3 Postcolonial Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Though the intersection of postcolonial theory and media studies might seem an obvious one due to their common focus on representation, the role of institutions and the transnational dimension, a critical assessment of their relationship and potential is to some extent undertheorized and long overdue. This has to do with the disciplinary entrenchment of the two fields: postcolonial theory originally emerged from comparative literary studies and initially focused strongly on textual criticism, whereas media studies developed more in connection with media objects, such as film and television, and focused on issues of production, reception and distribution. However, both fields can be considered relatively young with respect to more traditional disciplines. They emerged as a contestation of a changing cultural landscape that has seen the decomposition of colonial powers as well as the emergence of new technologies and forms of popular communication.

Postcolonial critique is particularly well suited to untangling the persistence of neocolonial discourses within global media: it prompts the analysis of power differences and power asymmetries that perniciously remain, reappear and persist within the liberatory discourses of technological advancement and the abolition of frontiers.

This chapter will focus first on the definition of postcolonial theory, then turn to the relation with media studies in general and finally conclude with a specific focus on media and migration. The intersection between postcolonial theory and media and migration studies offers critical insights into cosmopolitan futures where difference and diversity are not reserved to mark marginality but the dominant reality of a world in constant transition.

QUESTION: WHAT IS POSTCOLONIAL THEORY?

Postcolonial theory is a highly interdisciplinary field of studies that has been flourishing for the past 40 years. It is generally agreed that Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism*

(1978) functions as a start date. Said's book fundamentally challenged Western ideas of representation, knowledge production and canonization. But the postcolonial discourse as such has no strict chronological marker and should be understood more broadly as a critique of imperialism and its aftermath, including the way it still impacts on global formations. Within this broader spectrum, postcolonialism emerged with, and even before, anti-colonial movements, in the form of a politics of resistance to and intellectual contestation of colonization and patterns of domination (e.g. Mahatma Gandhi in India or Amílcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon in Africa). It should also be pointed out that postcolonialism as a practice of resistance is not linked purely to a critique of Western colonialization and imperialism but to other forms of domination and how they overlap (e.g. the Soviet empire, the Ottoman Empire overlapping with European colonization in North Africa, the US empire in the Philippines, Israel and Palestine).

This does not mean that postcolonialism is expandable and all encompassing but rather that it should be understood as a critical tool, not a normative definition. As Stuart Hall has stated, 'in any case the post-colonial does not operate on its own but is in effect a construct internally differentiated by its intersections with other unfolding relations' (1996: 245). As a result, although societies 'are certainly not "post-colonial" *in the same way*… this does not mean that they are not "post-colonial" in any way' (Hall, 1996: 246, original emphasis). Hall explains that we need to discriminate more carefully between different social and racial formations, whose roots are often to be found in colonial relations. Hall's statement is crucial to understanding the non-monolithic aspect of postcolonialism while acknowledging its indisputable capacity to address a wide range of shared topics, concerning not only the peripheries of an empire but also its very heart.

The task of postcolonial critique is therefore to counter many of the emergent universal frameworks that often obscure underlying racialized, gendered and classed processes that continue to define global hierarchies. This is how postcolonial scholarship emerged, as a challenge to the inadequacies and gaps left by many of the more traditional approaches in accounting for power imbalances and asymmetries in global relations, particularly insofar as the global South and subaltern formations were concerned. The challenge of postcolonial theory is therefore to make the 'invisible visible' (Young, 2012: 21) as well as to bring into dialogue different areas of study through the lens of postcolonial critique. The strength of postcolonialism lies in its flexibility, which allows it to find links between areas and patterns that would not normally be connected.

However, it has often been attacked for not having a clear methodology and for relying on heavy theorizing that reduces the material conditions of the colonized subjects to discourse. Yet this is not borne out by the impact major Marxist theorists, such as Frantz Fanon, Arif Dirlik, Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to mention but a few, have had on postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory, in fact, has relied on both Marxist critique and on poststructuralist thinking (Gandhi, 1998). Said's *Orientalism* is evidence of this: it was inspired by Antonio Gramsci's influential notion of hegemony as well as by Foucault's discourse analysis and how knowledge produces relationships of power. Later on, Gramsci's notion of the subaltern came to influence the Indian Subaltern Studies Group, whose attempt to retrieve marginalized and silenced voices from history has been essential to galvanizing postcolonial thinking, especially from a feminist perspective, as initiated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (her seminal article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' was originally published in 1985).

Postcolonial theory has evolved substantially since its inception, engaging with many critical fields other than comparative literary studies, becoming highly interdisciplinary and drawing on disciplines such as anthropology,

politics, philosophy, economics, gender studies, sociology, religious studies and media studies. Postcolonial theory is currently engaging with issues of environmentalism, ecocriticism and the anthropocene (Chakrabarty, 2009; Huggan and Tiffin, 2001; Nixon, 2011), development studies and human rights (Biccum, 2002; Escobar, 1995; Grovogui, 2013; Mutua, 2008; Rajagopal, 2003; Sharp and Briggs, 2006) media and digital media studies (Appadurai, 1996; Fernández, 1999; Gajjala, 2012; Hall, 2000; Hall et al., 1997; Nakamura, 2002; Odin, 1997; Shohat and Stam, 1996; Shome and Hedge, 2002), and science and technology studies (Harding, 2011) as will be discussed below.

INTERSECTIONS: POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE AND MEDIA STUDIES

There is no institutionalized field of postcolonial media studies and yet postcolonial theory and media studies are clearly interlinked and would benefit from a more thorough theoretical engagement. Postcolonial studies is in fact almost absent within media scholarship, which remains predominantly Western-orientated and tends to make universalistic assumptions (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Curran and Park, 1999; Harindranath, 2012; McMillin, 2007; Merten and Krämer, 2016).

It is therefore high time to decolonize media studies and to bring postcolonial studies to bear upon issues of mediation and mediatization in the wider sense (Silverstone, 2002, 2005). This can be done thanks to the pioneering work of a few scholars who have managed to cross disciplinary boundaries and foreground the analysis of the role of the media within postcolonial studies as well as the other way around. Critics such as Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Arjun Appadurai, Robert Stam, Ella Shohat, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Paul Gilroy and Inderpal Grewal have intertwined media and postcolonial studies through the studies of power relationships in diasporic formations and the critique of modernity as centred on European timeframes. Said's investigation of how representations are loaded with biases and stereotypes was followed up by the monumental work of Stuart Hall, who managed to combine postcolonial and media studies within the broader critical approach of cultural studies.

A politically engaged intellectual (Gunaratnam, 2018), Hall took his analysis of the media beyond the negative convictions of the Frankfurt School and Adorno's theory of the culture industry as a tool of fascist manipulation of the masses. Hall saw the development of the mass media as an opportunity to gain empowerment and participate in the cultural realm, which is always shaped by the interaction of class, race and gender. The media are therefore understood not as objects but as sets of practices that are instantiated through the participation of both producers and consumers, whose positions are never stark and fixed but interchangeable and negotiable (on participatory culture, see Henry Jenkins, 2006). They are infrastructural apparatuses where power dynamics are played out and new forms of representations and identities are constantly forged. Yet this did not mean that Hall was naive about the role of the media and their non-transparent or 'ideologically neutral' positions. For example, on the subject of photography Hall stated that:

> The photographic image is not a 'message without a code'. Reality cannot speak for itself, through the image in an unmediated way. Its 'truth' is not to be measured in terms of its correspondence to some objective reality out there beyond the frame. But the image is always implicated in a politics of truth as well as a politics of desire. Paradoxically, its apparent transparency to 'reality' is when it is at its most ideological – for example when photography disavows its status as a cultural practice, passing itself off as 'nature's paintbrush'. (Hall and Mark, 2001: 38)

Hall developed his main concept of encoding and decoding around the production and reception of texts by audiences. The encoding/decoding theory is a theory of communication that suggests audiences actively read

media texts according to their own cultural background and experiences; they do not just accept them passively. Hall suggested that media texts are read in three main ways. A dominant, or preferred, reading of the text is the way that its creators want an audience to understand and respond to it. An oppositional reading of the text is when an audience completely rejects the message. A negotiated reading is when the audience interprets the text in their own unique way, which might not be the way its producers intended (Hall, 2000). Hall was one of the first thinkers of audience-reception theory, and his theoretically informed postcolonial background meant that his interventions into media studies and visual culture were always marked by issues of cultural identity, diaspora and hybridity.

Representation and the media are therefore always entangled with power relationships, which are shifting, dynamic and negotiable. Continuing in this line, the work of Robert Stam and Ella Shohat has also been extremely influential, as they have criticized the inherent Eurocentric bias of media representation and film theory. In their influential *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994), Shohat and Stam examine Hollywood movie genres, such as the musical, the western and the historical epic, from a multicultural perspective, showing how popular culture and the mass media are still imbued with racial politics that perpetuate Eurocentrism.

Along similar lines, Ponzanesi and Waller introduced the concept of postcolonial cinema studies, to be understood not as a new genre or rubric but as an optic through which questions of postcolonial historiography, epistemology, subjectivity and geography can be addressed (Ponzanesi and Waller, 2012). According to this approach, postcolonial cinema opens up occluded frames and proposes a new engagement with the visual that is decolonized and de-orientalized, becoming a relational mode of representation, creating space for unofficial histories of nations, communities, gender and subaltern groups that have often been repressed, omitted or deleted. Within this perspective, Trinh T. Minh-ha has been a key figure, combining media theory with postcolonialism (1989), with particular attention to gender dynamics and racial formations. Her ethnographic films, such as *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), have been instrumental in rethinking the relationship between the object and subject of representation. Trinh's denial of several documentary elements, such as the search for truth, the objectivity of non-fiction and the authority of authorship, has been essential in rethinking not only the boundaries and limits of documentary studies but also representation in general and the authorial gaze.

With the work of theorists such as Arjun Appadurai the connection between postcolonialism and media studies has encompassed a wider spectrum, becoming part of a complex analysis of globalization. Appadurai analyses how globalization operates according to conjunctions and disjunctions between the local and the global that are instantiated and mobilized according to patterns of culture, technology, media and finance. In his influential *Modernity at Large* (1996), Appadurai offers a stimulating analysis of transnationalism's dialectic traffic between the local and the global via ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes. 'Mediascapes' refers to the movement of media around the world due to the rise in new forms of media production and distribution, such as newspapers, television, radio and film. It allows distant cultures to view and stay connected to each other. These media provide the narrative through which different communities live their lives and form 'imagined worlds', as the distinction between reality and fiction becomes blurred. However, this can also produce images of distant cultures that are biased or skewed.

The idea of the mediascape is influenced by Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities. As Anderson writes, a community 'is *imagined* because the member of even the smallest nation will never know most of their

fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991: 6). He also writes: 'All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined' (Anderson, 1991: 6).

However, Appadurai explores possibilities that go beyond the stricture of nation states to encompass new transnational dynamics that involve economics and diasporic formations shaped by multiple vectors, the media being a crucial one. This includes studies of satellite television, the creation of media-based diasporic communities (Georgiou, 2006; Karim, 2003; Slade 2014) and migration as always mediated according to different transnational flows, which show how the relationship between media and migration is never linear nor contained by the limits of the nation state (Hegde, 2016). The relationship with the media's power in shaping narrative structures is always to be countered by the migrant's participatory agency in shaping, albeit asymmetrically, the mediascape. Therefore, accounting for the connection between migration, capital and globalization is essential in order to articulate how new voices and perspectives emerge, at times against all odds.

CONTESTATIONS: POSTCOLONIALISM, MEDIA AND MIGRATION

The triad of postcolonial theory, media and migration is particularly interesting because it involves thinking about the media practices of migrants and the ways in which, by giving them different forms of agency, these practices allow them to feel and stay connected, making their presence visible in the public sphere. We need to remember that migration is not a new phenomenon and neither is the use of media new in relation to migration. This needs to be said because migration has always been mediated, and the forms of mediation have been diverse. Migrants previously depended on writing letters and sending photographs. Audio cassettes have also been a useful medium for keeping in touch. Video and cinema were adopted by established diaspora communities, especially in situations where illiteracy or multilingualism were prevalent. However, it is only with the recent so called 'refugee crisis' that we have experienced conditions of displacement in a fully digital era, creating not disenfranchised migrants but 'connected migrants' (Diminescu, 2008).

The availability of new, ubiquitous and instantaneous technology has changed not only the way in which space and time are perceived, disrupted and reconfigured for migrants but also the ways in which migrants and refugees are perceived by the West. The media has become resignified as a tool of Western affluence while migrants have been reduced to bogus refugees crossing borders with modern smartphones and taking selfies to send back home. These cases of 'high tech orientalism' (Chun, 2006: 73) and migrant-selfie disputes around agency and co-option by Western media (Chouliaraki, 2017; Risam, 2018) disregard the fact that migrants are often early adopters and heavy users of technologies; in many cases they are digital natives. Connectivity is crucial for migrant communities, which are often organized around digital diasporas that allow scattered communities to stay in touch and form virtual bonds, encompassing the local and the global in different ways. A digital diaspora (also known as an 'e-diaspora', or 'virtual diaspora') is an electronic migrant community whose interactions are made possible through 'new' technologies of communication (Bernal; 2014; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Diminescu, 2008; Everett, 2009). Digital diasporas are considered to be mutually constituted here and there, through bodies and data, across borders and networks, online and offline, by users and platforms and through material, symbolic and emotional practices that are all reflective of intersecting power relations. Social-networking sites offer

a 'safe space' for participants to negotiate their sense of self and express their hybrid identities or to demarcate what it means to be a member of their diaspora (Franklin, 2013; Madianou and Miller, 2012; Madianou, 2014; Nedelcu, 2012; Trandafoiu, 2013).

Yet this enabling and empowering aspect of digital technology also has a dark side, which is central to postcolonial critique. It is used as a top-down tool of securitization that impacts on citizens in unequal ways, monitoring the 'other' (migrant, refugee, alien) (Dijstelbloem and Meijer, 2016), a potential threat to Western democracy, through border-control agencies (Frontex), biometric databases (Eurodac) and European border-surveillance systems (Eurosur) (Broeders, 2009; Latonero and Kift, 2018). Therefore, the digital revolution did *not* do away with unequal power relations in the name of the democratization of information and access to technological advancement; rather, it shows how users' participation works unequally and can be curtailed through larger apparatuses, not only of control and monitoring but simply of mainstream programming and coding. The internet itself is menu-driven according to standardized, default identities, as Nakamura theorizes with her notion of cybertypes (2002), reconfirming the structure of inequality and racism (Daniels, 2012). Furthermore, corporations exploit free digital labour, use profiles gathered via social networks for commercial and marketing aims and repurpose the internet for capitalistic gains that lead to digital neocolonialism. In an era of fake news and post-truth, the validity of online information that goes viral is further fragmented by the waning authority, accountability and reliability of media sources, channels and publics. We could say that Adorno's critique of the culture industry is striking back with a vengeance but without clear-cut centres and one-dimensional dupes (Adorno, 1975).

There is therefore an urgent need to advance our understanding of the consequences of postcolonialism, migration and media cultures for participation, citizenship and intercultural communication as well as surveillance, racism and neocolonialism. This top-down control versus bottom-up resistance is also well articulated through the tension between encapsulation and cosmopolitanism articulated in the online world (Christensen and Jansson, 2015; Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2018).

CONCLUSION

It is important to consider postcolonial media studies as a useful paradigm for a digitally connected and highly mediatized world. Within this paradigm, migration and diaspora are understood as media practices embedded in everyday life. These interactions produce a relational engagement (Calhoun, 2017; Candidatu et al., 2019; Glissant 1997) in which difference and diversity are not add-ons but an integral part of cultures on the move which produce new forms of citizenship (Isin, 2002, 2014). The role of postcolonial theory is crucial in accounting for differentials within the power structures that determine access, literacy and security when it comes to personal data in the rapidly changing mediascape. Yet postcolonial theory also has the task of highlighting how the agency and participation of subaltern and minoritarian positions can be recognized and heard within the strictures of algorithmic culture and the corporate programming and design of online infrastructures. This mode of relationality and relativity is key to the intersection of postcolonial theory and media studies in which migration functions as a contact-zone as well as interference. It is in this intersection as well as interruption that postcolonial theory finds its fullest productivity.

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