History and Cultural Theory

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Postcolonialism

Of all the successive waves of cultural theory that have swept across the human sciences since the late twentieth century it is postcolonialism that arguably provides the greatest challenge to conventional historical practice. This is partly because it is a body of thought that specifically targets 'history' as an object within its broader enquiry into the geopolitics of knowledge, the relations between 'the West and the rest', the imperial powers and their former colonies. Postcolonialism provokes questioning *inter alia* of the conceptual framework of historical study (classically, the nation-state); of accepted models of periodisation (the traditional, the modern) and conceptions of historical time; and of categories deemed capable of universal application, such as capitalism and religion. It also interrogates the processes of historical research, the kinds of knowledge that can be derived from the archive and the status of historical 'evidence'. Not surprisingly, while some historians have received such ideas enthusiastically, and, indeed, have shared in elaborating them, others have treated postcolonialism with hostility or indifference. The historian of imperialism, John Mackenzie, for example, has vigorously rebutted Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, accusing Said among other things of grossly over-simplifying the complex history of cultural interchanges between East and West (Mackenzie 1995). Major historical studies of empire and globalisation continue to be published, meanwhile, with only passing reference to the detailed postcolonial literature (e.g. Cannadine 2001; Bayly 2004; see also Hall, C. 2004 for comments).

There is a long-established and voluminous historiography of empire. In Britain the tradition stretches from J.R. Seeley's *The Expansion of England*, first published in 1883, to the official Oxford and Cambridge University histories written over a century later (Seeley 1883; Louis

1998–9; Marshall 1996). Postcolonialism likewise has a history, if more recent and slight. Critics such as Robert Young have pointed to the historian Arnold Toynbee's denunciation of the illusions of Western cultural imperialism at the time of the Second World War, notably Toynbee's criticism of the 'Late Modern Western convention of identifying parvenue and provincial Western Society's history with "History", writ large' (Young, R. 1990, 19). Others have identified as an intellectual precursor the classic historical study *The Black Jacobins* by the West Indian Marxist C.L.R. James, first published in 1938, which explored the interaction between the French revolution of 1789 and the San Domingo (later Haitian) revolution two years later, culminating in independence from French rule in 1804 (James 1980). What is particularly significant about James' account is that not only are the two events seen as historically interrelated, but that it also clearly showed the way in which political influences had flowed both ways between metropole and colony. Among French intellectuals of the 1950s, as we saw in Chapter One, the war over the colony of Algeria which ended in Algerian independence in 1962 provoked anguished public debate about European imperialism and its effects, involving figures such as Roland Barthes, Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon. This experience, in turn, had a significant impact on French post-structuralist theory.

But such debates were by no means universal in the former imperialist powers. In Britain, where decolonisation occurred steadily over the three decades from the ceding of independence to India in 1947, the legacy of empire was for a long time met in intellectual circles by what Stuart Hall has termed a 'resounding but unconscious silence' in which historiography itself was complicit (Hall, S. 1996, 270). An influential strand of labour history in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, denied that imperialism had a significant cultural or political impact on the British working class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Pelling 1968; Price 1972). It was not only that empire occupied a shadowy place in debates, historical or otherwise, about British society, but that even the most cosmopolitan 'world histories', such as those of Perry Anderson and Fernand Braudel, proceeded on the implicit assumption that Europe was the centre and progenitor of History as a unified, unfolding process (Said 1985b, 22). One consequence was that Europe was deemed to be the place where historical processes of change, like industrialisation and modern democracy, first occurred, later to be replicated under local conditions in other parts of the globe. Thus from the vantage point of Australia, as the cultural critic Meaghan Morris laconically put it, the modern can appear only as 'a

known history, something which has *already happened elsewhere*, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content' (Morris, M. 1993, 10).

This chapter considers the interrelationship of postcolonial theory and historical studies. To begin with I shall examine the influential ideas of a group of theorists – Edward Said, Homi Bhaba and Gayatri Spivak – who have shaped the whole field of postcolonial thought. This includes the school of Indian historiography known as Subaltern Studies that has proved most receptive to this and other kinds of cultural theory, and whose own collective output has implications both for the practice and understanding of history in the West. I shall also look at how postcolonial theory has been used to rethink the impact of the 'Empire at home', in Britain and elsewhere, as well as some of the major criticisms that have been levelled at it. In particular, I shall argue that while postcolonialism puts in question the whole geopolitical framework of history, its application in certain contexts, notably British history, has had the paradoxical consequence of reinforcing staple elements of that framework, including the concepts of Europe and the nation. But before proceeding to these larger issues we need to define more precisely what postcolonialism means.

Defining postcolonialism

Like 'modernity', the term postcolonial implies both an historical periodisation and a mode of analysis or critique. It relates to the notions of colonialism and imperialism, concepts that are often used interchangeably. If both concepts imply the domination of one state or people by another, colonialism is normally used to refer to the informal, economically driven process whereby a metropolitan power exerted influence over parts of the world primarily for trading purposes. Imperialism, on the other hand, designates a project of domination carried out politically as an instrument of state policy (Young, R. 2001, 16–17; Porter 1975, 2–3). The historian of empire Catherine Hall thus uses the term colonialism to cover the processes of European 'discovery' and expansionism between the fifteenth century and the 1800s, and imperialism to refer to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when the pursuit of empire reached its zenith and became an active part of the politics of many European nation-states (Hall, C. 2000, 5).

The concept of postcolonialism is related to both these terms, but it has also accrued further distinctive meanings. It designates, first, a period after the dissolution of the world empires which had reached their apogee

between 1880 and 1920 when a quarter of the world was partitioned up between the major European imperial states, the United States and Japan (Hobsbawm 1987, 57–9; Bayly 2004, 228–33). The dismantling of empire was hastened by increasingly militant nationalist movements after the Second World War so that by 1970 the imperial era was effectively over, though its aftershocks were still felt in brutal wars in Vietnam and parts of Africa. By this period too the economic and cultural effects of globalisation were increasingly recognised by politicians, policy-makers and intellectuals. In an essay entitled 'The muse of history', first published in 1974, the Caribbean writer Derek Walcott reflected on the bitter legacy of slavery and spoke of the 'monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds', the Old World and the New, in the historical present (Walcott 1995, 374). The waves of migration from the former colonies which accompanied these processes provide another vantage-point from which to view the postcolonial moment. In Britain in particular the 1980s witnessed a growing recognition of the emergence of new ethnic identities as the children of migrants from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent came of age. Among members of this new generation identities (black, British, Asian, Caribbean) were no longer fixed by reference to a clear sense of 'home' and there was a tendency to reject all racialised and essentialised categories (Gilroy 1987; Hall, S. 1988). But if the concept of postcolonialism reflects a strong sense of historical transition, this is not taken to assume that colonialism and imperialism are 'over'. One of the central purposes of postcolonial critique is to combat the cultural and other legacies of colonialism as these persist and are renewed through a capitalist international division of labour and Western politico-military hegemony. Thus, a critic like Gayatri Spivak, professor of humanities at Columbia University in New York, refers to herself as situated within the 'current academic theatre of cultural imperialism' (Spivak 1996, 232). A striking and little remarked aspect of this neo-imperialism is the globalisation of English itself as the dominant language of academic exchange.

At the same time as it evokes an historical conjuncture, postcolonialism also represents a specific mode of critique, concerned in the first instance with the analysis of identity, 'race' and place. It is inherently an interdisciplinary project, deliberately calling into question conventional academic divisions between literature, history, and anthropology – the study of peoples assumed to be without 'history'. Postcolonialism also links bodies of thought not usually brought together or seen as compatible, such as Gramscian Marxism, literary deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Its working concepts – ambivalence, hybridity, difference – are

developed out of these theoretical traditions, while undergoing redefinition within postcolonial thought itself. The dimensions of postcolonialism are therefore geopolitical and epistemological. Within its bounds, geography matters – where a text (or history) is written from becomes equally (or more) important than who it is written by. An essential part of the postcolonial critique is thus concerned to effect the decolonisation of Europe's intellectual legacy. If, following Robert Young, postmodernism 'can best be defined as European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world', then postcolonialism is the principal instrument for the unravelling of European thought on a global stage (Young, R. 1990, 19). As such, it brings into question the plethora of disciplines and categories, from history and anthropology to reason and objectivity, through which what was in fact a local – European or Western – knowledge came to stand as something universal, as knowledge *tout court*. Postcolonialism, in short, represents the intellectual moment at which, to quote the title of a pioneering study, the empire strikes back (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982).

Orientalism, hybridity and difference

We have already seen that the origins of postcolonial thought can be traced back to the first half of the twentieth century and, indeed, earlier. But the emergence of postcolonialism as a distinctive intellectual constellation is conventionally associated with the work of three critics: Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Homi Bhaba. Originally from Martinique, Fanon trained as a psychiatrist in France. Moving to North Africa in the 1950s, he participated in the Algerian struggle for national liberation from French colonial rule before dying in 1961, a year before Algerian independence. His first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, published in 1952, was an attempt to understand the psychology of colonialism and the colonised subject; his last, *The Wretched of the Earth*, which appeared in 1961, represented a revolutionary manifesto on behalf of anticolonial movements.

In his writings Fanon contributed a number of influential themes to subsequent postcolonial thought. In the first place, the lengthy historical process of European expansionism was seen not simply as remaking the rest of the world, but Europe itself. 'The settler makes history' in the act of colonial expropriation, Fanon argued. 'The history he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation in regard to all that she skims off, all that she violates and starves.'

Consequently, in an ironic reversal Fanon depicted Europe as the product of its other: 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World' (Fanon 1991 [1961], 51, 102). At the same time Fanon paid detailed attention to the complex, divided character of black subjectivity created in and by colonial relations. 'Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man . . . Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has to place himself' and to which he simultaneously submits and resists (Fanon 1982, 110, 140). In adopting this issue as a central problem, Fanon constituted the colonised subject as the object of critical enquiry within the discursive framework of colonial power. Finally, in the revolutionary coda to *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon called for a rejection of European humanism as an intellectual resource, since humanism had revealed itself through the imperial project to be no more than a rhetorical sham. 'Let us waste no time in sterile litanies and nauseating mimicry. Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men wherever they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe . . . Today we know with what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind.' European fascism from this perspective was merely the violence of colonialism brought home (Fanon 1991, 101, 311–12). Fanon thus set in train a number of arresting critical themes which have resonated through much of the later literature of postcolonialism.

However, the figure who more than anyone is credited with inaugurating postcolonialism (though he himself disliked the term) was the Palestinian intellectual, Edward Said. Said's book *Orientalism*, first appearing in 1978, represents one of the foundational texts of postcolonial studies, initiating not so much a new object of study – the history of Western attitudes towards the East – as a new mode of critical, interdisciplinary analysis spanning literature, historical studies and anthropology. In its critique of cultural imperialism and its political engagement *Orientalism* looked back to Fanon, but in its methodology the study drew on the early work of Foucault, notably the latter's conception of discourse and power. According to Said, Orientalism is the product of European or Western discourses and forms of knowledge which define 'the East' as fundamentally other and – in the context of imperialism – as culturally subordinate to the West. He thus defined Orientalism as a '*distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts; it is an *elaboration*, not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves,

Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of "interests" which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description not only creates it but also maintains it' (Said 1985a, 12, italics original). As this implies, Western academic, administrative and cultural knowledges were not viewed as in any sense neutral or disinterested. While Said dismissed the notion of a simple relationship between Orientalism and imperial power, he nonetheless described the former as depending on a 'flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the upper hand' (Said 1985a, 7).

Orientalism, then, is the ensemble of discourses through which the East was (and is) produced as alien, exotic – and inferior. But when and how was it formed historically? Said was ambiguous about the periodisation of Orientalism. On one side he claimed it to be an endemic feature of European culture, apparent in the writings of classical Greece and regenerated through events such as the late medieval Crusades against Islam (Said 1985a, 55–60). On the other, however, Said also argued that Orientalism took distinctive shape in Europe from the eighteenth century and was thus coterminous with the expansion of the European empires from this period. In this latter case Orientalism was seen as deeply implicated in the cultural forms and disciplinary knowledges of the nineteenth century. Included here were the travel writing of figures like Charles Doughty, the poetry of Lamartine and Chateaubriand, and the novels of Flaubert and Conrad. Orientalism was identified too with the emergence of new academic disciplines: philology (the science of language), anthropology, history, and, not least, the scientific study of the Orient itself, whether by enthusiastic amateurs, like Edward Williams Lane who wrote on Egyptian customs, or by specialists at the many European universities which offered Orientalist subjects by the 1850s (Said 1985a, 190–1). Yet these literary and scholarly texts were not seen by Said as 'merely cultural', in Judith Butler's ironic phrase. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Said argued that they were central to imperialism as a military, administrative and governmental project. They were part of the 'enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period' (Said 1985a, 3). In the final part of the book, entitled 'Orientalism now', Said showed how Orientalist ideas have continued to inform cultural and political practices in the West, from academic 'area studies' to state policy formation. An example, which Said drew attention

to in a subsequent interview, was Samuel Huntington's polemical analysis of contemporary global politics as defined by the 'clash of civilisations', Western and Islamic, which took on increased potency following the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 (Said 2002, 4; Huntington 1997).

In *Orientalism* and the subsequent *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Said's principal contribution to intellectual debate was to establish 'colonial discourse' as an object of analysis and to delineate its cultural and political scope. Discourses described as Orientalist are thus revealed to underpin much of the history of Western relations with the East (and the South), not just attitudes that can be seen as obviously idealised or exoticising. But while this is generally recognised, his approach has been questioned by subsequent critics. Said has been accused of adopting the stance of Western humanism, which assumes a universalism of experience, and even of Eurocentrism in his attention to literary texts derived from the Western canon to the exclusion of other non-Western texts and voices (Clifford 1988). Moreover, his thesis can be seen as ahistorical in certain respects, as I have intimated, rendering Orientalism a more or less permanent feature of European culture, marked only by differences of degree or form. It also leaves minimal scope for resistance on the part of the colonised who were its principal objects, despite plentiful evidence of opposition wherever such ideological confrontation occurred. Consequently, Said's work can be deemed – ultimately and perversely – to reinforce the very binary opposition between East and West which he set out to undo, since it offers no historical or realisable space outside this fundamental division.

Certain of these weaknesses in Said's thought have been picked up and worked upon by the postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhaba. Bhaba's debt to Fanon is likewise evident, not only in the application of psychoanalysis to the situation of colonialism, but also in the insistence on the temporal as well as spatial situatedness of politics and culture. Thus Bhaba opens his major collection of essays, *The Location of Culture* (1994) with Fanon's statement from *Black Skin, White Masks*: 'Every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time'. What Bhaba principally questions in Said's work is the idea that within the parameters of Orientalist discourse power resides exclusively with the colonisers; Said's abrupt division between power on the one side and powerlessness on the other contributes to and exemplifies the way in which his arguments tend to reproduce binary oppositions. Instead, Bhaba portrays colonial power as fractured and ambivalent, especially in colonial settings such as

nineteenth-century India and the Caribbean. The existence of the colonised is registered in the discourses of their rulers by signs of a persistent unsettling presence, a subtle subversion that does not require outright resistance to achieve its destabilising effects.

How more exactly, then, does Bhaba depict the relationship between coloniser and colonised? He points first to a certain ambivalence or split in the colonial discursive system, evidenced in a range of texts from novels to administrative reports. At a primary level the discourse of the coloniser is split on the one hand between the necessity to represent the colonised, in the political and administrative senses of the term as well as in the cultural and imaginary; and on the other the need to disavow them, to recreate the native population as alien and inferior. This produces a tension if not an actual contradiction: for while the former strategy seeks to identify coloniser and colonised as mutually comprehensible and therefore similar, the latter insists on their fundamental difference. As a consequence, colonial mastery is flawed and incomplete; the identity of the colonised always eludes the grasp of authority.

At the same time, the power of colonial discourse produces in native subjects a certain 'hybridity'. What this involves is the formation of a subject who identifies with (or 'mimics') the colonising authority and is simultaneously alienated from it. Particularly notable among that segment of the native population most closely linked to the colonial power, such as minor officials, hybridity designates a subject-position defined by Bhaba as ambivalent: 'not quite/not white' (Bhaba 1994, 89–92). Yet the fact that assimilation is never fully achieved is also disturbing to colonial authority, since it points to an unknowable element in what is construed as the native 'character'. The problem for authority of the mimicry of the native subject is conveyed by Bhaba in the notion of 'sly civility', which he identifies, among others, in the writings of English missionaries to early-nineteenth century India (Bhaba 1994, 93–101). It is a notion that conveys, together with a certain indecipherability, the suspicion of insubordination and subversion. 'To the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, then mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility: signs of spectacular resistance. When the words of the master become the site of hybridity – the warlike sign of the native – then we may not only read between the lines, but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain' (Bhaba 1994, 121). Bhaba's notions of mimicry and hybridity here are close to the idea of the 'hidden transcripts' of everyday defiance that James Scott has reported in his comparative study of forms of popular resistance,

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symbolised in the Ethiopian proverb that forms the epigraph to his book: 'When the great lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply, and silently farts' (Scott, J.C. 1990).

In Bhaba's work, then, colonial hegemony is never total; it is always partial, prone to the destabilising effects of ambivalence and difference. Resistance figures, however, not as an opposition outside hegemonic relations so much as a permanent pressure within them. Drawing on Derrida's notion of *différance*, the discursive element that persistently works to unsettle stabilities of meaning, Bhaba argues that the 'space of the adversarial . . . is a pressure, and a presence, that acts constantly, if unevenly, along the entire boundary of authorization' (Bhaba 1994, 109). Elsewhere he refers to this as a 'Third Space' between the subject and object of discourse which disrupts the smooth transfer of discursive meaning, including that designed to affirm the 'historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People' – whether it be the historical identity and culture of the native or of the coloniser (Bhaba 1994, 37). Ultimately, then, Bhaba's arguments regarding ambivalence, hybridity and difference aim to undermine not only the idea of coloniser and colonised as operating within clearcut relations of power, but also the Western conception of history as a unified process that underpins such a view. 'The struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole' (Bhaba 1994, 41).

Unsurprisingly given their complexity and controversial nature, Bhaba's arguments have not gone without challenge. Bhaba has been accused of expropriating historical examples for his own theoretical purposes – he himself acknowledges the use of 'reckless historical connection' – and of analysing the relations between coloniser and colonised within a static, universal model, ignoring the evidence of variations in those relations over time and space (Young, R. 2001, 347; Bhaba 1994, 199; Sinha 1995, 18). Moreover, and in contrast to Fanon, there is little sense in Bhaba's writings of the native as an independent agent in the theatre of colonial relations, since to envisage this agency is seen as reverting back to the terms of a discredited humanism (Parry 1987; 2002, 77). But just as Bhaba's conceptual lexicon – ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry – has proved highly influential, so many of his theoretical insights have shaped the character of subsequent enquiry in postcolonial studies. They include the attempt to work within and against the binary oppositions set up by colonial discourse: East/West, power/agency, coloniser/colonised. In

particular, Bhaba raises the key question for postcolonial historians: how is it possible to locate and interpret the historical significance of those – the overwhelming majority of people, especially in the so-called developing countries – who leave no documentary record and whose traces have been obliterated in the colonial experience? If the work of Bhaba, together with that of Said and Fanon, can be said to provide much of the theoretical foundation for postcolonial studies, then it is a collective legacy that continues to resonate. Just how far this is so will be apparent by examining what is the most important movement in postcolonial historiography, Subaltern Studies.

Subaltern Studies

Literary studies, psychoanalysis, and philosophy: these represent the dominant intellectual ingredients, in various admixtures, in the work of Fanon, Said and Bhaba. 'History' is consequently seen through the particular lens which these disciplines provide. However, as we previously saw in considering definitions, they are not the only provenance of postcolonial studies. The earliest debates on this subject took place in political theory, as Aijaz Ahmad has observed, involving discussion of the 'postcolonial state' within the context of Marxist theory (Ahmad 1995, 5). The school of historiography known as Subaltern Studies may be seen as located within this tradition of social science research as well as that of literary theory. Thus the original issue around which the group emerged in India in the 1980s was that of the history of Indian nationalism. As the leading figure in its foundation, Ranajit Guha, put it in what came to serve as the manifesto of Subaltern Studies, 'it is this study of the failure [of the nation to come to its own] which constitutes the central problematic of colonial India' (Guha 2000, 6). In characteristic postcolonial fashion, however, the intellectual resources from which Subaltern Studies historians have drawn inspiration is very eclectic. They include Gramscian Marxism and 'history from below', associated with British historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson, together with Foucaultian post-structuralism and the literary deconstruction of Derrida. As befitting its central task – how to write history after colonialism – Subaltern Studies is a productive mélange of widely different intellectual currents, many of which are seen as frankly incompatible in more orthodox approaches to history and theory.

The project originated with a group of predominantly Bengali Marxist intellectuals who established Subaltern Studies as a series of collected essays on South-Asian historiography, under the editorship of Ranajit

Guha, in 1982; by 2000 ten such volumes had been published under this title (Guha 1982; Chaturvedi 2000, vii). What united the original group was a dual opposition: on the one hand towards the existing nationalist historiography of India, which concentrated heavily on the role of the nationalist leadership and the bourgeois parties; and on the other, towards the Cambridge school of historiography, which provided a less flattering counter-image that depicted Indian colonial history as a perpetual internecine struggle between rival elites (e.g. Seal 1968). Guha's manifesto for Subaltern Studies, modestly titled 'On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India', addressed the problem in stark terms. The existing historiography of Indian nationalism, whatever its provenance, was 'dominated by elitism' for it deliberately omitted the political contribution of the mass of the population to the ending of colonial rule, independent of the actions of the élite. 'The involvement of the Indian people in vast numbers, sometimes in hundreds of thousands or even millions, in nationalist activities and ideas is thus represented as a diversion from a supposedly "real" political process . . . or is simply credited, by an act of political appropriation, to the influence and initiative of the elite themselves' (Guha 2000, 2, 3). The task of the historian was therefore to reject this élitism, to recognise the existence of an autonomous sphere of popular politics and to analyse the interrelationship between élite and subaltern domains in the colonial history of India and its aftermath. Significantly given the later thinking of the group, Guha also stressed at the outset the role of the subaltern as an active political agent; it was necessary 'to focus on consciousness as our central theme, since it is not possible to make sense of the experience of insurgency merely as a history of events without a subject' (Guha 1985, 11).

The initial project of Subaltern Studies thus bore certain clear traces of the influence of Marxism and 'history from below' in its ambition to recuperate the voices of those marginalised in the dominant historiography. E.P. Thompson had been elected President of the Indian History Congress in the late 1970s and famously rode into the proceedings on the back of an elephant (Chandavarkar 1997). The group also borrowed from the work of Antonio Gramsci the conceptual framework of hegemony and, crucially, the notion of the subaltern. In his 1982 introduction Guha described the term 'subaltern classes' as synonymous with the 'people', defining them as representing 'the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as "elite"' (Guha 2000, 7). The subaltern thus encompassed a wide variety of social groupings, from the rural poor and urban working class to wealthy

peasants and even, in some cases, impoverished landowners and landlords. Both history from below and Marxism brought with them difficulties, however. In the first place there was the view of Eric Hobsbawm that the peasants who made up the vast majority of the population of India (and of other parts of the world) were 'pre-political', lacking a coherent political conception of the forces that oppressed them and of the increasing penetration of capitalist market forces into the countryside during the twentieth century (Hobsbawm 1959). Behind Hobsbawm's opinion lay the orthodox Marxist view that saw the urban, industrial working class as evidence of a more 'developed' state of capitalist relations and therefore more capable of authentic revolutionary (or anticolonial) action. In opposition to such views, Guha refused to interpret peasant political consciousness as 'backward' or, in Hobsbawm's term, 'archaic'; the peasant masses, he asserted, were an integral part of the modernity which colonial rule had imposed on India (Guha 1983a).

Problems of a more practical kind also confronted the group as they attempted to uncover the subaltern presence in histories of popular politics, protest and labour. For traces of that presence were few and far between in the historical record, especially the voices of subalterns themselves. Such sources as did exist on India prior to independence tended to be products of the colonial administration or filtered through them. Consequently, what Rosalind O'Hanlon called the 'recovery of the subject' was a project fraught with difficulty. For to the problem of sources was added the sensitivity of Guha and his colleagues to the dangers of historians merely adding a further layer of appropriation by interpreting evidence of insurgency in such a way as to confirm their own preconceived models and categories (O'Hanlon 2000; Guha and Spivak 1988, 26–33).

In their studies, therefore, the historians attempted to develop inventive methodological strategies. Once again Ranajit Guha was to the fore in this endeavour. In a highly original essay, 'The prose of counter-insurgency' (1983b), he suggested that for the study of peasant insurgency in nineteenth-century India, three types of discourse were available, each defined by its proximity in time to the events the discourses described. Primary discourse represented reports written by officials, who were also often eye-witnesses, in the immediate aftermath of the events, usually to alert the authorities elsewhere to disturbances. Secondary discourse referred to memoirs or histories of the events, written some years later by administrators or army officers who had directly or indirectly participated in them. Tertiary discourse designated histories written at a considerable distance in time by historians who had no direct affiliation to the events

and who could thus claim some independence and objectivity. What Guha sought to show was that each of these levels of discourse was written in the 'code of counter-insurgency'; in different ways each opposed the rationality of the colonial administration or of authority more generally (including the authority of 'history') to the irrationality of the peasant. While the nineteenth-century administrator might speak in the name of the 'civilising mission', nationalist and Marxist historians assimilated the peasant masses to the larger struggle for freedom. All sought the causes of peasant revolt in external factors, whether hunger, oppression or troublemakers, and consequently denied reason to the peasant themself. At the same time, the creative agency of the insurgents was at least partly visible in the challenge to the official codes manifested in both primary and secondary discourses. Guha thus demonstrated how the prose of counter-insurgency bore the stamp of the insurgents, 'the signifiers of the subaltern practice of "turning things upside down" ', as well as the predominantly religious framework of insurgent consciousness (Guha 1983b, 1–42). Even in the circumscribed and ideologically invested remains of the colonial record, Guha suggested, it was possible for the attentive historian to 'read history against the grain' and identify the evidence of an alternative moral economy.

Nevertheless, the questions of whether or not the historian can recuperate the subaltern presence in the sources and whether agency can be imputed to subaltern groups have remained troubled ones, as much for Subaltern Studies as a collective as among its critics. Indeed, it was the collaborator and critical friend of the group, the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chrakravorty Spivak, who further problematised the issue in a classic article entitled 'Can the subaltern speak?' (Spivak 1993). Spivak was well qualified to comment; not only had she co-edited a volume of *Subaltern Studies* with Ranajit Guha but she had worked in the 1980s on the archive of the East India Company, researching the Company's construction of 'India' as an object of representation and of Indian women in particular (Spivak 1985, 128–51; 1999, 199–311). In 'Can the subaltern speak?' she undertook a critique of many of the assumptions that underpinned the work of Guha and the Subaltern Studies group. The whole project of recovering the consciousness of peasants and other subaltern groups, according to Spivak, was rendered problematic, if not impossible, by the 'epistemic violence' of Western colonialism. For it was through this act of colonial violence that certain forms of knowledge, including 'history', had been installed as the normative version of reality, relegating native understandings to the status of 'subjugated' or illegitimate knowledge.

Spivak acknowledged the appropriateness of the semiotic approach which Guha and other historians had taken in seeking to decipher the subaltern presence in the interstices of the colonial text and their awareness of the dangers of a misguided appropriation of the subaltern voice inherent in the act of historical interpretation. 'With no possibility of nostalgia for that lost origin, the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamour of his or her own consciousness (or consciousness-effect, as operated by disciplinary training), so that the elaboration of insurgency . . . does not freeze into an "object of investigation"' (Spivak 1993, 82). But severe difficulties remained, ideological and philosophical as much as historical. The traces of the subaltern could be found but only in the sources of the native élite or colonial administration. Consequently, while the subaltern had undoubtedly spoken in the past, that voice could never be authentically recuperated (Spivak 1996, 292). Moreover, if the consciousness of Guha's male insurgent was beyond retrieval that of the native woman was doubly effaced by the effects of colonialism and patriarchy. Thus Spivak reached a sceptical conclusion: 'If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' (Spivak 1993, 83).

In other writings Spivak has elaborated these positions and indicated certain ways of analytically circumventing the problems she identified. While the subaltern as historical agent with a distinctive 'consciousness' remains beyond recovery, in her view, what is recoverable in certain cases is a subject position or 'effect', located in the spaces and silences of discourse. The subaltern is thus defined as a 'difference rather than an identity', 'the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic' (Spivak 1996, 213, 217). In a manner similar to Bhaba, therefore, Spivak urged the historian or critic to decipher the subject effects of the subaltern within the discourses of colonialism. Some of the difficulties involved in this approach are evident in her analysis of the nineteenth-century debate about *sati*, the Hindu practice of widow sacrifice outlawed by the British in 1833. Drawing on the studies of the Indian historian Lata Mani, Spivak sought to show how, despite the apparently irreconcilable opposition between the Hindu tradition which authorised the practices of *sati* and the British authorities who deemed them barbaric, both sides in the debate looked to the same sources in scriptural tradition to justify their positions. The object of *sati*, the widow, was trapped and rendered mute by the arguments of native patriarchy on one hand and colonialist liberalism on the other. For Spivak, this meant that the widow was not merely absent in the sources (that is, there was no direct documentary

evidence of her viewpoint), but that she had no subject position from which she could speak. Her position could only be spoken for by others. The case of *sati* thus symbolised for Spivak in an extreme form the general process by which the effacement of the subaltern woman was effected: 'The case of *sati* as exemplum of the woman-in-imperialism . . . mark[s] the place of "disappearance" with something other than silence and non-existence, a violent aporia between subject and object status' (Spivak 1993, 102). All that remained of the voice of the subaltern woman was an absent presence, a vacant space left by the double violence of colonialism and patriarchy.

Spivak's argument poses in graphic form the problems of writing the subaltern back into history, especially in societies such as India where the 'epistemic violence' of imperialist rule has transformed the conditions under which knowledge of the past (or indeed any scientific knowledge) can be obtained. Even 'India' itself represents an artificial concept, whose unity is comprehensible only as an effect of the history of British rule. What is therefore required of the critical historian is not simply to write counter-histories – Spivak has in any case shown such a project to be flawed – as to question the basis of Western notions of 'history' and the categories of thought which go with them. It is a task which Subaltern Studies' historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyan Prakash have begun to undertake with great acuity. For following Spivak the Indian historian is also subaltern in relation to the traditions of Western academic historiography. Thus for Chakrabarty the institutions of Western and non-Western history exist in a relationship of 'asymmetrical ignorance'.

> *Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate. Whether it is an Edward Thompson, a Le Roy Ladurie, a George Duby, a Carlo Ginzburg, a Lawrence Stone, a Robert Darnton, or a Natalie Davis . . . the 'greats' and the models of the historian's enterprise are always at least culturally 'European'. 'They' produce their work in relative ignorance of non-Western histories, and this does not seem to affect the quality of their work. This is a gesture, however, that 'we' cannot return (Chakrabarty 1992a, 1–2).*

Still more profound in the view of such historians, is the manner in which Europe continues to figure as the subject and referent of all histories, even those of the non-Western world. One of the fundamental premises of historical writing, for example, is that the sources used are verifiable. This assumes the existence of a public archive and of

information which is accessible to anyone who desires it. But in societies like India, knowledge is often restricted to the educated élite and access to historical information is limited since there is no clearly demarcated domain defined as 'public'. The historians' notion of the archive as the repository and testing ground of historical knowledge is thus revealed to be a local, Western supposition rather than a universal reference point (Chakrabarty 1992b; Prakash 2000a).

Dipesh Chakrabarty especially has pursued the project of 'provincialising Europe' by calling into question the very categories – reason, temporality, the archive – on which Western or European history is predicated. He refuses, for instance, the use of concepts such as 'religion' because it assumes a universal context which can assimilate and explain all 'gods and spirits', rather than understanding such local manifestations, like the subaltern itself, as an element of radical, untranslatable difference (Chakrabarty 2000, 76–7). Chakrabarty attacks equally what he terms Western historicism, which he defines as the perception of history as a singular, unified process of development over time, common to both liberal and Marxist traditions of historical writing. Taking the example of E.P. Thompson's classic article, 'Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism', he seeks to illustrate the effects of historicist thought (Thompson 1967). Thompson depicted British workers in the industrial revolution as undergoing a profound transformation in living and working habits, through subjection to the dictates of clock-time and factory discipline. This transformation is seen by Thompson as a fate awaiting the workers of the third world; with the spread of capitalism workers in developing countries will be required to submit to the same forces. Thus capitalism provides the mechanism through which history is represented as a continuous process that reduces all geographical and cultural specificities to a single logic: first here, then elsewhere (Chakrabarty 2000, 48). Because such processes are always seen as originating in Europe and as being transported elsewhere at a later date, they are also only rendered comprehensible beyond Europe by the categories of thought through which they have already been apprehended: that is to say, as 'industrialisation', 'class formation', 'democratisation' and so on. From the perspective of historicism, according to Chakrabarty, all history turns out to be Western or European history, since Europe is understood to provide both the originating point for global historical developments and the intellectual categories for defining them.

Western historicism as outlined by Subaltern Studies scholars thus condemns the third world to a history of successive 'failures' (to industrialise,

effect a bourgeois revolution, etc.) and, consequently, to a never-ending game of catch-up with the West. Unsurprisingly, therefore, such historians have sought to escape this determinist logic by questioning the premises on which Western historiography is based. Gyan Prakash calls for 'post-foundational histories' that critique all essentialised categories, such as 'race' and nation (Prakash 2000b); Ashis Nandy demands histories that are politically principled yet also psychological and post-rationalist, 'mythographies' through which the submerged and strange voices of post-colonial consciousness may be heard (Nandy 1983). Meanwhile, Dipesh Chakrabarty envisages a history which combines Marx's commitment to social justice with a critique of totalising thought that allows the super-natural to disrupt the secular world and a non-linear conception of histor-ical time that puts the present 'out of joint' with itself (Chakrabarty 2000, 16). For none of the Subaltern Studies group, however, is it possible to construct histories outside or beyond the intellectual legacy of colonial-ism and the West. All that can be done is to turn the intellectual tools bequeathed by the West, including Marxism and psychoanalysis, against the West's own categories of modernity – reason, progress, linear time – and to adapt these tools to create anti- and post-colonial histories of difference. As a result, history-writing in a postcolonial vein becomes a paradoxical enterprise. Thus in Chakrabarty's words, while Subaltern Studies necessitates the project of provincializing Europe, it is a project that can be undertaken 'only in an anticolonial spirit of gratitude' (Chakrabarty 2000, 255).

The empire at home

As part of its critique of traditional historiography, postcolonial criticism dissolves the conventional division between metropole and colony, 'home' and 'away'. 'Europe is literally the creation of the third world' wrote Fanon and subsequent critics like Paul Gilroy have echoed the theme, see-ing in the encounter with its colonial others the foundations of Europe's sense of its own modernity (Gilroy 1993, 17). Postcolonial historians have equally argued that it is impossible to understand the histories of Britain, France or Spain as separate from those of their colonies. Cultural and political influences, like trade, flowed both ways, from metropole to colony and back. If native societies were altered ineradicably by the impress of colonial rule, so too were the imperial powers. 'Empire was . . . not just a phenomenon "out there" ', Antoinette Burton has observed, 'but a fundamental part of English national identity and culture at home';

by 1914 it was to be found 'in spaces as diverse as the Boy Scouts, Bovril advertisements and biscuit tins; in productions as varied as novels, feminist pamphlets, and music halls; and in cartographies as particular as Oxbridge, London and the Franco-British Exhibition' (Burton 2000, 138–9; see also Burton 1998).

By the later nineteenth century the British empire was the largest of the European empires, extending over five continents and a quarter of the surface of the globe. Within this network colonies had a varied status, from the self-governing dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, to direct dependencies such as India, ruled by a British colonial administration. 'Britain' itself was a complex colonial formation, made up of four nations, two of which (Ireland and Scotland) had been brought into union with England and Wales in the previous two hundred years; Ireland's peculiar status as a 'metropolitan colony' meant that the issue of imperialism was always close to home. The 'British' empire was therefore predicated on the hegemony of England in Britain and of an Englishness, which, as a hegemonic identity, could deny its ethnicity altogether (Hall, S. 1988).

Under the postcolonial impulse historians have begun to rewrite not only the history of the British empire but also of Britain itself as an imperial society – the empire at home. This empire was, of course, not unchanging. Rather than the moment of 'high imperialism' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, recent historians have looked to the growth of Britain's sea-based, trading empire of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the progenitor both of later imperialism and of English national identity (e.g. Daunton and Halpern 1999; Wilson, K. 2004). The effects of empire were indeed visible in Britain at this period, not only in the products of the colonies but in the population at large. Rosina Visram has traced the origins of the Asian community in Britain to the nabobs, servants and lascars who arrived, in London especially, from the 1600s onwards (Visram 2002). A 'black' population, predominantly made up of Africans and West Indians, is estimated at between ten and fifteen thousand by the 1770s, concentrated mainly in London and ports such as Bristol and Liverpool. They included figures such as Olaudah Equiano, a Nigerian former slave, and Ottabah Cuguano, a Ghanaian, whose writings and speeches were to play an important part in the campaign in Britain to abolish the slave trade (Meyers 1996).

At still more profound levels the experience of empire permeated the political culture of eighteenth-century Britain. While Linda Colley stressed the importance of the wars with France in developing a distinctive sense of

British identity in the later 1700s, as we saw in Chapter Six, more recent historians like Kathleen Wilson have emphasised the contribution of empire to the same process. Building on Benedict Anderson's notion of the nation as an imagined community, Wilson sets out to show how large a part empire played in that imagining in mid-eighteenth century provincial England. The rapidly expanding newspaper press represented the mercantilist worldview of the period and regular news of politics and trade related to the Americas, the West Indies and elsewhere filled its columns (Wilson, K. 2003, 32–3). Alongside newspapers both politics and club life promoted a vision of citizenship and social order that prioritised trade, rationality, independence and masculinity. The result was a version of the nation, both English and British, that was at once participatory and exclusionary. 'Decades of war had tended to bolster a militaristic, masculinist version of national identity that privileged the claims of the white, trading and commercial classes while excluding a range of "effeminate" others who threatened their supposedly distinctive goals: not only the French or francophilic, but also the aristocratic, the foppish, the irrational, the dependent and the timid' (Wilson, K. 2003, 37). These last three categories, in particular, were aimed at marginalising those who were already placed at the edges or outside the community of citizens and nation, both women and the black populations who, as we have already seen, were present 'at home' as well as in the colonies. Yet this was also a highly flexible discourse of 'participatory patriotism', capable of upholding liberty and the rights of the 'freeborn Englishman' at home while withholding them from slaves and others in the colonies. The effects of the 'first British empire', in Wilson's terms, were thus less to place metropole and colony in binary opposition than to create complex hierarchies of citizenship and belonging in which the national polity was mapped onto the empire while imperial imaginings worked to reconfigure political identities in Britain itself (Wilson, K. 2003, 52–3).

Both the forms and the representations of the British empire changed over time. This was not only apparent in the uneasy shift in the mid- and later nineteenth century from an 'informal empire' based primarily on trade, to a formal one defined by territorial domination in which imperialism increasingly became a direct instrument of state policy (Porter 1975, 3). It also revolved around specific issues such as the politics of slavery and the ideology of 'race', as Catherine Hall has demonstrated in *Civilising Subjects* (2002), a study of Birmingham, England and Jamaica in the mid-nineteenth century. Hall's work is a good example of the attempt to write a new history of empire informed by postcolonial criticism. This ambition

necessitates, first, viewing metropole and colony not as independent entities – the standard historical approach – but following the arguments of Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper, dialogically, in a single 'analytic frame' (Hall, C. 2002, 9; Cooper and Stoler 1997). In particular, Hall is interested in tracing how Jamaica – a British colony seized in 1655 which became highly profitable in the following century for its sugar plantation economy – came to figure as an 'other' in the English imaginary: 'Jamaica was one form of the constitutive outside of England' (Hall, C. 2002, 10). By exploring attitudes to 'race' and empire in Birmingham and the activities of Baptist missionaries from Birmingham in Jamaica, the study analyses the 'making of colonising subjects, of racialised and gendered selves, both in the empire and at home' (Hall, C. 2002, 13).

At the centre of Hall's argument is the identification of a significant shift of outlook towards questions of 'race' and empire in Birmingham, and in England more generally, between the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1833 and the passing of the Second Reform Act in 1867. Birmingham was renowned as a centre of radical politics and religious Nonconformity, and figures such as Joseph and Sophia Sturge, John Angell James and Thomas Morgan were to the fore nationally in the anti-slavery movement of the 1820s and 1830s. Such peoples' view of slaves in colonies like Jamaica was fundamentally liberal; black people were part of the 'family of man' and as such should be treated like all other British subjects. Given the right conditions, which included, first and foremost, the abolition of slavery as an institution, former slaves could become industrious, independent, respectable men and women. At the same time, abolitionists tended to produce images of black people as essentially childlike. They promulgated a 'stereotype of the new black Christian subject – meek victim of white oppression, grateful to his or her saviours, ready to be transformed . . .' (Hall, C. 2002, 321). As Hall makes clear, what this represented was a form of cultural racism, predicated on a 'splitting' of the black subject by attaching to that subject a number of stereotyped characteristics in an act of what Pierre Bourdieu termed 'symbolic violence' (Hall, C. 2002, 322; Bourdieu 2000, 168–72).

A generation later, in the 1860s, however, attitudes had changed, in Birmingham and England generally. While the issue of 'race' was once again politically prominent, this time in the issue of slavery in the American Confederacy, the old liberal consensus was breaking up. Support existed in Birmingham for both sides in the American Civil War, but in the debates for an extension of the franchise in Britain Birmingham Liberals like John Bright and Nonconformist ministers like R.W. Dale argued that

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experience had proved that Englishmen were especially suited to self-government, whether at home or in the white settler dominions such as Australia. Their arguments increasingly rested, according to Hall, on a view of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon 'race', bolstered by ideas derived from the evolutionary thought of Darwin as well as by a broad-based notion of economic and social 'improvement'. 'In the late 1860s the emphasis of the men of the midland metropolis was on the hierarchy of races, peoples and nations and their own assumed position in that hierarchy' (Hall, C. 2002, 432).

Ideas of progress and superiority reflected also a view of developments in colonies such as Jamaica, to which men and women in Birmingham were connected through the missionary endeavours associated with church and chapel. Among liberals there was disappointment that the emancipation of the slaves after 1833 did not appear to have led to the social improvement of the native population for which they had hoped. While Jamaica had a British Governor, directly responsible to the Colonial Office in England, it also had a form of representative government, including a small group of black voters, which was expected to expand in numbers following emancipation and the acquisition of land by former slaves. Yet political unrest remained endemic, culminating in a major rebellion at Morant Bay in 1865 which was savagely repressed by local troops under the order of Governor Eyre. While public opinion in Birmingham was not generally sympathetic to Eyre, the episode resulted in the British government withdrawing rights to any form of representative government; Jamaica became a crown colony ruled from London. Consequently, the dominant logic of the later 1860s was that while the vote might be extended to the 'respectable' working man in Britain, self-government was unsuitable to 'coloured' colonial populations abroad, whose inherent savage or childlike characteristics disqualified them from political rights. The late 1860s therefore witnessed a new 'racial mapping of rights' across the British empire (Hall, C. 2002, 424). This change, in turn, was predicated on a discursive shift from cultural to biological racism, prefigured in the views of Thomas Carlyle, the Victorian polemicist, in his 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question' published in 1853. In the words of Catherine Hall, by the 1860s a 'structure of feeling dominated by the familial trope and a paternalist rhetoric had been displaced by a harsher racial vocabulary of fixed differences' (Hall, C. 2002, 440).

Hall's detailed account shows how events in two different locales, Birmingham and Jamaica, can be seen to have interacted and been part of the same historical dynamic at a particular historical moment, the early to

mid-Victorian period. Other historians, too, have examined the variety of ways in which 'home' and 'away' became linked, materially and discursively. In *Imperial Leather*, for instance, Anne McClintock has shown how deeply imperial imagery pervaded late Victorian advertising in Europe; through products such as soap, the colonies were implicated in the most intimate spheres of bourgeois domesticity and sexuality (McClintock 1995). Conversely, in her study of colonial masculinity Mrinalini Sinha has demonstrated the ways in which gender perceptions originating in debates in Britain shaped the categories on which controversies in India, concerned with the relations between native and European subjects, rested in the 1880s and 1890s (Sinha 1995). Stereotypes of the effeminate Bengali 'babu' or intellectual were contrasted with the figure of the 'manly Englishman', that of the European 'new woman' with the perceived traditionalism of Indian womanhood. In so doing Sinha sought to reorganise the framework of historical analysis, arguing 'that metropolitan and colonial histories were both constituted by the history of imperialism' (Sinha 1995, 182; see also Sinha 1998). From this perspective colonial masculinity was not the product of one national context or another, of Britain or of India, but of a single historical dynamic constituted by imperialism. In studies such as these the categories of metropole and colony, 'home' and 'away', begin to disintegrate in front of imperial currents and flows that had no exclusively national belonging or linear determination.

Evaluation

In the preface to *The Writing of History* Michel de Certeau begins with an image of the encounter between the fifteenth-century European explorer, Amerigo Vespucci, and a naked native woman representing Latin America. Certeau describes this as a foundational moment for the writing of history. 'An inaugural scene: after a moment of stupor, on this threshold dotted with colonnades of trees, the conqueror will write the body of the other and trace there his own history' (Certeau 1988, xxv). The whole institution of modern Western history, Certeau suggests, emerges from the colonial encounter between Europe and the other. The corpus of postcolonial theory and history proceeds from this same insight. For postcolonialism is concerned not only with the historical content and political legacy of colonialism, but equally – and at the same time – with the categories of Western thought, including the institution of history, through which that experience and inheritance are represented in the present. It holds up for scrutiny the position of the investigator as well as of the

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investigation. Postcolonial criticism is distinguished, in the words of Gayatri Spivak, by 'its insistence that in disclosing complicities the critic-as-subject is herself complicit with the object of her critique; [by] its emphasis upon "history" and upon the ethico-political as the trace of that complicity – the proof that we do not inhabit a clearly defined critical space free of such traces' (Spivak cited in Young 1990, 170). In effect, postcolonialism invokes history as a mode of critique at the same time as it unmasks the supposed neutrality of 'history' as an institutional practice.

Nevertheless, postcolonialism has not been without its own critics. Within historical studies, a number of issues have emerged from a critical assessment of Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects*. Hall's ambition to overcome the 'home' and 'away' dichotomy of much imperial history by attempting to comprehend England and Jamaica within a single 'frame' is only partly successful. The limits to this effort are exposed in the very division of the book into two main parts, the first dealing predominantly with events in Jamaica, the second with those in Birmingham. The resulting narrative therefore tends to be conventionally sequential rather than structurally synchronous, as Hall originally proposed. Moreover, as David Feldman has pointed out, although Hall ranges widely in her study to Australia and West Africa, the focus on the interrelationship between England and Jamaica means that the wider colonial matrix that bore on that relationship, including events such as the Indian Mutiny and the American Civil War, is obscured (Feldman 2004, 239–40). The lines of influence were not so much bilateral as multidirectional; colonies like the metropolitan countries were implicated in complex networks of power. By extension, and in a more general perspective, historians' attempts to demonstrate the impact of imperialism in Britain as in other colonial powers can have the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the idea of the nation as a fixed historical referent and of shoring up a hierarchical relationship between metropole and colony: first 'here', then 'there' (Burton 2000, 140–1). Recognition of this problem suggests the need to disrupt the deep-rooted connection between history and the nation-state and to begin to engage with the idea of 'post-national' histories. This is indeed a theme that has begun to emerge with the establishing of new frames for historical study, such as the 'the Atlantic world', which question established geographical boundaries and reveal unsuspected networks of social and cultural interconnection (Gilroy 1993; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000).

It is a standard accusation of historians, of course, including historians of empire, that postcolonial theory is unhistorical, abstract and lacking specificity. This criticism is flawed in so far as it treats history and theory

as separate compartments and falls back on the false assumption that conventional historical writing is itself in some sense theory-less. However, it remains the case that much of postcolonial thought, including that of many Subaltern Studies historians, works with unified and ahistorical ideas of Europe and 'the West' as well as of empire. Historians are only too well aware of the many different kinds of 'empire' – the Holy Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire and so on – which differ significantly from each other as well as from later imperial formations in their organisation and modes of rule. And what of one of the major empires of the twentieth century, that of the Soviet Union, which has yet to be constituted as an object of postcolonial study? In short, the focus on the British empire in postcolonial studies, as to a lesser extent on the French and Dutch empires, could be said to have obscured wider questions about the effects of imperialism and decolonisation in other parts of the world, though some studies of areas such as the Middle East and Africa have emerged (e.g. Mitchell 1991; Werbner and Ranger 1996).

In constructing Europe and the 'West' as monolithic entities, postcolonialism tends to reproduce the very ahistorical, essentialised categories that, ironically, Said saw as defining features of Orientalism. But as we have glimpsed here, 'Europe' itself was remade in its relationship with its colonies during the nineteenth century, positioned at the apex of a hierarchy of 'civilisation'; it too was not an historically static category (Ahmad 1992). Moreover, even if one accepts the idea of Europe as an intellectual abstraction, a form of shorthand for a cluster of hegemonic traditions of historical, sociological and philosophical thought, then it is necessary to see this as linked to very particular locations in modern Europe, notably to England, France and Germany. Europe, one could argue, has its own subalterns in its midst. While French and Anglo-American historians and theorists are assumed to have universal significance, how many British intellectuals could name a Norwegian or Portuguese historian, or a contemporary Spanish or Hungarian theorist? Asymmetrical ignorance, in other words, does not operate simply in relation to metropolitan centres and their former colonies, but within the ideological configurations of Europe and 'the West' themselves (Griffin and Braidotti 2003).

A still more fundamental criticism of postcolonial theory is that it tends to reproduce the very structures of thought which it aims to dissolve. We have already seen how Edward Said's Orientalism thesis repeats the essentialised ideas of East and West that it seeks to critique and this kind of internal contradiction is a sufficiently frequent feature to think of it as almost a trope of the genre. Concepts such as Bhaba's 'hybridity', for

example, appear to posit two previously undifferentiated knowledges, Western and native, which the hybrid both articulates and subverts. In the process, however, Bhaba conjures up precisely the type of essentialised categories – including the category of 'race' – that his arguments have sought to disavow. Essentialism and binary opposition, in other words, enter by the theoretical back door just as they appear to have been banished from the front. Such analyses can seem determinist in so far as it becomes difficult if not impossible to imagine any effective, permanent transformation in the conditions that they describe. As with certain forms of feminist and queer studies, noted in Chapter Six, postcolonialism can sometimes appear fixated on the very categories of 'race' and its associated relations of power that it claims to set out to abolish (Goldberg and Quayson 2002, xiii).

Rather than betokening retreat, however, these criticisms suggest the need to push the arguments described here further. Certainly, as I indicated at the outset of this chapter, postcolonialism poses a radical challenge to all types of history as it is currently practised and not only in the West. It shifts attention from purely epistemological or philosophical questions about the status of historical knowledge to the contemporary political ramifications of history as an institution. It suggests the need to expose the deep-seated complicity between the state, the nation and historical production, and the effects of this constellation on the ways histories continue to be apprehended and written. Following Foucault, postcolonial theory throws into the relief the spatial dimension of power relationships; power is not be considered merely in vertical terms as a matter of 'higher' and 'lower', but horizontally, across surfaces, networks and territories (Foucault 1986, 22). Not least it challenges historians to find fresh ways of thinking about historical time rather than as 'empty and homogeneous', to countenance the possibility of multiple simultaneous temporalities, and to think creatively about what might qualify as historical evidence outside the false universalism of the archives and the documentary record. Finally, and above all, postcolonialism invites the historian to revisit anew one of the oldest aspirations of historiography: to imagine the past as comprehensible while at the same time ineradicably other.