics to finally demonstrate the political involvement of creolization.

According to Hannah Arendt, authority becomes an empty concept and a political experience of the times that has no real concrete meaning. It is the analysis of this dissolution that makes her wonder: "what is authority?" Hannah Arendt intends to understand the authority in a specific form; this will not be understanding the "authority in general", but to grasp the meaning of authority in the "specified form". Her approach is historical: "that is why, I intend to reconsider what the authority has been historically, and the sources of its strength and its significance."<sup>12</sup>. A historical approach that will come up with what was the authority and allow us to understand the political crisis in the general crisis of culture. The authority must be distinguished from coercion and "persuasion through arguments": it is not the strength and in some ways repugnant to equality. "If we really need to define the authority, then it must oppose both coercion and

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<sup>9</sup> We will try, elsewhere, to outline similar problems of creolization with regard to ethics. It entails knowing the forms of normativity that are likely to be built in a Creole society, as the "values" also face the erosion of subversion of creolization.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. I*, 1997. *Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue*, Paris, Seuil.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Edmund Husserl, *La terre ne se meurt pas*, Paris, Ed. Minuit, 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *La crise de la culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, 123.



persuasion through arguments."<sup>13</sup> The basis of the authority is the "hierarchy". Indeed, the "hierarchy" comes from two Greek words "hieros" (sacred) and "archè", command and commencement, the hierarchy for this reason is being held by someone in respect of the priority of its situation within the bounds of time. It is the sacred nature that we recognize someone with because of his seniority and thus his ability to command<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, the report of the authority to the hierarchy is established, but it is the report of the authority in the beginning that is clarified.

"The authority rested on a foundation in the past which always served as the cornerstone, giving the world the permanence and sustainability that human beings need precisely because they are mortals – the most fragile beings known<sup>15</sup>".

Articulating this consideration of Arendt's inspiration about what we were holding on globally and its trembling, we conclude that creolization is celebrating the time of the disappearance of power and authority (creolization is the fulfillment of a promise of modernity to put an end to traditions). As such, it is politics that is being undermined, it is the living together as much as it is calling for a "cornerstone", a certain "permanence" that is disintegrated. The disintegration of this cornerstone, of this backbone of the world where the fragile man is holding on to ruins the very idea of the world. How to think about the world if the order is no longer, if everything is chaos, i.e. when no center is the key to the world activity. We appreciate the interests of a thought of the *All the World*: it shifts the centres of gravity, perverts them by ruining them, it disorients the course of the unpredictable, unforeseeable world. As a consequence, it helps breaking the great stories, the perceptions that outlined the history of the West. Arendt, herself, criticized the consequences of Western rationality, rationalism inspiring the great Western stories whose consequences are seen in the extermination of the American Indians and of the Carib Indians, the Slave Trade and Nazism. Glissant goes deeper, his criticism does not involve a sorting, sorting out the good grain from the chaff, it perverts, it deflates the reason by replacing the imaginary, the imagination, he turns away from the political rationale by creating a *poetics of the relationship*.

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<sup>13</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>14</sup> The objection that we can make by mobilising this use of Hannah Arendt is that of noting that the authority presented by Arendt was thought in a context of the Greek tradition. This is only partly true: and we can encounter in Caribbean societies, for example, the survival of this relationship with the "old", with the "old", it is possible to hold that modern politics does not undermine the "origin" towards "rational basis"; the origin has been criticized as historical inception backed by the ability to determine the founding capacity of subjectivity. In the sense, that what is denied, it is not the origin as unfounded beginning while basing the world, but the historic beginning posed as the foundation of subjectivity.

<sup>15</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 126.

The trembling of the world is its uprooting, the world has no roots, no origins. How is politics still possible at this moment of creating stories ?

Politics can face two ways. The first is what is taking shape now. It is, recognizing an improvised response to this major paradigm shift in the world order that passes from a scheduled order to a chaotic order. This response is set about practising undermining of identity from social groups or sociological minorities undertaking struggles in which they force the politician to consider their specific identities and cultures. In return, politics leads to legitimacy tossing about between the clear affirmation of a national identity and a soft integration policy, in order to avoid shocking any sensitivity.

The second way, which remains to be explored, is to first find another form of foundation for the political practice, to base the living together on something other than the beginning or the origin, ruined through postmodern thinking. The essential question is to know what authority can do today ? What is the key source of legitimacy that the lack of "place", or legitimizing instance caused by subversive crossing of cultures, has become our present<sup>16</sup> reality ? In reality, what disappears is not the authority on its own. What disappears is the authority that was based on rhetoric, by what Glissant calls, the myths in the book of Genesis. There are only stories today ; they play out and invalidate each other<sup>17</sup>. None has a monopoly on relevance to the conduct of our living together, of our plural-life. Myths vary. Each has the authority that it recognizes. So, the authority becomes a diffracted authority, an authority that generally bases nothing, but particularly. So, politics would be what Glissant calls the *Relationship*, about which he says :

"It is the quantity realized from all the differences of the world, and is opposed to the universal which was the reference to the achievable quality of a world absolute. The relationship allows us the passage, the crossing, between all the differences in the world, whereas the universal, until recently, was trying to abstract these differences into a truth that would get to the absolute truth of Being. The place is what within the Relationship, the quantity realized from the differences in the world, is essential, by the fact of the place we see that the

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<sup>16</sup> Here we mean "legitimacy" from a different point of view to that supported by Habermas who understands that as a result of the "colonisation of the lifeworld", where he traces the causes of the legitimacy crisis. Cf. *Raison et légitimité. Problèmes de légitimation dans le capitalisme avancé*, Paris, Ed. Payot, 1978, p. 11-20.

<sup>17</sup> Despite his optimism it is this instance that can lead us to the *Ethique reconstructive* of Jean-Marc Ferry who showed that from the "registers of speech (narrative, interpretive, argumentative and reconstructive) it is possible to reconstruct together the history of different histories. Sharing of pain or trauma should be made possible through dialogue and shared mobilization of memories. The problem with this view is that of not having asked about the very possibility of dialogue in the context of suffering or trauma, which, sometimes, blocks the "speaker".

Relationship is never a dilution of individuals, a mishmash where everything blends and dissolves. The Relationship is the quantity achieved in all places throughout the world."<sup>18</sup>

Politics will have to be the organization, which will allow individuals to move, to go. The authority will be the ability to allow citizens to go without being punished for their origin, to be conveyors between the open and different origins for all who wish to recreate their worldviews with those of other origins. It is to the politics of the Nation and of the Earth that the State must abdicate. What can be a political transition, transit ? How can we pass if it comes from nowhere ? What is the part that forces any transit to its otherworldliness ? We are faced with an outward and inward thought. What can be outside and inside politics, what is outside inside ? Finally, what can be "global" politics ?

*Translation of the French original by Amudha Lingeswaran.*

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<sup>18</sup> Edouard Glissant, "Images de l'Être, Lieux de l'Imaginaire", in *Che vuoi ?, Regards cliniques sur la loi*, Nouvelle série n°25, Revue du cercle freudien, 2006, p. 220 (available online).