

FROM EUROCENTRISM TO POLYCENTRISM

THE MYTH OF THE WEST

When Captain Mac, in King Vidor's *Bird of Paradise* (1932), repeats Kipling's nostrum that "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," he receives the joking response: "Hey, Mac, what's the dope on the North and South?" This apparently frivolous exchange calls attention to the geographical imaginary that imposes neat divisions, along a double axis (East/West, North/South), on a globe inhospitable to such rigidities. Like its orientalizing counterpart the "East," the "West" is a fictional construct embroidered with myths and fantasies. In a geographical sense, the concept is relative. What the West calls the "Middle East" is from a Chinese perspective "Western Asia." In Arabic, the word for West (*Maghreb*) refers to North Africa, the westernmost part of the Arab world, in contrast to the *Mashreq*, the eastern part. (In Arabic, "West" and "foreign" share the same root – *gh.r.b.*) The South Seas, to the west of the US, are often posited as cultural "East."

Furthermore, the term "West" comes overlaid, as Raymond Williams has pointed out in *Keywords*, with a long sedimented history of ambiguous usage.¹ For Williams, this history goes back to the West/East division of the Roman Empire, the East/West division of the Christian Church, the definition of the West as Judeo-Christian and of the East as Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist, and finally to the postwar division of Europe into the capitalist West and the communist East. Thus politics overdetermines cultural geography. In contemporary parlance, Israel is seen as a "Western" country while Turkey (much of which lies to the west of Israel), Egypt, Libya, and Morocco are all "Eastern." At times the "West" excludes Latin America, which is surprising since most Latin Americans, whatever their ethnic heritage, are geographically located in the western hemisphere, often speak a European tongue as their first language, and live in societies where European modes remain hegemonic. Our point is not to recover Latin America – the name itself is a nineteenth-century French coinage – for the "West," but only to call attention to the arbitrariness of the standard cartographies of identity for irrevocably hybrid places like Latin America, sites at once Western and non-Western, simultaneously African, indigenous and European.

Although the triumphalist discourse of Plato-to-NATO Eurocentrism makes history synonymous with the onward march of Western Reason, Europe itself is in fact a synthesis of many cultures, Western and non-Western. The notion of a "pure" Europe originating in classical Greece is premised on crucial exclusions, from the African and Semitic influences that shaped classical Greece itself to the osmotic Sephardic-Judeo-Islamic culture that played such a crucial role in the Europe of the so-called Dark Ages (a Eurocentric designation for a period of oriental ascendancy) and even in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As Jon Pieterse points out, all the celebrated "stations" of European progress – Greece, Rome, Christianity, Renaissance, Enlightenment – are "moments of cultural mixing."² Western art has always been indebted to and transformed by non-Western art, whence the Moorish influence on the poetry of courtly love, the African influence on modernist painting, the impact of Asian forms (Kabuki, Noh drama, Balinese theater, ideographic writing) on European theater and film, and the influence of Africanized dance forms on such choreographers as Martha Graham and George Balanchine.³ The "West," then, is itself a collective heritage, an omnivorous *mélange* of cultures; it did not simply "take in" non-European influences, "it was constituted by them."⁴

An idealized notion of the West organizes knowledge in ways flattering to the Eurocentric imaginary. Science and technology, for example, are often seen as "Western." The correlative of this attitude in the realm of theory is to assume that all theory is "Western," or that movements such as feminism and deconstruction, wherever they appear, are "Western"; a view that projects the West as "mind" and theoretical refinement and the non-West as "body" and unrefined raw material. But until recent centuries Europe was largely a borrower of science and technology: the alphabet, algebra, and astronomy all came from outside Europe. Indeed, for some historians the first item of technology exported from Europe was a clock, in 1338.⁵ Even the caravels used by Henry the Navigator were modeled after lateen-sailed Arab dhows.⁶ From China and East Asia Europe borrowed printing, gunpowder, the magnetic compass, mechanical clockwork, segmental-arch bridges, and quantitative cartography.⁷ But quite apart from the historical existence of non-European sciences and technologies (ancient Egyptian science; African agriculture; Dogon astronomy; Mayan mathematics; Aztec architecture, irrigation, and vulcanization), we should not ignore the interdependence of the diverse worlds. While the cutting edge of technological development over recent centuries has undoubtedly centered on Western Europe and North America, this development has been very much a "joint venture" (in which the First World owned most of the shares) facilitated by colonial exploitation then and neocolonial "brain draining" of the "Third World" now. If the industrial revolutions of Europe were made possible by the control of the resources of colonized lands and the exploitation of slave labor – Britain's industrial revolution, for example, was partly financed by infusions of wealth generated by Latin American mines and plantations – then in what sense is it meaningful to speak only of "Western" technology, industry, and science? The "West" and the

"non-West" cannot, in sum, be posited as antonyms, for in fact the two worlds interpenetrate in an unstable space of creolization and syncretism. In this sense, the "myth of the West" and the "myth of the East" form the verso and recto of the same colonial sign. If Edward Said in *Orientalism* points to the Eurocentric construction of the East within Western writing, others, such as Martin Bernal in *Black Athena*, point to the complementary Eurocentric construction of the West via the "writing out" of the East (and Africa).

The fact is that virtually the entire world is now a mixed formation. Colonialism emerged from a situation that was "always already" syncretic (for example among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Moorish Spain, among African nations before colonialism, among indigenous "Americans" before 1492), and the post-independence era has projected its own diasporas and crisscrossing migrations into a fluid cultural mix. Within this flux, "majorities" and "minorities" can easily exchange places, especially since internal "minorities" are almost always the dispersed fragments of what were once "majorities" elsewhere, whence the various "pan"-movements. The expanding field of "comparative intercultural studies" (North/South border studies, pan-American studies, Afro-diasporic studies, postcolonial studies) recognizes these dispersals, moving beyond the nation-state to explore the palimpsestic transnationalisms left in colonialism's wake.

THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM

As we suggested earlier, contemporary Eurocentrism is the discursive residue or precipitate of *colonialism*, the process by which the European powers reached positions of economic, military, political, and cultural hegemony in much of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Colonialism took the form both of distant control of resources (French Indochina, the Belgian Congo, the Philippines), and of direct European settlement (Algeria, South Africa, Australia, the Americas). We will use the term *imperialism* to refer to a specific phase or form of colonialism, running roughly from 1870 to 1914, when conquest of territory became linked to a systematic search for markets and an expansionist exporting of capital, and also, in an extended sense, to First World interventionist politics in the post-independence era.

Colonization *per se* preexisted latter-day European colonialism, having been practiced by Greece, Rome, the Aztecs, the Incas, and many other groups. The words "colonization," "culture," and "cult" (that is, religion) all derive from the same Latin verb *colo*, whose past participle is *cultus* and whose future participle is *culturus*, thus placing in play a constellation of values and practices which include occupying the land, cultivating the earth, the affirmation of origins and ancestors, and the transmission of inherited values to new generations.⁸ While nations had previously often annexed adjacent territories, what was new in European colonialism was its planetary reach, its affiliation with global institutional power, and its imperative mode, its attempted submission of the world to

a single "universal" regime of truth and power. Colonialism is ethnocentrism armed, institutionalized, and gone global. The colonial process had its origins in internal European expansions (the Crusades, England's move into Ireland, the Spanish *reconquista*), made a quantum leap with the "voyages of discovery" and the institution of New World slavery, and reached its apogee with turn-of-the-century imperialism, when the proportion of the earth's surface controlled by European powers rose from 67 per cent (in 1884) to 84.4 per cent (in 1914), a situation that began to be reversed only with the disintegration of the European colonial empires after World War II.⁹ Some of the major corollaries of colonialism were: the expropriation of territory on a massive scale; the destruction of indigenous peoples and cultures; the enslavement of Africans and Native Americans; the colonization of Africa and Asia; and racism not only within the colonized world but also within Europe itself.

Colonialist thinking, unfortunately, is not a phenomenon of the past. A 1993 *New York Times Magazine* article by Paul Johnson ("Colonialism's Back – and Not a Moment Too Soon") explicitly calls for a return to colonialism. Excoriating social ills in contemporary Africa, the essay systematically elides the West's role in engendering the situations that provoked these ills. Thus it denounces Somalia as unfit to govern itself, but says nothing about the role of superpower rivalries in nourishing armed conflict there, denounces Angola but ignores US and South African complicity in Angola's civil war, denounces Haiti but remains silent about past US invasions and support for dictatorial regimes. Meanwhile, the essay praises the West's "high-mindedness," for providing a "superb infrastructure of roads and ports," and for "meticulously preparing" the colonies for their freedom, all as part of what for the colonizers was a "reluctant and involuntary process." Some peoples, the essay concludes, "are not yet fit to govern themselves."¹⁰ Johnson's absolutist discourse asserts the West's disinterested generosity, as if control of land, resources, and forced labor could ever be "unprofitable" or "disinterested."

Colonialism has never been disinterested even on a cultural level. A sequence in Safi Faye's film *Fadjal* (1979) powerfully evokes the experience of *cultural colonialism* from the standpoint of its victims. The scene shows a village classroom in Senegal, where barefoot pupils recite the phrases of their history lesson: "Louis XIV was the greatest king of France. He is called the Sun King." Faye's film stages the theft and substitution of cultural identity. "Real" history, these pupils are told, resides in Europe; only Europeans constitute historical subjects living in progressive time. "Our ancestors, the Gauls," according to French high-school history books for colonial pupils in Vietnam and Senegal, "had blond hair and blue eyes." The Guinean film *Blanc/Ebène* (White Ebony, 1991) has a character correct the French teacher, telling the students: "Your ancestors were Mandinke, and they were heroes." Colonialism, in Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's words, annihilated the "people's belief in their names, in their language, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" and made them see their past as a "wasteland of non-achievement."¹¹ Colonialism exalted European

culture and defamed indigenous culture. The religions of the colonized were institutionally denounced as superstition and "devil-worship." Thus the "spirit dances" of the Native Americans were forbidden, and African diasporic religions such as Santeria and Candomblé were suppressed, partly because medicine men and women, prophets, and visionary-priests – the *papaloi* of the Haitian revolution, the *obeahs* of the Caribbean rebellions – often played key roles in resistance. Colonialist institutions attempted to denude peoples of the richly textured cultural attributes that shaped communal identity and belonging, leaving a legacy of both trauma and resistance.

Although direct colonial rule has largely come to an end, much of the world remains entangled in *neocolonialism*; that is, a conjuncture in which direct political and military control has given way to abstract, semi-indirect, largely economic forms of control whose linchpin is a close alliance between foreign capital and the indigenous elite. Partly as a result of colonialism, the contemporary global scene is now dominated by a coterie of powerful nation-states, consisting basically of Western Europe, the US, and Japan. This domination is economic ("the Group of Seven," the IMF, the World Bank, GATT); political (the five veto-holding members of the UN Security Council); military (the new "unipolar" NATO); and techno-informational-cultural (Hollywood, UPI, Reuters, France Presse, CNN).¹² Neocolonial domination is enforced through deteriorating terms of trade and the "austerity programs" by which the World Bank and the IMF, often with the self-serving complicity of Third World elites, impose rules that First World countries would never tolerate themselves.¹³ The corollaries of neocolonialism have been: widespread poverty (even in countries rich in natural resources); burgeoning famine (even in countries that once fed themselves); the paralyzing "debt trap"; the opening up of resources for foreign interests; and, not infrequently, internal political oppression.

"Dependency theory" (Latin America), "underdevelopment theory" (Africa), and "world systems theory" argue that a hierarchical global system controlled by metropolitan capitalist countries and their multinational corporations simultaneously generates both the wealth of the First World and the poverty of the Third World as the opposite faces of the same coin.¹⁴ "Our [Latin American] defeat," as Eduardo Galeano puts it, "was always implicit in the victory of others; our wealth has always generated our poverty by nourishing the prosperity of others, the empires and their native overseers."¹⁵ Dependency theory rejected the Eurocentric premises of "modernization" theories which blamed Third World underdevelopment on cultural traditions and assumed that the Third World need only follow in the footsteps of the West to achieve economic "takeoff." Dependency theory has been critiqued for its "metrocentrism," for its adherence to an unreformed version of Marxist base-superstructure theory, for its incapacity to conceptualize the interplay of global and local dynamics, for its failure to acknowledge the "residue" of precapitalist formations, for its blindness to the modernizing powers even of reactionary regimes, and for its insensitivity not only to class and gender issues but also to the "relative autonomy" of the cultural

sphere.¹⁶ Dependency theory was at times guilty of a kind of left Prometheanism, seeing the First World as an all-powerful mover and shaker, and the Third World as a homogenous block passively accepting the economic and ideological imprint of the First World.¹⁷ Given these inadequacies, we are not suggesting here that neocolonial dependency constitutes a total explanation for the disadvantaged position of the Third World, only that any adequate account of that condition requires at least partial recourse to it.

Our concern here goes beyond political economy per se to the role of discourses in shaping colonialist practices. We mean *discourse*, in the Foucauldian sense of a transindividual and multi-institutional archive of images and statements providing a common language for representing knowledge about a given theme. As "regimes of truth," discourses are encased in institutional structures that exclude specific voices, esthetics, and representations. Peter Hulme defines *colonial discourse* as "an ensemble of linguistically-based practices unified by their common deployment of colonial relationships."¹⁸ This discursive ensemble, which for Hulme includes everything from bureaucratic documents to romantic novels, produces the non-European world for Europe. We would distinguish, however, between colonial discourse as the historical product of colonial institutions, and *colonialist/imperialist discourse* as the linguistic and ideological apparatus that justifies, contemporaneously or even retroactively, colonial/imperial practices.

RACE AND RACISM

Racism, although hardly unique to the West, and while not limited to the colonial situation (anti-Semitism being a case in point), has historically been both an ally and the partial product of colonialism. The most obvious victims of racism are those whose identity was forged within the colonial cauldron: Africans, Asians, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas as well as those displaced by colonialism, such as Asians and West Indians in Great Britain, Arabs in France. Colonialist culture constructed a sense of ontological European superiority to "lesser breeds without the law." The "basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples," writes Jules Harmand, "is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority."¹⁹ Such imperial *pronunciamentos* exemplify Albert Memmi's definition of racism as "the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser's benefit and at his victim's expense, in order to justify the former's own privilege or aggression."²⁰ Although racism can be irrational and even self-destructive, racism usually comes "in the wake" of concrete oppressions. Thus Native Americans were called "beasts" and "savages" because White Europeans were expropriating their land; Mexicans were derided as "bandidos" and "greasers" because Anglos were seizing Mexican territory; and the colonized generally were ridiculed as lacking in culture and history because colonialism, in the name of profit, was destroying the material basis of their culture and the