



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Postcolonial Studies, A Materialist Critique (review)

Amar Acheraïou

Conradiana, Volume 39, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 59-67 (Review)

Published by Texas Tech University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cnd.2007.0000>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217054>

## Reviews

**Benita Parry.** *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique.*

London: Routledge, 2004. 256 pp. ISBN 0-41533-599-X

*Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* offers an enlightening and audacious study of colonialism and postcolonial theory. In this volume of new and reprinted essays, Parry moves away from the textualism predominant in postcolonial studies and concentrates on colonialism's sociomaterial conditions. She proposes an alternative reading and critical practice which focus on the predatory nature of colonialism. From the very opening chapter she vigorously criticizes the theorists of colonial discourse for reducing colonialism to a mere textual and cultural event. As she highlights the violence and imbalance of colonial encounters, she urges the critics to evolve towards a more materialist critique that connects imperialism's epistemic violence and material aggression.

The core of Parry's critique centres on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of "new" imperialism in *Empire* and Homi Bhabha's middle-ground theory. While acknowledging Hardt and Negri's distance from the current consensual ideology and commitment to a world beyond capitalism, she deplores their preference for cultural explanations of colonialism to economic and political ones. Parry further laments the book's conceptual promiscuity and subordination of class to ethnicity, gender, and sexuality; and she criticizes the authors' theoretical aversion to nation-based struggles which merely replicate the postcolonial scholar's contempt for all forms of nationalism. Parry underlines similar theoretical flaws and a similar contempt for nationalism in Bhabha's writings. She convincingly identifies the limits of his psycho-linguistic approach to colonialism and contests his view of colonial encounters as fundamentally transactional and agonistic.

In *Postcolonial Studies* Parry both intends to redress the balance between text and context and seeks to rehabilitate nationalist movements and liberation theory. In one fell swoop, she complains about the "poverty of serious discussion on liberation theory" within postcolonial

criticism and blames the scholars for disdaining nationalist discourses (9). Her third essay discusses at great length resistance theory and focuses on Frantz Fanon's writings. It painstakingly recapitulates this theorist-activist's materialist critique of colonialism, but its examination of *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skins, White Masks* does not unfortunately lead to groundbreaking findings. Its overall objective serves mostly to emblazon the liberation movement's image and reassert their Marxist inspiration and aspirations. Following Laura Chrisman's emphasis on the liberation movement's key role in theorizing colonial discourse, Parry keenly claims that it is the writings of these anticolonial movements which had inaugurated the questioning of colonialism. She reasserts throughout these movements' achievements and exhorts postcolonial critics to recognize the importance of nationalist discourses in the liberation of former colonies.

To valorize the liberation movement's contribution to independence, as *Postcolonial Studies* does, is a necessary act of remembrance in an era of political conformism and ideological conservatism. But attributing the questioning of colonialism exclusively to these Marxist-oriented militant organizations tells only part of the history of anticolonial struggles. Such a radical explanation creates, in my opinion, a gap in the narrative of resistance, for it undermines the early struggles against Western invaders, which, in some former colonies, lasted over twenty years. As a reminder, Algerian opposition to French imperialism, for example, started in 1830 by Amir Abdelkader and his nomadic troops and ended only in 1857 with the crushing of the Kabyle resistance. To avoid oversimplification, liberation movements should therefore be placed in a much wider historical context to better grasp the anticolonial spirit of insurgency.

On the whole the argument about resistance theory is regrettably shaped from a limited ideological perspective that leaves little room for smaller narratives of resistance. Throughout, Parry praises British Marxists' involvement in the liberation movements and passionately claims that Britain was the place where most of the anticolonial programs were devised and where the majority of the native anticolonialists had been trained. She thus overlooks the contribution of other parts of Europe and America, which gives the book's glossing over the transnational dimension of anticolonial resistance a parochial resonance.

A key feature of *Postcolonial Studies* is its pervasive didacticism. Its emphasis on the fundamental role played by the writings of Marxist theorist-activists in elaborating anticolonial struggles serves in this

respect two interdependent purposes: spurring the political left to reconnect with the spirit of former anticolonial struggles and counter-acting the ideological consensus which is prevalent in postcolonial studies. Pursuing her diatribe on the politics of compromise and consensus Parry daringly establishes a parallel between the middle ground theorists' position and the ideology of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in 1995 to reconcile South Africans to their past. She points out how the commission's report narrates the new nation and rewrites South Africa's colonial past as one of cooperation and transculturation, just as middle-ground theorists view the colonial relationships as transactional and dialogic encounters: "The terms missing in the current postcolonial discussion—capitalism, property relations, class struggle, remembrance and anticipations of postcapitalism—are also absent from the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (192).

In the same breath, Parry intends to recover the Marxist narrative missing both in postcolonial studies and in the commission's report. She rejects the reconciliation historiography and demands a retrieval of the erased Marxist anticolonial narrative, warning:

without an account and appraisal of the intellectual traditions associated with or stemming from the minority Unity movement—a Trotskyist left-opposition Movement whose permutations survive as a dissident strand in contemporary South African political thinking—there would be a hole in the narrative, since it was this tendency which grounded its analysis in Marxist understandings of colonialism within the context of international capitalism. (192)

The effort to recover the Marxist tales of resistance is certainly a legitimate undertaking; it would yet be wise not to fall prey to the same flaws that she had spotted in her opponents. I suggest that Marxist postcolonial theory be in turn more attentive to the holes within its own narratives, to those aspects lightly termed "the weakest features of the tradition, its Eurocentricity and preoccupation with things Western" (77). Eurocentrism, racism, and cultural arrogance may, indeed, sound weak when viewed from distant Europe, but they must surely have been grim, burdensome realities for those who had experienced them as daily humiliations in the colonies. The erasure of the Marxist tradition's "weakest features" is manifestly one of the book's soft spots (77). By omitting, for example, to discuss the works of controversial Socialist writers such as Albert Camus, André Gide, and Graham Greene, Parry

creates a gap in her account of colonialism. She undoubtedly prevents readers from seeing into the inconsistencies within the Marxist anticolonial rhetoric finely reflected in the fictions of the above-mentioned authors.

It is perhaps worth remembering that both Greene in *Journey Without Maps* and Camus in *The First Man* denounce imperialism's aberrations, but neither questions the legitimacy of the imperial enterprise. Additionally, the two condemn imperialism's exploitation of the "white" and "brown" proletariat, but they exonerate the petty colonists from imperialism's evils on the grounds that these proletarian masses did not come to the colony to civilize or rule but to flee starvation. In short, rather than fully rejecting colonialism, Camus and Greene seem to contrive what I call a para-colonialist discourse which implicitly legitimizes mass colonization as a benign substitute for bourgeois imperialism. We may stretch this argument to suggest that Camus' and Greene's reluctance to dismantle the imperial system stems from ideological and cultural biases rooted in the very structure of the Communist Party itself, in its Algerian version, at least. A critic referring to the Algerian Communist Party's racism and collusion with the imperial ideology bluntly said: "if you scratch at a Communist you find a European conqueror underneath" (McCarthy 55). In light of this statement I would argue that unless the occluded narrative of the Communists' racism and cultural arrogance is fully narrated, Marxist critics of former nation-state colonialism and "new" imperialism might be taken for the very capitalistic enemy they want to collapse.

The propensity to narrate Marxist anticolonial struggles as a homogeneous, monolithic narrative is obviously the most disturbing aspect of *Postcolonial Studies*, which is otherwise a challenging intellectual undertaking. The ideological imperative underlying this effort may account for the book's neglect of authors like Greene and Camus in favour of Socialist writers such as E. M. Forster, who is comparatively less politically engaged. Still, the essay dealing with Forster's fiction is illuminating. It offers a detailed analysis of the symbolic, sexual, cultural, and ideological issues addressed or silenced in *A Passage to India*. Its overall aim consists of uncovering signs of Forster's left militancy in order to interpret in a true light his works which, Parry regrets, have been read recently as an "exercise in Orientalism" (163).

Parry finds *A Passage to India* of particular interest, for it evokes a phase in the Raj that registers the Indian populations' dissent and disaffection from British rule. She reads it as a subversive text which resists the British Empire's discursive appropriations. Meanwhile, she com-

plains about the novel's neglect of colonialism's sociomaterial conditions, drawing attention to its erasure of India's scientific and technological past, as well as to its silence about Britain's exploitation of India's raw materials and human labor. Parry touches here on a crucial issue, but does not pursue her discussion to tease out the connection between these silences and Forster's tacit complicity with Britain's wider imperial ambitions. What I find most striking in connection with this argument is the fact that Parry, who gives primacy to a materialist critique of colonialism, should view Forster's "meagre critique of colonial situation" as a mere "lacuna," characteristic of "the British Indian texts from which all traces of base interests—India as source of raw materials, cheap labour, markets and investments opportunities, and India as a lynchpin of Britain's wider imperial ambitions—were erased" (166).

Whether deliberate or not, this hiatus may be owing to Parry's clearly stated mission to countermand the recent disparaging readings of Forster's works. By trying to find extenuating circumstances for the author's "lacunae," she obviously intends to rehabilitate his ideological and political outlook (166). Throughout, she presents Forster as a militant socialist and dissident, subversive figure and acclaims his political integrity, opposition to fascism, and commitment to internationalism: "It is often forgotten that in 1935 Forster attended a meeting in Paris of the International Association of writers for the Defence of culture, organized by the Popular front to unite communists, socialists and liberals in defence of the cultural heritage" (174).

Forster's struggle against fascism and defense of the cultural heritage is a significant political act. But the very Popular Front that organized the meeting in which Forster participated was, Parry fails to mention, far from being the locus of political integrity or moral probity. Needless to say that the members of this party displayed in the 1930s complete indifference to the fate of Algerian Berbers and Arabs who were subjected to oppression and exploitation by imperialist European nations that were horrified by fascism of which colonialism was merely a disguised version. It is bitterly ironic that the French Socialists and Communists committed to the preservation of the "cultural heritage" should show utter contempt for Algeria's languages and cultures (174).

This being said, it is of the utmost importance that readers remember Forster's engagement against fascism. Similarly, it is, in my view, just as crucial not to let the author's socialism distract us from his failure to reject the imperial system. Forster's ambivalence toward colonialism is finely captured by Edward Said who states that the author of *A Passage to India* "can neither recommend de-colonization nor con-

tinued colonization" (qtd. in Parry 173–4). Building on Said's observation, Parry reads the novel's open-ended closing act ("no, not yet, not there") as a sign of a "deferred post-imperial condition which temporarily in the novel has not the means to articulate" (174). To supplement this comment we may argue that Forster does not envisage a postimperial India because deep down he does not desire the demise of the British Empire. Although *A Passage to India* intimates a discursive resistance to the British Empire's, as the silences about the sociomaterial conditions indicate, Forster does by no means renounce the material advantages derived from India, nor depart from the colonial cultural and racial biases.

For the sake of my argument's coherence, I have anticipated the discussion of Forster's *A Passage to India* which is the penultimate essay of part two of *Postcolonial Studies* dealing with the imperial imaginary in the works of Charlotte Brontë, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, and H. G. Wells. In this section of the book Parry provides detailed textual and contextual readings which add a new dimension to these widely discussed texts. Through study of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, she addresses the conformity, even complicity, of English women writers and feminist movements with the imperial ideology. While underlining Brontë's inappropriate analogy between women's domestic subjection to male dominance and the natives' oppression in the colonies, she denounces her silence about "the long process of violent indigenous expropriation which had enabled the establishment of a Mansfield Park and Thornfield Hall" (111).

The discussion of gender relations in *Jane Eyre* follows Sally Ledger and Laura Chrisman's view of Victorian middle-class Englishwomen and feminist movements. These two authors argued that bourgeois women articulated a feminist identity which colluded with the empire's notions of ethnic and cultural difference. In a similar vein, Parry indicates that Charlotte Brontë, like other women writers and feminists, tends to conflate middle-class Englishwomen's subordination by male-dominated bourgeois society and the natives' oppression by the imperial system. Expatiating on this observation, she goes on to affirm that this category of women had actively participated in the empire's propaganda and contributed in shaping a national imperial identity. To substantiate her claim she refers to the "light fiction" produced by the wives of the colonial officials (113). She maintains that the latter's fictional works corroborated the writings of the politicians, political scientists, social commentators, and men of letters who validated the imperial ideology.

Rudyard Kipling's fiction widely discussed in *Postcolonial Studies* is another eloquent example of imperial propaganda. This fervent advocate of imperialism has, as made clear in this book, played an important role in fashioning a homogeneous British imperial identity by "naturaliz[ing] the principles of the master culture as universal forms of thought" (121). In a fruitful cross-examination of "To be Filed for Reference" and *Kim*, Parry reveals how far Kipling's writings "articulate a new patriotism purged of the radicalism in its earlier forms, and fabricate a linear narrative of England's undefiled heritage" (122). Manifestly, by resituating Kipling as an apologist of British imperialism she intends to counteract the writings of the "ideological right" which shows enthusiasm for Kipling's "idealistic commitment to empire and firm grasp of the political realities" (119).

In a different, more complex register Parry examines Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* which she reads as subversive narratives. According to her, both novels contest imperialism's grandiloquence and unearth "inadmissible desires, misgivings and perceptions concealed in its discourses" (130). She views *Heart of Darkness* as a text which reiterates colonial rhetoric and myths in order to mock colonialism's grandiloquence and subvert the imperial subject's claim to be an agent of absolute knowledge and universal progress. She further states that Conrad in this novella revisits the light-dark iconography and unsettles the colonialist customary evaluation of them. She shows how the terms "light" and "white" are associated with truth, probity, and purity as well as with lies, greed, and corruption. She similarly examines the "black" or "dark" imagery, which was initially applied exclusively to Africa, and indicates how it has migrated at the novella's end to civilized Europe which is now "plunged into darkness by its own imperialist project, invading the house of the Intended, casting the biggest and greatest town on earth in mournful shades" (135). Marlow returns to Europe with his sordid tale of imperialism; he meets the Intended, but bizarrely refuses to tell her Kurtz's full story on the grounds that the protagonist's story and life "would have been too dark" (135). Parry attributes this silence mostly to Marlow's "incompetence as communicator" (135).

We can extrapolate from this remark to suggest that the fact that the imperial invasion of the domestic space comes in the shape of a lie, an erasure, makes Marlow complicit with colonialism's exploitation of Africa's raw resources and labor. His lying to the Intended not only maintains Africa as a source of untold and untapped resources, but also preserves his privileged status as an agent of knowledge editing the



empire's narrative to suit his readers' expectations. Besides, Marlow's clearly stated refusal to enlighten the Intended and the people in the streets of "the sepulchral city" about "the peculiar blackness of [his] experience" lends support to the idea that in order for imperialism to thrive and for its self-proclaimed ideals to be upheld at home its hideous practices should be concealed from the domestic audience (232). The preservation of the "saving idea" at the back of colonization, Marlow's central preoccupation in this novella, seems thus predicated on his cynical lying to the Intended and on withholding knowledge from his countrymen (143).

Parry concludes her discussion of *Heart of Darkness* pointing both to Conrad's good grasp of imperialism's cupidity and lust for power and to his inability "to foresee and configure the forces that were to confront its dominion—as he was to do, even if with misgiving in *Nostromo*" (139). This perceptive observation paves the way for the transition to *Nostromo* which represents the arrival of industrial and financial capitalism in Latin America. This section of the book focuses on *Nostromo*'s subversive aspects and traces the ways in which Conrad in this novel questions the Western imperial mission. As she scrutinizes the novel's discursive texture and sociomaterial conditions Parry draws attention to inconsistencies within Conrad's critique of colonialism. On the one hand, the storyline's constant deferrals, digressions, and temporal displacements, she notes, go against imperial grand narratives and progressive history. On the other, the novel's ideological dead-end and overall pessimism about a possible viable post-empire seem to undermine the text's subversive impulse.

Parry acknowledges Conrad's attack on colonialism, but finds his critique of imperialism in *Nostromo* circumscribed by his meditation, the "saving idea" (143). Conrad is shown at once contemptible of Spanish colonialism and 'new' Anglo-American imperialism and reluctant to venture a vision of a post-empire world. His reticence is interpreted as a refusal to endorse the aspirations of those seeking to overthrow colonialism. As she brings home this point, Parry refers to the negative terms in which Conrad depicts Nostromo and other characters who try to dismantle imperialism. According to her, the unfavorable portrait of the proto-proletarian Nostromo is "a symptom of Conrad's unease about affirming a figure associated with socialist aspirations" (146). Conrad clearly depicts Nostromo as a caricatured socialist; and, in my view, he does so to question the very notion of the subaltern or proletarian. Evidently so, for Nostromo is a peculiar proletarian; he publicly castigates the rich, but he is covertly an aspirant capitalist silently dreaming about

becoming a wealthy bourgeois capitalist. His stealing of the silver is a clear illustration of his lust for possessions and power.

The essay following the discussion of *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* probes the anticolonial strain in H. G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* and traces the author's complex vision of the British Empire. It demonstrates how the novel refuses to acclaim the imperial mission, but remains widely complicit with the colonial ideology and empire's interests. Wells is shown in a mixed hue; he condemns the malignant effects of imperial expansion on the metropolitan population; at the same time he endorses the principle of having overseas colonies both for the advancement of the "non-adult races" and for the progress of the "civilized" world (152). Although, as stated in the essay, the narrator at the novel's close deprecates the social order with which he has been complicit, he refrains from fully condemning imperialism's predatory ambitions and exploitation of Africa's raw materials and human labor. Parry extends her observations about Wells's novel to J. A. Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study* and brings to light the affinities between the two authors. Similar to Wells, who naturalizes Europe's right to appropriate colonial resources, the anti-imperialist critic Hobson also attacks imperialism's excesses in the colonies, but instead of seeking to bring down the colonial system he simply advocates a "sane" imperialism (238). He does so on the conviction that the colonies need Europe for their development, just as Europe needs its overseas positions to maintain and improve its population's living standards.

To elaborate on the inconsistencies of Forster's, Conrad's, Wells's, and Hobson's critique of imperialism, we may argue that these modernist authors are not only disinclined to renounce the material advantages provided by overseas colonies, but are especially unable to fully detach themselves from the cultural, social, and ideological totalities which determine their identity.

AMAR ACHERAÏOU

Montreal, Canada

#### WORKS CITED

- Chrisman, Laura. "Empire's Culture in Frederick Jameson, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak." In *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Hobson, J. A. *Imperialism: A Study*. 1902. London: Unwin Hyman, 1988.
- McCarthy, Patrick. *Camus, A Critical Study of his Life and Work*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982.