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INTRODUCTION: (POST)COLONIALISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS, OR THE FUTURE OF PRACTICE

The culture within colonialism: bringing history back in

FREUDIANISM MAY BE out of fashion but, the post-hoc character of theoretical trends sometimes takes the form of a return of the repressed. Strictly speaking, colonialism is a historical phenomenon; its origins and demise as a political regime are explicitly documented but, its exploitative nature as a system is less the result of our ability to grasp the facts than the advent of a concept of political economy that reveals in abstract terms certain machinations of fact. In the latter sense, both colonialism and colonial theory are crises of mind that can initially be viewed in effect as attempts to problematize phenomena in the present. Thus, despite the wealth of writings that have presumably already graced a burgeoning literature on colonialism, its resurgence as a current topic of concern is related instead to specific developments in the 'postcolonial' theoretical literature. The definition of what postcolonial is or means is problematic, but, I think our renewed attention to the nature of the colonial experience is justified. For most part, the keywords that distinguish these recent postcolonial concerns in general revolve repeatedly around the notions of culture, history and discourse. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the conference on Colonialism and its Discontents held on 8–9 July, 1997 at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, where the papers included here were presented, was the diversity by which culture could be problematized in different concrete, historical contexts in ways that clearly transcend a single magic theory of postcoloniality, of the kind often invoked by the current theoretical literature, as though projected from the metropole.[1] While scholars in different disciplines have different languages for problematizing culture, it is important to note that they all point to complex processes that relate culture to the institutional practice of colonial regimes. The diversity of colonial experience is thus a product of its historical specificity, that is to say, its positionality within a context of global

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power, the cultural perceptions of its various agents, the strategies by which those in different positions of power rationalize wants or attempt to achieve goals within this framework, and, the cumulative outcome of all these intentions and actions.

In many ways, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) represents a pivotal focus for the debates that have emerged in this exponentially expanding 'postcolonial' literature. There are clearly two separate dimensions of postcolonial criticism that have been invoked by Said's work. First, in contrast to the early politico-economic literature on colonialism, his criticism of Orientalist discourse broadened the scope of existing analysis by making all forms of discourse, thought and representation, conscious or unconscious, potentially complicit in colonialism's project of (political) domination-cum-(cultural) hegemony. Yet, by shifting epistemological focus to the manifestations of a Western gaze (rather than the situatedness of 'absent others' in local sites of political contestation), it spawned a relentless stream of self-reflexive writings, mostly in the literary-humanistic fields of mainstream academia and often proclaiming the advent of 'postcolonial theory'. Rightly or wrongly, the proclamation of postcolonial euphoria and a return to 'grand theory' (exhibited by its post-structuralist strains in particular) are really the result of Said's influence on his own discipline rather than an attribute of his basic critique of Orientalism.

Essays especially by Shohat (1992), McClintock (1992), Ahmad (1992) and Dirlik (1994) have criticized the use of 'post', as if it incorporates the diversity of colonial experiences elsewhere under the same rubric and ties their fates together within the same unilineal narrative of History and social emancipation. Ironically, such a postcolonial 'theory' would be appear to be a new Orientalism, effectively divorced from actual postcolonial struggles that it claims to explain or represent. In effect, the literary modes of 'deconstruction' invoked to demystify 'the imperial contest', however self-reflective they are, have become the symptom of an ongoing Eurocentric solipsism rather than a critical solution that can or hopes to transcend any concrete colonial situation. The celebratory, if not prematurely, emancipatory nature of contemporary postcolonial theory aside, it is nonetheless worth arguing that some form of postcolonial criticism is necessary and apt, in Hall's (1996) sense of, 'thinking at the limit'. Moore-Gilbert (1997) echoes this sentiment also, when he distinguishes between 'postcolonial criticism' and 'postcolonial theory'. In this regard, something must be said about the global, not only because colonialism is a moment in that larger project of imperial domination that transforms itself into culture and discourse, but, also because the latter is an intricate part of its practice.

The colonialism within culture: empires of mind as political practice

A more fruitful line of analytical inquiry revolves around the nature of 'colonialism': how the socio-political contexts of practice in which it is situated are constituted, what kinds of representation or systems of meaning are invoked, and, to what extent the discursive strategies of agents (once removed in terms of culture) and historians/theorists (twice removed in terms of culture and history) play a role in manipulating or obfuscating the underlying regime of power that it really is. Contrary perhaps to the extreme criticism of Marxists, such as Ahmad, the focus on culture and representation is not a diversion per se from the political realities of postcolonial struggle and, can even be used to inform our understanding of those colonial processes per se. The work of scholars in diverse disciplines who have pointed to the colonizing role of proselytizing missions (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991), civilizing functions of language (Fabian, 1986; Viswanathan, 1989), narrative reification and symbolic structures in travel writing and art (Pratt, 1992; Smith, 1985), constructions of gender (Stoler, 1991) as well as of social structure itself (Cohn 1984) have all made seminal contributions to our understanding of cultural processes in the colonial project. Yet as McClintock (1992: 87) argues, if political differences between cultures should not be subordinated to their temporal distance from European colonialism, then they should be seen concretely in terms of their intrinsic differences. If South America is not postcolonial in the same way that India, Hong Kong, Africa, Australia or even the United States is, then some kind of comparative ethnography or history would seem to be a more appropriate point of departure for defining in the first instance what colonialism is. As Dirks (1992) has shown, the institutional realities of colonial experience cannot be inferred by simply demystifying Orientalist discourse. A focus on the signifying practices, in Thomas' (1994) terms, can easily show how colonialism is, more often than not, a shifting regime of conceptual contradictions and global strategies that has been played out differently in different local sociopolitical contexts.

Stoler and Cooper (1997: 7) phrased it best, when they said, 'the most basic tension of empire lies in what has become a central, if now obvious, point of recent colonial scholarship: namely, that the otherness of colonized persons was neither inherent nor stable; his or her difference had to be defined and maintained'. More than simply hard and fast distinctions between racialized selves and others, these differences were in essence culturally constituted ones. Not only did identities crafted by the civilizing process clash with the very process of stratification that aimed to keep the ethnic divide distinct, but, also the attempt to rule on the basis of native custom clashed with the process of domination that sought to incorporate the other into the same socio-economic sphere. Last but not least, the strict divide between self and other was constantly polluted by impurities and ambiguities of definition. In some cases (see Sakai, 2000, in this

issue), the colonial regime had to invent categories of ethnicity and citizenship in order to justify its regime of difference; in others (Bulag, 2000, in this issue), a regime of difference was rigidly put into practice despite a century of ethnic hybridization to the contrary. In (During's description of) New Zealand (During, 2000, in this issue), the mutating nature of self/other relationships was a function of changing moments in 'globalization' as well as the ambiguities of 'empire' in a settler colonialism. As if not to exhaust the range of possibilities, the mutation of Hong Kong's colonialism and its regime of difference (see Chun, 2000, in this issue) led to its disappearance in discursive and institutional terms, orchestrated by the modern state, while the effacement of colonial or neo-imperial tensions seems to be an integral element in the invented imaginary of an 'Asia-Pacific' world (Wilson, 2000, in this issue). More than simply the substance of ethnicity, culture itself must be viewed as a multi-faceted phenomenon that has significant ramifications for the construction of knowledge. Fabian's (2000) ethnographic account, in this issue, of the first German scientific mission to Africa neatly undermines the epistemological foundations of what later became the mature disciplines of Orientalist knowledge. Sakai's analysis of philosophical debates regarding the nature of the 'species' shows that the Japanese project of imperial nationalism had deep intellectual roots which were not irrelevant to the exercise of their colonial regime. Chun's focus on British colonialism's unconscious *mentalité* also underscores the basic premise here that culture (as representation and discourse) can take many forms. Especially in 'hybrid' settler colonies such as New Zealand, it is difficult to keep track of the complex permutations of culture in a globally influenced sociopolitical context, given the overlap between a fading 'empire', a resurging, indigenous nationalism and a shifting global economy, which easily problematize the very nature of identity. Even Fabian's 'trivial' excursions into life histories, sexual escapades and cultural interlocution can show that the routine order of things has a significant bearing on the construction of knowledge as well (thus, culture by implication). Culture in practice, or, cultures and practices: this should be the methodological point of departure for any analysis of colonialism and, by implication, any subsequent understanding of postcolonial theory.

Understanding colonialism as an abstraction must begin by understanding colonialism as a concrete, historical phenomenon. Moreover, this is the only basis for understanding colonial experiences comparatively, as well as for understanding what may be considered colonial violence in political regimes not literally defined as colonial (given the conventional definitions of European colonialism). Bulag's narrative of the contradictions of ethnic minority policy and socialist emancipation in Inner Mongolia, under the regime of the People's Republic of China, is perhaps less instructive as a case study of 'internal colonialism' in Hechter's (1975) terms than for the fact that the same abstract (colonial) politics of (ethnic) difference can be seen to drive what may be literally termed a nation-state. Similarly, Wilson's deconstruction of the APEC imaginary as an

Orientalism for our times, blinded by the fast and furious pastiche of borderless economic flows, decentred ethnic syncretisms and virtual, yet, sublime realities, raises the question of whether it is possible to effectively mask the blunt realities of neo-imperialist domination, even in an era of a (literally) dead colonialism. It should be argued that the future of method resides more in our effective understanding of the past than our theoretical imagination per se. There are ramifications as well for the rewriting of history, a point which was perhaps most forcefully articulated by Chakrabarty (1992).[2] However, not until a theory informed by historical practice is able to articulate the manifest dimensions of colonial power can one then use theory to reinform a postcolonial criticism.

Notes

1 Original participants at this conference included Arif Dirlik, Nicholas Thomas, Naoki Sakai, Uradyn Bulag, Johannes Fabian, Marta Savigliano, Simon During, Fred Y.L. Chiu, Allen Chun and Rob Wilson, as well as many commentators (Chu Yuan-horng, Chen Kuan-hsing, Tung Yuan-dzau, Douglas Fix, James Wilkerson, Antonia Chao, Chiang Bien and Stephan Chan) who stimulated useful discussion and contributed directly to the current revisions of the papers. Conference papers by Dirlik, Thomas, Savigliano and Chiu have since been published elsewhere.

2 See also the Prakash's defense of post-Orientalist historical writing (1990) and the critique by O'Hanlon and Washbrook (1992). One might contrast this with the view of historians critical of Said, such as MacKenzie (1995), who prefer to expand the ground of criticism to include a wider field of social history and historiography.

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