Chapter 22

Postcolonialism, Representation, and the City

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Topicality, the essence of good journalism, is perhaps less important for the longer-term perspectives of academic writing. Nonetheless, I shall begin with two events dominating world headlines during the week I write this chapter (June 1998): the entry on to the world stage of India in the role of nuclear power, and the riots in Indonesia which have replaced Suharto, after 32 years in power as the dictatorial president of that country.

What these two events have in common is that both have been influenced by postcolonial states and conditions. Half a century after formal independence, the right wing, Hindu nationalist government of India has, with the widespread approval and "mass ecstacy" of its population (*India Today*, May 25, 1998), affirmed its independent status and consolidated the national imagination according to the most important criteria of state power and modernity laid down by other, predominantly Western nuclear states. Irrespective of "economic" indicators, this scientific, political, and military gesture is seen as the only equalizer that matters. In Indonesia, Suharto's "New Order" regime of modernization had followed two decades of fervent postcolonial nation-building under his equally nationalistic predecessor. In each case, regimes and nations have declared their own destiny, made their own history, irrespective of the views of world "others," and not least in response to the continued marginalizations of Western dominance and the slights and memories of older imperialisms. If these are topical events in the spring of 1998, they will be historical benchmarks by 2008.

Irrespective of these events, however, we might simply acknowledge (not least in regard to my argument below) that India (with one billion people) and Indonesia (with over 200 million) are two of the world's four largest populations (the latter, the largest Muslim population). Their major cities (Jakarta, Mumbai, Calcutta) number between nine and twelve million inhabitants.

Yet my main aim in this chapter is not to examine the *realpolitik* of the postcolonial state, let alone "the" postcolonial city itself. Nor will I attempt to counter a "Western" understanding of urban processes by counterposing an "Eastern" (or "non-Western") one, as the previous paragraph might suggest. Instead, I shall

draw on a body of theory which, arguably, has developed out of the selective interaction between these two notional positions, a theory of hybridization (see Bhabha 1994) developed from the displacements of (urban) subjectivities and identities. I refer to the extensive literature on postcolonial theory and criticism generated in (and, I would argue, principally for) the Euro-American academy, especially since the late 1980s. I shall first say something briefly about the objectives of postcolonial theory and criticism, about the conditions governing its origins, and some of the critiques leveled against it. My aim is to see what it can tell us, not only about contemporary representations of "the city" but also, about some alternative ideas and directions for thinking about urban studies.

Interrogating the Postcolonial

Postcolonial criticism may be briefly described as an oppositional form of knowledge that critiques Eurocentric conceptions of the world. More fundamentally, in Mangin's words, "the term postcolonial refers not to a simple periodization but rather to a methodological revisionism which enables a wholesale critique of Western structures of knowledge and power, particularly those of the post-Enlightenment period"; it demands "a rethinking of the very terms by which knowledge has been constructed" (Mongin 1995: 2). For Achille Mbembe, postcoloniality is "the specific identity of a given historical trajectory, that of societies recently emerging from the experiences of colonization" (Mbembe 1992: 2). These two definitions neatly embody the idea of the postcolonial as an epoch, as a problematic, and as a form of expression and identity (Simon 1998: 230). Yet postcolonial criticism, as a new awareness or consciousness, is not just one thing; it can be distinguished from postcolonial theory as well as colonial discourse analysis, among others (Moore-Gilbert 1997, ch. 1). And for obvious reasons of continuing neocolonialism and imperialism, neither the term (McClintock 1992; Shohat 1992) nor the discourse (Dirlik 1997) go unchallenged. For Hall,

In the re-staged narrative of the post-colonial, colonisation assumes the place and significance of a major, extended and ruptural world-historical event. By "colonisation", the "post-colonial" references something more than direct rule over certain areas of the world by the imperial powers. I think it is signifying 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 (Hall 1996: 249).

In the literature I am citing above, postcolonial criticism has principally emerged in anglo-phonic literary studies, and cultural studies more generally, especially from the mid- to late 1980s (Moore-Gilbert 1997; Williams and Chrisman 1994). Three questions may be asked. Given the existence of anticolonial nationalisms at least from the early twentieth century and the formal ending of most modern European colonial regimes in the two decades after 1947, why has a consciousness of colonialism in the making of the modern world and, not least, in the construction of its forms of academic knowledge, only fully surfaced in the Euro-American academy in the late 1980s and 1990s? Why has it emerged most prominently in regard to the humanities and not (or only later) in the social sciences? What is the connection, if

any, between these (more recent) forms of postcolonial criticism and earlier studies of colonial space and urbanism?

As suggested elsewhere (King 1997) postcolonial criticism is an outcome of the new conditions of knowledge production that have emerged since the late 1970s and, in particular, in relation to the postcolonial diasporic transmigration of "Third World" intellectuals. By *trans*migration I refer both to the frequent movement of the transmigrant between being "abroad" and "back home," as well as the electronic/telematic connection between both places. It is these which enable postcolonial subjects (as well as others) to translate the social, political, and cultural capital gained in one setting into the social, political, cultural (and often economic) capital in another (after Schiller et al. 1995). Here, the capital is essentially intellectual as one-time "Third World" intellectuals have entered the Western (especially Euro-American) academy making, in the last decade, a significant impact on the cultural politics of knowledge creation, questioning traditional canons, and making space for diversity by developing new theoretical paradigms (McDowell 1995). Postcolonial scholars have not only challenged imperialism from the perspective of their previously marginalized positions in the "Third World" but also, in regard to discriminations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, from the position of internally colonized populations within the metropole. The real, as well as cultural racism of the Western academy, has also provided the context for the development of the discourse.

To summarize, therefore, critical perspectives in the humanities which draw on Foucault's insights into the "power/knowledge" relationship in the form of postcolonial studies have largely been developed in tandem with diasporic movements of postcolonial scholars to the metropole. In the social sciences, however, to oversimplify, somewhat comparable, though different, critical perspectives on the implications of imperialism in the construction of knowledge emerged some years earlier with the movement of scholars in the opposite direction (i.e. from the metropole to the postcolony). These would include (prior to Foucaultian influences), oppositional voices in "Development Studies" (for an overview, see Slater 1995), critiques in anthropology (Asad 1973; Cohn 1988) and in debates on the "the sociology of development and the underdevelopment of sociology" of Andre Gundar Frank, world-system perspective, and others in the late 1960s (see King 1995a). Though as Slater points out, the major weakness in the (mainly) Marxist accounts here was "the failure to theorize subjectivity and identity" (Slater 1995: 71).

Yet the failure of these various critical perspectives to fully interact must be accounted for not by the gaps between countries or languages but those that occur across the campus, *between* disciplines. For example, Moore-Gilbert writes in 1997 that "colonial discourse analysis now operates across an ever broader range of fields, including the history of law, anthropology, political economy, philosophy, historiography, art history, and psychoanalysis" (1997: 9), but makes no reference to studies in geography, planning, urbanism, or architecture. In his magisterial study of the impact of imperialism on the formation of knowledge and culture Edward Said does better in that, at least in passing, he refers to the impact of imperialism on metropolitan capitals and to the spatial transformations in colonial cities (Said 1994; see also King 1995a). There are, perhaps, other explanations to be offered.

The early exponents of postcolonial criticism focused on a critique of literary and historical writing and, as I have indicated, were located in the humanities of the

Western academy (this section is drawn from King 1995a). Subsequently, the objects of the deconstructive postcolonial critique expanded to include film, video, television, photography, painting – all examples of cultural praxis that are portable, mobile, and circulating in the West. Yet given that such literature, photography, or museum displays had existed for decades, if not centuries, why did this critique only get established in the late 1980s? And why did it not address, in any significant way, the impact of imperialism on the design and spatial disciplines of architecture, planning, and urban issues more generally, whether in the colony or, indeed, in the metropole (Home 1996; King 1976, 1990b)?

As suggested above, postcolonial criticism only developed in the West when a sufficient number of postcolonial intellectuals, and an audience for them, was established in the Western academy; as for the second question, the critique has not addressed issues in architecture and space, not only because they belong to different disciplines but because the cultural products on which imperial discourses are inscribed – the spaces of cities, landscapes, buildings – unlike literary texts, movies, and photography, are, for these postcolonial critics and their Western audiences, not only absent and distant, they are also not mobile. Critics have to take their own postcolonial subjectivities halfway round the world to experience them.

With perhaps the single exception of Fanon (1968), critical discourses on colonial urban culture, both in the colony and postcolony, positioned from a white, male, Western viewpoint, though generally also drawing on local indigenous postcolonial critiques, began in the 1950s and were usually the result of scholars in the social sciences, often working in "aid" or "development" roles in the colony or postcolony (See King 1976: 22, for early references). It was a discourse which spoke especially to the cultural politics of urban planning and issues of identity (1976, pp. 282–8). The renewed interest in these issues in the American academy in the late 1980s, also drawing to varying degrees on Foucault's "Power/Knowledge" paradigm (Metcalf 1989; Rabinow 1989), has as much to do with issues of theory in the Western academy (Wright 1991; AlSayyad 1991) as with urban policy and practice in the postcolony. Where the colonial city concept has been mobilized as a metaphor to represent the increasingly ethnically and spatially segregated situation of Western cities (King 1990a; Philo and Kearns 1993), revisionist discourses of "the global" (King 1990b) as well as poststructuralist approaches (Jacobs 1996) have led to studies on the imperial as well as the (technically) postimperial city (Driver and Gilbert 1998).

The more conscious application of the deconstructive methods of postcolonial criticism to the understanding of architecture, space, and urbanism have, with occasional exceptions (Noyes 1992) principally been the outcome of three conferences organized by a group of architects, academics and critics under the title of "Other Connections" and, in a deliberate attempt to avoid the influence of "Western hegemonies," located in Singapore (1993), Chandigarh (1995), and Melbourne (1997). In a selection of papers from the first two of these, *Postcolonial Space(s)*, the editors suggest that "Postcolonial space is a space of intervention into those architectural constructions that parade under a universalist guise and either exclude or repress differential spatialities or often disadvantaged ethnicities, communities or peoples." The essays, "located at the interstices of a number of disciplines including

architecture, literary theory, cultural studies and philosophy" and informed by "poststructuralist theory, psychoanalytic interpretations and feminist studies" are seen as investigating "questions of representation and interpretation, issues of difference and identity" (Nalbantoglu and Wong 1997: 7).

Earlier studies on colonial urbanism provided a political, social, cultural, and behavioral interpretation of the physical and spatial forms of the colonial city, principally from the position of the colonizer, emphasizing their social and cultural effects, and in relation to symbolic values and issues of social and cultural identity (King 1976). In challenging universalist approaches, newer studies emphasize questions of representation, difference, and identity, including questions of race and gender. What seems to have been lost, however, is an acknowledgment of the real forces of *neo*colonialism, and with globalization, the exploitative relations of global capitalism with its gross inequities (see Dirlik 1997).

The major contribution of the more general postcolonial perspectives to the study of the city (and not only the so-called "postcolonial" city) is in the recognition of the essential reciprocity of colonial processes, in the questioning of simple binary dichotomies (between colonizer/colonized, East/West) and in acknowledging the uniqueness of particular colonial situations. To use Said's words, the colonial relationship is best understood in terms of "Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories"; it requires a questioning of those categories "presuming that the West and its culture are largely independent of other cultures" (Said 1994: 134). In specifically urban terms, these perspectives are illustrated in Yeoh's study of the "contested terrain" of colonial Singapore in which "the spaces of everyday life were developed, sustained, renegotiated, distorted, or countered by a Chinese counter-discourse in the everyday resistance of the colonized" (Yeoh 1996; see also Kusno 2000).

Decentering and Recentering Studies of the City

What are the implications of postcolonial criticism for urban studies more generally? The first would seem to be for a decentering of Eurocentric conceptions of the world, not only in terms of society, space, and culture but equally, in terms of temporality and history; to contest the view, in Chakrabarty's terms, that all histories tend to begin and end with Europe (Chakrabarty 1992). In this context, there are any number of reasons to challenge the taken-for-granted assumption that the "natural" study of contemporary urbanism should properly begin with the so-called "industrial capitalist, modernist city" in the West, an assumption probably made by urbanists since Adna Ferrin Weber in 1899. Without reference to the larger, often colonial space economies, markets and systems of urbanization and culture of which it was a part, there is no "autonomous" understanding of the "Euro-American" capitalist industrial city. Moreover, though not denying the global importance of the relationship between capitalism and industrial urbanism, there have been other systems of cities in the course of world history (Chase-Dunn 1985), not necessarily understood "economically," and more than one urban revolution. But such reasoning apart, we can also ask whose city, whose history is being privileged? Whose "global explanation" is being foisted on the world?

"Modern," "modernist," and "modernity" are equally ambiguous, nontransparent terms. The problem with "modernity" is to assume that it is an historical term,

referencing time or history (without reference to space) rather than a cultural one that references a way of life. If modern means "now," "of the present," we need to know whose "now" and whose "where" is being privileged. As the English word "modern" has been around since the sixteenth century (King 1995b) it is evident that notions of modernity are ever-changing, inflected by such things as religion, politics, ideology. Different understandings of modernity exist simultaneously in different places, and under very different conditions. Colonial modernity is different from metropolitan modernity; Islamic modernity from Christian or "secular" modernity; postmodern modernity is different from premodern modernity. If one of the characteristics of the contemporary "modern" Western city is its ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, this was characteristic of late eighteenth-century Batavia (Java) (Taylor 1983) long before it was characteristic of London or Paris.

In the words of McDowell, "Recognizing different ways of knowing does not mean abrogating responsibility for distinguishing between them" (1995: 281). We need to recognize where theories come from, the conditions that produce (and also circulate) them, how exclusive as well as inclusive they attempt to be, whose interests are advanced by them, and where. Forms of knowledge reflect the worlds and spaces of the powerful; they also reflect their own times.

Given the hegemony of Western forms of knowledge and the dominance of English-language publishing worldwide, it is not surprising, therefore, that if we read some of the most widely circulating urban studies in the last two decades, it seems that an apparent unity has descended over many of the world's cities in that they have been largely narrated through one or the other (interrelated) system of representation. On one hand, the concepts, discourses, and narratives of a disciplinary urban political economy (e.g. the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* in the l980s) have had the effect of reducing the vast diversity of different topographies, politics, geographies, ethnicities, livelihoods, landscapes, peoples, memories, architectures, cultures, histories, religions, arts, languages, protests, identities, and differences of all kinds into a uniform collective whole, to be selectively understood as a series of urban social movements, cases of collective consumption, and instances of state intervention. On the other hand, with the invention of concepts of both the world and global city, stemming largely from a dominant American academy based either in Los Angeles or New York (with regional offices elsewhere) new paradigms have been launched the result of which, in prioritizing so-called "economic criteria," has focused (if not fixed) for a decade the attention of many urban scholars on perhaps 30 or 40 cities, all but three or four of them either in Europe or the United States (Knox and Taylor 1995; Knox 1995). As Duncan points out in relation to Burgess's "concentric zone" theory of the city in the infamous Chicago School of urban sociology, its effect was to ensure that all cities were made to defer to the form of Chicago (Duncan 1996: 259). Similarly, the effect of the "world" and "global city" paradigm has been to prompt scholars as well as municipal officials worldwide to ask, "Is this, or is this not a 'world city'?" Those that don't make the grade have, to some degree, dropped off the scholarly screen. The fixation on a particular socially constructed notion of "the economy" and "the accumulation of capital" without reference to the historical, cultural, and global conditions in which this has taken place and without reference to what, in other cities worldwide, gives meaning to people's lives leaves many questions unanswered.

I am not, of course, dismissing these two dominant paradigms offhand (not least as I have also been implicated in producing them). What I am saying is that such theories create particular social and cultural worlds that have meaning to those who use them. To imagine they are universally applicable, however, that they in any way give insight into the many different meanings of particular places, or can, without reference to the particular histories, politics, memories, or subjectivities, capture the highly diverse identities which exist in particular cities, is an illusion.

Here, perhaps the most striking absence in cross-cultural urban studies is reference to the institutions, power, and growing influence in many cities worldwide of religious movements, old and new. I refer here not simply to specific cities worldwide where the promotion or defense of particular religious identities has (for decades if not for centuries) been the defining force in the space and politics of the city – Belfast, Jerusalem, Beirut, Tehran, Varanasi, Rome, Istanbul – but also to the fact that, in a universe where worlds are shaped by particular religious *world*views, it might be worth asking why so-called "world cities" are overwhelmingly only in one of those worlds, conventionally understood as "Christian," and mostly in Protestant states.

Cities are not only sites of financial and economic activity, but also of symbolic and cultural capital. Particular sacred cities worldwide have, in recent years, become the sites for staging major religio-political struggles. In these, the essential element of the urban, namely, the building as symbolic signifier, as marker of sacred space, has become the preeminent site of religious and often violent political struggles – in India, Ayodhya, Amritsar, Mumbai; in the Middle East, Makka, Jerusalem; in Sri Lanka, Kandy, to say nothing of Waco in Texas, Jonesville, or the World Trade Center in New York. In Europe, new identities are inscribed, old ones violated, by the desecration of cemeteries or commemorative monuments. Sacred texts are stuck, like graffiti, on to one-time working-class walls. In the 1998 riots in Jakarta, shops of Indonesian ethnic Chinese were destroyed, except for those displaying Islamic signs. In India (and this is where I began) the city provides the stage for displays of Hindu nationalism. That I write here from an agnostic position should not inhibit the recognition that subjects live in worlds (and not least urban worlds) that are made and lived in through religious beliefs and worldviews or alternatively, as secular responses to them. New York's or London's trumpeting of being "global" (an inflated form of nationalism, or neo-imperialism) is not unconnected to many other cities being simply "national." If urban studies are to address issues of ethnicity, religion, nationalism, cultural identity, they need a language, and a set of concepts to do so. The question is not simply who is writing the city, or even where he or she is coming from. It is rather the positionality, and the theoretical language adopted.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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