

The Ruptures of the Particular: Against Generalised Critiques of Generalised Cultural Relativism

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The globalisation of literary studies and its professional institutions has brought with it some peculiar paradoxes, especially when we come to profess knowledge and theory about cultural relativism. The paradox that struck me after reading Professor Nemoianu's extremely erudite paper, is the difficulty in reconciling general theories about cultural relativity, for or against, with the sheer density and intractability of the particular. This potentially paralysing position has led to a great deal of agonising among multiculturalists, postcolonialists, deconstructivists and others who in the past had perhaps thought their common antagonist was a certain notion of imperialism associated with the history of the West.

Such a cosily filial state of cultural politics is easily punctured. The paper we have just heard gathers much of its strength from the pertinence of the particular. The paper's virtue is its refusal to countenance a dogma of correctness in which a unitary category such as Western "imperialism", with a seemingly single intentionality, is placed in a more or less fixed relation of destructive antagonism with another essentialised notion, the "other" culture.

Insofar as many of us share the refusal to accept such flabby conceptualisations, we agree with Professor Nemoianu's critique, and we applaud it. Nevertheless, it seems that two further moves are necessary: one a sort of regional translation of a position such as his from the point of view of southern African studies, and the other a proposed re-situating of the critique itself. I must deal very briefly with these two moves.

First, the regional translation. It is not entirely clear who the "multiculturalists" in Professor Nemoianu's paper are, although it is indicated that they show an affinity with "deconstruction" and "cultural studies". The paper itself regards the drift towards relativism in these approaches scepti-

cally. Although "postcolonial" approaches are not mentioned as such, we know that international postcolonial scholars are in the forefront of those who profess cultural relativism, and that they share both a political agenda with cultural studies, as well as a reliance on postmodernist strategies of decentering what are regarded as Western certainties.

In southern Africanist debate in disciplines such as literary studies, cultural anthropology, religious studies, and social history in general, a similar configuration of relativist scholars in combat with empiricist or conservative-leaning sceptics has become evident over the past few years. In this interdisciplinary sphere, the supposedly corrective onslaught of ideas related to constructivist theories which, in turn, derive from various postisms, have themselves been severely undercut. For example, in historical writing about religion, in particular, there has been a gathering swell of reaction against binary models which assume that Christianity was generally little more than a tool of imperialism, and that it is best analysed within the context of colonial imposition or capitalist machination. Highly regarded scholars, including African missiologists, have argued very convincingly that human agency and creative re-appropriation render such "separatist" arguments clumsy and untenable. One scholar, American historian Richard Elphick (1992: 16), goes so far as to press postmodernist conceptual tools into service to emphasise not the politics of cultural imperialism of separatism, but the surprising and joyful play of bricolage in southern African colonial history.

In a move to temper this revisionist brand of anti-binarism, others have sought to remind those who espouse such a particularism that the jolly bricolage occurred within oceanic currents of cultural imposition, a force which theory tries to bring into view by employing concepts such as hegemony (in its proper sense) and/or discourse so as not to resort to crude notions of evil conspiracy. One of South Africa's foremost cultural theorists, Njabulo Ndebele (1987: 224), for example, has taken pains to remind his fellows that "the English language brought with it the unquestioned, non-negotiable primacy of Western civilisation and its spectrum of values". American historian Frederick Cooper (1994: 1517) has urged his fellows to "confront the power behind European expansionism without assuming it was all-determining". Cooper (1994: 1529) reminds us that "recognition of the much greater power of the Europeans in the colonial encounter does not negate the importance of African agency in determining the shape the encounter took". This kind of argument could readily be applied to the long history of cultural politics in Southern Africa.

Such a third position seems to be emerging in southern African studies. It seeks to combine particularist critique without a recognition that, to a

certain extent, cultural forces in history, by overwhelming evidence, did indeed exercise a totalising effect on people and communities. This third approach is not confined to a deconstructivist or a multiculturalist affiliation. Indeed, it grows partly out of a sceptical appraisal of such orientations. It is as eclectic as it needs to be to describe its subject adequately. Importantly, it tends to liquefy the opposition between multiculturalism/post-colonialism/postmodernism on the one hand, and particularist empiricism or conservatism on the other. It sees a lot of benefit on both sides.

It is here that the second move, that of possibly re-situating the critique we have just heard, becomes possible. In various approaches allied to the deconstructivist/multiculturalist/postcolonialist positions, a very high degree of auto-critique has developed. This is true of southern African as well as metropolitan centres of study. An examination of the kinds of things these scholars are saying will reveal that the critique of dogmatic cultural binarism - which I take to be the gist of Professor Nemoianu's position - has itself moved the very centre of debate in academic spheres related to multiculturalism and postcolonialism. More, it has become the cutting edge of debates among the better exponents of such positions. The crudely oppositional variants live on, but one tends to find them in the more naive and eager appropriations of these theories.

Some examples may help a little. Writing from Port Harcourt, Nigeria, on a subject he calls post-Africanism, Denis Ekpo (1995: 122), who scornfully refers to the postmodern condition as "nothing but the hypocritical self-flattering cry of overfed and spoilt children of hypercapitalism", adds that

it did happen nevertheless that Africa, at a certain period in its history, came into contact with, and suffered defeat at the hands of, modern European rationality. The modernist culture blanket that Europe cast over Africa in the wake of this conquest meant above all the superimposition of a logocentric rationality on native minds.

(Ekpo 1995: 122)

Ekpo vigorously rejects a postmodernist preoccupation with the supposed crisis of the subject, yet he sees in most of the conceptions of African identity consequent upon colonisation an isomorphic relationship with Western logocentrism, and he uses deconstructive ideas to unmake these notions of African identity.

Satya P. Mohanty (1995), wrapping up a PMLA special issue on post-colonialism under the title "Colonial Legacies, Multicultural Futures", argues for an alternative to relativism and scepticism, turning instead to what she calls "postpositivist realism" grounded in social practice. A

committed multiculturalist by any account, she says the following:

Perhaps the most powerful philosophical ally of modern anticolonial struggles of all kinds is this universalist view that individual human worth is absolute: it cannot be traded away, and it does not exist in degrees These claims are also the strongest basis for the multiculturalist belief that other cultures need to be approached with the presumption of equal worth.

(Mohanty 1995: 115-116)

Then, contrary to the argument that multiculturalists are necessarily adherents of dogmatic relativism, Mohanty avers the following: "Beyond this starting hypothesis lies the difficult but necessary job of specifying commonalities and articulating disagreement and of learning from one another" (1995: 116). Such a delicate combining of difference and commonality has become a rich vein, articulated by Laclau and Mouffe as "an articulated totality of differences", and by Simon During as a "non-essentialist unity across a maintained difference" (Wade 1995: 48).

Laura Chrisman notes three results of the potential in postcolonial critical inflections for closure:

- 1) The analysis of colonial discourse becomes self-contained, even hypostatized, a scene devoted solely to the supreme encounter with the Other.
- 2) Imperialism itself is rendered homogeneous subsumed into colonialism, or reduced to a synonym for a vague totality called "Western power".
- 3) Colonialism becomes allegorised, "a notion applicable to all situations of structural domination in which Self is constituted through and against an Other".

(Chrisman 1994: 499)

I could go on for much longer, and quote many more self-critical positions of this nature, from Anthony Appiah to Gayatri Spivak, but I must conclude. These critiques all emanate from within a commitment to some form of cultural relativism. They suggest that the necessary undercutting of multiculturalism's "globalist and coercive potential", such as executed by Professor Nemoianu, has already entered the discourse of the relativists themselves. It remains to be seen whether these approaches will survive their own auto-critique in its more radical forms.

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