




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Slashing Postcolonial Studies, or: Why this Debate still Bothers Me A Response to Clemens Ruthner's "K.u.K. 'Kolonialismus' als Befund, Befindlich- Metapher"

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The discussion about the usefulness of postcolonial theory for questions of culture and power Europe has now been going on for quite a while, particularly in the primarily German-language platform *kakanien.ac.at*, and has produced many important and interesting contributions in the field of Central Europe. And it still bothers me. I am still not convinced. I still think that it simplifies issues while blowing others all out of proportion. The following is meant to provide a probable nature of the discussion from an outside point of view.

I am teaching cultural studies in Hong Kong, and part of my almost daily pedagogical task is to explain to my mostly Hong Kong Chinese students that the concept of Orientalism, a key concept of postcolonial theory, is not easily and seamlessly applicable to the Hong Kong context, that I and North Americans do not think that Hong Kong and Japan are backward places, nor do they think Cantonese an inferior language. The notion of Orientalism has made a deep impact here on how we think the rest of the world sees them and thereby essentializes geographical space, and how globalization is seen as promoting these spatial essentialisms. If this is true for Hong Kong, it means that even greater caution must be exercised in attempts to use postcolonial terminology in European contexts.

The point is that these situations are highly specific. Hong Kong's situation arises from a history of double colonization and the unique position of a quasi-independent, technologically infrastructurally highly developed city-state that has to face its colonial past as well as changing China at the same time as maintaining its "global city" status against increasing competition. The concept of Orientalism, complex and productive as it was when introduced to this context runs the danger of becoming an analytical shortcut which obscures more than that is to say, of being appropriated as a pop metaphor for cultural and racial hierarchies, which to fuel both unwarranted cultural insecurities and the kind of politically correct smugness that is not only highly objectionable but also strategically counterproductive.

Nobody would seriously deny that the work of postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak, Bhabha and Edward Said is intellectually challenging, politically engaged and impressively informed by a background of a diverse cultural knowledge and competence. Frankly, I often find it very difficult to read and comprehend, let alone to productively transform. In the current (admittedly lively) debate of its "applicability" to the Central European context, however, I constantly come across a very disturbing – undercurrent of complacent condescension to theory, a tendency to mimic gestures of having already known it anyway with throwaway remarks that are meant to convey that one is on top of these highly sophisticated and complex debates and can easily not merely discuss but judge, appropriate or dismiss them. I think this is what bothers me most. Maybe I expect a certain degree of self-reflexivity and willingness to learn from academics, but often find arrogant aloofness instead. Which brings me to Clemens Ruthner's latest ruminations in *kakanien.ac.at*.

Ruthner sets out to regale us with yet another "preliminary" clarification, and this time the topic that captivates his attention is "colonialism," a "paradigm" he reads as "Befund, Befindliche Metapher" (findings, mindset and metaphor). Nothing wrong with that, to be sure. However, a sense of unease predictably grows when Ruthner starts connecting sociological and cultural discourses of colonialism with postcolonial studies, and it remains unclear to me why or what for. Even if this is problematic, however, is how he does it. I will single out two passages (in which he explicitly refers to postcolonial theory) in order to explain my unease here and to probe more deeply into the rhetorical strategies of self-aggrandizement and dismissal.

First, let us consider a seemingly innocuous reference to Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. Ruthner's *komparatistisches Herangehen an den Untersuchungsgegenstand in Form von (kontrastiven) kulturellen Texten 'gegen den Strich'* – Edward Said's '*contrapuntual reading*' – versteht

selbst” (“The necessity of using a comparative approach to objects of investigation in the (contrastive) readings of cultural texts ‘against the grain’ – Edward Said’s ‘contrapuntal reading without saying”), writes Ruthner in response to an earlier accusation made by Stefan Simone Southern Slav literatures are being silenced in such an approach.

“It goes without saying” – or does it? And if so, *what* does exactly? Ruthner glibly glosses the depth of Said’s argument here by conflating two very different things – comparative and contrapuntal reading. Simonek demands that the voices of the marginalized Slavic literatures be heard and Ruthner seems to imply that Said’s method would do this justice, but a closer look reveals that it is not Said’s argument here at all. Said writes:

We must therefore read the *great canonical texts*, and perhaps also the *entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture*, with an effort to draw out and extend, and give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present... in such works. [...] The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by *extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded*. (Said 66, italics added)

That contrapuntal reading has nothing whatsoever to do with a comparative analysis in the same sense also “*versteht sich von selbst*” (goes without saying) from this passage; au contraire: *deliberately reads the (colonial) canon*. On the other hand, it has everything to do with what has been so sorely missing in the whole debate: *deconstruction*. The formative role of deconstruction in postcolonial theory is spelled out explicitly by Gayatri Spivak:

To render thought or the thinking subject transparent or invisible seems, by contrast, to hide the relentless recognition of the Other by assimilation. It is in the interest of such cautions that Derrida does not invoke ‘letting the other(s) speak for himself’ but rather invokes an ‘appeal’ to ‘call’ to the ‘quite-other’ (*tout-autre* as opposed to a self-consolidating other), of ‘rendering *delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us.’ (Spivak 89)

For postcolonial theory, deconstruction is “right there at the beginning” (Spivak, Landry and 28) – in a very deliberate move not to trivialize readings to detect the operations of p

hegemony. You can't leave your traditional disciplines without it if you want to engage postcolonial theory, which is decidedly not yet another way of demonstrating that there were problems against other cultures or that cultural hierarchies accompanied political domination. What postcolonial theory is about is how to retrieve the suppressed, marginalized or silenced voices of the oppressed, precisely the culture that oppresses them. To claim that such a reading "goes without saying," to introduce it as comparative, means either to bypass a whole body of debate about precise reading methods, or betrays a noteworthy lack of knowledge about these debates. While postcolonial theory cautiously appeals to the *tout-autre*, Ruthner's appropriations are determined to bolden the self-consolidating other in Spivak's sense, which begs the question of whether such a reading is indeed necessary in the case of a tradition where the other speaks back, frequently as revenge, as Simonek has pointed out forcefully.

Let me turn to my second example, another of those indicative throwaway remarks. When I was very heartened to learn that Clemens Ruthner found some usefulness in my earlier contribution to the debate, I was rather troubled that he could so "easily" dismiss my remark about the importance of considering American academic hegemony (cf. Reisenleitner):

Dieser Transfer-Problematik ist leicht *intern* zu entgegnen, dass gerade das *displacement* [sic] jener theoretischen Ansätze – die selbstverständlich in sich selbst als divergent anzusehen sind – die beste Gewähr bietet, diese ganz im Sinne postkolonialer Theoriebildung aus ihrer Befangenheit bzw. ihrer konkreten und nicht immer klarer politischen und institutionengeschichtlichen Verortung lösen...

(This problematic of transfer is easy to rebut *internally* because the very *displacement* of these theoretical approaches – which are obviously divergent in themselves – is the best guarantee, in the sense of postcolonial theory formation, of divorcing them from their (often fuzzy) political and institutional situatedness.)

As Ruthner writes, footnoting the passage with Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (without reference) and explaining that one (and I guess he means me) would be well advised to escape "angestaubt" (old-fashioned) considerations, "will man nicht *stante pede* die eigene Forschung beenden müssen" (if one doesn't want to be forced to terminate one's own research at once).

At first I was alarmed at the prospect of having to give up academic work immediately. I realized that I did not really understand Ruthner's argument, in spite of its "easy" nature. Here

To my knowledge, Bhabha uses the term *displacement* in *The Location of Culture* only in a very specific context, so I am guessing this must be Ruthner's reference. The context is a reading of Jameson's concluding essay in *Postmodernism Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (297-418) against (or with) Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This reading is intended to explore the "knowledge of postcolonial discourse." Bhabha describes the basic operation of colonial discourse succinctly:

[Conrad's] Marlowe does not merely repress the 'truth' – however multivocal and multivalent it may be – as much as he enacts a poetics of translation that (be)sets the boundary between the colony and the metropolis. [...] Between the silent truth of Africa and the salient lie to the metropolitan woman, Marlow returns to his initiating insight that the experience of colonialism is the problem of living in the 'midst of the incomprehensible.' (Bhabha 212-13)

From this, Bhabha draws a connection to the problematic I was trying to address in my remarks on the hegemony of the American academy: "And the long shadow cast by *Heart of Darkness* on the world of postcolonial studies is itself a double symptom of pedagogical anxiety: a necessity to move against generalizing the contingencies and contours of local circumstance, at the very moment when a transnational, 'migrant' knowledge of the world is most urgently needed" (Bhabha 214).

This form of migrant knowledge Bhabha refers to does (obviously, I am inclined to think) mean that you are supposed to get academics from Hungary and Austria to work together with the diluted Anglo-French theory to talk about Central Europe – if my suspicions are correct and that is what Ruthner wants to tell us here. *Pace* Bhabha's reading of Jameson, it is a method of "transforming the 'schizophrenic disjunction' of cultural style, into a politically effective discursive space" (Bhabha 216) via a psychoanalytic temporality, which invests utterances of the present with political and cultural value because it *displaces time* (extracts it from both the present – experience – and the past – tradition). In other words, it is the *mise-en-abyme* of representation which opens up a liberating space for Bhabha in transcultural narratives, "a multidimensional set of radical discursive realities" (Jameson quoted in Bhabha 216). This is the context of Bhabha's use of displacement: "a potentially liberating psychic space that is opened up by the limits of representation and subjectivity encounters when confronted with the temporal fragmentation of its global other." Full passage:

What must be mapped as a new international space of discontinuous historical realities is, in fact, the problem of signifying the interstitial passages and processes of cultural difference that are inscribed in the ‘in-between,’ in the temporal break-up that weaves the global text. It is, ironically, the disintegrative moment, even movement, of enunciation – that sudden disjunction from the present – that makes possible the rendering of culture’s global reach. And, paradoxically, it is only through a structure of splitting and displacement – ‘the fragmented and schizophrenic decentering of the self’ – that the new historical subject emerges at the limits of representation itself. (Bhabha 217)

Maybe I am missing something in Ruthner’s oblique reference to Bhabha, but one thing is certain: there is nothing easy about Bhabha’s highly sophisticated use of the term “displacement.” It is a very powerful theoretical concept of a politically emancipatory reading practice, and not juxtaposing mix-and-match approaches to academic work.

Neither is it an uncontested proposition, as furious attacks on “high” theory by postcolonial critics attest to. “For all its potentially useful insights, post-structuralist philosophy remains the handmaiden of repression, and if I may mix metaphors, serves as District Commissioner of this book title now changed from *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Congo* to *Enjoying the Other: or Difference Domesticated*,” writes Helen Tiffin (429-30), in a vein similar to Simonek’s attack on Ruthner, and Ahmad Aijaz spells out the direct impact on postcolonial positions: “The East, reborn and greatly expanded now as a ‘Third World,’ seems to have become, again, a *career* – even for the ‘Oriental’ this time, and within the ‘Occident’ too” (Aijaz 1994, 10). This may also be for German studies scholars in the center of Europe.

Such interventions cannot – and must not, I contend – be brushed off with *blasé* big-don’t-do-that gestures; those are real tactical as well as theoretical issues. In a time when academics are precarious, RAEs count numbers and rankings of publications in refereed (and, for the most part, English or American) journals, and an underclass of casualized labor works under highly precarious conditions to support the increasingly corporatized global academy, it seems a little facile (and uninformed) to “easily dismiss” the locatedness of knowledge production.

So let me ask again: how exactly can the centralization of knowledge production be challenged when a German- (or Hungarian-, or Ukrainian-) speaking academic discourse adopts postcolonial theories and concepts? The problematic of *voice* is crucial for approaches to marginalized, oppressed, and silenced groups.

silenced groups, and postcolonial theory provides a sophisticated engagement with this Clemens Ruthner does not.

THE DEBATE

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