

Theorizing on the Left: *Postcoloniality: The French Dimension*

Margaret A. Majumdar

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Margaret Majumdar's study of postcoloniality's French dimension presents a historical perspective and relies on a comparative approach to post-colonialism and the dialectical relationship between what Albert Memmi conceptualized as "colonizer" and "colonized." The book particularly focuses on the distinctive characteristics of France as a colonial power, tracing the influence of Enlightenment and Modernism therein. Though emphatic, the French dimension is inscribed in a global context governed by the imperial mercantile project and the colonial discourse which sustains it.

Colonial discourses and counter-discourses embedded in economic, political and cultural relations are examined in the study from a clearly defined position on the left side of the colonizer/colonized divide. The study's ideological frame is decidedly anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-globalization. History, politics, ideologies, space and time are considered from a Marxist critical perspective. Indeed colonization is reduced to its economic dimension as part of "the global expression of capitalist imperialism" (xiii). The author mentions, nevertheless, the ideological, religious and social motivations of colonization, without granting them much importance. They seem to play a minor part in the bigger strategy of challenging the contemporary hegemonic "world order."

The globalized point of view adopted by the author has made it difficult for her to deliver a comprehensive analysis of the promised French dimension. The nature and extent of power struggles that started in the 17th century among major imperial powers were such that she is obliged to provide the reader with a comparative study of imperial strategies with the British and French as basic models.

The eleven chapters of the book cover almost four centuries of imperial policies and their consequences on the current situation of former colonised populations following a North/ South divide. The aim is to single out the contradictions in imperial discourses that proclaim equality in the name of the Rights of Man and the Republican principles of homogeneity and assert the persistent belief in the "superiority" of the white race and its "civilising mission" which refuses to give the natives "full access" to French citizenship. The author lays emphasis on the European legacy of expansion and engages in a Marxist interpretation of imperial motives. To counterbalance the depiction of hegemonic imperial policy, she reads the movements of resistance as part of a historical determinism, using

arguments extracted from several works by Fanon, Memmi, Césaire and Sartre, to name a few. But her attempt to connect various liberation movements in French colonies by relating to Aimé Césaire seems a bit far fetched. Also, there is little on resistance, as the concept is not clearly defined. Does Majumdar have cultural resistance in mind? On what theoretical ground could resistance be based? What place might there be for violent resistance?

Majumdar analyzes Sartre's anti-colonialism and his theory of the *gaze* that maintains the *Other* (colonized) in a position of Object in a brilliant manner, viewing it as part of the counter-discourse against the Republican ideal of universalism. Sartre affirms that the *Other* also gazes at the colonizer, thus establishing a dialectical relationship rather than a relation of subordination. Majumdar formulates a relevant criticism of Sartre's neglect of language as part of the colonial strategy of maintaining the hierarchical order. But this criticism needs to be mitigated, as Sartre admits that language bears the mark of praxis and therefore the marks of its user, who is not necessarily French. Majumdar's view of anti-colonial discourse reaching its paroxysm in Sartre's position as a "committed philosopher" fails to single out the contradictions in Sartre's personal commitment, when it comes to dealing with other colonizer/colonized relationships, as in the case of Palestine. The author could have further extended her analysis to this aspect, with an invitation to turn the Sartrian "gaze" inward.<sup>1</sup>

Majumdar devotes Chapter 5 to the influence of Communist groups and parties in movements of national liberation. Fanon was forced into that frame despite his relative detachment from the Communist conception of universalism, which proved to be irrelevant when it came to dealing with the Algerian movement of liberation, because the economic structure and the modes of production in Algeria were basically rural and not industrial, and class-consciousness was replaced by "race-consciousness," as Fanon explains. The movement developed on the basis of the land question, both economically and metaphorically. The influence of Lenin's National Democratic Front among colonized people, contrary to popular belief, was very limited, given the limited number of elite groups and their rejection of Lenin's atheistic stance.<sup>2</sup>

The growing awareness of the necessity to rebel against the hegemonic and oppressive colonial power brought about a national consciousness that involved an engagement with history and culture. Readers, who expect the book's focus to be on post-colonial writers and thinkers because of their understanding of history and culture, might be somewhat disappointed. What we have is a very limited number of case studies with a special focus on Katib Yacine and his theory of heterogeneity. Sub-Saharan Africa is scarcely mentioned. Yacine's understanding of heterogeneity is presented as "a powerful

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<sup>1</sup> See Edward Said on this issue, « Ma rencontre avec Jean-Paul Sartre » *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Septembre 2000, 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> See the latest book on this issue by Georges Morin entitled *Algérie, idées reçues*, (Le Cavalier Bleu, 2007). He dismisses all confusion about stereotypical, false ideas concerning Algeria's colonial and post-colonial history.

strand of thinking in the Maghrebian context” (155). Apart from Katib Yacine, the Maghrebian trend was more about the revival of Arab identity than of hybridity. Even in Tunisia, where the French language was accepted as a means of access to modernity, the French dimension was never envisaged as a constituent part of national identity. The organic connection between the Arabic language and the Koran made it necessary for the newly independent populations to anchor their identity in a language and a religion that were not those of the colonizer. Bilingualism in the Maghreb meant conjuring two different languages and two different sets of references. Local dialects emerged as a form of *créole* where French and Arabic coexisted in some locutions and gave occasional birth to neologisms, half French, half Arabic, as shown by the author.

Though the book does not follow any diachronic progression, there is a clear interest in encompassing the economic, political and cultural aspects of post-colonialism and emphasizing the interdependence of all these aspects. The changing strategies of France’s colonial policy and discourse are also examined from different angles, as when the discourse shifts from the defence of the French language and culture to a larger defence of diversity with the hidden purpose of maintaining the same degree of influence over former colonies. The author exposes that hidden agenda very clearly by explaining why Algeria refused to be a member of the *Francophonie* group. We could add Algeria’s refusal to sign any agreement of friendship with France until it acknowledged the crimes committed during the Algerian War as another example of postcolonial distrust. The work of memory as a necessary step towards reconciliation is presented in the book from various points of view, not the least of which is the economic one, while dealing with the question of “reparations.”

Up until Chapter 8, the book continues to give an illuminating insight into the different implications of imperial policy. The effects are presented in the last three chapters dealing with the aftermath of colonization. The cause and effect logic establishes imperial powers as being responsible for the present woes of post-colonial societies and economies. Though it is an established fact that current inequity in economic relations and poverty in the world could be traced back to imperial policy, the author seems to neglect other factors relating to political, economic and cultural strategies adopted by post-independence regimes. Blaming it all on imperial capitalism removes responsibility from those who are instigators of the present situation. Such a vision might stifle any effort to take into account current power relations and find the means to change them in favour of a more balanced dynamic. The author states, “arguing otherwise is an attempt to shift responsibility from perpetrators to the victims” (240). Though one might be tempted to agree with her, seeing it as the sole evil is just as dangerous because development is presented once again as dependent on the former colonizers’ will to recognize their crimes and initiate a new power relation. This analysis is contradicted by the author’s own doubts in her elaboration on “Normalisation” where she

raises the rhetorical question of “whether this has been to make colonialism the cause of current ills or to lock coloniser and colonised in a never-ending regurgitation of old sores or disabling dependency” (248).

The North/ South divide constitutes the axis of analysis of post-colonialism and the author does not seem to believe in the idea of bridging the gap, at least culturally. Her criticism of hybridity is based on the idea that such theories as those developed in Edouard Glissant’s works do not amount to a genuine strategy of resistance. Subverting colonial paradigms through appropriation, mimicry (Bhabha) or translation (Rushdie), is considered irrelevant, as their effect is limited. The author takes the example of Glissant and his concept of “sameness,” which means roughly, uniformity/conformity to the universal model, and which Glissant replaces with “diversity.” It needs to be emphasised that the concept of sameness is borrowed from Heidegger, who uses it to refer to the diverse and not the universal/uniform. Heidegger uses other terms, “equal/identical,” to refer to the universal. Glissant subverts the concept through translation and appropriation in order to create the diverse. Is not this a striking example of the new *relations* bursting forth from the *magnetic attraction* of differences?

Margaret Majumdar does not offer any alternative to replace hybridity and contents herself with rejection, leaving the question of resistance without a convincing answer. What form should that resistance take? On what theoretical basis -if any- should resistance be grounded? The book is, nevertheless, thoroughly documented and effectively synthetic. Margaret Majumdar’s study is an outstanding contribution to postcolonial theorisation that departs from the elusive comparative studies of the past.