

## Postcolonialism

Rahul Rao

[Forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, eds. Michael Freeden, Marc Stears, Lyman Tower Sargent (Oxford University Press, 2012)]

Writing in 1992 about the ‘pitfalls of the term “post-colonialism”’, Anne McClintock places it in the cacophonous company of other ‘post’ words in the culture of the time—‘post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-cold war, post-marxism, post-apartheid, post-Soviet, post-Ford, post-feminism, post-national, post-historic, even post-contemporary’—the enthusiasm for which she reads as a symptom of ‘a global crisis in ideologies of the future, particularly in the ideology of “progress”’ (McClintock 1992: 93). The collapse of both capitalist and communist teleologies of development in the debt-wracked Third World seemed to conspire with postmodernist critiques of metanarrative to discredit not only particular articulations of ‘progress’ but also the very enterprise of charting a ‘progressive’ politics. Setting themselves resolutely against a past that they are determined to transcend, ‘post’ words drift in a present that seems allergic to thinking about the future.

Writing in 2004 and looking back on nearly three decades of ‘postcolonial studies’ in the academy, Neil Lazarus traces a significant shift in the meaning of the term ‘postcolonial’. Originally used in a strictly temporal sense to refer to the period immediately after decolonization (‘post’ as ‘after’), Lazarus cites a markedly different usage in the work of Homi Bhabha for whom “‘postcolonial’ is a fighting term’, invoked in polemics against colonialism but also against anti-colonial discourses such as Marxism and nationalism that are disavowed on account of their essentialism and deconstructed in the vocabulary of poststructuralism (Lazarus 2004: 4). In Lazarus’s retrospective view, what McClintock saw at the time as ideology *in flux* begins to look more like an ideology *of flux*. The ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ begins to signify not merely (or even necessarily) ‘after’, but ‘anti’: a periodizing or historical term has become an ideological concept.

This chapter attempts to illuminate what is at stake in the ‘fight’ between postcolonialism and its ideological antagonists. It proceeds to do this in three parts. First, it outlines some of the defining features of postcolonialism as an ideological discourse. There is some irony here in that while postcolonialism, as it emerged in the work of its leading practitioners under the sign of colonial discourse analysis, began as a tool for the analysis of ideology, its professed normative commitments have made it available as an object for ideological analysis. While postcolonialism has been attacked from both right and left, it is its engagements with Marxist and poststructuralist criticism that have been most productive of its further development. Accordingly, the second part of the chapter will focus on this engagement. Responding to this critique, the third part of the chapter locates postcolonial theory within a longer tradition of anticolonial thought, whose ambivalent relationship with the universalistic categories of colonial discourse

accounts for much of the contemporary ideological debate between postcolonialism and its critics.

## **I: The making of an ideology**

### *Orient/Occident*

'Postcolonial studies' as an academic field is conventionally dated to the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. The signal achievement of this work is its conceptualization of the colonial encounter as entailing not only the physical violence of military conquest and economic exploitation, but also an epistemic violence enacted by particular forms of knowledge tethered to imperial power. Said named this cognitive dimension of Western imperialism 'Orientalism'—a term that he defines in three ways at the outset of the eponymously named book. In its most obvious sense, Orientalism names a field of academic enquiry encompassing anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the 'Orient'. Second, Orientalism is a 'style of thought' based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'. In this sense, Orientalism names a Western tendency to dichotomize the world into a series of us/them contrasts and to essentialize the resultant 'other', so that the backward, savage, benighted Orient is seen to confront the developed, rational, enlightened Occident in a Manichean opposition of civilizational proportions. Third, from the late eighteenth century onwards, 'Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said 1985: 2-3). As such, Orientalism articulates a relationship of knowledge to power that is both instrumental (to rule them you have to know them) and constitutive, producing the putative reality (the 'Orient') that it describes. Enabled by the brute material superiority of European imperial power, the production of Orientalist knowledge also comes to function as an enabler of such power by legitimating imperial rule in the guise of a civilizing mission.

Borrowing Michel Foucault's notion of discourse as a pattern of statements to which specialized knowledge must conform if it is to be regarded as true (Foucault 2002: 131), Said argues that the Western discourse of Orientalism has been remarkably consistent across time. As a 'style of thought', Said's account of Orientalism accommodates figures of European classical antiquity such as Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides, through Dante and Marx, to the nineteenth century British and French orientalists, their twentieth century US counterparts and indeed contemporary popular culture. It ranges across an array of texts including literature, poetry, drama, travel writing, anthropology, economics and administration. Perhaps most crucially, it operates across ideologies taking within its sweep not only those committed to imperialism but also those like Marxism that are self-consciously anti-imperialist. Thus, while noting Marx's sympathy for the misery inflicted by Britain on its Indian subjects, Said indicts Marx as an Orientalist—the term now bearing

only a pejorative sense, thanks in no small part to Said's text. Citing Marx's observation that while England might be driven by the 'vilest interests', it 'has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of the Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia', Said remarks that 'the idea of regenerating a fundamentally lifeless Asia is a piece of pure Romantic Orientalism', conforming to the persistent logic of the colonial civilizing mission (Said 1985: 153-6). While this repudiation of Marx in a foundational text of postcolonialism warrants further scrutiny, suffice it to say that the staggering range of Said's account of Orientalism as a discourse operative across time, texts and ideologies—indeed as *the* constitutive discourse of Western civilization—made the argument a provocative intervention in the social sciences and humanities.

Unsurprisingly, *Orientalism* attracted a large number of critical responses. Some objected that Said's account of Orientalism was too monolithic in its focus on negative stereotypes and its neglect of affirmative tropes that were also a feature of the colonial archive. The Syrian philosopher Sadik Jalal al-'Azm argued that Said was guilty of reverse essentialism, opening himself up the charge of Occidentalism and in the process reifying the very East/West dichotomy that he had set out to deconstruct (Lockman 2004: 195-8). In a wide-ranging polemic against Said's oeuvre as a whole, the Marxist literary critic Aijaz Ahmad took Said to task for failing to identify capitalism as the structure that gives European prejudices against the extra-European world such devastating consequences. In particular, Ahmad defended Marx against the charge of Orientalism, noting that Marx's view of British colonialism in India as playing a progressive role in sweeping away the remnants of 'Oriental despotism' is analogous to his view of capitalism as dismantling the vestiges of feudalism in Europe (Ahmad 1994: 225). Moreover, Marx emphatically endorsed the right of Indians to resist colonialism, observing that while the British bourgeoisie were simply laying the 'material premises' for the development of India's productive powers, the full realization of those powers would require a proletarian revolution in Britain or an anti-colonial one in India (Marx 2000: 365).

But it is perhaps Said's engagement with poststructuralism that has attracted the greatest attention from both sympathetic and critical commentators alike (see for example Clifford 1988). *Orientalism* disavows any interest in, or capacity for, demonstrating what more accurate representations of the 'Orient' might look like. Indeed, there are deeply poststructuralist moments in the text when Said doubts whether there can be 'true' representations of anything, noting that all representations are embedded in the language, culture, institutions and 'political ambience' of the speaker (Said 1985: 272). Yet there are other moments when he insists on the possibility of 'scholarship that is not as corrupt, or at least as blind to human reality' as Western orientalism is (*ibid*: 326). In making these apparently contradictory claims, Said borrows the Foucauldian notion of discourse as constraining what can be said within a discipline, without pushing it to the logical extremes that Foucault does. Paraphrasing Marx's view of men and the making of history in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, we might understand Said as attempting to

articulate an understanding of scholarly production that takes into account the cognitive structures within which scholars seek to exercise agency: scholars produce their own scholarship, but not within discursive formations of their choosing. Indeed Said holds out the possibility that individual scholars can elude the constraints of discourse to exercise a transformational impact on the discursive formations within which they function. His 1993 Reith Lectures define the vocation of the public intellectual in terms of a duty to search for relative independence from institutional and other pressures to function 'as exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power' (Said 1994b: xiii). The tensions between these views of truth and representation place Said in an ambivalent relation to humanism which, I will suggest, is emblematic of the archive of anticolonial and postcolonial thought more generally.

### *Blurring binaries*

Perhaps most productive of further developments in postcolonialism were the criticisms of Homi Bhabha, for whom Said's notion of colonial discourse was too determining and univalent in its implication that power was possessed only by the colonizer. If Said presents colonial discourse as a totality that must be resisted from outside (without quite explaining how such agency-outside-of-discourse is possible), Bhabha sees discourse as itself riven with ambivalence. Deploying a Freudian understanding of ambivalence as the expression of antithetical emotions of equal intensity towards a common object, Bhabha proposes a view of colonial discourse as 'negotiation rather than negation', reading the antagonistic or contradictory elements within it as 'a dialectic without the emergence of a teleological or transcendent History' (Bhabha 1994: 37).

In contrast to Said's account of Orientalism as replete with stark binaries, Bhabha reads colonial stereotypes as ambivalent modes of representation. While the purpose of the stereotype is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate racial types with a view to justifying conquest, exploitation and 'civilization', colonial stereotypes oscillated between viewing the native as fixed, unchanging and timeless on the one hand, and as disorderly, anarchic and licentious on the other. The colonial fantasy both proposes a teleology of improvement in which under certain conditions of colonial domination the native is progressively reformable, while insisting on the separation of colonizer and native on the basis of the latter's irredeemable inferiority (*ibid*: 118). In Bhabha's reading, the stereotype is as anxious as it is assertive, declaring what is 'known' about the native but nonetheless anxiously restating this knowledge as if it can never be confirmed but only reinforced through constant repetition, making it a sign of a deeper crisis of authority in the wielding of colonial power (Childs & Williams 1997: 128-9).

This crisis becomes more evident in Bhabha's discussion of mimicry, which also inaugurates a tendency in postcolonialism towards the blurring of imperial binaries. Mimicry, in Bhabha's view, begins as a colonial strategy of power/knowledge that seeks the inclusion of an authorized 'good' native, with a view to excluding 'bad'

natives (for a contemporary illustration in the context of US imperial policy see Mamdani 2005). Exemplified by Lord Macaulay's desire, articulated in his infamous 1835 Minute on Indian Education, 'to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect', the strategy of mimicry is ambivalent in its desire to remake the colonized in the image of the colonizer without producing so close a resemblance as to threaten the racial and other hierarchies on which imperialism was premised. The difficulty of maintaining this balance means that 'the ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from mimicry—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to menace—a difference that is almost total but not quite' (Bhabha 1994: 131). Crucially, Bhabha makes visible the subversion inherent in mimicry, not by delineating the subjectivity of the colonized but through an account of ambivalence and equivocation in colonial strategies of power, so that mimicry becomes—in the interpretation of Robert Young (2004: 188)—'a kind of agency without a subject, a form of representation which produces effects, a sameness which slips into otherness, but which still has nothing to do with any "other"'. The menace in mimicry is not a deliberate strategy employed by the colonized, but an effect of the colonizer's own discourse: we might say, with David Huddart (2008: 60-1), that the colonizer 'spooks himself'.

It is in his writings on the messy, compromised process of religious conversion in colonial India that Bhabha makes some of his most acute observations. Analyzing British missionary Charles Grant's 1792 proposal for mission education in English in India, Bhabha describes how the tension between Grant's desire for religious reform and anxiety that this could make Indians restive for liberty resulted in a policy whereby Christian doctrine would collude with indigenous caste practices to keep the subject population divided, thereby illustrating how in the very practice of domination the language of the master becomes hybrid and perverts its professed moral project (1994: 124). In a move that begins to acknowledge the agency of the colonized, Bhabha finds in the archives of nineteenth century Christian missionaries in India, an obstinate native insistence on engaging with the missionaries on their own terms. Bringing their denied knowledges of indigenous religion, magic and superstition to this encounter, native converts accept the Bible as the word of God, but also decouple it from the authority of the English as religious, cultural and linguistic mediators. As such, the 'native' Bible must be located in a separate hybrid space of colonial discourse which, in Bhabha's view, 'has been systematically denied by both colonialists and nationalists who have sought authority in the authenticity of "origins"' (*ibid*: 171). The effect of colonial power, for Bhabha, then, is 'the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions'. The realization that colonial power never quite gets what it wants 'enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention' (*ibid*: 160).

Importantly, in Bhabha's view, ambivalence is a feature not only of colonial but also postcolonial discourses of authority. His writings on the nation explore the

numerous dissonances in discourses of national culture. While these are often clearly apparent in a spatial sense in the discourses of minorities that challenge hegemonic narratives of national homogeneity, Bhabha is particularly interested in the dissonances that haunt the nation as a temporal process. Drawing attention to what he calls the 'double and split time' of the nation, he observes that 'the people' in discursive strategies of the nation are doubled as both its past and present—they are both 'the historical "objects" of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*' and 'the "subjects" of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process'. As such, the narration of the nation is split between 'the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative' (*ibid*: 208-9). Indeed, the history of the postcolonial nation can be read as the incessant interruption of the pedagogical by the performative, so that 'national culture' can only ever be articulated as the dialectic of these temporalities and never as a knowledge that is stabilized in its enunciation because it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation (*ibid*: 218-9).

There is now a formidable body of postcolonial scholarship that independently, or under the influence, of Bhabha, builds on the impulse against imperial binarism and towards an exploration of the hybrid cultural formations resulting from the colonial encounter. Pioneering a technique that he calls 'contrapuntal reading' in which cultural identities are conceived, not as essentializations, but as contrapuntal ensembles in which identities cannot exist without an array of opposites, Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994a) reads a number of ostensibly metropolitan texts in ways that demonstrate the multiple ways in which they are deeply implicated in the colonial periphery, thereby reconceiving the imperial encounter as a process of 'overlapping territories, intertwined histories'. We are reminded, for example, that it is Australian wealth that enables the *Great Expectations* that Pip entertains, that the order and civility of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* are enabled by the profits from slave plantations in Antigua, and that Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* began life as a commission by the Khedive of Egypt to inaugurate the new opera house that he had built in Cairo as a way of signalling a modernizing Egypt's entry into international society. Partha Chatterjee (1986) has provided the definitive account of the hybrid imaginaries of anti-colonial nationalist elites in India, arguing that they sought to mimic the West in the sphere of the 'material' (statecraft, economy, science) where it was thought to possess decisive advantages, but rejected it insofar as 'spiritual' matters were concerned (language, literature, art, education, family), insisting on the superiority of the East in these domains of human endeavour. More recently, Leela Gandhi (2006) has written about the late nineteenth century 'affective communities' that brought together figures associated with marginalized lifestyles and subcultures, from both sides of the imperial divide, in struggles against imperialism.

### *Subaltern speech*

The postcolonial impulse towards a critique of both imperialist and nationalist narratives also finds expression in the work of the Subaltern Studies collective of historians of South Asia. Its leading figure, Ranajit Guha, criticized both colonialist and bourgeois nationalist historiography for their assumption that the development of political and national consciousness in India was a predominantly elite achievement, and for their failure to adequately theorize the mass character of nationalism. The collective has been animated by an interest in the history and politics of those social groups that Gramsci (1971: 52-5) described as 'subaltern'—non-hegemonic groups such as the peasants of southern Italy, who were thought to lack a social and political consciousness of themselves as a class. In the work of Subaltern Studies historians, the term has been interpreted more broadly to describe a 'general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way' (Guha 1994: vii).

The most profound challenge confronting subaltern studies has been the question of how to 'read' subaltern consciousness from archives that largely record the perspectives of elites. While acknowledging in his study of peasant insurgency in colonial India that he has had to rely on the archives of counterinsurgency in which policemen, soldiers, bureaucrats, landlords and other authorities register their hostility to insurgency, Guha nonetheless insists that counterinsurgency 'derives directly from insurgency and is determined by the latter in all that is essential to its form and articulation [and] can hardly afford a discourse that is not fully and compulsively involved with the rebel and his activities' (1992: 15). This means that although the archives overwhelmingly represent the will of colonial counterinsurgents, they do not derive their content from that will alone, for it is predicated on another will—that of the insurgents—leading Guha to conclude that it should be possible to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within the archive of counterinsurgency.

While the collective has gone on to publish a number of volumes, it is the critique of the very enterprise of subaltern studies that has generated some of the most influential statements in postcolonial studies, particularly on questions of subaltern agency, representation and the role of the intellectual. From a position of poststructuralist scepticism of coherent identities as effects of dominant discourses, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—herself a member of the collective—has questioned whether in attempting to reinscribe a subaltern consciousness in the archive, subaltern historians might unwittingly "'insidiously objectify" the subaltern, control him through knowledge even as they restore versions of causality and self-determination to him' (1988*b*: 201). Yet despite expressing discomfort with the self-presentation of the subaltern studies project as a positivist and essentializing

endeavour, she argues that the actual practice of the collective—driven as it is to articulating subaltern consciousness in terms of its difference from elite interests—is deeply Derridean in its implicit recognition that signs have meaning only in terms of their difference from other signs. It is this, coupled with her approval of the political agenda of the project as an ‘attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis’ that leads her to offer a qualified endorsement of subaltern studies as ‘a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest’ (*ibid*: 205). This phrase has taken on a life of its own in postcolonial studies, coming to be read as a slogan for the field’s broader attempt to draw from the seemingly incompatible heritages of Marxism and poststructuralism. I shall return to the implications of this in the final section of the chapter.

Spivak’s critique of the pretensions of intellectuals to represent the disenfranchised is most powerfully articulated in an oft-misunderstood article entitled ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988a; for a good discussion see Morton 2003: 56-68). Central to this work is a scepticism of claims of representation, whether they emanate from radical intellectuals in the academy (here Spivak takes aim at Foucault and Deleuze) or governments professing to use power in the defence of the powerless (her example here is that of British imperialists purporting to rescue Indian women from the native custom of sati—widow burning on the funeral pyres of their husbands). Spivak suggests that the apparent benevolence of these varied manifestations of the representation/rescue impulse can mask an appropriation and silencing of subaltern voice when the powerful claim to represent subalterns. Importantly, she contrasts two meanings of representation—representation as ‘speaking for’, as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation’, as in art and philosophy. Drawing on Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*—a text in which he distinguishes these connotations through the use of distinct German words (*vertreten* for political and *darstellen* for aesthetic representation respectively)—Spivak warns of the dangers of conflation of these distinct notions of representation in intellectual and political endeavours that profess an emancipatory agenda: the aesthetic re-presentation of subaltern groups as coherent political subjects can often be taken as a straightforward expression of their political interests.

Spivak concludes the article with a story that is intended to drive home the impossibility of subaltern speech. She describes the suicide of a woman named Bhuvanewari Bhaduri in Calcutta in 1926. Nearly a decade after her death, it was discovered that she had been part of the armed struggle for Indian independence and had killed herself because of her inability to carry out an assassination that had been entrusted to her. In an effort to subvert the typical attribution of such deaths to illegitimate passion, Bhaduri had waited for the onset of menstruation before she killed herself. Despite this and notwithstanding the evidence that later became available, her family clung to the narrative of illicit love by way of explanation. For Spivak, the incident suggests that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to represent herself, it does not fulfil itself in an intersubjective speech act. Defending herself against critics who misread her as suggesting that subalterns are mute and unable to represent themselves, Spivak has insisted that the issue has



never been whether subalterns can talk (they can), but whether their utterances are intelligible in relationships of power (1996: 287-90). Perhaps the challenge for subaltern studies has always been 'can the bourgeois theorist hear?'

Spivak's critique of the gender-blindness of early work in subaltern studies coupled with her incisive interventions in discourses that purport to emancipate women have worked to make space for postcolonial feminism. A full account of the insights of postcolonial feminism is impossible in a chapter of this length. Nonetheless, Spivak's description of nineteenth century British colonial officials professing to save Indian women from the custom of sati—'white men saving brown women from brown men' (1988a: 297)—usefully draws attention to the differently situated actors implicated in transnational colonial and postcolonial discourses of feminism, and signals the trajectories of subsequent scholarship. From the perspective of white men, gestures such as sati prohibition enabled imperialism to represent itself as the establisher of the good society by espousing women as objects of protection from their own racial and national kind (for a contemporary illustration of this dynamic in the realm of queer theory see Puar 2007). Elsewhere, Spivak offers a literary account of the implication of white women in imperialism through a reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Noting that Bertha Mason, the mad Creole first wife of Mr. Rochester 'has to set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction', Spivak reads this 'as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer' (1999: 127). A great deal of postcolonial feminism is devoted to elaborating the historical and contemporary processes by which Third World women were constructed as abject, oppressed and in need of saving, as a means of consolidating white Western women as fully formed subjects epitomizing modernity and progress (Grewal 1996; Mohanty 2003).

The brown man's interests become visible in Chatterjee's (1993) gendered account of the split consciousness of anti-colonial nationalism, whereby men became agents of mimicry of the West's material modernity, while women were required to function as repositories of the East's spiritual superiority. This gendered division of labour would bequeath a legacy in which any attempted transformations of gender relations via discourses of feminism or, more recently, queer activism have come to be seen as encroachments on the sovereign terrain of the nation (Rao 2010: 101). Finally, the silence of the brown woman in the context of Spivak's example of sati prohibition, receives its fullest elaboration in the work of Lata Mani (1998) who argues that women were neither subjects nor objects but the grounds or sites on which tradition was contested and reformulated in debates between male colonial officials and indigenous elites. Thus, in common with subaltern studies, postcolonial feminism has worked to fracture monolithic images of the colonized and to elaborate more complex hierarchies of domination and subordination.

While subaltern studies originated as an argument within Indian Marxism, it has also questioned central assumptions of Marxist historiography. In particular, it has

registered difficulties with Marxist modes of production narratives that chart transitions from feudalism to capitalism and so on in ways that reflect the history of Western Europe, but cannot adequately theorize situations in which capitalism fails to effect these transitions completely. When Marxists encounter locations such as these, featuring social groups that do not mobilize along class lines, or whose collective life features gods, spirits, and supernatural agents in worlds that have yet to become disenchanted, they have tended to relegate such phenomena to the realm of false consciousness and to the time of the pre-political, viewing them as anachronistic relics of another time. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) suggests that the very notion of anachronism—by no means unique to Marxism but intelligible to all forms of historicist thinking—assumes an underlying unity of historical time: one that is singular, homogeneous and secular, in which (most of) the world (barring its non-modern holdouts) is located by the historian, regardless of the understanding of time held by the societies s/he is studying. Arguing that such historicist thinking is imperialist in its imposition of a single notion of time on the world, Chakrabarty proposes that rather than viewing the world outside Europe as having made an incomplete transition to modernity, we begin to think in terms of the heterotemporality of modernity. Acknowledging that subaltern histories cannot avoid being constructed within the master code of history, he nonetheless insists that they cannot afford to grant this master code its claim of being a natural and universal mode of thought. The task for subaltern histories, as he sees it, is ‘to ask how this seemingly imperious, all-pervasive code might be deployed or thought about so that we have at least a glimpse of its own finitude, a glimpse of what might constitute an outside to it’, and further, ‘to hold history, the discipline, and other forms of memory together so that they can help in the interrogation of each other, to work out the ways these immiscible forms of recalling the past are juxtaposed in our negotiations of modern institutions, to question the narrative strategies in academic history that allow its secular temporality the appearance of successfully assimilating to itself memories that are, strictly speaking, unassimilable’ (*ibid*: 93-4). It is evident from a manifesto of this kind that the agenda of subaltern studies and postcolonialism more generally—sometimes simplistically construed as that of including the excluded subaltern—has far more profound epistemological consequences that is often recognized.

## **II: Against postcolonialism**

By the early 1990s, the contours of postcolonialism had become clear enough for Bhabha to offer the following confident assessment:

The postcolonial perspective...departs from the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or ‘dependency’ theory. As a mode of analysis, it attempts to revise those nationalist or ‘nativist’ pedagogies that set up the relation of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition. The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political

boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres. It is from this hybrid location of cultural value—the transnational as the translational—that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project...the encounters and negotiations of differential meanings and values within ‘colonial textuality’, its governmental discourses and cultural practices, have anticipated, *avant la lettre*, many of the problematics of contemporary theory—aporia, ambivalence, indeterminacy, the question of discursive closure, the threat to agency, the status of intentionality, the challenge to ‘totalizing’ concepts, to name but a few (Bhabha 1994: 248).

While this should not be taken as a definition of postcolonialism with which all those identified with it might agree, the crystallization of postcolonial thought in these terms does much to explain the onslaught to which it was subject. Indeed, Bhabha’s major work *The Location of Culture* (1994) neatly divides early critiques of postcolonialism that accused it of being too nativist (Appiah 1991: 354) from later ones that berate it for almost exactly the opposite reason. Thus, Benita Parry (2004) has strenuously objected to what she sees as postcolonialism’s insistent critique of the nativism of anticolonial liberation movements and its concomitant valorization of hybridity and synthesis, arguing that this relies on a highly selective reading of the anticolonial archive. In a close reading of Bhabha’s oeuvre, she questions whether the putative ‘ambivalence’ of colonial discourse matters very much, given that it did not seem to inhibit the drive to mastery and domination, not to mention the longevity, of colonial authority virtually everywhere it prevailed (see also JanMohamed 1985). She disputes Bhabha’s reconceptualization of the colonial relationship as agonistic rather than antagonistic, arguing that this seems to imply a competition amongst peers rather than the brutal, often existential, material struggle between unequally placed adversaries that the documentary record suggests (Parry 2004: 62-3).

For all its Marxist critics (Ahmad 1994; Dirlik 1994; Lazarus 2002, 2004; Parry 2004), the fundamental problem with postcolonialism lies in its repudiation of the foundational role of capitalism in history. This repudiation—although far from total, as I will go on to suggest in the following section—is a function of postcolonialism’s critique of the Eurocentrism of all forms of historicism, manifest in the temporal teleologies of narratives of progress, whether in the guise of the ‘modernization’ or ‘modes of production’ stories central to bourgeois nationalism and Marxism respectively. Lazarus (2002: 54) sees the postcolonial focus on the cultural dimensions of the colonial encounter as a ‘bracketing, displacement, or euphemization of the specific agency of capitalist social relations in imperialist development’ that leaves postcolonial theorists unable to explain what distinguished Eurocentrism from other forms of ethnocentrism with such devastating consequences for the world. Postcolonial theorists stand accused of ignoring the conceptual resources within Marxism that have long sought to engage with the very problems they have diagnosed—work on ‘combined and uneven development’ that seeks to theorize the differential insertion of global peripheries

into a world capitalist system, a long tradition of thinking about the relationship between the material 'base' and cultural 'superstructure' of social formations, and the efforts of Third World Marxists to 'translate' Western Marxism to the conditions of their locations (for an exceptional postcolonial engagement with these questions see Young 2001; 2004). As Arif Dirlik (1994: 342) has complained, rather than seeking to engage with Marxism, postcolonial theorists have deconstructed and decentred it in the vocabularies of poststructuralism. Claiming to repudiate the universalistic pretences of one Eurocentric narrative, they have replaced it with another First World language claiming universal epistemological relevance. Yet in their disavowal of 'totalizing' theory, they have jettisoned, and sabotaged, the conceptual resources with which they might have contested the totalizing structures of capital.

Indeed, these critics detect a more insidious logic in the proliferation of postcolonial critique, seeing it as expressive of the needs of late capitalism. Thus, the transition from Fordist to flexible accumulation under conditions of neoliberalism has necessitated a capitalism that is fluid and able to articulate itself in multiple cultural contexts outside its original European home (one has only to glance comparatively at the menus of McDonalds outlets the world over to confirm that multinational capital understands that it cannot afford cultural parochialism). To its critics, postcolonialism seems to affirm precisely those modes of belonging—fluidity, hybridity, cosmopolitanism—that are most conducive to the working of global capitalism. Not coincidentally, postcolonialism in the academy is articulated by the beneficiaries of this form of capitalism—upwardly mobile immigrants from the high bourgeoisies of former colonies migrating to the metropolis and seeking employment in its professional (including university) sectors. The allegation here is two-fold. By producing an ideology that downplays class in favour of other markers of 'subalternity' the purveyors of postcolonialism accord themselves privileged status in the academy as representatives of the disenfranchised (Ahmad 1994: 195-7). Beyond crude instrumentality, postcolonial critics also stand accused of a sort of epistemological solipsism in projecting their subjectivities onto their reading of the global condition, so that their own experiences of migration, exile, liminality and multiple belonging come to be treated as exemplary (Dirlik 1994: 339). Expressing incredulity towards metanarratives they have, in effect, elevated autobiography to the status of metanarrative.

### **III: The dialectics of anticolonial thought**

At stake in the dispute between postcolonialism and its antagonists are questions of historical interpretation (how should the colonial encounter and its aftermath be understood?) but also political progress (how should oppression and liberation in the contemporary conjuncture be theorized and responded to?). A central feature of these debates is the extent to which all parties refer to the archives of anticolonial liberation in legitimation of their arguments. This makes it imperative to consider

how postcolonialism is related to that archive: is postcolonialism a restatement, or a revision, of the protocols of anticolonial liberation?

The vast majority of anticolonial activists—irrespective of ideological affiliation—viewed imperialism as a totality comprising economic, political, military, cultural and psychological dimensions and necessitating struggle on all of these fronts. Many saw the cognitive dimensions of imperialism as even more fundamental—because more insidious—than its more obvious physical manifestations. Gandhi famously excoriated his countrymen for wanting ‘English rule without the Englishman’ (1938: 26), arguing that they had been subjugated by British imperialism not only because of political disunity but also because of their *moha* (infatuation) for British civilization, and warning that such a mentality would perpetuate the ‘rule’ of British civilization even after the cessation of political and economic control (Parekh 1995: 16-18). If Marx welcomed modernity but questioned the appropriation of its fruits by the bourgeoisie, Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* is an indictment of modernity itself—but one whose message would ironically be disseminated via the quintessentially modernist technologies of the railways and mass media.

Running through the anticolonial archive is an enduring tension between two tendencies: on the one hand an acceptance of the terms of colonial discourse even as the valuations encoded within these are reversed; on the other hand, a refusal of those terms altogether. Ashis Nandy (1988) provides a number of examples of this tension in the context of Indian anticolonial thought. Thus he contrasts the resistance efforts of nineteenth century writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay whose reinterpretations of Hindu texts projected on to the Hindu past the qualities of Christianity that seemed to give it strength—a process that has been described as the ‘semitization’ of Hinduism—with Gandhi’s less defensive willingness to grant Hinduism its open-ended, anarchic and unorganized character. In an analogous illustration, he notes that colonialism was structured around a homology between sexual and political dominance in which a virile, masculinized West was seen to penetrate a subservient, feminized Orient. Once again, he contrasts earlier forms of anticolonial thinking and praxis that accept the colonial ordering of masculine as superior to feminine and respond with idioms of protest that valorize indigenous forms of masculinity such as ‘Kshatriyahood’ (the cult of the warrior), with Gandhi’s more gender-ambiguous cultivation of self (the eccentric experiments with celibacy, the self-description as ‘God’s eunuch’, etc.) and androgynous techniques of ‘passive resistance’.

This tension between negation within terms derived from colonial discourse, and the deconstruction of those terms, is also visible in the great debates central to Pan-Africanist thought in the Americas, Caribbean and Africa, between proponents of various forms of indigenism, and advocates of more hybrid modes of belonging such as Creolité, Métissage, etc. (Munro & Shilliam 2011). Here, the tension between derivative negation and deconstructive negotiation is understood by some of the leading figures in these debates as equally necessary stages in a historical dialectic. In his preface to a 1948 anthology of African and West Indian poetry edited by

Léopold Senghor (the leading figure in the black nationalist ferment of the 1930s that came to be called Négritude, later to become President of Senegal), Jean-Paul Sartre describes the poetry of Aimé Césaire in the stark dichotomies of negation:

It is not a question of the poem becoming part of the calm unity of opposites; but rather of making *one* of the opposites in the “black-white” couple expand like a phallus in its opposition to the other. The density of these words thrown into the air like stones from a volcano, is found in negritude, which is defined as being *against* Europe and colonization. What Césaire destroys is not *all* culture but rather *white* culture; what he brings to light is not desire for *everything* but rather the revolutionary aspirations of the oppressed negro; what he touches in his very depths is not the spirit but a certain specific, concrete form of humanity (Sartre 1964-65: 33).

Sartre affirms the indispensability of this poetic negation in his insistence that ‘this anti-racist racism is the only road that will lead to the abolition of racial differences’ (*ibid*: 18). Yet even as he does so, he announces the necessary end of Négritude and, by implication, all movements of negation:

...Negritude appears like the up-beat...of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself, and these black men who use it know this perfectly well; they know that it aims at preparing the synthesis or realization of the human being in a raceless society. Thus Negritude is *for* destroying itself, it is a “crossing to” and not an “arrival at,” a means and not an end (*ibid*: 49).

Irritated at the teleological condescension of the European Marxist who has effectively relegated Négritude to the status of a passing phase, Frantz Fanon responds with incredulity in his 1952 work *Black Skin, White Masks*:

What? I have barely opened eyes that have been blindfolded, and someone already wants to drown me in the universal? ... I need to lose myself in my negritude, to see the fires, the segregations, the repressions, the rapes, the discriminations, the boycotts. We need to put our fingers on every sore that mottles the black uniform (1986: 186-7).

Yet this book ends with a denial of the very notion of racial essences, expressing the author’s hope that ‘it may be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be. The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.’ (*ibid*: 231) Moreover, in a move that recalls the Sartrean dialectic, even as he affirms Négritude as an indispensable insurrectionary mode, Fanon warns presciently of the ‘pitfalls of national consciousness’ in his 1961 work *The Wretched of the Earth*. In a vision of freedom that encompasses not only independence from colonial oppression but also liberation from the native bourgeoisie, Fanon insists that the people must pass ‘from total, indiscriminating nationalism to social and economic awareness’ if they are to

attain the forms of consciousness with which to challenge the ossification of the revolutionary leader and party into instruments for the entrenchment of native capital (Fanon 1967: 115). In effect, this statement represents a logical working through of the Leninist strategy of temporary alliance between the forces of communism and anti-colonial bourgeois nationalism in the worldwide struggle against imperialism, as first articulated at the 1920 Second Congress of the Comintern (Young 2001: 130). By implication, once the colonizer had been expelled, the tactical alliance between communists and bourgeois nationalists and the ideological consciousness of nationalism through which it had been forged, could no longer serve a progressive purpose. As such, Fanon's early disagreement with Sartre is best interpreted as one about not the direction in which History marches, so much as the speed with which Marxism expects it to do so in its hurry to subsume all forms of oppression under the rubric of class.

Far from transforming it into a 'reconciliatory rather than a critical, anti-colonialist category' as argued by its critics (During 1998: 31), we can see postcolonialism's critique of nativism and its affirmation of hybridity and synthesis as evocative of the most subversive voices in the anticolonial archive. From a materialist perspective, the critique of nativist and nationalist consciousness, while cognizant of its necessity as the vehicle for postcoloniality, is nonetheless entirely consistent with a Leninist project that accords it a vital but temporary place as a mode of consciousness conducive to a particular stage of the historical dialectic. From this perspective, the debate between Marxism and postcolonialism can be understood as one about temporality within the terms of Lenin's dialectic, so that it becomes possible to conceive of postcolonialism as a form of Marxism: the debate, then, is one about whether the time of transcendence of nationalist consciousness has arrived. From a cultural perspective, postcolonialism views nativism as problematic because of its tendency to fight the colonizer within the terms set by the latter: it is a reverse ethnocentrism that upends the hierarchies inherent within colonial discourse without undermining the notion of hierarchy per se. As Nandy eloquently puts it, in terms that resonate with the Sartre-Fanon debate:

...in every situation of organized oppression the true antonyms are always the exclusive part versus the inclusive whole—not masculinity versus femininity but either of them versus androgyny, not the past versus the present but either of them versus the timelessness in which the past is the present and the present is the past, not the oppressor versus the oppressed but both of them versus the rationality which turns them into co-victims...the opposite of thesis is not the antithesis because they exclude each other. The true 'enemy' of the thesis is seen to be in the synthesis because it includes the thesis and ends the latter's reason for being (Nandy 1988: 99).

Yet even as we recall the subversive, rather than reconciliatory, potentials of voices of synthesis, it is salutary to bear in mind that the anticolonial archive is a space of debate rather than the locus of a singular view on questions of liberation. Confronted with the universalistic categories of colonial discourse—'reason',

'History', 'human'—anticolonial thought responds in at least three registers. First, there is the register of reverse ethnocentrism, which accepts the orientalist notion of a native essence, but posits this as superior to that of the colonizer and therefore as having a stronger claim to the mantle of universality. Second, there is the register of synthesis which looks to the creation of a more perfect universality encompassing colonizer and colonized on equal terms, audible in Césaire's stirring insistence that 'no race has a monopoly of beauty, intelligence, strength / and there is room for all at the rendez-vous of conquest' (1968: 125). In its refusal of the constitutive terms of colonial discourse, this second register begins to anticipate the mode of reading that we would now call deconstruction, whilst nonetheless holding out the possibility of the reconstruction of a better universal. But third, albeit more infrequently, we can also hear—in a much clearer anticipation of poststructuralism—a scepticism of universality per se. When James Joyce has a character in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—a novel that appears in book form in 1916, the year of the Irish Easter Uprising—describe the protagonist Stephen Dedalus as a 'born sneerer' (1965: 219) in bewilderment at the latter's disparagement of quite distinct campaigns for world peace and Irish freedom, we might read this as a literary anticipation of Jean-François Lyotard's definition of the postmodern condition as 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (1984: xxiv).

As such, although postcolonialism is conventionally described as bringing the tools of poststructuralism to the terrain of the 'non-West'—the colonization of which had hitherto been understood primarily in terms of categories derived from Marxism—it is more accurate to think of it as bearing the inheritance of the anticolonial archive, which itself *anticipates* debates between Marxism and poststructuralism as a result of its diverse and contradictory responses to the universalistic platitudes of Western humanism encoded within colonial discourse. Moreover, notwithstanding the tendency of its critics to portray it as a unified discourse, postcolonialism continues to speak in the dissonant registers of that archive. Nowhere is this more visible than in the contrasting appropriations by postcolonial theorists of the work of Fanon, who can himself be read as speaking in multiple registers. Thus, there is the widest of chasms between Said's embrace of the universalist humanism of the Fanon audible in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Said 1994a: 278) and Bhabha's disavowal of this very same Fanon in favour of a dialectics without transcendence, a 'politics without the dream of perfectibility' (Bhabha 1994: 86-91).

It is here that Spivak's endorsement of 'a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' has come to be seen as a way of making sense of postcolonialism's simultaneous pursuit of both humanist and anti-humanist critique. If Marxists worry that postcolonialism's (poststructuralist-influenced) critique of essentialism renders impossible a politics of solidarity, postcolonialism might respond that it does not criticize essentialism per se but the persistence of particular essentialisms beyond the time of their strategic usefulness. Indeed Spivak has acknowledged that essentialisms—categories such as 'worker', 'woman' or even 'human'—are unavoidable and that the critique of essentialism should be understood not as an exposure of error but as 'an acknowledgement of the



dangerousness of something one cannot not use' (2009: 5). Sitting precariously between the humanist essentialisms of emancipatory discourses such as Marxism and nationalism, and the anti-humanist interruptions of poststructuralist deconstruction, postcolonialism can legitimately claim to have inherited the archive of anticolonial liberation in its dissonant entirety.

## **Bibliography**

Ahmad, Aijaz, 1994 [1992], *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso).

Appiah, Kwame Anthony, 1991, 'Is the Post— in Postmodernism the Post— in Postcolonial?', *Critical Inquiry* 17(2): 336-57.

Bhabha, Homi K., 1994, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge).

Césaire, Aimé, 1968 [1956], *Return to My Native Land*, trans. Emile Snyders (Paris: Présence Africaine).

Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Chatterjee, Partha, 1986, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books).

\_\_\_\_\_, 1993, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Childs, Peter & Williams, Patrick, 1997, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall).

Clifford, James, 1988, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Dirlik, Arif, 1994, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', 20(2): 328-56.

During, Simon, 1998, 'Postcolonialism and globalisation: A dialectical relation after all?', *Postcolonial Studies* 1(1): 31-47.

Fanon, Frantz, 1967 [1961], *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin).

\_\_\_\_\_, 1986 [1952], *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press).

Foucault, Michel, 2002 [1969], *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge).

- Gandhi Leela, 2006, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press).
- Gandhi, Mohandas K., 1938 [1909], *Indian Home Rule or Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House).
- Gramsci, Antonio, 1971, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart).
- Grewal, Inderpal, 1996, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (London: Leicester University Press).
- Guha, Ranajit, 1992 [1983], *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1994 [1982], ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- Huddart, David, 2008, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London: Routledge).
- JanMohamed, Abdul R., 1985, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', *Critical Inquiry* 12(1): 59-87.
- Joyce, James, 1965 [1916], *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin).
- Lazarus, Neil, 2002, 'The fetish of "the West" in postcolonial theory', in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Crystal Bartolovich & Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 43-64.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2004, 'Introducing postcolonial studies', *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Lockman, Zachary, 2004, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Lyotard, Jean-François, 1984 [1979], *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Mamdani, Mahmood, 2005, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: Islam, the USA, and the Global War Against Terror* (Delhi: Permanent Black).
- Mani, Lata, 1998, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Marx, Karl, 2000 [1852-3], 'The Future Results of British Rule in India', in *Karl Marx: selected writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- McClintock, Anne, 1992, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"', *Social Text* 31/32: 84-98.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, 2003, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press).
- Morton, Stephen, 2003, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London: Routledge).
- Munro, Martin & Shilliam, Robbie, 2011, 'Alternative sources of cosmopolitanism: nationalism, universalism and Créolité in Francophone Caribbean thought', in *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, colonialism and investigations of global modernity*, ed. Robbie Shilliam (London: Routledge), 159-77.
- Nandy, Ashis, 1988 [1983], *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- Parekh, Bhikhu, 1995 [1989], *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (Delhi: Ajanta).
- Parry, Benita, 2004, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge).
- Puar, Jasbir K., 2007, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press).
- Rao, Rahul, 2010, *Third World Protest: Between Home and the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Said, Edward W., 1985 [1978], *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books).
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1994a [1993], *Culture and Imperialism* (London: \_\_\_\_\_).
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1994b, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage).
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 1964-65 [1948], 'Black Orpheus', trans. John MacCombie, *The Massachusetts Review* 6(1): 13-52.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 1988a, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan), 271-313.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1988b, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge).
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1996, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, eds. Donna Landry & Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge).
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1999, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2009 [1993], *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge).

Young, Robert J. C., 2001, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell).

\_\_\_\_\_, 2004 [1990], *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge).