The Productivity of Colonial Power

The way power and domination are theorized has been irrevocably altered by Post-Structuralist and Post-Marxist insights. No longer is repression viewed purely in negative and material terms, but a far more complex array of ideological relationships are introduced. Under the triple-aegis of Gramsci, Althusser and Foucault, modern theories couple the naked exercise of power with a *productive* idea of discourse, ideology and identity: insidious and pervasive; it structures the domain of individual consciousness itself. The intercasual dialectic between material manifestation of power and its ideological effects is central. However, this has raised a troubling question for those who encounter power not in books, but *barrios*, not in academies, but in army brutality. Like all politicised *others*, the postcolonial radicals need to balance the more complex theories of discourse and identity with the need to maintain their own project which aims at articulating an authentic voice. The question is how they are supposed to detach themselves from colonial discourses? How are they to recover the histories from the years of subjugation, those of the *subaltern* subjects? Moreover, how are they going to progress to forge some kind of modern identity which is positively inscribed in the postcolonial era? Hence, there has been increased interest in the fissures and margins of colonial discourse which may – if not providing the authentic voice of the subaltern – allow the uniform presence of the dominant ideology to be breached. This concept, reflecting the diverse racial mix in the postcolonial world, has been labelled hybridity.

Hybridity grows out a prior concept relating to the mutuality of the crucial 'latent' (to use Said's[1] term) binary which underlies so much colonial discourse. This is based around the notion of self and other: the hardening of a basic conceptual strategy (arranging the world into the familiar and strange) into an elaborate and often damaging ideology. For example, Europeans counterpointed what they saw as the qualities of civilisation with various formulations of 'other' based around the other continents. The stereotype, as Bhabha[2] notes, is much like a fetish, simultaneously gathering the identity of a whole race into a single sign, which then enables it to be disavowed. Literary texts, especially travelogues, were a particularly potent mechanism through which to express such binaries. The Orient was conceptualised as inscrutable and decadent, whilst Africa figured as barbaric and uncivilised. These forms found a graphic expression in maps, where one can contrast the stately, classical figure of Britannia with symbols of American and Africa as half-naked, vulnerable women; ripe for plunder and exploitation.

Yet the binary was also based on interpenetration. Foucault once analysed Enlightenment justice as a normalising force: whilst superficially excluding and erasing the mad, criminal and corrupt, these very classifications helped to define exactly what the dominant ideology's qualities were supposed to be. The elaborate classification of criminals (into mentally incapable or aristocratically corrupt eg. the 'gentleman murderer') finds a counterpart in the differing stereotypes of colonial discourse. It is indeed paradoxical that a disavowed 'other' should find itself structured and restructured. This, perhaps, is symptomatic of the interpenetrative aspect mentioned above. There is something strange and yet familiar about the colonial stereotype: familiar because it has been partially assimilated into the dominant ideology and indeed helped to define it; strange because the dominant ideology needs to emphasise its very distance and strangeness. This curious doubleness is not a unique instance. Colonial stereotypes also represented a site of both derision and desire. This is particularly evidenced in portrayals of women: they find themselves the target of all the West's moral scorn; accused of wanton lust, lesbianism, decadence and unrefinement. Yet they also stand in as the realisation of some of the West's fantasies – that of a submissive and yet exotic, sensuous sexual partner. Indian scholars have noted a recurrent 'colonial fantasy' which appears in Victorian literature (eg.*Around the World in Eighty Days*) is that of a Western man saving an Indian widow from the pyre. This combines civilised morality and ideals of courage with a dark undercurrent of sexual longing which sums up the contradictions of the stereotype.

Another crucial incidence of doubleness is perhaps the opening to hybridity itself. It concerns the paradox at the heart of the civilising mission. On the one hand, imperialism must take its moral justification from the ethical, social and religious inferiority of the colonised. For example, pro-slavery rhetoric included the idea that the slaves were actually being delivered *from* the godlessness of their 'dark continent.' And yet,

this project undermines its own foundations. If the 'other' can be normalised, can be civilised, then it appears the inferiority is nothing more than a cultural construct and not an inner inevitability. Suddenly, the whole essentialistic foundation of the imperial mission, supported by discourses of science which aimed to prove the existence of *homo monstrous* as a lesser species, was under threat.

As the colonial period wore on, the amount of 'educated others' began to undercut the whole civilised/uncivilised binary – the latent ideology of all western discourse about the colonies – and what emerged was a growing 'contact zone.' The contact zone was the crucible of hybridity. The disintegrating 'civilised/uncivilised' binary was just one example of how the material arrangements of the colonies were challenging the 'latent' binaries which underwrote so much of the ideology. In India, the assimilation of certain educated native castes into the colonial apparatus was a movement from 'other' into 'self.' In other areas and colonial situations, there was an opposite movement from 'self' to 'other': colonial élites, carrying with them the identity of the metropole, found themselves estranged from it in a foreign land. As the stereotypes became increasingly inadequate to deal with the complexity of the colonial experience, they became a class which began to form its own identity; separate from the metropole, and yet still a European élite within the colony. This can be seen in, for example, the Thirteen Colonies, where a notion of 'American-ness' gradually emerged and eventually displaced the European identity. This, of course, led to revolutions by colonial élites. This tended to be the situation in the Americas: elsewhere, where the inferiority and presence of the 'other' was perhaps stronger, the fear was a neurotic and horrifying one of 'going native.'

Another movement across the 'contact zone' which provoked particular fear was interbreeding. This can be seen most spectacularly in Latin America, where contemporary society is *mestizo*: a multiple patchwork of groups between margins of pure indigenous people and (very rarely) people of purely Spanish descent. Obviously, the fact of interbreeding diluted the substratic binary which was the justification for so much of coloniality's repressive action. Interbreeding has a form of mirror-image in *diaspora*: the penetration of the metropole by substantial numbers of colonial 'other.' Once again, the hard-and-fast distinctions become blurred and the metropole's citizens are confronted by something more complex: the metropole becomes a cosmopole. It is worth noting that literature is a particularly fertile field for such *transcultural* activities, whereby colonised peoples seek to express themselves in the modes of the coloniser, and the coloniser attempts to come to terms with the colonial experience. Literature tends to mediate – whether consciously or unconsciously – between modes of value. Although a lot of colonial literature is obviously locked into the discourse of the coloniser, we can see the erosion of the latent binaries in work such as *Heart of Darkness* which uses an admittedly stereotypical image of the 'other' to diagnose a malaise at the root of 'self.'

Many theorists have attacked the relentless emphasis on discourse. They argue its shifts the emphasis away from the material conditions of exploitation, and gives the impression of some kind of symmetrical contact. Of course, contact was profoundly asymmetrical, and, in the words of Césaire's rhetorical question: "has colonialism really *placed civilisations in contact*?…no human contact, but relations of domination of submission."[3] Others say that hybridity is not a sign of subversive liminality but rather a powerful violation of a colonial subject's authentic identity. Nevertheless, in the hands of Bhaba, hybridity is also seen as having a disruptive effect; opening fissures and fractures within a dominant ideology.

He identifies the *productivity* of discourse: its need to embody itself not only in stereotypes and examples of *prélèvement* (naked exercise of repressive power) but in a complex set of discourses, institutions and relations. As such, it evolves along with the colonial situation; responding to it. Indeed, what he calls the 'play' in colonial discourse is a condition for its very existence: its ability to contextualise and recontextualise itself. Yet he contrasts this diachronic aspect of colonialism – "historically and discursively determined"[4] – with the compulsive need to crystallise colonial relations into stasis and fixity: primarily to preserve the master/slave opposition. However, just as Derrida's 'play' undermines and destabilises the text, Bhabha hypothesises that the 'play' of colonial discourse opens up problematic gaps. Colonial discourse can never reproduce itself exactly: the former dynamics have to be twisted to fit a new situation. This 'play' is particularly intense in the 'contact zone': just as Derrida concentrates on signs which appear to transgress the established system of the text, Bhaba sees *mestizos* as transgressive agents.

Other postcolonial writers have tapped a different vein of hybridity and multiplicity. They believe Bhaba has come to close to accepting the crude dichotomy between coloniser and colonised, and ignored the diversity of the colonial situation. Theirs is not a hybridity of interpenetration between two poles, but the intersection of multiple discourses which simultaneously provide the architecture for and yet threaten to collapse the simple latent binary. They point out that there is more than simply a continuum between poles

of 'coloniser' and 'colonised': instead, class and gender provide additional vectors to support race. To illustrate the resulting complexity, they show how males on both sides of the colonial divide often concurred in their attitudes to women. They analyse the divisions within anti-colonial movements, and show how there was a hierarchy whereby certain elements (such as the indigenous peasantry in Mexico) were doubly-excluded: by the Spanish because of race and by the creoles because of class. Nevertheless, it appears that the two positions need not be in opposition. The intersection of discourses simply provide more instances of transgression and instability. Of course, this must be countered by the realisation that it also provides more instances of oppressive structures.

Thus, not only is the material situation in the colonies criss-crossed with fissures, but the ideological situation is too. It is through this transgression and potential dissolution of colonial discourse that colonial subjects inhabit a space that is obviously bound up in a dominant discourse, but partially their own too. No longer a hegemonic apparatus of power, colonial discourse is threatened by its own contradictions and scarred with counter-currents. From these fissures – the *mestizo* who is both Indian and Hispanic, the educated Bengali administrator – voices may be recovered that are not simply reproductions of the imperialist stereotype. Colonised nations cannot simply erase their colonial past – any new identity must assimilate the cultural and ideological impact of the metropole – but hybridity offers a hopeful synthesis whereby the nation acknowledges and yet is not inscribed by the fact of colonial domination. In terms of literature, fictions may be used as a ground to contest representation, to evoke the possibility of 'alternative worlds.' As language is among the fundamental divides, literature becomes a crucial and complex area of colonial self-identification: whether writers feel they are trapped in a language that is not entirely their own (eg.Daedalus in Joyce) or whether they feel they can appropriate it for their own situations (eg.Achebe.) Culture is perceived, wrongly or rightly, as a reservoir for the values of any society, and hence can become an important element in contesting the identity of the colony, resisting the discourse of the coloniser and eventually defining a new nationhood.

Yet whilst this, on paper, seems very well, there are those who have argued its post-structuralist trajectory simply overflies the harsh realities of coloniality and postcoloniality. Once again, they raise the objection that it overemphasises discourse. Even if one grants that discourse itself is fractured and provides sites of resistance, does not resistance simply become a condition and effect of discourse? Postcolonialist radicals are worried that this seems to erode the capacity for personal agency in a revolutionary struggle. If colonised subjects simply inhabit the margins of a colonial discourse, is the best they can manage is to appropriate and invert the existing binaries of colonialism itself: is nationalist solidarity simply a byproduct of the imperialist's own discourse? For example, the Irish nationalist movement appropriated Celtic imagery, thereby reinforcing an existing (albeit inverted) stereotype; perhaps at the cost of the identity of 'modern Ireland.' This can be seen in the work of Yeats, among others, who have been charged with perpetuating the images of a lost Gaelic past, and emphasizing tragic failure. Others have suggested that nationalism itself is deeply complicit with Western formulations of 'nation-hood.'

However, others have questioned the confidence of those who attempt to work beyond existing ideologies. Foucauldian pessimism – the idea that ideologies can create a contained space for resistance, and are actually far more pervasive than at first glance – seems reinforced by the 20th experience of colonial independence. Far from being proud new nations, the 'third world' is still deeply interpenetrated by Western culture and, more dangerously perhaps, by Euroamerican economic domination. One might cynically ask whether postcoloniality – allowing the colonies political independence (usually on the Western model), yet within a globalised marketplace where they are still dominated – is simply a shrewd evolution of the imperialist project into the era of late capitalism. There is also the question as to the 'discourse' of the anti-colonialists. There is a strange paradox that those who berate theorists like Bhabha for giving up authentic identity for hybridity and action *within* the dominant ideology often look to a 'myth of origin' which is every bit as stylised as (and sometimes merely an inverted form of) the pre-colonial stereotype constructed by the imperial power. They think they have escaped discourse, but in fact have not. The fact that, for example, black slavery was founded on a trade with African slave-kingdoms such as Benin, ought to rein in the excesses of pan-nationalist 'Eden' discourses. Also relevant is the fact that nationalist movements often assimilate and reproduce elements of colonial discourse themselves, vis-à-vis class and gender.

Hence it becomes clear that any notion of resistance which is autonomous of colonialist discourse is oversimplistic. No nationalist movement can simply 'erase' the centuries of colonial history which have helped the evolution of their culture, yet to give up on the project of recovering some pre-colonial 'authentic' identity is a depressing prospect. Yet if the postcolonial radical is truly interested in the voice of

the ‘subaltern’ during the era of colonisation itself, then he/she could do little better than to look to the liminalities and hybridities of colonial discourse. There they may be able to find the repressed histories and identities they seek. Literature - as an ambiguous terrain of representation, fictions and alternative worlds, culturally-specific in its use of language and a traditional mediator of conflicts in discourse and value – can become a rich lode of these things within ideology. By analysing a colonial work, a critic can begin to unravel the contradictions, instabilities and interpenentrations in the ideology of the coloniser. By writing a postcolonial work, a writer can resist or question colonial discourse right at its cultural heart. It is little surprise that hybridity in literature has become symbolic not only of the complexity of colonial experience, but also the possibilities of transgression and disruption.