Realism, modernism, and post-colonial theory

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When was "the post-colonial"? asks Stuart Hall. What should be included and excluded from its frame? Where is the invisible line between it and its "others"—colonialism, neo-colonialism, Third World, imperialism—in relation to whose termination it ceaselessly, but without final supersession, marks itself? (Hall 1998). Does 'post-colonial' refer to some people, or some societies, and not others, as something like a "badge of merit" (Hulme 1995, quoted in Hall 1996)—or does it signal something more abstract? Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin effectively include all nations which have once been colonized in order to "cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (1989: 2). In doing so, however, they designate as equally 'post-colonial' 'very different national-cultural formations—the United States, Australia and Canada, on the one hand, and Nigeria, Jamaica and India, on the other' (Shohat 1992). Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani's (1993) rejoinder to this has been to claim that, while these are all indeed post-colonial societies, they are not so 'in the same way'. A further difficulty with the concept of the 'post-colonial' is that it seems to suggest a period that follows the demise of colonialism. As has often been pointed out, this is a misconception since colonialism certainly does not end with the arrival of national independence in formerly colonized states. This in turn has lead to charges that post-colonial theory has 'managed to obfuscate some of the enduring legacies of colonialism, including the pauperization of the Third World in the age of late capitalism' (Majid 1995: 6). Efforts, sometimes acrimonious, have been made, in this context, to bring to light what post-colonialism is 'actually' all about. Thus, Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests how post-colonial theory may be seen as the political theory of the diasporic Third World intellectual, who is part of 'a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained, group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery' (1991: 348) while Arif Dirlik begins an essay on post-colonialism with the—avowedly facetious—statement that the 'post-colonial' begins 'when Third World intellectuals have arrived in First World academe' (1994: 329).

The seeming shambles that is current post-colonial theory is caused partly, as a number of writers have pointed out, through uncertainty as to whether the concept of post-colonialism is a chronological or an epistemological one. Hall goes further and argues that post-colonial theory is faced with a choice of epistemologies: a 'rational and successive logic or a deconstructive one' (Hall 1996: 255). The way out of this, he suggests, is to agree that, whatever our location, post-colonial theory allows us to reconceptualize colonialism itself, in the light of our current knowledge of global capitalism.
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Colonization, from this ‘post-colonial’ perspective, was no local or marginal sub-plot in some larger story (for example, the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe . . . ) In the re-staged narrative of the post-colonial, colonization assumes the place and significance of a major, extended and ruptural world-historical event . . . signifying the whole process of expansion, exploration, conquest, colonization and imperial hegemonization which constituted the ‘outer face’, the constitutive outside, of European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492. (Hall 1996: 249)

This needs to be said. However, once said, it is worth adding that we cannot simply speak of only one ‘re-staged narrative of the post-colonial’. First, in the designation of the site of the restaging act: it would be my experience, living and working in India, that the route by which issues such as these arrive on my doorstep constitutes them less as issues with an autonomous import than as a staging-ground of numerous binary oppositions. It is precisely this staging context—rather than the debate—that is in turn replicated and restaged in other, typically ‘nationalist’ contexts which then appear free to introduce to it their own subject-matter. Second, in the (dominant) deconstructionist version of the role of narrative in the post-colonial, there is an assertion that post-coloniality is not one of the grands récits of modernity but a baggage of ‘narratives’ which, because they are narratives, leave out things, have limits, and do not present themselves as ‘solutions for the future’ (Spivak, in Harasym 1990: 18–19). When I try to situate this kind of argument in India, in some of the most violent, as well as politically contentious, events that have addressed caste (the Mandal Commission), religion (the rise of a Hindu right), and gender (the Uniform Civil Code debates)—none of which, unfortunately, can feature in a brief survey of this kind—I find myself arguing that ‘rational and successive logic’ is not an epistemological either/or in relation to deconstructionism. It is, rather, that the two alternatives always live in some kind of negotiated relationship to each other, and this in itself is one of the reasons why the sphere of an objective, ‘political’ arena is so difficult to designate.

This is perhaps best revealed in the crisis of the cinema itself in relation to post-colonial theory. Until the early 1980s the cinema was at the forefront of post-colonial theory but has now virtually disappeared from recent debates on post-coloniality. The very construction of the filmic image, through editing, sound recording and mixing, and the process of projecting that image to an audience, had a relationship with the structuring of various kinds of modernist ‘publicness’ which has, in the relocated status of colonialism, lost out to larger, less controllable impulses and to the range of technologies that mediate such ‘autonomous social impulses’ (to use Spivak’s term). In this context, it is worth looking at the three-decade history of post-colonial relations between national cinemas in the ‘Third World’ and independent film movements in the West.

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The Western avant-garde

In 1972 Peter Bürger’s influential book Theory of the Avant-Garde was first published in German, reflecting, as he wrote later, ‘a historical constellation of problems that emerged after the events of May 1968 and the failure of the student movement in the early 70s’ (1994: 95). That book in many ways launched a series of theoretical interventions to resuscitate the concept of an avant-garde which Bürger saw as challenging bourgeois notions of aesthetic autonomy. Most of the contributors to this debate agreed that the ‘historical avant-garde’, which Bürger located mainly in Dadaism, Surrealism, and the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde, had met its demise following the Second World War, with the institutionalization of modernism in the
United States. Thereafter, while the term survived, it was increasingly 'overpowered by conformism' (in Walter Benjamin's [1973/1979] widely quoted phrase). For Rosalind Krauss (1986) this conformism was identified with a valorization of originality, while Andreas Huyssen (1986) sought to find avant-garde impulses (amongst other places) within mass culture. Several of these debates in New York occurred specifically in the context of the rise of a European 'trans-avant-garde', a set of Neo-Expressionist movements mainly in Germany (Georg Baselitz, Markus Lüpertz, A. R. Penck) and Italy (Sandro Chia, Clemente), which were extensively debated in Europe and the United States, and attacked (notably by Buchloh 1981) for their aggressive assertion of a neo-nationalist elitism, 'reflect[ing] and diamant[ing]' the ideological impact of growing authoritarianism (Wallis and Tucker 1984: 108).

It was within this broad context that Peter Wollen in 1975 wrote his classic essay 'The Two Avant-Gardes', which identified two parallel movements in the West (see Smith, Part 3, Chapter 2). The first avant-garde emphasized formal experimentation and was deeply suspicious of 'programmatic' political activism; the second was more aggressively political, but still preoccupied with 'the whole process of signification out of which a world view or an ideology is constructed'. In evoking this distinction, Wollen draws the debate into the ambit of modernism proper, emphasizing the 'critical semiotic shift' represented by the avant-gardes: the 'change of emphasis from the problem of signified and reference, a classic problem of realism, to that of signifier and signified within the sign itself'.

It is perhaps only in retrospect that Wollen's essay reveals just why it proved so influential: it was not the two specific vanguard movements that made the essay significant so much as the virtually global resonances of his paradigm. The paradigm spoke of a modernist model in which two (or more) movements were presented as being on different sides of a divide, with each side in some sense attached to historical precedents which were repressed, reinvented, or re-enacted in order to address the present.

It was characteristic of the time (the 1970s–1980s) that none of the theorists mentioned above, dealing with theories of the avant-garde, were familiar with, or even seriously interested in, what was going on outside the Euro-American context. Nevertheless, I think the model itself remains useful, even as we include those other contexts here. In doing so, I will revert to the original opposition which preceded the concept of the 'two avant-gardes'—that of realism versus modernism—and add a third term: that of nationalism.

**Nationalist realism—modernism**

A second history can be inscribed into this battle of two avant-gardes. From the 1950s and the Brazilian Cinema Novo, 'new cinema' movements swept through large parts of Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Many of the filmmakers associated with these movements addressed issues similar to those of the Western avant-garde, and were, indeed, in some kind of dialogue with it: most celebrately in the meeting between Godard and Glauber Rocha (emblematically presented in Vent d'Est [1969], where Rocha appears in a brief sequence). Indeed, in this phase many of those active in the 'Third World' were possibly unaware of their counterparts in similar situations, and often came together as a consequence of having common Western referents.

In many countries New Cinema movements were constituted through direct state intervention, and were intended to establish indigenous film infrastructures in the context of political independence. To put it bluntly, in several countries, for example in Africa, there was literally no cinema before the New Cinema. In many of these movements, a commitment to institutionalization went alongside a commitment to the promotion of indigenous realisms. This can be seen in Cinema Novo's commitment to GECINE (the Grupo executivo da indústria cinematográfica, set up by the government to examine the Brazilian film industry in 1961), and later, more significantly, Embrafilme, the Brazilian state organization for funding cinema; the Cuban cinema and ICAC (the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, established in 1959, within three months of the success of the revolution); the FEPACI (the Fédération panafrique des cinéastes) in Africa; the NFDC (National Film Development Corporation) in India; and a host of others (such as the Sri Lankan State Film Corporation and the Royal Nepal Film Corporation).

Thus, it is possible to see several nationalist reconstruction agendas adopting economic programmes based on the principles of scientific rationalism and its aesthetic counterpart of realism. As Fredric Jameson argues, 'realism designates an active, curious,
The Nouvelle Vague meets counter-cinema—Glauber Rocha at the crossroads in Godard’s Vent d’est (1968)

eperimental, subversive—in a word scientific—attitude towards social institutions and the material world; and the "realistic" work of art is therefore one which encourages and disseminates this attitude, yet not merely in a flat or mimetic way or along the lines of imitation alone" (Jameson 1977: 205). Thus, in India the report of the Patil Enquiry (Film Enquiry Committee 1951), the first major state initiative after Independence to address and reform the film industry, embodies several key tenets of this aesthetic of realism, in advocating a cinema of 'social purpose', denigrating the mass-cultural industry as 'gamblers' who work 'often at the cost of both the taste of the public and the prosperity of the industry', and recommending that numerous state institutions be started, including the Film Finance Corporation, the National Film Archive of India, and a film training institute. Between 1945 and 1975, which Aijaz Ahmad identifies as the 'high period of decolonization' (1992b: 39-40), indigenous realism played a crucial role in nation-building. In the words of Gyanendra Pandey, realism—or rather, various national realisms—were important in writing up the 'biography of the emerging nation-state' (1991: 560), and creating the authoritative self-image of the nation.

During this same period, one particular strand of 'author cinema' from the 'Third World' also came to critical prominence and was associated with artists whose major virtue, it appeared, was the fact that they 'straddled two cultures'. Roy Armes's (1987) book on the subject is exemplary in its identification of this category. In a chapter entitled 'Cinema Astride Two Cultures', he lists a small number of 'first generation' film-authors—Satyajit Ray, Youssef Chahine, Glauber Rocha, Yilmaz Güney, Ousmane Sembène, and Jorge Sanjínés—who are seen as contributing simultaneously to Western modernism as well as to their 'own native tradition' (Armes 1987: 229-30). (We might also add the names of Lester James Peries, Lino Brocka, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, and maybe even Akira Kurosawa.) Most of these filmmakers have consistently been showcased in Western film festivals as exemplars of modernist 'author cinema'. This has led to the virtual exclusion of all knowledge about the contexts in which the filmmaking practices of these very names occur—as well as the work of others who explicitly aligned themselves to (or opposed) a socialist avant-garde internationalism. Furthermore, it has resulted in the elision of any argument that might assign to the mass-cultural mainstream of newly independent "Third World" nations their own vanguardist initiatives (for example, in creating audiences, or in shaping their own anti-colonial indigenous mass culture).
The Third Cinema and the avant-garde

In 1969 the famous manifesto of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino was published, heralding the new concept of a 'Third Cinema' which, for the first time, allowed a second, more explicitly avant-garde position to emerge in opposition to the one of modernist 'author-cinema'. The manifesto, which was followed by several other texts and films hitherto unknown outside their local contexts (see Chan 1983), was premised on a replacement of nationalism with 'the development of a worldwide liberation movement whose force is to be found in Third World countries'. According to Solanas and Getino's typology, First Cinema was represented by Hollywood; the Second Cinema by the so-called 'author's cinema', 'expression cinema', 'nouvelle vague', and 'cinema novo'; while Third Cinema was seen as using 'films as a revolutionary tool', and radically relocating the practices of viewing and the industrial-economic designation of cinema itself.

It is worth noting that the Third Cinema manifesto was, among other things, in dialogue with a post-May 1968 European-American film avant-garde, and the work of Jean-Luc Godard in particular (see Godard and Solanas 1987: 82–9). Indications of this engagement include the years of Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government, when European filmmakers 'as diverse as Chris Marker (who helped complete Patricio Guzmán's Battle for Chile, 1973–9) and Roberto Rossellini contributed in their own ways to the Chilean filmmakers' famous call for 'national liberation and the construction of socialism' (quoted in Fusco 1987: 118). Indeed, it is clear that Wollen is indebted, in part at least, to Solanas and Getino for his own manifesto statement written six years later and that there are evident continuities between Solanas and Getino's characterization of 'Second' and 'Third' Cinemas and Wollen's identification of two avant-gardes. It is therefore possible to see in Wollen's (1975) essay a relocating of the two concepts of authorship and political activism into more explicitly semiotic and narrative practices, not only in this essay itself but more schematically in an earlier essay on 'Godard and Counter-Cinema', where he marks the divide in terms of narrative transitivity versus intranessity, identification versus estrangment, and fiction versus reality (Wollen 1972).

Among the consequences of this manifesto in film—
not only the Western imperium but also the nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie. (Appiah 1991: 353)

As many writers have pointed out, the 'end' of anticolonial developmentalist nationalism also coincides with the rise of post-structuralism. Ahmad, for instance, writes that

... the national-bourgeois state partly basked in the reflected glory of the wars of national liberation, hence in the greater valorization of nationalism as such. . . . Now, as the stagnation of that type of post-colonial state has become more obvious in more recent years, and as the perception of that stagnation coincided chronologically with the ascendancy of post-structuralism in literary theory, cultural nationalism itself is currently in the process of being discarded as illusion, myth, totalizing narrative. (Ahmad 1992b: 41)

Post-colonial theory and internationalism

It is possible to list a three-way split in the directions that post-colonial theory has broadly taken since the early 1980s—all three differently informed by poststructuralism and the work of Edward Said, especially Orientalism (1978). The first, we might broadly characterize as an investigation into nationalism itself: the best-known work being, in the West, Benedict Anderson's remarkable book Imagined Communities (see also Geilner 1983) and, outside the West, the influential writings of the Subaltern Studies Collective (see Guha 1982–9), and those of Partha Chatterjee (1986, 1994) in particular. A second track sought mainly to shift erstwhile 'Third World' nationalism into a theory of the 'Third World' itself: effectively transforming the more subtle divides along the fault lines of modernism–realism, as these impacted upon the construction of citizenship, into more straightforwardly 'First-World'–'Third World' opposites. While this was introduced into film theory by Teshome Gabrieli's Third Cinema in the Third World (1982), with its prescriptive listing of how 'First World' films differed from those of the 'Third World', later developments have taken place almost entirely outside the ambit of film, and would be, in some respects, the dominant trend in US academia today. The third track, in which cinema did (and still does) feature, albeit on the margins, was a more explicit effort to deploy post-colonial theory to address the condition of immigrant minorities in the West, and it is mainly in this area that cultural studies has made its most significant impact on post-colonial theory.

Two seminal essays by Fredric Jameson—'On Magic Realism in Film' and the more controversial 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital' (1986a, b)—attempt to link, on the one side, the Brecht-Lukács debate concerning realism with, on the other, a new literary categorization of the 'Third World' in post-colonial theory that might address all the three alternatives stated above. The trajectory that both essays assume is the one that began with nationalist 'Third World' efforts to translate the realism–modernism divide into their own terms, and ended with the redesignation of nationalism itself within post-colonial theory. On the way, they make indirect reference to Third Cinema theory, and more pertinently seem to designate the place where that theory came to reside in its post-colonial versions of the 1980s.

Both essays are premised on questions of narrative—on structures that seemingly resemble, but do not eventually play the part of, more familiar narrative conventions in the West (as in the resemblance, at times, between magic realism and the American nostalgia film). The first essay seeks, it seems to me, to address the poignant question of Kwame Anthony Appiah's (1991) text 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?'. Jameson chooses to compare a Polish film (Agnieszka Holland's Fever, 1981) with a Venezuelan production (Jacobo Penzo's La casa de agua, 1984) and a Colombian production (Francisco Norden's Candelas no entierran todos las dias, 1984) to argue that the very location of narrative—the 'shock of entry into narrative—departs from the 'consumed... visual commodity' of the nostalgia film in the way that the 'permutations of the gaze, which irritate and intensify it, do not... as in postmodernism and the nostalgia film, transform its objects into images in the stronger sense of that word. Although both genres deal with history, the magic realist film is a 'history-with-holes', where a whole range of subtle or complicated forms of narrative attention, which classical film... laboriously acquired and adapted from earlier developments in the novel, are now junked and replaced... Narrative here has not been subverted or abandoned, as in the iconoclasm of the experimental film, but rather effectively neutralized, to the benefit of a seeing or a looking in the filmic present.' All of this is presented in contrast to the
"enfeebled"—both in terms of history and class—post-modernism of the industrialized West.

The second essay takes this argument further: narrative, in non-canonical 'Third World' literatures, is not only woven in more complex and subtle ways into history and political action than its seeming resemblance to Western conventions would reveal, but plays a different role altogether even in its position in civil society. The key (and intensely controversial, as we shall see) paragraph goes: 'All third world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of pre-dominantly Western machineries of representation, such as the novel.' Jameson goes on to argue that whereas 'the culture of the Western realist and modernist novel' involves 'a radical split between the private and the public', Third World texts—even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—'necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society'.

Jameson's avowed intention is to 'rethink our [i.e. the US academic] humanities curriculum' and to do so in a way that avoids simply embracing non-canonical texts by proving that these are 'as great as those of the canon itself', a self-defeating exercise which 'borrows the weapons of the adversary'.

There is, however, a second history that feeds into this intervention, contributing to Jameson's somewhat deliberately provocative tone. This history constitutes, in one spectacular moment of the 'end of nationalism', a literal migration of Third Cinema into the 'West', notably into the United States, and thereby also into post-colonialism. In 1973 the Allende government fell in Chile and through the 1970s state repression in several Latin American countries increased massively. Jorge Sanjines and Mario Arrieta, members of the Ulamau group, went into exile following the coup d'état in Bolivia in 1971; the Third World Cinémathèque in Montevideo was ransacked by the police in 1972, who confiscated all films, equipment, and records; while elsewhere organizations like the Argentine Anti-communist Alliance (AAA) were on the rise. The AAA killed Julio Troxler, an actor, while working on a Fernando Solanas production. In 1976, in an epochal statement, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson, when in Spain, vowed never to return to his native Argentina as long as his films were banned there.

To a great extent, this caused the very concept of the Third Cinema, along with its key protagonists, to go into exile (in the United States and in Europe) or turn to Cuba, its only major support in Latin America still to be intact. In 1976 the Emergency Committee to Defend Latin American Filmmakers, based in New York, was supported by Hollywood stars like Candice Bergen, Francis Ford Coppola, Jane Fonda, Jack Nicholson, and Martin Scorsese. A decade later, the Fundación del nuevo cine latinoamericano (New Latin American Film Foundation, FNCL) was founded in 1985, with Marquez as chairman and with major—if radically different from the past—ambitions, including owning movie theatres in every Latin American country and several cities in Europe, and even installing their own satellite. But it was soon forced to resort to a political-aesthetic survival strategy addressed mainly towards garnering support within the 'First World.' In 1986 the FNCL started the Escuela Internacional de cine y TV (International School of Cinema and TV), with Fernando Birri as its first director. The school constituted one important statement of this intention with its barely concealed effort to export 'revolutionary film' to the capitalist world. Apart from Latin American connections (the Instituto Nacional de Cinematografía (INC) Argentina, Embrafilm, the Colombian Ministry of Communication), the only 'exchange link' this school had was with Robert Redford's Sundance Film Institute. Birri, in his inaugural speech, provided a virtual recipe for the by-now vastly broadened concept of the Third Cinema when he debunked 'marginalism versus professionalism' as a false option, promising to provide students with filmmaking that included possibilities
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‘that go from pure political cinema to pure experimental cinema, taking into account all the possible alternatives: clandestine, militant, denunciation, resistance, social, didactic, independent, vocational, underground, marginal, diverse, off and off-off cinema’ (Birri 1986: 5).

During much of this time, the contribution of writers like Julianne Burton and Julia Lesage, as well as journals like Jump Cut, was perceived even by people as eminent as Tomás Gutiérrez Alea as providing a virtual lifeline to the Cuban cinema in familiarizing and popularizing their work with US audiences. This issue was for a while extensively debated, notably in an encounter between Burton and Teshome Gabriel in the pages of Screen (Gabriel 1983, 1986; Burton 1983, 1985). Fredric Jameson himself saw the three films he discusses in his ‘magic realism’ essay (1986a) at the Latin American Film Festival in Havana, 1984, and dedicates the essay to the Cuban Revolution. This essay, written at the same time as the Burton–Gabriel debate, suggests that the Western critic, in the current situation, could—indeed, had to be—‘critic and interpreter’ within certain new terms of globalization requiring new kinds of political responsibility to be addressed.

Aijaz Ahmad’s (1987) attack on Jameson’s (1986b) ‘Third World Literature’ essay constitutes a seminal launch of post-colonial theory into one of its current positions. Ahmad begins by questioning Jameson’s very intention: in seeking a ‘cognitive aesthetics of third world literature’, he argues, Jameson suppresses the multiplicity of significant differences to create a simple, binary opposition between ‘First’ and ‘Third World’ literatures. Much of Ahmad’s critique stems from his argument that the ‘Third World’ itself consists of several independent nation-states, with developed social formations and with their own well-established literary canons. He therefore recommends the abolition of the ‘three worlds’ concept, and its replacement by the ‘radically different . . . proposition that we live not in three worlds but in one; that this world includes the experience of colonialism and imperialism on both sides of Jameson’s global divide . . . that societies in formations of backward capitalism are as much constituted by the division of classes as are societies in advanced capitalist countries’ (Ahmad 1992a: 103).

Post-colonial theory: political-deconstructionist

By the 1990s post-colonial theory had clearly carved for itself a distinct disciplinary ‘area’, as is evident in the appearance of several ‘readers’ and anthologies (see especially Williams and Christman 1994, Prakash 1995, Chambers and Curti 1996). Virtually all of these, in their choice of authors as well as their category distinctions, embody a new contest between efforts to find political modes of addressing ‘Otherness’, versus a more deconstructionist initiative featuring, mainly, the writings of Trinh T. Minh-ha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha.

Homi K. Bhabha’s influential work began in the 1980s as a deliberate confrontation with such themes of ‘Third Worldist’ resistance. At the Edinburgh Third Cinema conference he presented what he saw as a false and disabling opposition.

Between what is represented as the ‘larceny’ and distortion of European ‘metahistorical’ and the radical, engaged activist experience of Third World creativity, he argued, one can see the mirror image (albeit reversed in content and intention) of that ahistorical nineteenth century polarity of Orient and Occident which, in the name of progress, unleashed the exclusionary imperialist ideologies of self and other. This time round, the term ‘critical theory’, often unauthored and unargued, is defined, the ‘other’, an otherness that is consistently identified with the vagaries of the depoliticized Eurocentric critic. (Bhabha 1994: 19)

He argued, instead, for theory as negotiation: ‘the event of theory becomes the negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle’ (Bhabha 1989/1994 29). Bhabha’s insistence on discovering, within colonial discourse, those spaces where ‘hybridity’ starts shifting away from strait-jacketed oppositions and into ‘a heterogeneity that the existing dichotomies themselves make simultaneously possible and impossible’ (Prakash 1992: 17) revitalized the very terrain on which theory could now operate, seemingly overcoming the shambles of multiple subjects of fragmented histories that post-colonial theory had become in the late 1980s. As Gyan Prakash puts it, ‘at these moments of indeterminacy, when the discourse can be seen to veer away from the implacable logic of oppositionality, the critic can intervene, and, using historical work as a license for a strategy of reading, re-negotiate the terms of discourse’ (17).
Crucial to Bhabha’s work has been his formulation of ‘colonial mimicry’, or the ‘desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite ... the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its own slippage, its excess, its difference’ (Bhabha 1987). Such terms as ‘slippage’, ‘excess’, and the crucial one, ‘difference’, or the ones that circulate extensively in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s work—‘hybridity, interstices, voids, intervals, in-betweeness’ (cited in Chambers and Curti 1996)—opened a new space, veritably a flood, of theory for what still goes broadly under the title ‘deconstructionism’.

Perhaps the most significant contribution contextualizing both the political as well as discursive constitution of the ‘subject’ of theory—including crucially the colonial subject—is Gayatri Spivak’s essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988). Working with a triangular grid of ‘power, interest, desire’, Spivak distinguishes between two concepts of representation: representation, in the sense in which the ‘people’, an absent collective consciousness often dispersed and dislocated as ‘subjects’, find a category of representatives (who sometimes betray them), versus re-presentation: the space for rhetoric, realism, the ‘scene of writing’; radical practice should attend to this ‘double session of representations rather than reproduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire’.

It is on this terrain, of the tragic, eternally silenced subaltern figure whose own voice is always lost in the tumult of an invoked subject of oppression, that Spivak seems to bring together two until then incompatible intellectual positions: the Derridean and the explicitly stated anti-elitist historiography of the Subaltern Studies group. Both effectively work on their resistance to the constitution of the undifferentiated, textualized subject.

Gyan Prakash’s contribution to this debate has been to suggest, controversially, a need to move beyond ‘foundational histories’.

The subaltern is a figure produced by historical discourses of domination, but it nevertheless provides a mode of reading history different from those inscribed in elite account ... these historians seek to uncover the subaltern’s myths, cults, ideologies and revolts that colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and conventional historiography has led to waste by their deadly weapon of cause and effect. (Prakash 1992: 9)

The importance of the link between Derridean-Spinvakian deconstructionism and Subaltern historiography is, however, less related to its linguistic designation of the subaltern voice (or its absence) than it is to a consequent validation of the status of a new kind of history-writing, which Prakash calls ‘Post-Foundational history’. Work by the Subaltern Studies historians ‘disrupts ... the nationalist narrative that considers all colonial revolts as events in the becoming of the ... nation and contests the older Manéist accounts which see these episodes as preludes to the emergence of full-fledged class-consciousness’ (Prakash 1990: 399–400).

The most contentious of Prakash’s statements was an apparent dismissal of capitalism itself on the grounds that capitalist narratives, being by definition homogenizing and therefore foundational, cannot therefore thematize post-colonial history, since it is precisely histories emphasizing heterogeneity—rather than mere documentation of how capitalism becomes dominant—that will allow us to contest capitalist homogenization. Two major attacks followed: one by Rosalind O’Hanlon and David Washbrook (1992), who argued that, for Prakash, capitalism becomes a ‘dispensable fiction’, and a second by Dilrik (1994), who argued, effectively, that this entire trend of argumentation (represented by Spivak, Bhabha, Prakash et al.) constitutes a deliberate ‘obfuscation of its own relationship to what is but a condition of its emergence, that is, to a global capitalism that, however fragmented in appearance, serves as the structuring principle of global relations’ (331).

Post-colonial theory and diaspora: negritude to immigritude

Politically, there is a straightforward problem with the very approach of deconstructionism: a problem that Stuart Hall sums up as the ‘fantasy of a powerless utopia of difference’. It is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that, because essentialism has been deconstructed theoretically, therefore it has been displaced politically (1996: 249). There is however a different sense in which one can, perhaps more fruitfully, contextualize Spivak’s and Bhabha’s work: as an interrogation of the colonial encounter in the context of, and addressing the condition of, Immigrant minorities in the West. In his effort to shift the emphasis
of identity politics away from its burden upon the slave, the colonized, the immigrant, to the colonial authority itself, Bhabha (and generally deconstructionist politics) intervenes, along with major writers mainly from Africa, the Caribbean, and the black community in Britain and the United States, in the shift away from colonial ethnography and into a new terrain of ethnic cultural politics.

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The inversion of ethnography, a colonial discipline to tackle the problems of studying alien cultures, into an assertive politics premised on identity is a key part of this history. An early inversion of colonial identity was the concept of ‘nègritude’, originating in the work of Aimé Césaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor. In its original form, nègritude claimed black identity as ‘emotional rather than national’ with ‘a distinctive African view… separated from the supposedly universal values of European taste and style’ (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 21–2). Although extensively critiqued by African writers—most notably by Wole Soyinka, who declared ‘a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude’—nègritude as a concept was transformed by and survived in various subsequent efforts, throughout this century, to posit a black aesthetics. Senghor’s work traces an influence to the Harlem Renaissance, to Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, and, subsequently to Black Power movements. In the 1980s it was once again addressed, via black musical structures as these related to literary style, in Henry Louis Gates’s influential compilation Black Literature and Literary Theory (1984) while Gates’s own book The Signifying Monkey (1988) attempted ‘to identify a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the Black vernacular tradition’.

The double problem—how to assert ethnicity and at the same time combat the essentializing imperialist ethnography on which that identity has, all too often, been based—bedevils a great deal of black theory on the subject. There has also been a certain discounting of ‘nationism’, of whatever kind, in the face of what Vivek Dharshavar has called ‘immigrature’—the ‘whole narrative of displacement which has become a normative experience in metropolitan politics’ (1989: 143). If 1970s–1980s Latin America saw in its right-wing takeovers an spectacular end of anti-colonial nationalism, clearly it was on a scale nowhere near the experience of Black Africa’s own experience, of having to comprehend an earlier ‘global’ economy of the slave trade. The descendants of those enslaved, and later immigrants, some of whom emigrated through choice, experienced the end of nationalism within the heartlands of globalized capital, even as they were forced to acknowledge the impossibility of return.

Some of the richest interventions into political theory, and indeed the cutting edge of post-colonial theory itself, have taken place at this particular frontier. Frantz Fanon’s work in positing black identity as first and foremost a political one clearly shifted nègritude into a different terrain (see notably Fanon 1967). E. K. Braithwaite’s emphasis on a pan-African nationalism, alongside his interests in forming a new cultural thrust for creolization (Braithwaite 1984), informed a new effort to understand the phenomenon of racism, especially following the realization that ‘by defining “race” and ethnicity as cultural absolutes, blacks themselves and parts of the anti-racist movement risk endorsing the explanatory frameworks and political definitions of the new right’ (Gilroy 1987: 13). Gilroy points to the ‘social movements which have sprung up in different parts of the world as evidence of African dispersal, imperialism and colonialism’ as providing a ‘glocal perspective from the memories of slavery and indenture which are the property of the African diaspora’ (156–7).

Perhaps the most useful way of reading the African American and black British theory mentioned would be in its address of nationalism itself, but from the outside, and in the process its transformation of the very terrain on which ‘the national’ operates as a phenomenon. If, as Gilroy has argued, an effort to understand racism requires a new understanding of class, then, by extension, an effort to understand the conditions of immigrant ethnic minorities equally requires a new understanding of nation.

At any rate a new area was opened up for theory itself within this broad field when in 1964 the Centre for Cultural Studies was started in Birmingham. Interestingly, black cultural theory and politics were not on the
centre's agenda in much of its initial work. The thrust was mainly around culture—the space it occupied on the terrain of a public arena. Ethnography was, however, a key area, anticipating much of what came later to be known as 'ethnic studies', and underpinned the centre's early interest in working-class subcultures. For Cohen (1972) all subcultures correspond to a 'parent' culture, and attempt to work out, express, and resolve, albeit magically, the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture or which are 'inserted' into the subculture by the parent culture. Placed on the realm of the symbolic, the 'parent culture' could discursively extend into both an understanding of the state—in Britain, crucially the Thatcherite state—as well as the numerous communitarian institutions that constitute, as well as oppose, 'state apparatuses'.

Gilroy's There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack (1987) comes out of this tradition, but remains one of the first works to remap the 'parent' symbolic—here the symbolic of racial identity—onto questions of class and nation (in the sense in which British 'patriotic' nationalism crucially depends on mobilizing racial factors), and eventually onto what he calls an 'affirmative' culture of syncretism. This mass upsurge had its component in a 'dimension of diaspora', a 'back to Africa' move, which saw its culmination in the Rastafari, a pan-African, Ethiopianist movement (see Gilroy 1987: 187–92), and inaugurated numerous cultural forms, in dress, music, and the very formation of what Gilroy, quoting Said, calls an 'interpretative community'. Those outside the 'debates encapsulated above (which includes myself) are nevertheless aware of some of the impact made by this entire history onto the cinema: notably, in the first phase, the revaluation of first-generation black filmmakers from Africa (Sembene and Souleymane Cissé) and, later, black cinema's efforts to enter both the mass-cultural mainstream (notably Spike Lee) as well as create an independent sector which nevertheless relates to the cultural repositionings that the later theoretical history took (e.g. Charles Burnett in the United States, the Black Audio, Sankofa, and Ceddo collectives in the United Kingdom).

Conclusion

Although Gilroy's later book The Black Atlantic (1993) has attempted to address the shift in the space occupied by identity politics—the shift towards imaginary constructs, discourse theory, and the broad terrain of constructing Subjects-as-the-Other of deconstructionism—it is clear that several of the areas I have tried to map in this chapter, quite simply, do not talk to each other. A great deal more work still needs to be done before we can clearly identify 'post-colonial theory' and before—in the words of Spivak—'power, desire and interest' can come together to offer large patterns of what has happened and what is likely to happen.

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