

"No Direction Home ?" - Futures for Post-Colonial Studies

Being asked to speculate on future directions for Post-Colonial studies is daunting in any circumstances. Being asked to do so briefly¹ seems to court disaster. The sense of anxiety or uncertainty this engenders is not necessarily diminished by a conference title which appears ambiguously located between the descriptive, the prescriptive and the predictive (this is how we have changed direction; this is how we ought to be changing direction; this is how we will change direction). That in turn produces anxiety about a model of Post-Colonial studies which would assume endless changes of direction; a model whose effortless self-transcendence or self-revolutionising might have rather more to do with fashion or the commodification of theory than the generally slow and difficult negotiations which produce theoretical developments; a model, finally, which replicates that overly celebratory stance which was one of the things for which The Empire Writes Back was criticised, (and there is, of course, a monitory parallel here with postmodernism).

Such worries notwithstanding, changes of direction have occurred in the field - indeed, elaboration of the field itself represents a major change of direction for many individuals or departments. Little perhaps needs to be said about the way in which Colonial Discourse Theory and, more recently and more importantly, Post-Colonial Studies have affected traditional methodologies, created new objects of analysis (not least through the recognition of the need to escape disciplinary boundaries) and new questions to ask - to the extent that post-colonialism constitutes one of the most complex and challenging terrains in contemporary academic life. Its complexity and lack of easy definition mean that it frequently frustrates, dissatisfies or bewilders - and hence generates the sort of negative reactions to which I shall return shortly.

Rather than simply speculate on changing directions which are absolutely new, I prefer to identify a number of issues or trends which currently exist (to a greater or lesser extent) but whose development appears desirable. The first direction I wish to take is not the most obvious in this context : backwards. Partly because of the speed and manner of the development of the field, many people seem afflicted with something like a terror of being theoretically *passé*, of using concepts which are discredited or simply not the latest. I would, however, like to urge the importance of critically re-evaluating older theoretical categories and forms of writing. For instance, one of the more discredited concepts at present (and arguably one with a particular relevance for post-colonial analysis) is the Marxist notion of totality, the subject of repeated criticism from a variety of post-structuralist and postmodernist positions.

For a number of reasons, however, it seems to me a concept which is worth retaining or resurrecting. Fredric Jameson says :

The general feeling that the revolutionary Utopian or totalising impulse is somehow tainted from the outset and doomed to bloodshed by the very structure of its thought does strike one as idealistic, if not a replay of doctrines of original sin in their worst sense. ²

and goes on to argue that resistance to globalising or totalising concepts can be seen as a function of the universalisation of capitalism and its attendant modes of thought. While for Jameson totality itself remains inaccessible or unrepresentable, the actual process of totalising involves nothing more objectionable than the making of (historically grounded) connections between phenomena.

While, given his allegiances, Jameson would obviously be expected to retain concepts such as totality, it is more surprising to find a scrupulous deconstructor like Gayatri Spivak doing so - and in remarkably similar terms :

if we dismiss general systemic critical perception as necessarily totalising or centralising, we merely prove once again that the subject of capital can inhabit its ostensible critique as well. ³

Indeed, one can argue that in view of the fact that the post-colonial - however unsatisfactory and contested a term - refers to more than three quarters of the world, and that one of the major contemporary phenomena in relation to which post-colonialism has to situate itself is that of globalisation, any avoidance of totalising methods which attempt some understanding of the overall workings or significances involved would be sheer irresponsibility.

A related form of recuperative reappraisal of a less than fashionable area can be seen in Benita Parry's recent work on nativism and Negritude. Even if she feels able to offer only "Two Cheers for Nativism", Parry nevertheless treats it with a seriousness absent from so many recent accounts which dismiss rather than discuss.

Instead of disciplining these [rhetorics of nativism], theoretical whip in hand, as a catalogue of epistemological error, of essentialist mystifications, as a masculinist appropriation of dissent, as no more than an anti-racist racism, etc., I want to consider what is to be gained by an unsententious interrogation of such articulations, which, if often driven by negative passion, cannot be reduced to a mere inveighing against iniquities or a repetition of the canonical terms of imperialism's conceptual framework. ⁴

This type of refusal simply to accept what have become the dominant terms of the debate is an important example for work in the post-colonial field, where the rapid development of theories and positions can mean that intellectual fashions tend to acquire rather more weight than they deserve.

One area which is simultaneously important, over-fashionable, and in need of serious engagement by post-colonial scholars is that of globalisation. While some

would see it as no more than the glamorous refuge for those for whom the attractions of postmodernism had all too rapidly waned, it is an undeniably significant aspect of that contemporary world which post-colonial theory strives to analyse, (but not one which it has yet subjected to significant scrutiny). As an example of potentially useful intersections, the title of a recent book, Orientalism. Postmodernism and Globalism by Bryan Turner⁵, signals the desire to reexamine the earlier concept (Orientalism), retain - rather than (prematurely) reject - the recent one whose appeal is dwindling (postmodernism), and introduce the one whose moment appears to have arrived. Unfortunately, Turner does not take sufficient note of work done on Orientalism since the appearance of Said's book, and his discussion of globalisation reads more like a review article of Roland Robertson's work -which, while important, is not the whole of the debate. Globalisation shares with post-colonialism its status as unstable or contested term and uncertainly demarcated area of inquiry. In addition, while post-colonialism's emphasis on cultural products and processes is obvious, that is also, and more surprisingly, how some commentators want to define globalisation :

material exchanges localize; political exchanges internationalize; and symbolic exchanges globalize. It follows that the globalization of human society is contingent on the extent to which cultural arrangements are effective relative to economic and political arrangements.⁶

But only some commentators. For others, like Arif Dirlik,⁷ globalisation is clearly the latest phase in the centuries-old but undiminished process of the internationalisation of capitalism, which Marxists and some post-colonial critics argue is best understood and named as imperialism. The globalised world may be post-colonial, but it is in no way post-imperial, and we forget that at our peril.

A similar type of peril arguably attends a too-easy acceptance of globalisation theory's focus on the way in which the process emphasises universal humanity at the time when disparities between people of the countries of the North and South, or First and Third World, have never been so acute - precisely as a result of the dynamics of capitalism which produce globalisation. It also returns us to the question of how it might be possible to make proper sense of contemporary structures and processes without resorting to totalising theories.

The reorganisation of spatial relations which is an unavoidable part of globalisation is an area which post-colonial theory could usefully address. Although there have been occasional useful studies such as John Noyes' Colonial Space⁸, post-colonial work has emphasised place rather than space, locality rather than spatiality. An influential article by Arjun Appadurai⁹ uses spatial and kinetic metaphors of 'scapes' and 'flows' to examine the processes in the global cultural economy. Appadurai's categories include technoscapes (the global configurations of technology), finanscapes (the disposition of capital), mediascapes (media images and

the means of their production), ethnoscapes (human populations, especially those in motion, such as immigrants, exiles and migrant workers) and ideoscapes (distributions of ideologies and counter-ideologies), while the 'flows' and relations which constitute such fields are, in Appadurai's view, disjunctive, fluid and uncertain. Though the terms of his discussion might be unfamiliar to that tradition, Appadurai feels that he is working both to retain and restructure a Marxist explanatory framework.

For Anthony Giddens¹⁰, the equating of globalisation with capitalism is too simple an explanation, and the latter term is only one of four major dimensions of globalisation which he isolates, the others being the international division of labour, the world military order and the nation state system, (though it is hard to see why most of these could not be subsumed into the processes of world capitalism). In Giddens' model, globalisation is a dialectical process in which 'local' events are shaped by others occurring far away - and vice versa. Despite his rejection of the 'globalisation = capitalism' equation, Giddens' view of modernity as "inherently globalising" does make it sound rather like the capitalism-as-imperialism of various standard Marxist accounts.

At least from Fanon's "Pitfalls of National Consciousness" in The Wretched of the Earth onwards, post-colonial theory has been aware of the problems of the nation state, and especially of nationalism as an ideology which could be divisive, even murderous, as well as unifying and liberating. In particular, Fanon saw the national as an essential stage, but one which had to be superseded in the formation of true internationalism. More recently, globalisation theory has celebrated the perceived decline and possible demise of the nation state in the context of a very different kind of internationalism from that envisaged by Fanon. For some critics, however, such celebration is premature :

We hear a great deal these days about the post-national status of global capitalism and postcoloniality. Such conclusions ignore the ferocious recoding power of the concept/metaphor 'nation state', and remain locked within the reversal of capital logic and colonialism.¹¹

Post-colonial analysis which addresses itself to aspects of globalisation will have to examine a far wider range of cultural forms than is usually the case - particularly if it is to be more than a mechanism for saving English Literature from stagnation, which is how some university departments use it. Although a certain amount of work has been done on film, notably by people like Teshome Gabriel, analysis has often remained within frameworks other than the post-colonial : national (e.g., Senegalese film), continental (e.g., African or Asian cinema), or political/theoretical (e.g., the Third Cinema debate). Otherwise, work tends to be of the nature of Gayatri Spivak's occasional and avowedly non-specialist forays, such as

her pieces on Kureishi's Sammy and Rosie Get Laid or Mrinal Sen's Genesis. A recent book on film which follows the trend in bypassing post-colonialism or existing in tension with it is Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's Unthinking Eurocentrism¹², where the bypassing results from their focus on multiculturalism (a term which is possibly even more contentious than post-colonialism), and the tension exists in Shohat reprising her doubts about post-colonialism originally expressed in her article in Social Text. Beyond cinema, however, even less is done : television as aspiring high- or happily popular-cultural, as part of the national imaginary or an aspect of cultural imperialism, is one of post-colonialism's largely unmapped spaces, and that is even more true of emergent forms such as the Internet. Clearly, work in these areas may require different forms of expertise than those typically deployed in post-colonial studies - occasionally, perhaps, to an extent which is off-putting - but that does not constitute a reason for ignoring their relevance or the urgency of engaging with them.

Additional possible directions for Post-Colonial Studies are bound up with, among other things, questions of self-reflexivity. A recent development has been a greater awareness of the implications of post-colonial intellectual practice, particularly in terms of pedagogy and power relations. Realisation of the connections between education and power has an important history in anti-colonial and post-colonial phases. For Fanon, self-education on the part of oppressed groups is both a sign of their resistance and a guarantee of its success, as well as a clear refutation of colonialist ideologies which stressed the mental incapacity of colonised peoples. If Fanon focuses on education in the struggle, for Paulo Freire, education is the struggle, and his vision of self-reflexive revolutionary pedagogy both prefigures and in many ways still surpasses current post-colonial developments.

For Freire, education both anticipates and participates in the revolution; its forms and procedures are those without which no true revolution could exist. Post-colonial work might not necessarily see itself as revolutionary, but nevertheless clearly hopes to effect change. Ways of making a difference are explored by, for example, Patrick McGee's Telling the Other¹³, which emphasises the need for an attitude of radical openness towards the Other (however constituted), or Gayatri Spivak in Outside in the Teaching Machine, which continues her discussion of the (frequently unwitting) implication of intellectuals in the reproduction of oppressive power relations, begun in articles such as "Can the Subaltern Speak ?". As far as metropolitan academics working in the post-colonial field are concerned, she is insistent that while it is pointless to deny the position of privilege occupied, there is a need for constant vigilance with regard to the effects of the power involved in such positionality, as well as to minimise those effects, beginning, for instance, with the

attempt to learn the cultures of post-colonialism, not just teach them. Interestingly, Spivak opposes what in certain quarters has become something of an orthodoxy in thinking about the Other, namely that any attempt to know or understand the Other interferes with their fundamental alterity, is therefore unethical, and ultimately imperialist. For Spivak, however, "...it is not possible for us as ethical agents to imagine otherness or alterity maximally. We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical."¹⁴ The idea that that not only is it possible, but is indeed necessary to trespass on the absolute alterity of the Other can only be theoretically liberating for those in the field constrained by a reluctance to appear to be operating oppressively.

Although post-colonial work may have radical possibilities, it undoubtedly needs to be aware, now and in the future, of the dangers of its complicity with, or appropriation by, institutions and structures of power which it would normally wish to oppose. The institutional emergence of post-colonial studies represents simultaneously the result of years of struggle to have such topics accepted as academically legitimate, and the (mis)use of their appeal by institutions. For some, however, post-colonialism seems to be always already institutionalised :

"When exactly... does the 'post-colonial' begin ?" queries Ella Shohat in a recent discussion of the subject. Misreading the question deliberately, I will supply an answer that is only partially facetious : when Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe.¹⁵

The question of institutional cooptation is clearly not confined to post-colonial studies; it is one which has plagued all oppositional or politicised tendencies in the academic world, notably, in recent years, Marxism and feminism. However, unless we accept the proposition that the game is already lost, there is no inevitability about cooptation - it is simply one of many directions in which post-colonial studies needs to continue to be vigilant and resistant.

A final area of necessary self-awareness concerns the status of the term post-colonialism and the field designated by it. It would almost seem as if post-colonialism continues to be used despite the number of criticisms made of it, rather than because of the amount of support. Well-known criticisms have come from those working in the field (Ane McLintock, Ella Shohat, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge) as well as from those who would see themselves as marginal to the field as it is constituted (Arif Dirlik, Aijaz Ahmad, and others). For some, the term has not properly arrived (the condition it designates is not fully achieved globally); for others, such as the historian John MacKenzie, the whole theoretical enterprise has already run its course.¹⁶ Some critics, such as Robert Young and Gayatri Spivak, have gradually come to accord it greater importance; others, like Aijaz Ahmad, think

it has already been given far more than it deserves. The term may be profoundly unsatisfactory; at the same time it is arguably the only one we have in order to construct the kind of field of inquiry which is needed. Such an apparent lack of fit between terminology and a complex area of study brings to mind Gayatri Spivak's use of catachresis as "A concept metaphor without an adequate referent..." and "...a generality inaccessible to intended description".¹⁷ - though how far these are actually true of post-colonialism is a matter for discussion. As Spivak says in a different context, "one is left with the useful yet semi-mournful position of the unavoidable usefulness of something that is dangerous."¹⁸ Whether or not post-colonial studies are currently 'dangerous', one way forward is to make them more so, and not to feel in the least mournful about it.

References :

- 1) This paper was given as part of the panel plenary at the Changing Directions conference to launch the University of Kent's Post-Colonial Studies centre, and was therefore necessarily brief. Thanks to Lyn Innes and Nigel Rigby for the invitation to speak.
- 2) Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Verso, 1990, p.402
- 3) Gayatri Spivak, Outside in the Teaching Machine, Routledge, 1994, p.256
- 4) Benita Parry, "Resistance theory / theorising resistance, or two cheers for nativism", in Barker et al, eds., Colonial discourse / postcolonial theory, Manchester University Press, 1994, p.176
- 5) Bryan S. Turner, Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism, Routledge, 1994
- 6) Malcolm Waters, Globalization, Routledge, 1995, p.9
- 7) Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura : Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism", Critical Inquiry, 20, Winter 1994,
- 8) John Noyes, Colonial Space, Harwood Academic, 1992

- 9) Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", Public Culture, 2, 2, 1990, reprinted in Williams and Chrisman, eds., Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, Harvester, 1993
- 10) Anthony Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity, Polity Press, 1990, excerpted in Williams and Chrisman, op.cit.
- 11) Gayatri Spivak, op.cit., p.183
- 12) Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism, Routledge, 1995
- 13) Patrick McGee, Telling the Other, Cornell University Press, 1992
- 14) Spivak, op.cit., p.81
- 15) Dirlik, op.cit., pp. 328-9
- 16) See John M. MacKenzie, Orientalism : History, theory and the arts, Manchester University Press, 1995. However, the fact that MacKenzie consistently refers to his object of critique as 'colonial discourse analysis' is perhaps significant.
- 17) Spivak, op.cit., pp. 60, 29
- 18) Spivak, *ibid.*, p.5