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Sociology, Eurocentrism and Postcolonial Theory

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Abstract

Postcolonial theory, particularly in its poststructuralist variant, presents important challenges to sociology's self-image, and open debate on these attempts to 'unsettle' the modernist, Westernized disciplines is both conceptually and politically interesting. However, the postcolonial unsettling of sociology has to be actively extracted and reconstructed from the key texts of postcolonial theory – it is not transparently available as such – and this is the first main goal of the article. Particular attention is paid to the framings of these issues by Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and Robert Young. Second, the article offers the elements of a counter-critique, pointing out where the anti-sociological impulses of postcolonialism are exaggerated or unfounded, and also indicating serious internal problems for postcolonial theory when it is pitched as a direct and superior alternative to the modernist sociological 'imaginary'. The continuing centrality (and difficulty) of questions on the nature of and purpose of *explanatory* social theory and postcolonial cultural studies are discussed.

Key words

■ Eurocentrism ■ explanation ■ postcolonial theory ■ sociology

Sociology has been comparatively slow to engage with the growing programme of argument and research in the human sciences around postcoloniality and postcolonialism. Where the journals in some related areas of study, through the 1980s and 1990s, seem to have been showered by 'special issues' on postcolonial theory and politics, few articles on the matter appeared in the mainstream sociology serials (see Mouzelis, 1997; Parker, 1997), while popular textbooks on the sociological classics (e.g. Craib, 1997; Hughes et.al., 1995) barely touch the problem of Eurocentrism/colonialism in the founding figures of sociology. With few exceptions (Lemert, 1993; Seidman, 1994), presentations of modern *sociological theory* are similarly almost devoid of mention of the postcolonial issues that seem so pressing elsewhere.¹ In a previous article in this journal (McLennan, 2000a), I examined one version of the postcolonialist argument that sociology is intrinsically *Eurocentric*, by looking at the definitions of the latter by 'world systems'

theorists, and showing how, in the case of the way in which the 'rise of the West' theme is handled by prominent historical sociologists, the picture was considerably more complex than simple accusations of Eurocentrism convey. The present contribution extends the pattern of this assessment, first, by showing in some detail how the importantly different strand of *poststructuralist* postcolonial theory seeks to 'disrupt' typically sociological forms of reasoning, and then offering a counter-critique.

Initially, it is important to identify the full charge of the postcolonial challenge to the academic discipline of sociology,² and to participate in the therapeutic disturbance that such basic awareness generates. If sociological interests, findings and categories have always been in some significant sense 'Western' in character, it has become impossible today to dissociate this once-neutral characterization from more negative connotations of imperialist bias and modernist defensiveness. Stuart Hall has couched such defensiveness as a 'powerful unconscious investment', to the point where the postcolonial counts as a veritable 'signifier of danger' for those in the conventional disciplines (Hall, 1996: 242). The latter charge summons up the conservative 'interests' of academic sociology as an ordering and classifying enterprise, a discourse born into the world uncomfortable with the upheavals of the early nineteenth century, and quickly apprenticed in the craft of scientifically and politically mastering the social structures and problems of modern urban life in the West. Put that way, social and intellectual unrest are not generally to sociology's liking, and the bearers of any strenuously unsettling impulse could fittingly be regarded as representing some kind of 'threat' to the developed inclinations of many modern sociologists, notwithstanding the interlude of between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, in which rather different images of insurgency and 'presentism' prevailed.

These characterizations help account for sociology's relative tardiness in coming to terms with such movements as postmodernism and postcolonialism, but they are rather sweeping and psychologistic, and we may consequently wish to put a more *methodological* gloss on sociology's habitual guardedness in the face of the ostensibly new. W.G. Runciman (1983), for example, has developed a fertile distinction between the analytical elements of reportage, explanation, description and evaluation in any project of social enquiry. Deploying this, we might say that sociology could be seen as being especially concerned with the *explanatory* aspect. Since explanation typically involves rigorous retrospective reasoning, sociology could perhaps hardly be expected to arrive at its conclusions except circumspectly and 'after the event'. Meanwhile, other genres (postcolonial cultural studies, perhaps), being notably more *descriptive/evaluative*, could be expected to launch sharper and riskier impressions of contemporary happenings. There is something to this, in my view, but this only exacerbates the problem that sociologists cannot *take a lead* on questions of postcolonialism just by defending the integrity of its major thinkers or by articulating better its methodological distinctiveness. Accordingly, sociologists could seek more actively to feel the force of the charge that the Western 'disciplines' emerged to address the question of 'the social order' through the lens of the particular social order of the Western European capitalist nations.

A further step forward would be for sociologists to embrace postcolonialism as the most interesting, and possibly most lasting, rendering of *postmodernity*. Some writers (e.g. Craib, 1997: 5) are inclined to dismiss postcolonial criticisms of sociology on the grounds that, being essentially equivalent to postmodernism, and postmodernism being contradictory in requiring a grand meta-narrative of its own with which to denounce the meta-narratives of modernism, critiques of sociology's Eurocentrism cannot proceed. No doubt this assertion of equivalence, together with an ingrained suspicion of postmodernism itself, further explains sociology's reluctance to confront postcolonialism head-on. Some postcolonialists, by contrast, take quite the opposite view, insisting that postmodernism is but the latest form of self-privileged Eurocentric theory, obsessed with the dilemmas of epistemologically challenged metropolitans.³ In my view, neither of these positions – that postcolonialism is *equivalent* to postmodernism, or that they are fundamentally *antithetical* to one another – is correct. We need to say, along with the subtler sociological analysts, that postmodern pluralism, ambivalence, and de-centredness in some major sense encapsulate 'the erosion of the global structure of domination upon which the self-confidence of the West and its spokesmen has been built' (Bauman, 1992: 96; see also Smart, 1993: 150).

However, I will argue that such accommodation of sociology to postcolonial theory, in its postmodernist variant, should only be taken so far. For one thing, the field of postcolonial studies is increasingly reported as having reached something of an 'impasse'.⁴ One dimension of this standstill concerns postcolonial theory's prevailing 'textualism', its tendency to evade the constraints of 'structural' investigation into the divisions of labour of our times (Hall, 1996: 257). In that context, a certain 'classical' sociological dimension finds expression in the way that some writers refuse to accept 'the repudiation of foundations and objective validity' on the part of more committed deconstructionist postcolonials (San Juan, 1998: 8), and in the revival of Marxist notions of totality and universality for contemporary global analysis (Lazarus, 1999: 29). These notes are also, though more guardedly, struck in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), the undisciplined convolutions of which seem otherwise to confirm rather than relieve the troubles within postcolonial thought.

With those points in mind, it is useful to reconstruct and critically appraise the way in which sociology's ostensible Eurocentrism surfaces in key formulations of the postcolonial problematic in the work of Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Robert Young. Sociology is seldom referred to explicitly or at length in these statements, but overall the logic is damning: sociology, unlike postcolonial theory, is assumed to be constitutively Eurocentric, because of the structural(ist) and rational(ist) lenses through which its knowledge is characteristically focused. The whole idea of a postcolonial sociology, in that case, would be a contradiction in terms.

Postcolonial Theory: Off Limits

Stuart Hall has attempted to give coherence to the notion of postcolonialism, suggesting that although the field is far from homogeneous, there is something

both substantial and novel that is common to those working within it (Hall, 1996: 245). However, Hall's ecumenical gesture soon takes on a more stringent character, for he designates the *differentia specifica* of postcolonialism as an engagement in the process of 'thinking at the limit'. Postcolonialism could, of course, be defined in more orthodox ways: as a Third World or anti-imperialist political movement, or as a stage in the historical struggle/process. But while Hall is sympathetic to those who sustain these activist and historicist senses, they have not caught the cutting edge of the phenomenon. The first, for example, encourages a self-definition which merely inverts, and therefore reaffirms, the dominance of the category of First World, while the second, even though it announces the potential for genuinely *new* social and cultural formations, still represents a variation on a familiar stageist conception of history. But for Hall, these 'reversals' of dominant political discourses do not quite reflect what is excitingly different about postcolonialism, namely, the prospect of a complete change of *frame of reference* for theory and politics, at the highest level of abstraction. Instead of envisaging the 'posts' – postcolonialism, postmodernism, and so on – as simply introducing new elements along familiar conceptual chains of meaning, we should see them instead as profoundly interrogating or undermining the norms of 'centrist', European-forged thinking.

In particular, radical postcolonialism should be envisaged as interrupting the 'false and disabling distinction' between colonialism as a system of *rule* on the one hand, and as a system of knowledge or *representation* on the other (Hall, 1996: 254). That enables an interesting and rigorous extension of the scope of the postcolonial phenomenon from the demise of the geo-political empires, to the hybridization of cultural life within the metropolitan centres themselves, to creative disaffiliation from the dominant, almost unspoken mainstream structures of cultural thought (pp. 246–8). This latter target of postcolonial criticism is what others arrestingly call 'the invisible Empire' (Sayidd, 1997: 129) and 'the Empire within' (Young, 1991: 175). 'Thinking at the limit', then, in postcolonial style, involves not only, perhaps not even, offering a *different* version of politics and social thought, but rather a by-passing or 'bracketing off' of conventional representational, linear, and necessitarian modes of understanding. The point of critique is not to produce another, better representational account of 'our' problematic history, but to incite a proliferation of histories.

Occasionally, sociology gets noted in the ecumenical postcolonial literature as a useful resource for counteracting the *literariness* of much current work.⁵ Under the strong form of postcolonial critique, however, it is doubtful whether any such legitimacy could be conferred on sociology, seen as a form of understanding and explanation. In major part a representational discourse, staking claims for descriptive accuracy and universal cognitive gain, sociology might be thought definitively to exhibit the kind of 'scientific and aesthetic disciplining of nature through classificatory schemas' which embodies the 'imperialist ordering of the globe under a panoptical regime' (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 100). Sociology, in this formulation, could only be part of the *problem* for postcolonialism, not part of the solution. Ultimately, Hall for his part hedges the issue as to whether the

ideas of postcolonialism as defined are to be entirely endorsed, or whether they are to be seen mainly as creatively unnerving. But the radical path is clearly attractive, if only because of the frequent swings of opinion noticeable among less adventurous postcolonialists, often producing unsatisfactory conceptual entanglements. Some try to argue, for example, that while the anti-universalist, postmodernist sort of postcolonialism is wholly suspect, the goal is still to achieve 'an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images' (During, 1995: 125). Others, believing uncompromisingly that Western colonialist thinking and 'ethnocentric essentialism' remain firmly lodged within the 'bad epistemic habit' of academic theory, history and film (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 10), nevertheless balk at the threshold of discursive postcolonialism, for fear of the depoliticization that might follow with an abandonment of all forms of left universalism (Shohat, 1996).⁶ These combinations, though, seem highly contradictory, awkwardly caught on either side of the 'limit' rather than moving boldly off limits. Couze Venn, for example, still seems to think it is possible to uphold an account of the specificity of modernity as being 'bound up with the history of colonialism and capitalism' while at the same time roundly rejecting arguments deriving from 'the claims of structural relations' (Venn, 2000: 2). What, then, does the poststructuralist–postcolonial critique involve, exactly, and what are its ultimate implications for the discourse of sociology?

Translating Bhabha

The work of Homi Bhabha, generally neglected by sociologists, has been central to recent debates within and about postcolonialist theory. One problem is the rather opaque and elliptical quality of his keynote collection, *The Location of Culture* (1994), which consequently requires a relatively free translation in order to connect to problems of sociology and disciplinarity. As it happens, the discursive politics of *cultural translation*, and the problematic status of intellectual transparency in discourses such as sociology, are pivotal to the way in which Bhabha casts his version of postcolonial theory. His starting point is to accept, along with other postcolonialists, the pervasive and oppressive history of Western colonialist politics and culture. However, Bhabha refuses to picture the subjective and imaginary relations between colonizer and colonized as a simple, undialectical one in which the rule and mind-set of the one either wholly reconstructs that of the other in its own image, or by contrast unleashes a 'pure' form of resistance and oppositional consciousness. Rather, there is constant intellectual, political and psychic negotiation happening between the colonizing and colonized subject positions, so that variable hybrid moods, conditions and products emerge over time. Today, that initial hybridity has been intensified by a greater presence of migrant peoples within the West itself, and marginal groups engage in new processes of cultural hybridization, as colonizer and colonized identities repeatedly clash and mix, shaping unstable – but always different – postcolonial interpretations.

For Bhabha, neither in the past nor in the present can social/psychic being be regarded as exemplifying the kind of subjective certitude which is governed by crass binary categories: colonizer/colonized, white/black, West/East, home/foreign, inside/outside, self/other, and so on. Cultural and imaginative life constantly traffics ambivalently *between* these poles, and transgressively *across* those borders, with no particular practice or understanding forever fixed in a given location. All the time, cultural translations of ideas, images and practices from one register and mode of being to the next are taking place. Even the dominant colonizing consciousness, which aspires to emit self-images of mastery and to construct regimes of hierarchical certainty, does so only in the enabling rhetorical presence of the 'Other' – that which is figured as colonized, weak, and silenced – but also, importantly, feared, forbidden and threatening. And so it is, we can surmise, with dominant Eurocentric *theories*. In the Western academic tradition, schemes of cognitive penetration are construed as gloriously independent, translucent and consensual, but their sense and power are made possible, we should see, only by means of a prior murky process of negotiation with, and separation from, other suppressed/forbidden currents.

These strands of thought are quite evidently connected to postmodernist thought, and also to earlier styles of phenomenological philosophizing. It is worth repeating then that for Bhabha the definitive 'unhomeliness' of the unsettled modern consciousness is *not* a matter of 'Man's' ontological alienation as such (1994: 9), any more than the 'master–slave' dialectic that plays such a large part in European thought is an arbitrary exemplification of the workings of power as such (Young, 1991: 5). No, these topoi are extrapolations from the specific psychic ambivalence generated by and through *colonialism*. Bhabha is thus comfortable with postmodernism, but only insofar as there is a 're-naming of the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial' (Bhabha, 1994: 175). The impact of this formulation can be seen in two important segments of discussion in Bhabha. The first is his notion of the 'time-lag' as something which disrupts the representational coding of Western social theory (pp. 171, 238). As I read it, the idea is this: even if it is increasingly accepted that the social history of modernity has been a specifically colonial history, 'postcolonial' sentiments cannot then just be re-inserted into accounts of 'the rise of the West' or the 'making of nations' or 'the class struggle' and so forth. Nor can we readily re-periodize and re-name the object of enquiry to fit our revised inclinations. This *postcolonial* interruption, unalterably, has come 'after' the substantive and epistemological framings of pre-postcolonial understanding, and it points 'beyond' the shared cultural reference points that have given life to the received histories until now. Past and present time, then, is now *out of joint*, there is a 'lag' which cannot be made up, and a corresponding visceral and cognitive 'lack' in the very mode of historical apprehension of historicity for which there is no adequate substitute or relief. That is why Bhabha says, with his Fanon, that the struggle against colonial oppression not only changes the direction of Western history, 'but challenges its historicist idea of time as a progressive, ordered whole' (p. 41). And again: 'The cultural inheritance of slavery or colonialism is brought

before modernity not to resolve its historic differences into a new totality' (p. 241).

A second way in which postcolonialism makes a difference to postmodernism lies in Bhabha's casting of the now familiar point that Western thought is oppressive in its universalizing aspirations, its habitual search for a *totality*, for a rational summary of the *common* structures which govern all social thought and action. In postcolonial light, however, this need to speak for human society as a whole is a desire and demand typically located within *cultural majorities*. From the point of view of cultural *minorities*, such totalization has no intrinsic merit and fulfils no social need of theirs. Why, then, should minority or hybrid subjectivities, which we might assume as increasing in cultural presence today, have any deep-rooted cultural or cognitive interest in sustaining this kind of universalist intellectual theme? The aim is thus to 'rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization' and not only from the angle of more general postmodern scepticism (p. 162).

The Dislocation of Sociology

These reflections of Bhabha's have decisively negative effects for three sorts of sociological consciousness. One is the kind of 'oppositional' postcoloniality which advocates liberation from colonial and other oppression, sees the distorted forms of Eurocentrism as Western capitalist ideology, and wishes to radicalize the progressive parts of Eurocentric universalism. There is manifestly a sociology at work in these social and intellectual alternatives to the dominant system, whereby a basic international relation of exploitation between classes generates socio-economic interests, which in turn overdetermine many of the specificities of cultural life and consciousness. This perspective also assumes a thoroughgoing top-down process of social control, whereby the cultural 'translation' process that is going on in neo-colonialist *institutions* is far from significantly 'negotiated' or truly 'hybridized'. But for Bhabha this kind of 'sociology of underdevelopment' continues to reveal a searching desire to locate a pure politics of Otherness, or even 'nativism', involving the kind of 'unitary representation of a political agency or fixed hierarchy of values and effects' that are now thought to be deeply in trouble (1994: 28, 173). Critics of Bhabha (e.g. Ahmad, 1997) understandably find it by turns deliciously and infuriatingly ironic that Bhabha should see the consequent embrace of 'aporia, ambivalence and indeterminacy' (1994: 173) as postcolonially 'radical', when for them it is the clear sign of a retreat from genuinely radical politics into liberal angst. More sympathetic readers may want to note that Bhabha is equally concerned to problematize any form of sociological liberal pluralism.

This is the notion that the cognitive space of sociology and the political culture of liberal democracy can both *recognize* and *represent* cultural difference. As political life in the Western nations becomes more complex, the liberal argument goes, the empirical map of its constituent ethno-cultural groups will need to be

carefully drawn up so as to ensure that the various interests gain a voice, and that our institutions reflect that. But for Bhabha, this is a recognition of cultural *diversity* within the conventional totalizing, knowing frame of Western rationality. It is not an appreciation of serious cultural *difference* (1994: 35–6). The latter, he argues, is a matter of living with the ‘insurmountable ambivalence’ which accompanies the question of ‘knowing’ other cultures within the framework of still-dominant host culture (pp. 154–7). There is no single representative space within pluralist political culture in which all the multicultural subject positions can be ‘equally’ voiced, because that idea of a *single*, if conflictual, space is precisely the hallmark of just one cultural tradition – that of Western liberalism itself. Against the sway of the multiculturalism or pluralism which conceives of cultural and political discourse as ‘mirroring’ the multicultural complexity which exists in the society, Bhabha thinks that while each specific cultural voice ‘adds to’ the dense fabric of cultural and political exchange, there is no (diverse) totality that ‘adds up’ (p. 163)

Within ‘multicultural’ sociology, there is clearly a version of this problem at work. But there is a general meta-theoretical parallel too. We routinely say to students, for example, that the social structure that sociology studies can be conceived as a series of divisions, identities and perspectives – of class, race, and gender classically, but also age, sexuality, dis/ability, and so on. However, none of these posited agencies and perspectives, when taken on the full, ‘add up’ exactly, because each, in order to make its distinctive impact and sense, declares a kind of priority of vision and politics which inevitably *weakens* the strength of the other ‘factors’. In other words, how can a coherent sense of a structured totality be involved here, as long as each of these ‘dimensions’ and causalities is treated as *equally* part of the (multifactorial) sociological picture?⁷

And who is the reader/student/expert who is positioned in these pluralist modes of address? Ellen Rooney (1989) has interestingly analysed the workings of pluralistic literary criticism in terms of its assumed culture of ‘reasonableness’. We both recognize (perhaps even celebrate) differences of being and interpretation, but ultimately over-ride these in favour of common understanding of what is at stake in such profound disagreements. We agree to differ, reasonably, then go on to articulate and press our separate passionate commitments, some of which will be thoroughly incommensurable with others. Rooney – and Bhabha says something similar (1994: 175) – finds a violent inappropriateness lurking within this form of academic-liberal ‘seduction’.

Once again, we can readily envisage a sociological version of this problem, exemplified by W.G. Runciman’s argument that while there is, naturally, considerable scope for value-laden assessment in social theory, disagreements that are likely to be unresolvable occur within the discursive dimensions of ‘description’ and ‘evaluation’. When it comes to ‘reportage’ and ‘explanation’, however, there is much less room for impressionistic evocation; rather, arguments in these crucial dimensions must be of the sort that command the rational and considered assent of all ‘theorists of rival schools’ (Runciman, 1983: 195–6). Now Runciman has little time for the popular post-positivist mantra that theoretical

disagreements, being the products of particular socio-cultural commitments, run 'all the way down' – from assumptions to explanations to the 'facts' of reportage. His belief is that the 'soundness' of well-founded depictions and arguments outstrips the ideological and socio-cultural background of the beholder and advocate alike. In that case, the merit of his own meta-level argument about the cut-off point for value-ladenness should also be seen as being quite unaffected by the fact that he is a senior aged man, a practising capitalist, and a social democratic ameliorist, and unaffected too by his recognition that his magnum opus, the *Treatise on Social Theory*, could have been produced within no other cultural frame than that of the 'Western European intellectual tradition' (Runciman, 1989: 15; 1983: 52). But the extension of the Rooney-Bhabha point would be that this assertion merely begs the question, for the appeal to considered disinterestedness is *precisely* what would strike *just* such a person as being beyond 'reasonable' dispute. Under postcolonial values, one could go even further and insist that it is no longer the assertion of *substantively* 'Westernist' propositions about culture and politics that today constitutes the most pervasive expression of Eurocentrism. Rather, it is this tenacious attempt to rescue the talisman of rational consensus, at a time when liberal rationalism is being seriously challenged (Sayyid, 1997: 128).

The third critique of sociology implicit within Bhabha's writings follows from, and encapsulates, all this in the recommendation that a very different *style of theorizing* is now presaged. Instead of the 'traditional sociological alignment' between self and society, whereby the interests and positions of individuals are comprehensible in terms of a 'background of social and historical facts' (Bhabha, 1994: 42), the life of the self must be re-figured in terms of image, fantasy and disjunction. Instead of the 'paradigm of social action' that dominates sociology, we must seek 'a more affective and iterative' register (p. 193). Instead of the 'sententious and exegetical mode' in which writers such as Runciman both distinguish and entrap themselves, we need to 'catch' the forms of spatio-temporal being which lie 'outside the sentence', moving from a paradigm of 'knowledge *that*' to one in which the modes of justification and explanation are inextricably mixed up (pp. 181–3, 127).⁸ Instead of seeing culture as an object of social enquiry, even one which is subject to radically different interpretations, we need to reject the idea of a representational frame in which these different accounts are convened at a 'safe' distance from the 'phenomena' themselves. Indeed, we need to develop a symbolic vision which treats the cultural not as an epistemological object *at all*, but rather as an 'enunciatory site' in which meanings are creative, not mimetic, in character (pp. 36, 177–8). Now, if, accordingly, the 'place of the theoretical' cannot be as a 'metanarrative claiming a more total form of generality', and if we need to see theory instead as itself an act of cultural *performance*, one which necessarily 'deforms' as it apprehends, then it seems as though the reconceptualizing of theory that Bhabha is engaged in must be a movement 'beyond theory'.⁹ This style of theory thus promotes the 'development of unmeaning' as a way of progressing 'beyond modernity and its sociology' (pp. 239, 255).

The Ambivalence Within

Bhabha's work has provoked a number of critical reactions, the most informal of which has been a frustration with its obscurity and pretentiousness. No doubt some sociologists will share this impression, concerned to quickly disqualify 'discursive' postcolonialism as either over-inflated or hopelessly opaque. Certainly, Bhabha's arguments are couched in a form that makes them hard to confirm or refute, and sometimes they are indeed strikingly overblown, as in the High Street new-ageism of signature phrases like 'the Third Space', or when pronouncing portentously that the path of enlightenment lies in 'neither the one nor the Other but something else besides' (Bhabha, 1994: 28, 39). Unfortunately, such wordy vacuity can now frequently be encountered within discursive postcolonialism, as when Bobby Sayyid, for example, tells us – with an air of explanatory depth – that 'What is extraordinary about Islam is that, although it can be used to articulate so many divergent positions, it maintains its specificity – it remains "Islam"' (1997: 44).

However, Bhabha's 'difficulty' per se is not an insuperable problem, as I hope my own interpretative summaries have shown, and in any case, there is an intellectual consistency in his position that demands respect. He is not 'doing theory' in the normal sense, and it is important for him to make 'us' feel uncomfortable with rationalist and representationalist forms of argument. Not all writers need to seek to 'convey' their truths in the conventional way, and Bhabha firmly believes that a more performative stylistics within cultural theory is necessary and beneficial. You may disagree, but his intention is coherent and interesting, it seems to me. Similarly, the complaint that he is minimizing his critical audience, or failing to convince us by virtue of his cryptic style alone, involves exactly the sort of assumption about the 'availability' of a culturally transparent, fair-minded and consensualist reader that he is unhappy with, and for intriguing reasons.

Other common criticisms target the pseudo-radicalism of Bhabha's work, and I have already touched on this. The line is basically that such a position could only be developed by a *declass *, re-centred and ex-marginal social stratum, posturing towards a radical stance, but in effect leading us down a profoundly apolitical cul-de-sac. This is the viewpoint of some 'universalist' postcolonialists who feel that Bhabha has lost all materialist explanatory bearings and any serious anti-imperialist politics. This is also, as indicated before, a strongly *sociological* critique, in its account of the world in which such a view becomes influential, and as a way of explaining bourgeois ideological frameworks in general. The politics of this kind of issue is an important facet, and one that is thoroughly debated on the circuit of postcolonial studies. Adjusting those themes to this article results in significant paradoxes emerging for Bhabha's contribution. On the one hand, he might want to refute (as many sociologists would) the *reductionism* involved in the leftist portrayal of 'his' stratum. After all, there are many intellectuals – say, from South Asia – at work in Western institutions, and many of them remain convinced universalists, not deconstructionists. More broadly phrased, the sociological characterization of the intellectual subculture might well

be informative in its way, but the intellectual potency of the positions generated within that formation is another matter altogether.

But the problem with this riposte is that at some level it still demands assent to sociological and rationalist norms. The last argument touted, for example, is a variant on the classical philosopher's (and Runciman's) gambit against sociological reductionisms of all kinds: that the content and value of ideas are largely *independent* of the social location of those who produce them. And yet, as we saw at the very beginning of my exposition of Bhabha's perspective, he *requires*, and can in no way obliterate, a background sociological account of the ways in which contemporary hybridity as a major new cultural force has come to take on such urgent and disturbing significance within and 'beyond' the intellectual discourses of the West. Just as postcolonial assaults on the notion of historical truth and representation tend to reveal, beneath the headline sensations, a minimal commitment to 'mundane' realism and 'conventional historiographical consideration' (Schwarz, 1996: 21, 26), so postcolonialism relies upon a baseline sociology of cultural movements. If new energies and forms of social interaction are happening, these emerging formations must be carefully, mundanely, 'tracked'. And indeed, when they are carefully tracked and opened up for further debate, assertions about both the *prevalence* or ruptural *significance* of hybrid consciousness might have to be seriously qualified (see Werbner and Modood, 1997).¹⁰ It would be simply foolish for postcolonialists to insinuate that such tracking and revising was illegitimate due to its reliance on discredited 'representationalism'.

Similar factors come into play in any assessment of the anti-universalism involved in radical postcoloniality. As we saw, *explanatory* universalism is considered severely limiting, and other liminal and affective sources are felt to be at work 'underneath' the narrowly cognitivist framings. The watchword might be: rather than look for the truth *within* sociological totalizations, let us consider the truth *about* them. For Bhabha as for others, the suggestion is that it is in the ambitions of colonial *desire* and the workings of psychic ambivalence that the most revealing reference point is to be discovered, or perhaps 'enunciated'. Some specify these forces of 'other-desiring' in Lacanian–Derridean terms, such that Western 'logocentrism' is thought to express a repressive 'disavowal' of loss, lack and split in the subject, falsely arresting a primal instability of the self (Venn, 1996, Sayyid, 1997: 42). But the problem here – reflected in the embarrassingly unreserved language used – is that these reference points act as new *foundationalist* gestures, signalling a more inclusive truth, and a different but still compulsive *explanatory* solution. The surface of Western cognitivism is penetrated, and deeper mechanisms are then discovered doing the real work underneath. Clearly, this is as universalist, cognitivist, conventional, and potentially reductionist, as you like.

The ethics of intellectual exchange become interesting and sensitive at this juncture. In one sense, the discourse works to present postcolonial theorists as occupying a superior moral and subjective state: *they* can see, but the blinded representationalist cannot, that when postcolonial questions are asked, the 'demons are released' and the play of colonial desire across power and knowledge

is revealed when 'thinking at the limit' is on the agenda (Hall, 1996: 259). Yet at the same time, the new explanatory hinterland is potentially embracing of *all* subject positions, for how could postcolonial subjectivity be exempted from the terms of critical assessment without 'essentialism' being reintroduced – possibly with a vengeance?¹¹ It can, then, legitimately be asked of the postcolonial theorist's subjectivity *itself*: what is the play of power and knowledge, the desiring and demonizing, that is going on *here*? Some might argue that such a '*tu quoque*' manoeuvre is improper, because postcolonial theory cannot be practised, or even understood, by people who do not share in the subjectivity of exile or diaspora (Moore-Gilbert et al., 1997: 5). That indeed is a challenging thought, and one worthy of the fullest political and existential consideration; but such elaboration has *not* been forthcoming in the discursive postcolonial project, because its residual element of explanatory as well as political universalism will not permit such exclusiveness.

These complications need to be underlined. If *explanatory* universalism persists in the postcolonial project, then contrary to the rhetoric of wholesale intellectual disruption, some of the background norms of liberal discourse – the striving for rational consensus, the ideal of an inclusive totality, minimal representationalism – cannot, after all, be dispensed with. The same applies to the question of *political* universalism: in spite of strongly anti-humanist rhetoric, the background assumption of all postcolonialisms must surely be that if there is a problem with Eurocentrism, this is because of the latter's contribution to racism and exploitation, and that these are intrinsically and generally bad things. The adoption of a postcolonial framework, it follows, signals an aspiration to political and moral Progress.¹²

Bhabha's work, and postcolonial theory generally, highlight the importance of states of ambivalence and hybridity, but by this stage in our assessment we must wonder whether persistent ambivalence *in the theory itself* is an ultimately positive feature. Take the idea that, in the words Anthony Kwame Appiah, postcolonialism is about the 'manufacture of *alterity*' (cited in Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 6, emphasis added). This implies a root-and-branch alternative vision, an ontology and politics that are incommensurable with the political and intellectual mainstream, the kind of wholly fresh pathway that is intimated by Bhabha's references to the Third Space and to the production of a 'counter-modernity' (1994: 241). Yet in other renderings, alterity cannot possibly be a matter of total contrast. Counter-modernity, it seems, is a matter of living 'otherwise' than modernity but not *outside it* as such (p. 18). And if we do encounter 'insurmountable ambivalence' at every turn, then we would be wise not to put our trust in *any* declaration of cultural certainty. In this regard, Bhabha has strongly questioned the aspiration to political and cultural Otherhood in the postcolonial understanding, and is clearly in favour of some kind of cosmopolitan multiculturalism.

Chetan Bhatt has probed this dilemma further, showing that in spite of its rhetorical anti-Eurocentrism/anti-rationalism, the terms and categories of Bhabha's discourse parallel those of long-standing currents within European philosophy. For example, the pitching of the One against the Other, in order to come

out with something new and Different Again, stands as the briefest tracing of the Hegelian dialectic. And if, for lack and fear of rational certitude, we feel it necessary to gesture towards the energetic existence, or sublimity, or ineffability of that which lies *beyond* the fixity of knowledge, then that might serve as a thumbnail sketch of the Kantian system itself (Bhatt, 1997: 13–14).

The Young Hegel

The single-minded effort of another postcolonial theorist, Robert Young, to demolish the entire Marxist and modernist tradition in social theory comes to grief by way of a related philosophical parallel. Young believes that Marxism's 'collusive Eurocentrism' stems from its Hegelian foundations, in that Hegel's imperialist dialectic involves a coercive metaphysical 'appropriation of the other' on the part of the knowing subject (Young, 1991: 3, 83). Hegel, as rendered by Young, constantly sought to 'escape' rather than fully 'recognize' the intractability of the stubborn *tensions* which exist between the constitutive poles of the knowledge relation: subject/object, general/particular, self/other. Foucault, by stark contrast to Hegel and all his neo-Marxist progeny, *did* recognize such intractability, and is therefore deemed by Young to be superior as a philosophical resource for postcolonialism.

But this argument is doubly misguided (quite apart from any exegetical dispute about the extent to which Marxism *is* really Hegelian). First, Young's presentation of Hegel is highly idiosyncratic. The whole point of Hegel's effort, in explicit counterpoint to the intractable 'antinomies' which Kantian thought was locked into, was to lodge within the very *identity* of each antinomial pole of consciousness its tense but indispensable relation with the other, opposite pole. Hegel's Reason, in unshrinkingly *recognizing* rather than seeking to *escape* the tensions entailed by identity-in-difference, is thus able to claim that a new level of understanding has been reached (see Berthold-Bond, 1989). Arguably too, Hegel felt that the limitations of static presentations of the antinomies of knowledge and experience were due to the adoption of a narrowly *epistemological* framework. But the second unimpressive aspect of Young's argument from original sin now becomes clear, because Young has marked the theoretical advantage of Foucault in precisely Hegelian terms. Indeed, Young places the assessment of Foucault himself within a sequence of theorists running from Althusser to Bhabha, each of which is judged by Young according to the extent to which they exhibit this quasi-Hegelian realization (and therefore partial transcendence) of contradiction–intractability.¹³

In a sense, it is rather depressing that the question of postcolonialism should have come down to this kind of philosophical concept-mongering, for the current of thought taken as a whole does offer exciting new points of departure for sociological cultural studies. Certainly, the thoughts of postcolonial theorists on matters of knowledge and being, portentous and authoritative though they seem, are not in the end particularly new or original. Nor are they absent in the texts

of more conventional discourses. Within sociological theory, for example, at just such a quasi-philosophical level of abstraction, there is a range of conceptualizations of the binaries of thought and experience. For some sociologists, we cannot think about social life coherently without *dualistic* categories first being installed – the distinction between subjective and objective, structure and agency, culture and material life, and so on. A different stance is taken by those who think it both possible and desirable seamlessly to weave these polarities into mutually constitutive '*dualities*', thus overcoming the stasis bequeathed by traditional antinomial vocabularies. A third type of sociological generalist casts an ironic glance across the sociological scene in which debates like this take place, reflecting on how it almost always turns out that theorists who one day are to be found announcing a brand-new, fluid, anti-binary synthesis/transcendence of familiar debilitating dualisms, the next day are discovered to have been covertly backing *one* of the familiar sides of the relevant binary distinction over its 'other'. Nothing in the literature of postcolonial theory convinces me that these debates on binary classification are uniquely modernist, and no postcolonial theorization (or performance) has yet emerged which decisively manages to bypass them.

Conclusion

I have argued that the form and content of postcolonial theory are indeed troubling for modernist discourses like sociology, and that this unsettling effect should be met with interest and self-scrutiny rather than irritated defensiveness. At the same time, I have insisted that sociology has resources with which to reformulate these concerns in an unthreatening way, and that some of the general conceptual strategies at work within postcolonialism cannot be sustained without generating serious internal contradictions. In making this assessment, what emerges with particular force, is that the whole question of the purpose and structure of *theory/analytical categories* in the critical human sciences, for all its rehearsals over the generations, remains a difficult one. It is often hinted, for example, that, unlike staid and reductionist sociology, postcolonial cultural studies, by highlighting performativity and liminality rather than structural positioning and rationalist assessment, offers a wider canvas and a more inclusive sense of the richness of social experience than sociology.

But really, this is just the latest form of the old complaint that the grey paint of theory fails to do justice to the green fields of life. Its *superficiality* lies in thinking that it is possible for *any* distinctive *analytical* discourse – and in spite of its 'energetic' terminology, postcolonialism *is* one of these – fully to 'capture' the raw edge of life as it is actually felt and lived. Constitutively, all theories and categories 'reduce' experience to their own conceptual priorities, and rigorously exclude rival theories/categories which counteract those central abstract foci. Postcolonialism is no different in that regard, and indeed poststructuralist postcolonialists might be expected to be wariest than most of the implicit naive realism which lies behind the gripe that sociology misses out on much of what is 'really'

interesting. The *contradictoriness* of the accusation that sociology is no longer (if it ever was) 'adequate' to the nature of the social is that it sets up an almost unattainably *totalizing* image of what should constitute 'adequate' theory, such that its proponents are likely to be still disappointed beyond the initial attraction to postcolonial theory. Notwithstanding notable differences of emphasis, tradition and political resonance between sociology and postcolonial cultural studies, then, there is an extensive interface and overlap between them.¹⁴ One part of this overlap concerns the continuing necessity of 'sociology' in the generic, if not necessarily disciplinary, sense: an elementary and plausible sociology of current trends and developments, and some kind of articulation of 'the logic of the social' (cf. McLennan, 2000b). Another dimension of the interface is that lucidity and consensus about the exact nature and purpose of explanatory, descriptive and normative categories within and across these connected fields remains elusive but vital.

Notes

- 1 See Maynard (1989), Craib (1992), Layder (1994), Scott (1995), Stones (1996), Ritzer (1996), May (1996) and Layder (1997). Promisingly, the new generation of globally conscious *introductory* sociology textbooks, such as Macionis and Plummer (1998: 122–3) and Spybey (1997: 71, 89ff.), feel a greater obligation to deal in some way with both sociology's Eurocentric past and the prospect of a postcolonial future. One assumes that this trend will continue, but the point here is that it has been late to start up.
- 2 It is, of course, something of a moot point as to whether 'disciplinary' sociology can be definitively separated from the more general discourse of 'social theory'. But the article proceeds on the basis that this demarcation remains viable in some respects, and that those who see themselves – at least in *British* circles – as primarily sociologists tend to be more sceptical about the value of postcolonialist articulations than self-declared social theorists.
- 3 See During (1995), Williams and Chrisman (1993: 13), Ashcroft et al. (1995: 2), Rattansi (1997: 494) and Ahmad (1997: 365).
- 4 For example, Slemon (1994: 29), Young (1995: 163), Moore-Gilbert (1997: 186).
- 5 For example, Mongia (1996: 2) and Moore-Gilbert (1997: 8, 186).
- 6 Remarkably, Shohat and Stam (1994: 16) exemplify the *persistence* of colonialist history by reference to just one article – by Paul Johnson, the right-wing historian turned journalist.
- 7 For a more detailed discussion of the dilemmas of methodological pluralism, see McLennan (1995: Chapter 5).
- 8 Spivak (1996: 32–3) has a related discussion on the hegemony and limitations of 'explanation'.
- 9 For this train of thought, see Bhabha (1994: 30, 179, 242). Much of Bhabha's discourse on these matters is (appropriately, perhaps) enunciative – so I stress again that I am freely interpreting his drift.
- 10 Bhabha speculates that 'the truest eye might now belong to the migrant's double vision' (1994: 5), another assertion seeming to require substantial sociological

backing, and a modicum of representationalism. Taken as a stand-alone rhetorical flourish, critics like Friedman (1997: 81) would observe that it could only come from postcolonials 'who can afford a cosmopolitan identity'.

- 11 For a stringent analysis of one kind of radical alterity, see Howe (1998).
- 12 Bhatt (1997: Chapter 1) provides several telling comments on the ineliminability of universalism within postcolonial theory.
- 13 Hall (1996: 249) notes that Derrida, the crucial reference point which grounds Young's critique of others, is actually absent from the discussion. But from my angle, that is a fittingly Hegelian role for the Absolute to play. More generally, we need to draw attention to the important moments at which 'orthodox' thoughts decisively puncture Young's coruscating anti-modernist discourse. For example, Young (rightly) demands to know of Bhabha himself: how exactly does Bhabha's intervention fit into the wider 'text' of colonialism? (a *totalizing* question); who exactly are the colonized and colonizers anyway? (a *sociological, realist* question); and exactly what kind of political resistance does pan-subjective ambivalence incite? (a conventional Leftist question of *historicist* provenance) (Young 1991: 151–2).
- 14 I elaborate on the rhetoric of exchange between sociology and cultural studies in McLennan (1998, 2002).

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