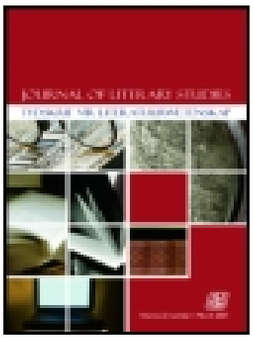

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The Postcolonial Other as a Problem for Political Action

Annamaria Carusi

Summary

This article is an attempt to broach the issue of heterogeneity, recasting it as a problem for theories of postcolonialism, and for the poststructuralist theories on which they are based. Heterogeneity results in a dilemma for the theorising of reconstitutive political action: If the colonised person is seen as radically heterogeneous, s/he is inevitably either passive and incapable of acting for liberation, or the discourses which allow for resistance or emancipatory action are subject to the same critique as the discourses of imperialist domination. Where heterogeneity is conceived as a problem, but theoretically retained and affirmed, the theory becomes incoherent. This is a result of the terms in which heterogeneity has been cast in these theories. Ultimately the problem of heterogeneity as it emerges in theories of postcolonialism threatens to undermine the political dimension of these theories, and of poststructuralism.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word gepoog om die kwessie van heterogeneïteit te bespreek deur dit enersyds te herformuleer as 'n probleem binne postkolonialistiese teorieë en deur dit andersyds te sien as 'n vraagstuk wat ook betrekking het op die poststrukturalistiese teorieë waarop postkolonialisme gebaseer is. Heterogeneïteit loop uit op 'n dilemma vir die teoretisering van hersamestellende politieke optrede: indien die gekolonialiseerde persoon gesien word as radikaal heterogeen, is sy/hy onvermydelik óf passief en dus nie in staat tot bevrydende optrede nie, óf die diskoerse wat weerstand of emansiperende optrede toelaat is onderworpe aan dieselfde kritiek as die diskoerse van imperialistiese oorheersing. Waar heterogeneïteit beskou word as 'n probleem wat teoreties gehandhaaf en bevestig word, word die teorie onsamehangend. Dit is 'n gevolg van die voorwaardes waarkragtens heterogeneïteit binne dergelike teorieë sy beslag gekry het. In die laaste instansie dreig die probleem van heterogeneïteit, soos dit te voorskyn tree in postkolonialistiese teorieë, om die politieke dimensies van hierdie teorieë en van poststrukturalisme te ondermyn.

Theories of postcolonialism present themselves as intrinsically political. This is so firstly because of their view of literary discourse as being constituted in a significant way by the sociopolitical, secondly because of the active sociopolitical function they read into the text, and thirdly because the aim of these theories, broadly speaking, is to insert themselves into literary and cultural discourse generally in order to effect some sort of change in sociopolitical structures. This change can be characterised in the broadest possible way as one which will effect an emancipation of previously colonised people from all forms of domination and imperialism.

This paper will concentrate on the third political dimension of these theories. Two stages can be extrapolated: the first is a critique of imperialist discourse, and the effect it has had on postcolonial cultural discourse, and the second is the attempt to define what an anti-imperialist reconstitutive cultural practice would – or should – look like. As we shall see, emphasis thus far has been on the former, not without reason since the latter is a problem of embarrassing proportions for theories of postcolonialism. While the ability to

account for the political dimension of literary and generally cultural practices has been facilitated by the poststructuralist basis of theories of postcolonialism, these theories are also beset by all the problems with reconstitutive practice attendant on poststructuralism. The limitations of theories of postcolonialism in this regard will rebound on the poststructuralism which informs them. It will be shown that postcolonial contexts are not merely an area of application for poststructuralist theory, but may instead force us to re-think some of the central concepts of this theory.

The concept at issue here is that of otherness or heterogeneity: postcolonial cultural discourse is almost uniformly seen as being produced in a milieu which is radically other or heterogeneous to the West. Otherness is seen as being an essential feature not only of cultural discourse, but of the way in which the identities of postcolonial subjects are specified or constructed within or by means of that cultural discourse, such that they are able to speak and to act. This accounts, to a large extent, for the appropriation and assimilation of poststructuralism by these theories, since poststructuralism not only traditionally privileges that which is deemed other or heterogeneous, but is also theoretically committed to the concept of otherness. The colonised subject seems to provide the historical instantiation of the difference, otherness and heterogeneity theorised by poststructuralism.

My aim is to show that the commitment to otherness risks perpetuating the structures of imperialist domination by either rendering the other passive or when it does act, subject to the same critique as imperialism. This leads postcolonial theory into a problematic relation with anti-imperialist practices. These alternatives are not overcome by attempts to reconcile anti-imperialist practice with poststructuralist critique. On the contrary, it will be argued that this has damaging consequences for the coherence and tenability of the theory, as well as for the very possibility of reconstitutive action. Otherness is then a problem for theories of postcolonialism; it is also one of the major obstacles to their fulfilling their claim to contributing to emancipatory political intervention.

1

It is not the purpose of this article to give a substantive overview of developments in the current debate concerning issues in postcolonialism. Instead, I shall restrict my argument to specific proposals concerning the status, provenance and function of otherness in postcolonial contexts, in order to highlight otherness as a problem. Exemplification from two main sources is used: firstly, certain proposals of Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, and not their work as a whole, will be analysed as exemplary standpoints in the theorising of postcolonial otherness, within a poststructuralist framework. Secondly, the ethno-nationalist stance will be looked at as an example of the practical consequences of the retention of otherness, in a nontheoretical cultural discourse.

Both Spivak and Bhabha have undertaken extensive critiques which are predominantly concerned with the way in which colonial authority has

distorted, excluded and "othered" the colonised subject. However, these critiques have been unable to account for how that which is excluded by the closures of imperialism can in turn deploy counterstrategies, how it becomes active in its turn, rather than purely reactive. In the article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak's reply to the question posed in the title is unequivocally negative, concluding with the words "The subaltern cannot speak" (1988: 308).[1] Spivak's readings of colonialism's texts proceed from a poststructuralist basis, adhering particularly closely to antihumanism and anti-essentialism. Bhabha, while similarly working from a poststructuralist basis, is critical of the way in which otherness has been posited by poststructuralist theories, but has also been reappropriated by them such that otherness has no role to play except in so far as it acts as a limit to the West. Such a reappropriation and construal of passivity are inevitable within a poststructuralist framework.

Bhabha's criticism is that while such terms as différance, signifiance and so on, reveal the limits of Western metaphysics, and "recognise the spectacle of otherness" (1986: 151), the anti-ethnocentric stance of these theories is paradoxical in that, in attempting to constantly subvert the presentation of presence, they reappropriate it as the symbol of their own limit; in other words, otherness becomes merely the symbol of difference, significance, etc. – the "presentification" of what is necessarily unpresentable. As Bhabha states: "The place of otherness is fixed in the west as a subversion of western metaphysics and is finally appropriated by the west as its limit-text, anti-west" (1986: 151).

Bhabha's criticism of poststructuralism is not something which could be corrected within poststructuralism – it is impossible to adjust the balance by for example conceiving of a place from which the other *could* speak, as other. The recognition of otherness or the affirmation of heterogeneity in poststructuralist theories is limited to an exposure of the procedures whereby exclusions occur, and whereby others are constituted by a dominant discourse. The other as such can never be presented; neither can it actively present itself. Within poststructuralist theory, this is impossible since it *is* the unpresentable. The unpresentable is that which lies beyond intelligibility and rationality. Construed as that which cannot be signified, it also lies beyond signification. If intelligibility and rationality function by means of limits, their subversion lies in the act of transgression. Transgression itself is entirely consumed by its act, or rather by the action on the limits; there is nowhere to transgress to beyond the limits, if one is to retain any hold on intelligibility at all.[2] The other is in a structurally identical position as the beyond of transgression, that is, it has only negative status. As soon as it is signified or attempts to positively signify itself as other, it loses its status as other, but is instead assimilated into the sameness of the West. Since there is effectively no place from which the other can signify itself *as other*, the idea of an other to the West reinforces the position of nonfunctionality and powerlessness of this other with respect to the West. Working within such a framework – in which, it must be noted, there is a conflation of epistemological and discursive exclusions on the one hand, and culturalist notions of otherness on the other[3]

– it is no wonder that "the subaltern cannot speak". Within this logic of thinking the other, it is inevitable that when the other does speak, it will be subject to the same critique as the imperialist discourse which has positioned it as other, since in order to speak at all, it must reinscribe itself within imperialist discourse.

2

Bhabha's account of imperialist discourse as an apparatus of power which has consequences not only for the colonised but also for the colonising subject will be used to show that firstly, this still does not address the question of passivity, and secondly, that what he says of imperialist discourse in this regard can be extended to anticolonialist action based on otherness. A discussion of the construction of a distinctively African personality will show that practice based on otherness has a tendency towards reactive ethnonationalism structurally built into it.

In his article "The other question: difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism" Bhabha criticises Said:

> There is always, in Said, the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer which is an historical and theoretical simplification. The terms in which Said's Orientalism are unified – which is, the intentionality and undirectionality of colonial power – also unifies the subject of colonial enunciation.
>
> (1985: 158)

Bhabha then goes on to show how processes of subjectification in colonial contexts reduce the colonising subject as well as the colonised subject, by reading together Freud's work on fetishism and Foucault's concept of the "apparatus" as that which consists in "strategies of relations of forces supporting and supported by, types of knowledge" (quoted in Bhabha 1986: 161). Bhabha wishes not only to expose the way in which knowledge concerning the colonised is related to power (in scientific racialism for example), but also to supplement this with an exposure of psychic mechanisms whereby the strategy and play of power linked to the apparatus of imperialism, produce subjects for that play of power. He does this by a reading of the stereotype in terms of fetishism (the disavowal and fixation of difference which both reactivates the primal anxiety associated with difference and normalises difference by producing substitute objects for the lack produced by difference). The disavowal/fixation of fetishism is correlated with the two forms of identification complicit with the imaginary in Lacanian psychoanalysis – narcissism and aggressitivity. Granting Bhabha his reading of the stereotype, it is rather to some of the consequences of the theory that I will turn.

For Bhabha, the type of knowledge produced by racialist science and duplicated by commonly held racist opinions, is itself necessarily an acting out

of the fantasy associated with fetishism; furthermore what this "knowledge" does, both in its scientific and popular guise, is produce subjects for the apparatus of imperialist power. This reading allows Bhabha to account for ways in which the colonising subject is not entirely master of a discourse which he simply imposes on the colonised subject, but is subject to it and constituted by it, just as the colonised subject is. However, the fetishising discourse is still seen as emanating from the dominant colonising discourse: it may have repercussions for the colonising subject but not by virtue of any agency which could be located on the side of the colonised subject.[4] Not only does the theory fail to account for ways in which the colonised subject is not entirely passive but in the terms of his own theory, if Bhabha were faced with cultural discourses of origination, he would have to apply to them the same criticism as he applied to the fantasy of the coloniser.

> The taking up of any one position, within a specific discursive form, in a particular historical conjuncture, is then always problematic – the site of both fixity and fantasy. It provides a colonial identity that is played out – *like all fantasies of originality and origination* – in the face and space of the disruption and threat from the heterogeneity of other positions.
>
> (1986: 164; emphasis mine)

Cultural discourse which attempts to reconstitute an original African specificity experiences the otherness of the coloniser as threatening; the coloniser as "other", is excluded and "othered" in its turn by the closure of African thought. The procedure is structurally identical: if Bhabha carries through his critique in a coherent fashion (which he is not reluctant to do), the implicit moral judgement he is making of imperialist discourse would also have to be made of any attempt to consolidate resistance or reverse the distribution of power on the side of the colonised, where such an attempt is based on otherness.

Anticolonialist cultural discourses of origination have been contested from many quarters; they are admittedly not the only foundation for resistance and mobilisation, and often work in tandem with or sometimes in opposition to other strategies of resistance. Here, they are used as an example of a discourse in which otherness and difference become the basis for cultural identity, and consequently a rallying point for resistance and mobilisation.[5] These discourses share with imperialist discourse not only the structure of othering, but they are also constructed in terms of power (that is, in view of establishing, reversing, resisting and/or maintaining a power configuration). By means of the construction of a discourse of origination, the mythical origins of a previously colonised people are re-discovered and reaffirmed. In so doing, a precolonial and heterogeneous identity, which is uncontaminated by the coloniser, is affirmed and serves as the cultural ground for political liberation. What this discourse tends to construct is an ethno-nationalism, based on a distinctively African personality. Since it is unable to depend on the unifying force of national language, and is obliged to transcend tribal or

ethnic difference, this discourse calls on an original precolonial African identity.[6]

This identity is however specified in reaction to the binarisms of the coloniser, with the term which was denied or subordinate in the oppositional hierarchy being affirmed as that which is specific to Africa. Hence the descriptions of the collective nature of African art as opposed to the individualised status of the author in the West; communal property in African societies as opposed to private property in Western capitalist systems. Thus the specification of this precolonial identity is dependent on a prior colonial moment. The assertion of the collective and the communal as specifiers of African identity prepare the ground for an African Marxism; the people of the nation are identified with the proletariat by the feature of collectivity seen as essential to the African personality. Kelwyn Sole states that: "The fiction of an egalitarian pre-colonial era transmutes easily into the rhetoric of a classless modern South Africa, in which equality and liberty would be guaranteed if it were not for apartheid.... The stress is on human nature rather than class struggle as the major force of social change, and a distinctive African personality which lends itself to collective existence is constructed" (1984: 58). This construction then forms the essentialist basis for conscientising and mobilising programmes.

Distinctiveness must be seen as part of an overall strategy which is inherently reactive; such a discourse assumes the very difference that imperialist discourse assigns to it and formulates a counterstrategy in response to it which adopts its terms and structure. There are several reasons for the suspicion elicited by such discourses. One reason is that if the imperialist can be said to construct the otherness of those who it subjugates, and endow this construction with truth-value, thereby legitimating subjugation, then discourses of origination utilise the same strategy in reverse. In this way the imperialist construction of otherness is assimilated to such a point that it actually does play a significant role in constituting the way in which the subjugated people specify their identity. By this means, hegemonic imperialist strategies are perpetuated in the most insidious possible way. Another reason for this suspicion is that the solidarity of a group is effected by narratives which not only recover lost origins, but which function by means of the exclusion of other individuals and groups.[7] Such narratives are necessarily associated with othering mechanisms. Thus not only do discourses of origination perpetuate the structures of imperialism with respect to the subjectivity of the subjugated people, but they also operate in precisely the same way with respect to the subjectivity of what is then construed as being *their* other, in this case the West. A further reason for suspicion is that individuals and groups must be conscientised into adopting the image offered them by the discourses of origination, which leaves the way open for mass manipulation. Apart from the ethnocentrism that is built into reconstitutive anti-imperialist action which retains otherness as a foundation, there is the concomitant danger of such action leading to manipulative and at worst reactionist political policies.

3

Both Bhabha and Spivak are suspicious of such discourses. We have already seen how Bhabha's criticism of the othering mechanism of imperialist discourse must also be applied to the African fantasy of origination. For Spivak, discourses of origination are instances of "hegemonic nativist or reverse ethnocentric narrativisation" (quoted in Parry 1987: 35).

Despite their suspicion of narratives of native specificity and origination, both Bhabha and Spivak wish to retain otherness as a value. Faced with the impossibility of describing a reconstitutive anticolonialist discourse which does not risk reactionist ethno-nationalism but does retain otherness, Bhabha simply states that this "requires an alternative set of questions, techniques and strategies in order to construct it" (1986: 155). In a similar vein, Spivak states: "But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous" (1988: 284).

In her work on the interventionist practice of the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG), Spivak attempts to specify a way in which such practice does not simply take over the categories of Western thought. The adherence to notions of consciousness and the appropriation of Marxism in particular by this group must be seen in the light of a political strategy. Spivak attempts to retain both what is necessary for a political strategy (consciousness as a basis for conscientising), and a view of subaltern consciousness as heterogeneous to Western consciousness since it is produced by and within subaltern history. That is subaltern consciousness is historically and not essentially heterogeneous. Any essentialist description of the heterogeneity of subaltern consciousness by subaltern interventionist discourse will lead to strategic manipulation. Spivak is well aware of the dangers attendant on practice requiring a basis in consciousness. Consider for example the way in which she outlines the possible paths open to such practice (interventionist historiography being seen as a form of practice):

> If it were embraced as a strategy, then the emphasis upon the "sovereignty, . . .consistency and. . .logic" of "rebel consciousness" (EAP 13) can be seen as "affirmative deconstruction" knowing that such an emphasis is theoretically non-viable, the historian then breaks his theory in a scrupulously delineated "political interest". If on the other hand, the restoration of the subaltern's subject-position in history is seen by the historian as the establishment of an inalienable and final truth of things, then any emphasis on sovereignty, consistency and logic will,. . .inevitably objectify the subaltern and be caught in the game of knowledge as power.
>
> (1987: 209)

Subaltern interventionist discourse must therefore maintain a careful balance between the following three factors: 1) an acknowledgement of the complicity of subaltern interventionist discourse with Western humanist notions of consciousness, which must be retained for strategic purposes; 2) the construal of subaltern consciousness as heterogeneous, and 3) a denial of truth-value to any positive description of subaltern consciousness. Indeed Spivak points out that subaltern consciousness can in some important respects only be thought

of as negative consciousness: it is the consciousness of the subaltern or the insurgent, that is, those who have been the subjects of domination. If there is any specificity in this consciousness it lies precisely in the fact of having emerged through domination. Its mode of insurgency is to negate the definitions and images which imperialism has imposed on the subaltern. Thus it has to do more with the relation of domination than with the being of the subaltern (1987: 203). It is important to note that in the case of subaltern interventionist action we are not dealing with ethno-nationalism, but rather with a form of consciousness which brings about solidarity through a common domination, by providing an identificatory image in the fact of domination. However this form of solidarity can be distinguished from ethno-nationalist solidarity only by its content, and not by its structure, since it retains a view of this consciousness as a "fullness" which is structurally similar to the fullness which is recovered by myths of origination. It is only by reading "against the grain" (1987: 205) that Spivak is able to draw the notion of negative consciousness from the texts of the SSG, which otherwise remain open to being interpreted as a positivisation of consciousness (1987: 202).

The careful balance of the "affirmative deconstruction" outlined in the quotation above is problematic, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, if the "political interest" the theorist wishes to serve, and the means which it requires (i.e. consciousness), are not theorised in a manner which is consistent with the theory which leads to a view that the sovereignty etc. of consciousness is "theoretically nonviable", the theory is incoherent. If the incoherence emerges at the precise point where a decision concerning "political interest" is required, on what basis and at which point does the theorist decide to break with his/her theory? On what basis is the "political interest" theorised? And if his/her own theory is as incoherent as those theories which insist on the truth-value of what defines not only subaltern consciousness, but consciousness in general, then how does the theorist know that his/her own theory, specifically the moment at which s/he swerves away from it in the name of political interest, is not itself "caught in the game of knowledge and power"?

Practically, this is also an impossible balance for interventionist practice itself, placing it in an extremely compromised and contradictory position. A notion of consciousness derived from Western thought is considered essential if transformative social action is to occur. How can the stability and coherence of consciousness be a basis for this essentially conscientising action and any positive manifestation thereof simultaneously be held at bay? In other words, how is the *acknowledgement* of the complicity with Western humanist notions of consciousness going to coexist with the strategic action made possible thereby? Acknowledgement is not going to erase the underlying contradiction of action construed in this way.

Heterogeneity, whether it is associated with a positive description of subaltern consciousness, and gives rise to ethno-nationalism, or whether it is negatively defining of subaltern consciousness, and gives rise to interventionist strategies, is inherently susceptible to manipulation and/or contradiction.

4

Spivak's concern with subaltern consciousness and her limitation of its heterogeneity to a purely historicist account can be recast as an attempt to negotiate a way around the dilemma outlined above: either the other is passive, or the discourse of the other is subject to the same critique as that of the imperialist. The specificity or otherness of subaltern consciousness is negatively delimitated by her. We have seen that subaltern consciousness (i.e. consciousness in so far as it is specific to the subaltern and therefore distinct from other types of consciousness) is defined as negative consciousness: there is nothing essential to this consciousness which establishes its heterogeneity transhistorically. This is the reason for the inability of positive descriptions of subaltern consciousness to sustain a truth-value. An associated reason is that the heterogeneity of subaltern consciousness, limited to Spivak's nonessentialist negative construal, is located in the same space as the unpresentable or the beyond of transgression mentioned earlier. That which cannot be presented as having a positive content (or as having definable properties) cannot have a truth-value. We have seen that locating otherness in the same space as the unpresentable leads to the passivity of the other. Purposeful action requires a basis in a positive foundation in that it requires a basis on which decisions and predictions are made. In the same way as negative heterogeneity cannot sustain a truth-value, neither can it sustain action. However, on the other hand, we have already seen that the positivisation of heterogeneous (distinct) consciousness leads to the susceptibility of anti-imperialist action to the same critique as imperialism.

Spivak rightfully points out that such positivisation risks falling prey to the manipulations of the power/knowledge game, but she is similarly aware of the danger of passivity. Hence her suggestion that consciousness, and particularly *subaltern* consciousness in its heterogeneity, be considered as being strategically essential. We have already seen the incoherencies this gives rise to.

In conclusion, theories of postcolonialism find themselves in a dilemma: a negatively defined other leads to the inevitable (theoretical) passivity of those who have been constituted as other, and thus to the perpetuation of imperialism. The positively defined other on which ethnocentric anti-imperialist action is based defines itself in reaction to imperialist discourse and ultimately perpetuates its structure. This renders anti-imperialist practice subject to the same critique as imperialism. If this critique is carried out effectively, that is in such a way that it does have an effect on cultural practices, then anti-imperialist action is incapacitated, and we are back to passivity. An attempt to avoid positivisation but retain the strategic usefulness of heterogeneous consciousness is ultimately incoherent. In all cases, theories of postcolonialism risk undercutting any claim they may have to contributing to social and political change via cultural discourse and therefore of losing a significant dimension of the way in which they define themselves. Or they risk retaining this political dimension in the worst possible sense: as complicity with imperialism.[8]

Notes

1. For Spivak, the position of subaltern women is aggravated by a double exclusion: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (1988: 287). My argument in this article would hold for women as well, and for the feminist retention of an-other status for women, as it occurs for example, in the work of Irigaray and Cixous: how does one speak if one is to speak *as a woman*?
2. Psychosis as the ultimate transgression, is itself never pure. The consequences of placing the other in a *structurally* similar position to psychosis need to be examined.
3. This clarification is owed to Ulrike Kistner.
4. Bhabha's theory of parody and mimicry as a strategy whereby the native inappropriately imitates the colonial voice and thereby threatens colonial authority does not have a place as a counterstrategy in this account of fetishism. However, if the native is limited to imitating and parodying the colonial voice, it can hardly be said that s/he is speaking in his/her own voice.
5. Evidently, otherness need not necessarily be specified according to nation, race, culture, tradition or language. Other specifiers are for example, class or the fact of domination itself, as well as religion and gender, depending on the context.
6. For a more extensive critique of anticolonial discourse of origination, see my "Post, post and post. Or where is South African Literature in all this?" (1990). The outline of a reconstitutive programme I proposed at the time is also problematised in the present article.
7. See Lyotard (1988) for an account of nationalist or group-defining narratives, particularly nos. 155–160 and "Notice Cashinahua".
8. This article is a revised version of a paper read at the 1991 Saval Conference. I would like to thank Paul Voice and Marianne de Jong for comments and suggestions on previous versions of this paper.

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