

What postcolonial theory doesn't say

NEIL LAZARUS

Abstract: This article proposes that there is a category error at the heart of 'postcolonial studies' as an academic field. There has been a notable failure in the field to situate the historical projects of colonialism and imperialism in the determinant contexts of the inception, consolidation and development of the modern world system, whose developmental logic is that of combined and uneven development. Even on the best postcolonialist accounts, imperialism is typically situated in civilisational terms and refers to 'the West' rather than to capitalism. The social and temporal power identified through this means is a euphemism. The idea of 'the West', as it is deployed in postcolonial studies, inevitably issues in a dematerialised – and, for that matter, unhistorical – understanding of the forces powering the world system over the course of the past 500 years. This case is argued through reviewing work by Edward Said, Andre Gunder Frank, Benita Parry, Fredric Jameson, Susan Bassnett, V. Y. Mudimbe, Rey Chow and novelists such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ousmane Sembène, *inter alia*.

Keywords: capitalist world system, combined and uneven development, comparative literature, Edward Said, Eurocentrism, Orientalism, postcolonial studies, Rey Chow, Susan Bassnett

The origins of this essay lie in a plenary lecture delivered at a conference entitled 'What postcolonial theory doesn't say' at the University of York in July 2010.¹ Much of my own work since the early 1990s has taken the form of a contestation of particular ideas and assumptions predominant in postcolonial studies. In this work, I have sought in general to call into question concepts and theories that

Neil Lazarus is Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at Warwick University. His latest book, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, has just been published by Cambridge University Press.

Race & Class

Copyright © 2011 Institute of Race Relations, Vol. 53(1): 3–27
10.1177/0306396811406778 <http://rac.sagepub.com>

have seemed to me to lack accountability to the realities of the contemporary world system that constitutes their putative object, and also to register my disagreement with the partial and tendentious ways in which the work of some key writers in the field has been taken up. My current writing is concerned with a plausible 'reconstruction' of postcolonial studies. Such a reconstruction needs to begin, I argue, with a periodisation of postcolonial studies, aimed both at situating its emergence and consolidation as a field of academic enquiry and at contextualising its distinctive emphases and investments. Concerning the latter, we can register immediately the supplementarity of postcolonial studies to post-structuralist theory. This supplementarity has often been noted, and some of the defining theoretical and ideological dispositions in the field have correctly been identified and assessed by critics, accordingly, through reference to poststructuralism. But we need to say more than this. To ring true, our periodisation must do more than offer an *intellectual* genealogy of postcolonial studies; it needs, in addition, to supply a credible sociological account of the relationship between the field's problematic and developments in the wider social world.

Emerging at the end of the 1970s and consolidating itself over the course of the following decade and a half, postcolonial studies has been very much a creature of its time; or, rather, it has been a creature *of* and *against* its time. Just behind it lay the post-1945 boom – a 'golden age', as Eric Hobsbawm has called it,² – of a quarter century or so of explosive global economic growth accompanied, in the core capitalist countries, by an historically unprecedented democratisation of social resources and, in the 'Third World', by insurgent demands for decolonisation and self-determination. This boom period had come to an end at the beginning of the 1970s, when the world system stumbled into the economic recession and attendant political crisis, from which it has yet to recover. The thirty-plus years since the puncturing of the boom – the 'long downturn', to use Robert Brenner's term³ – have been marked, economically, by a steady decline in the rate of return on capital investment and, politically, by the global reassertion of US dominance (involving, among other things, the rolling back of the challenge represented by Third World insurgency) and the brutal imposition of 'the logic of unilateral capital'.⁴

Postcolonial studies emerged as an institutionally specific, conjuncturally determined response to these global developments. The emergent field breathed the air of the reassertion of imperial dominance beginning in the 1970s, one of whose major preconditions was the containment and recuperation of the historic challenge from the Third World that had been expressed in the struggle for decolonisation in the boom years after 1945. After 1975, the prevailing political sentiment in the West turned sharply against anti-colonial nationalist insurgency and revolutionary anti-imperialism. The substance and trajectory of the work produced in postcolonial studies were strongly marked by this epochal reversal of the fortunes and influence of insurgent national liberation movements and revolutionary ideologies in the Third World. The decisive defeat of liberationist ideologies within the western (or, increasingly, western-based) intelligentsia, including its radical elements, was fundamental to the emergent

field, whose subsequent consolidation, during the 1980s and early 1990s, might then be seen, at least in part, as a function of its articulation of a complex intellectual response to this defeat.

On the one hand, as an initiative in tune with its times, postcolonial studies was party to the general anti-liberationism then rising to hegemony in the wider society. The field not only emerged in close chronological proximity to the enforced end of the 'Bandung era', the era of Third World insurgency, but also characteristically offered, in the scholarship that it fostered and produced, something approximating a monumentalisation of this moment; not, indeed, a celebration, but a rationalisation of, and pragmatic adjustment to, the demise of the ideologies that had flourished during the 'Bandung' years. Especially after the collapse of historical communism in 1989, it was disposed to pronounce Marxism dead and also buried.

On the other hand, however, as a self-consciously *progressive* or *radical* initiative, postcolonial studies was, and has remained, opposed to the dominant forms assumed by anti-liberationist policy and discourse in the dark years since the mid-1970s, years of neoliberal 'austerity', 'structural adjustment' and political 'rollback'. What Homi K. Bhabha influentially described as 'the postcolonial perspective'⁵ might then be conceptualised (analogous to the liberal cold war discourse of 'anti-anti-communism') as 'anti-anti-liberationism'. Itself predicated on a disavowal of liberationism, which it understands to have been rendered historically anachronistic by the advent of the new world order represented by 'globalisation', postcolonial studies has nevertheless stood as a firm opponent of 'mainstream' or politically institutionalised anti-liberationism, as expressed both in the frankly imperialist language of leading policy-makers and intellectuals in the core capitalist states and through the punitive policies enacted by such corporate agencies as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation.

A good place to start to unpack this complex placement of postcolonial studies might be to register that, before the late 1970s, there was no field of academic specialisation that went by this name. This is not, of course, to say that there was no work being done before the late 1970s on issues relating to postcolonial cultures and societies; on the contrary, there was a large amount of such work, much of it deeply consequential and of abiding significance. There were political studies of state formation in the newly decolonised countries of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean; economic and sociological studies of development and underdevelopment; historical accounts of anti-colonial nationalism and of the various and diverse nationalist leaderships that had fought or campaigned against colonial rule and had then themselves come to power when independence had finally been won; literary studies of the new writing that was being produced by writers from these territories, and so on. In every academic discipline, there were presses specialising in the publication of material relating to postcolonial issues. Moreover, in most disciplines, dedicated journals had latterly come into existence to carry the emerging debates and to sponsor wider scholarship.⁶

The word 'postcolonial' occasionally appeared in this scholarship, but it did not mean then what it has come to mean in 'postcolonial studies'. Thus, when Hamza Alavi and John S. Saul wrote about the state in 'post-colonial' societies in 1972 and 1974, respectively, they used the term in a strict historically and politically delimited sense, to identify the period immediately following decolonisation, when the various leaderships, parties and governments that had gained access to the colonial state apparatuses at independence undertook to transform these apparatuses, to make them over, so that instead of serving as instruments of colonial dictatorship, they would serve these new leaders' own social and political interests, whether socialist or bourgeois, progressive or reactionary, popular or authoritarian.⁷ 'Post-colonial', in these usages from the early 1970s, was a periodising term, an historical and not an ideological concept. It bespoke no political desire or aspiration, looked forward to no particular social or political order. Erstwhile colonial territories that had been decolonised were 'postcolonial' states. It was as simple as that. Politically charged and ideologically fraught terms were all around and were fiercely contested – capitalism and socialism; imperialism and anti-imperialism; First World and Third World; self-determination and neocolonialism; centre and periphery; modernisation, development, dependency, underdevelopment, mal-development, 'dependent development' – but the notion of 'postcoloniality' did not participate, on any side, in these debates. To describe a literary work or a writer as 'postcolonial' was to name a period, a discrete historical moment, not a project or a politics.⁸ It was far more usual to see writers and works characterised in terms of their communities of origin, identity or identification. Thus, Chinua Achebe was described variously as an Igbo writer, a Nigerian writer, an African writer, a Commonwealth writer, a Third World writer, but seldom, if ever, as a 'postcolonial' one. To have labelled Achebe a 'postcolonial' writer would have been, in a sense, merely to set the scene, historically speaking, for the analysis to come.

Between this early use of the idea of 'postcolonialism' and today's usage, a sea change has occurred. What is at issue is not simply a matter of the changing of the guard, the routine emergence of new theoretical concepts and emphases that supplant or sit alongside the old ones in accordance with shifting generational interests. Rather, there has been a decisive change of paradigms or problematics, such that the retention of particular terms ('postcolonial' itself, for instance) is, in fact, quite misleading. Aijaz Ahmad's identification of a shift in 'theoretical framework[s] ... from Third World nationalism to postmodernism'⁹ is powerfully suggestive here. Even more illuminating, because more precise, is Neil Larsen's observation that what tends, in the new discourse, to be referred to as the 'postcolonial' is a 'euphemism' for what used to be referred to as the 'Third World', a euphemism because the political meaning of Third World, which used to 'conjure ... up an entire historical conjuncture and accompanying political culture, in which one naturally went on to utter the ... slogans of "national liberation," etc.', has now been eclipsed. '[W]e who once unself-consciously said "third world" now hesitate, if only for a second, to utter it in the same contexts. This hesitation reflects the decline of the national liberation movements of the

"Bandung era" ... leaving us with the question of why and with what effect this decline has occurred ...¹⁰

In a commentary from the mid-1990s entitled 'East isn't East', Edward W. Said wrote that one of the enduring achievements of postcolonial criticism rested in its 'consistent critique of Eurocentrism'.¹¹ The project of 'unthinking Eurocentrism'¹² is certainly central to postcolonial studies; it is arguably the only project that all scholars active in the field would agree that they hold as a common aspiration. Building upon Said's own canonical formulation in *Orientalism*,¹³ postcolonial critics have produced a considerable amount of work over the past thirty or so years on 'western' conceptions of the 'non-West', in which they have been concerned to demonstrate not only the falsity of these conceptions, but also their systematicity and their capacity to engender and anchor oppressive social practices, policies and institutions. There has also been a considerable amount of work directed not merely at the conceptual underpinnings of the various scholarly disciplines (history, philosophy, economics, comparative literature, and so on), but more broadly at 'reason' and 'science' themselves, in which it has generally been argued that these latter modes of practice and enquiry, which have understood themselves as universal, are in fact local and locally conceived and that their global dispersion must therefore be reckoned in terms not of enlightenment, but of violence and imposition.¹⁴

The heuristic value of this body of work can be freely acknowledged. One might want to protest that the unthinking of Eurocentrism is not as novel an exercise as scholars in the postcolonial field have tended to think it is. (It has, after all, been an abiding source of irritation to older scholars, in such abutting fields as anthropology or development studies, that their own insurgent work of the 1960s and 1970s – committed similarly to the critique of Eurocentrism – has not been registered by many of those who have subsequently made names for themselves as 'postcolonialists'.) Yet, it remains true – above all when we place postcolonial studies alongside the latently or expressly supremacist thinking that it has sought to expose and challenge – that work in the field has brought a welcome self-consciousness to the conceptualisation of what is entailed in the taking or constructing of 'non-western' cultures and societies as objects of knowledge in a world order structured not merely by difference, but by inequality.

Yet the genuinely progressive desire to contribute to the decolonisation of knowledge has routinely been compromised by a category error at the heart of postcolonialist critical practice. The problem, put simply, is that scholars in the field have tended to pay insufficient attention to the fact that colonialism is part and parcel of a larger, enfolding historical dynamic, which is that of capitalism in its global trajectory. There has been a notable failure within the field to situate the historical projects of colonialism and imperialism in the determinant contexts of the inception, consolidation and development of the modern world system. This failure has disciplinary roots, to be sure, having to do with the fact that 'postcolonial studies' emerged initially as an intervention in the *literary* field, rather than in the social sciences, which was where work on colonial and

formerly colonised societies had typically been anchored in the period before 'postcolonial studies'. But it is also conjunctural, speaking to wider questions about progressive intellectual affiliation and engagement in the West at the moment of postcolonial studies' emergence in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

External assessments of what I have elsewhere called 'the postcolonial unconscious'¹⁵ have been severe. Consider, for example, a paper delivered at a meeting of the International Studies Association in 2001, in which Andre Gunder Frank set out to offer a schematic overview of global developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, beyond the account he had offered in his book *ReOrient: global economy in the Asian age*, published a couple of years earlier, and whose analysis had extended only to 1800.¹⁶ Frank is of particular interest to us here because, relatively late in his career, he turned sharply against what he had come to see as the Eurocentrism of the received traditions in historiography and social theory, including those of the Left and even his own previous work in such seminal publications of the late 1970s as *World Accumulation, 1492-1789* and *Dependent Accumulation and Underdevelopment*.¹⁷ In *ReOrient*, Frank sought, in his own words, to 'turn Eurocentric historiography and social theory upside down' by viewing 'early modern economic history ... from a world-encompassing global perspective'.¹⁸ The argument that underlies *ReOrient* is that since,

from a global perspective Asia and not Europe held center stage for most of early modern history, the most important question is less what happened in Europe than what happened in the world as a whole and particularly in its leading Asian parts. I render historical events from this much more global perspective and propose to account for 'the Decline of the East' and the concomitant 'Rise of the West' within the world as a whole. This procedure pulls the historical rug out from the *anti*-historical/scientific - really ideological - Eurocentrism of Marx, Weber, Toynbee, Polanyi, Braudel, Wallerstein, and most other contemporary social theorists.¹⁹

We might suppose, on the basis of this conception, that there was an elective affinity to be identified between Frank and postcolonial studies. For, such leading postcolonialist scholars as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Robert Young, Walter Dignolo and Rey Chow have also challenged the identification of 'modernity' with 'the West', and of 'modernisation' with 'westernisation', which they believe to be a constitutive feature of pretty much all hitherto existing social theory, and, like Frank, they have made the critique of Marxist historiography foundational to their claims for an avowedly new, post- or non-Eurocentric standpoint. Frank actually goes even further in this regard than they do; so thoroughgoing is the slash and burn epistemology of *ReOrient* that readers are exhorted to junk not simply all hitherto existing social theory, but even the very idea that we live, or have ever lived, in a capitalist society. As far as 'capitalism' is concerned, Frank tells us, we had 'best just forget about it, and get on with our inquiry into the reality of universal history'.²⁰

However, we would be mistaken if we were to infer from all this that there was a congruence to be established between Frank's ideas and those prevailing in postcolonial studies. For, what Frank goes on to say about postcolonial theory in this paper of 2001 is witheringly dismissive:

The re-examination of reality [that I propose] ... may [be imagined to] ... parallel the denunciation of the received wisdom of both ... 'traditional' and ... dependence as well as world-system theory ... by recent post-modernist, post-colonial, and subaltern textual 'analysis' as far as the latter go, which is not much. For they offer no examination and much less analysis of any political economic reality and its history. Most importantly they have and offer no global perspective, examination, nor political economic history and analysis of the one world economy and system whose own whole globe encompassing structure and dynamic is so determinant of the possibilities, options and therefore successes and failures of its ever changing geographic, political economic, social and cultural parts.²¹

Frank scorns the idea of a *capitalist* world system, but he retains and, indeed, heightens his longstanding commitment to systematicity in sociological analysis. His late work advances the radically continuist argument that while there is indeed a world system, it has been in existence for 5,000 years, not 500. I think Frank is quite wrong about this. His trivialisation of what his one-time intellectual confederate Immanuel Wallerstein has described as the 'great structural changes' that have 'occur[red] in the world in the last several hundred years', and which, on Wallerstein's account, 'make the world of today qualitatively different from the world of yesterday',²² strikes me as refractory and unconvincing. But we can, at least, easily see the differences between Frank's standpoint and what Homi K. Bhabha has influentially identified as 'the postcolonial perspective', and which, on Bhabha's own formulation, 'departs from the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or "dependency" theory', not because the systemic logic underpinning these traditions is insufficiently global or comprehensive in its conception, but because postcolonial theory must 'resist ... the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation'.²³ Frank moves towards the specification of a 5,000-year world system; the 'postcolonial perspective' abandons system altogether. As Bhabha writes, 'it forces a recognition of ... more complex cultural and political boundaries ...' than those implicated by any systematic philosophy.²⁴

This comparison tells very severely against postcolonial studies. The problem is that the postcolonialist attention to forms of politics and culture that are supposedly 'more complex' than the struggle-based models (now thought to be obsolete) has typically led to a wholesale neglect of the ground beneath their feet. Benita Parry makes just this point in her historical critique of postcolonial studies, writing that:

[t]he institutionalization of postcolonial studies took place at a time when the linguistic turn was in the ascendant within philosophy and literary theory,

and at the moment when cultural studies was in the process of turning its back on materialist beginnings. The stage was then set for the reign of theoretical tendencies which Edward Said, among others, has deplored for permitting intellectuals 'an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history'. In the realm of postcolonial studies, where premises affording analytical priority to formations of discourse and signifying processes were already to the fore, discussion of the internal structures of texts, enunciations and sign systems became detached from a concurrent examination of social and experiential contexts, situations, and circumstances.²⁵

We need to proceed carefully here, as Parry herself does in her incisive examination of the 'countercurrents and tensions in Said's critical practice'.²⁶ For, while Edward Said himself clearly calls for a materialist countermanding of the idealism of mainstream postcolonial studies – with the gravity of history bringing the field's giddy and unmoored intellectuals back to earth – his is never remotely an *historical* materialism. My claim in this essay is that postcolonial theory generally has failed to situate colonialism relative to the wider framing history of capitalist development. Even on the best postcolonialist accounts, such as Said's own in *Culture and Imperialism*, 'imperialism' is typically cast as a *political* dispensation and referred, in civilisational terms, to 'the West' rather than to capitalism. Thus, Said holds 'imperialism' to implicate military conquest, alien governance, systematised top-down violence, social asymmetry, cultural and symbolic domination, and Eurocentrism as a set of deeply patterned 'structures of attitude and reference'. He makes comparatively little of the fact that it centrally involves the imposition of a particular mode or modes of production and specific regimes of accumulation, expropriation and exploitation in the form of the extraction of surplus value, commodification and the generalisation of commodity production, and so on. Parry's overview of the contradictions deriving from what she calls Said's 'deliberated disengagement' from Marxism in *Culture and Imperialism* is altogether winning here. I quote from it at length:

Said's was the long view of 'imperialism' as 'the practice, the theory and the attitude of a dominating centre ruling a distant territory,' and because his interest was in the formation of ideologies underwriting an European hegemony, the study is not concerned with differentiating between mercantile-plantation colonialism, which stimulated the accumulation of capital in Europe, and the subsequent industrial-military interventions of metropolitan nation-states in overseas territories, an era known to historians and political scientists as 'imperialism' and austere described by Rosa Luxemburg as 'the political expression of the accumulation of capital in its competitive struggle for what remains still open of the non-capitalist environment'. Said wrote with passionate intensity about imperial aggression without referring to the analysis of Lenin or Luxemburg; he distinguished between anticolonial nationalism and liberation movements without alluding to the communist orientation of the latter or the class interests of either; and he placed economic

and political machinery and territorial aggrandizement at the center of modern empire without specifying capitalism's world system. At the same time he cited adherents of the Marxist critique such as Aimé Césaire, Fanon, C.L.R. James, Eqbal Ahmad, Amílcar Cabral, and Walter Rodney with respect, embracing them as comrades in the struggle against colonialism.²⁷

Parry distinguishes pertinently here, in passing, between 'colonialism' and 'imperialism', and we know that, especially within Marxist theory, there is a very specific deployment that sees 'imperialism' as referring narrowly to the process of capitalist accumulation on a world scale in the era of monopoly capitalism. But, as the example represented by Said's *Culture and Imperialism* demonstrates, this is not where the blind spot in postcolonial theory is to be located. For our purposes here, in fact, there is no need to cavil at a relaxed usage that would regard the two terms as more or less interchangeable. While this might involve a little imprecision, it would have the advantage of connecting with both mainstream political philosophy and non-specialist convention.²⁸ For the problem is not that postcolonial theory is inclined to conflate the categories of 'colonialism' and 'imperialism', but that it tends to construe 'colonialism' as an exercise solely in *political* domination, of the global projection of *power*.

It is, therefore, important to insist, in opposition to this emphasis, that whatever else it might have and, indeed, *did* involve – all the way from the systematic annihilation of whole communities to the cultivation of aesthetic tastes and preferences – colonialism as an historical process involved the forced integration of hitherto uncaptialised societies, or societies in which the capitalist mode of production was not hegemonic, into a capitalist world system. Over the course of a couple of centuries in some territories, mere decades in others, generalised commodity production was imposed: production for exchange rather than use; monetisation; private ownership; the development of specifically capitalist markets (involving 'free' wage labour and the buying and selling of labour power) or the appropriation, de- and re-centralising of existing markets and of ancillary systems and institutions designed to enable and facilitate the consolidation, extension and reproduction of capitalist production and capitalist class relations. Along the way, existing social relations and modes of existence were undermined, destroyed, reconfigured; new social relations and modes of existence were brought into being. Existing circuits of production, distributions of power, universes of meaning, were disturbed, appropriated, reoriented. Peasantries were destroyed, along with subsistence, tributary and market economies (some of them vast and elaborate), to be replaced by capitalised agriculture in one location, proletarianisation in another, with waves of migratory labour (more or less regulated, sometimes not at all) in between. Ruling elites were made, unmade and remade, the basis of their power thoroughly transformed.

Yet it is not only for theoretical reasons that it is necessary to insist on the centrality of capitalism to colonialism. It is also because this point is steadily figured (and often given direct emphasis) across the full range of 'postcolonial' literature.²⁹ What Wallerstein speaks of as 'the commodification of everything'³⁰

is registered equally succinctly also by the Congolese novelist Sony Labou Tansi in *The Antipeople*: 'The invasion of money into everyday life is something the Belgians left us as a mark of love.'³¹ Where the identification of social conditions of existence in the (post-) colonial world is concerned, literature has typically played a vanguardist, not a belated, role.

Indeed, the protracted, brutal and violently disruptive process through which peasant economies, both material and 'moral' or symbolic, were undermined and disrupted – with capitalist class relations being superimposed over them, historic patterns of land tenure and corresponding modes of community decimated, new forms of community and of resistance forged – constitutes the very subject matter of a number of significant literary works. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's panoramic novel *Petals of Blood*, for instance, centres on Ilmorog, which mutates over its course from a peasant village – 'at its most expansive a haven, but subject still to the ravages of nature'³² – into the horror of New Ilmorog, an industrial wasteland of factories and slums, leaving the bulk of its inhabitants ruined: dispossessed, impoverished and demoralised. As Tamara Sivanandan observes:

[t]he juxtaposition of the village/city in the story is no mere provider of incidental background, but effectively maps a geography of imperialism, and is a metaphor for the contrast between the potential for autochthonous development – a realisation of the dreams of independence that the common people struggled for – and its supersession by a native capitalism in cahoots with a global imperialism.³³

The same process also forms the backdrop of F. Sionil José's major fiction, most notably the 'Rosales Saga', which, considered as a whole, offers a veritably Balzacian portrait of Filipino culture and society from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century.³⁴ One could also cite here such masterworks as Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, Carlos Fuentes's *The Years with Laura Díaz* and Earl Lovelace's *Salt*, which, as vastly different from one another in form, tone and ideology as they are in location (an unnamed state in the Persian Gulf, Mexico and Trinidad, respectively), are nevertheless all directed to the *longue durée* of a specifically capitalist imperialism.³⁵

To say that the forced introduction of capitalism in the historical contexts of colonialism spawned the development of new classes and groupings, and of new forms of class domination and struggle, is not, of course, to say that the social relations previously existing were simply overwritten or replaced. On the contrary, capitalism in these contexts was superimposed on the pre-existing relations, strengthening or reinforcing them in some respects or some situations, weakening or ameliorating them in others. As Perry Anderson has argued, an appreciation of the 'complex and differential temporality' of the capitalist mode of production, 'in which episodes or eras were discontinuous from each other, and heterogeneous within themselves', is already observable in Marx's writings from the late 1840s onwards.³⁶ In this sense, the famous passages from the *Communist Manifesto* that seem to evoke a transformation that is as abrupt as it

is total are potentially misleading: 'All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient prejudices and opinions are swept aside, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air', and so on.³⁷ But, just as readings of such passages in the *Manifesto* as being infused with enthusiasm for capitalism typically 'forget' that the writings of Marx and Engels are notable also for recording and protesting the violence of expropriation, the systematised misery and servitude that the imposition of capitalist social relations visited on populations everywhere, so too it is necessary to insist that the authors were well aware of the fact that the 'capitalist revolution' was not a once-and-for-all event, but rather a sprawling, erratic and bloody historical process.

In Marx's writings, there is an awareness of the fact that even within capitalist or capitalising social formations, vast rural populations continued to provide the material ground for the persistence of earlier economic conditions, social relations, cultural practices and psychic dispositions. This insight was then notably amplified in Trotsky's writings of the 1930s in which, on the basis of his consideration, first, of conditions in Russia in 1905 and, subsequently, of those in China in 1925–1927, he formulated a 'Law of uneven and combined development'. In Russia, China and other analogous contexts, Trotsky suggested, the imposition of generalised commodity production and capitalist class relations tends not to have the effect of supplanting (or is not allowed to supplant) pre-existing modes and structures; rather, capitalism is forcibly conjoined with these pre-existing modes and structures. The outcome, he wrote, is a contradictory 'amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms': an urban proletariat working in technologically advanced industries existing side by side with a rural population engaged in subsistence farming; modern plants built alongside 'villages of wood and straw'; and, peasants 'thrown into the factory cauldron snatched directly from the plow'.³⁸

Some of Fredric Jameson's writings (concerned centrally with the relations between capitalist modernity and literary form) begin to sketch in the relevance of this theory of combined and uneven development for the analysis of 'postcolonial' literature. While his essay on 'Third-World literature in the era of multinational capitalism' has regrettably received attention merely because of its claims about 'national allegory' – claims which, as I have argued elsewhere, have been tendentiously misunderstood³⁹ – Jameson's commentary in that essay on the 'crisis of representation' in non-metropolitan cultures that were, and remain, 'locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism',⁴⁰ strikes me as decisive. It certainly enables Jameson to offer remarkably suggestive readings of Lu Hsun's 'A madman's diary' and Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*, the two texts that he chooses to focus on in his essay.⁴¹ His thought-provoking argument that the violence entailed in the imposition of capitalism in such societies made for the 'generic discontinuities' of the literatures subsequently produced receives elaboration also in 'On magic realism in film', another essay addressing 'postcolonial' cultures (published, like the 'Third-World literature' essay, in 1986), in which Jameson proposes that magic realism be considered a 'formal mode ... constitutively

dependent on a type of historical raw material in which disjunction is structurally present', and in which the content

betrays the overlap or the coexistence of precapitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features. In such a view ... the organizing category of magic realist film ... is one of modes of production, and in particular, of a mode of production still locked in conflict with traces of the older mode ... [T]he articulated superposition of whole layers of the past within the present ... is the formal precondition for the emergence of this new narrative style.⁴²

In a footnote to the 'Third-World literature' essay, Jameson speculates further that this way of thinking about combined unevenness demands a new type of literary comparativism; namely, the 'comparison, not of the individual texts, which are formally and culturally very different from each other, but of the concrete situations from which such texts spring and to which they constitute distinct responses'. He adds that comparative analysis of this kind 'would necessarily include such features as the interrelationship of social classes, the role of intellectuals, the dynamics of language and writing, the configuration of traditional forms, the relationship to western influences, the development of urban experience and money, and so forth'.⁴³

I have been emphasising the registration of the specifically capitalist dimensions of the colonial experience, across the full range of 'postcolonial' literature, in order to draw attention to the fact that postcolonial *criticism*, as an institutionalised mode of academic practice, has tended to turn a blind eye to what this body of literature has notably been concerned to put on display. The gap or disjuncture between the purviews of 'literature' and 'criticism' here is no cause for celebration, in my view. I see it as telling decisively against postcolonial criticism, testifying both to its abstraction and to the tenuousness of its grasp of the central realities of life in the 'postcolonial' world.

I have mentioned in passing, above, that even on the best postcolonialist accounts, 'imperialism' is typically situated in civilisational terms, as an 'encounter' or 'ongoing contest between north and south, metropolis and periphery, white and native',⁴⁴ and referred to 'the West' rather than to capitalism. It is now necessary to add that the social and temporal power identified through this means – and subjected to criticism in postcolonial studies, as when critics will refer negatively to '*western* forms of thought' or '*western* domination' – is a mystification or, better still, a euphemism. The idea of 'the West' as it is deployed in postcolonial studies inevitably issues in a dematerialised (and, for that matter, unhistorical) understanding of the forces powering the world system over the course of the past 500 years.

To say that the idea of 'the West' that is operative in postcolonial studies is unhistorical is to say nothing new. When Edward Said, for example, defines 'Orientalism' as a 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient', proposes that, thus defined, the category 'can accommodate Aeschylus ... and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx' and adds, a few

pages later, that 'to be a European or an American' is to 'belong ... to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer',⁴⁵ it is clear that what is involved is a (trans-) historical abstraction. Said's formulation (which is paradigmatic in precisely this aspect) flattens out history, failing to register the necessary distinctions between qualitatively different moments, epochs and determinate universes of meaning.

But it is not only with respect to *history* that the postcolonialist idea of 'the West' can be faulted. For the disposition to homogenisation is also evident with respect to *geo-politics*, where internal differences and divisions – as between one country and another, one policy and another, one ideology and another – are cavalierly disregarded, ignored altogether or treated as of no consequence. Thus, V. Y. Mudimbe prefaces *The Invention of Africa* with the claim that, 'until now, Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order'.⁴⁶ It is clear that 'western' is, for him, a civilisational and supra-ideological construct, for the specifically ideological distinctions, as between Marxism and liberalism, for instance, are, on his reading, exceeded whenever the subject of the 'non-West' is raised. Even those who have expressed opposition to imperialism – including many who have fought actively against it – have been operating with concepts whose effective tendency has been to submit the actualities of 'non-western' culture to 'a western model': 'Modern African thought seems somehow to be basically a product of the West', Mudimbe writes.⁴⁷ He draws two conclusions from this premise. The first of these is that to the extent that commentators (including African commentators) have been using 'western' concepts to think about 'Africa', 'African' experience has continued to elude them. The second is that the existent discourse on Africa has been, and continues to be, *hostile* to 'African' realities, since its 'western' provenance and orientation are both ineradicable and also indelibly colonialist. Among the clearest statements of this general argument in Mudimbe is the following, from *Parables and Fables*:

All colonialisms and imperialisms are predicated on a ... rational madness ... What I am suggesting here is an immense paradox: there is a relation of congruence between the philosophical solipsism born from the Cartesian cogito and the expansion of the European space which actualized the conditions of possibility for arranging reasons and processes of converting non-Western peoples, reducing them to a European historicity, and promoting a universal will to truth.⁴⁸

There is only one kind of 'western' thought, it seems, and that is the dominating kind: Eurocentric, colonising, logocentric, rationalist. It seems to me that a diagnostic of this sort, that draws no distinction between the ideas of, say, Marx and Carlyle, Kipling and Multatuli, Lévi-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Thomas Hodgkin – or, more precisely, argues that beneath their many and manifest differences, the ideas of these thinkers are unified at the deepest levels by structuring assumptions deriving from an episteme centred on

'western-ness' – that such a diagnostic seems to me too blunt an instrument, too reductive and indiscriminating. One is reminded in this context of Paulo de Medeiros's complaint that:

Within the general attack on Eurocentrism ... there are two related flaws: first, the amalgamation of everything European into a fictive unity that, even if it might have some correspondence to the dream of homogeneity, has no real counterpart in a fragmented and divided Europe, more often than not torn against itself and amongst its constituent members; second the forgetting exactly of those parts of Europe that 'Europe' itself tends to forget, its own, anything but central, dominated others.⁴⁹

The categories of 'the West' and 'Europe' are routinely conflated in the post-colonial discussion, such that, for example, the US is presented as a more or less organic outgrowth of 'Europe', merely with a broader geostrategic base. Also discernible is a widespread tendency to generalise from the dominant western European states – typically, Britain and France – to 'Europe' as a whole. The fact, as Lucia Boldrini has cogently pointed out, that '[m]any European countries have no imperial history if not a passive one, having themselves been "colonised", subjugated or controlled by other political powers',⁵⁰ is hardly ever taken into account by postcolonial critics. Boldrini is surely correct to deplore the 'continuing identification of Europe on the one hand with *some* Western European countries and, on the other, with "the West" and therefore with colonial history ... the reduction, that is to say, of Europe to the colonial history of some of its states'.⁵¹

It is because Edward Said's work both homogenises 'the West' and construes it as the agent of imperialist domination that he has sometimes been accused, by critics to his left and to his right, of 'Third Worldism'. There is no need to rehearse this dispute here. What can be noted, however, is that the tendency to essentialise 'the West' has become a staple ingredient, across the range of literary scholarship, of much of the recent work that, following Said's injunction, has been directed to 'unthinking Eurocentrism'. We can see this very clearly, for instance, in Rey Chow's recent call for a 'post-European' perspective in comparative literature, to which I shall turn shortly. Before doing so, however, it will behove us to look quickly at a little essay by Susan Bassnett entitled 'Reflections on comparative literature in the twenty-first century', since it is to the kind of thought exemplified in Bassnett's essay that Chow is evidently responding.

Bassnett wants to take stock of comparative literature *after* the disciplinary critique of Eurocentrism. This critique is taken to have been levelled, absorbed and appropriately acted upon. '[W]e have come a long way in three decades', she writes, summarily, en route to a restatement of the value and vitality of the 'western' literary canon and the tradition that it inscribes and memorialises.⁵² She readily concedes that it was important for scholars of literature generally to take to heart the central argument brought against mainstream scholarship by the critics of Eurocentrism, which argument she introduces under the rubric of

'plurivocality': the call for multiple voices to be attended to, 'rather than one single dominant voice'.⁵³ (It is worth registering in passing here the distance between this concept of 'plurivocality' and the Saidian notion of 'contrapuntalism'. For all that might be said against it, the latter identified 'overlapping territories' and 'intertwined histories', which, according to Said, it was necessary to think *together*, as registrations of a vast social experience binding all its participants, even if antagonistically and unequally.⁵⁴ 'Plurivocality', by contrast, identifies only the multiplicity of discourses; it has nothing to say about their interrelations.) But Bassnett goes on to argue that while a comparativist approach to literature, governed by this model of plurivocality, 'works for anyone approaching the great literary traditions of the northern hemisphere from elsewhere', it is not

particularly helpful for those of us who have as a starting point one or other of those great traditions. The question remains as to what new directions in comparative literature there can be for the European scholar whose intellectual formation has been shaped by classical Greek and Latin, by the Bible, by the Germanic epic, by Dante and Petrarch, by Shakespeare and Cervantes, by Rousseau, Voltaire and the Enlightenment, by Romanticism and post-Romanticism, by the European novelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by generations of writers who have borrowed, translated, plagiarized and plundered, but whose works run inexorably to some degree through the consciousness of anyone writing today.⁵⁵

Some of the implications of this deeply tendentious formulation are worth exploring in detail.⁵⁶ We can start by noting the conceptual muddle entailed in the internal slippage from 'northern hemisphere' to 'Europe', compounded elsewhere in the essay when Bassnett mobilizes, in addition, the category of 'the West' (as in 'western foundation texts' and 'western writing'). She deploys these three terms – 'Europe', 'northern hemisphere' and 'West' – in her essay as strict synonyms, all naming the same thing. That thing is, evidently, a (singular) transnational (but not global) 'culture' or 'civilisation'. 'No single European literature can be studied in isolation', Bassnett writes, evidently meaning thereby to challenge national(ist) literary scholarship; but nor, she adds,

should European scholars shrink from reassessing the legacy they have inherited. There is a great deal to learn from the perspectives of Southern hemisphere scholars, principle [*sic*] of which is the shift in perspective that their views inevitably incite, but it is important not to lose sight of where we, as Europeans, stand in relation to our own literary history.⁵⁷

While 'Europe' comes into focus as a civilisational unity for Bassnett, the premise of a *world* system is denied or disregarded. 'No single European literature can be studied in isolation', she writes, but *European* literature evidently can – indeed, must – be studied in isolation from 'non-European' (or 'southern

hemisphere') literatures. No 'contrapuntalism' for Bassnett, evidently. Instead, we must assume that she conceives of the world as the ensemble of plural, more or less discrete, *civilisations*.⁵⁸

What Bassnett proposes as a bedrock – the cord that supposedly binds together and unites into a single 'great tradition' the various microtraditions of the constituent cultures, nations and peoples of 'Europe'/'northern hemisphere'/'West' – is in fact a strictly ideological construction, which it would be better to construe as a *post facto* justification for the currently prevailing global dispensation.⁵⁹ The problem is not only that Bassnett's presentation tends to erase the violence structurally entailed in 'intercultural' relations in the contexts of colonialism and capitalist modernity, specifically the relations between 'Europe' and the world beyond its historically porous and often shifting boundaries. (What she terms 'interconnectedness', in this respect, and sees as a positive good might, with greater historical warrant, be described in terms of systematic exploitation.) Just as important is the fact that her essentialism serves to mystify the history of Europe itself. It is worth reminding ourselves that, far from representing any intrinsic civilisational unity or 'community of values', the 'making of Europe' involved (and continues to involve) conflict, division, violence and mutual animosity. The 'Europe' that would come to impose itself on the rest of the world in the modern era, and that would present itself in civilisational terms in doing so, was, as Robert Bartlett has argued very eloquently, itself the product of 'internal' conquest, colonisation and enforced cultural change:

Conquest, colonization, Christianization: the techniques of settling in a new land, the ability to maintain cultural identity through legal forms and nurtured attitudes, the institutions and outlook required to confront the strange or abhorrent, to repress it and live with it, the law and religion as well as the guns and ships. The European Christians who sailed to the coasts of the Americas, Asia and Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries came from a society that was already a colonizing society. Europe, the initiator of one of the world's major processes of conquest, colonization and cultural transformation, was also the product of one.⁶⁰

Reciting the names of Dante and Shakespeare and Cervantes, evoking Latin and the Bible and the Enlightenment, Bassnett conjures up the image of a literary tradition freely available, as something like a family inheritance, to all 'Europeans', but not, evidently, to 'non-Europeans'. (Her thesis is made more convoluted still – not to say, more untenable – by the fact that, on her reading, the category of 'Europeans' would include [some? most? all?] North Americans, Australians, and so on.) One could play Bassnett's game in reverse here and recite other names that point in a completely different direction: Andalusian Arabic, Bulgar, Drevani, Muromian, Curonian and Pomeranian, for instance – now extinct 'European' languages, obliterated (and along with them the cultural identity of the people who spoke them) in the long march of 'Europeanisation' – or

Cornish, Welsh, Occitan, Breton, Livonian and Sardinian – dominated and/or subnational languages that still survive in Europe despite the fierce pressures exerted upon them by hegemonising forces (often trans- or supranational cultures and languages), whose imposition it has proved impossible to resist. It takes nothing away from Shakespeare and Cervantes, the epic and the Bible, English and German, surely, to recognise that it has often been precisely in the name of the selective tradition identified through reference to them (and such as them) that politically dominant forces in Europe have rained violence and terror upon their neighbours, by way of subduing and subordinating them, a process involving first deculturation and then enforced acculturation. It is not only in extra-European theatres that English, French, German, Italian, Russian have been imposed on speakers of other languages, by way of breaking their resistance and undermining their cultural integrity.

Bassnett's article is written partly by way of attempting to re-energise comparative literature after the critique of Eurocentrism, which, for all its indispensability, is seen to have left the discipline somewhat demoralised. Hence, her suggestion that 'the perspectives of Southern hemisphere scholars [are] not particularly helpful for those of us who have as a starting point' the 'great tradition' represented by the 'western' canon. Her argument is unambiguously 'First Worldist'; it is clearly predicated on an assumption as to the distinctiveness and internal unity of 'Europe'/'northern hemisphere'/'West' as a civilisational bloc irreducibly different from, if not necessarily in opposition to, other civilisational blocs (such as that represented by the 'southern hemisphere'). But because of its essentialism, this construction of 'Europe' mystifies the history of Europe as well, of course, as the relations between Europe and the rest of the world.

It might be worthwhile here to place Bassnett's argument in relation to the debate about European 'identity' sparked off by Jürgen Habermas's recent call for the development and projection of a European presence capable of counterbalancing 'the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States'.⁶¹ Writing in May 2003, in the shadow of the US-sponsored invasion of Iraq, Habermas asked whether there were 'historical experiences, traditions, and achievements offering European citizens the consciousness of a shared political fate *that can be shaped together*'.⁶² He answered in the affirmative, but only after rejecting firmly the civilisational idea of Europe evoked by Bassnett. Arguing that there can be no resort to the inherited civilisational idea of Europe as 'Judaean-Christian' or 'Greco-Roman' (*that* idea of Europe would be merely the corollary of the particularist chauvinism sponsoring the 'bellicose past' that 'once entangled all European nations in bloody conflicts'), he proposed instead an idea of 'Europe' predicated precisely on a break from this past through the reflexive creation of 'new, supranational forms of cooperation'.⁶³ A similar vision has been promoted by the Swiss writer Adolf Muschg, who writes, in dialogue with Habermas, that:

What holds Europe together and what divides it are at heart the same thing: common memories and habits, acquired step by step through the process of

distancing oneself from fatal habits. Europe is what Europe is becoming. It is neither the Occident nor the cradle of civilization; it does not have a monopoly on science, enlightenment, and modernity. It shouldn't attempt to ground its identity in any other way than through its own experiences: any claims for exclusivity can only lead into the same delusion and pretension through which Europe of the nineteenth century believed itself to represent the rest of the world, and entitled to dominate it.⁶⁴

The idea here is of Europe as a counter-hegemonic work in progress, a strictly contemporary project negatively motivated by the recognition that the effects of all of the previous projections of 'Europe' – that took themselves to be gestures of civilisational self-assertion – have been catastrophic.⁶⁵ Yet, even this carefully historicised and radically contingent construction⁶⁶ might be susceptible to criticism on the grounds that it generalises unwarrantedly from the modern experience of the historically dominant European nations to all of Europe. Thus, a latent essentialism seems to lurk in the background of Habermas's refunctioning of the category of 'core Europe' (*Kerneuropa*) and his suggestion that this 'avant-gardist core of Europe' must play the role of 'locomotive', powering the generation of a new, pan-European consciousness and politics.⁶⁷ While we certainly appreciate the necessity of defending France and Germany (whose governments opposed the rush to war against Iraq) from the wrath of the Bush administration, the metaphor of 'core' and, presumably, 'peripheral' Europe, like that of 'old' and 'new' Europe,⁶⁸ seems both impolitic and high-handed. Hence, presumably, the anger directed at Habermas's manifesto by certain commentators, not only in 'East' and 'Central' Europe, but also in Scandinavia and the Iberian peninsula, unwilling to accept his apparent marginalisation of them as 'non-core' Europeans.⁶⁹

Rey Chow's article 'The old/new question of comparison in literary studies: a post-European perspective' appeared two years before Susan Bassnett's. Chow writes self-consciously from what Bassnett calls the 'perspective of the Southern hemisphere'; indeed, she might be seen as offering a 'Third Worldist' critique of precisely the model of comparative literary scholarship that Bassnett both champions and seeks to represent. Chow begins, thus, by identifying the performative contradiction represented by comparative literature's 'cosmopolitanism' or 'universalism' whenever the focus is shifted from the European to the world stage. On the one hand, the commitment to comparativism in the discipline gestures towards intercultural reciprocity:

As part of a cluster of concepts that sees linguistic cosmopolitanism and the peaceful coexistence of national and cultural traditions as its telos, comparison in comparative literature is understandably grounded, as the etymology of the word suggests, in the notion of parity – in the possibility of peer-like equality and mutuality among those being compared ... Hence ... comparative literature often proceeds with investigating multiple literary traditions on the assumption that there ought to be a degree of commonality and

equivalence – and thus comparability – among them; that they are, somehow, on a par with one another despite their obvious differences.⁷⁰

On the other hand, this 'mutuality' proves to be highly selective. It operates only between 'European' literatures and cultures, never between 'Europe' and its 'Others'. Chow quotes as exemplary in this respect René Wellek and Austin Warren's formulation, in their canonical *Theory of Literature* (1949), of the basic predicate of comparative literature as a discipline:

it is important to think of literature as a totality and to trace the growth and development of literature without regard to linguistic distinctions ... Western literature, at least, forms a unity, a whole ... and, without minimizing the importance of Oriental influences, especially that of the Bible, one must recognize a close unity which includes all Europe, Russia, the United States, and the Latin American literatures.⁷¹

One might have expected Chow to criticise the essentialism evident in Wellek and Warren's formula, their insistence on the singularity and specificity of what they call 'western' culture. But she does not. Nor does she comment on the fact their their formulation is altogether blind to the radically discrepant and incongruent histories of the ideas of 'Europe' and 'the West'. The mere facts, for instance, that significant sections of the Russian intelligentsia have consistently defined themselves in explicit opposition to the category of 'the West' (while insisting on their fidelity to 'Europe'), while significant sections of the US intelligentsia have consistently defined themselves in explicit opposition to the category of 'Europe' (while insisting on their fidelity to 'the West'), ought surely to have given Wellek and Warren pause, especially in 1949. But Chow focuses instead on Wellek and Warren's bracketing of the 'non-West' and the implications that derive (in her view, with iron logic) from it:

Wellek and Warren's formulation of comparison, which may be named 'Europe and Its Others,' remains a common norm of comparative literary studies in North America today. In this formulation, the rationale for comparing hinges on the conjunction *and*; the *and*, moreover ... signals a form of supplementation that authorizes the first term, Europe, as the grid of reference, to which may be added others in a subsequent and subordinate fashion ... The *and* thus instigates not only comparison but also a politics of comparison: on the one side, the infinite opening of histories, cultures, languages in their internal vicissitudes in such a manner as to enable their studies to become ever more nuanced and refined; on the other side, a crude lumping together of other histories, cultures, and languages with scant regard to exactly the same kinds of details and internal dynamics of thought that, theoretically speaking, should be part of the study of any tradition. These other histories, cultures, and languages remain by default undifferentiated – and thus never genuinely on a par with Europe – within an ostensibly comparative framework.⁷²

Proposing that Eurocentrism is, as it were, 'hard wired' into the disciplinary machinery of comparative literature, Chow calls not for a revision of the discipline, but for the generation of an entirely new notion of comparativism, implicating a new form of critical practice:

The incommensurability between what scholars might want to uphold as the ethical as well as theoretical ideal of an inclusive world literature, on the one hand, and the actual events that take place in the name of comparison, on the other, requires us to conceive of a radically different set of terms for comparative literary studies.⁷³

There is much in this proposal – and in Chow's general critique – that I find attractive and congenial. Certainly, I echo her call for a new practice of comparativism. The problem, however, is that she mis-identifies both the nature and the historical dynamic of the dominant social instance that she wishes to counter and oppose. Linking her project explicitly to Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential campaign to 'provincialise Europe' – an agenda as thoroughly 'Third Worldist' as her own and for pretty much the same reasons – Chow promotes a 'post-European perspective' in literary studies. However, the persistent slippage in her commentary between geohistorical and ideological categories ('European', on the one hand; 'Eurocentric', on the other) fatally undermines her argument, transforming a potentially compelling ideological critique into an ineffectual complaint about 'European' civilisation, which, she supposes, has always, or at least throughout modern history, presented itself as 'culturally superior'.

Thus, 'the dominance of *European* conceptual models' (not 'Eurocentric models') is deplored, and 'Europe' is incoherently identified not merely as the 'source', but as the very *form* of domination on the world stage. This way of putting things has the effect of homogenising 'Europe', mystifying its 'internal' history and flattening out the unevenness of its 'internal' development. (It's a bit rich for Chow to complain that her antagonists are guilty of 'a crude lumping together of ... histories, cultures, and languages with scant regard to exactly the ... kinds of details and internal dynamics of thought that, theoretically speaking, should be part of the study of any tradition', when this exactly describes her own commentary on 'Europe'.)

Chow's 'Third Worldism' also leads to a dehistoricisation and dematerialisation of the dynamics of 'modernity'. Her suggestions that 'comparison' in literary scholarship ought to include 'a critique of the uneven distribution of cultural capital among languages themselves',⁷⁴ and that such scholarship ought to take as its object 'a type of discursive situation, involuntarily brought into play by and inextricable from the conditions of modern world politics',⁷⁵ for instance, sound very promising until we realise that, on her understanding, *capitalism* evidently plays no part in 'modern world politics'. Instead, the latter are evidently to be thought of as being about the encounter between civilisational blocs: 'Europe' (including the US, of course) and its various 'others'. Even when

'imperialism' is named, the term is inevitably prefixed by the qualifier 'European', thus making it clear that what is at issue for Chow is not a process of accumulation on a world scale, but rather the imposition of 'European' culture upon other cultures.

Fredric Jameson has urged us to take on board the implications of the fact that,

the United States is not just one country, or one culture, among others, any more than English is just one language among others. There is a fundamental dissymmetry in the relationship between the United States and every other country in the world, not only third-world countries, but even Japan and those of Western Europe.⁷⁶

Chow's ears are resolutely deaf to this reminder. She proceeds as though it were possible to achieve the 'provincialisation' of 'Europe' in the absence of any plausible explanation of what has grounded and enabled 'European' dominance over the course of the past 500 years. The fact that this idealistic understanding is counter-posed to the dominant understanding, equally idealistic, does not, in my view, make it more compelling. A new comparativism in literary studies only makes sense in the context of an overarching theory of the (capitalist) world system.

References

- 1 I would like to thank the conference participants who responded so challengingly and constructively to my presentation at York and especially the conference organisers, Anna Bernard, Ziad Elmarsafy and David Attwell.
- 2 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: a history of the world, 1914–1991* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1994).
- 3 R. Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: the advanced capitalist economies from long boom to long downturn* (London and New York, Verso, 2006).
- 4 Samir Amin, *Capitalism in the Age of Globalization: the management of contemporary society* (London, Zed Books, 1997), p. 95.
- 5 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994).
- 6 In fact, it could be argued that this journal, *Race & Class*, with its masthead 'For Black and Third World Liberation', came directly from such a movement. Many articles published in the 1970s, such as A. Gidiri's 'Imperialism and archaeology', *Race & Class* (Vol. XV, no. 4, April 1974); Susantha Goonatilake's 'Imperialism and development studies', *Race & Class* (Vol. XVI, no. 2, October 1974); and, M. Anis Alam's 'Science and imperialism', *Race & Class* (Vol. XIX, no. 3, winter 1978), reflect the scholastic interest in tracing imperialism within different disciplines.
- 7 Hamza Alavi, 'The state in post-colonial societies', *New Left Review* 74 (1972), pp. 59–81; John S. Saul, 'The state in post-colonial societies: Tanzania', in R. Miliband and J. Saville, eds, *The Socialist Register* (New York, Monthly Review Press; London, Merlin Press, 1974), pp. 349–72 (reprinted in John S. Saul, *The State and Revolution in Eastern Africa* (New York and London, Monthly Review Press, 1979), pp. 167–99).
- 8 For a late example of such usage, see my own *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (1990).
- 9 Aijaz Ahmad, 'The politics of literary postcoloniality', *Race & Class* (Vol. 36, no. 3, 1995), p. 1.
- 10 Neil Larsen, 'Imperialism, colonialism, postcolonialism', in Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray, eds, *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005), pp. 24–5.

- 11 Edward W. Said, 'East isn't East', *Times Literary Supplement* (No. 4792, 3 February 1995), p. 5.
- 12 The phrase derives from Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's book, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: multiculturalism and the media* (London, Routledge, 1994).
- 13 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage, 1979).
- 14 Two influential examples are Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000); and, Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 15 Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- 16 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: global economy in the Asian age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998).
- 17 Andre Gunder Frank, *World Accumulation, 1492-1789* (New York, Monthly Review Press; London, Macmillan, 1978); also Frank, *Dependent Accumulation and Underdevelopment* (New York, Monthly Review Press; London, Macmillan, 1978).
- 18 Frank, *ReOrient*, op. cit., p. xv.
- 19 Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.
- 20 Ibid., p. 332.
- 21 Andre Gunder Frank, 'Location, location, location to dissipate and absorb entropy in the nineteenth century world economy', paper presented at International Studies Association, Chicago (February 2001), available at: <http://www.rrojasdatabank.info/agfrank/online.html>.
- 22 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century* (New York and London, Academic Press, 1974), p. 3. Wallerstein himself, and such other long-term interlocutors of Frank's as Giovanni Arrighi and Samir Amin, have written extensively in rebuttal of the new line followed by Frank from about 1990 onwards.
- 23 Bhabha, op. cit., p. 173.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Benita Parry, 'The institutionalization of postcolonial studies', in N. Lazarus, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 74. Parry's citation from Said is from *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1993), pp. 366-7.
- 26 Benita Parry, 'Countercurrents and tensions in Said's critical practice', in Adel Iskanar and Hakem Rustom, eds, *Edward Said: a legacy of emancipation and representation* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010), pp. 499-512.
- 27 Parry, 'Countercurrents', op. cit., p. 508.
- 28 See the discussion in Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: a study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1999).
- 29 I insert the scare quotes around the 'postcolonial' of "postcolonial" literature' by way of emphasising that this is a problematical category. 'Postcolonial studies' is an institutionalised field of academic specialisation. However, few of the literary writers whose work might be said to fall within the purview of this field would situate themselves as 'postcolonial' writers. See, for example, T. Vijay Kumar's interview with Amitav Ghosh, in which the novelist explains his dislike of the term 'postcolonial' in reference to his work; see Ghosh, "Postcolonial" describes you as negative', *Interventions* (Vol. 9, no. 1, 2007), p. 105.
- 30 Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism with Capitalist Civilization* (London and New York, Verso, 1996), pp. 11-43.
- 31 Sony Labou Tansi, *The Antipeople*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London and New York, Marion Boyars, 1988[1983]), p. 28.
- 32 Tamara Sivanandan, "'Lies of our own making": the post-colonial nation-state in the writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Essex (1993), p. 15; also Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London, Heinemann, 1977).
- 33 Ibid.

- 34 The 'Rosales Saga' is made up of: *The Sampsons* (New York, Modern Library, 2000), comprising two novels: *The Pretenders* (1962) and *Mass* (1982); *Tree* (Manila, Solidaridad, 1978, but originally serialised a decade earlier); *My Brother, My Executioner* (Quezon City, New Day, 1979[1973]); and *Po-on (Dusk)* (New York, Modern Library, 1998 [1984]).
- 35 Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York, Vintage, 1989[1984]); Carlos Fuentes, *The Years with Laura Díaz*, trans. Alfred MacAdam (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000[1999]); Earl Lovelace, *Salt* (London and Boston, MA, Faber & Faber, 1996).
- 36 Perry Anderson, 'Modernity and revolution', *New Left Review* 144 (1984), p. 101.
- 37 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1988[1848]), p. 38.
- 38 Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol. 1, trans. M. Eastman (London, Sphere Books, 1967[1932–1933]), p. 432.
- 39 Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, op. cit., Ch. 2.
- 40 Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World literature in the era of multinational capitalism', *Social Text* 15 (1986), p. 68.
- 41 Lu Hsun, 'A madman's diary' (1918), in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1978); Ousmane Sembène, *Xala*, trans. Clive Wake (London, Heinemann, 1976[1974]).
- 42 Fredric Jameson, 'On magic realism in film', *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986), p. 311; cf. also the argument in the concluding section of his book on postmodernism that modernism itself must be seen as 'uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development', in which there is a 'peculiar overlap of future and past', such that 'the resistance of archaic feudal structures to irresistible modernizing tendencies' is evident (*Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1995], pp. 307, 309). Jameson illustrates this argument through reference to Kafka's *The Trial*, focusing on the juxtaposition in the novel of a thoroughly modernised economic order and an older, indeed archaic, legal bureaucracy and political order deriving from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- 43 Jameson, 'Third-World literature', op. cit., pp. 86–7, fn. 5.
- 44 This description is taken, again, from Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, op. cit., p. 59.
- 45 Said, *Orientalism*, op. cit., pp. 3, 11.
- 46 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press; London, James Currey, 1988), p. x.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 185; see also Alfred J. López, *Posts and Pasts: a theory of postcolonialism* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2001): 'Western discourses, and their accompanying assumptions of Western privilege and superiority, are pervasive even, and perhaps especially, within the discourses that would resist and oppose them' (p. 122). López's assumption that Eurocentrism is *particularly* deep-rooted (and virulent) in the thinking that sets out explicitly to 'resist and oppose' it strikes me as spectacularly ill-considered. A theory that commits one to arguing, for instance, that Fanon's Eurocentrism is more of a problem than Camus's, or that Fernández Retamar's discourse is more of a problem in this respect than David Landes's, would seem to me to have lost sight of reality.
- 48 V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: exegesis, textuality, and politics in Central Africa* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 177–8.
- 49 Paulo de Medeiros, 'Beyond the looking glass of empire: the colonization of Portuguese literature', in Michael Thomas Carroll, ed., *No Small World: visions and revisions of world literature* (Urbana, IL, National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), p. 43.
- 50 Lucia Boldrini, 'Comparative literature in the twenty-first century: a view from Europe and the UK', *Comparative Critical Studies* 3(1–2, 2006), pp. 15–16.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 52 '[T]here is a need now to look again at the idea of the canon, not least because of the way in which Western foundation texts have found their way into other literatures – think of the impact of naturalism on southern Indian literatures, of the extraordinarily creative use of

Homer and the epic tradition by the St. Lucian Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, of the current translation boom in China, as Western writing is translated, imitated and rewritten in exciting new ways. A fundamental question that comparative literature now needs to address concerns the role and status of the canonical and foundation texts that appear to be more highly valued outside Europe and North America than by a generation of scholars uneasy about their own history of colonialism and imperialism' (Susan Bassnett, 'Reflections on comparative literature in the twenty-first century', *Comparative Critical Studies* 3[1], 2006, p. 5).

53 Ibid., p. 4.

54 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, op. cit., p. 72; cf. the dedication to Nayantara Sahgal's 1985 novel *Rich like Us* (New York and London, W. W. Norton, 1986): 'To the Indo-British Experience and what its sharers have learned from each other.'

55 Bassnett, op. cit., pp. 4–5.

56 The tendentiousness of Bassnett's argument can be exposed merely through counter-citation of Sophie Bessis's elegant demolition of its general premises in her book *Western Supremacy: the triumph of an idea?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London and New York, Zed Books, 2003). Bessis writes of Eurocentric evocations of a 'Greco-Roman tradition' in general: 'In fact, since Petrarch and others gave it an initial form in the fourteenth century, the founding myth of an exclusive Greco-Roman source has functioned as an implacable machine for the expulsion of oriental or non-Christian sources from European civilization. Erased: the Babylonian, Chaldean, Egyptian and Indian influences on Greece, from the pre-Socratics to the late descendants of Alexander. Disregarded: the huge prestige that Egypt always enjoyed within the Greek world, whose literary figures happily recognized what they owed to its sciences and its religion. Obscured: the crucial dimension of the Hellenistic era, that hybrid of Hellenism and the East. Passed over in silence: the cultural pluralism of a Roman empire for which the barbarians were men from the North, not the familiar peoples along the southern shores of the Mediterranean' (p. 13).

57 Bassnett, op. cit., p. 10.

58 In which case, one would want to know the grounds on which Bassnett's idealist positioning of the 'inter-connection' between these 'civilisations' is to be preferred over Samuel Huntington's altogether grimmer, 'realist' theory of a 'clash of civilisations'.

59 In fact, Bassnett's argument is, in places, so definitively Eurocentric (in the restricted sense of 'Europe-centred') as to render implausible even her own conflation of 'Europe' with 'the West' and 'the northern hemisphere'. It is difficult to know, for instance, how North American readers are to position themselves in relation to the advice that 'it is important not to lose sight of where we, as Europeans, stand in relation to our own literary history'.

60 Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: conquest, colonization and cultural change 950–1350* (London, Penguin, 1994), pp. 313–14.

61 Jürgen Habermas, 'February 15, or, what binds Europeans together: plea for a common foreign policy, beginning in core Europe', in Daniel Levy, Max Pensky and John Torpey, eds, *Old Europe, New Europe, Core Europe: transatlantic relations after the Iraq war* (New York and London, Verso, 2005), p. 6.

62 Ibid., p. 7.

63 Ibid., p. 12.

64 Adolf Muschg, "'Core Europe": thoughts about the European identity' (2003), in Levy et al., eds., op. cit., p. 25.

65 See also Zygmunt Bauman, *Europe: an unfinished adventure* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004); also Tzvetan Todorov, *The New World Disorder: reflections of a European*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005).

66 Or one could describe it as deconstructive. Habermas's manifesto actually appeared under the joint signatures of himself and Jacques Derrida. Derrida was too ill at the time to contribute directly and managed to append only a short preface. But he indicated that he wished to have Habermas's piece appear under his own name also. The manifesto ('both an analysis and an appeal' [Habermas, op. cit., p. 3]) duly appeared simultaneously in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Libération*; see Levy et al., eds, op. cit., pp. xi–xxix.

- 67 Habermas, op. cit., pp. 5–6.
- 68 Habermas was responding to then US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, who had infamously castigated France and Germany as 'old Europe', praising instead the 'new Europe' of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, among others, whose leaders had supported, or at least refrained from publicly disavowing, the American-led offensive.
- 69 See, for example, the dissenting pieces by Esterházy, Stasiuk, Krzeminski and Keel in Levy et al., eds, op. cit. Péter Esterházy begins his piece with the witty observation that: 'Once, I was an Eastern European; then I was promoted to the rank of Central European. Those were great times (even if not necessarily for me personally), there were Central European dreams, visions, and images of the future; in short, everything (everything one needs for a round table, but that is spoken in haste and unfairly). Then a few months ago, I became a New European. But before I had the chance to get used to this status – even before I could have refused it – I have now become a non-core European' (p. 74). Andrzej Stasiuk, too, protests that Habermas's idea of 'core Europe' is not only truncating, but falsifying, beginning his article with a cascading list of peoples evidently relegated by Habermas to the status of non-core Europeans: 'Albanians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Estonians, Croatians, Lithuanians, Macedonians, Moldavians, Montenegrins, Poles, Romanians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Czechs, Ukrainians, White Russians.' And he adds: 'And just so it doesn't appear too simple, let's add the "belt of mixed population" – as Hannah Arendt calls the diverse, amorphous areas somewhere between Germany and Russia – that is, small heaps of Germans and Russians scattered here and there. To this, we can add, for example, the Gagausians and Aromunians, the restless international Sinti, the Crimeans and the Turks who didn't get back to their native lands on the Bosphorus before it unexpectedly shrank' (p. 103). For his part, Aldo Keel, self-consciously writing from 'the Scandinavian perspective', takes the opportunity to remind Habermas that if Danes in the modern era have participated in the 'bellicose past' that Habermas sees as having 'entangled all European nations in bloody conflicts', it has not been as instigators, but rather as subjects struggling against German domination: 'Around the year 1700', he writes, 'some 20 per cent of Copenhagen's population was German-speaking, and Herder still regarded Copenhagen as "the Danish end of Germany". Up until the end of the eighteenth century, German was the native tongue of the Danish royal family. It was only in 1773 that Danish became the official language of the army' (pp. 81–2).
- 70 Rey Chow, 'The old/new question of comparison in literary studies: a post-European perspective', *ELH* 71 (2004), p. 290.
- 71 René Wellek and Austin Warren, 'Theory of literature', cited in Chow, op. cit., p. 294.
- 72 Chow, op. cit., pp. 294–5.
- 73 Ibid., p. 297.
- 74 Ibid., p. 303.
- 75 Ibid., p. 301.
- 76 Fredric Jameson, 'Notes on globalization as a philosophical issue', in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds, *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham, NC and London, Duke University Press, 1998), p. 58.