

Rethinking the Postcolonial and the Global: An Introduction

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In his latest *New Left Review* article titled “How to Begin from the Beginning,” Slavoj Žižek points out that the world today is confronted with four major antagonisms: Eco-environmental crisis, challenge to the established parameters of intellectual property, the unethical potential of biogenetic technology, and “new forms of social apartheid—new walls and slums” (53). In his view, the fourth antagonism, “the one between the included and the excluded,” stands out as the crucial one, for without it “all the others lose their subversive edge” (53). In focusing on the antagonism between the included and the excluded, Žižek purports to uncover or foreground the “need for communism” the antagonism generates. Žižek’s notion of the excluded versus the included recalls what Judith Butler’s conception of the excluded expounded in a different context. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler discusses the fate and situation of a different kind of the excluded who as “a host of ‘unlivable lives’” are deprived of their legal and political status (xv); they “have fallen outside the ‘human’ as it has been naturalized in its ‘Western’ mold by the contemporary workings of humanism” (32). These excluded are brutally subjected to the “violence of derealization” (32), whose existence as racial or cultural Other is understood as “neither alive nor dead but interminably spectral” (32–33). Obviously, Žižek and Butler are talking about two different kinds of antagonism or excluded: while the former places his discussion of the global excluded in the context of capital-labour confrontation, the latter takes up the issue of the excluded from the perspective of the West/North-East/South antagonism. These two kinds of antagonism undoubtedly constitute two major figures of antagonistic contradiction, although the world is saturated with numerous other excluded/included confrontations.

Indeed, since the inauguration of postmodern globalization, the world has undergone sea changes and there have arisen various new and unprecedented forms of social apartheid, and new forms of exclusion or marginalization. All of this has to do, it is arguable, with the dissemination of capitalism in the last analysis. To talk about globalization is actually to talk about the global dissemination of the capitalist mode of production, the consumerist culture-ideology, and digital technology. All the other socio-cultural changes are derived therefrom. The real globality today is what critics like Leslie Sklair call a transnational capitalist class, a transnational lumpenproletariat, and a transnational consumerist culture-ideology. To re-run this point in Žižek's terms, the real globality of the world today is the global confrontation between the excluded and the included. As a result, the globe is indeed in the process of becoming homogenized at some important levels of socio-economic life. Alongside a transnational capitalist class, there is today a transnational class of technocrats, a transnational class of social elite, and a transnational class of the dispossessed. Transnational capitalism shares the same strategies of exploiting local labour and making maximal profits out of the local labour and merchandize markets. Taking advantage of what David Harvey calls uneven geographical development to institute an implicit differential wage system, capitalism makes huge profits by way of multifold exploitation of local or indigenous labour and deposits easy-earned money in overseas banks. When bad times come, the burden of losses is unanimously shifted onto their third-world employees and society at large. The transnational class of the dispossessed or excluded have a totally different share of experience and anxieties of global capitalism: They are reduced to the status of faceless, homeless, placeless, and stateless existence and have been transformed into *Homo Sacer*, to quote from Žižek again (55), for they have never been treated as fully human, although not deprived of their rights to equality of being in legal terms.

The racially/ethnically excluded in the world today as discussed in Butler's counter-colonialist book *Precarious Life* no doubt first of all refer to those peoples who have been excluded from the human and have suffered the violence of derealization in the West, particularly in the past

decade of global brutality. In tandem with the global differential distribution of wealth and power there is a global differential distribution of sympathy and grievability: that is, some people are so insignificant and valueless that they are regarded as totally undeserving of empathy. As Butler notes,

... we seldom, if ever, hear the names of the thousands of Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with United States support, or any number of Afghan people, children and adults. Do they have names and faces, personal histories, family, favorite hobbies, slogans by which they live? What defense against the apprehension of loss is at work in the blithe way in which we accept deaths caused by military means with a shrug or with self-righteousness or with clear vindictiveness? (32)

The bleak picture of the deprived and dehumanized should in no way be limited to Palestinians and Afghan people though they are the communities specifically named here; rather, it should be taken as a picture of the global present. In the world today, enormous numbers of the world's populations are dehumanized in such a way that their rights and their entitlement to sympathy and grieving are generally ignored or cancelled, or, to quote Derrida speaking in a different context, "never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity" and never before, "in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth" (85). The continuity between Žižek and Butler in their respective discussions of the contemporary global reality consists in their shared insightful focus on the included/excluded antagonism. It is exactly such antagonism that urges critics like Edward Said and Alain Badiou to propose their respective reinvented notions of "one world" and "one-worldism." To abolish the "murderous division of the world into two"—the north and the south and the poor and the rich (38), Badiou proposed his idea of "performative unity": "we must affirm the existence of the single world right from the start, as axiom and principle. The simple phrase,

'there is only one world', is not an objective conclusion. It is performative: we are deciding that this is how it is for us" (38).

These global realities, together with the idea(l) of one-worldism or "performative unity" deployed to contest or eradicate them, pose serious challenges to all politically progressive communities including postcolonial critics and postcolonial editorial collectives. It is out of these acutely felt concerns that we have decided to mark *ARIEL*'s fortieth anniversary with a special issue entitled "Thinking Through Postcoloniality." Over the past few decades, the desire and discourse called postcolonial studies has come a long way in terms of investigating the social, cultural, ideological, and political effects of colonialism, interrogating and dismantling Eurocentric or West-centric structures of knowledge and power, and decolonizing the world, the text, and the mind. To rejuvenate itself as a neo-Gramscian project dealing with a world of unprecedented multiple confrontations, crises, and polarizations, however, postcolonial studies needs to offer the world something of epochal importance—new perspectives and theorizings—on the various emergent paradigms of oppression and exclusion as well as the emergent forms and sites of resistance to such oppression and exclusion. The articles included in the present special issue address the subversive and insurgent nature of postcolonialism as preoccupied with global subaltern, exploited, poverty-stricken populations, the overlapping experience of discontinuous peripheral modernities triggered by capitalism and imperialism, alternative modernities emerging from the interaction between the local and global, Pan-Africanism and transnational black identity, new forms of invisibility and exploitation endured by stateless or illegal immigrants in the age of globalization, postcolonial and diaspora studies in China, and the new tasks facing postcolonial studies in the new historical moment of postmodern globalization.

In summer 2006 I met with Arif Dirlik and Wang Fengzhen in Beijing and during our three-hour conversation, we talked about sites and forms of resistance to the global system of capitalism. Arif recommended the academic journal special issue as an important site for raising new ideas and ways of thinking. Indeed, a journal special issue can be useful and empowering. It has the potential to provide a discursive space for think-

ing through emergent questions in various fields of critical inquiry and intellectual pursuit and for mobilizing counter-hegemonic energy and consciousness. My co-editor, Wang Ning, and I hope that the *ARIEL* fortieth anniversary special issue as such a discursive space will provoke or inspire further, rigorous discussion on the new directions and new tasks of postcolonial studies.

Works Cited

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