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## Introduction: Marxism, modernity, and postcolonial studies

*Crystal Bartolovich*

This book has its origins in a panel on “Marxism and Postcoloniality” organized by the editors for a “Rethinking Marxism” conference at Amherst several years ago. The large turnout for, and lively discussion during, that session – even as a blizzard swirled around the building housing the meeting rooms – convinced us that we should try to recapture the intellectual excitement of that day by continuing the conversation in print. Some of the contributors to this volume were participants in that conference; others were invited to add their thoughts later. All, however, share with the editors the convictions that Marxism and “postcolonial studies” have something to say to each other – and that there might be more productive ways of dealing with their differences than have been exhibited hitherto. There has, in fact, been little direct, serious dialogue *between* Marxists and postcolonial theorists. The neglect (even ignorance) of Marxism in postcolonial studies has often been countered by the reflexive dismissal of the entire field of postcolonial studies by Marxist writers. In this longstanding dispute, a good deal of oversimplification, caricature, and trivialization has crept into the discourse on both sides, with the charges each group hurls against the other being by now well known: Marxism is said to be indelibly Eurocentric, complicit with the domineering master-narratives of modernity (including that of colonialism itself) and, in its approach to texts, vulgarly reductionistic and totalizing; postcolonial studies, in turn, is viewed as complicit with imperialism in its contemporary guise as globalization, oriented exclusively to metropolitan academic adventurism, and, in its approach to texts, irredeemably dematerializing and unhistorical. In contrast to these polarizing and exclusionary positions, this volume advocates a strong and visible *Marxist* postcolonial studies.

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Insisting on a specifically Marxist understanding of problems raised by the question of “postcoloniality” takes on an added urgency given the spectacular success of postcolonial studies within the metropolitan academy since its inception nearly twenty years ago. For these are years in which Marxism itself has had to combat a growing consensus in the intellectual culture at large – on the political left as well as the right – that capitalism is an untranscendable horizon: as the academic credibility and prestige of postcolonial studies has risen steeply, Marxism has been confronted with widespread capitalist triumphalism in the wake of the events of 1989, when we were all, as Eduardo Galeano put it, “invited to the world burial of socialism” (1991: 250). Meanwhile, advertisements for academic positions in postcolonial studies and/or “ethnic” or “global” studies – mostly in English departments, but also in the disciplines of history, anthropology, art, and others – have been proliferating. Several dedicated academic journals – among them *Public Culture*, *Postcolonial Studies*, *Diaspora*, *Third Text*, and *Interventions* – have begun publication, and countless other journals have devoted special issues to “postcolonial theory” or “the postcolonial condition.” In addition to the hundreds of books and thousands of articles that might be said to be *in* the field of postcolonial studies today or indeed to make it up – from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and the works of Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, V. Y. Mudimbe, Arjun Appadurai, and Trinh Minh-ha to the mass of specialist work on particular authors, periods, situations, events, and concepts – there has recently emerged a burgeoning production of texts that take the field itself as their object: witness the publication – merely over the course of the past decade – of books by Boehmer (1995), Childs and Williams (1997), Gandhi (1998), Loomba (1998a), Moore-Gilbert (1997), Quayson (2000), and Young (1990).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it is not surprising that Marxists have eyed this burgeoning production – which is for the most part so ambivalent toward, so unsystematic in its treatment of, the realities of “actually existing capitalism” – with suspicion. Even within postcolonial studies, there has been an acknowledgment that neo-colonial imbalances in the contemporary world order . . . have in fact not been engaged with enough by postcolonial critics who grapple with the shades of the colonial past much more than with the difficulties of the postcolonial present. If postcolonial studies is to survive in any meaningful way, it needs to absorb itself far more deeply with the contemporary world, and with the local circumstances within which colonial institutions and ideas are being moulded into the disparate cultural and socio-economic practices which define our contemporary “globality.”

(Loomba 1998a: 256–57)

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Agreeing with this, the contributors to this volume further assert that Marxism is the theoretical perspective best suited to accomplishing the concerted and effective critique of the violence of the contemporary world order as well as of the ravages of the colonial past that Loomba calls for here.

However, our conviction as to the privileged role of Marxism in this critique is unlikely to be welcomed unequivocally within the field of postcolonial studies. For unquestionably (as a metropolitan disciplinary formation, at least) this field has been deeply and constitutively informed by theoretical protocols and procedures – Foucauldian discourse analysis, deconstruction, Lacanianism – which are not merely indifferent, but, in their dominant forms, actively and explicitly hostile, to Marxism. As Stuart Hall has conceded recently, in response to Arif Dirlik, among others: “two halves of the current debate about ‘late modernity’ – the postcolonial and the analysis of the new developments in global capitalism – have indeed largely proceeded in relative isolation from one another” (Hall 1996a: 257–58). Hall attributes the failure by postcolonial theorists to attend to these “developments in global capitalism” – and, more generally, we would add, to any of the larger questions of political economy – to the fact that

the discourses of the “post” have emerged, and been (often silently) articulated against the practical, political, historical and theoretical effects of the collapse of a certain kind of economistic, teleological and, in the end, reductionistic Marxism. What has resulted from the abandonment of this deterministic economism has been, not alternative ways of thinking questions about the economic relations and their effects . . . but instead a massive, gigantic and eloquent disavowal. (258)

About the “disavowal” of Marxism within much of postcolonial studies, Hall is surely correct, though what he might have given more emphasis to – as this volume does – is how *heterogeneous* Marxism has actually always been. Not only has the “reductionistic” version of Marxism Hall conjures up had critics *within* Marxism all along, but Marxists have been working in a number of ways from the start on the very issues and concerns – such as imperialism, nationalism, racism, subalternity, and so on – which have become central to postcolonial studies, though you would be hard pressed to find much acknowledgment of this in the work of many of the scholars active in the field. Among our primary agendas in this volume, accordingly, is the reactivation of this *disavowed* Marxist heritage in the theorization of the (post-)colonial world. At the same time we attempt to bring to the forefront some of the specifically Marxist interests and tendencies

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located in the work of critics (among whom Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is probably the most prominent) who have situated themselves, or have been situated, in postcolonial studies from early on. We seek to confront head on the ambivalence toward, or rejection of, Marxism characteristic of “post-”discourses in general, and indicate the particular ways the Marxist tradition has itself dealt with the theoretical and practical dilemmas that “post-”theorists have raised.

Some critical commentary on the Editorial of a recent issue of the journal *Postcolonial Studies* (3.3) can suggest the stakes of our project, and its variance with dominant trends in contemporary postcolonial studies. In this Editorial, the regular journal editors supplement a guest-edited special issue – on the theme of fashion – by reproducing photographs of objects from an exhibition entitled “1000 Extra/ordinary Objects,” which was curated in Florence under Benetton’s auspices to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Benetton magazine, *COLORS*. They take as their point of departure Benetton’s own press release, which presents the exhibition as “an anthropological report on our world, which goes beyond the boundaries between ordinary and extraordinary, designer objects and those in everyday use, reality and representation, and between haute couture and the commonplace” (qtd. Cairns et al. 2000: 247). Discussing this press release, the editors point out that it is a mere rationalization: the claim to “anthropology” masks the truth that the exhibit is a giant advertisement for Benetton. “This is commerce,” the editors write, “even if sophisticated, state of the art commerce, which achieves its ends through seduction” (247). This “critique” seems unexceptionable, if banal. But having delivered themselves of it, the editors then move immediately to disavow it, fleeing from their own critical position instead of developing it, as if embarrassed that it had ever occurred to them. First they declare that their own initial assessment of the exhibit is “seriously incomplete”; and then they move to decry “left critique” more generally:

too leaden-footed a left critique falls into economism by treating the radical aesthetic disjuncture of advertising as epiphenomenal, as a simple but clever ruse to hide the cash register devices of the Benetton group. What is not registered by this focus on cash, however, is the productive, seductive effect of their promotional materials’ shock effect. What is not registered, in other words, is our own seduction by their techniques of representation. Perhaps part of the reason for our ambivalence lies in our inability to pin these two sides of the Benetton story down. (247)

The editors speak here of “ambivalence,” but the further their discussion of the exhibit proceeds, the less ambivalent their position

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becomes. Indeed, they progressively make it clear that they have nothing but scorn for *any* attempt to “follow the money,” not simply those which are “economistic.” Because they genuinely appear to believe that “Benetton’s extraordinary market reach, its seeming penetration of every corner of the globe” is an effect of the “profound semiotic indeterminacy and mobility” of its images, the economic, for them, becomes *entirely* superfluous (248). Toward the end of the Editorial, then, they confidently propose a “semiotic” attack on Benetton (as if this were novel or radical). Putting the old Foucauldian reading of Borges’s “Chinese encyclopedia” through its tired paces yet again (is there, at this point in time, any trope in all of critical theory more thoroughly trodden than this one?) they come up with a “tactic” which involves emphasizing the “convoluted folds and ludic openings in the seamless datum of Benetton’s semiotic world” (251)! They appear to assume that this confrontation with categorical contingency will cause the world according to Benetton to totter if not necessarily to fall.

We might all agree, perhaps, that a “leaden-footed” pursuit of the path of political economy is best avoided (indeed, the contributors to this volume would insist that it *has been* avoided in Marxist theory now for many, many years). But surely this ought not to lead to a wholesale flight from political economy – so characteristic of postcolonial studies in general today – as demonstrated here by the editors of *Postcolonial Studies*. Does it really never occur to the editors of that journal to explore Benetton’s labor practices, the sources of its income, or the economic colonization of everyday life demonstrated by the exhibit, and to imagine that these material forces might have something to do with Benetton’s “semiotic” success? Certainly, the essays in *this* volume reject the facile supposition that to mention “cash” is already to have fallen into “economism.” There are *mediations*, to be sure, but there are (irreducibly) *relations* between “the economic” and “the cultural,” nevertheless, which are simultaneously multiplied and rendered more elusive as capital permeates more and more aspects of our existence. Only by a direct address of *all* the tactics (not merely the narrowly semiotic ones) of the Benettons of the world can these relations be understood, and attacked, effectively.

Recognizing this, Henri Lefebvre famously observed that Marxism is “a critical knowledge of everyday life,” a definition in which the crucial term for him was not only the “everyday,” ineluctably allied with his name ever since, but also the “critical,” without which the quotidian would refuse to give up its secrets. A Marxist analysis of the everyday “is not satisfied with merely uncovering and criticizing this real,

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practical life in the minutiae of social life," or focusing solely on the issues of subjectivity, cultural fragmentation, and dispersion of power typical of much postcolonial analysis (as the editors of *Postcolonial Studies* attest). Rather, Lefebvre urged, it ought, "by a process of rational integration . . . to pass from the individual to the social" – and, ultimately, to materialize itself in collective action toward social justice (Lefebvre 1992: 148). Like other theorists of the "ordinary" from Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin to C. L. R. James, Stuart Hall, and Frantz Fanon, Lefebvre insisted on taking seeming trivialities seriously, believing that anyone devoted to resisting capitalist domination could not afford to ignore its permeation into the nooks and crannies of all aspects of our lives. And while Lefebvre did not direct his attention to the (post-)colonial condition, certainly for Fanon, James, and Hall, among others, the insidiousness of *colonial* regimes consisted, similarly, in their ability to capture subjects in the everyday, in language and culture. What distinguishes a specifically Marxist critique, however, from a more general anticolonialism, is the insistence that cultural analysis of the everyday (and the extraordinary alike) is inseparable from questions of political economy, in and outside the metropole; and that the critique of colonialism, and of the social order that has followed formal decolonization, is inextricable from the critique of capitalism.

As a brief rejoinder to the *Postcolonial Studies* analysis of Benetton, we would like to draw attention to a certain theme in the popular business culture of the 1990s which unabashedly celebrates capital's ongoing expansionism by deploying imperial tropes – and demands precisely the sort of analysis *Postcolonial Studies* would have us avoid. Consider, for example, the magazine spread which set portraits of "history's most ambitious leaders" (Lenin among them) next to a luminous bottle of Coca-Cola, with the caption: "Only one launched a campaign that conquered the world."<sup>2</sup> Or ponder the publicity letter advertising the publication of the 1996 *World Development Report: From Plan to Market*, which focused on Eastern Europe and the "challenges" and "expanding opportunities" it provides for "policymakers . . . scholars . . . and global investors." This letter *opens* with a citation from the famous "all that is solid melts into air" passage from the *Manifesto*, and goes on to note simply: "that's how Marx and Engels described the arrival of capitalism in the nineteenth century, and it's no less true of the economies in transition at the close of the twentieth." There is no suggestion that the *Manifesto* (which is never named) is a text which advocates "an association [of workers], in which the free

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development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (1988: 61). To the contrary, the *Report* evidently has an entirely different sort of "freedom" in mind: it "drives home the utter necessity of liberalizing economies through trade and openness to new markets, stabilizing them through reduced inflation and fiscal discipline." In other words, its vision is one of "free markets" and the subjugation of all peoples to the neoliberal policies that benefit metropolitan investors (as well as scholars and policy makers, apparently), with an eye to securing profits in territory that was formerly off-limits. By quoting Marx to the opposite of his purpose, the advertisement for the *Report* transforms the *Manifesto* into a document which comes not to bury capitalism, but to praise it.

To ignore the economic in an analysis of such gestures can only entail capitulation to them. The advertising agency which sponsored the "world conquest" spread goes so far as to suggest that its efforts have resulted in a *proper* revolution, whereas all earlier attempts failed because they did not choose "the right weapon." Interestingly, it does not even trouble to differentiate itself from "history's most ambitious leaders." Nor does it appear to find it troubling to think of advertising as a "weapon" – and, thus, to imply that its own projected conquest of the world is as much a matter of force as was, say, Napoleon's or Hitler's. The advertisement also enacts with stunning confidence the shift from a world in which struggles for power are depicted as involving human actors to one in which even politics has been usurped by the commodity form itself: a bottle of Coke, not that company's CEO, is credited with "success." And "success," furthermore, is explicitly *defined* as the mass subjection of consumers to the commodity which "speaks" in advertising. Likewise, the *World Development Report* advertisement takes capitalism's rule for granted, and views its (formal) movement into the former Soviet Union as monumental if inevitable. Indeed, the specter of counter-revolution haunts its rhetoric, though it is more circumspect than the Coca Cola advertisement: "consider that between 1917 and 1950, countries containing one-third of the world's population seceded from the market economy and instituted central planning... Today's transition back to a market economy is an event of equal significance." The historical narrative suggests that people once thought about (and even attempted to live) *alternatives* to capitalism, but that this is no longer the case. Marx has been conjured up to preside diagnostically over this "transition," presumably because, like a deactivated virus, he can no longer do any harm.



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However, one might ask why, then, Marx needs to be adduced at all? While the advertisements we have just described offer direct articulations of the triumphalism that amounted to something rather like a spirit of the age during the 1990s, it can be argued that in conjuring up Marxism explicitly, such advertisements also speak to a continued need to “manage” the *possibility* of socialism, even after its supposed liquidation as a threat to actually existing capitalism. And the need to manage, of course, implies a continued power – implies, indeed, that the “specter” cited in the *Manifesto* has not yet been laid to rest – even at the very moment when the map of the world is being actively remolded in accordance with what Samir Amin (1997: 95) has called “the logic of unilateral capital.” “Everyday” appeals to an ostensibly discredited Marx(ism) paradoxically indicate its persistent afterlife – as well as the value of an ongoing Marxist critique of capitalist expansionism.

Among the factors that render a supposedly moribund Marx(ism) so embarrassing to the currently dominant order – and thus mandate its continued management – is Marxism’s insistence that it is *capitalism* which stalks about the world “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (Marx 1990: 926). It is, thus, *capitalism* that is “dirt” – matter out of place in Mary Douglas’s influential formulation – in any project to attain a just society. To expose this face of capital, the essays in this volume brush history against the grain to reveal its shadowy side: they direct our attention to what has been displaced and cast aside in the march of “civilization” and “modernization.” Brennan and Larsen, for instance, both locate a *disavowed* “Marx” at the gateway of the “theory” machine that dominates trendier scholarship in the humanities and social sciences today; Nimitz and Jani recover and assert the lost and ignored aspects of Marx’s texts that indicate a more nuanced approach to imperialism and the movement of history than is often acknowledged; Lazarus, Scott, and Ganguly address themselves to concepts (such as “the West” and “race”) which still await adequate theorization in postcolonial studies, while resuscitating others (such as “imperialism” or “authenticity”) that have been prematurely junked; Parry and San Juan direct our attention to the (marginalized) contributions to Marxism generated in the movements against imperialism in Africa; Arrighi and Cleary show how the histories of East Asia and Ireland, respectively, disrupt or falsify dominant assumptions about the development of capitalism and the coherence of “Europe”; and Gopal proposes that an adequate theorization of the figure of “woman,” especially in non-metropolitan contexts,



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carries the capacity to unsettle not only the received understandings of modernity, but also the prevailing counter-understandings developed in postcolonial studies.

By focusing their attention on abandoned and undervalued aspects of history, these essays follow the methodological path Walter Benjamin explored so assiduously throughout his work, but especially in his *Arcades Project*: “rags and refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them” (1999: 460). The essays collected here as a whole show a particular concern for investigating what has been rendered archaic, rejected, or forgotten in mainstream postcolonial studies: the most important – from a Marxist perspective – being the primacy of the critique of capitalism itself.

This project is intended as a counter-force *within* postcolonial theory, where it has, in general, become perfectly acceptable – even conventional – to make no mention of Marxism, even when the situations described seem to call out for it (from Paul Gilroy’s highly visible neglect of the spatial implications of Marxist world systems theory in *The Black Atlantic* [1993] to the host of specialist work taking a non-Marxist worldview for granted, such as Eleni Coundouriotis’s *Claiming History* [1999], an otherwise insightful study of African fiction which evades altogether the Marxist inflections of liberation movements). When the subject of Marxism *is* brought up, it is typically with hostility. In the writings of some postcolonial scholars, for example, Marxism is held *primarily* accountable for the difficulties that certain decolonized states have experienced in the “postcolonial” era (Miller 1990: 31–67; Quayson 2000: 14–16). To see the problem with such analyses, one need only consult C. L. R. James’s (1977) patient and careful assessment of Nkrumah, which seeks – without in any way excusing or explaining away manifest failures and mistakes – to situate the critique where it properly belongs: in the profound dilemmas all post-independence states faced by virtue both of their intrication in a set of global relations they did not control and their inheritance of internal difficulties which were to a large degree a legacy of colonialism itself (cf. Davidson 1992; 1978: 283–382). What is centrally at issue in these differences between Marxist and postcolonialist perspectives, in short, is the former’s emphasis on the continuity and even extension of capitalism’s rule in the “postcolonial” world, even though this perspective has been abandoned across much of the *left*, which, as Slavoj Žižek has put it in a recent critique of multiculturalism, “silently accepts that capitalism is here to stay . . . [such that] the very mention

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of capitalism as world system tends to give rise to the accusation of 'essentialism,' 'fundamentalism' and other crimes" (1997: 46). Working against such assumptions and charges, the contributors to this volume not only emphasize the importance of examining all parts of the world in irreducible, mutually implicating relation to each other from early modernity, but of understanding *capitalism* (not "Eurocentrism" or "cultural imperialism") as underwriting those relations in their historically specific form of "uneven and combined development" (see San Juan's essay for elaboration). They further insist that precisely because of these material interrelations, Marx and Marxism *belong* (and have always belonged) to the whole world, not merely to Europe, or still less, to that mythical entity "the West." Whether we look to the Marx of liberation struggles against imperialism in the postwar period (as do several contributors to this volume, including Parry and San Juan), the "creole culture of anti-imperialism" between the wars (explored here by Brennan), or the decentering effect of non-European struggles on the thought of Marx and Engels in their lifetimes (traced by Jani and Nimitz), we see a Marxist legacy that is not only *not* dismissable as Eurocentric, but is not even in any meaningful sense a "possession" of Europe. Thus, this volume maintains not only that Marxism is rightfully a matter of fundamental interest to intellectuals who would unsettle Eurocentrism and critique colonialism and its after-effects, as postcolonial studies purport to do, but also that, especially at this moment of capitalist triumphalism, a Marxist critique is unforfeitable.

But if it is indispensable to retrieve Marxism from its contemporary disavowal (not least in postcolonial studies), it is arguably also important not to commit oneself either to an undifferentiating (Marxist) disavowal of postcolonial studies. With such prominent Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars as Arif Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmad, we recognize the structuring conceptual and historical weaknesses of postcolonial studies as a field of inquiry. But we still feel that their categorical repudiation of postcolonial studies is deeply misconceived. (Ahmad, for instance, dismisses *all* postcolonial criticism as "postmodernism's wedge to colonize literatures outside Europe and its North American offshoots" [1995a: 1].) Among many other things, such repudiations make impossible any balanced consideration of the field's genuine intellectual (and ideological) achievements. It seems to us that Marxist theorists can and should engage *with* postcolonial studies in mutual sites of concern, and concede to the field the authentic insights and advances that have been generated within it. Among these we would