



Postcolonialism

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Since the mid-1980s the term "postcolonial" has become a well-known key signifier in analysis of cultural and political representations of dominance and subalternity in contemporary societies. It was in the wake of the success of this term that from the early 1990s an impressive field of studies, from transversal to traditional disciplines, entered the archives of Western knowledge, at first in the Anglo-American world but later worldwide: postcolonial studies, or postcolonial critique. It could be argued, as in the case of cultural studies, that postcolonial criticism emerged at an imaginary epistemic intersectional point, binding in new ways objects, approaches, and perspectives coming from different traditional disciplines: from literary critique to philosophy, from anthropology to psychoanalysis and sociology, from history to the political sciences, from English to linguistics. It is for this reason that the postcolonial discursive formation is usually conceived both as a radical epistemological challenge to traditional academic disciplines and specializations and as a new and more democratic approach to the conceptualization of contemporary and historical relationships between the West and its others. According to this self-representation, then, postcolonial studies may be better defined as an emergent critical space aimed at the decolonization of current theoretical and political practices.

Despite its close association with academic European postmodernism and poststructuralism in mainstream critical thinking, postcolonial critique can be approached as the effect of a very complex genealogy. My approach to its emergence as a discipline is based on Edward Said's constructivist idea of *beginning*. A beginning, Said maintains, is different from an origin because a beginning can be chosen, while an origin can only be acknowledged: "beginning is not so much an event unto itself as an *opening* within discourse" (Said 1975, 350, emphasis original). Said's idea of beginning is important here because it seeks to methodologically combine "intention" and "method," allowing subjectivity and politics ("secular agency") to enter the domain of theory through an epistemological solid ground.

Our starting premise will be that postcolonial criticism came out of multiple hybrid and transnational roots. It was not a discourse that originated in the postcolonial world but one produced by migrant postcolonial intellectuals displaced in the West, who were also notably critical of the essentialist and binary political imaginary of anticolonial first "great narrations." However, it could be argued that its beginning can be tracked down to classical anticolonial thinking (to political interventions of figures such as Mariátegui, Gandhi, Sartre, Césaire, Fanon, etc.), namely to the critique of Western imperialism that arose in the context of the different national liberation movements during the decolonization processes. Its beginning can also be tracked down to the development of black studies and African American and Caribbean political radicalism (represented



by figures such as W. E. B Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, C. L. R. James, James Baldwin, and Malcolm X). Yet the field of current postcolonial studies, in the form it took in the Western academy, cannot be considered without taking into account both the turmoil disseminated worldwide by the struggles of antiracist and pro-migration movements, and the irruption of the questions posed by black and non-Western feminism against the Eurocentric discursive limits of traditional white European feminism. The particular claims conveyed by the work of black and non-Western feminists such as Angela Davis (1981), bell hooks (1982), Gayatri Spivak (1985b), and Chandra Mohanty (1988) must be considered as extremely significant in the formation of postcolonial studies.

Hence the postcolonial critique is not based on a single system of thought or on a single political or theoretical position: it entails, instead, “a complex set of overlapping perspectives, intertwined one against the other, sometimes also in conflicting ways” (Young 2003, 12–14). Drawing from Robert Young’s work, it could be defined as a particular outcome of an indigenous translation and combination of Marxism, existentialism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, feminism, and anticolonial thinking. It is for this reason that postcolonial studies should be approached as an unstable historical archive with blurred borders, since it was always already crisscrossed by eclectic and concomitant theoretical and political tensions and positions, that is, by a continuous *indigenous* self-reflexivity oriented toward colonial subaltern subjectivity and thus to the decolonization of knowledge.

Postcolonial studies as a discursive formation also has a strong literary filiation. The contribution of black and non-Western writers (such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Wole Soyinka, Sam Selvon, Ben Okri, Alejo Carpentier, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Asja Djébar) to the irruption and development of postcolonial criticism has been no less significant. The suggestions conveyed in this kind of postcolonial literature on the effects of slavery, colonialism, decolonization, postcolonial nationalism, and migration on colonial subjects, cultures, identities, languages, and genders have always been a constant and influential source of inspiration for all the postcolonial critics. For most scholars working within postcolonial studies, such writers are significant not only because they “incorporate, transgress, and redesign the forms, aesthetic conventions, and cognitive resources of the Western tradition” but mainly because their work also draws on “traditional narrative forms and idioms” (Parry 2004, 73).

However, the most important input to the formation of postcolonial studies as an academic discipline has come from the debate on the work of the authors with whom it is currently mostly associated within an international theoretical frame: first of all, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha (the so-called holy trinity of postcolonial studies) but also Indian subaltern historians such as Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakabarty, and Partha Chatterjee; key figures of British cultural studies such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy; the literary critic Robert Young; and anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai and James Clifford. Yet, in the constitution of the postcolonial critique and postcolonial studies a key role and place must be given to Edward Said and to the influential debate on his major text, *Orientalism* (1978). The novelty and power of Said’s work resided in his original attempt to draw at the same time from poststructuralism, metropolitan theory, and critiques developed around national liberation movements (Parry 2004), and in his suggestion that European national cultures—and



not only those of the colonized countries, as classical anticolonial thinking had hitherto maintained—must also be conceived as a historical product of their involvement with colonial rule.

Orientalism; or, The Western construction of the East

The aim of *Orientalism* is clearly enunciated by Said from the first pages of his work: to bring into focus the constitutive dependency of Western discourses and representations of the East on European material domination of Eastern societies, namely the intrinsic relationship between knowledge production and the exercise of power in Western culture (Said 1978). Drawing on Michel Foucault's work on the birth of the modern cultural order, Said maintains that the Western dominance of Eastern societies has always worked through the production of certain kinds of discourses about the "oriental" other. *Orientalism* is structured on a literary close reading of images, narrations, and representations of the East disseminated in several texts and fields of Western culture—from sociology to humanities, from the arts to travel writing, from philosophy to colonial political archives—as Said's aim is to disclose the existence of an "orientalist field" underlying Western culture, which is shaped by historical representations of oriental subjects and topics that were by no means *mere* descriptions (i.e., neutral or objective discourses). What the Western cultural archive contains are, for Said, only stereotyped representations of oriental societies and peoples aimed only at their material rule by Western powers. Said's discourse is that these (mostly negative) representations of oriental societies (culturally codified as despotic, violent, static, backward, archaic, licentious, erotic, sexist cultures) have become embedded throughout history in the different fields of Western culture and were rendered dominant and productive only by the configuration of specific relations of power and subordination between the West and the East. Orientalism as a discursive formation (or structure) underlying Western knowledge and culture is therefore the result of this power-knowledge complex—the power and privilege to move, to travel worldwide, and to narrate the other that is historically enjoyed by Western people. In sum, orientalism as a body of knowledge should be thought of as a kind of *social cognitive structure* rather integral to the hegemonic Western political project for global dominance. For Said, in fact, the comprehension of different cultural representations

cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied. To believe that the Orient was created or, as I call it, "Orientalized"—and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous. The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth century European, but also because it could be—that is submitted to being-made Oriental. (Said 1978, 6)

It goes without saying that for Said images and representations (dominant discourses) of the East do not correspond to any real social entity. They are conceived as cultural effects of an "imaginary geography" that is independent of any empiric foundation: orientalism is only the expression and projection of the historical Western desire to



dominate, manage, and repress what has historically been its other par excellence. Yet Said's argument is not simply that orientalism is a Western creation, but that the oriental has been culturally encoded as the other of the West, as the repository or signifier of all that the West is not. It is through the development of orientalism and its ill-founded representations of the East that the West managed to self-produce itself as a culturally different and superior entity. It was this orientalist gaze on the East, the apprehension of the Oriental other as primitive, static, traditional, backward, and so on that, for Said, allowed the West to shape its own image and the continuous affirmation or celebration of its hierarchical distinctiveness. But it is worth remembering that, for Said, this discursive process of domination—although his text remains rather contradictory on this point—could have occurred only *within* a material network of power relations between the West and the East. According to *Orientalism*, discourse and knowledge (textuality) cannot be conceived *outside* their social and material determinants.

The main goal of *Orientalism* then was not to critique presumed false notions of the East that are present in Western knowledge and culture but to undermine the very idea of the West highlighting the discursive limits of its archives and self-representation systems. Said begins with the assumption that the East is not a given or a natural entity, something that is simply over there:

I have begun with the assumption that Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just there either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (Said 1978, 5)

Western epistemic violence

Although orientalism as a body of knowledge was produced within and mainly for Western audiences, its power depended and still depends on its colonial and imperial capacity to superimpose on Oriental and non-Western subjects its enunciations about their human condition and mode of being in the world. Gayatri Spivak suggested that this capacity of orientalism to materially inscribe itself on the body of oriental people, to become the very inner gaze through which colonial and oriental subjects apprehend not only the world but also their own subjectivity, should be seen as the typical colonial form of "epistemic violence" (Spivak 1988). Orientalism and its assumption about the inner relationship between colonial power relations and Western representations of the other have had great impact within anthropology as well. Said's influence in anthropology is highly visible in postmodern anthropology foundational texts such as *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus 1984) and *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Although *Orientalism*, as Clifford notes, represented in itself the very symptom of a more general and radical contestation of the West and its Eurocentric bias of representation of the other, it has to be considered nonetheless as a watershed text. As is



well known, the disruptive force of *Orientalism* came from its great capacity to extend Foucault's analysis on the constitution of modern European reason to the historical relationships between the West and its colonial others, in particular, as Clifford puts it, in highlighting that

Said extends Foucault's analysis to include ways in which a cultural order is defined externally, with respect to exotic "others." In an imperialist context definitions, representations, and textualizations of subject peoples and places play the same constitutive role as "internal" representations (for example, of the criminal classes in nineteenth century Europe) and have the same consequences—discipline and confinement, both physical and ideological. (Clifford 1988, 177)

After *Orientalism*, then, it was by now clear that Europe could not have self-represented (or imagined) its own history as the embodiment of a universal path without the constitutive violence of its colonial expansion, and hence that the epistemological standpoint of Western human and social sciences was founded, first of all, on the historical existence of a lively colonial laboratory. Given these premises, it becomes self-evident why *Orientalism* is generally considered the *founding* text of postcolonial studies as a theoretical formation. Said's colonial delocalization of the Foucauldian approach to modern society is at the base of the development of one of the more productive concepts of postcolonial studies, that of *colonial discourse*. This is why postcolonial studies first came to be known or defined also as "colonial discourse analysis." As suggested by Robert Young, by resorting to the notion of discourse to emphasize that different forms of knowledge concerning the East "were constructed within a particular kind of language," which was in turn saturated "with all sorts of cultural assumptions," images, and representations about oriental peoples, Said's text enabled what can be called a *discursive approach* to colonialism. A discursive approach stands here for an approach centered on colonialism not just as a mere economic development of capitalism, or even as its "superstructure" or "ideological formation," as traditionally Marxist accounts had correctly emphasized, but as an approach based more on colonialism's fundamental historical role as a "discursive formation" within modernity: intended thus as a set of discourses disseminated "across different kinds of texts produced historically from a wide range of different institutions, disciplines and geographical areas" (Young 2005, 385).

Postcolonial studies as colonial discourse analysis

As is well known, the major contribution to the development of the concept of colonial discourse comes from Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. In Bhabha's perspective colonial discourse stands for that complex of signs, symbols, representations, and practices that had managed the existence, experience, and cultural and material reproduction of colonial societies. For Bhabha (1994), it was through the proliferation of colonial discourses that the "dispositive of colonial power" has become a historical *worlding* structure. He suggests that we consider colonial discourses as the fundamental vehicles of a knowledge and cultural *system* that pervades all spheres of modern Western culture



(science, literature, arts, common sense, politics, economy, etc.), which is aimed both at the production of specific representations of the European self and non-European others and at the strengthening of the social, political, and economic structures at the core of colonial power. According to Bhabha, the predominant strategic function of colonial discourse is the creation of a space for a “subject peoples” through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and complex forms of pleasure/unpleasure is incited. It seeks authorization for its strategies by the production of knowledges of colonizer and colonized, which are stereotypical but antithetically evaluated. The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction (Bhabha 1994, 70).

It is important to note that, in contrast to Said, Bhabha stresses here the *material* dimension and scopes of colonial discourses. If for Said Western discourses on the East may not correspond at all “to any real social entity” as they emerge as the effects of an “imaginary geography without any empirical equivalent,” this is not the case in Bhabha’s view: in his perspective, the idea of colonial discourse reacquires its Foucauldian imprint of “material practice.” Bhabha’s critique of Said is very important, since it claims that colonial discourses are not disembodied entities, that is, they must not be conceived of as merely “textual” or “literary” descriptions or representations (as Said sometimes seems to suggest in *Orientalism*). Their pregnancy and power derive from their capacity to produce or to institute specific kinds of material subjectivity. It is for this reason that, as emphasized by Foucault himself, the emergence of a discursive system is always a violent social fact: since it brings to light the superimposition of a specific cultural and linguistic order on material lives, that it stands for the constriction or narrowing of the world into the borders of specific kinds of enunciations.

Even for Gayatri Spivak, the main function of colonial discourses is to legitimize and justify at a political level both imperial expansion and the exercise of power by colonial powers. She dedicates some of her better-known essays, like Said and Bhabha, to analyzing the way in which different categories of texts (literary, scientific, historical, legal, philosophical, travel writing) that emerged during the colonial and imperial age contributed to the standardization of a rhetorical structure that was essential to the ideological and cultural legitimization of the global expansion of Western rule, both in colonial and in metropolitan territories. For Spivak Western historical writing in general, and certain kinds of texts in particular, must be thought of as fundamental practices at the root of the global dissemination of the idea and politics of the Western civilizing mission—that is, at the core, retrieving here one of her most famous expressions, the “worlding of a world” (Spivak 1985a, 243). In Spivak’s argument this explains precisely why we can find, for example, recurring references to colonial territories as “empty” or “virgin” spaces or to indigenous populations as “barbaric,” “primitive,” “uncivilized,” “non-writing,” “without history,” or “underdeveloped” communities within a rather heterogeneous body of texts, from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* to the archives of the East India Company, from David Livingstone’s literary narrative to Kant and Hegel’s philosophy, from colonial officers’ legal documents to traditional anthropological research and ethnography. It is this pervasive presence of certain kind of colonial discourses in the archives of Western knowledge that proves for Spivak, beyond the



specific connotations of every single text, the capacity and ability of modern writing, textuality, and knowledge to actively contribute to the expropriation, exploitation, and management of colonial people.

More specifically, what Spivak ascribes to colonial discourse is a rather effective competence in managing time and space through what she calls “othering processes,” that is, providing cultural descriptions of non-European others that could be used to manage and exploit them and, at the same time, by virtue of its “colonial authority” and access to the power to narrate, to render disposable or to appropriate native subjectivities (i.e. to inscribe colonial agency itself in natives’ bodies). This specific power of colonial discourse allows us, according to Spivak, to understand the traumatic character underlying the colonial experience in all its tragic dimensions. As Stuart Hall also posits, it was not the case just to “represent” colonial subalterns in Said’s orientalist sense but to position them as the material other of the order of discourse: colonial power must necessarily become subjectification, inferiorization, and experienced self-negation, namely, a powerful dispositive of indigenous “internal coercion”:

The ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation. Not only, in Said’s “Orientalist” sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as “Other.” Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet “power/knowledge.” (Hall 1990, 224)

Spivak thus centered her reformulation of Said’s text, as Bhabha did, by recalling the material dimension of colonial discourses. It is from this starting premise that she suggests approaching what she calls the “worlding of the European world” as an exercise of violence. Through this expression Spivak intends to highlight not only the capacity of colonial discourses to impose their own universe of meaning on colonial minds and their capacity to disarticulate in a violent way natives’ “forms of life” and insert them into an exclusively European or imperial representation process, but also the political and discursive nature of all the foundational epistemological concepts historically mobilized by Western knowledge to the study and comprehension of non-Western cultures. Conceived through this meaning, the concept of *epistemic violence* serves to highlight two foundational premises of the postcolonial critique. First, as it is not possible to separate the will to know native societies or territories from the will to dominate and possess them, to inscribe non-Western societies in Western knowledge archives meant to neglect and distort their historical specificity and autonomy. In a colonial world shaped by colonial relations of power, to know, study, and classify other human groups of people—reducing them to silent and passive objects of knowledge—meant first of all to gain “authority” over them. It was precisely through the discursive deployment of this *epistemic authority* that Western systems of knowledge ended up in the legitimization and justification of imperial designs, of the European right to police and rule colonial subjects, since natives were considered incapable (in their extraneousness to scientific thinking) of knowing themselves. Second, it is not possible to consider the historical self-institution of Europe as the unique sovereign subject of the modern age



without taking into account this encounter–collision with the colonial other, that is, independent from the constitutive violence of these continuous and highly contradictory othering processes of the other since, as Spivak reminds us, the colonized had been codified according to colonizer cultural schemes—that is, as a rather reassuring other. Europe founded its own epistemic role as a sovereign subject through the definition of its colonies as others even if they were deliberately constituted, in the scope of their administrations and markets, as mere reproductions of that same sovereign self (Spivak 1985a).

The resistance of the colonized

However, this overwhelming political strategy imputed to colonial discourse by Bhabha and Spivak does not mean that, in their view, the colonial experience is to be considered as always successful or as one-way, or that it works as a completely closed power system, devoid of contradictions or internal fractures and controlled by a single conception of the world (that of the colonizers). Both Bhabha and Spivak criticized Said for his ahistorical and all-encompassing conception of oriental discourse, that is, for a conception of orientalism as the cornerstone of a closed, stable, and coherent system of domination, as a discursive machine able to reproduce itself in the same way everywhere and in every historical phase. It is not difficult to see that Said's notion of colonial discourse presents these difficulties not only because he conflated the Foucauldian idea of discourse with that of representation, as it is intended in the dominant literary tradition, but also because his main concern in *Orientalism* had more to do with the imposition of colonial power than with resistance to it. Sure enough, orientalism concedes no space to subaltern counternarratives and anticolonial movements' oppositions, which have interrupted the historical deployment of colonial power and narration and forced a permanent reelaboration of them.

Bhabha, instead, suggests that colonial discourse be considered as the fundamental expression of a highly unstable and contested relationship between colonizers and colonized. He thus prompted a rather different “anatomy of colonial discourse” from the one encoded in *Orientalism*. Bhabha's approach is centered on what he considers as the three distinctive features of colonial discourse: ambivalence, heterogeneity, and perpetual ineffectiveness. Adding an essentially psychoanalytic interpretation to Said's scheme, he begins by fixing the meaning of what he calls “colonial discourse ambivalence”: for Bhabha, colonial discourse's economy is determined not only by a mere imperial will to power but also by complex and unconscious psychological dynamics that shape from below the relationships between colonizers and colonized, between Western people and their others. Bhabha also locates at the core of colonial discourse a “Western desire for the other,” that is, a desire to know and to possess what appears to be a rather culturally different subject which, precisely because of this, is always perceived as an ontological threat to the security and solidity of self-identity. Colonial discourse, then, is characterized by ambivalence since it approaches the other, at the same time, as an object of desire and derision, attraction and repulsion, identification and negation. In Bhabha's view the aim of colonial discourse is not only to materially dominate and



enslave the colonial other but also to calm down the anguish, anxiety, and paranoia of an identity that can be founded and reproduced only by a certain reassuring regime of representation of the other. In sum, for Bhabha, the proliferation of colonial discourses, of colonial and racist stereotyping about the self, the other, and their respective relationships, is driven mainly by the need to ceaselessly suture the emergence of a void, and a wound originates in the constitutive trauma of an ever ill-founded self-identity.

Through this conceptualization of colonial discourse Bhabha is trying to shift the balance of colonial power from the colonizer to the colonized. In his analysis, the fulcrum of colonial power relations is no longer the colonizer but the colonized, namely a subject that is always avoiding the colonial gaze, disavowing the control of the master by virtue precisely of his inscrutable difference. In his view, then, it is the colonized—the very sign of difference—and not the colonizer that is the real subject of the colonial drive. In sum, it is the colonizer who is pursuing the colonized and not vice versa. This specific dynamic of the *colonial dialectic* of domination and resistance brings us directly to the second feature of colonial discourse delineated by Bhabha: heterogeneity. In his discourse, given that it is always the colonizer who is moved by the destabilizing (historical, geographical, cultural) difference of the non-Western other, it is clear that colonialism appears to be characterized by a plurality of heterogeneous discourses rather than by a never-changing homogeneous totality or narration (always identical to itself). From this point of view, for Bhabha, as Young notes, speaking about colonial discourse in general terms always ends up in “the obliteration of the materiality and historicity of colonial power,” more specifically “not only in the obliteration of the cultural or historical–geographical differences that characterize the world and which constitutes its raw material” but also in the removal of the trace or anticolonial resistance itself of subalterns in history (Young 1990, 186).

The “third space”: Hybridity, mimicry, dissent, dissonance

Finally the third aspect of colonial discourse underlined by Bhabha is what can be called it “permanent inefficacy” or, as Young suggests, its impossible closure. The idea of a permanent inefficacy being inherent in colonial discourses is directly related to Bhabha’s attempt to recover the historical agency of the colonial other within the specific historical narration of Western dominance inaugurated by Said in *Orientalism*. For Bhabha, ambivalence and heterogeneity derive from the impossibility of colonial discourse replicating itself, that is, of its reproducing or inscribing itself automatically in the native’s mind. In one of his most famous phrases, Bhabha reminds us that the ambivalence of colonial discourse can be grasped by focusing on the *mimicry* processes that have always characterized the reception of Western cultural practices and political institutions in colonial contexts. Through the concept of mimicry Bhabha condenses all those historical situations in which the natives, induced by colonial discourses to imitate the behaviors and cultural habits of their colonizers, had produced practices of syncretism and hybridization that openly represent a kind a parody or, in his own words, a “bad copy” of original practices and models. To illustrate more concretely the dynamics of cultural mimicry, he concentrates on two particular historical accounts: the distortions



of the Bible's reception during its diffusion in colonial India and the transformation of a part of the Indian elite into what we can call "brown Englishmen." These kinds of cultural records, which are present in the history of anthropology—think, for example, of the classic *cargo cults*—reveal to Bhabha the limits, or the "inherent inefficacy," of colonial discourses, in the sense that they openly show the ambivalence, dislocation, or distortion to which colonial rule was always subject. In fact, to the colonizers the "mimic man" can never be considered a reassuring subject because they have always seen only a "monstrous" and "threatening" dislocation of the colonizer's self-identity in his images and behaviors. In Bhabha's perspective, *imitation*, the unavoidable process of transformation undergone by familiar colonial mores when disseminated in culturally distant places, is always a disturbing practice, since it clearly shows to the colonizer the inherent vulnerability of the colonization process itself.

Bringing into focus "colonial mimicry" for Bhabha means locating the site of native cultural agency, of subaltern cultural resistance and reappropriation, against the authority of colonial power. According to Bhabha, these processes of "cultural hybridity" usually involve the emergence of new and different practices, that is, a space for the negotiation of destabilizing meanings and (self-)representations which he calls "the third space," suggesting that it prefigures an unknown and common field which is very different from both colonizer and traditional native discourses. This third space of hybridization—of mimicry, native dissonance, and dissent—is conceptualized by Bhabha as the postcolonial space par excellence because it allows us to recover the subaltern trace in history, to bring into focus the site of an antagonistic resistance that is able to

reverse "in part" the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence; a gaze of otherness, that shares the acuity of the genealogical gaze which, as Foucault describes it, liberates marginal elements and shatters the unity of man's being through which he extends his sovereignty. I want to turn to this process by which the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed and "partial" representation rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence. (Bhabha 1994, 88–89)

Can the subaltern speak?

Spivak's position on this argument is more complex. In contrast to Bhabha, Spivak aims to outline the premises of a "postcolonial critique," that is, a deconstructionist critique of the anticolonial counterhistory project, not merely by locating a subaltern positive historical trace through different colonial archives but also by asserting in advance the sheer impossibility of developing such a project. From her point of view, Western historical archives cannot contain any *authentic* native or colonial subaltern voice or agency since what can be found here are nothing more than *representations* of these alterities. This is necessary to understanding one of her most famous statements: "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 1988, 310). In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) Spivak seeks to give form to a feminist reading of colonial history, suggesting that the "Third World" woman as the real figure of subalternity—a concept retrieved here in an original way



from Gramsci's philosophy of praxis. Taking into account colonial vicissitudes between colonial British authorities and Indian natives on the ritual of sati, Spivak is suggesting an approach to the figure of the Third World woman as a human signifier, that is, as an empty and floating discursive effect, since throughout history many voices (local patriarchy, imperialism, Western feminism) have spoken for her except her own. What Spivak is saying is that the Third World woman, subaltern within the subalterns, has always been written and rewritten both by local patriarchal societies and by Western imperialism and feminism without ever achieving (in colonial archives) the status of a fully autonomous enunciating subjectivity.

Spivak's arguments are based on the analysis of one specific historical case study, that of the Rani (queen) of Sirmur. The *rani* was the wife of a local *raja* deposed by British colonial authorities at the beginning of the nineteenth century because of his presumably apparent "barbaric" and "lascivious" habits. The *rani* decided to disobey the legal dispositions announced by British authorities, reaffirming her desire to be burned alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Shocked by the *rani's* wish to subdue herself to such a "primitive" and "savage" cultural custom, the British attempted to discourage her from committing suicide. The *rani's* desire to become a sati (the practice was legally abolished by the British in 1829, with the approval of the enlightened Indian bourgeoisie) was not fulfilled, but to Spivak her case is clearly symptomatic both of the subaltern social condition and agency and of the absence of any authentic native account within the historical records or official colonial archives. The purely fleeting and fragmentary traces left by the *rani* in colonial archives (even her name remains unknown) remind us that real subaltern subjectivities could not have found any place within dominant signifying regimes, for these are always operating and reproducing cultural frameworks that are somewhat alien to subaltern forms of being and agency. Spivak is therefore suggesting that we think of this failed sati—debated between local patriarchy, Western feminism, and imperialism—as an empty signifier for all the "most poor women from the global South": everyone in history has spoken for these women except they themselves. It is for this reason that the subjectivity of these women cannot be found in historical documents. According to Spivak, it is not that subalterns did not speak or that they did not show any struggle or resistance to colonial rule and local patriarchy, but that dominant discursive regimes, shaped by selective one-sided epistemic tools, could not manage to grasp or record their voice.

The silence of subaltern women in colonial records or in "official" histories must be understood as an "irreducible cognitive failure" (Spivak 1988, 199), as a specific kind of void originating in the collision or an incommensurability between two different spheres of meaning: dominant and subaltern. Having accepted this "cognitive failure" as a permanent condition of Western knowledge, Spivak suggests that the main task of the postcolonial intellectual is to destabilize or to deconstruct those representation and classification systems that have rendered subaltern women "muted subjects" by preventing the articulation or emergence of their authentic voices within Western forms of knowledge. It is only after the assimilation or empowerment of this "epistemic fracture" that real forms of subaltern resistance can be read or perceived; for Spivak these seem to appear only through negative practices and behaviors, that is, through the form of implicit or explicit refusals of roles and status assigned to the subaltern by dominant



elites and hegemonic discourses. Subaltern political agency is always inscribed more in terms of *exit* (of negation, defection, evasion, or spontaneous insurrection) than of *voice* or clearly explicit or discursive *pris de parole*. This is why subaltern agency is conceived by Spivak as an “irreducibly historical” social fact and thus as “untranslatable” and “irrecoverable” political forms of consciousness.

The postcolonial condition

Given Said, Bhabha, and Spivak’s work, one of the main goals around which the discursive space of postcolonial studies has emerged: the requirement to submit to a constant reflexivity or to critical self-account categories and concepts that orient not only our own interpretive protocols but also our choice of our possible research fields. However, it could be argued that postcolonial critique owes much of its originality and notoriety to suggestions coming directly from the recurrent use of the term “postcolonial” to conceptualize the contemporary sociocultural condition in the field of literary and cultural studies. Yet, what does this adjective specifically mean? A response will derive from many of the questions touched upon in this entry.

As has been seen, the development of postcolonial criticism was based on a rather simple epistemological premise: modern colonial experience must be conceived of as one of the key episodes in world history, since it represents a constitutive social event of Western capitalist modernity, that is, of a historical phase that is at the root of our present condition. Through this new postcolonial narration of history, as Said, Bhabha, and Spivak’s work clearly show, colonialism is intended as something more complex than mere direct economic and political imperial rule over certain populations of the world: in Stuart Hall’s words, it could be said that colonization is intended as the “whole process of expansion, exploration, conquest, colonization and imperial hegemonisation which constituted the outer-face, the ‘constitutive-outside’ of Western capitalist modernity since 1492” (Hall 1996, 249).

At the base of postcolonial studies thus we find the assumption that colonialism has never been the mere product of a complex of fortuitous cases but is a truly global (economic, political, and cultural) system of exploitation of non-European societies—a system that has marked in an indelible way societies, histories, and consciousness of both the colonizer and the colonized. Can it therefore be said that colonialism is still with us, though there are nowadays only a few formal colonies? Yes and no, and the ambivalence of this response is key to understanding the essence of the project of postcolonial critique.

On the one hand, postcolonial studies seeks to underline what can be called, retrieving Fernand Braudel’s famous expression from another context, the *material longue durée* of the historical colonial system, that is, its main role in the formation of the world capitalist system and the political and economic unevenness at its core. This postcolonial view asserts that the international-relations system that emerged through modern colonial expansion has overdetermined the structure of the global capitalist economy and hence that the different positioning of nations, ethnic groups, and cultures within



the hierarchies of the contemporary global system have their roots precisely in that historical period.

Yet, on the other hand, postcolonial studies has produced its own discursive space, unveiling the *cognitive long durée* of the colonial world by stressing the persistence of a colonial imaginary (a colonial unconscious) in contemporary Western culture and knowledge. This persistence is seen as the result of the all-encompassing dimension of colonialism ideological apparatuses, of the colonial *épistème*, in the formation and development of the (political, cultural, and scientific) self-representation systems of modern Western knowledge. Given this epistemological assumption, for Spivak the role of the postcolonial intellectual must be to challenge the “cognitive heritage of imperialism,” that is to “change something that she/he is obliged to inhabit by dismantling the authority of Europe’s story-lines ... reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value-coding” (Spivak 1990, 56).

It could be argued thus that the originality, as well as the political and epistemological power, of the “postcolonial” signifier derives precisely from the deliberately ambivalent meaning of the prefix “post.” It seems obvious that the prefix “post” here is intended to mean first of all a detachment from colonialism and power structures. However, given the particular dynamics of the historical process of formal decolonization, this critical detachment cannot ever be translated into the celebration of a fully achieved postcolonial historical condition: it does not stand, then, for a new historical phase completely free from colonial relations of power or distinguished by more substantial forms of justice and freedom concerning former colonized groups. The postcolonial could therefore be considered as a political expression aimed at describing tensions and conflicts of an ongoing “long transition,” of a contradictory phase characterized by a past that does not pass and a future that has not yet arrived. To define the present social condition as a “postcolonial condition” does not mean placing it in a chronologically historical period consecutive to that of formal historical colonialism. The adjective “postcolonial” is operating here more as an epistemological cut than a historical–chronological one: it is not referring to a clear-cut fracture with the past but quite the opposite—the impossibility of reading the present outside of it. The “post” in the “postcolonial” is intended to remind us that colonial culture has not been dissolved with the end of the historical colonial system. The prefix compels us to think of colonialism as a historical event whose material and symbolic effects have not yet been fully overcome or completely deleted. It suggests that colonialism should be thought of as something like a lingering existential wound in both colonizers and colonized people. From a postcolonial perspective, then, it is not possible to grasp most of conflicts and struggles of the present without taking account of the lingering cognitive colonial heritage: colonialism is established here as the necessary starting point of every political, economic, and cultural analysis of the modern and contemporary world. In this sense, writers such as Salman Rushdie, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jamaica Kincaid, or Hanif Kureishi are also considered postcolonial writers not only because their novels came out after the colonial moment or they are usually set in a postcolonial period but because in their literary work colonialism—its contact zones, borderlands, and third spaces of hybridization—is understood as the only possible common past, the only committed starting point of every postcolonial history wherever it is located in the world.

In this sense, the postcolonial term refers to a sort of *transitional* or *in-between* social condition: while focusing on the lingering of a colonial condition in the present, of neocolonial forms or dispositives, it becomes at the same time the signifier itself of the impossibility of stabilization or pacification of these colonial power relations, emerging therefore as one of the arising symptoms of its potential overcoming. Yet it might be mistaken to approach this contemporary postcolonial condition as a mere linear and repetitive continuation of the historical colonial system. As Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Sandrine Lemaire (2005) assert, referring to the particular French case, this “colonial fracture” is occurring in metropolitan spaces through relations both of continuities and of discontinuities with the historical colonial past: it is endlessly composing and decomposing itself but usually along unprecedented spatial axes and through relatively new discourses, practices, and logics. This colonial fracture has no systemic logic and its unique coherence or cohesion lies in its historical roots, in the common historical origins of all the hierarchies and processes it is engendering in the present. It is, then, the expression of a colonial imaginary which it perpetuates, transforms, reproduces, and rearticulates daily in very different and not necessarily interconnected fields: in international (economic, political, juridical, cultural) relations; in migration politics; in media representations of non-European others; in the dynamics of most of the ethnic and religious conflicts occurring all over the world, in the articulation of typically colonial technologies of population control and subjectification in Western metropolitan urban spaces, in the rhetoric and lexicon of new Western “humanitarian” missions and politics, in the Occidentalism and “civilizational” strategies that characterize most of the invective against migration and multiculturalism in the nations of the global North and, finally, through the paradoxically paternalistic discourses of a remarkably white, Western, and Eurocentric kind of feminism aimed at the disempowerment of non-Western women’s agency. It is obvious, then, that the postcolonial critique can articulate its analysis over a rather heterogeneous complex of topics and fields. And, as has been shown, since its inception its strength and originality have depended on this extreme eclecticism.

SEE ALSO: Mariátegui, José Carlos (1894–1930); Foucault, Michel (1926–84); Postcoloniality; Representation, Politics of; Colonialism and the Museum; Coloniality of Power; Indigeneity in Anthropology; Power, Anthropological Approaches to

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1980s the term "postcolonial" has become a well-known key signifier in analysis of cultural and political representations of dominance and subalternity in contemporary societies. It was in the wake of the success of this term that from the early 1990s an impressive field of studies, from transversal to traditional disciplines, entered the archives of Western knowledge, at first in the Anglo-American world but later worldwide: postcolonial studies, or postcolonial critique.

KEYWORDS

colonialism; colonization; decolonization; postcolonialism