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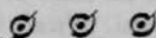
Postcolonial Studies and the Study of History



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By the 1970s, the historical study of colonial empires had become one of the deadest of dead fields within the discipline of history. Students interested in pushing the frontiers of historical research looked to Africa, Asia, or Latin America, or they sought to look at Europe and North America "from the bottom up." The revival of interest in the colonial world a generation later reflects the influence of literature and anthropology, and, more important, wider intellectual currents that threw into question the most basic narratives and the most fundamental ways in which knowledge is configured. *Historians had to face the fact that the new challenges were not simply to* add an African or Asian component to a previously Europe-centered curriculum but to rethink what it meant to study a continent called Europe and to examine the position of the researcher in the production of historical scholarship.[1]

But perhaps it is now the interdisciplinary domain of postcolonial studies that needs a shot in the arm, particularly a more rigorous historical practice. Postcolonial studies has brought before a large and transcontinental public the place of colonialism in world history, yet it has tended to obscure the very history whose importance it has highlighted. A generic colonialism—located somewhere between 1492 and the 1970s—has been given the decisive role in shaping a postcolonial moment, in which intellectuals can condemn the continuation of invidious distinctions and exploitation and celebrate the *proliferation of cultural hybridities and the fracturing of cultural boundaries.* This essay will develop a critique of ahistorical tendencies in colonial studies and argue for approaches that give more weight to the specificity of colonial situations and the importance of struggles in colonies, in metropoles, and between the two.[2]

History, as a discipline, has itself become the object of critique. Ashis

Nandy argues that history is inseparable from its imperialist origins, that it necessarily imposes the imperialist's understanding of a people's past over their own. To some scholars, history confines the zigzags of time into linear pathways, privileges state building over other forms of human connection, and tells a story of progress that inevitably leaves Africans or Asians on the side, lacking some crucial characteristic necessary to attain what is otherwise universal.[3] Such arguments constitute valid criticisms of many histories, but do they amount to an indictment of the study of history itself? In fact, the indictment of history is itself historical. To trace history to imperialism is to give power to a phenomenon that is historically located. If there is some truth in Nicholas Dirks's assertion of the "irrevocable link between History and the Nation-State," the evidence that the nation-state is not so universal makes for another sort of history that documents more varied sorts of political imagination.[4] The question is whether one can be satisfied with the simple *naming* of imperialism or colonialism as the dark side of universality, progress, or modernity, or whether we need to know something more about imperialism and colonialism.

Here, the virtues and the weaknesses of recent scholarship run close together. If any intervention shook up historians' complacency, it was Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said showed how certain visions of Asiatic societies were deeply woven into canonical European literature. Colonization no longer resided out there, in exotic places, but in the heart of European culture. Said soon faced criticism for presenting a view of the colonized as Other so tight that no room remained for alternative constructions, including those by Arabs, Africans, or South Asians. In a subsequent book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said tried to restore balance by emphasizing not the stark separation of European and indigenous discourses but the efforts of colonized intellectuals to work between them and to develop cross-cutting languages of liberation.[5] Such an argument necessarily proves a historical one.

To some postcolonial theorists, the goal has been no less than to overthrow the place of reason and progress as the beacons of humanity, insisting that the claims to universality that emerged from the Enlightenment occlude the way colonialism imposed not just its exploitative power but its ability to determine the terms—democracy, liberalism, rationality—by which political life the world over would from then on be conducted. By holding this universalizing modernity against the ugly particularity of colonialism, postcolonial theorists attack head-on a metanarrative of a history that shows Europe step by step repudiating the oppressiveness of its own past and making itself into a model to the rest of the world. Some hope to persuade us to "give up the seemingly powerful corollary *presumption* that liberalism and indeed democracy (even a purportedly radical one) have any *particular* privilege among ways of organizing the political forms of our collective lives."[6]

Critics—and even some scholars who identify themselves with postcolonial studies—at times worry that the repudiation of Enlightenment may have gone too far and brought aid and comfort to political forces—such as the Hindu Right in India—whose rejection of liberal democratic values does not serve to enhance respect for the values of different communities. Some fear that the critique of so-called foundational concepts in Western thought, particularly those of Marxist theory, disarms social scientists of the tools they need to understand the all-too-real power of global capitalism.[7]

These arguments are not what concerns me here. My focus is the double occlusion that results from turning the centuries of European colonization overseas into a critique of the Enlightenment, democracy, or modernity. First is the occlusion of European history, for the counterpart of the charge of reducing non-Western history to the lack of what the West had is the assumption that the West actually had it itself, that the metanarrative of European progress is more relevant than the messy and uneven history of post-1789 Europe. Second is the occlusion of the history of the people who lived in what became colonies. What is lost in telling nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism as the story of the coming ashore "of the terrible storm called progress" or as "the politico-ethical project of producing subjects and governing their conduct," or as the production of "colonial modernities through the regulation of cultural difference" is the range of experiences and actions among people who confronted colonial rule.[8] One misses the crudeness and the excess of violence of much of nineteenth-century colonization, as well as the ways in which colonized people sought—not entirely without success—to build lives in the crevices of colonial power and to deflect, appropriate, or reinterpret the teachings and preachings thrust on them. The line of argument mentioned above may celebrate "resistance," but the idea that struggle actually had effects on the course of colonization is lost in the timelessness of colonial modernity. The Haitian Revolution—and especially the possibility that the Haitian Revolution actually affected the meanings of citizenship or freedom in Europe and the Americas—remains as strikingly absent in prominent postcolonial texts as in conventional narratives of European progress.[9]

For some, the occlusion is explicit, as in this formulation of Robert J. C. Young: "The postcolonial does not privilege the colonial. It is concerned with colonial history only to the extent that history has determined the configurations of power structures of the present, to the extent that much of the world still lives in the violent disruptions of its wake, and to the extent that the anti-colonial liberation movements remain the source and inspiration of

its politics."[10] How one would be able to judge "the extent" without studying the history is not obvious, but that is beside the point: the "colonial" that is relevant here is the generic one, a singular colonialism, spatially undefined and temporally spread out over four centuries, whose contours are exempted from examination, yet whose power still determines the present.[11] But might not this generic colonial history produce an equally generic postcolonial present?

My argument is not with the postcolonial critic's insistence that the evils of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism lie firmly within the political structures, values, and understandings of its era; colonialism *should* not be reduced to an atavistic holdover from the past. It is with a juxtaposition of a supposed post-Enlightenment universality and colonial particularity frozen in time, isolated from the dynamics ensuing from the tensions within any ideological formation and the tensions produced by efforts of empires to install real administrations over real people. What such an approach privileges is the stance of the critic who decodes this transhistorical phenomenon, hence the label Gyan Prakash and others have attached to their project, "colonial critique."[12]

Such a critique has had its value, above all in forcing historians—like anthropologists or other social scientists—to question their own epistemological positions and to think long and hard about how historical sources, as much as interpretations, are produced. But critique is no substitute for historical or ethnographic research, and the question is how one understands and moves beyond the limits inherent to the stance of the critic.[13] Let me turn now to a brief analysis of modes of writing that can be called ahistorical history, which purport to address the relationship of past to present but which do so without interrogating the way processes unfold over time. I will mention three modes of looking at history ahistorically: story plucking, leapfrogging legacies, and time flattening. My goal in doing so is not to dismiss certain critical strategies, but to suggest limitations that can be transcended. It is not to issue a blanket criticism of "postcolonial studies" (a category containing much variety and debate), but to point to the insufficiency and imprecision of certain concepts and certain ways of framing issues. And it is not to defend one discipline or condemn another, for some of the most searching historical questions have been asked by literary critics or anthropologists, and historians, including some who have stimulated the study of colonial questions, have also contributed to the tendency to take colonialism out of a historical framework.[14]

First, story plucking. Here I mean extracting tidbits from different times and places and treating them as a body independent of their historical relationship, context, or countervailing tendencies. Postcolonial writers from Homi Bhabha to Walter Mignolo to Dipesh Chakrabarty write with little apparent misgivings about a phenomenon labeled colonial, appearing in many places and times.[15] Implicitly or explicitly, "coloniality," or its related form "postcoloniality," can be abstracted from context and process. The weighty *-ity* attached to the colonial implies that there exists an essence of being colonized, independent of what anybody did in a colony. One can pluck a text or a narrative from Spanish America in the sixteenth century, or from the slave colonies of the West Indies in the eighteenth century, or from a moderately prosperous twentieth-century cocoa planter in the Gold Coast, and derive a lesson that conveys a generalizable meaning. What gets lost here is that colonial power, like any other, is the object of struggle, a struggle that depends on the specific resources of those involved, and that colonizer and colonized themselves constitute far from immutable categories, categories that must be reproduced by specific institutions, institutions that themselves change historically. People did not just sit around contemplating what it meant to be colonized, and examining repressive power is not the same as assuming that it alone characterized a particular situation; the extremes of colonial violence may well reflect the limits of routinized power. Traders, peasants, religious converts, and others might seize spaces that colonial authorities could not understand or bend an institution in a new direction, or else Creole elites might replicate metropolitan institutions while attacking imperial rule. Different forms of exploitation, from compulsory production on plantations to taxation of the exports of peasants whose farms and families were largely ignored, could have very different social and cultural implications. A concept like coloniality is either so dilute that it carries little meaning, or so essentializing that it becomes deeply misleading.[16] Naming the colonial says little about how people confronted the forms of power they faced, about the social and cultural resources they brought to the confrontation, or about the dynamics of interaction and struggle.

Second, leapfrogging legacies. Here I refer to claims that something at time A caused something in time C without considering time B. Students of race in the United States have encountered a striking instance of this fallacy: the Moynihan report done during Nixon's presidency, which blamed the dislocation of African American families on the legacy of slavery. The causes of dislocation were placed in the safely distant past, skipping over anything that happened between 1863 and 1963, notably the effects of industrialization and urbanization on African Americans. Colonial legacy arguments exhibit the same flaw. African political scientist Mahmood Mamdani, in his book *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late*

Colonialism,[17] draws a direct causal connection between a colonial policy, arguably important in the 1920s and 1930s, of ruling through "decentralized despotisms," African chiefdoms given authority under colonial auspices, and the brittle politics of authoritarianism and ethnicity in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Like Moynihan, Mamdani has a point at either end of his leapfrog, but he misses everything in between. His book says almost nothing about the 1950s and 1960s, and thus misses the alternative explanation for Africa's malaise: that there was indeed effective mobilization in those years that cut across ethnic divisions and urban/rural distinctions, through which Africans made strong claims to citizenship, which African politicians used against colonial regimes. But once in power, such leaders understood all too well the danger such claims represented. The explosion of citizenship in the final years of colonial rule appears nowhere in Mamdani's book, and he thus misses not only the sequence of processes in the decolonization era but the tragedy of recent African history, people's heightened sense of possibility, and the thwarting of their hopes. This book does not stand alone in finding a too-ready explanation of the postcolonial by invoking the colonial, leapfrogging over precisely the period and the processes that most need examination.[18]

Third, time flattening. This refers to an assumption that a certain essence characterizes a long period of time, passing over the conflict and change within it. This constitutes an old vice of history departments, notably in course listings that divide modern and premodern, distinctions bad enough in European history, but often extended elsewhere. Era labeling has been given a new interdisciplinary lease on life, in part through the work of Michel Foucault that locates modern governmentality in a space amorphous in time and amorphous in agency and causality, but that provides a blueprint for a wide range of scholars to attribute practices and discourses to the fact of modernity, often elided with post-Enlightenment rationalism, bourgeois equality, and liberalism.

Let me take the most persuasive version of this argument, from historian Dipesh Chakrabarty.[19] He justly criticizes versions of Indian history—colonialist, nationalist, or Marxist—that measure the colonized by how well they did at class formation and state building—where Europe supposedly led the way—and attribute their failures to certain "lacks" on their part (of a proper working class, of a proper bourgeoisie). Chakrabarty instead calls for the "provincialization" of Europe, its history seen as particular rather than as a universal model.

But then he proceeds to do the opposite. What he variously calls post-Enlightenment rationality, bourgeois equality, modernity, or liberalism become not provincial ideologies, but a grid of knowledge and power forcing people to see the nation-state as the only political model and obliging them to give up diverse understandings of community in favor of a one-to-one relationship of the unmarked individual and the nation-state, at best seeking "alternatives" to a modernity decidedly singular and decidedly European.

The pleasant irony of this argument is that Europeans become the people without history, a tag formerly reserved for the victims of their colonial endeavors.[20] European history, from Denis Diderot to Jacques Derrida, is flattened into a single post-Enlightenment era. A reference to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel stands in for a European history reduced to the claim of progress.[21] The problem, of course, is that Europeans—like the people they conquered—had a history that does not fit in boxes like this. Nineteenth-century Europe was immersed in struggles within and among many parochialisms and many universalities. Secularism was more often beleaguered than triumphant, anciens régimes and aristocracies did not die out on the guillotine. One would not know from Chakrabarty's account how intense the struggles have been over what the Enlightenment meant and what political deductions to draw from this. The balancing of the universalized, rights-bearing individual against questions of difference, constituted, as gender historian Dena Goodman argues, a vital debate *within* Enlightenment thinking. Critiques of post-Enlightenment thinking, as David Hollinger notes, have "evacuated" the history of "modernism" in the era 1890 to 1930, with its "revolt against the positivism, rationalism, realism, and liberalism," in order to create a stark—and profoundly ahistorical—opposition between the Enlightenment and the posts- in vogue today.[22]

Instead of provincializing Europe, Chakrabarty seems to be saying that Europe cannot be provincialized. He assumes not only that the Enlightenment won a complete ideological victory after 1789 over the defenders of aristocratic, Catholic, and monarchic social orders but that modernity constituted a kind of lived experience in contrast to that of India.[23] What is lost when one takes Europe out of its history is not only how badly the tale of progress fits the political, intellectual, and cultural history of this continent but the extent to which even such constructs dismissed as bourgeois equality were not some essence of "the West," but products of struggle. The English citizen, for example, far from constituting an unmarked individual in direct relation to the state, emerged from a vision of community centered around the idea of a jury of one's peers.[24] The ascension of a liberal idea of a rights-bearing individual over the equally liberal idea of rights as earned by the civilized behavior of a collectivity reflected the labors not only of a Frederick Douglass but of unnamed ex-slaves, dependent laborers, and colonized

peasants who revealed the limits of colonial power and defined alternative modes of living and working in the crevices of authority.[25]

One antidote to writing history as the rise of the nation-state could focus on alternative readings of European history itself. Postrevolutionary France, for example, proved a peculiar combination of so-called old colonies, especially in the Caribbean, and a European France whose boundaries and degrees of "Frenchness" were far from clear even a century later. Precisely because Saint Domingue (later Haiti) formed part of an imperial space, the question of whether the rights of man and the citizen applied there was argued over in both Saint Domingue and Paris. The Haitian Revolution of 1791 stands alongside the French in opening questions of slavery and citizenship, of cultural difference and universal rights, to wider debate, the long-term relevance of which C. L. R. James made clear in 1938.[26] Napoleon's conquests in Europe and Egypt extended even further the fact of France as a differentiated territory, establishing a differentiation that did not neatly line up in a self-Other dichotomy.[27] That ex-slaves of African descent in the old colonies became citizens in 1848 while the large Muslim population taken in by the conquest of Algeria in 1830 were defined as subjects points to the difficulties of producing a stable theory of imperial difference. Most important, the range of distinctions within the French empire meant that people of any given status knew of the other possibilities, and just as in Haiti white planters, mulatto planters, and slaves had all used the citizenship concept to make claims, the efforts of France to define an imperial space produced a succession of claims to reconfigure citizenship, especially in moments of uncertainty like 1848, the beginnings of the Third Republic in the 1870s, and the world wars. If one wants to rethink France from its colonies, one might even argue that France itself only became a nation-state in 1962, when it finally gave up its hold on Algeria and tried for a time to define itself as a singular citizenry in a single territory.[28]

In the colonies, meanwhile, flattening nineteenth-century history into the imposition of colonial governmentality or colonial modernity produces, to an African historian at least, something unrecognizable. Certainly, one can point to efforts of geographers, explorers, and scholarly minded colonial officials in the aftermath of conquests of the 1870s to slot African cultures into schemas of scientific knowledge, but any study of knowledge and power must also recognize the deliberate ignorance of early-twentieth-century colonial states: there was no need to know the laborer whom one was going to use and discard. If advocates of so-called free labor hoped to extract a market-responsive individual from the confines of both slavery and community, colonial officials soon realized that the West Indian ex-slave or the

African ex-peasant was not following the script, and rather than make individual subjects, a powerful colonial lobby advocated new forms of coerced labor and the alteration of community structures to provide collective discipline. Religious conversion and education had their proponents, who wished to colonize minds, but until the 1940s, the detractors were more centrally placed in African administrations, and British, French, and German colonial regimes spent very little money to realize whatever civilizing missions they professed. In French and British Africa, a patchwork of early colonial projects to remake the African largely gave way after World War I, in the face of the inability of regimes to impose their will, to a more custodial version of colonialism, to acceptance of working through the indigenous elites once labeled primitive and tyrannical, and to a refusal to spend metropolitan funds on "development" until confronted with a new wave of challenges in the late 1930s and 1940s. For an African living in a colony, fluctuations or variants in colonial policy could have an enormous impact: between the forced laborer on a Mozambican sugar farm and the relatively autonomous coffee farmer in the southern Gold Coast, between the teacher trained at the École William Ponty in Senegal and the Algerian victimized by land alienation and labor exploitation, a great deal hung in the balance. And the kinds of politics for which such people could be mobilized varied accordingly, in place and in time. African historians since the 1970s have shed a good deal of light on such phenomena, and the specific trajectories of struggle deserve a place in the pantheon of colonial and postcolonial studies.

Doing history historically, as these examples suggest, does more to challenge the supposedly dominant narratives of nation building and development than an approach to the past based on story plucking, leapfrogging legacies, or time flattening. Criticisms of many historians for writing everything into a linear history of human progress are often accurate and appropriate, but an understanding of different forms of temporality is not assisted by positing a Western temporality divided into premodern, modern, and postmodern epochs or by focusing on an era of modernity in which European ascendancy is juxtaposed against but unaffected by the actions and ideas of colonized populations. A more dynamic view of the exercise of power, of the limits of power, and the contestations of power constitutes a fundamentally historical endeavor, demanding methodologies both rigorous and self-aware.

Colonial studies has by and large been so intent on taking apart the narrative of Western progress that it has remained rather uncurious about exploring the implications of looking backwards in time or toward the variety of forms of state power that shared the temporal field of modernity. Scholars

of early modern Europe—Peter Hulme stands out in this regard—have gone further to engage postcolonial theory than have scholars of later colonization and decolonization to extend their own temporal bounds.[29] My coedited book *Tensions of Empire* proves no exception to this orientation toward Western Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[30] The focus risks reproducing Eurocentrism by all but ignoring other empires—the Ottoman, the Habsburg, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Russian—and initiatives to compare the Soviet empire of 1917–89 to empires of Britain and France in the twentieth century have come almost entirely from the side of scholars of the Soviet Union. Nineteen eighty-nine is not celebrated here as a milestone of decolonization: Central Asian Muslims conquered by the czars and subjected to the violent modernizing project of the Soviets are not the object of analogous moral and political attention as North African Muslims colonized by the French.

The narrowing of the range is based on certain assumptions: that these empires are different sorts of animals, that they are not really colonial, and, above all, that with the exception of the Soviet case, they were not "modern." The latter argument is actually a bit of whig history, reading backwards the collapse of the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian empires in 1917–23 into a thesis of the inevitable transition from empire to nation-state. Recent scholarship has shown that far from being beleaguered holdouts against claims to the nation, these empires produced a strong empire-centered imagination that captured the minds of many self-conscious opponents of imperial power until the time of World War I. Ottomanism constituted a compelling ideology, even among Young Turks whose national focus to a large extent postdated the demolition of the empire rather than inspired it. Likewise, the critics of Habsburg conservatism included many who saw the imperial unit as a possibility offering something to reform-minded intellectuals, Jews, and others who sought a bigger field than what became national units. Yet these empires were not quaint repositories of aristocratic cosmopolitanism. If difference is the hallmark of colonialism, they articulated and reproduced difference aplenty—and did not lack for repression either, but not in the same way as Britain or France.[31] And what passes for "modern governmentalities" in nineteenth-century Europe—cadastral surveys, the enumeration of imperial subjects—was a thousand years old in China.[32] Like the empires of nineteenth-century Western Europe, these empires had both universalizing and particularizing tendencies and illustrate a stunning range of possibilities for examining their relation.

Broadening the range of oppositional movements as well as empires should underscore the point made earlier: the dangers of the backward projection of the post-1960s world of nation-states into a nineteenth-century path of inevitability. One can fruitfully put in relation to each other the saliency of Ottomanism in the late nineteenth century, the rise of pan-Arab and pan-Slavic movements in the same era, and the long history of pan-Africanism, all of which put political affinity into a nonterritorial framework. Many scholars quote the same passage from Aimé Césaire in which he eloquently depicts the horrors of colonial rule, but not everybody remembers that his vision of decolonization was not limited to forging independent nation-states, but stressed remaking France itself to eliminate the invidious inequality among the component parts of this supranational unit and recreating a capitalist world order.[33] The possibilities that the political imagination of Césaire opened up—and the ways in which those possibilities were constrained—require a historical analysis more attuned to different voices than the assumption of a course from empire to nation-state set at the time of the French Revolution.

My own thinking has been shaped by reading old trade union pamphlets and colonial archives from French Africa in the late 1940s, where one finds workers' organizations telling officials: you want to talk about civilizing us, but what we want to talk about is equal pay for equal work, about piped water in our neighborhood, about schools for our children.[34] Such demands in their own way proved as threatening as the efforts of a Ho Chi Minh to throw France out of Southeast Asia, for they promised to turn the very premises of postwar imperial ideology into a series of expensive demands whose refusal would be ideologically as well as politically dangerous. Multiplied by many mobilizing efforts throughout the French empire, such demands not only won concrete benefits for many people—the forty-hour week for wage workers, for example—but the fact of insisting that such measures should apply to Africans as much as anybody else profoundly affected the meaning of citizenship and social distinction. They provoked doubts in Paris about the entire doctrine of postwar French colonialism, whose insistence that Greater France was the only unit of political possibility implied that the French standard of living was a legitimate reference point for colonial social movements. Political mobilization around imperial citizenship also injected a self-confidence into social movements themselves—and above all a socially focused, activist notion of citizenship—that proved threatening to postindependence regimes as well.

The efforts of trade unions, farmers' organizations, traders' organizations, and groups of teachers and students to challenge modernizing colonial regimes for both material benefits and political voice risk being lost if one privileges the Manichaean version of studying colonialism and anticolonial-

ism.[35] But more is lost than the stories of a generation of activists in the 1940s and 1950s and the important but bounded accomplishments they achieved. The very claim of the "victors" of the politics of the 1950s and 1960s to represent a true anticolonialism and their contempt for the more diverse politics that had made the 1950s such a volatile era provided a rationale for the labeling of challengers to the new regimes as imperialist stooges or enemies of the people and the purging of the opposition from the political spectrum. The cultivation of heroic anticolonialism became part of postcolonial repression. Rather than contrast an era of pure anticolonialism, built around iconicized heroes, against a sordid picture of postcolonial corruption and venality, one can gain a more thorough understanding of the possibilities and tragedies of decolonization by examining the political space people opened for themselves, with its limitations and their compromises, provisional victories, and powerful disappointments.[36]

To some postcolonial theorists, those Africans who insisted (or who today insist) that the real issue is water, schools, or wages did not have it right. What is "important for the present," writes David Scott, is "a critical interrogation of the practices, modalities, and projects through which modernity inserted itself into and altered the lives of the colonized." Well, yes, but what about the water pipe, the health clinic, and the farmers' cooperative? Is there not a danger that we, as scholars, project onto people who lived at a certain time and in a certain place a metahistorical perspective that crowds out the question of how people, in a particular conjuncture, phrased their demands and organized themselves?[37]

The issues raised here are not mere exercises in historical refinement. History, as such, does not offer any lessons (although historians offer plenty), but to think through a historical process is to observe the relationship of action and its consequences. That is why I keep insisting on the importance of looking at the way in which specific actions by states or political movements reconfigured concepts and possibilities. If we are to do more than lament the passing of an era of true radicalism or to assume that colonialism's opponents could only follow a script written by colonizers themselves, we need to do more careful research into social and political movements at all levels, from the people trying to put together a local cooperative to transterritorial movements of intellectuals who fought to make colonialism an anathema. We cannot read that history off a text by Fanon.

There is a danger that ahistorical history encourages an apolitical politics. To take a stance against the Enlightenment, to hold modernity responsible for racial and class hierarchy, offers little account of the responsibility of elites for their words and actions and little insight into how people facing

the possibilities and constraints of particular colonial situations acted. We lose the power of their example to remind us that our own moral and political choices, made in the face of the ambivalences and complications of our present situation, will have consequences in the future. As politically attuned a writer as Chakrabarty separates his politics from his critique, conceding that the liberal order and Enlightenment ideals he criticizes may be the best means for defending the position of the subaltern.[38] A more dynamic view of history would make the separation of colonial critique in the academy from politics in South Asia less artificial.

The antislavery movement, the anticolonial movement, and the antiapartheid movement have been subjected to relentless irony, for their humanistic claims can be set off against the exclusions and hierarchies they reinscribed and the whiggishness that narrating their history seems to imply.[39] But such movements were not simply entrapped in a framework of European beliefs; they profoundly changed what Europeans thought they believed. The Haitian Revolution, the Jamaican slave revolt of 1830, the Martinique slave revolt of 1848, the countless escapes and small acts of defiance of slaves in the southern United States—all formed part of the process that made slavery, a very normal part of very normal empires, into something first questioned and then attacked. That colonialism became the object of attack in Hanoi or Paris in the 1930s the way slavery did a century earlier reflects not the opposition of an abstracted "colonial subject" against a colonizer, but the coming together of specific forms of struggle in a particular conjuncture. At critical moments, the intersection of locally or regionally rooted mobilizations with movements deploying a liberal-democratic ideology, with attempts at articulating a Christian universalism, with the mobilization of Islamic networks, with the linkages of anti-imperialist movements in different continents, with trade union internationalism helped to shape and reshape the terrain of contestation. Such interactive mobilizations have hardly eliminated exploitation or invidious distinction, and they have had to contend with powerful forces seeking to confine challenges to carefully bounded domains, but incremental changes and systemic shifts are nonetheless part of the history of the present.[40]

One can readily agree with Uday Mehta when he writes, "I do not claim that liberalism *must be* imperialistic, only that the urge is *internal* to it."[41] One could just as easily write, "I do not claim that liberalism *must be* anti-imperialist, only that the urge is *internal* to it." As in the case of nineteenth-century English liberalism, the crucial questions about arguments for liberation and democratization today are not resolvable by epistemological critique alone, but turn on the concrete possibilities that our political, eco-

nomic, and social conjuncture permits and the political choices that people make. Which liberalism? Whose Enlightenment? What kind of development? Which vision of an Islamic *umma* (community)? Whose community? Which network of connections across linguistic or cultural divisions?

If such an argument is valid, the question of how one finds evidence and constructs an argument about moments of possibility and moments of constraint proves crucial. The stance of the critic has been useful in reminding scholars in dusty archives of the impossibility of seeing themselves in a position of neutral judges outside of the history about which they write. Historians are warned of the dangers of imposing a notion of "objective truth" without probing the truth regime that gives weight to certain evidence and denies it to others; of missing the "temporal heterogeneity," the diverse ways people understand time and their relation to it, and of the need to get inside religious or other forms of understanding that deviate from secular, rationalist visions of how people make choices and act.[42] But it would be unfortunate if these issues were reduced to the imposition of modern reason on a recalcitrant nonmodern past; they prove fundamental to understanding *any* past. How regimes of truth are constructed in a particular context has been the subject of important analyses, and the efforts (notably among African historians since the 1960s) to build a more inclusive notion of the archive and to analyze the production of history—how the telling or writing of history is itself part of a history—have helped to make history writing a more examined and debated process.[43] A critical stance need not reproduce the modern/nonmodern dichotomy it pretends to deconstruct or to which it claims to provide alternatives.

Postcolonial studies has a strong stake in not carrying the contextualization of truth claims into a dismissal of truth as just another Western conceit. The moral force of the insertion of colonialism into world history depends on the reader's conviction that the slaves on a Jamaican sugar plantation actually felt the whip and that the Toussaint-Louvertures of the colonial world—and the unnamed peasants who frustrated the plans of colonial agents—are more than archetypes. The colonial apologist's tale of colonialism as the bringing of schools and hospitals to hapless natives might be seen as the expression by a group with its own cultural criteria, its own regime of truth, equivalent to but different from the cultural criteria and truth regimes of other groups. If all versions are to be seen as alternative fictions, each associated with a specific identity category, then there is no basis, other than an already specified position (race, gender, ethnicity) for anybody to convince anybody of anything.[44]

The historian's insistence on referring to the archive—oral, written, or whatever—pushes debate toward consideration of the time and the context in which a process occurs and makes it imaginable that a historian from, say, South Asia, might convince a reader in Great Britain to question a received truth. That the ground on which contestation takes place is not even, and that the historical or any other profession may resist the reconstitution of its canons, does not negate the importance of such debate. To foster the material and political conditions that extend the range of discussion outside of academic venues in which it has become accepted is no easy task, but the importance of extending intellectual debate derives from it being more than the juxtaposition of preconstituted stances.

One of the achievements of scholars who consider themselves postcolonial is to bring the colonial question out of the colonies and into Europe and North America. Here, too, there is a danger of the power of this insight becoming diffuse, of explaining generalized difference in the cities of England via reference to an undifferentiated colonial past stretching back to Columbus. One cannot understand the Le Pen phenomenon in France without understanding Algeria, but one cannot understand Le Pen by reducing him to Algeria. The terms in which Le Pen–style xenophobia is articulated also comes out of a line of right-wing Catholicism that has been anti-Semitic and anti-Protestant, loudly proclaiming itself "French" while at the same time opposing the republican notions of civic virtue that others consider the basis of Frenchness.[45] The problems of immigrants from ex-colonies or other regions outside of Western Europe will not be solved by juxtaposing a postcoloniality that is filled with hybridity and multiculturalism against an all-containing colonial modernity.

Tejumola Olaniyan writes that "even the most unforgiving critics of the *term* [postcolonial] do not deny that a lot of relevant work is being done in its name."[46] He is certainly correct, and the most important question is how to go about continuing the work. Stuart Hall has given historians, among others, plenty of employment when he describes the domain of postcolonial studies as "the whole process of expansion, exploration, conquest, colonisation and imperial hegemonisation which constituted the 'outer face,' the constitutive outside, of European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492."[47] This agenda will, and should be, pursued by scholars using a variety of theoretical frameworks, in useful conversation with the conceptual critiques that postcolonial theory has encouraged. But the metaclaim that the unit in question is "Western capitalist modernity since 1492" can easily become a shortcut of just such an examination, an evocation of a past flattened into a blunt tool useful for showing the ugly flip side of European progress, but not for building up other ways of narrating and explaining a

complex history. If the kind of inquiry I am advocating is consistent with the goals of many who consider themselves postcolonial theorists, some of the concepts deployed within such a framework contribute more to the flattening than to the examination, and I have suggested that coloniality, colonial modernity, post-Enlightenment rationality, and colonial legacy are among them. Similarly, Homi Bhabha and others have brought into wide usage notions like hybridity, aporia, and fragmentation, and they have provoked a useful debate against other theorists who see discourses in colonial spaces in more Manichaean terms, but there are risks in deploying such concepts generically and at a high level of abstraction, for they may say too little (about the different forms in which hybridity appears) or not enough (about the specific conjunctures in which hybridity or dualism gain ascendancy).[48]

Let us, in short, *really* provincialize Europe. To do that is not to invert the narrative of progress to expose its underbelly, but to examine the limits as well as the power of European domination, the unevenness and conflict within Europe itself; it is to study systems of power and representation in interaction with each other, neither presuming the centrality of modern Europe as a reference point nor shying away from analysis of power as it actually was exercised.

Enlarging the field should not dilute the importance of European colonization in its earliest or most recent manifestations, but rather produce a more compelling account of its mechanisms and its limits, including the mechanisms and limits of modes of representation. It is worth thinking about how far one can generalize about a phenomenon called colonialism, about the degree to which different historical trajectories are linked by the shared experience of coercive and cultural subjugation. One can recognize that all colonizing systems—from Rome's universal empire to Islamic universalism to the civilizing mission of twentieth-century France—created a tension between the incorporation of conquered peoples into a singular imperial system and the maintaining lines of distinction that marked the center's unique role in the system. Such a tension, and the conflicts it provoked, was built into the institutions of empires, given their geographic dispersion, extended chains of command, incorporation of regional economic circuits, local systems of authority and patronage, and often the presence of religious or ideological affinities embodied in the values not just of a subjugated community but of an alternative version of universality. Generalization can homogenize too far (as in abstracting coloniality from the lived experience of people in colonies) and demarcation can be misleading (separating modern empires from those prior or contemporaneous to those of nineteenth-century Western Europe). But comprehensive historical analysis might help sketch out likely fields of struggle, might help to look for conjunctures where power relations were most vulnerable and to probe limits of power beneath the claims to dominance. The analytical challenge consists of both comparing and studying connections, of examining changes in the imaginable and the possible across time and space.

The analytical challenge cannot be separated from a political one, for one should neither avoid the specific trajectories of Western European expansion nor fetishize them. At the same time, one loses a great deal by using *colonial* as a mere metaphor for extremes of power, for that is to give up a differentiated vocabulary with which to discuss the spatial, institutional, and cultural patternings of colonial systems. I agree with Stuart Hall that one should not shy away from using *postcolonial* in an epochal sense, for the decolonization movements of the decades after World War II did in fact remove colonization from the political repertoire, and from then onward the institutionalization and representation of transnational power had to take forms other than that of a colonial empire.[49] Once again, one can try to name or invoke a "postcolonial moment" as if it had a distinguishing essence, or one can use the concept as the point of departure for a methodologically diverse examination of different trajectories of power, of its mechanisms and limits, as well as of the changing ways in which such forms of power were contested.[50]

We are not faced with a dichotomous choice of practicing history in one way only or rejecting historical scholarship altogether, between reducing colonization to a sideshow of European progress or assuming it represented a single, coherent project; between romanticizing anticolonial movements in their moment of triumph or treating colonial history as if the actions of the colonized never changed its course; between making clear the colonial histories' continued effects today or accepting that anticolonial movements have succeeded in eliminating colonial rule as a normal part of world politics. Far from having to choose between examining the complexities of a colonial past and broadening our sense of the opportunities and constraints of the future, a critical and sensitive historical practice can help us retain our focus on the possibilities of political imagination and on the importance of accountability for the consequences of our actions.

Notes

. Most notable is the recognition within the historical profession achieved by scholars whose work crosses the colony/metropole divide: Alice Conklin and Julia Clancy-Smith in "French" history; Antoinette Burton, Catherine Hall, and Susan Thorne in "British" history; Lora Wildenthal in "German" history; and Christopher

Schmidt-Nowara in "Spanish" history, to name a few. And if my generation of historians of Africa (early 1970s) tended to think that colonial topics were not African enough, subsequent generations have if anything tilted in the opposite direction. The establishment of journal *American Historical Review* has recently given colonial questions a prominent place; note also the proliferation of journals like *Postcolonial Studies*, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, and *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*.

2. Some of the critiques and analyses suggested in this essay are developed at greater length in my *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

3. Nandy, "History's Forgotten Doubles."

4. Dirks, "History as a Sign of the Modern," 25.

5. Said, *Orientalism*; and Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. For a recent reassessment of Said's contribution by historians, see Rotter, Fleming, and Biddick, "Orientalism Twenty Years On."

6. Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 156.

7. For sympathetic critiques, see Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*; and Dirks, "Postcolonialism and Its Discontents," 244, 246. For hostile ones, see Sumit Sarkar, "The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 20, 1993, 164–65; and Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura." For an illuminating debate on foundational concepts, see Prakash, "Writing Post-orientalist Histories of the Third World"; O'Hanlon and Washbrook, "After Orientalism"; and Prakash, "Can the 'Subaltern' Ride?"

8. Dirks, "Postcolonialism and Its Discontents," 246; Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 52; Burton, introduction to *Gender, Sexuality, and Colonial Modernities*, 2.

9. Thus Dipesh Chakrabarty, for whom the post-Enlightenment is a crucial category, makes no mention of the post-Enlightenment of the Haitian revolutionaries. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Scott does not mention Haiti either in *Refashioning Futures*. Young, *Postcolonialism*, cites Haiti as a slave revolt, not as a revolt that shaped debates on emancipation. It is the very "unpost" C. L. R. James who appreciated the significance of this event (*The Black Jacobins*).

10. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 4.

11. For Stuart Hall, the relevant unit of analysis is "European and then Western capitalist modernity after 1492." Hall, "When Was 'the Postcolonial,'" 249.

12. Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism."

13. Young defines postcolonialism as a stance, as an assumption of the mantle of anticolonial liberation movements in a changed situation. He posits a singular intellectual-political lineage going from Marxism to analyses of the subjective affects of colonialism. Denying any particular interest in colonial history, his postcolonialism nevertheless assumes "a common political and moral consensus towards the history and legacy of western colonialism" (*Postcolonialism*, 5). He dismisses the historians' potential concern about the variety of colonial experiences with a rhetorical flourish: "Postcolonial critique . . . identifies with the subject position of anti-colonial activists," while the "empiricist" historian presumably does not (19). The problem with defining a mode of inquiry by a stance is not merely its cavalier attitude toward human experience but that any political thinking or forms of mobilization that do not fit the singular narrative are excluded from the start. Yet Young's dismissive comments are contradicted by his often context-sensitive text, and even by his subtitle, *An Historical Introduction*.

14. Any criticism of work coming out of Subaltern Studies must acknowledge that no group has done more, by exhortation and practice, to stimulate research on colonial history. Fruitful debate is also animated by Indian historians outside the Subaltern Studies fold, such as Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics*; and Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*.

15. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man"; Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

16. This dilution is the basic problem with using *coloniality* to express extremes of power and extremes of differentiations—but without regard to institutions—and with treating a wide range of experiences of subordination as the consequences of a generic "centuries of Western colonial expansion," rather than specific trajectories, as in Grosfoguel and Georas, "'Coloniality of Power.'"

17. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report was entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," and the controversy it provoked can be examined in Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*.

18. For another example of the leapfrogging fallacy, see Price, *The Convict and the Colonial*. This book is constructed around the ironic juxtaposition of a violent confrontation of police and demonstrators on the French island of Martinique in 1925 and the trivializing of the memory of colonization in the period of Price's fieldwork, when the people of Martinique were caught up in the peculiarities of the tourist business and the French welfare state. By omitting the history in between, Price occludes the seriousness of political mobilization in the 1930s and 1940s, when a strong Caribbean movement pressed the French government to accord this colony the status of a French department and thereby could lay claim to French educational and social resources equivalent to those claimed by other French citizens. One would not know from Price's account that this movement succeeded in 1946, that the victims of the 1925 conflict did not die in vain, or that the noted writer/activist whose authority Price invokes in indicting French colonialism, Aimé Césaire, was the main leader of the departmentalization movement. The missing middle contains the politics.

19. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*. If in some of his writing, Chakrabarty has engaged the difficulties of using Marxist theory in colonial situations by focusing on the specific modes in which economic, political, and social power operates; other writing goes in the opposite direction, toward abstraction and away from context. See his *Habitations of Modernity*.

20. The allusion here is to Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*.

21. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 237; Prakash, *Another Reason*, 8, 118; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 52.

22. Goodman, "Difference"; and Hollinger, "The Enlightenment and the Genealogy of Cultural Conflict in the United States," 11–12.

23. Similarly, Prakash places a valuable reading of the variety of ways in which South Asians engaged in science against a singular notion of European "reason." Prakash, *Another Reason*.

24. Somers, "Rights, Relationality, and Membership."

25. On the role of slaves in redefining the meanings of freedom, see Blackburn, *The*

Overthrow of Colonial Slavery; Fredrickson, *Black Liberation*; and Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*.

26. James, *The Black Jacobins*. See also Dubois, *Les esclaves de la République*.

27. Curiously, arguments about post-Enlightenment colonialism have not led to a reexamination of Napoleon's empire. This maps poorly onto a modern/nonmodern distinction, for Napoleon combined the deployment of "scientific" principles of geography and rationalized organization with a symbolic orientation toward Rome (and Caesar's Rome more than republican Rome); he restored slavery (abolished in 1794) and was close to some elites of the ancien régime. Most important was that Napoleon's France was more complicated than a "nation" subjecting others: his conquests incorporated some territories into the departmental system and ruled others through local monarchs or elites, or else through relatives or clients, and sometimes with the support of local republican elements. An attempt to rethink part of this story was a colloquium at the University of Paris VIII–Saint Denis, held in June 2002, entitled "Rétablissement de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises: Ruptures et continuités de la politique coloniale française: 1802, 1804, 1825, 1830." See also Woolf, "French Civilization and Ethnicity in the Napoleonic Empire."

28. For the switches in direction in policy toward citizenship and nationality, see Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français?*; and Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*.

29. Hulme, *Colonial Encounters*; Pagden, *Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination*; and Schwartz, *Implicit Understanding*. As Florencia Mallon notes in this volume, many Latin Americanists feel that postcolonialism does not apply to them.

30. Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*.

31. Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries*; Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*; Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*; and Barkey and von Hagen, *After Empire*.

32. Wong, *China Transformed*.

33. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 21. A notable effort to bring a transnational perspective to studying such questions is Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*. One wishes that Africa had more of a place in his Black Atlantic.

34. Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*.

35. Hence the argument that Ann Stoler and I made claiming that understanding Manichaean tendencies within colonial ideologies should not imply taking a Manichaean position oneself. Cooper and Stoler, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in *Tensions of Empire*, 1–56.

36. My argument differs from David Scott's stage theory that develops from "anticoloniality" to "postcoloniality" to "after postcoloniality." Even more striking than Scott's willingness to reduce the politics of the 1950s to its icons is the absence in his book of consideration of a liberation movement that does not fit his anticolonial stage, the struggle in South Africa against apartheid in the 1980s and 1990s. Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 10–14, 16, 45, 199. Achille Mbembe vividly evokes the atmosphere of politics after independence, but lets the category of the postcolonial do the work that a historical analysis would do much better. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.

37. Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, 17. See also James Ferguson's essay in this volume. Modernity-bashing is by no means limited to postcolonial studies. A considerable literature criticizes "development" by focusing on its rhetoric (with less to say about the material stakes). See Escobar, *Encountering Development*; and Sachs, *The Development Dictionary*.

38. Chakrabarty, "Modernity and Ethnicity in India," 3374.

39. A more satisfying approach is Catherine Hall's contextualized analysis of debates among antislavery advocates, which brings out the openings as well as the closures of their different discourses. Hall, *Civilising Subjects*.

40. I have argued elsewhere that anticolonial movements, as well as colonialism itself, have been transnational and transcontinental and that—contrary to those who write about globalization as a phenomenon of the present—both processes have a very long history. Cooper, "What Is the Concept of Globalization Good For?"

41. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 20; emphasis original.

42. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 243; see also 99–113, 237–55. Chakrabarty notes that today's historian of the European Middle Ages, not just the historian of India, uses secular reason to dissect a religious framework (110–12). But so, too, will an American scholar exploring the relationship of fundamentalist Christianity to the Republican Party under the Bush administration, and such a scholar needs both to understand the religiosity of his/her subjects *and* not be limited to interpreting politics in the administration's terms. Discussion of the problematic nature of truth claims goes back, indeed, to the Enlightenment, and becomes clear in "modernist" texts like Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. For the debate over objectivity among historians, see Novick, *That Noble Dream*; and Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*.

43. Guha, "The Prose of Counterinsurgency"; and Stoler, "In Cold Blood." For pioneering and innovative work on sources in African history, see Vansina, *Oral Tradition*. For more recent interventions, see Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon*; Desai, *Subject to Colonialism*; and Cohen and Odhiambo, *Burying SM*.

44. Guarav Desai astutely uses a text written by Akiga Sai, a mission-educated, colonial-era Nigerian, to show how an African could subtly insert his views into the "colonial library." But Desai's comments about the need to "nuance" truth made in relation to a story illustrating the falsity of certain representations of the truth miss the point that the power of Sai's text lies in that he has already convinced the reader that one version of the story is in fact true. Desai's comments on truth depend on a stark separation of a "modern" conception and an indigenous one, which is what Sai's text refuses. See Desai, *Subject to Colonialism*, 131–36, 144, 148. See also Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 99–100.

45. For the complexities of questions of inclusion and nationality in both colonial and postcolonial European polities, see Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français*; Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*; and Tabili, *"We Ask for British Justice."*

46. Olaniyan, "On 'Post-colonial' Discourse," 745.

47. Hall, "When Was 'the Postcolonial,'" 249.

48. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2–4, 171. The view of colonialism as Manichaean, most powerfully articulated by Frantz Fanon, has been defended by, among others, JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*.

49. Hall, "When Was 'the Postcolonial,'" 246. This redefinition of the political repertoire provides a better way of distinguishing the postcolonial epoch than a distinction based on a binary coloniality and a hybrid postcoloniality. In arguing that *postcolonial* can be used in an epochal sense, but not in a substantive one (that postcolonial societies or polities have given characteristics), I am making the reverse argument of that which Bernard Yack makes about postmodernism: that one can identify

certain patterns of postmodern thought, but that such thought does not distinguish any particular era, including the present one. Although I am not convinced of a modern/postmodern divide in intellectual terms, Yack's antiepochal argument about the postmodern is not incompatible with my or Hall's epochal argument about postcolonialism. See Yack, *The Fetishism of Modernities*, esp. 4–5, 19, 29. It should also be noted that it is the recent decolonizations that extinguished colonialism as a legitimate political form, not earlier ones (the independence of Haiti, the United States, or Latin American countries).

50. For an extreme instance of the former, of an evocation without grounding in any kind of historical or institutional analysis (indeed, without even curiosity about the kind of information that might support one's assertions), see Hardt and Negri, *Empire*. For a critique of the way this and other works misuse the concept of empire in relation to the present conjuncture, see Cooper, "Empire Multiplied."