

A COMPANION TO
LITERARY *T*HEORY

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Postcolonial Theory

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The Problem of Postcolonial Theory

To appreciate the distinctiveness of postcolonial theory, we need first to understand its complex relationship to the anticolonial movements from which it sprang. Leading postcolonial scholars have argued that a colonial concept of freedom still imprisons the field. We could call this concept “sovereign freedom,” thus naming its three interrelated levels: freedom in this sense depends on rational sovereignty over the self, national sovereignty over politics, and human sovereignty over the earth.

In David Scott’s *Conscripts of Modernity* (2005), the prototypical postcolonial hero, Toussaint l’Ouverture, embodies precisely this freedom and, by extension, the mindset decolonization never overcomes. Freedom as Toussaint understood it derived from the French Revolution, in whose wake his own revolutionary career followed (Scott 2005: 129–30, 162–4, 168, 191–2, 202–5). But French revolutionary freedom depended, in turn, on the wealth produced by plantation colonies such as Haiti. Hence, in *Conscripts of Modernity*, the plantation economy’s forms of reason, discipline, and global interdependence constitute the hidden conditions of “freedom”—conditions to which Toussaint remained committed even as he fought the French. Such conditions, masquerading as freedom from the eighteenth-century revolutions onward ensure that every anticolonial struggle turns tragic before long—as Toussaint’s personal and Haiti’s national history poignantly testify. The “tragedy of colonial Enlightenment” is that while the colonized’s modernity—their very capacity to struggle for freedom as it has been defined since the eighteenth century—depends on their tacit acceptance of particular epistemic, political, and economic configurations, these conditions always reintroduce colonial (or neocolonial) relationships in the end.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's essays on the challenge climate change poses to postcolonial studies likewise take the eighteenth-century revolutions as their starting point. During this period, humanity's historical agency suddenly metamorphosed into a geological force, a power not merely to master nature but to transform the earth for millennia. What emerged in the late eighteenth century exploded during decolonization: these two moments mark, respectively, the beginning and planetary sweep of fossil-fuel use (Chakrabarty 2009: 207–9; 2012: 1–4; 2014: 15). In Chakrabarty's account, it is the Western origins and the global spread of "freedom" that precipitate the era we now call the Anthropocene. If this revolutionary discourse leads to tragedy in Scott's narrative, its trajectory produces, just as inexorably and even more intolerably, ecological and civilizational collapse in Chakrabarty's. Our concepts of freedom—whether liberal, Marxist, or postcolonial—all presuppose human sovereignty over the earth and hence legitimize the destruction of the environment on which human survival itself depends.

For Scott and Chakrabarty, it is not postcolonial states alone but the postcolonial humanities as well that are imprisoned by the dream of sovereign freedom. Scott has commented, for example, that in their "vigorous defense" of the colonized's "acts of resistance," the humanities have provided this dream "disciplinary authority" (Scott 2005: 118). The very idea of "subaltern modernities" creates "a normative expectation of resistance" (Scott 2005: 117, 105). In a similarly sweeping dismissal of academic knowledge, Chakrabarty has noted that his "readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism"—all concerned to reconcile "historical diversity with human freedom"—could not make sense of the "planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today" (Chakrabarty 2009: 199, 207–8).

In Scott's view, postcolonial studies must think critically about the modern conditions of revolution rather than merely advocate more of the same: "the relevant questions are those posed in terms of the new conditions [of] resistance"; "what is at stake [is] how colonial power transformed the ground on [which] resistance was possible in the first place" (Scott 2005: 106, 119). Until it undertakes this kind of critique, postcolonial studies will itself remain, no less than Toussaint, a "conscript of modernity," unwittingly captive to its own colonial mindset.

In Chakrabarty's view, postcolonial studies must instead begin to think the "human" no longer as the historical agent that, by definition, struggles toward freedom but rather as a geological force that, in the very process of acquiring its freedoms, destroys their terrestrial basis. This is a vision of the human, Chakrabarty insists, that "the critique of the subject [n]ever contemplated": "In no discussion of freedom [since] the Enlightenment was there ever any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as [their] freedom" (Chakrabarty 2012: 9; 2009: 208). Such a rethinking would, presumably, be the first step toward a future in which Enlightenment and Hegelian definitions of the human would no longer obtain—a future in which the human would no longer be the "figure of sovereignty" (Chakrabarty 2012: 4). Chakrabarty's challenge to us, perhaps even more demanding than Scott's, is to imagine a critical method that exceeds the limits of "human" consciousness itself. In either case, such thinking would no longer be bound to sovereign freedom.

Scott and Chakrabarty's critiques of postcolonial studies tacitly align it with anticolonial revolutions. I would argue, in diametric opposition, that the critique of sovereign

freedom Chakrabarty and Scott pose anew has in fact been the discipline's distinguishing feature from its very origins. From this perspective, Scott and Chakrabarty's critiques tell us less about postcolonial studies' limits than about the difficulty even its most eminent scholars have keeping its history in mind. Or we could say, more generously, that the importance of *Conscripts of Modernity* and Chakrabarty's climate essays for postcolonial theory lies in how their critiques of the European revolutionary tradition bring to the surface the field's own deepest undercurrent. We could follow this current from the early twentieth century through decolonization to the present, from the founding figures of postcolonial studies, such as Antonio Gramsci and Frantz Fanon, to its most influential literary theorists, such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak today. For each of these intellectuals, both revolutionary praxis and critical method count as authentically anticolonial only if they introduce an epistemic rupture into the history of revolution. This rupture empties the very words "revolution," "freedom," and "human" of the meaning liberalism and Marxism had given them, in order to open them, finally, to the diverse possibilities these traditions had excluded. It is the effort to move from the former to the latter that constitutes postcolonial studies as a distinct theoretical approach.

The Anti-Colonial Roots of Postcolonial Thought

Mid-twentieth-century French philosophy, which would inform francophone anticolonial writing, valorized the modern struggle for freedom in terms inherited from Hegel (Kojève 1980; Young 1990: 3). But in response, Jean-Paul Sartre emphasized the colonial and racial limits of such freedom: it can unfold "universally," he insisted, only by subjecting every other form of life to its own authority. "Nothing is more consistent, among us"—Sartre's 1961 preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* declares—"than racist humanism": "Europeans have [made] themselves human [by] creating slaves and monsters" (Sartre 1961: 155). As "Colonialism Is a System" (Sartre 1956) explains, history had become "inert" in Europe, "caught" as it was within "the trap of colonialism" (1956: 45). The potential for "praxis" lay, therefore, *only* in those who resisted the colonial system in ways not given by that system: "others are making themselves human beings through their opposition to [our concept of freedom]"; "we [are] enemies of the human race" (1956: 51). Anticolonial revolution thus drove history forward, in Sartre's account, precisely by calling the systemic "conditions" or "ground" of historical agency into question, as Scott has demanded.

And if Sartre's commitment to anticolonial revolution reiterated the Hegelian emphasis on humanity's historical struggle for freedom, opening him to charges of Eurocentrism, Sartre wanted, nonetheless, to explode this tradition's very concept of the "human." "[F]or us," Sartre commented, this human "means 'accomplice'" (1956: 51). The human that would eventually emerge from Sartre's dreamt-of decolonization remained radically open, even its sovereignty over the earth, presumably, up for debate.

Sartre's premise that the European revolutionary tradition could survive now—albeit in forms yet to be determined—only if it joined Third World movements typified a generation of anticolonial intellectuals, from Aimé Césaire and Fanon to Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, among many others (Gikandi 2004: 101–2; Young 2001: xvii). Hence, on the one

hand, Césaire's 1950 *Discourse on Colonialism* privileges the "human" and its historical agency, identifying the destiny of both with a revolutionary "proletariat" (Césaire 2000: 44, 46, 52, 56, 69–70, 78). But, on the other, the very style of the *Discourse* subverts such privilege, partaking of Césaire's larger poetic project "to carve out a new direction altogether": to search, far from the proletariat as it had been conventionally conceived, in the imagination, the subconscious, even madness, and, above all, non-European histories for what has been excluded from the revolutionary tradition and might therefore point "a different way forward" (Kelley 2000: 28).

The effort that shapes Sartre and Césaire's work to think freedom in an anticolonial form was equally constitutive of Fanon's. In his case, though, the idea of liberation and the history of decolonization were not aligned with but strictly opposed to each other. He was fully aware that, no less than European liberal and Marxist parties, anticolonial elites considered peasants—who constituted most of the colonized—dead weight. Nationalist parties "looked down" on them; labor unions had "lost all contact" with them (Fanon 1963: 121). Both institutions considered them nothing more than "brute force" to be mobilized in the interests of the urban professional, commercial, and working classes. Fanon insisted, against all such prejudices, that if decolonization was to be national in more than name only, if it was truly to become a "struggle for national liberation," it must take seriously those whose political competence colonial rule and anticolonial nationalism alike denied (1963: 108).

Hence, the revolution Fanon described was not the official process led by urban political parties and trade unions. It was instead the guerrilla war undertaken by geographically dispersed peasants. Unlike the former process, this war occurred on many fronts, none of them "strategically privileged," involving many local engagements, none of them "decisive" (Fanon 1963: 141). Such decentered struggles were, Fanon emphasized, an altogether different kind of revolution, "a new form of political activity" no way resembling "the old" (1963: 147). Their aim was less to replace the colonial state with different political institutions than to keep the colonized perpetually engaged in its own emancipation. Their newness lay precisely here: guerrilla movements rejected decolonization's reformist tendencies, resisted neocolonial concepts of sovereignty, and advanced broader visions of who should undertake direct political action.

In Fanon's account, the guerrilla war gains speed when some leftist intellectuals, recognizing nationalism's complicity with colonialism, abandon this alliance at their peril. They seek refuge first in the city's outskirts, then the countryside and mountains. Their flight from the capital brings them into contact with, initially, the *lumpenproletariat*, subsequently, peasants and guerrillas. In the process, they create alliances of a kind largely absent from the Western revolutionary tradition, helping each group understand how arduous the path from colonization to liberation is, how many traps have been set along the way, how false the colonizer's promise of freedom almost always turns out to be. Their primary concern becomes, in other words, to ensure that "native consciousness" does not "remain rudimentary" or get "bogged down" but instead passes from "indiscriminate nationalism to social and economic awareness" (Fanon 1963: 138–44). Such awareness is attuned, above all, to the different ways the colonial system re-emerges even after its apparent overthrow, to the conditions that define "freedom" at the moment of decolonization. For Fanon, it is the slow growth of this awareness—not revolution or freedom conventionally understood—that liberates the colonized (or brings them as close to

liberation as anyone can hope to be) since it discloses the systems in which their political agency is enmeshed.

My point is that advocating resistance and critiquing the conditions of resistance are not, contra Scott, inherently opposed or even separate activities. For Fanon, they were, in fact, one and the same: guerrilla warfare was distinct from bourgeois and proletariat revolution precisely because of its critical stance toward modern concepts of agency. Fanon manifestly did not call for resistance at the expense of critiquing what counted as resistance at that time: in his view, the colonized could not have one without the other. Resistance was, above all, a means toward critical consciousness and vice versa: the “new facts” natives must now know “exist only in action”; without “knowledge of the practice of action, there’s nothing but a fancy-dress parade” (Fanon 1963: 147). Or, as Che would subsequently observe in regard guerrilla struggle, “[t]he road is long and, in part, unknown”; “[w]e recognize our limitations” but “forge ourselves in daily action” (Guevara 2003: 227).

In the relationship of the intellectual to peasants and guerrillas, the liberation of consciousness does not occur, therefore, in only one direction. Those intellectuals who “hear the true voice of the country” escape “the old political structure” and its preconceptions about revolution and nation (Fanon 1963: 126–8). They recognize the peasantry as “the only spontaneously revolutionary force,” the *lumpenproletariat* as a “new phenomenon” that “disintegrat[es]” the nationalist parties (1963: 123, 130). In short, though Scott and Chakrabarty have consigned Fanon to a revolutionary tradition no longer relevant today, Fanon himself insisted on the need for a radical break with that tradition. His work occupies the same side of the divide as Scott and Chakrabarty’s critiques, though the latter overlook the connection. The intellectual’s unprecedented relationship to peasants and guerrillas is equally central to rethinking revolution not only in Che’s essays “The Essence of Guerrilla Struggle” (1960) and “Socialism and Man in Cuba” (1965) but also Mao’s “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art” (1942) (Mao 2001: 2–38). It would also become the model, more surprisingly, of the scholar’s orientation toward the text for literary theorists such as Said and Spivak.

Sartre, Césaire, and Fanon’s work constitutes one of postcolonial theory’s two primary anticolonial bases; Gramsci’s writing constitutes the other. Yet, though Gramsci founds a different lineage for postcolonial theory, he also explores—even more fully than the francophone line—the argument just considered: namely, intellectuals must break with the history of revolution in order to align themselves with those it has excluded. Fanon’s paradigmatic revolutionary class was no longer the proletariat but instead dislocated peasants living illicitly on the margins of Third World cities, whom he called *lumpenproletariat*. Gramsci’s revolutionary paradigm centered on Southern Italian peasants similarly “removed from all lines of social mobility,” whom he called “subaltern.”¹ Gramsci, like Fanon, thus explored a social terrain Marxism had left uncharted (except, dismissively, in the “Agrarian Question”): oppressed groups whose interests could not be assimilated to the working classes and hence who appeared reactionary from a Marxist perspective.

Even more than Fanon, Gramsci emphasized the racial character of Marxist prejudices in this regard: he noted that from the perspective of the North’s leftist parties and labor unions, Southern peasants appear “biologically inferior beings” (Gramsci 2005: 33). The influence of Gramsci’s term “Southernism” on Said’s term “Orientalism” is pronounced here. In either case, an academic discourse about racial (and geographic) inferiority clears the way for colonial domination. To break free from their own colonial mindsets,

intellectuals will need, Gramsci and Said argued, to become aware of how deeply embedded this discourse is within their thought.

Like Fanon again, Gramsci understood that, Marxist claims for its revolutionary character notwithstanding, the proletariat was in fact produced by the colonial system and could disentangle its interests from this system only with great difficulty. Emerging from “the complex of State life,” the proletariat was “subjected, unconsciously, to the influences of the educational system, of newspapers, of bourgeois tradition” (Gramsci 2005: 32). Proletariat-led revolutions thus only further silenced subalterns, leaving them in still colonial situations. Hence, in Gramsci’s *Southern Question*, as in Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, the revolution that liberates the colonized *tout court* cannot take its direction from any European tradition. In fact, the Northern proletariat can radicalize itself, according to Gramsci, *only* by following Southern subalterns (2005: 31–2, 43).

Gramsci’s most cited concept is “hegemony,” the process by which ruling classes mold art, media, and educational institutions, thus eliciting the governed’s tacit consent. To give hegemony a revolutionary form, intellectuals must ensure it articulates subaltern understanding, not only influencing but also influenced by those not properly integrated into the nation. Society’s most highly educated order must, in other words, take seriously those who lack formal education, expanding their own idea of revolutionary agency to every social practice “in contradiction to or simply different from the morality of the governing strata” (Gramsci 1985: 190).

As this quotation illustrates, Gramsci did not share Scott’s presupposition that *all* revolutionaries are necessarily conscripts of modernity. Fanon likewise refused to force anticolonial revolution into any pre-existing mold. The problem with the nationalist parties, according to him, was that “[t]hey do not go out to find the mass of the people”; “they only [follow] an *a priori* schedule” (Fanon 1963: 113). The subaltern and *lumpen* possess revolutionary potential precisely because they are outside the revolutionary tradition: their insurrections consequently import into this tradition forms of agency that previously appeared unproductive, if not altogether unintelligible.

The “*a priori* schedule” of communist revolutions was working-class ownership of the factories, that of liberal revolutions, per Hannah Arendt, the founding of political institutions in which freedom would flourish (Arendt 1990: 30–5). Gramsci and Fanon recognized these opposed *a priori* goals as different kinds of neocolonialism. They were fully aware, in other words, that revolution conventionally conceived had tragic consequences for the colonized. *Pace* Scott, a tragic sense of decolonization pervades their work. Making the colonized fully conscious of that tragedy is, to a great extent, revolution’s goal (and the intellectual’s role) in both *The Southern Question* and *The Wretched of the Earth*.² This pedagogic project underlies postcolonial theory. It also gestures toward a different humanities, one that identifies the “human” no longer with the spirit of freedom but rather with a much more profound awareness of its limits.

From Poststructuralism to Postcolonial Theory

The structuralist generation, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* (1962) in particular, critiqued Sartre’s concepts of history and the human (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 248–62; see also Young 1990: 39–45). According to Lévi-Strauss, these concepts, whose provenance was

narrowly European, made Sartre's thought Eurocentric despite its best intentions. Here, history is, necessarily, a dialectical process, the human the singular capacity to take hold of the historical dialectic, revolt against the dominant system, and realize subjective freedom. If one accepts these definitions, it follows that those who do not act in this way are not "human." Perhaps it is Lévi-Strauss's critique of the revolutionary subject in Sartre—silently passed from structuralism to poststructuralism and beyond—that led Scott and Chakrabarty to collapse revolution *per se* into the Western revolutionary tradition alone.

In any case, though, Lévi-Strauss's aim was nothing less than to displace the human subject from its privileged position (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 247; Gikandi 2004: 108–10). In its place, Lévi-Strauss emphasized the power of linguistic structures that constituted the subject in ways it could not make conscious, much less choose. One could argue that the tectonic shift in emphasis that Lévi-Strauss's work precipitated from the conscious human subject to subconscious, extra-human structures fundamentally misread theorists such as Fanon. As I have tried to demonstrate, the subject here never has complete control over itself: the very effort to liberate itself entangles it even more deeply in the ideological and material structures colonial rule left behind. In fact, like Scott's and Chakrabarty's critiques of postcolonial studies, Lévi-Strauss's critique of anticolonial humanism might be most valuable for articulating explicitly and making visible what remains inchoate and partially concealed in theorists like Fanon: that is, the struggle for subjective freedom always takes place inside imperceptible limits.

The critique of Lévi-Strauss that won the argument was much more penetrating than this. Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Language of the Human Sciences" (1966) and *De la grammatologie* (1967) identified "logocentrism" even in the work of structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss (Derrida 1976: 3, 11–2, 102 and Derrida 1978: 278–93). If this desire for a truth modeled on God's Word had shaped Western philosophy from Plato forward, it re-emerged in Lévi-Strauss's work, according to Derrida, in the form of structuralist method itself. Even as it revealed historical consciousness to be programmed by subconscious linguistic structures, Lévi-Strauss's method was itself contaminated in the same way, the product of metaphysical presuppositions in denial about their own discursivity. The "science of writing" structuralism unleashed proved, in Derrida's hands, to be its own undoing (Derrida 1978: 4).

Derrida replaced this science with "deconstruction" (see Chapter 8, "Deconstruction"), which locates behind every discourse not truth or knowledge but *différance* (Derrida 1982: 1–27). This neologism names the forgotten process by which a particular discourse differentiated itself from others to become the dominant one, a truth above language. Those other discursive worlds nonetheless survive as traces within the ruling discourse's genealogy. Deconstruction attends to these traces, thus revealing the antithetical languages "truth" depends on but denies. During his "ethical turn," Derrida reconceived the ultimate point of such deconstructive reading: no longer articulating *différance* it became instead responding to the experience of the other (Derrida 2002: 230–98; Spivak 1999: 426–8). This reconceptualization identified the semantic possibilities disavowed by a given discourse with forms of consciousness existing outside the governing episteme (or system of knowledge) at that time.

Derrida's ethical turn bears the influence of Emmanuel Levinas (see Chapter 20, "Levinas and Agamben"), who declared the origin of philosophical thought to be not ontology or metaphysics but rather ethics. In other words, human subjectivity originates not in the

pursuit of knowledge but instead in a response to “the call of the Other” (Levinas 1994; 1998). Once we acknowledge that this response founds subjectivity, we can turn our ultimate goal from “autonomous freedom” to “heteronomous responsibility,” the obligation to respect and indeed protect others’ difference (Young 1990: 12–16). “The human” ceases to be the capacity to realize a supposedly intrinsic spirit of freedom by mastering nature and negating all those who stand in its path. It becomes instead the capacity and willingness to surrender its agency to the other, thus exposing itself to a future it cannot control. Levinas’s redefinition of the human attempted, in its own way, to place the Hegelian tradition on its feet again. Though Gramsci and Fanon are both frequently assimilated to that tradition (as Scott’s and Chakrabarty’s critiques illustrate), the intellectual’s relationship to the colonized in their work prefigures, if again inchoately, the ideas of responsibility and futurity evident in Levinas and Derrida.

Derrida’s critique of structuralism is relevant here because Spivak and Said had studied and absorbed it long before they wrote anything that could pass as postcolonial theory. Though Spivak published her English translation of Derrida’s *De la grammatologie* in 1976, she had begun work on it—and the monograph-length essay that introduces it—almost as soon as the French original appeared. Seven years before *Orientalism* (1978), Said wrote an essay on structuralism/poststructuralism for *TriQuarterly*—eventually the penultimate chapter of *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975)—discussing Derrida’s intervention at some length (Said 1971).

The problem with Orientalism is precisely its ontological—not ethical—approach: the Orientalist seeks knowledge of the other to master it, decidedly not to protect its epistemic difference. In fact, Orientalism’s explicit premise is that only Europeans are capable of knowledge in the strict sense. From Lord Cromer and Arthur Balfour at the twentieth century’s turn to Henry Kissinger and Bernard Lewis nearly one hundred years later, the discourse of Orientalism consistently claimed for Western civilization a singular capacity to think dialectically, distinguishing subject from object, “rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant” (Said 1979: 32–3, 37–8, 315, 319). In diametric opposition, Asians consider the world “completely *internal* to the observer,” cutting themselves off from empirical reality (1979: 46–7). Their resistance to dialectical thought keeps them “fundamentally, even ontologically stable,” potentially objects, but never subjects, of knowledge (1979: 32). Orientalism thus declares an epistemological as well as ontological difference between the European and the non-European. Indeed, the former is the very source of the latter: Europeans and Orientals are different types of being precisely because they have different ways of knowing.

Orientalism avoids this false dichotomy by refusing to make *any* claims about the East; it does not consider its method adequate to any history or rationality outside its own. If Orientalism proclaims that—like the dancer Kuchuk Hanem who Flaubert met in Egypt and evoked in his novellas—Asia cannot speak for itself but must be spoken for, at the heart of *Orientalism* is, in diametric opposition, an absolute refusal to speak for the other (Said 1979: 2, 6). Said’s study begins and ends with the same caveat: it “has very little to contribute” to the fact that Eastern cultures’ “brute reality” is “greater than anything that could be said about them in the West”—“except to acknowledge [this fact] tacitly” (1979: 5, 322, 325). This tacit acknowledgement parallels Gramsci’s alliance with the subaltern and Levinas’s response to the Other: in each case, the intellectual enters into a relationship

with something foreign to him, about which he will absolutely refuse ever to produce authoritative knowledge. In each case, the point of the relationship is, in fact, to question the grounds of knowledge itself. Said's work is, ultimately, an archeology of knowledge, its solution to the problem of Orientalism clearly influenced by French poststructuralism, though more by Michel Foucault than by Derrida, as his *TriQuarterly* essay shows.

As Said's *Culture and Imperialism* subsequently explained, the false dichotomy underlying Orientalism engendered comparative literature as well: "the genuinely profound scholarship of the people [who] practiced *Weltliteratur* implied the extraordinary privilege of an observer located in the West who could actually survey the world's literary output with a kind of sovereign detachment" (Said 1993: 48). A shared premise of *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* is that such European surveys of non-European societies migrated back to the colonies, where they ironically defined, and deformed, anticolonial nationalism (Said 1979: 25). As Said observed, "nativist" discourses presumed, from an elite position, to speak for the colonized as such (Said 1993: 276). These discourses shaped the struggle for "national independence," that is, freedom as the European revolutionary tradition had always conceived it (1993: 216). This struggle, Said emphasized, depended on "mass mobilization" in the interests of the urban elites. It thus continued imperialism under another name (1993: 267).

Against this tragic trajectory, *Culture and Imperialism* insists, to an even greater extent than *Orientalism*, on the intellectual's proper relationship to the colonized. The aim of this relationship was not freedom in the conventional sense but rather what Said called "liberation" (1993: 51). He considered Fanon the thinker *par excellence* of 'the immense cultural shift' that must occur if a revolution is to move from 'the terrain of national independence to the theoretical domain of liberation' (1993: 268). This move involves not mass mobilization but "mass participation," not conventional war but guerrilla struggle, as Said's invocation of the FLN-led Battle of Algiers demonstrates. In contrast to national independence, liberation remains a "theoretical domain" because it was neither mapped out nor amenable to mapping, not a "goal" so much as a "*process*" (1993: 273).

The shift from one to the other required intellectuals to think not just historically but also, crucially for Said, geographically. Here, he considered *The Southern Question* exemplary. Gramsci supplemented idealist and Marxist universal histories with southern Italy's colonized geography—the axis of time with that of space. His "spatial consciousness" disclosed what historical models had obscured: metropolitan culture's world-historical role is to legitimize colonial domination (Said 1993: 51). To oppose this culture, "proletarian hegemony" must therefore comprise not just metropolitan perspectives but peripheral ones as well (Gramsci 2005: 31). Only the latter can lead the intellectual from the prison of "nationalist consciousness" to the boundless world of "social consciousness," from the false promise of freedom to the unending process of liberation (Said 1988: x).

Like Sartre and his generation, Said clung fiercely to humanism and was condemned for it by those claiming more politically radical or theoretically sophisticated positions.³ Yet just as—and precisely because—the idea of revolution in Sartre, Césaire, and Fanon is discontinuous with the revolutionary tradition before them, the humanism to which they and Said were attached forces us to rethink this term as well. Said claimed that when Orientalism created the Oriental, it "obliterate[d] him as a human." But Said did not insist, in response, on the Oriental's humanity, much less presuppose any definite concept thereof. His

“humanistic” concerns mandated instead that he make visible “the rise, development, and consolidation of Orientalism,” the “worldly” process that rendered non-Europeans inhuman (Said 1979: 27).

In the posthumously published *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), Said reconceived the victims of that process: “our age and our country [are] not just what has been settled and permanently resides here [but] the undocumented turbulence of unsettled and unhoused exiles, immigrants, itinerant or captive populations for whom [no] adequate expression yet exists” (Said 2004: 81). These categories—“unhoused exiles,” “immigrants,” “captive populations”—evoke the diverse histories of the Palestinians after 1948, and link these histories to various surplus populations proliferating today: namely, refugees and the stateless, undocumented labor, and the incarcerated. But if the category of the human has changed in the historical transition from colonialism/neocolonialism to globalization/neoliberalism, the essential labor of the humanist has not: “Humanism must excavate the silences[,] the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn’t make it onto the [media] reports but which more and more is about whether an overexploited environment, sustainable small economies and small nations, and marginalized peoples outside as well as inside the maw of the metropolitan center can survive” globalization (2004: 81–2).

Said valorized humanism because he identified it with the struggle for human emancipation. But his premise was that, to make such emancipation truly universal, humanists must focus on those whom the category of the human—or, in the case of *Orientalism*, the tradition of humanism—itself denigrates. Far from presupposing that the human is, by definition, the sovereign bearer of rights or the one who exercises sovereignty over the earth, Said’s humanist makes visible the historical consequences of all such limited definitions. *Pace* Chakrabarty, this postcolonial scholar emphasized the environment’s fragility as one such consequence.

Though Spivak has never been accused of humanism, she has in recent years explicitly aligned herself with it. “The Stakes of World Literature” (2009) claims that Gramsci’s approach to the subaltern and hence Spivak’s own extend the humanist tradition: “study humanism, said Gramsci, in somewhat the same spirit as some of us say [literary studies] train the ethical reflex. [T]o think of responsibility as a freedom, you need that very humanistic education which teaches rebellion against it” (Spivak 2012: 461).⁴ “Humanist education” in general trains the “ethical reflex” in precisely the same way literary study in particular does: it opens one to forms of consciousness fundamentally different from one’s own. Such openness eventually requires one to “rebel” against one’s training itself: the otherness of some text—indeed, perhaps every text—will exceed what one has been taught. In provoking this rebellion, humanism suggests the imaginative “freedom” it makes possible leads not to individual autonomy but rather to heteronomous “responsibility” (Spivak 2004: 533). Such responsibility is the source of the resemblance, invoked by both Gramsci and Spivak, between the humanist’s approach to the text and the intellectual’s affiliation with the subaltern.

In either case, one must—in Spivak’s idiomatic description of deconstruction—“take a step back” from one’s axioms about humanity and agency. The subaltern is, by definition, “removed from all lines of social mobility”: it cannot, in other words, easily utilize the economic and political institutions that emerged during the European

Enlightenment—think of the difficulty an illiterate Third World peasant, for example, might face in this regard. This difficulty is the precise sense in which, according to Spivak's most famous formulation, "the subaltern cannot speak": it lacks "agency" in the sense of "institutionally validated action" (Spivak 2012: 431–2). To appreciate the alternative forms—the "unrecognizable resistance"—subaltern groups can and do actually exercise, we would need first to deconstruct our very concept of agency (2012: 434). As we make visible the *différance* that constituted this concept, we would also trace other forms of action erased along the way. In Spivak's view, taking a step back toward all those subaltern forms would alone realize the humanist and revolutionary traditions' deepest ideals (2012: 462–5).

Yet this step back would, at the same time, begin to liberate critical thought from those traditions. As Spivak's "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and Popular" (2005) suggest, Gramsci's fascination with the former stemmed from his desire to free himself from both his classical education and his Marxist training (Spivak 2005: 435). The latter is trapped, according to Spivak, within an industrial mindset. The semantic constellation "society"/"social"/"socialize" (*Gesellschaft/gesellschaftlich/vergesellschaften*) presupposes an association of people based on quantified labor (2005: 462). This constellation gave rise to the ideas of justice—founded on the possibility of equivalence—that inform Marxism as well as liberalism. In contrast, the category of the subaltern, whose origins Spivak traces to *The Southern Question*, contains principles of social organization and justice not commensurable with any others. It provided an "amendment" to the logic of capital, enabling Gramsci to grasp what the Marxist thinkers who preceded him never could, the revolutionary possibilities particular to spaces of uneven development (Spivak 2005: 431). Spivak has emphasized that the subaltern refers not to particular groups or identities but rather to "long-delegitimized epistemes" (2005: 432). Recall my claim that postcolonial studies emerges from an epistemic rupture within the revolutionary tradition. I can now add: this rupture is, more precisely, a refusal of the conditions imposed on human agency. In this refusal, the work not just of Gramsci and Spivak but also of the Subaltern Studies collective anticipates *Conscripts of Modernity* by many decades.

In its work, postcolonial theory is, explicitly, a critical response to revolutionary discourse. From the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789, 1793, 1795) forward, this discourse has placed sovereignty in the "nation." Hence, anticolonial movements became credible, as Spivak's "Breast-Giver" (1997) recounts, only when they "acceded to sentiments of nationhood" (1997: 79). Anticolonial nationalists needed, therefore, actively to suppress "innumerable examples of subaltern resistance" (1997: 80). Doing so effectively replaced imperialism with neocolonialism. Multilateral institutions now use the discourse of human rights to re-impose international control on Third World states whose policies are deemed—always from above—contrary to "the *national* interest." In diametric opposition, Spivak's "Righting Wrongs" argues that "responsibility" to the subaltern would slowly transform—in principle "from below"—the meaning of "rights," "human," "citizen," and "nation" (Spivak 2004: 525–8, 531, 533, 541, 563). Such responsibility could make these terms finally acknowledge subaltern forms of democracy (2004: 548, 557).

But Spivak scarcely distinguishes between the capacity to hear subaltern speech and the skills necessary to read literary texts. As "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography"

argues, the former presupposes sensitivity to “sign systems” (Spivak 1988: 4). Conversely, to grasp the singularity of any literary text—its figurative or non-referential dimension—one must hear the subaltern speech surviving within it. In Spivak’s view, literature contains forms of language and agency that “amend” what is considered correct speech and action. As *Death of a Discipline* makes clear, “World Literature” must contain those forms that supplement what human rights discourse considers correct (Spivak 2012, 460–4; 2005: 14). Spivak’s deconstructive approach to this discourse crystallizes the interlinked theories discussed here and reveals their relevance today. If Marxism responded to capitalism dialectically, wanting to replace it with a single and even more universal system, anti-globalization movements now respond to capitalism deconstructively, wanting instead to articulate the disparate demands of those who build the global economy but are neither seen nor heard there. If they remain so, who will crawl, Spivak asks, “into the place of ‘the human’ of ‘humanism’ at the end of the day, even in the name of diversity?” (Spivak 2005: 23).

Scott and Chakrabarty’s shared premise is that postcolonial thought’s horizon remains the “autonomous rights-bearing” subject, the legacy of the late eighteenth-century revolutions (Chakrabarty 2012: 4). This chapter has argued, against any such premise, that postcolonial theory has long since moved beyond that horizon. Its point of departure was, in fact, a critique of the conditions colonialism had imposed on freedom and a willingness to put “the human” radically into question. Both this critique and this question were occasioned by the effort of anticolonial intellectuals to align themselves with those who were in no position to exercise human rights, who did not necessarily aspire to their acquisition, and whose humanity consequently could not be reduced to their ownership.⁵ This alignment was meant to liberate anticolonial movements from the prison of European freedom. Perhaps it possesses the power still today to release the humanities from their own elitism and help them finally see themselves as spaces less of (academic) freedom than of “exclusion and invisibility.” In any case, though, the genealogy of postcolonial theory recounted here—from Gramsci and Fanon through Said and Spivak to Chakrabarty and Scott—can be read as a necessarily endless effort to rethink the revolutionary principle of freedom from the perspective of those to whom it was never designed to extend.

NOTES

- 1 This definition of the subaltern comes from Spivak (2004: 531 and 2012: 430, 439).
- 2 One could argue that Gramsci devoted practically all of *The Prison Notebooks*—with its histories of state formation and civil society, studies of workers and peasants, analyses of cultural media and popular culture, and typologies of intellectuals—to elaborating a consciousness of revolution’s limits as well as its possibilities (see Anderson 2016: 71).
- 3 See, for example, Ahmad (1994: 159–220).
- 4 Spivak quotes Gramsci’s claim (1971: 10) that “the new intellectual” must acquire a “humanist conception of history, without which one remains ‘specialist’.”
- 5 Spivak explains (2004: 534): “Living in the rhythm of the eco-biome does not lead to exploration and conquest of nature.”

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