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The Historian and the Theorist Revisited

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PONDERING the relationship between social history and postmodern and postcolonial theory seems a fitting way to commemorate 30 years of *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, in that postmodern and postcolonial theory currently constitute both an opportunity for and a challenge to the practice of social history. Since I was born in the same year as the journal, this topic offers me a significant if inadvertent opportunity to reflect on the influence of postcolonial and postmodern theory read through the lens of my own research into the history of colonialism and gender in nineteenth-century British Columbia. While postcolonial and postmodern theory can sometimes stymie the work of social historians, they can also strengthen it in important and sometimes forgotten ways.

Postcolonial and postmodern theory are intimately and inextricably linked despite the significant differences between the two bodies of thought. They share, at root, a common critique of narratives of Western progress, although postmodern thinkers emphasize the narratives of progress while postcolonial thinkers highlight their Western character.[1] They also share certain key figures, with the aptly dubbed "holy trinity" of postcolonial thought — Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said — figuring prominently in postmodern pantheons.

Postcolonial and postmodern thought also share some common history, both having gained widespread academic cachet in the 1980s and 1990s. Typically, scholars dispute the reasons behind this shared stardom. Anne McClintock attributes the growing influence of postmodern and postcolonial thought to the increasing dissatisfaction with narratives of linear progress.[2] Others associate it with the tendency to bracket "theory" as a distinct mode of thinking, a tendency that reflected the radical disagreement regarding cul-

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1 This point is made by Gyan Prakash, "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography", *Social Text*, vol. 31/32 (1990), p. 10.

2 Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism' ", *Social Text*, vol. 31/32 (1990), pp. 84–98.

tural practices and modes of interpreting that marks the postwar world. More pessimistic observers like Ajaz Ahmad characterize both postcolonial and postmodern thought as the ominous product of the academic left's disavowal of radical politics and indeed of social relevance after the 1960s.[3]

Whatever the reasons behind the ascent of postcolonial and postmodern theory, historians, including social historians, have been at best ambivalent witnesses, reluctant to hop on the respective or collective bandwagons. Much of this reticence comes from the knee-jerk anti-theoretical stance nurtured in history departments and journals, an implicit hostility to explicit theorizing that, of course, belies the fact that empiricism is itself a theory. Yet, beyond this garden-variety hostility, there are some meaningful reasons for the ambivalence of historians in general and social historians in particular. In this context, the literary emphasis of postmodern and postcolonial theory and their whiggish underpinnings deserve our critical analysis.

In the North American academy, postmodern and postcolonial thought have found their most articulate supporters and practitioners amongst textual and literary scholars. Spivak, Bhabha, and Said are literary scholars, and their prominence is indicative of the intimate wedding of postcolonial, postmodern, and literary studies. Yet this triumverate is not necessarily reflective of either postcolonial or postmodern thought's intellectual or political roots. The development of postcolonial theory especially owes much to the explicitly social analyses of the members of Subaltern Studies. This collective is committed to fashioning a historical methodology capable of resurrecting the untold, subaltern history of British imperialism — a goal that is not only profoundly social but deeply historical and overtly political. Indeed, rather than challenge the viability of "history from below", Subaltern Studies enriches its interests and exposes its biases. "As an alternative discourse," writes Said, "the work of the Subaltern scholars can be seen as analogue of all those recent attempts in the West and throughout the rest of the world to articulate the hidden or suppressed accounts of numerous groups — women, minorities, disadvantaged or dispossessed groups, refugees, exiles, etc."[4] That it fails to make good on such revolutionary promises by neglecting the roles of women and the limitations of nationalism suggests that the postcolonial history practised by Subaltern Studies suffers from some of the same weaknesses as its bedfellows.[5]

Despite these social and historical roots, postcolonial theory has, like its postmodern cousin, been most intensively utilized in literary scholarship, and its relevance to those of us labouring in the vineyards of social analysis

3 Ajaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 1–2.

4 Edward W. Said, "Foreword", in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. vi.

5 On this, see Himani Bannerji, "Politics and the Writing of History", in Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri, eds., *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race* (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1998).

has sometimes seemed obscure. In their emphasis on the textual, postcolonial and postmodern thinkers seem neither able nor even disposed to capture the voices of those who dwelt in the hypothetical below without recourse to written, self-identifying records. Some, like Spivak, have indeed sharply critiqued the very project of recovering the "subaltern voice".[6] Historical work produced explicitly within the postmodern rubric, like Christopher Bracken's *The Potlatch Papers*, may be clever and quixotic, but it tells us suspiciously little about the societies that produced, received, or were shaped by the texts analysed — nor does it purport to do so.[7] Social historians are not alone in noting the seemingly asocial character of such work. Led by the polemical Ahmad, some literary scholars associate the rise of both postmodern and postcolonial thought with a larger abandonment of emancipatory politics and call instead for a return to Marxist analyses.

More than ignoring the social, postmodern and postcolonial literary scholars sometimes seem to conflate the literary and the social, using, for instance, a reading of Rudyard Kipling to make sweeping arguments about the character of imperialism. Kipling no doubt tells us something about imperialism, possibly quite a bit about middle-class, male British perceptions of the colonial venture, and a great deal about the constructions of empire in English literary discourse. To suggest that Kipling is an adequate basis for an analysis of imperialism as a whole, however, surely confuses literary texts with the entirety of human history. As R. W. Connell points out, it also implies a wrong-headed theory of social change. Commenting on literary studies of masculinity, he argues that studies that "operate wholly within the world of discourse" are inevitably reactive. He continues, "One can get from such criticism no pro-active idea of how to *change* oppressive gender relations — except perhaps to fly back in time and write a better war novel."[8] Following Connell's metaphor further, literary analyses of imperialsim would imply that the course of Western imperialism could only be altered if Kipling had written a different book. As much as we might gain access to the past through texts, the past itself is not literally a text: or, if it is, it is surely more than one text.

Historians sound a strong disciplinary chord in their objection to both postmodernism's and postcolonialism's apparent ahistoricism. We might accept that we are "beyond" or "post" modernism. "Modernism" refers to a specific mode of expression and analysis, which, however vague, ill-defined, and overused, can be left behind insofar as one might reject or critique it.

6 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", reprinted in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

7 Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

8 R. W. Connell, "The Big Picture: Masculinities in Recent World History", *Theory and Society*, vol. 22 (1993), p. 200.

Colonialism, on the other hand, refers to a global mode of domination and exploitation that encircled, and indeed continues to encircle, the world's peoples.[9] That being the case, it is difficult and possibly politically dangerous to suggest that any person or peoples are "beyond" or "post" it. When a literary scholar referred to my work on gender, race, and the making of a colonial society in British Columbia as a study of "postcolonial women", I reminded her that, if there was ever a period when the world was "beyond" colonialism, it certainly was not the mid-nineteenth century. In positing a clear break from a tawdry past and an entry into a clearer and brighter world, the term postcolonial reinvokes, as McClintock argues, the same whiggish, linear belief in progress that it purports to critique.[10]

This point is salient cross-culturally as well as chronologically. A colleague from the American colony of Puerto Rico reminded me of the irony of his being asked to attend a conference on "postcolonialism" in Boston. Many nations that have formally rejected their imperial masters remain enmeshed in what might be thought of as "neocolonial" politics and economics. Others are shaped by overlapping and competing claims to nationhood that confound any simple definitions of "pre" and "post" colonial. Canada is surely as an effective an example of this as any other country, as articles in *Histoire sociale/ Social History* have documented over the past 30 years. There are at least five distinct contexts to which the term postcolonial might be applied: the lingering cultural and political influence of Britain; the continuing and possibly increasing dominance of American ideas, money, and cultural forms; Québécois demands for independence from English Canada; First Nations' calls for sovereignty and land claims; and the increasing numbers of diasporic people of colour demanding their place in the nation.[11]

There are meaningful methodological, political, and theoretical reasons why social historians might be wary of postcolonial and postmodern theory. Yet there are at least two compelling reasons why social historians need to pay attention to them. First, both encourage us to think critically and hard about the character of our sources and what we propose to do with and say about them. This is somewhat ironic, in that what is sometimes presented as the most newfangled, anti-historical kind of thought leads us back to the essence of traditional historical enterprise: the primary source and that standard historical methodology, the close textual reading. Postmodern theory, with all its emphasis on text and discourse, forces us to confront both the

9 On this point, see McClintock, "The Angel of Progress"; Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Post-Colonial", *Social Text*, vol. 31/32 (1990), pp. 99–113. While Shohat's call for a return to the use of "third world" seems off the mark, her analysis of the abuses of the term "post-colonial" are sound.

10 McClintock, "The Angel of Progress", pp. 93–97. This point is also made in her *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

11 This is borrowed from Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 10–11.

limitations and possibilities of our source base in a careful and systematic way.[12]

Postcolonial analysis similarly urges us to probe the character of our evidence, if for different reasons. The most lasting contribution of Said's germinal *Orientalism* is probably his eloquent reminder that studies of the "other" tell us much more about their authors than about their subjects.[13] This is a point of some consequence for historians, whose work is so dependent on locating and interpreting written sources. It makes it impossible to read documents of cultural encounters — whether between colonial administrators and local peoples in Asia or between reformers and the poor in downtown Montreal — as straightforward avenues into the past. For historians of Canada, recognizing and interrogating the extent to which our sources are steeped in, and indeed forged by, the politics of imperialism challenges us to find new documents and new ways of reading them. Such tools are necessary if we are to develop a history able to account for the experience and perspective of the colonized as well as the colonizer. As Himani Bannerji argues, historical scholarship that fails to consider "the question of location and the colonized's history, language, and culture" cannot move beyond its profound limitations.[14]

Taking postmodern and postcolonial perspectives seriously will not necessarily put us under the hypnotic sway of the text. It can, instead, produce histories that are both socially engaged and socially oriented. Postcolonial theory equips us with concepts that enable us to analyse the social past in important ways. Bhabha's distillation of hybridity and mimicry, for one, can help historians to understand both the lives of those who occupied literal and figurative borderlands and the views of those who observed them.[15] That this same body of theory may lead us to be less naively enthusiastic about the project of recovering the lost voices of the past is something to be celebrated rather than mourned. Critiques like Spivak's are not attacks on the project of social history as much as they are powerful reminders of the epistemic and political vanity of academics who presume the ability to interlocute their subjects — especially when the investigator is Western and the subject is not.[16]

This leads us to the second asset of postcolonial and postmodern theory, namely that they force readers and practitioners to confront ingrained subject

12 On this, see Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 3 (September 1995), pp. 354–376.

13 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1975).

14 Bannerji, "Politics and the Writing of History", p. 290.

15 See Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *October*, vol. 28 (Spring 1984), pp. 125–134.

16 On this in Canadian history, see Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History", in Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendall, eds., *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

positions and open the possibility of alternative, politically engaged historical analyses. I do not mean to suggest that postmodern and postcolonial practice are necessarily feminist, socialist, or anti-racist: clearly they are not. But the use of a theory never guarantees its outcome. People have produced conservative work using Marxist analytic tools, just as anti-feminists have utilized feminist research to create scholarship that is singularly acritical of gender division and hierarchy. Like Marxism and feminism, however, both postmodern and postcolonial thought encourage alternative, challenging readings of the human record.

The radical possibilities of postmodern thought are made most clear by recent feminist historiography. In the last ten years, women's and gender historians have turned to postmodern thought to read old documents in new ways to expose the gendered politics of the past. In works like Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight*, we see the tools of literary analysis utilized to reveal the social histories of gender and class in *fin-de-siècle* London.[17] Within Canadian historiography, Joy Parr's *The Gender of Breadwinners* demonstrates how selectively harnessing the insights of postmodern theory can help us to understand even overtly material issues like labour process.[18] Studies like Sarah Carter's *Capturing Women* and Elizabeth Vibert's *Traders' Tales* suggest some ways in which postcolonial and postmodern theory can illuminate the complex process by which images simultaneously reflect and help constitute our social world.[19]

Postcolonial theory, unlike its postmodern cousin, wears its politics on its sleeve. It is explicitly dedicated to exposing the vested national, cultural, and racial interests that inform traditional historiography and challenges us to develop new modes of conceptualizing the world's history. As Gyan Prakash writes, it is fundamentally concerned with "how the history of colonialism and colonialism's disciplining of history can be shaken loose from the domination of categories and ideas it produced — colonizer and colonized; white, black, and brown; civilized and uncivilized; modern and archaic; cultural identity; tribe and nation".[20]

That postcolonial history can help us to do so in practice as well as in theory is suggested by some recent work on the history of colonization in Canada. Winona Stevenson's fine study of her Cree missionary grandfather

17 Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

18 Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Men, Women, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

19 Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997); Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders' Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Plateau, 1807–1846* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997).

20 Gyan Prakash, "Introduction: After Colonialism", in Prakash, ed., *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 5. Also see his "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography", *Social Text*, vol. 31/32 (1990), pp. 9–19.

indicates how postcolonial analysis can help us to interpret the history of cultural contact in Canada in a way that better accounts for First Nations' voices.[21] Cole Harris's recent rethinking of the "resettlement" of British Columbia demonstrates how postcolonial scholarship has led one scholar radically to rethink his historical practice.[22] While calling the world postcolonial might be misguided, certainly we might strive to be postcolonial historians in the sense of having exposed and rejected, or at the very least recognized, the central role of colonial categories and hierarchies in Western historical thought and methodology. In this sense, postcolonial theory may not be able to tell the story of colonial history, but it can help us to become post, or at least less, colonial historians.

Social historians have a difficult mandate. Like all historians, our work is necessarily and irrevocably dependent on primary sources, those small and problematic fragments of the past. Social historians bear the additional responsibility of the conviction that history is incomplete unless it acknowledges the significance of ordinary people, ordinary words, and ordinary acts — things that are so often either ignored or obscured by the sources we depend upon so profoundly. Postmodern and postcolonial theory certainly cannot solve all the problems that flow from this predicament. Sometimes they magnify them. Postmodern and postcolonial theory do offer meaningful insights into some of the problems and possibilities of social history, however — and we can use all the help we can get.

21 Winona Stevenson, "The Journals and Voices of a Church of England Native Catechist: Askenootow (Charles Pratt), 1851–1884", in Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History* (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1996).

22 Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).