

Introduction: The political unconscious of postcolonial studies

Much of my own work since the early 1990s has taken the form of a contestation of particular ideas and assumptions predominant in postcolonial studies. I have sought, in general, to call into question concepts and theories that have seemed to me to lack accountability to the realities of the contemporary world-system that constitutes their putative object; and also to register my disagreement with the partial and tendentious ways in which the work of some key writers in the field has been taken up.¹ In *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, however, I want to move from the ‘negative’ moment of critique to the more ‘positive’ moment of reconstruction. While I still believe that it is important to write in the mode of critique, I will be concerned here also to propose alternative readings and conceptualisations, to be set alongside and compared with those currently prevailing. Much of this book will therefore be devoted to an elaboration of concepts, methods, and substantive themes, upon which what I would view as a plausible ‘reconstruction’ of postcolonial studies might conceivably be based.

The work of reconstruction needs to begin, I think, with a periodisation of postcolonial studies, aimed both at situating its emergence and consolidation as a field of academic enquiry and at contextualising its distinctive emphases and investments. Concerning the latter, we can register immediately the supplementarity of postcolonial studies to post-structuralist theory. This supplementarity has often been noted; and some of the defining theoretical and ideological dispositions in the field have correctly been identified and assessed by critics, accordingly, through reference to post-structuralism.² To ring true, however, our periodisation will need to do more than offer an intellectual genealogy of postcolonial studies; it will need in addition to supply a credible sociological account of the relation between the field’s problematic and developments in the wider social world.

Emerging at the end of the 1970s and consolidating itself over the course of the following decade and a half, postcolonial studies was very much a creature of its time – or, better, it was a creature *of* and

against its time. Just behind it lay the post-1945 boom – a ‘golden age’, as Eric Hobsbawm has called it,³ of a quarter-century or so of explosive global economic growth accompanied, in the core capitalist countries, by an historically unprecedented democratisation of social resources and, in the ‘Third World’, by insurgent demands for decolonisation and self-determination. This boom period had come to an end at the beginning of the 1970s, when the world-system stumbled into economic recession and attendant political crisis, from which it has yet to recover. The thirty-plus years since the puncturing of the boom – the ‘long downturn’, to use Robert Brenner’s term⁴ – have been marked, economically, by a steady decline of the rate of return on capital investment and, politically, by the global reassertion of US dominance (involving, among other things, the rolling back of the challenge represented by ‘Third World’ insurgency) and the brutal imposition of ‘the logic of unilateral capital’.⁵

The *social* dimensions of the boom era must be emphasised here.⁶ In the core capitalist countries, the ‘welfare state’ was made possible by a strategic compromise between capital and labour. For a combination of reasons – among them the relative strength of organised labour and the relative weakness of ‘organised capital’ in the immediate postwar years, and an exhausted disenchantment on all sides with the politics of confrontation – postwar reconstruction in these countries took the form of social democracy. Economic growth on the one hand was complemented by the dispersal of social benefits on the other. During this period of thirty years or so, as Colin Leys has written,

the industrialized countries experienced steady economic growth, distributed the benefits with a degree of equity (however modest) between capital and labour and between town and country, invested in their infrastructure, increasingly recognized and assisted disadvantaged groups and pursued all sorts of other social and cultural objectives, from gender equality to care for the environment, even if such goals were only very imperfectly attained.⁷

Much the same point is made also by Jürgen Habermas, in a rather striking summary that warrants quoting at length:

Of course, the explosive growth of the global economy, the quadrupling of industrial production, and an exponential increase in the world trade between the early 1950s and the early 1970s also generated disparities between the rich and the poor regions of the world. But the governments of the OECD [Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development] nations, who were responsible for three-quarters of global production and four-fifths of global trade in industrial goods during these two decades, had learned enough from the catastrophic experiences of the period between the two world wars to pursue intelligent

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domestic economic policies, focusing on stability with a relatively high rate of economic growth, and on the construction and enhancement of comprehensive social security systems. In welfare-state mass democracies, highly productive capitalist economies were socially domesticated for the first time, and were thus brought more or less in line with the normative self-understanding of democratic constitutional states.⁸

It is worth picking up on Habermas's term 'domesticated' here and stressing that the welfare state was a political *settlement*, reflecting no magnanimous or 'natural' aspiration on capital's part to harmonise its interests with those of labour but, on the contrary, the hard-won ability of organised labour to constrain capital.

If the social gains achieved under the rubrics of the 'welfare state' (in western Europe) and the 'Great Society' (in the United States) were made possible by a temporary truce or stand-off between capital and labour, those in the 'Third World' were powered by the struggle for self-determination. This was a struggle that had to be waged precisely *against* the core capitalist states, of course, whose *domestic* policies might have been 'intelligent', to use Habermas's term – and 'more or less in line with the normative self-understanding of democratic constitutional states' – but whose *foreign* policies continued to rationalise colonial overlordship and to justify imperialist domination. In these terms, the sheer, irreversible advance represented by the achievement of decolonisation in the postwar years needs to be registered decisively. The articulation and elaboration of national consciousness; the mobilisation of popular will or support; the tempering of this will in the fire of the anticolonial campaigns, of campaigns for national liberation, when the least response of the colonial powers was intransigence and the arrogant refusal even to contemplate reform, and the more typical response (from Malaya to Vietnam, Kenya to Algeria) was to call out the police and very often the army to silence dissent and quell resistance – these developments, concerted in their nevertheless uncoordinated appearance across the globe in the immediate postwar period, were (and remain) of huge significance. 'The world became a larger and happier place', as Basil Davidson writes of the decolonising years in Africa⁹ – not '*seemed* to become a larger and happier place', note, but actively *became* such. '[T]here were many reasons for optimism', Davidson continues:

The old empires were falling fast and would not be restored. The social freedoms that had provided the real magnet behind nationalism were making themselves increasingly felt; and the grim silence of the colonial years was already shattered by a hubbub of plans and schemes for a more favorable future. People even talked

of a 'new Africa', and yet it did not sound absurd. A whole continent seemed to have come alive again, vividly real, bursting with creative energies, claiming its heritage in the human family, and unfolding ever more varied or surprising aspects of itself. (pp. 195–6)

It is important to recollect the energy, dynamism, and optimism of the decolonising and immediate post-independence era, both for the sake of the historical record and also to enable us to register the *successes* of this period, however slender, partial, provisional, or unsustainable they proved to be in the longer term.¹⁰ The Vietnamese army's defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; the staging of the Bandung Conference itself in 1955; Nasser's stand on Suez in 1956; the acquisition of independence in Ghana in 1957 – these were all events that fired the imaginations of millions of people worldwide, in the global 'North' as well as the 'South', placing on to the world stage, perhaps for the first time, the principled and resolute figure of 'Third World' self-determination. Domestically, too, the newly inaugurated postcolonial regimes, initially at least, undertook all manner of ambitious projects intended to improve the livelihood and welfare of their citizenry, from literacy and adult education campaigns to the construction and provision of hospitals, from the building of roads and sewage facilities to irrigation schemes, and from the redistribution of land to the outlawing of feudal rights over the labour of others. Here, women were granted the right to vote and to own property. There, workers won the right to organise and strike. Still elsewhere, compulsory education of children was introduced. Constitutions were framed; new laws were passed; many tyrannical and bitterly resented colonial laws and edicts were struck down, and many equally bitterly resented precolonial customs and practices were officially scrapped or proscribed.¹¹

This new sense of uplift and regeneration proved to be of relatively short duration, of course. In *The Black Man's Burden*, Davidson attempts to analyse the processes through which, in the postcolonial era, the gap between 'people' and 'state' widened rather than (as might have been anticipated, and was certainly hoped for) narrowed. Increasingly, he argues, 'social' imperatives – those concerning the distribution of capital, resources, and services – were subordinated to the 'national' requirements of elite entrenchment – that is, where they were not cynically jettisoned altogether. Not only was 'the extraction of wealth from ... already impoverished [societies] ... in no way halted by the [ending of colonial rule]'. The "national conflict", embodied in the rivalries for executive power between contending groups or individuals among the "elites" ... [took] priority over a "social conflict" concerned with the interests of most of the inhabitants of

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these new nation-states' (pp. 219, 114). Although his commentary is focused on sub-Saharan Africa, what Davidson says is readily applicable elsewhere in the (post-) colonial world as well. For in territory after territory, leaders and ruling elites came to identify their own maintenance in power as being of greater importance than the broader 'social' goods of democratisation, opportunity, and equality, and they increasingly used the repressive apparatuses and technologies of the state (often inherited from the colonial order) to enforce order and to silence or eliminate opposition.¹²

There are some excellent accounts bringing into clear focus the failures of postcolonial leaderships to extend and democratise the momentous social advance represented by decolonisation. Neil Larsen, for instance, has argued that in what he calls the 'Bandung era' there was an historic failure to steer the anti-imperialist movement worldwide in the direction of proletarian internationalism on the basis of 'a strategic alliance of metropolitan and third world labor against capital as such'.¹³ The result of this was that, while the macrosocial schemes of 'development' (or 'modernisation') produced relatively impressive *economic* results throughout the 'Third World' in the quarter of a century following the Second World War, these typically failed to augur *democratisation*, either political or economic. Thus the introduction of 'some aspects of a welfare state in health, social security and housing' in various Latin American states in the post-1945 period, for instance, was never socially dispersed: as Jorge Larraín has written, 'the benefits . . . continued to be highly concentrated and the masses of the people continued to be excluded'.¹⁴

We should also note here that the Second World War ended with the definitive supersession of European political hegemony by that of the US, and that post-1945 developments unfolded, accordingly, on the frame of a *pax Americana*. It is not only that the 'East–West' conflict, the cold war, continually buffeted postcolonial states about, obliging them to present themselves in certain lights, to implement certain policies and to shut down or abort others, in order to secure favour or forestall disfavour; it is also that decolonisation – the emergence of new autocratic or would-be autocratic regimes in the postcolonial world – was from the outset viewed by the United States, the postwar hegemon, as a potentially dangerous development, to be monitored closely and crushed whenever it seemed too threatening.

There is a remarkable moment in Norman Mailer's great novel of the Second World War, *The Naked and the Dead* (first published in 1949), in which the demented and rabidly right-wing American general, Cummings,

lectures his liberal junior officer, Hearn, about the historical significance of the war for the United States:

Historically the purpose of this war is to translate America's potential into kinetic energy ... When you've created power, materials, armies, they don't wither of their own accord. Our vacuum as a nation is filled with released power, and I can tell you that we're out of the backwaters of history now ... For the past century the entire historical process has been working toward greater and greater consolidation of power ... Your men of power in America ... are becoming conscious of their real aims for the first time in our history. Watch. After the war our foreign policy is going to be far more naked, far less hypocritical than it has ever been. We're no longer going to cover our eyes with our left hand while our right is extending an imperialist paw.¹⁵

As though performing to Cummings's script, the United States in the post-1945 period made it its business to export counter-revolution, working ceaselessly, sometimes directly, sometimes covertly, to undermine, subvert, and overthrow regimes and movements which it deemed to stand in opposition to its interests and political philosophy.¹⁶ Brennan refers, in this context, to the 'orchestrated mass killing of leftists in Indonesia, Chile, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Colombia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and elsewhere';¹⁷ and any casual listing of the states and regimes which the United States actively worked to destabilise in the post-1945 era must give one pause: such a listing must start, of course, with Cuba; but it might then move outwards, to such 'middle American' and Caribbean nations as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Guyana, Grenada, and Haiti; then on to such properly continental Latin American states as Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile; Africa (Angola, Congo, Libya, Ghana, for instance); the 'Middle East' (a wide arc from Somalia to Afghanistan, and including Iran, Iraq, and Syria) and South East Asia (most notably Vietnam, the Philippines, and Korea, but also Indonesia, Cambodia, and Laos).

The setbacks suffered by and the defeats inflicted upon progressive forces in the 'Third World' in the decades following the end of the Second World War were considerable. But even they register indirectly the insurgency, the restless dynamism, of the era. Writing at the end of the 1950s, Frantz Fanon spoke famously of 'the upward thrust of the people' of Africa, and evoked the 'coordinated effort on the part of two hundred and fifty million men to triumph over stupidity, hunger, and inhumanity at one and the same time'.¹⁸ The term 'Third World' itself dates from this time, and was used, banner-like, to announce a consolidated platform of resistance to imperialism – one term among many in a distinctive lexicon

of keywords: liberation, revolution, decolonisation, non-alignment, pan-Arabism, pan-Africanism, 'African socialism', nationalism, and so on.

Beginning in the late 1960s, however, a series of related developments combined to bring the postwar boom to a shuddering halt. 'The crisis manifested itself', according to Amin, 'in the return of high and persistent unemployment accompanied by a slowing down of growth in the West, the collapse of Sovietism, and serious regression in some regions of the Third World, accompanied by unsustainable levels of external indebtedness' (*Capitalism*, p. 94). The key point to note here about this crisis is that it provoked capital into the promulgation of a raft of new policies aimed at arresting and turning around the falling rates of profit. As Peter Wilkin has written, these policies formed part of a consolidated attempt on the part of the neo-liberal political elite then rising to hegemony in the core capitalist countries and elsewhere 'to overturn the limited gains made by working people throughout the world-system in the post-war period'.¹⁹ What was labelled 'globalisation' and projected by neo-liberal ideology as a deterritorialised and geopolitically anonymous behemoth – or as a tidal wave (another favoured metaphor) of 'technology and irresistible market forces', 'sweeping over borders . . . [and] transform[ing] the global system in ways beyond the power of anyone to do much to change'²⁰ – was, on the contrary, a consciously framed political project or strategy. A savage restructuring of class and social relations worldwide was set in train, in the interests of capital.²¹

In the 'West', the practical effects of this restructuring, still ongoing, have been to privatise social provision, thereby crippling or even dismantling the welfare state and stripping vast sectors of metropolitan populations of security across wide aspects of their lives; to drive millions of people out of work, forcing them not only into unemployment but into *structural* unemployment; and to enact legislation that has made it increasingly difficult for people to represent themselves collectively, to campaign and fight for their interests and the rights formally accorded them.²² In the 'Third World' the effects have been analogous. Economically, '[w]hat was new about this recession and the period that followed it', as Larrain explains,

was that the anti-depression policies followed by most governments produced inflation without adequately stimulating the economy, thus provoking high levels of unemployment. Throughout the developing world the recession had damaging effects: it aggravated the chronic deficits of its balance of payments by bringing down the prices of raw materials and raising the prices of oil and other essential imports, thus producing inflation, unemployment and stagnation. This marked the beginning of the huge expansion of the Third World's international

debt, which soon became an impossibly heavy burden for its very weak economies, with the result that several countries defaulted on their obligations. (*Identity and Modernity*, p. 133)

Even during the ‘boom’ years, the sheer size of the debts owed by ‘Third World’ states to foreign lending institutions posed a big problem. But once the global downturn commenced, any chance of their ‘catching up’ and keeping a clean balance sheet disappeared definitively, and probably forever. As John Saul has written, with respect to Africa:

Fatefully [the] ... debt came due, in the 1980s, just as the premises of the dominant players in the development game were changing. The western Keynesian consensus that had sanctioned the agricultural levies, the industrialization dream, the social services sensibility, and the activist state of the immediate post-independence decades – and lent money to support all this – was replaced by ‘neo-liberalism’. For Africa this meant the winding down of any remnant of the developmental state, the new driving premise was to be a withdrawal of the state from the economy and the removal of all barriers, including exchange controls, protective tariffs and public ownership (and with such moves to be linked as well to massive social service cutbacks), to the operation of global market forces.²³

The African case is extreme but not unique. In Latin America, the crippling burden of debt repayment led such major economies as Mexico, Argentina and Brazil to the brink. Growing indebtedness contrived to render states ever more dependent on foreign capital at the very moment when foreign capitalists, themselves concerned with profitability, became unwilling to extend credit and eager to get the highest possible short-term returns on their loans and investments. ‘In the aftermath of the debt crisis’ of the early 1980s, as Gwynne and Kay have written,

the international financial institutions were by and large able to dictate economic and social policies to the indebted countries, especially the weaker and smaller economies, through structural adjustment programs (SAPs). While Brazil and Mexico were able to negotiate better terms with the World Bank and foreign creditors, Bolivia and other countries were unable to do so. Peru, during the government of Alan García, tried to defy the international financial institutions but was severely punished for it and, after a change of government, the country had to accept the harsh reality of the new power of global capital and implement a SAP. SAPs were used as vehicles for introducing neoliberal policies ... they had particularly negative consequences for the poor of Latin American economies as unemployment soared and wages and social welfare expenditures were drastically reduced.²⁴

Throughout the postcolonial world over the course of the final quarter of the twentieth century, Structural Adjustment Programs were imposed as

conditions for the distribution of loans, which the recipient nations were not in any position to refuse.²⁵ Typically mandating huge cuts in government spending and social provision, the slashing of wages, the opening up of local markets to imported goods and the removal of all restrictions on foreign investment, the privatisation of state enterprises and social services, and deregulation in all sectors to ensure that all developments were driven by the logic of the market rather than by social need or government policy, SAPs became a favoured means of disciplining postcolonial states, domesticating them and rendering them subservient to the needs of the global market. They also became a means of ensuring that postcolonial states would retain their peripheral status, neither attempting to delink themselves from the world-system nor ever imagining themselves capable of participating in it from any position of parity, let alone power.

Postcolonial studies emerged as an institutionally specific, conjuncturally determined response to these global developments. The emergent field breathed the air of the reassertion of imperial dominance beginning in the 1970s, one of whose major preconditions was the containment and recuperation of the historic challenge from the 'Third World' that had been expressed in the struggle for decolonisation in the boom years after 1945. After 1975, the prevailing political sentiment in the West turned sharply against anticolonial nationalist insurgency and revolutionary anti-imperialism. The substance and trajectory of the work produced in postcolonial studies was strongly marked by this epochal reversal of the fortunes and influence of insurgent national liberation movements and revolutionary ideologies in the 'Third World'. The decisive defeat of liberationist ideologies within the western (or, increasingly, western-based) intelligentsia, including its radical elements – was fundamental to the emergent field, whose subsequent consolidation, during the 1980s and early 1990s, might then be seen, at least in part, as a function of its articulation of a complex intellectual response to this defeat.

On the one hand, as an initiative in tune with its times, postcolonial studies was party to the general anti-liberationism then rising to hegemony in the wider society. The field not only emerged in close chronological proximity to the enforced end of the 'Bandung era', the era of 'Third World' insurgency. It also characteristically offered, in the scholarship that it fostered and produced, something approximating a monumentalisation of this moment – not, indeed, a celebration, but a rationalisation of, and pragmatic adjustment to, the demise of the ideologies that had flourished during the 'Bandung' years. Especially after the collapse of historical communism in 1989, it was disposed to pronounce Marxism dead and buried also.

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On the other hand, however, as a self-consciously *progressive* or *radical* initiative, postcolonial studies was, and has remained, opposed to the dominant forms assumed by anti-liberationist policy and discourse in the dark years since the mid 1970s – years of neo-liberal ‘austerity’, ‘structural adjustment’, and political ‘rollback’. What Homi K. Bhabha influentially described as ‘the postcolonial perspective’²⁶ might then be conceptualised (in analogy with the liberal cold-war discourse of ‘anti-anti-communism’) as ‘anti-anti-liberationism’. Itself predicated on a disavowal of liberationism, which it understands to have been rendered historically anachronistic by the advent of the new world order represented by ‘globalisation’, postcolonial studies has nevertheless stood as a firm opponent of ‘mainstream’ or politically institutionalised anti-liberationism, as expressed both in the frankly imperialist language of leading policy makers and intellectuals in the core capitalist states, and through the punitive policies enacted by such corporate agencies as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation.

A good place to start to unpack this complex placement of postcolonial studies might be to register that, before the late 1970s, there was no field of academic specialisation that went by this name. This is not, of course, to say that there was no work being done before the late 1970s on issues relating to postcolonial cultures and societies. On the contrary, there was a large amount of such work, much of it deeply consequential and of abiding significance. There were political studies of state formation in the newly decolonised countries of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean; economic and sociological studies of development and underdevelopment; historical accounts of anticolonial nationalism and of the various and diverse nationalist leaderships that had fought or campaigned against colonial rule and that had then themselves come to power when independence had finally been won; literary studies of the new writing that was being produced by writers from these territories; and so on. In every academic discipline, there were presses specialising in the publication of material relating to postcolonial issues. Moreover, in most disciplines, dedicated journals had latterly come into existence to carry the emerging debates and to sponsor wider scholarship.²⁷

The word ‘postcolonial’ occasionally appeared in this scholarship, but it did not mean then what it has come to mean in ‘postcolonial studies’. Thus when Hamza Alavi and John S. Saul wrote about the state in ‘postcolonial’ societies in 1972 and 1974, respectively, they used the term in a strict historically and politically delimited sense, to identify the period immediately following decolonisation, when the various leaderships,