

## Postcolonial studies: a beginning. . .

Once upon a time, there were civilised peoples and uncivilised, or partially civilised, ones. The former were possessed of states—itsself an index of their civilised status—and were to be found in parts of the western world. The latter, the bulk of the world's population, were scattered in far-off continents, such as Africa, Australia, Asia and the Americas. The countries of the West ruled the peoples of the non-western world. Their political dominance had been secured and was underwritten by coercive means—by conquest and in blood. It was further underwritten by narratives of improvement, of the civilising mission and the white man's burden, which were secured in systems of knowledge which made sense of these narratives, and were, in turn, informed and shaped by them.

In all this, the colonised appeared as passive, for the West was the subject of history, and the colonies were the inert object it acted upon. But just as the colonies were subjected to governance, exploitation, and other processes of transformation, the colonisers too were transformed by the colonial encounter. Not only did the elites of the metropolitan countries grow fat on colonial profits, not only did these profits facilitate the industrial and other transformations which shaped the West anew; the administration and exploitation of the colonies shaped the West's sense of self, and created new forms and regimes of knowledge. A huge array of data was collected, to enable rule and exploitation; the non-western world was represented in a burgeoning literature and art; and whole new disciplines were born, such as anthropology. In short, the new ways of perceiving, organising, representing and acting upon the world which we designate as 'modern' owed as much to the colonial encounter as they did to the industrial revolution, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

In time, the colonies declined to be treated as objects awaiting transformation, and as adjuncts to the history of the West. The old world began to shatter, along with its certainties. The ideas which inspired and accompanied the struggles against colonial and neo-colonial domination were many and varied—self-determination, liberty and equality; the invocation of indigenous ways of being in the world against a rationalised, instrumentalist and individualist western culture; negritude and black pride; nationalism and pan-nationalism; and so on. Because the anti-colonial struggle so often occurred under the umbrella of nationalism, and was often partially articulated in the political and conceptual language of the coloniser, it could appear that this presaged one of those political reversals which left everything else untouched. But the subaltern classes who constituted the backbone of most mass anti-colonial struggles were not bourgeois citizens simply seeking to replicate in their lands what the West already had; and even the elites who led and sometimes misled these struggles were products of the contradictions and juxtapositions which characterised colonial culture, and were thus seldom replicas of the European elites they challenged. Decolonisation was never the history of the European modern played out in a different theatre.

It was, of course, possible to reinscribe the non-West into a history not of its own making, and the dominant discourse of the postcolonial period, that of ‘development’, did precisely this. The non-West was to eventually ‘take-off’ on a path of economic and social development analogous to that of the West; and the intellectual’s task was to harness the resources of science to discovering the impediments to such development, in order that social engineering could remove them. Versions of this paradigm proved remarkably resilient despite their manifest failures, and they are still very much alive today. But other voices and other programs, sometimes temporarily drowned out in the din of development, reasserted themselves. Some challenged the statism which had defined the nationalism of their elites; others developed critiques of the nation-state itself. Some challenged how development was conceived; others questioned whether it was attainable, or even desirable. Some critics, schooled in knowledges which had their origins in the West, applied a critical eye to the knowledges of which they had become unwitting heirs.

Such questioning coincided with political struggles and intellectual movements in the western countries. One consequence of the emergence or reemergence of struggles of workers, women and blacks in the West was an intellectual challenge to received frameworks. The ‘postmodern’ may or may not be a useful characterisation of the state of the world today; but there is no doubt that it is a useful shorthand for designating a growing scepticism re the ‘grand narratives’ which have underwritten the modern’s sense of itself and its own achievements. Critiques of the Enlightenment, of ‘progress’, and of the epistemological foundations of modern western thought were sometimes informed by, and struck a chord with, activists and intellectuals engaging with colonialism and its legacies.

It is out of this political, cultural and intellectual conjuncture that ‘postcolonialism’ was born. Given these enabling conditions, briefly and schematically sketched above, it should be clear that postcolonialism is not a new discipline, nor a clearly identifiable field of research. The term, undeniably and necessarily vague, a gesture rather than a demarcation, points not towards a new knowledge, but rather towards an examination and critique of knowledges ...

... Seen as such, postcolonialism has much in common with other related critical endeavours—such as women’s studies and gay/lesbian studies—classified under the rubric of the ‘new humanities’. Marked by an underlying scepticism, these closely aligned projects find their shared intellectual vocation in a determined opposition to coercive knowledge systems and, concomitantly, in a committed pursuit and recovery of those ways of knowing which have been occluded—or, in Foucault’s terminology, ‘subjugated’—by the epistemic accidents of history. Given its particular inheritance, postcolonialism has directed its own critical antagonism toward the universalising knowledge claims of ‘western civilisation’. And often, its desire to trouble the seemingly impassive face of western rationality has found expression in its will to, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, ‘provincialise Europe’.

As with its critical allies within the ‘new humanities’, postcolonialism has defended its discursive protestations *against* ‘major’ knowledges, and *on behalf* of ‘minor’/deterritorialised knowledges, as quintessentially political and opposi-

tional. Taking their cue from Edward Said's many eloquent defences of academic dissidence, postcolonial intellectuals have consistently maintained that 'criticism belongs in that potential space inside civil society, acting on behalf of those alternative acts and alternative intentions whose advancement is a fundamental human and intellectual obligation.'<sup>1</sup> And yet, not without cause, postcolonialism's sometime self-important posturing within the metropolitan academy now stands charged of a certain pietism. While Arif Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmad, among others, have sternly berated the postcolonial intellectual for opportunistically making a career out of 'marginality', critics like Gayatri Spivak are rather more salutary (and restrained) in their warning that recent concessions to 'marginality' studies within the first world metropolitan academy often serve to identify, confirm, and thereby exclude, certain cultural formations as chronically marginal.

Thus, we might consider the notion that the postcolonial project of 'provincialising Europe' is complicated in its very inception by anxieties of influence, whereby the spectre of European epistemology continues to haunt the scene of postcolonial scepticism. As Chakrabarty concedes, 'since "Europe" cannot after all be provincialised within the institutional site of a university whose knowledge protocols will always take us back to the terrain, where all contours follow that of my hyperreal Europe, the project of provincialising Europe must realise within itself its own impossibility.'<sup>2</sup> How, then, might postcolonialism circumvent the authorising signature of its European inheritance, or even articulate its heady desire for self-invention without always already speaking back to the West? For all its apparently oppositional energies, can the postcolonial project ever liberate the cultures/histories it represents from the shadow of 'alterity', from the consolations of 'difference', from the language of 'otherness'? Indeed, how far is the postcolonial intellectual implicated in the relentless 'othering' of her own cause? And, finally, is it possible to dissolve the disabling oppositions of centre/margin, metropolis/province, West/rest without submitting to the feeble consolations of 'hybridity' and 'syncretism'? Can we imagine, instead, a situated dialogue between competing knowledges; a coming face-to-face of old antagonists in the aftermath of colonial violence?

These are some of the questions which *Postcolonial Studies* seeks to pursue. The publication of this journal coincides with the academic 'highpoint' of postcolonial investigations. Once counter-canonical and enablingly amorphous in its motivations, the postcolonial has now acquired institutional validity. Respectable, popular, publishable and pedagogically secure, it is time for postcolonialism to become self-critical and introspective and, so also, to resist the seductions of canonicity and disciplinarity. Thus, rather than commemorate the inevitable solidification of a 'postcolonial studies' curriculum, this journal is principally a forum for debate, for contestation, for disagreement. It hopes, once again, to facilitate a critique of knowledges rather than to become the triumphant purveyor of a new epistemic orthodoxy ...

... Because of this, even the naming of this journal requires comment and explanation. *Postcolonial Studies*, as a title, trades on the (albeit newly emerging) postcolonial canon to suggest an authoritative status that belies the above stated commitments. The adoption of this title is therefore undertaken as a

conscious act of bad faith. It is, to employ De Certeau's term, a 'tactic'. The tactic being utilised here is to establish a title that suggests an authoritative status yet foregrounds a program of work that undermines this. Like all tactics, we are engaged in a ruse. It is a gamble with our readership who are probably old enough to remember those famous words of Johnny Rotten, 'Don't you feel cheated?'

Yet to cheat in this way is the only way we know how to break down the rapidly emerging boundaries cordoning off and 'defining' postcolonialism as a discipline which is 'safe' and within the academic setting. For us, the real excitement of postcolonialism lies in its desire and determination to theorise those 'dangerous terrains' that academic knowledge feels either uncomfortable with or unwilling to accommodate. Postcolonialism is what we employ to excavate the marginal, the magical, the erotic and the everyday. It means engaging seriously with circuits of knowledge that lie outside the well worn paths of the North American academic market. It means bringing into discourse those debates and arguments that are befriended by Western academics only as ethnographic curiosities or to be employed by them as authenticating reference points for more worthy academic theses'. In this respect we see the journal, in part, as a place to forge a new working relationship with circuits of knowledge that are either marginalised, anthropologised or used as footnote fodder in the western academy. Forging such a relationship entails not only a more inclusive format to the journal but a critical introspective re-examining of our own commitments and writings as academics. We recognise our complicity as academics in the western academic market system. Yet we also tactically appreciate those 'blurring moments' when new knowledge formations, such as postcolonialism, momentarily upset the disciplinary 'apple cart' and offer portents of other ways of seeing and doing. To remain disruptive in this way postcolonialism itself must keep moving. It is in this mobility, flexibility and heterogeneity that a tactical space is opened up not only to broaden debate by including the previously unacknowledged and unincluded, but to tip intellectual debate sideways by tilting the intellectual 'spotlight' away from established names and arguments and toward the politics of the everyday.

To this end we wish to incorporate a range of topics and issues that have generally been the preserve of the 'new humanities' in western academic discourse. From the Simpsons to Suttee, from Madonna to Mao, 'our' postcolonialism offers a new promiscuity which not only heads 'downmarket' but along the way, breaks through the cordon that separates the anthropological-based cultural studies practiced in relation to non-western societies from the popular culture schools that focus on the popular in the West. Such apartheid requires critique, for it not only leads to a new form of exoticism, but also privileges a method which relies on this divide to make sense of the world and privilege itself. It is at this point that western theory, to steal a line from Bloch, 'shows its Scotland Yard pass' and once again produces a form of intellectual colonialism that reorders the world in a binary image that works in its favour. Our aim is to keep the politics *in* postcolonialism by keeping it alive to these sorts of problems. It is for this reason that *Postcolonial Studies* refuses to 'stick to its turf' and focus exclusively on the 'other' of the white and the West. The 'once

upon a time' nature of this divide, as our opening remarks suggested, produced a certain fantasy about the colonial 'other'. Such fairytales can all too easily resurface in different forms along the fault lines of other such binary divisions. It is therefore as important for us to theoretically 'loop the loop' and employ the voices of non-Western scholars in critique of many of the universalising, segmenting and privileging tendencies within western theory, as it is to open up the grounds upon which these voices can be heard. A postcolonialism that incorporates such marginalised, everyday and aberrant forms of knowledge will no doubt be tempted to produce its own 'once upon a time' fantasies. It is important to remain alive to these possibilities and, for this reason, *Postcolonial Studies* is a space for critical dissent and dissection rather than an authoritative voice of what it is to be postcolonial ...

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983, p 30.
- <sup>2</sup> D. Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: who speaks for "Indian pasts" ', *Representations*, 37, 1992, p 22.

