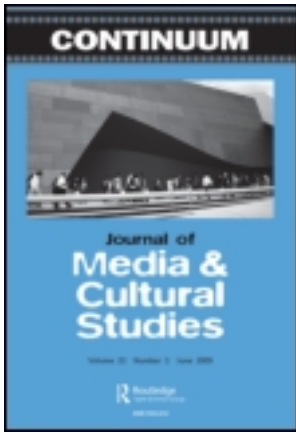


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Vinay Lal^a

^a Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

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The politics of culture and knowledge after postcolonialism: Nine theses (and a prologue)

Vinay Lal*

Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Whatever the achievements of postcolonial studies, its practitioners were evasive about some fundamental questions that must be grasped if we are to strive for more ecumenical futures. This paper puts forward nine theses, commencing with the claim that postcolonial theory mounted an effective epistemological critique neither of the nation-state nor of history. It disavowed any substantive interest in civilizational dialogues and similarly shows its affinity with the dominant intellectual traditions of the West in its refusal to take the idea of nonviolence seriously. Howsoever much of the classic forms of oppression remain with us, it is critical to understand that oppression will increasingly be exercised through an imperialism of categories associated with modern knowledge systems. We shall perhaps have to think of the dissent that is beyond dissent if we are to achieve a more equitable state of affairs than can be presently comprehended.

Postcolonial theory, it has been argued, has run its course. Some scholars, who would underscore the importance of poststructural thinkers in the shaping of postcolonial theory, suggest that thinkers such as Foucault have even become part of our commonsense; others who point to the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as the foundational moment of postcolonial studies are sensitive to the critiques levelled at Said himself; and yet others who were drawn to such intellectual developments as 'Subaltern Studies', often seen as the form in which postcolonial studies took its most distinctive shape in India, can now only reflect on the fragmentation of Subaltern Studies. As is true of nearly every field of intellectual inquiry, fractures and fissures gradually opened up within postcolonial studies. Thus, to adduce one example, one of Subaltern Studies' founding members and among the most eminent scholars of Indian history, Sumit Sarkar, effected a departure from the collective less than a decade after its inception with a stinging critique of postcolonial studies. He charged it with being ineffective, incapable of any 'real' intervention in a world where the last pockets of resistance to neoliberalization policies and capitalism's surge had apparently been abandoned by the early 1990s, and as so enamoured of its own interpretative strategies and intellectual concerns as to be spectacularly indifferent to questions of material culture and political economy (Sarkar 1994).

On the other hand, there is the view, which also has a large number of adherents, that (to borrow from the concept note of a meeting on postcolonial studies in Berlin in November 2010) 'postcolonial studies have been proven extremely effective for the humanities'. Phenomena that were formerly at the margins have been brought to the

*Email: vlal@history.ucla.edu

forefront; those who were left out of the narratives of history, and of the nation-state, have struggled, often successfully, to make themselves heard. The ‘master narratives’ (as they were called) of the Enlightenment are no longer accepted uncritically, and it is widely recognized – though postcolonial theory has been scarcely alone in coming to this awareness – that many of the universalisms taken for granted are particularisms, often of an insidious sort. One could continue in this vein. Nevertheless, even among the adherents of postcolonial studies, there is a growing recognition that exhaustion has set in and that one is only likely to encounter regurgitation of familiar arguments. There are only so many studies of Kipling’s *Kim*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, or Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* that one can consume with pleasure and profit.

Arguing at something of a tangent to the debates that animated practitioners of postcolonial studies, I wish to suggest that, for all their achievements and insights, they were largely evasive about some fundamental questions. We should be thinking of ‘ecumenical futures’ which, however, are not possible without a rather different intellectual framework for understanding the nature of oppression in contemporary society and the place of modern knowledge systems in consolidating intolerable forms of inequality within the Global South, within the Global North, and between the two. Indeed, the dominant strands of contemporary theory since from around the 1970s, have, I think it can reasonably be argued, been largely insensitive to many of the considerations that follow.

Prologue

If there is ‘postcolonial fatigue’, we should perhaps be asking whether everyone is suffering from this fatigue in equal measure. Curiously, even if practitioners of postcolonial studies often saw themselves as heavily indebted to the insights of Derrida and Foucault, postcolonialism had few adherents in the French academy and the enterprise remained largely confined to the Anglo-American world and perhaps the wider Anglophone intellectual world. How far this has to do with traditions of French republicanism and with the sense – embodied, to take one infamous illustration, in the Law of 23 February 2005, which required that school courses should recognize the positive role of the French overseas, notably in north Africa – that colonialism left behind a glorious inheritance, albeit one squandered and trivialized by formerly colonized subjects, is an interesting question in itself.

However, there is little reason to suppose that postcolonial studies were as pervasive even in the American or English academy as is sometimes assumed to be the case. True, nearly every American university or college of some standing had resolved, some years ago, to hire at least one postcolonial scholar, but postcolonial scholars remained in a distinct minority, even if on occasion they managed to attract a disproportionate amount of attention. Scholars of international relations (IR) had found some place for postcolonial theory in their work, but political scientists as a whole and practitioners of many other disciplines proceeded in their work in complete indifference to postcolonial studies. Once one moves outside the domain of the academy, there are far more unsettling questions about the at best tenuous relationship of postcolonial studies to the wider public sphere. During the three decades that postcolonial studies flourished in the American academy, the United States engaged in rapacious conduct around the world, from its illegal mining of Nicaragua’s harbours to the Gulf War of 1991 and, more recently, to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The gist of all this should, in any case, be transparent: before we convince ourselves of a postcolonial fatigue, perhaps we should seriously ask if postcolonial studies travelled as far as is sometimes believed.

Thesis One: Postcolonialism never mounted an effective critique of history

The French feminist Luce Irigaray speaks for many intellectuals when she voices the opinion that ‘the dominant discipline in the human sciences is now history’ (Irigaray 2002, vii). The likes of Saul Bellow and Allan Bloom argued that the Yoruba had never produced a Beethoven, Bach, Goethe, or Shakespeare, but no insult is calculated to arouse as much anger indeed outrage as to suggest to a people that they have no history. However else colonized people may have been perceived by their vanquishers, they were often rendered as people bereft of history. India, a prominent colonial official and intellectual wrote in 1835, had a ‘history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long, and geography made of seas of treacle and seas of butter’ (Macaulay 1835). If this was true of an ancient civilization, one that had even aroused the admiration of some of Europe’s most prominent intellectuals and writers, could it at all be doubted that Melanesians, Polynesians, Africans, Australian Aboriginals, and many others were a people ‘without history’?

Irigaray speaks of history becoming predominant in the present. History had, however, become ascendant much earlier, certainly by the early part of the nineteenth century. When James Mill and Thomas Macaulay sought in the first half of the nineteenth century to demonstrate that Indians were not much given to rational thinking, they adduced as evidence the lack of interest in history among Indians and the sheer inability of Indians to deliver even simple chronologies. Europeans marvelled at the fact that the only historical work produced in pre-Islamic India, Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini*, a twelfth-century chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir, enumerated kings that were said to have ruled for three hundred years. If any Indian was disinclined to believe the European charge against Indians, all that was required was to flaunt Gibbon, Hume, Macaulay and later Ranke before the sceptic and ask if any Indian text could even remotely meet the standards of historical reasoning that had become commonplace in Europe. Nationalist intellectuals took it as their brief to respond to the colonial charge (Lal 2005). Thus the nationalist response remained oblivious to the consideration that Indians, disavowing any intellectual or social interest in history, perhaps did so for very good reasons and never saw it as a lack. I suspect that our forefathers generations ago would have been astounded by the idea that a sense of history should be construed as a sign of a people’s capacity for rational thinking or the maturity of a civilization.

The relationship between history and the nation-state has been well established. No sooner is a nation-state born than an official version of the history of the nation in the making is authorized. Postcolonial studies’ practitioners have sought to show how all such histories are partial, often as oppressive as the colonial histories that they seek to supplant. One response has been to ensure that women, religious and ethnic minorities, and others marginalized in one fashion or the other are written back into histories. That such enterprises barely question the epistemological template of ‘history’ is less understood. The resurgence in ‘world history’ in the United States has been another response, and its many defenders and practitioners have been fired by the noble sentiment that the history of the world should no longer be, as it has been so often, the history of the West. They also presume that world history is the best antidote to national history (and, in the United States, to proverbial American insularity), though here, as is often the case, what is good for the West is presumed to be good for the rest of the world.

There have been other, yet more sophisticated, responses to the problem of history. Chakrabarty (2000) is among those who have argued that the reference point for all histories, even those of India, Africa, or Latin America, somehow remains Europe. The gist of his argument is anticipated in Rabindranath Tagore’s *Nationalism* (1917), where

a distinction is put forth between the ‘spirit of the West’ and ‘the nation of the West’ – and the ‘nation of the West’ had, Tagore seemed to argue, sadly captured the imagination of the world. Tagore was more willing to disavow the language of history than contemporary scholars, and was singularly unimpressed by the idea that a sense of history might be viewed as a necessary tool of citizenship.

My point, then, is three-fold, suggesting in what manner we need to go well beyond the framework of postcolonial studies with respect to the question of history. First, we require a more radical reading of the particular ways in which a sense of history may be unproductive or disempowering. One may have some form of historical awareness and yet not be committed at all to the sense of history: if the adage, ‘a nation that has no history is a happy nation’, is at all to be intelligible, it can only be so on the supposition that the task of forging a nation is a bloody one, and history is almost always complicit in such an enterprise. The historian need not be pulverized by the thought that such an argument is calculated to make her or him obsolete. Secondly, we shall have to enter into a more sustained conversation with other modes of accessing the past. If the choice word of abuse for the Marxist critic is ‘romantic’, for the historian it is surely ‘myth’. And, yet, who would want to settle for the historical narrative of the origins of a city – for example, Bengaluru [Bangalore] or Mumbai – when the myth is so much more interesting or richer? Thirdly, if a persistent case has been made for remembering, an equally persistent epistemological, cultural, and philosophical case has to be made for forgetting. It may well be that certain forms of forgetting are yet ways to remember the past, but the postcolonial critique of history cannot be said to have ventured in this direction.

Thesis Two: Postcolonialism remains unreflective about the imperialism of categories

It is nearly an axiom of contemporary thought that we live in a shrinking world, in a world of unprecedented transnational exchanges, the global movement of peoples, flows of goods and ideas, and so on. Global village sounds trendy, chic, even sexy and, in some vague way, ethically responsible. It gives rise to the satisfying idea, which however demands no action on our part, that our humanity links us all.

There are obvious rejoinders, of varying complexity, to the notion that our world has shrunk and that information travels at immense speeds not even remotely imaginable a mere few decades ago. Visa and passport regimes have been considerably tightened, borders have never seemed so hostile and insurmountable, and walls – in Palestine, between India and Bangladesh, along the US border with Mexico, and many others – have come up even if the Berlin Wall came down. The increasing turn towards biometric measurements and national identity cards points to the fact that surveillance regimes the world over have become normalized. There are, of course, many walls besides those built with brick and mortar, or with electric wiring calculated to leave dead or shock into submission those daring to transgress the law of borders. The fate of the Euro aside, of more interest is the question whether the EU is at all the harbinger of a freer and more ecumenical world as it is sometimes made out to be. Even nation-states that trumpet free-trade agreements are altogether unwilling to contemplate the free mobility of outsiders across their borders. The idea of wanderlust is restrained by the laws of political economy.

There is much talk of ‘knowledge cities’ and ‘knowledge societies’, and no one doubts that the sum total of our ‘knowledge’ of the natural and social world is much greater than it has ever been before. But everything hinges on what we mean by knowledge, and what relation knowledge has to awareness, wisdom, perspicaciousness, and insight; moreover, any pride we may feel in our capacity for knowledge is at once moderated when we begin

to ask, whose knowledge, to what end, and for whom? Even as our knowledge of the world has perhaps grown, oppression has assumed new life forms. Highly iniquitous class relations, the military-industrial complex, feudal norms that stipulate the place of overlords and servants, the brutal exercise of sheer military force: all these have persisted through the advent of modernity. But oppression is now increasingly exercised through what might be described as the *imperialism of categories* established by modern knowledge systems. What are the categories of knowledge bequeathed to us by the social sciences through which we are induced to comprehend the world around us, and how have these categories become nearly impermeable to critique?

In an earlier work I advanced the idea that, if knowledge helps to liberate us, it also enables a more thoroughgoing and rigorous oppression than anything else that we have so far witnessed (Lal 2002). Even concentration camp inmates understood that one could be broken in the body and yet not in the mind. From there we move to the more complex idea that the interpretive categories through which we understand the world have shrunk rather than grown, even as disciplines have developed and multiplied and the entire knowledge industry has grown by gargantuan proportions. The social scientist may object that certain categories are jettisoned as they are found to be inadequate, false, misleading, or unproductive, but in truth the social scientist establishes an imperialism of categories. If the idea of the nation-state holds us in captivity, as is obvious to those who have thought about the fact that the nation-state appears to be the only form in which corporate political community is now conceptualized, why should we expect that the categories with which economists and social scientists work, such as 'development' and 'growth', or 'poverty' and 'scarcity', to be any less compromised? The Palestinians and Kurds may simply want 'freedom', but why does freedom necessarily have to take the form of a nation-state? Why is 'literacy' prized so much, beyond the fact that literates generally have advantages over those deemed illiterates, if not because literacy has become part of an evaluative scale used to judge civilizations in relations to other and develop hierarchies of the 'developed' and the 'under-developed'? If oppression will increasingly be exercised through the imperialism of categories established by modern knowledge systems, the corollary is that our conceptual categories have, contrary to received opinion, shrunk dramatically.

Thesis Three: Postcolonialism's critique of the nation-state remains inadequate

The nation-state is the only game in town; and, since we only have a conception of finite games, this game has winners and losers. (As an aside, it is not accidental that the United States, which embodies the idea of the nation-state as well as any other country, remains incapable of comprehending games that are not finite. 'Finite' and 'infinite' games, as Carse (1987) has deployed those terms, go well beyond games as those are ordinarily understood, but for our purposes the literal examples of games will suffice beautifully. American games, among them basketball, football, and baseball, cannot countenance the possibility of a draw: a draw is not an acceptable result, and if the score is tied at the end of regulation play, the game goes into over-time, and if necessary into double and triple over-time. Cricket offers the greatest contrast: Americans are among those who are gravely puzzled by a game that, in its ideal version, could last five days and end, as was more often the case than not, in a draw. Cricket in its classic test match version has long seemed to be a game where the killer instinct could not be exercised.) In this scenario of finite games, a nation-state advances at the cost of another nation-state. These nation-states exist in a highly hierarchical relationship to each other, an idea equally to be encountered in the very apotheosis of the nation-state, namely the United Nations (where, as is transparent,

the General Assembly that in principle deems all nations to be equal is wholly subservient to the wholly undemocratic organ known as the Security Council).

Well-meaning people like to speak of win-win situations, and hope for such outcomes, but the relentless logic of the nation-state permits no easy consolations. One modern narrative, about the renewed ascendancy of China and India, shows as clearly as anything else how modern political discourse has succumbed entirely to the zero-sum politics of our times. A prolific literature adverts to the 'awakening' of these two giants. The only points of comparison seem to revolve around the number of new cell phone connections, the amount of foreign exchange reserves, the share of each country in world exports, the growth of domestic product, the growth of the automobile culture, rapidly expanding consumer markets, and the like. To be sure, such discussions are leavened by apparently more sophisticated considerations, such as whether India is, in comparison with China, disadvantaged by restraints on growth placed by adherence, however nominal, to democratic freedoms, or whether China's one-child policy will work to its detriment as its population ages at a much faster rate than is the case in India. Those interested in geopolitical considerations have taken this narrative further, comparing and contrasting the growing reach of India and especially China throughout Africa. If the Chinese are tapping the mineral wealth of Africa at an astronomical rate, Indian telecommunications giants such as Airtel have also made spectacular inroads.

In these comparisons between India and China, any reference to the fact that India and China long enjoyed civilizational ties before they knew each other as nation-states is dismissed as nostalgia or soft-headed romanticism. The hostility to civilizational discourses in Marxism is well known, but postcolonial scholars have held a similarly corrosive view of civilizational languages and have not permitted civilizational frameworks to shape their arguments. Tagore's views, expressed in his aforementioned manifesto on nationalism in 1917, are instructive in this regard. He was obviously not unaware of the oppression wrought in the name of civilization, and nearly everyone with a modicum of awareness of colonial histories recognizes that the idea of 'civilizing mission' served to keep some people in a state of submission. Nevertheless, Tagore also understood that civilizations vary immensely and offer the only countervailing force to the nation-state and the homogeneity that it demands. Modern civilization is a strange thing, Gandhi opined in *Hind Swaraj* (1939[1909]), but stranger still is the nation-state.

The civilizational framework may be important as it furnishes cues on how to think about such notions as 'cosmopolitanism', 'citizenship', and the 'commons'. The best of liberal discourse on citizenship seems positively anaemic, operating, even after policy prescriptions are given full consideration, at a level of abstraction which says little about how, say, workers inhabit the condition of dwelling at home, in the workplace, and in the myriad public spheres of the nation. The discourse of cosmopolitanism – 'citizen of the earth', to return to the term's Greek roots – may be afflicted with similar problems, judging from the literature on 'world cities' that has been generated in recent years. It may be argued that the idea of world cities should be warmly embraced, if for no other reason that it shows a way out of the iron grip of the nation-state. What new hierarchies, we may then ask, are established? How does the present conception of world cities differ substantively from the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century web of cities crisscrossed by imperialist and nationalist elites alike? Do contemporary notions of citizenship offer a more expansive conception of hospitality and mode for thinking about, in Appiah's (2007) phrase, 'ethics in a world of strangers'?

Thesis Four – Nonviolence is a gaping hole in postcolonial thought

The enterprise of making a nation is fraught with violence. People have to be not merely cajoled but browbeaten into submission to become proper subjects of a proper nation-state. Overt violence may not always play the primary role in producing the homogenous subject, but social phenomena such as schooling cannot be viewed merely as innocuous enterprises designed to ‘educate’ subjects of the state. One of the most widely cited works to have put forward this argument with elegance and scholarly rigor is Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen*, where one learns, with much surprise, that even in the Third Republic ‘French was a foreign language for half the citizens’. The making of France entailed not only the modernization of the rural countryside but drum-beating peasants into becoming fit subjects of a proper nation-state. The making of the United States offers another narrative of the role of violence in the production of the nation-state, with the extermination of native Americans long before and much after the ‘Revolutionary War’ constituting the most vital link in the long chain of violence that marked the emergence of the United States.

Postcolonial thought, attentive as always to the politics of nation-making and nationalism’s complicity with colonialism, bestowed considerable attention on the various phenomena that can be accumulated under the rubric of violence; however, it had almost no time to spare for a pragmatic, much less ethical or philosophical consideration of nonviolence. The violence of the nation-state may have always been present to the mind of postcolonial theorists, but the work of Fanon, Cesaire, Memmi, and many others brought the violence of the colonizer to the fore. In those works that have underscored the complicity of nationalist and imperialist thought, a principal motif in the work (say) of Ranajit Guha, the violence of indigenous elites also came under critical scrutiny. It is characteristic of most social thought in the West that it has been riveted on violence – here, postcolonial thought barely diverged from orthodox social science, mainstream social thought, or the general drift of humanist thinking. Nonviolence is barely present in intellectual discussions. We see here history’s continuing enchantment with ‘events’; nonviolence creates little or no noise, it merely is, it only fills the space in the background.

One of the many genuine insights at which Gandhi arrived was the recognition that the practitioners, theorists, and ardent believers in nonviolence in Europe and America had become entirely marginal to dominant intellectual traditions of the West (Lal 2009). The Tolstoy who turned to anarchism and nonviolence was seen as having betrayed the finest humanist traditions that he had once embodied; Thoreau was dismissed as a freak; and Edward Carpenter was reduced to obscurity. That one of the supreme novelists of nineteenth-century Europe, feted and celebrated not only in aristocratic and learned circles but in the much wider and emerging public sphere, should have turned to philosophical anarchism, renouncing his own works and embracing a political view of Christianity that put him on the path of confrontation with the church, is something that passed the comprehension of Tolstoy’s contemporaries.

The point cannot be reinforced enough: nonviolence never had much salience in Western thought, and postcolonial thought has in this respect scarcely deviated from the intellectual traditions of the West. Once we leave aside Indian scholars such as Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy, for whom Gandhi perforce has had an inescapable presence, we find that postcolonialism in the Western academy never had the slightest truck with the histories and practices of nonviolence. Gandhi has long seemed to postcolonial theorists as unsexy in the extreme. The case of Edward Said is instructive: though he had gotten in the habit of furnishing lists of anti-colonial thinkers and texts to his readers, Gandhi remained

singularly uninteresting to him. It is informative that in a voluminous collection of interviews with Edward Said, edited by Gauri Viswanathan and published in 2004, the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. appears twice: but where King is remembered around the world chiefly and justly as one of the chief architects of the civil rights movement, the preeminent prophetic voice of an aggrieved black America, Said mentions him both times *only* (and without so much as an explanation) as an unequivocal supporter of Zionism. Many have pointed to the fact that the oppression of the colonizers was much more visible to Said than the resistance to colonial rule, though in *Culture and Imperialism* Said sought to make amends; but, even within the canvas of resistance, the idea of nonviolent resistance, and its histories, was not even remotely on Said's horizon. Nonviolence has been a gaping hole in postcolonial thought, and this alone points us to the irrepressible and uncomfortable truth of the deep structuring of violence in the entire edifice of modern Western thought.

Thesis Five: South-South dialogues are a moral and political imperative

It has been argued that postcolonial thought only became possible owing to the presence of intellectuals and academics from formerly colonized countries in the metropolitan capitals of the West (or, more narrowly, in the American academy). Leaving aside for the moment the critique levelled by Aijaz Ahmed against Edward Said, which (in part) focuses on Said's supposed fetishization of 'exile', and leaving aside also the question of whether the relationship between the metropole in the West and the capitals in the global South has really changed all that much over the last few decades, we might try to pursue another implication of the location of intellectuals from the global South in the global North.

Why, we should perhaps ask, must the West mediate between the conversations that the people of Asia or Africa might have amongst themselves? Postcolonial studies may have familiarized South Asians with the writings of Ngugi, Achebe, Walcott, and Jamaica Kincaid, and Africans with the writings of Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy, but the mediation of the academy in the United States and United Kingdom has been central to nearly all such enterprises. As a historian whose canvas extends considerably beyond India, for instance to the worldwide Indian diaspora, it took me very little time to come to an understanding of that peculiar phenomenon which is termed comparative history. Comparative history has *generally* meant nothing more than comparing Latin America with the West, China with the West, Japan with the West, Africa with the West, and so on. For European scholars without much of an interest in Europe's former colonies, it has generally meant extending the canvas from one nation-state in western Europe to several, to encompassing France, England, Germany, Italy, and so on, with an occasional foray into the dreaded territory of the Slavs. The pattern is unmistakably clear: in comparative history, one axis remains the West, and the other is determined either by the scholar's national origins or area of interest. Just as the United States found it unacceptable that its services and mediation should have been rejected when Turkey and Brazil recently sought to negotiate directly with Iran over the question of its compliance with the NPT (Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty), so the historian is baffled when the Euro-American world is not explicitly or at least tacitly present in the enterprise of comparative history.

It is transparent that when humanists and especially social scientists from China, India, and Africa speak to each other, if at all they do so, their discourse is invariably mediated through the West. The matter may be put this way: however impressive the rise of China, whatever the consequences of its increasing military reach, its creation of a blue seas navy, and its economic penetration of the world, what kind of categories has it contributed to the

edifice of modern knowledge? Which Chinese philosophers, social scientists, literary critics, or humanists have become part of the 'indispensable' canon? English is the language of international social science, but if Foucault, Badiou, Derrida, and countless others can be translated from French into English and Chinese, just as Habermas, Adorno, and Benjamin can be translated from German into English, Chinese, and French, why is it that Chinese social science or philosophy is unavailable in English (not to mention Indian languages)? Or, as is much more likely, is it not the case that Indians, Chinese, Africans and Iranians tacitly understand that to read each other is, in each instance, effectively to read someone who is merely replicating some model of the economist or theory of the anthropologist from the West? If nearly all social science in the global South is derivative, why bother at all reading each other?

It has not always been this way. China, the east coast of Africa, southeast Asia, the Gulf states, and India all contributed to the immensely rich cultural, social and intellectual exchanges of the Indian Ocean world before the coming of the Europeans. Afghanistan may be a byword in Europe and the United States for backwardness, relentless patriarchy, and the tyranny of the Taliban, but Afghan rulers left behind a legacy of cultural refinement in north India centuries before the commencement of India's relations with European powers. It may be argued that the Bandung conference of 1955 sought to capture some of this legacy, and one could also speak, in this vein, of various (failed) attempts at Asian–African solidarity, but the imperative of South-South contacts cannot be met only by enhanced contacts between the nation-states of the global South or by officially orchestrated cultural exchanges. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) may be doing a commendable job in sponsoring public performances in India of the folk dances of Mongolia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, even if these are performed in largely empty auditoria, but these cannot substitute for the liveliness of interactions that stem from a political awareness of the real meaning and implications of South-South civilizational dialogues that are attentive to a wide range of structures of thought and feeling.

Thesis Six: In incommensurability is the promise of more democratic futures

One narrative of colonialism insists that, however adverse the consequences of colonialism for the peoples of the Americas, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Polynesia, and so on, it opened up these worlds to the modern West and its scientific, technological, intellectual and political advancements. This argument has seen an extraordinary resurgence over the last two decades, and its advocates point sometimes to the 'failed states' of Africa, and at other times to the rise of militant Islam, to suggest that the colonial powers let down their subjects by pulling out too early. Some commentators insist only on the supposed fact that the colonized subjects have repeatedly shown themselves incapable of good governance; others advance the view that colonialism can productively be understood and condoned as the narrative of provincial and insular cultures being opened up, even if forcibly, to the salutary and progressive influence of the West in all domains of life. Some historians of empire continue to indulge in a similarly puerile exercise, weighing the 'good' that colonialism wrought for the darker races against the 'bad' that, mostly 'inadvertently', was done by a few rotten specimens of the white ruling elites in the colonies.

We know what the 'opening up' of Australia and the Americas, to take two obvious and gruesome examples, meant for indigenous peoples. It is barely necessary to rehearse the histories of genocide, the devastation of lifestyles and cultural inheritances, and destruction of ecosystems that must be understood in their most expansive sense as encompassing complicated relationships between humans, animals, plants, the soil, and

the elements. The question before us, rather, is whether the theoretical trajectories of the last few decades have not, inadvertently or otherwise, also opened up formerly colonized subjects to the knowledge systems of the West and thereby paved the way for the extinction of the little cultural and intellectual autonomy that might have remained in colonized societies. There is, of course, a legitimate question to be asked whether there are ever any 'pure' categories of thought, and it may even be that the scientific methods and categories of the West have themselves been deployed to stake arguments about the history and authenticity of a local knowledge tradition (as, some would argue, is true of Ayurveda). Nevertheless, what cannot be doubted is the massive inequilibrium between modern knowledge systems and knowledge systems that remain local, indigenous, suppressed, or marginal. On the liberal view, to take one instance, the West has shown itself to be increasingly accommodating to alternative knowledge systems, and in medicine liberals will point to the growing acceptance of homeopathy, acupuncture, Ayurveda, traditional Tibetan medicine, and naturopathy in the United States and Europe. But are these merely viewed as complementary systems, or do practitioners of allopathy permit their assumptions about medical care to be seriously put into question by practitioners of other medical knowledge systems?

Let us consider an analogy: Foucault's *History of Sexuality* has had a seminal place not only in recent understandings of sexuality in Europe and the Americas but also in the attention being lavished on sexuality in Indian cultural studies. As in economics and anthropology, the assumption persists that Foucault has furnished a universal template for the study of sexuality, even if notions of femininity, masculinity, sexual conduct, and the care and practices of the body in India may not be amenable to his cultural histories. Fortuitously, another bespectacled bald man, this one in India, had an abiding interest in sexual practices. I have in mind, quite surprisingly, Mohandas Gandhi. Unlike the two bald men fighting over a comb, Jorge Luis Borges's memorable description of the squabble between Argentina and Britain over the Falkland Islands, Gandhi and Foucault would, I suspect, have disagreed over much that is truly substantive for our understanding of human sexuality. I wonder when the history of sexuality in Europe will be opened up to the penetrating gaze of the sexual practices of Gandhi, who had firm and deeply rooted ideas about the public and the private, masculinity and femininity, the violence of sex and the sex of violence, and the joys of sexuality without sex.

Though it is now an axiom of modern thought and sensibility that the moral imperative of the day is to enhance cultural cooperation and comprehend the various ways in which the world is shrinking, it is rather the case that conditions for equal exchanges and flows do not exist. In the present state of affairs, keeping in mind the enormous iniquities in the world system, little diminished by the alleged erosion of American power or the ascendancy of China, and nowhere better manifested than in the fact that modern knowledge systems are generally derived in toto from the West, there can be no more desirable outcome than to reduce *certain* contacts and repudiate *certain* conversations. In the totalizing conditions of modern knowledge, we have the intellectual, political and moral obligation, at least from the standpoint of those living in the Global South, to increase incommensurability. To deny the South this choice, to compel it to enter into the stream of world history the teleological centre of which remains the Euro-American world – Fukuyama's bland 'end of history' being a case in point – notwithstanding all the critiques of recent decades, would be the clearest sign of surrender to a resurgent colonialism masquerading as the harbinger of the familiar universalisms of freedom, liberal democracy, progress, development, and the like.

Thesis Seven: The psychogeography of home will be critical to new theoretical paradigms

In a trenchant and famous critique of Edward Said to which I have previously alluded, the Marxist scholar Aijaz Ahmad (1992) drew attention to what he described as postcolonialism's fetish with the idea of exile. Ahmad had partly in mind the fact that the most compelling figures in Said's intellectual landscape – among them Conrad, Adorno, Auerbach, Mahmud Darwish, C.L.R. James, and Faiz Ahmad Faiz – lived as exiles. Said placed himself squarely in that lineage, but went much further in his claim that modern Western culture was fundamentally a creation of exiles. Said advanced this claim in yet another, perhaps more compelling, language: modern culture, he wrote, could be described as the product of a conflict between the 'housed' and the 'unhoused' (Said 2001). Ahmad's criticism that Said and postcolonial intellectuals who have glamourized the idea of exile are quite oblivious to their own positions of immense privilege is perhaps not without some merit, but can we locate a different and less acrimonious point of entry into this question? There are obvious and pertinent considerations that remain tacit in Ahmad's critique. We are living in an era characterized not only by the mobility of émigrés and exiles, but by nearly unprecedented movements of domestic and sex workers, political and economic refugees, stateless persons, immigrants, and so-called undocumented aliens. The intellectual émigré is surely a member of a miniscule minority, but does such an admission suffice as a basis on which Said might be critiqued?

To the extent that the 'nation' remained, if only as the focal point of critique, the fundamental operative category in postcolonial writings, the idea of home as such went unexamined. Just what is this thing we call home, and does the geography of the landscape that might be called home correspond to the psychogeography of home? That little-noticed passage in Said, where he characterizes the problem of modern culture as the conflict 'between the unhoused and housed', helps to push his insights further. The death in 2008 of Samuel Hallegua, a Jew whose family had been resident in the coastal city of Cochin for a little more than four centuries, brought home to me the problem of 'home' in modern thought. Every scholar of global Jewish history admits that, in India at least, Jews never encountered the slightest trace of anti-Semitism. 'Indian Jews lived', Nathan Katz writes, 'as all Jews should have been allowed to live: free, proud, observant, creative and prosperous, self-realized, full contributors to the host country' (Katz 2000). Yet, in the aftermath of the creation of Israel, there was an exodus of Indian Jews to the new Jewish state. How and why their numbers dwindled will seem no mystery to those who, citing the horrendous experience of European Jews, the long history of anti-Semitism in many parts of the world, and the passage of the Law of Return, deem it but natural that India's Jews also sought to migrate to Israel. But is it really all that 'natural' that the modern nation-state should be construed as the only entity capable of commanding the loyalties of human beings, and should we effortlessly concede that primordial ties, of blood and religion for instance, reign supreme in human affairs?

In their passage from India to Israel, many Indian Jews may have gained much – solidarity with other Jews, perhaps new employment prospects, and the sense of freeing themselves from their hitherto eternal diasporic condition. Some of them, it is certain, would also have experienced a sense of loss – not just a feeling of nostalgia, but even discrimination as they found themselves representing strands of Judaism all but foreign to other Jews. Their children and grandchildren will perhaps not be privy to such sentiments. But what of Hallegua's contemporaries? If they desired the comfort of numbers, what enabled Hallegua, who never left Cochin, to resist that easy temptation? Should we

conclude that he was less enterprising than his peers and less willing to take the risk of dislocation? Or should we entertain the possibility that Hallegua, in his own quiet manner, was registering a dissent against the ethos of modern political and social identity? *The Hindu*, in reporting the death of Hallegua, quoted him as saying of India, 'It has been more than tolerant. The Santa Cruz High School I went to was run by Jesuit priests. My sister studied in a school which was managed by Italian nuns. But we were never under pressure to shun Judaism. The country accepted us as we have been. I'm a proud Indian. I'm also a Hindu in an apolitical sense' (Anandan 2009). Hallegua did not succumb to the modern political arithmetic of 'majority' and 'minority'. Like his contemporary Marek Edelman, the Polish deputy commander of the ill-fated Warsaw Ghetto uprising who survived the war but refused to emigrate to the new Jewish state, Hallegua was less than charmed by the idea that Israel is singularly the proper home for all Jews. New theoretical paradigms in the aftermath of postcolonialism will indubitably have to help us resist the debilitating arithmetic of modern politics.

Thesis Eight: A more ecumenical conception of the future must contend with the question of religion in the public sphere

I do not think it can be doubted that postcolonial thought has displayed a stern reluctance to engage with the question of religion or, more broadly, the language of transcendence. The very template of 'religion' comes from the canon of Western thought; more precisely, religion the world over was sought to be remade in the template of Protestant Christianity. Even the notion of world religions served to enforce the idea of European modernity in the guise of pluralism (Masuzawa 2005). Though a religion such as Hinduism could be accommodated within the Aryan-Semitic divide, it posed distinct problems for many of its adherents, many of whom unwittingly or tacitly accepted the notion of Protestant Christianity as representing the acme of an authentic and proper religion. To become a real world religion, and be viewed as one, having, that is, the notion of a singular saviour, a single book, and a clear and unambiguous theology, became the aspiration of many modernizing Hindus as well.

To admit all this is only to say that we must begin with a deep recognition of the limitations attached to the idea of 'religion'. Moreover, in speaking of religion, one is already severely compromised into using a language that cannot fully describe the various modes in which peoples experience the divine, the transcendent, the notion of the after-life, or, even, the ethical life. But once we are past this admission, the problem persists: it is all but clear that postcolonial theory had very little to say about the place of religion in the public sphere, and that too at a time when the world over religion was making inroads into politics and the public life of communities. If there is a larger and entirely legitimate question about how postcolonial thought was positioned in the public sphere, it is in the realm of religion that postcolonial thought proved to be wholly inadequate. This lacuna is most evident in the work of Said himself: insofar as he engaged with the question of religion, he did so mainly by talking about the representations of Muslims in the western world, whether in the media or in works of scholarship. He adverted, as well, to the rise of religious extremism; to the extent that he acknowledged religious belief, it is only the perversion of such religious belief that came to his attention. Said's critical scholarship is equally an illustration of his steadfast indifference to religious works, theological treatises, the religious life, the nature of religious practices and rituals, or even the philosophy of religion. His essay on 'Freud and the Non-European', written towards the end of his life, is perhaps something of an exception, though it is less of an engagement with religion than it

is a reflection on the intellectual milieu in which Freud worked and the manner in which the state of Israel repressed the non-Jewish elements which had formed the backdrop to Jewish identity (Said 2003).

This indifference to religion, in Said and most other postcolonial thinkers, can be described in part as stemming from their fear that religion claims dominion over ‘universal ideas’. The postcolonial scholar has always found it easier to engage with works that fall under the rubric of ‘reason’ (in all its registers, from ethical reason to the brute instrumentalization of reason). Said’s response was to put into place a critical humanism that he hoped would serve, in the manner of religion, as a template to generate competing universals. It is in this rather odd fashion that we can think of Said as a religious thinker. But, more to the point, the consequences on the part of secular and postcolonial scholars of abandoning the public sphere are there to be seen – in, to take three examples, the dramatic rise of Christian evangelicals and their forging of a worldwide network, the ascendancy of the Hindu right and its heady if often inadvertent embrace of what were once colonial conceptions of Hinduism, and the numerous manifestations of violence in Islam. Postcolonial secular scholars barely probed what might be entailed for a committed non-believer to come to the defence of religious belief.

Thesis Nine: Let us think of the dissent that is beyond dissent

Noam Chomsky and the late Howard Zinn have perhaps justly been the models of dissent in the United States. If there is one liberal voice that to the world represents the ability of the United States to tolerate its own critics, it is surely the voice of Chomsky. Critical as Chomsky is of the United States, one suspects that he can also be trumpeted by his adversaries as the supreme instance of America’s adherence to notions of free speech. Chomsky is simultaneously one of America’s principal intellectual liabilities and assets. What is more germane to my argument is, however, the indisputable fact that Chomsky is everywhere the model of dissent – which is not to say that other countries do not have other dissenters. He is frequently cited in India, Pakistan, the Arab world, Latin America, China, indeed all over the world. The theorists of global import, from Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Adorno, Heidegger and Althusser to Lacan, Habermas, Levinas, Judith Butler, Alain Badiou and Agamben all hail from the West, but now it appears that even the ultimate dissenters are from the West. Is the Global South so colonized that it must borrow *even* its models of dissent from – where else but the United States?

There may be no good reasons why Chomsky should be disowned by those who find themselves in agreement with his views. No less a person than Gandhi sought alliances, throughout his life, with the ‘other West’. Holding firmly to the principle that freedom is indivisible, and that it is not only India that needed to be free of colonial rule, but also England itself that had to be liberated from its own worst tendencies, Gandhi sought out those writers, intellectuals, and activists in the West who had themselves been reduced to the margins. Those who rightly recall this critical aspect of Gandhi’s life conveniently forget that Gandhi, on more than one occasion, also described the West as ‘Satanic’ (Lal 2009). If he accepted English, American, and European friends as allies in the struggle for Indian independence, he also never wavered from his firm belief that ultimately Indians had to fight their own battles. Thus, following him, some difficult questions that come to mind should not be brushed aside.

What begins in people’s minds can only end in people’s minds. All over the colonized world in the nineteenth century, Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Tocqueville were held up as the torchbearers of freedom. Almost no one recognized Tocqueville, even today a sacrosanct

figure in the United States, as the holder of the most virulently racist ideas about Arabs and Muslims. Mill's ideas about representative government extended only to people he conceived of as free, mature, and possessed of rational faculties – in other words, Europeans. The habits of simulation in the global South are so deeply engrained that Americans become the ultimate and only genuine dissenters. The rebellions of the dispossessed, oppressed, and marginalized are generally dismissed as luxuries possible only in permissive democracies, as the last rants of people opposed to development and progress. However, the problem of dissent is far from being confined to the global South: it is, if anything, more acute in the United States, where the dissenters have all been neatly accommodated, whether in women's studies, ethnic studies, or gay studies departments at universities, or in officially sanctioned programs of multiculturalism, or in pious-sounding policies affirming the values of diversity and cultural pluralism. The dictators of tomorrow will also, we can be certain, have had diversity training. How will we recognize the dissent of those who do not speak in one of the prescribed languages of dissent? The United Nations has officially recognized languages, but the world at large has something much more insidious, namely officially recognized and prescribed modes of dissent. Those who do not dissent in the languages of dissent will never even receive the dignity of recognition, not even as much as a mass memorial to 'the unknown soldier'. Let us think of the dissent that is beyond what now passes for dissent.

Notes on contributor

Vinay Lal teaches history at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He held a visiting position as Professor of History at University of Delhi in 2010–2011. His dozen books include *Empire of Knowledge: Culture and Plurality in the Global Economy* (Pluto Press, 2002), *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 2003), and (edited) *Political Hinduism: The Religious Imagination in Public Spheres* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009).

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