Rethinking the Problem of Postcolonialism

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Like all other "post"-marked terms, "postcolonialism" has caused no end of debate among its protagonists and antagonists. While the authors of The Empire Writes Back champion a loose use of the term "postcolonial" in expanding it to the literatures of Canada, Australia, and the United States, Simon During defines "postcolonialism" as "the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images." However, critics like Linda Hutcheon, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha are unmistakably skeptical of the possibility of an "uncontaminated" or "indigenous" postcolonial theory. Hutcheon argues that "the entire post-colonial project usually posits precisely the impossibility of that identity ever being 'uncontaminated,'" for postcolonialism designates a subversive discourse within the dominant Eurocentric culture rather than outside it. Spivak advocates the cataphatic strategy of "reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding" instead of constructing indigenous theories by ignoring the last few centuries of historical involvement. Differing from other postcolonial critics, Bhabha shifts focus from the colonized/colonizer confrontation to a third space beyond the binary structure. In relaunching Derridean différance on postcolonial terrain, he provides a narrative scheme for analyzing the hitherto neglected grey, ambiguous space of culture, renaming the colonial subject and colonial discourse in terms of the in-between, and more importantly, turning the indeterminacy of colonial discourse into an agency of counterhegemonic resistance.

While these critics, despite their divergences, all agree to use the term "postcolonial" for designating the subaltern consciousness and praxis, critics such as Ella Shohat, Anne McClintock, and Arif Dirlik fault the term for glossing over contemporary global power relations. McClintock objects to the term "postcolonial" for its premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism, and to her, part of the reason for the curious ubiquity of the term is its academic marketability, for it sounds more palatable to the authorities of universities than "third-world studies," or "studies in neo-colonialism" (AP 93). In Dirlik's estimate, postcolonialism is a progeny of postmodernism, and postcolonial critics' most original contributions consist in their rephrasing of older problems of Third-Worldism in the language of poststructuralism, but they have deliberately avoided examining the relationship between postcolonialism and global capitalism. While giving postcolonial critics full credit for engaging "in valid criticism of past forms of ideological hegemony," Dirlik takes them to task for their complicity in covering up "contemporary
problems of social, political, and cultural domination.” Shohat takes issue with the term “post-colonial” for its implication that “colonialism is now a matter of the past,” which inadvertently conceals the fact that global hegemony persists in forms other than overt colonial rule. In her rigorous interrogation of postcolonialism both as a term and as an emergent discourse, Shohat addresses the problems of its origin, contradictions, and political failures. From her point of view, the term “postcolonial” fails to address the issue of contemporary power relations; it lacks a political content which can account for U.S. imperialism in the eighties and nineties (NP 105). Despite differences and contradictions among and within Third-World countries, Shohat prefers the term “Third World,” for it contains a common project of allied resistances to neocolonialisms, “usefully evoking structural commonalities of struggles among diverse peoples” (NP 111). In her assessment, the term “postcolonial” would be more precise if it were “articulated as a ‘post-First/Third Worlds theory’ or ‘post-anti-colonial critique,’ as a movement beyond a relatively binaristic fixed and stable mapping of power relations between ‘colonized/colonizer’ and ‘center/periphery’” (NP 107-8).

These critics reject the term “postcolonial” primarily for its dismaying implication of “after the demise of colonialism.” Their objections to the concept of postcoloniality arise from the recognition of the increasing presence of neocolonialism. To these critics, it is a logical impossibility to assign postcolonialism and neocolonialism to the same temporality. But, ironically, their arguments contain a boomeranging consequence that will ultimately undermine their own positions, for they fail to see that neocolonialism, as I will demonstrate, is the condition of possibility of postcolonialism, which can be articulated as a neo-Gramscian counterdiscourse in the age of hegemonic imperialism. Postcolonial criticism, as Gyan Prakash points out, “force[s] a radical rethinking and re-formulation of forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and western domination.” In this sense, the postcolonial “exists as an aftermath, an after—after being worked over by colonialism” (PC 8). Emerging in a world embedded in colonial forms of knowledge, the postcolonial designates a moment within colonialism and beyond it. Postcoloniality points to a world that has [End Page 8] done with what Abdul JanMohamed terms the “dominant phase of colonialism” and yet is caught up in what he calls the “hegemonic phase of colonialism.” It is the historical need to deconstruct residues of older colonialism and withstand neocolonialism that, I will argue, gives rise to postcolonialism, which shifts the battlefield from the political and military onto the cultural terrain. In response to those objections to the legitimacy of postcolonialism, I will also argue that postcolonialism designates an anxiety to move beyond Eurocentric ideology, beyond colonialist binary structures of self/Other, and ultimately beyond any form of racism. The postcolonial shares some of postmodernism’s fundamental assumptions, but it is misleading to reduce postcolonialism to a mere function of postmodernism. If the contemporary neocolonialist hegemony is, as JanMohamed succinctly points out, based on the active direct consent of the dominated, then it is also arguable that the neocolonized are guilty of complicity in consolidating neocolonialism. Therefore, the postcolonial counterhegemonic project urges the postcolonial intellectuals of neocolonized countries to interrogate and dismantle thoroughly imperialist forms of knowledge ingrained in their own political and cultural unconscious as well as inscribed in Western representations of the non-Western.

As Prakash notes, postcolonial discourse benefits tremendously from Derrida’s and Foucault’s deconstructive readings of Western thought, which provide "a powerful critique of the rule of modernity that the colonies experienced in a peculiar form" (PC 10). This is true and partly explains why critics like Dirlik share the assumption that postcolonialism is a progeny of postmodernism. But, despite postcolonialism’s indebtedness to postmodernism, it is dangerous to regard postcolonialism as a mere figure of postmodernism. For this position represents a general tendency to turn postcolonialism into a West-centered discourse against West-centered universalism and rationalism.