

In Memoriam: Edward W. Said¹

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I had written the words that follow on the day before the death of my friend and ally, the founder of postcolonial studies, Edward W. Said. I want the occasion of this important translation to mark our tribute to our magisterial colleague.

The translation of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* into Serbian is an instructive event for me. The relationship of postcolonial theory to the Balkan as metaphor is a crucial task for our world. You will have to translate your translation for me, so that I can at least follow along, as postcolonial theory unmoors itself from its provisional beginnings and transforms itself in the process. Every postcoloniality is situated, and therefore different. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* was to some extent provoked by Kant's use of the West Australian aboriginal. How will this travel to the "European" imagination of the "Balkan" today? Mark von Hagen has expanded postcolonial theory to reconstellate Soviet Eurasia. What will you add to it? My anti-colonialism has little patience with nationalism, at home and in the diaspora. How will you displace that impatience?

In response to students in the Slavics Department, I wrote as follows:

"Colonizer" and "colonized" can be fairly elastic if you define scrupulously. When an alien nation-state establishes itself as ruler, impressing its own laws and systems of education, and re-arranging the mode of production for its own economic benefit, one can use these terms, I think. The consequences of applying them to a wide array of political/geographic entities would be dire if we thought colonialism had only one model. On the other hand, if we noticed how different kinds of adventures and projects turn into something that would fit the bare-bones description given above, we would have a powerful analysis of the politics of progressivism, of one sort or another. How do political philosophies of social justice relate to the overdeterminations of practical politics? This venerable question would receive interesting answers if we considered the irreducibility of the colonial in a situation-specific and flexible way. Additionally, if we cast our glance at the place(s) colonized (according to the rarefied formula), we encounter great heterogeneity. This pro-

vides us an opportunity to study the politics of cultural and epistemic transformation.

The problem with applying these terms to the area you cover would be merely to follow the three most powerful models of colonial discourse theory currently available, belonging to the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America. These refer to colonial adventures undertaken by single nations as exploration and conquest nourished mercantile capitalism—followed by the expanding market needs of industrial capital. By contrast, your area displaced the political lines of old multi-ethnic imperial formations: Ottoman, Habsburg, Russian. The Eastern edge pushes into terrain that would be even further from the single-nation model. Another great difference is the presence of an articulated ideal—versions of "scientific socialism"—which gave a seemingly greater specificity to the epistemic change. Although the single-nation model was almost invariably accompanied by explicit or implicit "civilizing missions," they did not dictate the political and economic structure of the colonial state directly.

When we look at these differences we realize that using the colonizer-colonized model creatively in your area will enhance existing colonial discourse and postcolonial studies as well as provide you with an interesting model.

Historically, it has always been the powerful who have spoken or been spoken of. I don't know enough about the area under study to go into detail here but, as a feminist and a subalternist, I am used to looking at the pores of elite texts to tease out excluded itineraries. As we move eastwards, the nature of the texts changes. Here, my disciplinary commitments kick in. I want us to use the literary imagination to read sagas and chronicles. As for the postcolonial material, I always go in search of the gendered subaltern. I spoke with women from inner Asia ten years ago, and to folks from former Soviet Armenia more recently. They spoke of the difficulty of communication with their mothers—and for sure their grandmothers—because Russian gets in the way. (This linguistic barrier crosses the gender line: it was to penetrate this barrier that Najibullah, the last

Communist president of Afghanistan, was translating *The Great Game* into Pashto when he died.) The fracturing of gender is somewhat different from the nationalist insistence on native-language politics in the “new” nations bordering on the Russian Federation. However one approaches this, it seems to me a fertile field for real language-based Comparative Literature, much more like Cultural Studies than the older model of East European Comp. Lit.—where the discipline began. Colonial discourse and postcolonial studies have not been good with languages. The areas you study can certainly turn this around. I have long said that history should join hands with literary criticism in search of the ethical as it interrupts the epistemological. Your field can offer spectacular opportunities for such interdisciplinary work.

Postcolonial theory has always relied on the study of dissident intellectuals. Is that a representation of “alterity?” For me, alterity is a philosophical term loosely naming what is other than the intending subject. My own intellectual and political taste balks at self-representation as “the other.” If you mean analytical representation of positions other than the colonizers’ (old and new) in the model of the organic intellectual (“permanent persuaders”—Gramsci) I am with you there. The gendered voice is particularly effective in postcolonial work because it often seeks to elaborate a position that exposes the patriarchal collaboration between colonizer and colonized. (The “surrogate proletariat” argument introduces an interesting complication here.) I do not know what the “prescriptions” of postcolonial work would be.

Feminism and postcolonial theory have a certain concern for social justice. I would like to think that this would be the case for all Humanities and Social Science work, perhaps for all work. But too narrow a definition of political commitment leads to work with foregone conclusions coming to the same dull litany time after time. I have always found such “research” tedious. I also don’t think one chooses a theoretical model and then applies it to primary material. I think the production of theory is itself a practice and the matter studied participates in this production. I therefore think one studies all kinds of theories for their “own sake” in depth, so that one’s own reading practice is altered. The actual reading “norms” the theory, every time. If the matter studied is read as an “illustration” of a theory studied as an instrument, it is invariably what escapes the reading that generates interest for more robust users of “theory.”

How will you revise this?

The entire text is feminist in impulse. How will you graft on to your gender politics, your gender history, the philosophical lines of your gendering?

Your translation is a contract for ongoing work. I thank you for making me a part of it. And I dedicate our shared future to Edward Said.²

NOTES

¹This is the Preface to Obrad Savic’s Serbian translation of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

²In response Obrad Savic wrote:

Dear Gayatri,

We received your preface to *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*: it made us happy, but also very sad... The words with which you addressed friends gathered around the Belgrade Circle are in fact words directed to our spiritual mentor—Professor Said. I think I understand the void you must feel now after Edward Said is gone... You must have been one of his most loyal friends and associates. In that sense, it seems to me that a great “burden” of spreading postcolonial theory has now fallen on your back. What I can promise at this moment is that you can always count on complete and unconditional support from your friends in and around the Belgrade Circle. We are small, but we never let go!

Once again, thank you for the moving preface.

I do hope to stay in touch, Gayatri.

Yours, Obrad