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Introducing postcolonial studies

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Before the late 1970s, there was no field of academic specialization that went by the name of "postcolonial studies." Today, by contrast, postcolonial studies occupies a position of legitimacy and even relative prestige, not only within the Euro-American academy but also in universities in many countries of the formerly colonized world. Postcolonial studies centers have been set up in many institutions – mostly linked to departments of literature but inviting significant input also from scholars based in cultural studies, history, anthropology, art, and other disciplines – and innumerable conferences and colloquia have been convened. Advertisements for academic positions in postcolonial studies have become fairly routine. Several dedicated academic journals have begun publication, and any number of other journals have devoted special issues to "postcolonial literature," "postcolonial theory," or "the postcolonial condition." Literary anthologies and critical readers, as well as compilations of essays in the field, have been published, and many of these have sold very well.[1] And in addition to the hundreds of scholarly books and thousands of critical articles that might be said to be *in* the field or indeed to make it up – from the works of Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, V. Y. Mudimbe, Peter Hulme, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to the mass of less influential work on particular authors, periods, situations, events, and concepts – there has recently emerged a burgeoning production of scholarly texts that take the *critical field itself* as their object.[2]

To say that postcolonial studies as an institutionalized field of academic specialization did not exist before the late 1970s is not to say that there was no work being done then 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 decolonized countries of Africa, Asia, and

the Caribbean; economic and sociological studies of development and underdevelopment (typically centered on Latin America); historical accounts of anticolonial nationalism and of the various and diverse nationalist leaderships which had fought or campaigned against colonial rule in territory after territory – Jamaica, Ghana, Algeria, India, Indonesia – and which 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 discipline, there were presses specializing in the publication of academic 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. (In the context of African literature, to give just one example, the first issue of the influential periodical, *African Literature Today*, was published in 1968, and the first issue of what is still the field's flagship journal, *Research in African Literatures*, appeared in 1970.)

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 "post-colonial" societies in 1972 and 1974, respectively, they were using the term in a strict historically and politically delimited sense, to identify the period immediately following decolonization, when the various leaderships, parties, and governments which had gained access to the colonial state apparatuses at independence undertook to transform these apparatuses, to make them over so that instead of serving as instruments of colonial dictatorship they would serve these new leaders' own social and political interests, whether socialist or bourgeois, progressive or reactionary, popular or authoritarian (Alavi 1972; Saul 1974). "Post-colonial" (or "postcolonial" – the American variant), in these usages from the early 1970s, was a periodizing term, a historical and not an ideological concept. It bespoke no political desire or aspiration, looked forward to no particular social or political order. Erstwhile colonial territories that had been decolonized were "postcolonial" states. It was as simple as that. Politically charged and ideologically fraught terms were all around, and were fiercely contested – capitalism and socialism; imperialism and anti-imperialism; first-world and third-world; self-determination and neo-colonialism; center and periphery; modernization, development, dependency, under-development, mal-development, "dependent development" – but the notion of "postcoloniality" did not participate, on any side, in these debates. To describe a literary work or a writer as "postcolonial" was to name a period, a discrete historical moment, not a project or a politics.[3] It was far more usual to see writers and works characterized in terms of their communities of origin, identity, or identification. Thus Chinua Achebe was

described variously as an Igbo writer, a Nigerian writer, an African writer, a Commonwealth writer, a third-world writer, but seldom if ever as a "postcolonial" one. To have called Achebe a "postcolonial" writer would have been, in a sense, merely to set the scene, historically speaking, for the analysis to come.

To begin to appreciate how much things have changed in this respect, consider the following passage from Homi K. Bhabha's essay, "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency," in *The Location of Culture*. I quote from Bhabha's essay at length, both because of its relevance to my commentary and because Bhabha's work has been so influential in framing the parameters of postcolonial studies:

> Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of "minorities" within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic "normality" to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the "rationalizations" of modernity. To bend Jürgen Habermas to our purposes, we could also argue that the postcolonial project, at the most general theoretical level, seeks to explore those social pathologies – "loss of meaning, conditions of anomie" – that no longer simply "cluster around class antagonism, [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies" . . . 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.
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> (1994: 171, 173)

We can see straight away that in Bhabha's thinking, "postcolonial" has ceased to be a historical category. The term does not designate what it sounds like it designates, that is, the moment, or more generally the time, *after* colonialism. There *are* temporal words and phrases in Bhabha's formulation – "no longer," for instance – but these do not appear to relate in any discernible way to *decolonization* as a historical event, that is to decolonization as a "cut" or break in time, such that one could speak of a colonial "before"

and a postcolonial "after." Bhabha writes that "postcolonial criticism" concerns itself with "social pathologies" that can "no longer" be referred to the explanatory factor of class division: "postcolonial criticism" is thus opposed to (and for Bhabha evidently comes after or supersedes) class analysis. No explanation is given, however, as to why the term "colonial" is felt to be implicated in the putative obsolescence of class analysis. Indeed, on the basis of what Bhabha says, "postcolonial criticism" could as easily be called "post-Marxist criticism."

Or even "post-modern criticism," since Bhabha is at pains to emphasize that the "post-" in "postcolonial criticism" is directed against the assumptions of the "ideological discourses of modernity," which are said to flatten out complexity, to simplify the sheer heterogeneity and unevenness of real conditions, to reduce these to "a binary structure of opposition."[4] For Bhabha, "postcolonial" is a fighting term, a theoretical weapon, which "intervene[s]" in existing debates and "resists" certain political and philosophical constructions. "Postcolonial criticism," as he understands and champions it, is constitutively anti-Marxist – departing not only from more orthodox Marxist scholarship but even from "the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or 'dependency' theory"; it evinces an undifferentiating disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturality (see Smith, in this volume); it is hostile towards "holistic forms of social explanation" (towards totality and systematic analysis) and demonstrates an aversion to dialectics (see Ganguly, in this volume); and it refuses an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics in favor of one that emphasises "cultural difference," "ambivalen[ce]" and "the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp" of what "modern" philosophy had imagined as the determinate categories of social reality.

Between Alavi's and Saul's "post-colonialism" and Bhabha's, a sea-change has occurred. It is within the context of this sea change that postcolonial studies has emerged to prominence as a field of academic specialization. The task then becomes to account for this sea-change, to explore its causes and consequences. This is by no means an easy task, because it requires us to operate on many levels simultaneously. At the level of political economy, thus, we can speak (and indeed must, since it is an important part of the whole story) of the reassertion of imperial dominance beginning in the 1970s, that is, of the global re-imposition and re-consolidation both – economically – of what Samir Amin has called "the logic of unilateral capital" (1997: 95) and – politically – of an actively interventionist "New World Order," headquartered in Washington, DC. One of the fundamental preconditions of this

re-imposition and re-consolidation (Walden Bello [1999] calls it "rollback") was the containment and recuperation of the historic challenge from the third world that had been expressed in the struggle for decolonization in the post-1945 period. (Chapter 2 in this volume, by Lazarus, deals centrally with this issue, which is also taken up, to some degree, in the chapters by Sivanandan, Parry, Brennan, and Chrisman.) Postcolonial studies not only emerged in close chronological proximity to the end of the era of decolonization.[5] It also has characteristically offered something approximating a monumentalization of this moment – a rationalization of and pragmatic adjustment to, if not quite a celebration of, the downturn in the fortunes and influence of insurgent national liberation movements and revolutionary socialist ideologies in the early 1970s. In this context it is also necessary to mention the collapse of historical communism in 1989. For "[t]he fall of the Berlin Wall and the crisis of the Soviet world," as Robert Gwynne and Cristóbal Kay have written, served to "reassert . . . the dominance of the world capitalist system . . . The demise of the bipolar world, which had been based around Cold War political ideologies, shifted the emphasis to the variations of political economy within the world system" (1999: 9). After 1975, as many commentators have observed, political sentiment in the West tended to turn against nationalist insurgency and revolutionary anti-capitalism; after 1989, socialism itself was pronounced dead and buried (see Parry, in this volume).

This goes quite a long way towards explaining the strong anti-nationalist and anti-Marxist dispositions of most of the scholars working within postcolonial studies – an academic field that has scarcely been immune to the *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the age. Yet too much of the commentary on postcolonial studies (including the critical or dissenting scholarship) has been reductive. There has been a tendency to read postcolonial studies as *mere* ideology, as though in fact the class position of its leading practitioners relative to the class position of most members of postcolonial societies were in itself a mark, or brand, of inauthenticity. Kwame Anthony Appiah's fiercely oppositional definition has been much admired, for instance – "Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: of a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery" (1992: 149) – as has Arif Dirlik's reformulation of it – "I think [Appiah] . . . is missing the point because the world situation that justified the term comprador no longer exists. I would suggest instead that postcoloniality is the condition of the intelligentsia of global capitalism" (1994: 356). However, both of these definitions are guilty of a certain unwarranted determinism, as they move surreptitiously and in the

absence of any analysis from one kind of "standpoint" to another, from an identification of the social location of the postcolonialist to an identification of the political and philosophical position that the postcolonialist will (necessarily? probably?) assume or take up.

It is not, of course, that the class position of the postcolonial theorist relative to that of the people whom he or she is theorizing ought not to be a matter of concern. Of course it should: and in fact, precisely this "gap" *has* been a major matter of concern in the scholarly literature. Yet what really needs to be addressed in this respect – and it has to be said that it has not thus far been addressed with the requisite degree of subtlety and precision in the scholarly literature – is how postcolonial studies, as a particular field of academic specialization, has been shaped by this gap, or how scholars, using the particular resources generated by their work in the field of postcolonial studies, have sought to bridge or shrink or destroy this gap. Dirlik comes close to identifying this theoretical task when he states that "[t]he question . . . is not whether this global intelligentsia can (or should) return to national loyalties but whether, in recognition of its own class-position in global capitalism, it can generate a thoroughgoing criticism of its own ideology and formulate practices of resistance against the system of which it is a product" (1994: 356). It is clear, however, that for Dirlik himself, this is a rhetorical question. As he has defined it, "this global intelligentsia" – the community of postcolonial scholars – cannot be imagined formulating "a thoroughgoing criticism of its own ideology."

Consider in this context the following formulation by Anthony D. King, intended to give a sense of what postcolonial studies is about, a sense of what it does and why, and of what theoretical and methodological investments govern its practice:

> What might be called the modern history of postcolonial (literary) criticism, informed by poststructuralism, began seriously in the early 1980s. Its early exponents (Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak) focused on a critique of literary and historical writing and . . . were located in the humanities of the western academy. The critique was directed especially at Eurocentricism and the cultural racism of the West. Subsequently, the objects of the deconstructive postcolonial critique expanded to include film, video, television, photography, all examples of cultural praxis that are mobile, portable, and circulating in the West. Yet given that such literature, photography, or museum displays have existed for decades, why did this postcolonial critique only get established in the 1980s? . . . The answer is apparently simple. Postcolonial criticism in the West had to wait until a sufficient number of postcolonial intellectuals, an audience for them, was established in the Western academy.
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> (1995: 543–44)

Large sections of this passage are unexceptionable, indeed, admirably clear. King identifies (without specifying) the close connection between poststructuralism and postcolonial criticism (see Gikandi, in this volume); he identifies the critique of Eurocentrism as a foundational aspiration within postcolonial studies, and the fact that the field emerged initially in departments of literature and then, having achieved critical mass there, was taken up in culture studies generally, and in anthropology and history (see Parry, Marx, in this volume). Still, King's final sentence is deeply problematical, for two reasons. First, it makes the strange suggestion that the emergence of "postcolonial studies" was merely a matter of the demographic density of "postcolonial intellectuals" in "the Western academy" – a suggestion that crudely quantifies and renders one-dimensional a phenomenon that was clearly qualitative and multi-dimensional. The result is to strip postcolonial studies of any particular *content*. Second, it seems to suppose that "postcolonial studies" was, as it were, *there* in the Western academy all along, merely waiting for its audience of "postcolonial intellectuals" – a supposition that neutralizes the particular *history* (global and political-economic as well as more concretely institutional and academic-theoretical) of the field. In opposition to King, we could argue that "postcolonial criticism" could not possibly have existed before the 1980s, not because it would have lacked an adequate audience then, but because it would have made no sense at all in the historico-ideological context of the 1970s.

2

Colonial rule, as V. Y. Mudimbe notes in *The Invention of Africa*, was established and consolidated on the basis of "the domination of physical space, the reformation of *natives*' minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective. These complementary projects constitute what might be called the colonizing structure, which completely embraces the physical, human, and spiritual aspects of the colonizing experience" (1988: 2). To the extent that the ideological legitimation of colonialism took the forms of a denigration of "native" cultures and a silencing of "native" voices, the responses of the colonized to colonialism included, centrally, an ideological dimension, in which colonial representations were contested and the validity and integrity of "native" cultures reclaimed (Said 1993: 191–281). Among the best-known instances of such resistance are those offered by Chinua Achebe in his "auto-ethnographic" novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1976 [1958]) and by Aimé Césaire, in his searing *Discourse on Colonialism*. In a key passage in *Discourse*, Césaire self-consciously assumes the agency and sovereignty of the speaking subject in order to throw the various apologies

for colonialism back in the faces of the colonizers. "They talk to me about progress, about 'achievements,' diseases cured, improved standards of living," he says. But

> *I* am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out.
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> They throw facts at my head, statistics, mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks.
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> *I* am talking about thousands of men sacrificed to the Congo-Océan. I am talking about those who, as I write this, are digging the harbor of Abidjan by hand. I am talking about millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life – from life, from the dance, from wisdom. (1972: 21–22)

This kind of rhetorical–political gesture has come to be known, in the scholarly literature, under the playful rubric of "the empire writing [or striking] back" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989). Nevertheless, what marks a specifically *post*-colonial inflection of it is the awareness that the subalternizing and silencing propensities of the colonialist representations are often – and symptomatically – evident, too, in *élite* representations issuing from within the colonized – and then, after decolonisation, the post-colonized (nominally independent) – society: in the language and thought of members of the political classes, national and local leaders and spokespeople, men and women of substance, the rich, the landed, the propertied, the educated. Confronted with this relatively late-breaking awareness, the progressive intellectual response, since the 1980s, has been to raise again the question of "the people," to re-direct attention to the disenfranchised sectors of the society – actually a majority and typically an *overwhelming* majority of the population – to insist that both the reclamation of tradition and the (re-)construction of national culture *after* colonialism require a recovery of popular consciousness across the full range of its social articulations. In the domain of scholarship, this new – or perhaps renewed – emphasis has seen the rise of a veritable battery of projects – in Europe and North America as well as in the "Third World" – aimed at the recovery and adequate theorization of popular consciousness and popular practice: a variety of "histories from below," insurgent sociologies, new approaches in political economy, mould-breaking developments in anthropology, feminist and environmentalist work in all sectors of the social sciences, and so on.

In *The Invention of Africa*, Mudimbe follows Jean Copans in proposing that this "intellectual evolution" was powered in the early 1960s by "the advent of sociology and Marxism as major events" (1988: 176).

"Sociology," Copans had written in 1976, with particular reference to the African context

> was not just a new specialization, it constituted a complete break on several counts; empirically, as it was taking into consideration the real history of African peoples; in scale, as it moved on from the village to national social group (from "mini" to "maxi"); theoretically, as a materialistic and historical explanation took the place of Griaulian idealism which ignored the realities of colonialism. (qtd. Mudimbe 1988: 176)

Such is the *culturalist* emphasis in postcolonial studies, however, that little of this pioneering work in sociology or political economy or development studies is known; and even less is it taken on board (see Brennan, in this volume). From the standpoint of postcolonial studies, the turn from élite (understood as axiomatically élitist) forms of representation to popular ones seems to have derived not from sociology or political economy but from the more culturally inflected disciplines of history and anthropology: the work of James Clifford and Néstor García Canclini, Arjun Appadurai and Partha Chatterjee, Jean and John Comaroff is routinely cited, not that of, for example, Peter Gutkind, Walter Rodney, John Saul, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, or Anouar Abdel-Malek.

It is, indeed, Subaltern Studies that has come to provide the methodological template for the approach to the question of popular consciousness in postcolonial studies (see Gopal, Coronil, in this volume). Importantly, however, what is considered exemplary is not the work that initially appeared under that imprimatur in the early 1980s, and that was still committed to the enterprise of recovering or uncovering the contents and forms of consciousness of "the people," those spoken of and for in élite representations, but never afforded the public, sanctioned space to speak of and for themselves: "the wretched of the earth," in Fanon's famous formula (1968); the "people without history," in Eric Wolf's (1982). Instead, the version of subalternity that has proved most influential in postcolonial studies is that proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.[6]

Spivak defines subalternity very strenuously in terms of a structured inarticulacy at the élite levels of state and civil society – such that to be positioned as subaltern in any discursive context is to be incapable of representing oneself within that context (see Bahri, in this volume). The subaltern is the object of discourse, never the subject. Subaltern practice, on Spivak's construction, cannot signify "as itself" across the divide that separates social élites from whose who are not élite. Within the élite spheres, "[t]he subaltern cannot speak" (1988b: 308); or, as Spivak puts it in a more recent essay,

"[t]he gendered subaltern woman . . . can yield 'real' information as agent with the greatest difficulty, not the least because methods of describing her sympathetically are already in place. There is a gulf fixed between the anthropologist's object of investigation and the activist's interlocutor" (1994: 143). On Spivak's reading, the actual contents of the social practice of "the people" are always, indeed definitionally, unrepresentable, including by intellectuals. Whatever is read (that is, represented) as "subaltern" within élite discourse has for her always-already been made over, appropriated, translated, traduced. It is precisely the irreducible gap between popular practice and its (misrecognizing) construal in élite discourse that the term "subalternity" designates on her usage of it. This conceptualization seems to me to come close to fetishizing difference under the rubric of incommensurability. The central problem with Spivak's theorization of subalternity is that in its relentless and one-sided focus on the "gap" of representation, representation as political ventriloquization, it contrives to displace or endlessly defer other questions – among them an *epistemological* question, concerning not the conditions of possibility of representation, but its *adequacy*, and a *methodological* question, concerning the relation between theory and practice.[7]

3

I have already mentioned that contestation of colonialist representations of the colonial enterprise and of "native" cultures was from the outset central to the response of the colonized to colonial rule. Certainly since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 – and significantly prior to this date in such disciplinary fields as anthropology – the attempt to "unthink Eurocentrism" has been lodged as a foundational aspiration of most scholarship, including that deriving from the West, on the subject of colonial discourse.[8]

It is, however, worth drawing attention to two distinctive features of the critique of Eurocentrism in postcolonialist scholarship, both deriving – directly or indirectly, warrantedly or unwarrantedly – from Said's example in *Orientalism*. First, there is the emphasis placed upon the socially constitutive role of Orientalist (or Eurocentric) discourse: such discourse is said literally to have *produced* the fantasmatic worlds which it designates, such that they thereby cease to be fantasmatic and become real. "The Orient" emerges as an effect of Orientalist discourse: representation precedes and produces the reality which it can then claim merely to re-present, having obscured if not obliterated the earlier reality which, as a colonizing discourse, it had begun by misrepresenting. Hence Said's reference to "the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to