

The Limits of Postcolonial Criticism: The Discourse of Edward Said

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ONE OF THE fundamental discoveries of Marxist historiography is that capitalism as a world system has developed unevenly, with the operations of the “free market” determined by unplanned but (after analysis) “lawful” tendencies of accumulation of surplus value.

With the rise of merchant capitalism, diverse modes of production with varying temporalities and “superstructural” effects have since then reconfigured the planet. In a new cartography, we find metropolitan centers subordinating peripheral territories and peoples. Colonialism and later finance-capitalism (imperialism) compressed time and space, sharply juxtaposing a variety of cultures linked to discrepant economies and polities, with the colonizing center dictating the measure of modernity.

After World War II, the accelerated migration of former colonial subjects into the metropolises, together with the refinement of technologies of communication and foreign investment, heightened the spectacle of heterogeneous languages and mixed practices coexisting with the homogenizing scenarios of everyday life in both center and margin.

I consider postcolonialism as the cultural logic of this mixture and multilayering of forms taken as an essential ethos of late modernity, a logic distanced from its grounding in the unsynchronized interaction between colonial powers and colonized subalterns.

The Indo-British critic Homi Bhabha, among others, has given ontological priority to the phenomenon of cultural difference between colonized and colonizer. The articulation of such difference in “in-between” places produces hybridization of identities: “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 1994, 1-2).

Since (following Wallerstein 1991) capital ethnicizes peoples to promote labor segmentation, hybridity and other differential phenomena result. But for Bhabha, ambivalence arises from the poststructuralist “difference of writing” that informs any cultural performance.

Such performances are found in certain privileged positionalities and experiences: “the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasants and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees.” (5) Alex Callinicos calls Bhabha’s approach “an idealist reduction of the social to the semiotic.” (1995: 111)

Indeterminacy, interruption of the signifying chain, aporia, endless displacements, translations, and negotiations characterize postcolonial literary theory and practice. Aijaz Ahmad (1996) points to the ambiguity of historical references in postcolonial discourse. In the discursive realm of floating signifiers and the language metaphor, the objective asymmetry of power and resources between hegemonic blocs and subaltern groups (racialized minorities in the metropolises and in the “third

world") disappears, as well as the attendant conflicts.

Clearly this fixation on the manifestations of "unevenness" has undergone fetishization, divorced from its concrete social determinations. What postcolonial theory (Bhabha's practice is replicated in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Trinh Minh-ha, and others) seems to carry out in the name of individualist resistance is the valorization of reified immediacies—the symptomatic effects of colonization in various forms of "orientalisms" and strategies of adaptations and cooptations—unconnected with the institutions and instrumentalities that subtend them.

Viewed from the perspective of late-capitalist political economy, the figures of difference, fragmentation, liminality and diaspora, which Lawrence Grossberg (1996) considers the principles of identity for postmodern cultural studies (of which postcolonialism is a subspecies), are modes of regulating the social relations of production, in particular the division of global social labor and its reproduction.

But postcolonial critics not only remove these principles of identity from their circumstantial ground, from their historical contexts; they also treat them as autonomous phenomena separate from the structures of cultural production and political legitimation in late modern societies. In the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's words, "Each of these moments' of the real [i.e. hybridity, fragmentation, etc.], once isolated and hypostatized, becomes the negator of the other moments and then the negator of itself. Limited and transposed into a form, the content becomes oppressive and destructive of its own reality." (1968: 167) Postcolonialism is guilty of what it claims to repudiate: mystification and moralism. What postcolonialism ultimately tries to do is to reify certain transitory practices, styles, modalities of thought and expression that arise as attempts to resolve specific historical contradictions in the ongoing crisis of late, transnational capitalism. Cultural difference is the single ambivalent result of colonialism that can be articulated in plural ways. Unevenness is no longer an abstract categorizing term, but an empirical one-sided description that affords the subaltern's newly-discovered agency some space for the display of libertarian astuteness. What the Marxist theoretician Georg Lukacs (1971) calls "ethical utopianism," the lapse into subjectivism, afflicts postcolonial theory because it denies the internally complex determinants that are its condition of possibility. This mediation of the hybrid, interstitial and borderline experience with the concrete totality of the social formation is rejected as "essentialism" or "totalization" (San Juan 1998). Instead of inquiring further into the poststructuralist mystification of what David Harvey (1996) calls the contemporary "geography of difference" configured by a complex dialectic of flows and permanences, I would like to comment briefly on Edward Said's {Culture and Imperialism} (1994), in particular the refusal of the historical-materialist framework and its subsequent lapse into "ethical utopianism." Given his influential work {Orientalism} (1978), Said deserves to be called the originator and inspiring patron-saint of postcolonial theory and discourse. References to him abound in the writings of Spivak, Bhabha, Mohanty, and others. The anti-Marxism of postcolonial theory may be attributed partly to Said's eclecticism, his belief that American left criticism is marginal, and his distorted if not wholly false understanding of Marxism based on doctrinaire anticommunism and the model of "actually existing socialism" during the Cold War. It is somewhat surprising that the British scholar Francis Mulhern would include in a recent anthology Said's

essay on Jane Austen as an example of Marxist literary criticism, even though its inferred "moral geography" supposedly "reinserts the humane traditions of English culture in their ambiguous role in the unfolding of Britain's colonial history." (1992: 97) To be sure, Said has contributed to the salutary revisions of the vulgar or dogmatic Marxism that Fredric Jameson, Alan Wald, Terry Eagleton and others have criticized. But Said is certainly not revitalizing historical materialism for revolutionary socialist goals. Many other critics, especially Aijaz Ahmad, have pointed out the weaknesses and lacunae in Said's interpretation and rather opportunistic use of classical Marxism. I think this opportunistic quoting, excerpting and tokenizing of Marxist thinkers by postcolonial orthodoxy may explain its reputed radicalism. This putative solidarity, according to fellow-travellers, gives postcolonial criticism a sanction to condemn Marxism's systemic reductionism and other excesses (usually, of course, attributed to ex-Soviet Union dogmatism) under the guise of sympathy and knowledgeability about it. I am reminded of a former colleague who, in the sixties, always warned me to beware of Marxists because he had been a Trotskyist in the forties. The sociologist Bryan Turner also reminds us of Said's adoption of a deconstructive strategy derived from Michel Foucault and Martin Heidegger, whose anti-Marxism needs no elaboration. Not only romantic anarchism but a hermeneutic subjectivism whose textualism confuses "the materiality of social relations with an alleged materiality of the context" has generated in Said's early work a "vicious solipsism." (Turner 1994: 7) Alluding to comments of Maxime Rodinson and Sadek Jalal el-Azm, Samir Amin (1989) has also remarked on Said's provincialism and its inability to explain the historical causality of Eurocentric prejudice. In {Culture and Imperialism}, Said uses Gramsci and C.L.R. James, among others in the Marxist tradition, to give an aura of leftism to his text. Gramsci is referred to in connection with an intellectual vocation, with Yeats' poetry, with the Indian Subaltern Studies. But it is in the way Said appropriates and refunctions Gramsci's notion of hegemony that is symptomatic of a syncretizing, cooptative project. Said first demarcates Gramsci from Lukacs; the latter belongs to the Hegelian tradition, Gramsci to the "Vichian, Crocean departure from it" (49) so that Lukacs attends more to temporality, while Gramsci to social history and actuality grasped in geographical terms. This is said to be evidenced by Gramsci's use of such words as "terrain," "territory," "blocks" and "region," in his essay Some Aspects of the Southern Question. But obviously Gramsci's concept of space is precisely historicized to those places in Southern Italy left out of the main capitalist trend of industrialization because of the stranglehold of the landlord class and its traditional intellectuals like Croce. In my view, Gramsci's conceptualization of topography is historical, not just temporal; the meridional environment is such because of the political subordination of the agrarian economy to the financial power of the Italian bourgeoisie in the North, not because of mere cultural backwardness. The problem Gramsci is grappling with in that text is the workerist sectarianism of the Italian socialist party; he is proposing a united-front policy in which the proletariat will demonstrate its hegemonic capacity by incorporating the demands and needs of the peasantry into its national-popular program of action. The prerequisite for this is the recognition of the historically uneven development of the Italian social formation. In short, profoundly conscious of uneven capitalist development, Gramsci posits

the task of Marxist intellectuals as a systematic attempt to propagate the philosophy of praxis, Marxism, on the terrain where cosmopolitan bourgeois ideas supported by the Catholic Church are dominant. The organic intellectual of the proletariat would assume this pedagogical and agitational role, helping to integrate the Italian South with the national-popular agenda of the leading class, the proletariat. Analogies to dependency theory or to Wallerstein's world-system paradigm of center-periphery may not be quite appropriate. Instead of historicizing the problematic of geopolitical discordance, Said hypostatizes it and, contrary to his initial proposition, focuses on the temporal (in effect, existential) dimension of cultural progress. But what is revealing is Said's enlargement of the intellectual's role which, in retrospect, anticipates that reserved for the postcolonial mediator: {"Gramsci also understands that in the extended time span during which the coral-like formation of a culture occurs, one needs "breaks of an organic kind." Gobetti represents one such break, a fissure that opened up within the cultural structures that supported and occluded the north-south discrepancy for so long in Italian history."} (1993: 50) What distinguishes Gramsci's intellectuals is that they are class-rooted and universalizing in their motivation, whereas the postcolonial intellectual resembles more the declassed intellectual of the metropolitan literary circles. The "Gobetti factor," that is, the intellectual who (in Said's words) "furnishes the link between disparate, apparently autonomous regions of human history," is the model of the postcolonial, diasporic intellectual who will link comparative literature and imperial geography, harmonizing alterities and flattening out contradictions. What has happened here is typical of Said's methodology. The vocation of the postcolonial intellectual as middleman-facilitator of colonized subalterns and Western imperial power is thus legitimized by the illicit subsumption, if not perversion, of Gramsci's idea of how partisan Marxist intellectuals can work to promote the worker-peasant alliance within an all-encompassing program of socialist transformation. Said's circumstantial and secular intelligence ascribes a "spatial consciousness" to Gramsci's reading of the "Southern question" in order to "reinterpret the Western cultural archive as if fractured geographically by the activated imperial divide." (50) But instead of calling for a united front of the Western proletariat and the "peasantry" of the "third world," Said reverts to an academic exercise in contrapuntal reading of the Western cultural archive. In short, Gramsci's insight can rationalize the academic business of interpreting English novels in the context of "the specific history of colonization, resistance, and finally native nationalism," without questioning the ideological and political framework of the expansive, reformist imperial archive. Said's "solidarity" with Marxism consists then in selective deployment of concepts to advance a deconstructive brief. In *Orientalism*, for example, he cites Gramsci's distinction between civil and political society in which culture, located in civil society, is taken as the chief instrument for inducing consent and therefore hegemony. The state disappears since hegemony becomes culturalized. Culture divorced from political economy offers then the framework of intelligibility for understanding the social division of labor, property relations, and the power structure. Injustice and exploitation are thus occluded. In {*The World, the Text, and the Critic*}, Said converts Gramsci into a philosophical idealist, a pluralist who assigns culture to "some large intellectual endeavor—systems

and currents of thought—connected in complex ways to doing things, to accomplishing certain things, to force, to social class and economic production, to diffusing ideas, values, and world pictures.” (1983: 170) Gramsci, for Said, privileges intellectual elaboration as “the central cultural activity,” as “the material making a society a society.” (171) The strength of Western culture, based on “its variety, its heterogeneous plurality,” accounts for “the strength of the modern Western State.” (171) In effect, Said has made Gramsci a disciple of Croce and Hegel. I argue that for Gramsci hegemony cannot be reduced to the domain of culture or superstructure that guarantees the reproduction of the social relations, the state, and everything else. All relations of social forces are conditioned by the material contradictions in the social formation. The hegemonic apparatus of state plus civil society in Gramsci should be grasped within a framework of totality, as rendered by the French scholar Christine Buci-Glucksmann: {“the hegemonic apparatus turns out to be a constitutive part of the relations of production as “ideological social” relations, in the distinction made by Lenin. Practical ideologies and modes of living and feeling have their roots in the economic base: the relation between civilta and production is a pivotal point in Gramsci's whole problematic of capitalism, and of socialism too.”} (1980: 89) In addition, for Gramsci, civil society cannot be fully grasped separate from its internal relations with political society, since civil society involves the linkage between class relations in the economy and the explicitly political aspect of the primary agent of coercion, the state. The dual perspective of consent/coercion unites political and civil societies in Gramsci's extended or integral state, “the unified site in which Western bourgeois classes have established their social power ashegemony protected by the armour of coercion.” (Rupert 1993: 79)

Proletarian counterhegemony then takes place in the integral state, construed by Gramsci as “the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules.” (Gramsci 1971: 244)

Given this misreading of Gramsci, it is no wonder that Said is unable, in *Orientalism*, to propose alternatives to the hegemonic discourse of Orientalism. Dennis Porter comments: “because [Said] overlooks the potential contradiction between discourse theory and Gramscian hegemony, he fails to historicize adequately the texts he cites and summarizes, finding always the same triumphant discourse where several are frequently in conflict.” (1994: 160)

This leads us to Said’s postcolonial eclecticism, which hardens into an orthodoxy as the Bandung “third worldism” of the sixties and dependency liberalism of the seventies mutates into the neoconservative postmodernism of the eighties and nineties.

In a critique of mainstream postcolonial theory, Arif Dirlik noted the fetishism of hybridity and the antifoundationalist rejection of history by Bhabha and others. Postcolonialism’s complicity with capitalist reification and commodity-fetishism has also been examined by Callinicos, Parry and others.

Said (1994) endorses Bhabha’s universalizing conception of the hybridity of all cultures, but the celebration of multiplicity, difference and syncretism at the end of *Culture and Imperialism* still occurs within the field of a pluralist global market which can tolerate Said’s ethical protest.

Despite this moralizing, Dirlik argues, Said's lack of a dialectical method explains why he has failed to take into account the "Oriental's participation in the unfolding of the discourse of the Orient" (1997: 118; see also Chen Xiaomei 1994), and heed the imperative of historicizing capitalist modernity and its hegemonic reifying of non-Western cultures.

An admirer of Said, Frederick Buell in his book *National Culture and the New Global System* aptly describes Said's stance: ". . . Said tries to bridge both positions [that of Sara Suleri and Benita Parry], advancing, for example, his vision of a vehemently antinationalist, yet ardently anti-imperialist, Fanon for the present era, and eschewing a **politics of blame, 'advocating compassion, and seeking to forgenew alignments...across borders, types, nations, and essences'** at the same time as he writes an extended indictment of imperial culture." (1994: 237)

Fanon is refunctioned or rehabilitated to legitimize an academic regime of compromise and liberal multiculturalism—a perfect description of the middleman negotiator. On the other hand, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh locates Said's pragmatic neohumanism in the horizon of post-al theory, "a utopian theory of entrepreneurial individuality and agency,. . . a voluntarism unburdened by history." (1995: 7)

One evidence that points to Said's limitation as marked by the refusal of a materialist, that is, Marxist theorization of history may be discerned in his treatment of C.L.R. James. For Said, James' achievement in *The Black Jacobins* is comparable to that of the petty-bourgeois nationalist George Antonius, author of *The Arab Awakening*: Both allegedly stood within the fold of the Western cultural tradition, "however much they articulate the adversarial experience of colonial and/or non-Western peoples." (248)

In effect, both Antonius and James, like Ranajit Guha, resemble Said or are mirror-images of Said's postcolonial persona. James has metamorphosed into a model of the assimilationist immigrant. According to Said, James "saw the central pattern of politics and history in linear terms . . . and his basic metaphor is that of a voyage taken by ideas and people; those who were slaves and subservient classes could first become the immigrants and then the principal intellectuals of a diverse new society." (253)

The reason why postcolonial thinking like Said's cannot go beyond the limits of a liberal mentality arises from the peculiar condition of diasporic intellectuals, the political conjuncture of the United States in the eighties and nineties, and the global power alignment.

Peter Gran, Arif Dirlik, Ella Shohat, Ann McClintock and others have discussed the historical conjunctures—in Said's case, the Palestinian struggle within the Cold War framework, the poststructuralist trend, and so on—that partly explain the rise of a conservative postcolonial consensus.

The general sociohistorical template of "uneven and combined development" has been fully articulated by Samir Amin (1977), Michael Löwy (1981) and Neil Smith (1984), a materialist cognitive mapping theoretically light years removed from Nietzschean genealogy, which is Said's preferred epistemological mode of inquiry (in spite of the uneasy marriage between Foucault's discourse theory and a version of Gramsci's hegemony). (Porter 1994)

This problematic eschews a dialectical approach to the fundamental condition of late modernity: reification (centered on commodity-fetishism and the circulation of exchange values) on a global scale.

Ultimately, Said's muted or nuanced anti-Marxism is premised on the choice of a libertarian or

“liberationist” perspective. Nicos Poulantzas (1978) and Alex Callinicos (1989) have already exposed the antinomies and compromising paradoxes of this anarchist illusion.

In this perspective, power/desire determines the trajectory of societies; any claim to knowledge and truth—truth is, for Said, “a function of learned judgment,” of institutionalized discourses—can only be a form of ideological maneuver, history or any of the “grand metanarratives” derived from the Enlightenment suspected as a totalizing blackmail.

While Said’s ambition to liberate Europe’s silent Others from the imperial will-to-knowledge/power, to give them voice or the right of representation and signification, is exceptional vis-a-vis Baudrillard’s cynicism and the general nihilism of postmodernist gurus, this attempt undercuts itself by revindicating a liberal brand of humanism on which imperial capital accumulation relies for its aesthetic and ethical legitimation.

This middleman position stems from a revolt against the subordination of use-value to exchange value and the failure to grasp the contradictions inherent in the system of commodity production, in the logic of capitalism as such (Haug 1986).

But the key to this retrograde strategy of humanist recuperation lies in the absence in Said’s thinking of the category of a differentiated and dynamic totality that underlies historical development, the principle of a Marxist critique of imperialism. This totality, in Mezsaros’s words, is “a structured and historically determined overall complex” (1983: 480) embodied in the manifold mediations and transitions of concrete life.

Distinctions can be meaningful only within an integral unity, a complex of internal relations in historical motion. In Marxist thought, Harvey explains, “Difference is given in this scheme of things by the perspective on the totality, not by supposing some clearly defined, isolated entity that is a totality in itself”—an ontological shift that sets the historical-materialist optic apart from poststructuralist textualism and its fetishism of the local and heterogeneous, with its antiessentialist and antifoundationalist retreat into the obscurantism of Lacanian psychology.

Despite Said’s stress on worldliness and the secular density of experience, it is striking that he has no dialectical grasp of the structure of a concrete multilayered totality such as finance capital, imperialism in its several stages, and so on. Said aims for “emancipation” and “enlightenment” but confesses that “the transnational capitalism of global finance” is “relatively irrational and very difficult to comprehend” (1994: 24)—a difficulty that Said mystifies the more by judging it irrational.

It seems to me that Mary Louise Pratt has correctly put a finger on the symptomatic absence in Said of any critique of neocolonialism, since this historical phenomenon marks the limits of postcolonial theory. Pratt argues: “This difference in chronology with respect to colonization and decolonization seems to be one of the main reasons the Americas have remained almost entirely off the map of the colonial discourse movement and colonial studies in general.” (1994: 4)

U.S. neocolonialism is the “missing link” in Said’s fugal charting of modern imperialism. Remarkable too, in this context, is the absence of references to the struggles of the “internal colonies” of the United States, in particular, the Puerto Rican dilemma, the Hawaii sovereignty struggle, and raging conflicts over Affirmative Action and “undocumented aliens,” among others.

I don’t have to dilate on the fact that postcolonial criticism has been unable to comprehend or pay attention to the current crises in Africa, in East Timor, Myanmar, Peru and other societies suffering from neocolonial structures. The inability to comprehend neocolonialism results, I think, from the failure to comprehend uneven and combined development, itself due to an idealist metaphysics that

over-valorizes the intervention of the diasporic, postcolonial intellectual in political struggle.

This intellectualism or theoreticism, if you like, arrogates all agency to borderland personalities like Said, Bhabha, Trinh, Spivak and others who seek to negotiate the zone between the bourgeoisie-comprador nationalism of neocolonized nation-states and the cosmopolitan "high culture" circuit of academic celebrities.

Hence, despite the mention of Cabral or Fanon, Said discounts organized mass political struggles as the other pole of a dialectical totality. He has nothing to say about the praxis of revolutionary transformation, about cultural literacy (emphasized by Paulo Freire) and all those "subjective factors" that Michael Löwy believes are necessary to thwart bureaucratic despotism in postcapitalist societies: "the participatory character of the revolutionary process, the democratic outlook of the socialist vanguard, the degree of proletarian self-activity and popular self-organization." (Löwy 1981: 230)

With the focus on contrapuntal flux, hybrid positionalities, and directionless or aleatory ambivalence, the postcolonial intellectuals' sophisticated and erudite opposition to global capital can only serve as a vehicle for soothing the anguish of the oppressed and promising a utopia of "cultural compassion."

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