



PROJECT MUSE®

Empire's Present

Simon During

New Literary History, Volume 43, Number 2, Spring 2012, pp. 331-340
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/nlh.2012.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0017)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nlh/summary/v043/43.2.during.html>

Empire's Present

Simon During

ONE WAY OF BRINGING TOGETHER Robert Young and Dipesh Chakrabarty's timely essays is to recognize that Young wants to hang on to postcolonialism's politics and analytic apparatus, while Chakrabarty wishes to move forward, not so much to leave postcolonialism behind as to situate it alongside ways of thinking that are better able to deal with current circumstances, and with anthropogenic global warming (AGW) in particular. Young's essay makes its case for postcolonialism's continued vitality by pointing to situations where he believes it remains pertinent, that is, where the "politics of invisibility and of unreadability" come into play as they do when hegemonic groups fail to recognize the insecure, disempowered lives lived by the stateless, much of the Islamic world, and indigenous peoples. On the other side, Chakrabarty subtly sidelines postcolonialism, arguing (in his essay's last section) that with AGW we have entered a new historical epoch that requires us to come to terms with a category over which postcolonialism has little command, namely "the inhuman-human."

My response to the difference between the two pieces is that Young's essay underestimates the degree to which recent historical events have indeed diminished postcolonialism's analytic and political force, while Chakrabarty's overestimates the degree to which AGW marks a historical break in the same period. This is to imply that the essays connect around the irony by which the current global system of state capitalism has been compelled to confront its limits at the exact moment when, after assigning colonialism to history, it became the world's only fully legitimated governmental system.

We can begin with Young's arguments for postcolonialism's continuing force. For him, postcolonial theory's usefulness will only cease when colonialism's "transformative energies" no longer operate on the contemporary global order: "The only criterion that could determine whether 'postcolonial theory' has ended is whether . . . imperialism and colonialism in all their different forms have ceased to exist in the world, whether there is no longer domination by nondemocratic forces . . . or economic and resource exploitation enforced by military power, or a refusal to acknowledge the sovereignty of non-Western countries, and

whether peoples or cultures still suffer from the long-lingering aftereffects of imperial, colonial, and neocolonial rule, albeit in contemporary forms such as economic globalization" (20).

This way of thinking assumes that postcolonialism is a unified field. But that, after all, is questionable. From its beginnings, postcolonialism was constructed around internal divisions of which probably the most important was that between its "reconciliatory" and its "anticolonialist" wings. The first set out modes of analysis that undid the hard opposition between the colonized and the colonizer. To simplify somewhat, reconciliatory postcolonialism's aim was to recover and analyze the history of the ambiguities, mimetic plays, hybridities, and loops through which the two sides—colonizer and colonized—prefigured, or arrived at, accommodation. On the other side—Young's side—anticolonialist postcolonialism remained attached to the emancipatory drive of the postwar struggle against formal colonialism, which it treated just as an oppressive force.

The obvious difficulty for anticolonialist postcolonialism, then, is that colonialism as a governmental structure is receding into history. As a consequence, it turns to something like the French distinction between *la politique* (formal politics) and *le politique* (the political considered as an autonomous field). For postcolonialism, *la politique* of colonialism has ended but *le politique* of colonialism continues to shape the global system.

Does it? At the very least, colonialism's presence in current situations is often a matter of dispute. Take the case of NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo. Was this, as many claimed, a case of colonialism *après la lettre*? (Régis Debray compared it to France's war against the Algerians.) Or was it a humanitarian intervention on behalf of Kosovo's Islamic people's human rights? Similar arguments have occurred whenever Western powers, or international bodies dominated by Western powers, have intervened supposedly to liberate peoples from tyrannical rulers, as, for instance, in 2011, when NATO enforced a no-fly zone in Libya. Likewise, postcolonial leaders like Robert Mugabe use the old rhetoric of anticolonialism to demonize their enemies who claim to be fighting for their freedom and rights. Whatever one's position on these cases, the dispute over how to assess them can't just appeal to the colonial paradigm, since what's at stake is whether that paradigm is relevant in the first place.

Similar difficulties appear in less contentious, if no less important, cases. For instance, Young argues that the rise over the past couple of decades in people who live and work in states in which they have no citizenship rights is to be understood as a fruit of colonialism. But, as he also recognizes, this precarious life is not just lived by those who are fleeing the peripheries for the center (to use the language of

world-system theory) but by those who move from one periphery to another. Indeed what organizes the formation of a global precariat (to use Pierre Bourdieu's term) is not quite colonialism, but the worldwide system of democratic state capitalism in its contemporary form. And if the global system of democratic state capitalism is a historical product of colonialism, it is also a product of other processes and technologies independent of colonialism. In fact many of the postcolonized today find a comfortable berth in democratic state capitalism. It is worth pointing out, for instance, that the political party that represents New Zealand's indigenous peoples—the Maori Party—is currently in power in coalition with a fiercely neoliberal party. Why has it joined the coalition? Partly best to protect the considerable capital sums that have accrued to *iwi* (tribes) by virtue of their successful appeal to the 1840 Waitangi treaty by which Maori seceded sovereignty to the British. How does anticolonialist postcolonialism apply here?

The problem is more than casuistical because democratic capitalism is itself supported by many of the values that motivate Young's critique of it, including democracy itself. He appeals for more democracy, believing that will weaken the politics of invisibility. But state-based representative democracy in particular is not an enemy of the political system in which the precariat, Islam's social and intellectual complexity, and indigenous people's interests may be neglected or made invisible. It is a key element of the system that enables such indifference, especially when voters demand immigration laws to be tightened and citizenship's privileges to be protected. There's no reason to believe that more direct forms of democracy would alter this. Nor, in this context, should we forget that the moment of Western Europe's high imperialism was also the moment of its first mass democratization.

Young's understanding of postcolonial theory's current applicability further depends upon a moral judgment of colonialism. As I have said, he thinks of it just as a process of expropriation and domination. But again, arguably, that's not exactly how it was. No doubt, and unforgettably, colonialism involved expropriation after expropriation, oppression after oppression, atrocity after atrocity. Nonetheless, even among those very aware of this, it has long been recognized that there is also a strong case for arguing that empire brought benefits to its subject peoples too. Marx himself came early to this cause. In his report on "The British Rule in India" for the *New York Daily Tribune* in June 1853, he noted that Britain was bringing about Asia's first "social revolution" by obliterating old forms of Indian social organization. This revolution was a consequence "not so much [of] the brutal interference of the British tax-gatherer and the British soldier" as of "the working of English steam and English free trade."¹ At this point Marx ascends to an exhilarating flight of rhetoric:

Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness those myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organizations disorganized and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities . . . had always . . . restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. We must not forget the barbarian egotism, which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of the population of large towns, with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events. . . . We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalization of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Kanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow.²

It is difficult today to cite this passage without being offended by it. But let's pause to examine it more closely. Marx contends that empire brings substantial benefits, even if consideration of these can only be mixed with a moral horror at imperialism's brutality. His second point is that empire's transformative power does not, however, depend on violence or state control but on political economy, that is, on imperialism being a vehicle of liberal capitalism. And his third thesis is that empire's benefits are not so much material as intellectual and political. Empire ends social and moral passivity and ignorance; it opens the world to cosmopolitan exchanges; it secularizes so as to extend human control of nature and contingency. Downplaying Marx's confident secular humanism, we can say that what empire brings to populations restricted to local traditions and affiliations is the possibility to participate in the world at large, critically or not. Or to use another modern terminology: imperialism is an agent of development, where development is parsed as the extension of freedom or at least as "the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states," to cite Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom*, an important and (within limits) persuasive contemporary work, insufficiently acknowledged by postcolonialists, which implicitly continues Marx's analysis.³

One or other version of the "benefit of empire" thesis is now mainstream. Manmohan Singh, India's current Prime Minister, can, for in-

stance, quite casually declare that the “idea of India as an inclusive and plural society” was inherited from the Raj. I make this point fully aware of the most recent and most public debate over the issue in the West—that which followed the Nicolas Sarkozy’s UMP party’s 2006 passage of a law requiring French schools to teach colonialism’s positive values, a law which, however, was quickly repealed after widespread protest. But the insensitivity of extreme articulations of the benefit of empire argument like the UMP’s or, to take another example, like Niall Ferguson’s in his 2006 BBC television program “Empire: How Britian Made the Modern World,” do not constitute sufficient grounds for dismissing the argument wholesale. It is better to turn to work like David Abernethy’s careful, sociologically grounded examination of empire’s various moral evaluations in his recent book, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance*. Surveying a wide range of evidence, Abernethy concludes by arguing, like Marx, that colonialism was not the “sum-total of its worst case scenarios,” and that it nurtured new ideas that were “not only comforting and enlightening but empowering.”⁴

There are, however, important methodological difficulties with the benefit-of-empire argument. The value of the utilities that empire has indeed brought about (for example, better life expectancies, better access to education and mobility across large sections of the population, etc.) cannot be measured against the violence, death, and suffering it inflicted on the way. Nor can its benefits be set against the effects of its fragmentation of cultures and identities. In both these cases, we are dealing not with equivalent, calculable quantities but with incommensurables. And of course the assessment of empire is necessarily made by appeal to values that adhere to our current global system, not to those of the cultures it has subsumed. That makes for a conceptual impasse.

Moral judgments for or against empire must also contend with the fact that imperialism/colonialism was not enacted by a single agent. It was driven forward by all kind of groups, sometimes including indigenous peoples themselves, and was continually interrupted by contestation of its policies and principles, both from within and without. Crucially, imperialism rarely proceeded through moments which allowed clear choices between itself and an alternative. Rather it moved forward fitfully, sometimes in naked expropriation and sovereign annexation; sometimes through acts of exchange and mutual benefit; sometimes blocked (and thus, paradoxically, secured) by central state intervention on behalf of indigenous peoples against unscrupulous settlers; sometimes in a collapse caused by disease; sometimes as a more or less unintended byproduct of scientific expeditions or Christian missions; sometimes by way of acts of careless primitive accumulation; sometimes, as I say, in manipulations of,

or violence against, one group of indigenous peoples by another. Cases of clear decisionism by states are relatively rare, although they include Commander Perry's ultimatum to Japan to open its ports in 1853; and from outside the West, China's Ming rulers forbidding Zheng He from further expeditions in the late 1420s. Nonstate players could be, of course, less circumspect. Take, from the anticolonialist side, Alexander Dalrymple and Benjamin Franklin's eighteenth-century proposal that the British trade with and supply the Maori with modern technology, but not colonize them, so as to preserve their lifeways. And from the colonialist side, Edward Gibbon Wakefield's highly publicized and theorized efforts to promote "systematic" colonization from the 1830s on. Tellingly though, none of Wakefield's projects received state support (in some cases they were actively opposed by the Colonial Office), despite heavy lobbying. Europe may not have acquired its empire in a "fit of absent mindedness" as Jack Gallagher and Ronald Robinson famously remarked of British imperialism, but, for much of its history, it did not acquire it against any practical, or even expressible, alternative.

In sum: given colonialism's limits and disjunctions, tribunalizing it quickly becomes posturing. Empire, we might say, solicits from us a moralism that it ultimately fails to satisfy. And that is partly because the retreat of colonialism does indeed open into a world order which colonialism has shaped and which it continues to haunt, but for which it no longer provides adequate terms of reference. In particular, as I have just argued, the moral critique of colonialism appeals to values that now shore up the current world system. More than that: to reform the system by implementing these values more evenly and effectively would set the seal on the benefit of empire argument. If our current system became as fair as we imagine it could be, colonialism would then be all the more retrospectively justified. So to move beyond the reformism that effectively legitimates empire requires more risky and innovative modes of thought. In lieu of revolutions against democratic state capitalism to which history shows no sign of tending, it requires us, I think, to reject the moral apparatus around which modern politics turn and, most incisively, it ends up by requiring us to reject that moral apparatus's primary strut—the value of human life itself. Along one path this rejection might mean a return to a mode of nonhumanist theopolitics, one whose reference point might be ontology or Being in Heidegger's sense. Or, of course, God. Alternatively, it might mean a turn to the inhuman.

Which brings us to Chakrabarty's essay.

It begins by making a case for the need for modern political thought to hold together incommensurable ideals. Chakrabarty is not directly thinking of the incommensurabilities that I have been discussing around

which a judgment of empire, and hence postcolonialism, turn. He is thinking rather of those incompatibilities between the rights-bearing liberal individual, the full citizen of democratic state capitalism, and subjectivity conceived as a meeting place of differences and disjunctions, that is, as a subject who is an expression of “multiplicity in unity” or *multorum in uno expressio* as Leibniz long ago phrased it. This provides Chakrabarty with a basis for his much more radical suggestion that AGW means that we must “think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once” (1), a formula in which, as we can observe, human agency nonetheless comes first.

Let us accept this recommendation: indeed in affirming the concept of human rights, Chakrabarty (following Homi Bhabha) helps us recognize that the Leibnizian, postmodernist/poststructuralist subjectivity paradigm is no longer adequate to the politics of endgame capitalism and precariousness. He has accepted that human rights have important ethical and political utility in the current system, as has become even clearer in Samuel Moyn’s recent historical account of their rise to prominence since the 1970s.⁵ It may be, of course, that incommensurability is not, or is not always, the best way to think of relations between the rights-bearing individual and the subject-in-difference. They can also just oppose one another, after all. Or, more subtly, it might be more accurate to think of rights (and the human “dignity” to which they appeal) as being affirmed in particular institutional settings—in relation to the state for instance—while a multiple, more distended subject is affirmed in another setting—in academic thought for instance.

Putting all this aside, an important question still remains unsettled for me in Chakrabarty’s essay. What exactly is new in its presentation of relations between human beings and the environment? Haven’t we always had to think across human and inhuman scales? In this context, that AGW happens at a planetary scale seems to me less to the point than that man-made environmental transformations have always affected populations and shaped experience and history. Claims that “man is [or will become] the sovereign of nature,” as Marx put it in the citation above, have always been wishful.

The so-called “environmentalist thesis,” by which particular societies are considered to be effects of particular climates, dates back to the Hippocratic work *Airs, Water, Places*.⁶ Within this tradition, analyses which further understand climates themselves as effects of human activity have not been uncommon. Take R. G. Collingwood’s contention that history itself in its current sense—as the story of, and investigation into, past human actions—suddenly appeared in Greece in the fourth century BCE as a response to radical ecological instability. Earthquake and ero-

sion (presumably partly caused by human activity) were then changing “the face of the land with a vehemence hardly to be seen elsewhere.”⁷ So a metaphysics of permanence became difficult for Herodotus, who wrote the first description of social change on a purely human scale, including analyzing how Egyptian society was formed by its ecology. By this account, socially caused environmental degradation was a parent or agent of historicism itself.⁸

More specifically, thinking simultaneously on different scales, and of the dynamic and dialectical relations between different scales, has long been an important part of colonial historiography, as in works like Alfred W. Crosby’s *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, and J. R. McNeill’s *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*. Let us focus on just one aspect of this literature. As Crosby’s book in particular points out, of the various relations between people and environment which drove colonialism on, few, if any, were more important than the development of grasslands across the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Southern and East Africa. Grass-fed sheep and cattle, whose meat, by the late nineteenth century (the apex of empire), fed Western Europe across what James Belich has called a “protein bridge” that drew together an array of ecologies and technologies—grassland itself of course, but also refrigeration, mechanized slaughterhouses, and artificial fertilization—and which helped improve the health and confidence of Western, as well as some indigenous, peoples.⁹ Grassland became both a primary purpose and a reward of settler colonialism in the period between about 1880 and 1970. It changed landscapes, shaped ideologies, and reordered sociabilities in profound and uncontainable ways that were in large part ordered by the earth itself. And it has been understood by many of its progeny, which include Maori for instance, as a triumph of precisely human history. (This gives us reason to believe that, in centuries to come, at least some of AGW’s survivors too will celebrate the world that global warming has wrought, blind to ruins. The geological scale of the process will likely provide a further platform for progressivism.)

The truth of the grassland spiritual economy, as we might boldly say, appeared most clearly in art and literature. In New Zealand (to take an extreme case) the disjunctions that the settler agricultural ecology brought to bear on the settlers and their society appears with extraordinary force in Colin McCahon’s North Otago and Canterbury landscapes from the late forties on. In these pictures, which have learnt much from Cézanne, the geological geometries of depopulated and deforested landscapes, delivered over to grass and sheep bred to feed

distant populations, spell out the visual language of a cosmic but not sacred order. It's a sparsely populated landscape whose scale is neither human nor geological, neither built nor natural, but which becomes a threshold into a perception of an "inhuman life" to use Eugene Thacker's phrase.¹⁰ In this aesthetization of a particular ecological economy, what's in question is not an incommensurability between the human and the inhuman, but their merging, as if that were possible.

A similar, not-just-human sensibility nurtured in the colonial grasslands, is exposed in Janet Frame's novel *A State of Siege*. There, after her mother's death, a middle-aged art teacher, Malfred Signal moves from an isolated Central Otago village (settler country, sheep and cattle country) to an island outside of Auckland. It's a brave experiment, aimed at finding and painting a "new vision" modeled on MacCahon's. Malfred's move is from one ecology to another: from the Otago grasslands and the communities and perceptions it brings into being, to a house near the bush (forest) with a view of the sea. She moves, that is, to a precolonial ecology, and one with Maori presence. But Malfred does not find her new vision in her new home. Instead she feels increasingly threatened. Exposing herself to her new environment while still possessed by her old one, her subjectivity erodes. It becomes a theater where remembered grassland, present forest, and sea clash against one another: an environmental allegory staged as imperiled experience. Actually that last phrase conceals a redundancy, since the words "imperiled" and "experience" derive from the same root, the Greek word *peira* for "trial" or "experiment," as if to mark that experience *is* imperilment. And in the end a supernatural force (expressive of a precolonial past?) kills Malfred.

At this point we can return to Young's anticolonialist politics and their appeal to the values by which democratic state capitalism improves and consolidates itself. One way out of that predicament, I suggested, might be to let go of the notion that the preservation and development of human life are fundamental moral ends. That too is McCahon and Frame's message, which they come to by aesthetically responding to and articulating the profound ecological transformation caused by New Zealand settler colonialism. Theirs is not Chakrabarty's message either, of course. He asks us to hold together the human and inhuman, the historical and the geological, human rights and the subject-in-difference. But I wonder whether he retains his faith in this still decent position (in John Rawls's sense of "decent" in *The Law of Peoples*), because he remains interested in preserving human dignity against its latest threat, and so passes too quickly over the possibility that AGW, for all its planetary scale, is just another moment in the long history in which the human effort to survive and control its environment has led to the species' more

insistent determination by its environment. To see AGW as continuous with the past also allows one to regard it as just another event in the ceaseless train of events in which experience is fused with imperilment. And ultimately (I'd say in a somewhat Pascalian spirit) to concentrate on that fusion is to stay most true to the species' place in the world. The primacy of imperilment is at risk when we begin to take self-ascribed, politically and legally useful dignities and rights as real, or, to say this more carefully, as grounded in a philosophical anthropology.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Colonialism* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1968), 40.
- 2 Marx and Engels, *On Colonialism*, 40.
- 3 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 4.
- 4 David B. Abernethy, *The Dynamics of Global Dominance: European Overseas Empires, 1415–1980* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 407.
- 5 See Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010)
- 6 See Peter Harrison, *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 112–20.
- 7 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), 22.
- 8 Compare Dipesh Chakrabarty's own very suggestive remarks on Collingwood's turn to the human in Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 201–2.
- 9 James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 54–68. See also Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson's very informative *Seeds of Empire: The Environmental Transformation of New Zealand* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010). I thank Greg Chappel for this reference.
- 10 Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), 5.