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Writing Against the Current

Ananth Aiyer



Beyond Postcolonial Theory. By E. San Juan, Jr. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. vii + 325 pages.

The recent rise to prominence of Third World scholarship in academia has crystallized around a series of issues broadly known as "postcolonial studies." Since authors associated with this trend purport, in different ways, to speak for and about the Third World, it becomes imperative for us to address and understand the claims being made under this "new" framework. More importantly, we need to understand the political implications of postcolonial studies and postcolonial theory both inside and outside the academic context. This is the focus of San Juan's impressive book, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*. Through a meticulously argued set of essays, the book seeks to situate postcoloniality as "a moment in this worldwide crisis of late imperial culture," and to offer a critical explanation for "postcolonial theory's claim to institutional authority."

The book consists of essays published over several years and are organized around specific themes. Chapters one and three deal with the politics of representation of the Third World, while chapters four and five address the contours of cultural politics in the US, especially multiculturalism, racism, and the Asian-American experience. Chapters six and eight, on the other hand, highlight broader issues of globalization and the nation-state. While chapter two is directly concerned with the struggles of the Filipino people, the image of the Philippines is present throughout the book as it allows the author to pose questions about the relationship between imperialism, advanced capitalism and the politics of resistance. Similarly, although chapter seven analyzes the work of the Trinidadian intellectual, C.L.R. James, the role of intellectuals seeking to form broad-based historic alliances—be they amongst the subjugated peoples of the Third World, between the oppressed masses of the North and South, or between universalist racism and capitalist subjugation—is a concern that informs the core arguments of the book.¹

San Juan's position is clearly stated early on: "Despite its *prima facie* radicalism, I contend that in general postcolonial discourse mystifies the political/ideological effects of Western postmodernist hegemony and prevents change." While on the surface this may seem an excessive charge, it is a valid argument to pursue, given postcolonial theory's anti-socialist orientation in general and its attempts to rearticulate in Third Worldist form the central tenets of bourgeois liberalism. In its very negation of popular and national liberation struggles, and its admiration for a romanticist and idealist politics associated with identity and cultural difference, postcolonial theory masks the brutal contours of contemporary capitalist restructuring while it applauds and endorses the indeterminacy of social relations and the limitless agency of the individual subject. All of this, of course, sits well with the hegemonic notions of consumer choice, neoliberalism and the "flexibility" of transnational capital. San Juan's project is thus twofold: to repudiate the epistemological and political claims made by postcolonial theory, and to argue for the central role of historical materialist theory in offering a better explanation for the intricate connections between human agency, cultural production and revolutionary transformations.

One of the strengths of postcolonial theory has been its radical questioning of Eurocentric and imperialist discourses about the Third World. However, as San Juan argues, while this impulse is laudatory, postcolonial studies have placed undue emphasis on the politics of representation and the radical incongruity of the self/other binary. Issues of class formation, racism and neocolonialism are displaced onto the politics of language and deconstruction. Furthermore, attempts that seek to grasp the totality of the social relations in the non-European world are declared, tout court, to be oppressive. Given such posturing by postcolonial theorists, San Juan then raises the question as to whether it is possible for Third World people to comprehend and make sense of their world, and in the process critique the oppressive regimes under which they live and struggle. He then points to concrete examples by highlighting the works of Rigoberta Menchu, C.L.R. James, and Maria Lorena Barros. In their writings, he finds neither a concern with the indeterminacy of language nor romanticist notions of place. Instead, these writers pursue a deeper project, aiming to articulate how individuals and peoples strive to build alliances and coalition that challenge the concrete conditions under which exploitative relations and politics are reproduced.

Nowhere is the de-radicalizing move of postcolonial studies more manifest than in its formulation and discussions of the "subaltern" question. Popularized in Western academia through the interventions of the Indian Subaltern Studies group, "subaltern" has become a vacuous description of anyone subjugated, marginalized or oppressed in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Furthermore, anyone seeking to comprehend the politics of subalternity is deemed as Eurocentric, since they seek to represent people who ostensibly exist outside and beyond European categories. In opposition to this reification

of people into fixed categories, San Juan argues in chapter three that the original formulations of Gramsci on the subaltern question were not only complex but also central to his analyses of peasant-proletarian alliances. Gramsci's position toward subalternity was ambivalent as he strove to underscore its positive and radical impulses while at the same time deploring the parochial and disorganized nature of subaltern militancy. San Juan points out forcefully that for Gramsci, subalternity was a political/ideological moment that is broken when a historic bloc strives to achieve critical self-consciousness. But this can only be achieved through organizational discipline and broad-based ethico-political activity, whether by intellectuals or a political party. This is precisely what different activists/intellectuals (see San Juan's discussion of Nawal el Saadawi, Paulo Freire and Leslie Silko) have done. For them, it is less a question of who is speaking on behalf of the marginalized or what frameworks are being used. Rather it is what kind of concrete political/ideological issues oppressed peoples' representations address.

Moving from the periphery to the center, one sees a similar problem at play in the heated debates over multiculturalism in the US. Multiculturalism, San Juan argues, has sought to achieve hegemonic stature in a country fundamentally structured by class politics and racism (chapters four and five). Cultural pluralism has gained ascendancy just as anti-immigrant policies are being reconstituted and deployed. As San Juan points out, the idea of one culture (or aspects of each) being equal to all others is derived from the logic and centrality of commodity fetishism under capitalism. Antagonism and hierarchy, whether we speak of classes or people subjugated/oppressed in various ways, is displaced into a discourse of difference and mutual respect. In the process, the historical specificity of racism and its dynamic interaction with class struggle in the US context is erased. This is further compounded through a lack of attention to immigration policies, which have constantly shifted in response to US capital-wage labor relations, and which play a key role in the production and reproduction of human subjects as "racialized" beings.

Through its refusal to link issues of "identity" to questions of political economy, multiculturalism in its various forms ends up valorizing cultural difference as an end in itself. Just as the commodity is taken for granted and seen as exchangeable with every other kind of commodity (expanded value), a similar operation is performed when evaluating different cultures. However, just as money under capitalism comes to assume the role of representing the value of all other commodities, multiculturalism would seem to require a similar criterion that would help us deal with cultural "sameness" and difference. But the multiculturalist would be loathe to invoke such a criterion because it would mean affirming European or American imperial culture. The only option left, as San Juan expresses, is the hope that the

endless array of cultural artifacts produced on a day- to-day basis will "do away with hierarchy, with domination and subordination."

The case of Asian-Americans in the US (chapter five) provides San Juan with a manifest example of the inadequacies of multiculturalism.² Arguing that it would be better to conceive of Asian-Americans as an internal colony, he outlines the importance of specifying the nature of settler-colonial formations and the centrality of linkages between periphery and center. This would work well against the melting-pot ideology that continues to be recycled in multitudinal forms with assimilation into a "common" or "national" culture seen as the endpoint. In the face of this, postcolonial and postmodern theorizing seems to emphasize the ephemeral, the hybrid and slippery nature of immigrant identities. But these idealist formulations cannot deal with the real issues confronting Asian-Americans: poverty, lumpenization and marginalization on one side and the rise of neoconservative Asian-American political groupings (the model minority) and the growth of anti-immigrant racism on the other. Thus, precisely at a time when historically attuned research linking political economy to cultural struggles is extremely important, emphasizing cultural pluralism only serves to reinforce the status quo.

San Juan's analysis above concludes the following: just as capitalism thrives through the endless production of commodities, each while unique is nonetheless subject to the laws of value and appropriation of surplus labor. So this endless parade of cultural uniqueness and difference sits well with the logic of capital accumulation, caught as it is within the hegemonic confines of a society organized around hierarchy, exploitation, stigmatization and exclusion. For academics, dissatisfied both with capitalism and any alternative future, the choice leads to two directions. It either emphasizes cultural difference/incongruity wrapped within the idea of multiculturalism or, alternatively, arguments that posit the impossibility of truly representing voices/struggles of exploited peoples anywhere. Here then, within the belly of the beast, the politics of representation is conjoined with the multicultural imaginary, and postcolonial theory and cultural pluralism move to reinforce one another.

Most of these debates have been reformulated and given new life in contemporary discussions about globalization and pronouncements about the end of the nation-state (chapter six and eight). For San Juan, globalization is nothing but "imperialism for the twenty-first century." His larger concern is to emphasize how the struggle over the nature of the nation-state continues to remain the central problem for progressive politics. This is not an issue of a nostalgic longing for place but, rather, is central to any comprehensive understanding of sovereignty and independence in a world wracked by the dictates of transnational capital and the World Bank. San Juan shows that for theorists ranging from Fanon to Bakhtin to Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, there is a concern to delineate the importance of conjoining the "I/we the

people/nation" as the means through which the struggle against capitalism and imperialism is articulated and realized concretely. What postcolonial theory does, while celebrating the end of the nation-state, is highlight the magical qualities of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and diaspora. What it evades is that the majority of contemporary migrants who form these diasporas live in wretched conditions, are super-exploited (see his discussion of sex workers) and do not even have the time to enjoy the libidinal pleasures that are the ostensible hallmarks of globalization and postmodernity. The central political question of how one can begin to imagine "the end of empire" is not even raised within the framework of postcolonial theory. Thus, it reinforces the idea that postcolonial studies is a rather self-serving discourse, less about global realities and more attuned to the needs and dilemmas of academic intellectuals.

The arguments raised throughout the book are nothing short of impressive. To be fair, though, let me point out that San Juan's impassioned and well-thought out exegesis suffers at times from daunting language and threatens to undercut the tenor of his writing. This is also compounded by unnecessarily long detours that navigate the length and breadth of Marxian political economy (commodity-form, value-form, fetishism, money-form, value theory, etc.) and by shoddy editorial work (repetitious arguments). Despite that, this book of essays is profoundly dialectical as it moves within and across several levels of analysis: contemporary capitalism and colonial pasts; center and periphery; intellectuals and subalterns, and World Bank policies and revolutionary struggles. What San Juan highlights is the continued importance of historical materialist theory in providing a much better analysis of contemporary transformations and restructuring than offered us by the arguments of postcolonial theory. Furthermore, he brings back into the debates on cultural studies the key figures of twentieth-century revolutionary politics who pose awkward questions and threaten to destabilize the individualist frameworks of contemporary theorizing.

This book should be essential reading for activists and academics alike who are interested in the issues of postcoloniality, imperialism, cultural politics, Asian-American sociopolitical formations, multiculturalism, and socialist imaginaries.

Notes

1. Constraints of space do not allow me to do justice to the range of theories, philosophers, and ideas that San Juan engages with in the book. Consequently, I make no mention of his lengthy discussions about Althusser, Bakhtin, Bhabha, C.L.R. James, Fanon, Marx, etc. Neither do I deal with his important arguments surrounding the reconfiguration of the "Third World," racialized subject-formation, the dynamics of

the law of value, and commodity fetishism. I focused on the ways in which he demonstrates how postcolonial theory displaces political questions and reinforces notions of individualist liberalism.

2. Chapters four and five are too multifaceted to be adequately summarized here. San Juan does us an invaluable service by mapping out the broad spectrum that makes up US multicultural politics and its relationship to immigration, state and civil society, consumer culture, etc. In chapter five he provides a powerful set of critiques of the large body of theoretical and literary works on the Asian-America-experience which are too detailed to discuss here.