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### Unrealized promises: the subject of postcolonial discourse and the new international division of labor

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## The Relative Externality of My Critique: A Postscript

At the beginning of this study, I described my approach to postcolonial theory as an ideologically external but methodologically internal form of critique.<sup>350</sup> However, whether such a separation is possible at all and whether it is not itself indicative of an ideological position, are questions that have emerged once and again in my analyses of the work of other authors. In retrospect, my own approach requires a similar appraisal.

Asserting that my fundamental beliefs do not coincide with those of postcolonial theorists, yet taking postcolonial theory as my central object, I have repeated the “initiation rite” that I criticized in the Introduction. As I observed by way of Young, this is the ceremony by which the newcomer to the field “denounces one or preferably several aspects of the founding father’s text, criticizes the very concept of the postcolonial and then asserts that he or she stands outside it, in a position of critique” (2001: 384).

Moreover, my enactment of that pattern fulfills yet another one, that of cynical reason. Such a pattern, which describes the status of contemporary ideology, is criticized by Sloterdijk and summarized by Žižek as follows:

Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it. (1989: 29)

In recognizing the complicit character of several of the strategies of postcolonial criticism, while deliberately carrying out my analyses on the basis of a “suspension of disbelief” of the instability of their foundational assumptions, I played along according to the rules of such an enlightened false consciousness. In recognizing this pseudo-distancing as cynical yet persisting in it, a *mise-en-abyme* emerges, paralyzing the possibility of a liberating intellectual praxis. This sum of paradoxes might provoke a sense of suffocation, because it points to the threatening possibility that hegemonic political ideology and ontological reality might be perfectly co-extensive. Yet, this possibility may be deemed a fact only if the concepts of interiority and exteriority are taken as absolutes.

Relative points of exteriority do appear when historically changing conditions are taken into account and we examine discourses as responding to grounded interests, thus overlapping,

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<sup>350</sup> For a definition of these two forms of critique, see Marshall 2004: 459. I elaborate on his definition in the Introduction.

coinciding and differing with the reigning ideology in specific ways. If ideology is but a relation with historical reality that co-constitutes it, then history must necessarily be the central referent to understand ideology. Yet, the methodological enclosure that this approach entailed (for, how could I measure ideology against reality when I had no direct access to the latter?) required that, in bringing about that historically situated approach, I committed to a specific methodology and to the limits of its foundational assumptions.

I recurred to cultural analysis as an approach that provided the possibility of articulating ideas and objects across disciplinary and historical distances. More specifically, I engaged with “travelling concepts,” because I experienced that traveling as a process of confrontation that had the effect of constantly foregrounding the cultural and ideological situatedness of the tools that I employed (see Bal 2002). This mode of recognition did not imply that cultural analysis guaranteed a greater degree of impartiality. Actually, I discovered that its stronghold was its capacity to exploit the partiality of my perspective, thus providing a greater degree of (self-)relativization. In other words, I found that greater accuracy emerged from the faculty of “travelling concepts” to trace the trajectory of the concepts I employed in analysis and thus to monitor the role of historiography in the narratives that through them I articulated.

In addition, the *modus operandi* of cultural analysis allowed me to gain a certain distance from the *mise-en-abyme* described above. In taking postcolonial theory as my cultural object of investigation, I could do more than simply insert myself in the ongoing discussion. By employing traveling concepts, I had the possibility to explore the relationship between the constative and the performative, the epistemic and ideological, the literary and the political aspects of the discourses that I analyzed. Furthermore, I was able to articulate detailed close-up readings with panoramic views of the objects in their context. This allowed me to target the false dilemmas between the abstract and the concrete, and between the theoretical and the political; those dilemmas convert questions of political positioning into ontological issues, and preserve the status quo through that displacement. More specifically, I selected two meta-concepts to determine the specific points and modes of divergence and coincidence between the discourses and their hegemonic contexts: the symptom and the fetish.<sup>351</sup>

My choice of these concepts was guided by my object. This study is a discourse analysis and an ideological critique of postcolonialism; a field that is often (treated as) the subset of post-structuralism that deals with (non-Western) particularity. The identification between non-Western

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<sup>351</sup> For the predominant influence on my understanding of these concepts, see Žižek 1989 and 2000.

particularity and particularity itself was one of the central interests targeted here. The concepts of the symptom and the fetish were useful because they describe a relation between the universal and the particular. The symptom is the point of exception at which truth emerges to denote the surrounding context as ideological. Conversely, the fetish is the point of truth that makes bearable our resignation into the generalized lie.

I have described these concepts as “meta-” because I employed them in this study as indicative of the dynamics of an array of other concepts. The fetishes and symptoms that have served as anchors to my analyses are made up of a number of specific rhetorical, ideological and methodological strategies such as metaphors, metonymies, certain acts of citation, linguistic reifications and given uses and abuses of cultural capital. All of these were brought about by the postcolonial theorists of my concern. I explored those strategies as particulars, not only in the sense of approaching them as cases that deviated from a given universality, but also as the internal contradictions that were structurally necessary for the universal to achieve its closure. Therefore, these internal negations mark the internality and externality of the ideology to which they belong at the same time. Such a double function is not merely an abstract, structural quality, but emplaces a historically specific constellation that points to possible exit routes in each particular case.

Taking this account into consideration for the assessment of my own discourse, I must first say that the possibility of falling into a self-referential impasse was centrally determined by what I have experienced as my most challenging methodological choice: to persist in postcolonial theory as my single object of analysis. As a field, postcolonial theory is defined by its object. Hence, like Midas’s hand, everything that this object touches turns into something “postcolonial” as well. In lieu of a comparative analysis between postcolonial theory and another school of thought as the most straightforward way to escape excessive self-referentiality, I turned to the field’s procedural usages and questioned its object-based definition.

Crucially, centering on postcolonial theory as a methodology allowed me to partially transcend the *mise-en-abyme* that characterizes the ideology I have criticized. My persistent focus on a singular field of study, in conjunction with my emphasis on methodology, enabled a more analytical approach than a comparative study would have. By focusing on the *how* of postcolonial theory, as well as on the way in which it linked up with the *who* and the *where* of its enunciation, I was able to determine how certain foundational assumptions and customary procedures, in correlation with given geo-economic locations, defined the positioning of particular discourses and their implications.

The externality of my critique resides largely in this attempt to account for postcolonialism as a collective subject position. As the model underlying the theories and practices of the field, the collective subject position is, as I have explained, the paradigm of postcolonial theory. In approaching particular texts as articulated by such a generalized (yet historically located) subjectivity, which supersedes the individual author, I was able to observe the distance between the texts' presumed potential and their actual effects in context. I am not only referring here to the contradictions between the texts' discursive claims and their performativity, nor only to their technological uses and supports, but also to the distance between simulation and actuality as a systematic device in the preservation of contemporary hegemony. Approaching the field as a collective subject position I was able to observe how the promise of the field articulates with other paradigmatic promises that are widespread today, such as that of statelessness, of democracy, of freedom, of difference, of the blank space.

My focus on the procedural aspects of that field has a further consequence. The critique of the usual identification of postcolonial criticism with the thing seen rather than with a specific way of looking is not something new. Timothy Brennan, for example, has criticized the field's excessive commitment to ontology (2006: 10-17, 95). Yet, precisely because of this repeated, if by no means unjustified, accusation, it is important not to fetishize postcolonial criticism as *the* place of ontology. That would be to repeat the faulty practice by means of which Bhabha (1994), for example, equates "class" with what it designates, disregarding its possibilities as an analytical category (Chapter One). The approach to postcolonial theory as a methodology helps to avoid a parallel foreclosure, making available its conceptual and analytical tools to other fields, as well as opening up a dialogue with those working from other ideological points of departure.

My interest in methodology notwithstanding, the main theme of this study was the subject of postcolonial discourse and its relation to the new international division of labor. Precisely this accent allowed me to moderately overcome the enclosure that a purely formal interest in postcolonial discourse would entail. Taken on its own, my insistent privileging of form over content would run the risk of falling into a structural vacuum, a particularly dangerous fall in the context of the present hegemony. In *The Sublime Object*, Žižek describes that context. He returns to Freud to take one step further Lacan's affirmation that the unconscious is structured like a language. Žižek proposes that the unconscious may be understood as form *qua* form (1989: 11-16; cf. Jameson 1981: 98-99).

In Chapter Two, I reached a conclusion that makes that claim a rather urgent question. I proposed that tools of representation today tend to be foregrounded to the degree that they become invisible, then to be co-opted as a transparent site of enunciation. Similarly, the contemporary emphasis on the formal aspects of language can serve to reintroduce Enlightenment ideals surreptitiously. That was the case with the reification of the claim of transcending historical specificity in the rhetorical trope of metonymy, or the reification of the subject in the signifier. In the context of that pervasive and widespread co-optation of technological mediation, Žižek's assertion that the unconscious may be equated with form exposes the unconscious under the present hegemony as an always already usurped recipient, ready to accept whatever content without altering its basic shape. In sum, *form* is allegedly the residence of the subject's most intimate site of individuality (the unconscious) and, perhaps for that same reason, also the stronghold of a media-prolific hegemony (providing modes of articulation that structure our dreams and shape our imagination). This is why my exploration of (the subject of) postcolonial discourse has taken a central interest in the formal procedures of the latter.

This view of the way in which ideology is embedded in the contemporary subject is also the reason why I turned to historical places of enunciation when seeking to determine how the internal (conscious or unconscious) structures of the subject of postcolonial discourse were shaped. With the analysis of *Mabepari* in Chapter Five, this contextual conditioning of an objectified subject's interiority was taken to its most literal limit. Counter-intuitively, the reliance on context increased, rather than foreclosed, the work's autonomy (see also Morin 2005). In Chapter Four, I explored a correlated paradox, namely how the subject's objectification increases, rather than forecloses, its position as a universal, transparent entity of considerable cultural value.

My approach to the subject of postcolonial discourse as constituted in relation to its surroundings was guided by Adorno's constellational approach, in which "the thing itself is its context, not its pure selfhood" (1983: 162; Chapters One and Five). Similarly, Spivak (1993a) helped me to sustain that the constitution of subjects *qua* subjects is culturally specific (Chapter Three). Yet, crucially, taking my cue from Spivak and from Bal (2002), I have not defined culture as limited to the semiotic register of neither subjects nor objects. In the last three chapters, I held that culture pervades the epistemic, economic, and even the ontological constitution of both objects and subjects. These entities only acquire what I hold to be the cultural attribute *par excellence*, value, when they have been physically and semantically molded into objects – or subjects – within a specific society (see Brown 2001). Hence, this study contends that the capitalist mode of

production, the most widespread form of creating value today, can by no means be excluded from any serious exploration of culture, whether postcolonial or otherwise.

Nonetheless, to imagine the object or subject as a thing that precedes or exceeds historical specificity allows us to suspend our most basic assumptions about it. As Culler argues:

Freeing ourselves from our most pervasive ideology, our conventions of meaning, makes no sense because we are born into a world of meaning ... But even if we could, we should find ourselves amidst a meaningless babble ... What we must do is *imagine* freeing ourselves from the operative conventions so as to see more clearly the conventions themselves. (1973: 481-82; emphasis in text)

Even if, as I speculated at the beginning of this postscript, the possibility that hegemonic political ideology and ontological reality are perfectly co-extensive persists, theory, as a form of imagination, can still provide a relative point of exteriority. Pushing this assertion further, it could even be said that the insertion of this alternative space back into the historical space from which it was abstracted could, when cutting back into it at the right angle, disturb the perfect co-extension between hegemony and reality. This would constitute what Freire (1972) would have termed a liberating intellectual praxis.

Yet, imagination itself is historically informed (Chapter Five; see also van Alphen 2003). Therefore, historical experience is crucial for the constitution of a mode of imagination that provides a relative point of exteriority. In this sense, the new international division of labor (NIDL) effectively functioned as a key analytical category when I tried to understand even some of the most abstract epistemological aspects of the discourses I have discussed. For this reason, it is fair to say that my foregrounding of the new international division of labor was also strategic. As Spivak argues, “[s]trategy works through a persistent (de)constructive critique of the theoretical” (1993c: 3; Chapter Three). In that spirit, I employed the NIDL as an axis that on the one hand historicized or, as Spivak would say, questioned the theoretical objects of my concern “into visibility and specificity” while, on the other hand, it intervened at their discursive level (1993a: 39).

In describing my use of the category as strategic, I refer to the fact that I made use of the new international division of labor as the name to signal what is most invisible in the context of the present hegemony. Yet, the fact that this usage was strategic does not necessarily mean that it denies the reality it names. Quite to the contrary, the usage is aimed at negating the negation of the NIDL’s existence; a negation that naturalizes the current geo-economic order. While I concur with

Žižek and Sloterdijk in that cynicism is the prevalent form of ideology today, I find an exception in the case of the NIDL; perhaps it is even the exception due to which the universal may achieve closure.

The oblivion of the NIDL does not tend to be cynically accepted today because, from certain angles, it is not even seen. Hence, it has not been processed and denied. In historical terms, this is to say that the correlation between economic globality and subjective everyday experience has not been consciously internalized, particularly when the effects of that correlation are beneficial to the beholder. In other words, while shaping the collective subjects positions aggregating around its poles, the formal and forming capacity of the NIDL remains largely obscured. That is why I have based much of my analysis on the contention that a symptomatic reading of culture is still pertinent today and that the NIDL emerges as one such symptom.

My own historical experience in relation to the NIDL marks my approach. I write these concluding remarks removed from what had been my home throughout the completion of this study, at the other side of the NIDL. From this perspective, I see not only how my previous displacements within the Third World provided different angles from which my appreciation of the NIDL was informed, but also how my location in the First World shaped that very recollection of my past. The strategy, from where I now stand, would certainly be different.

Yet, even when I did take up strategy as an effective mode of “(de)constructive critique,” the structural (and my own subjective) continuities across the NIDL enjoyed an overriding place in my approach. Ultimately, I locate my point of relative externality in my methodological choices and corresponding foundational assumptions. These choices constitute the difference between the teleology in which I incur and the teleology that is privileged by the part or aspect of postcolonial discourses that seeks to preserve the status quo by assigning a foundational role to what I have systematically sought to expose as epiphenomenal realities. I locate my point of divergence here because a major consequence of my methodological approach, as well as of the narrative that through it I construct, is the symbolic reintroduction (and, in this sense, the partial negation) of some of the constitutive exclusions of the ideology I targeted.

As what Culler terms “a convention of meaning,” teleology may never be fully avoided, yet it denotes where we assign responsibility and thus point to action. That signaling is a performative in the limited sense of the term. Nonetheless, at times it can be productive to imagine it as a juncture from which theory could engage as a performative in the extended, social sense. Since it can only be from a historical place other than mine that my own constitutive exclusions are negated, the degree

to which my own signaling falls short of its promise is a recognition I have yet to encounter; in time, and in socializing my endeavor.