

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND THE 'POST-' CONDITION

Aijaz Ahmad

The End of History is the *death* of Man as such.

Alexandre Kojève

The issue of 'postcolonial theory' shall detain us at some length presently.' So, let me start by reflecting on the other term in the title of the discussion at hand: the Post Condition. The phrase itself is taken from Niethammer whose book on the past careers of the concept of 'posthistory'² was published in Hamburg barely a few months after Francis Fukuyama, the philosopher from Rand Corporation, published his famous essay which he then went on to revise and expand into the even more famous book that outlines his own tamer version of **Kojève's** philosophically magisterial statement on *fin de l'histoire*.³ In political persuasion, philosophical stance and structure of argument, the two authors could hardly be more dissimilar. It is uncanny, therefore, that both should have been concerned – Fukuyama as advocate, Niethammer from a position at once antagonistic and nuanced – with those strands in European intellectual history which have been fond of announcing that History has already ended. Since we hear so much these days about the End of History and its 'metanarratives of emancipation' – from Fukuyama in one register, but in many more registers from **postmodernist, deconstructivist** and postcolonialist positions – it might be useful to begin by reflecting briefly on some of the political origins of this postist philosophical reflex.

The origins of the idea are obviously traceable to **Hegel** but then enunciations of this kind, often in versions very different from anything **Hegel** might have said or thought, became particularly loud and bewilderingly various at two distinct historical junctures: during the 1930s – in the midst of revolution, depression, fascism and world war – and then in the present period of capitalist triumphalism. Meanwhile, the repertoire of **posthistorical** imaginings has been refracted through complex and competing traditions of thought, and it would be a mistake to identify it all with a singular political stance. In **Hegel's** reflections on the French Revolution,

of course, this idea of the 'End' had the predominant meaning of 'Purpose' or 'Vocation': the proposition, in other words, that History had finally found its vocation in the Idea of Liberty which had become the irreversible ground on which collective human struggles were henceforth to be fought. By the 1930s, however, in the times of National Socialism, three competing versions were to emerge in definitions of *posthistoire*. In Nazi apologetics, the Third Reich itself was portrayed as the **EndState**, still in the process of its universalisation, towards which history was said to have been tending. Secondly, those who were later disillusioned with the Reich, either with the manner of its progression or with its demise, were then to cultivate a posthistorical melancholy, becoming deeply sceptical not only about the feasibility of collective social projects of any kind but also about what Spengler had already called 'rose-coloured progress,' so that modes of withdrawal ranged from stoical a-sociality, to (to use a Foucauldian phrase for our own purposes) Care of the Self, to quasi-aristocratic clericism of Being.'

But, then, in a completely different kind of variant, some of the most powerful thought that arose among the German intelligentsia in opposition to the Nazis, notably the writings of Horkheimer and **Adorno**, identified a little too easily a critique of the technologically efficient barbarism of the Nazis with a global Eclipse of Reason and *Art* – identified that particular barbarism, indeed, with a cage-like entrapment in the technological reason of the Modern as such. **Adorno's** remorseless avant-gardism in matters of Art and Literature, as the reliable refuge from technological Reason and popular culture alike, is of a piece with the stringent pessimism of *Minima Moralia* and a pervasive sense that collective politics of a revolutionary kind is really impossible in the face of the 'massification' of modern culture; 'mass' and 'popular' are, in the writings of Horkheimer and **Adorno**, words of punctual and irredeemable degradation. What Bourdieu calls Heidegger's 'ultra-revolutionary conservatism' and 'aristocratic populism' meet their contrary and complement, in **Adorno's** writings, in the form of an avant-gardist aristocratism, in which *Art* seems often to serve the same function as that of Being in Heidegger's 'effects of priestly prophecy'.⁵ In *this* version, the Third Reich, and the pervading technological Reason of which the Reich is seen to be the chief embodiment, spells out the end of History, then, not as its realization, as Nazi apologists would have it, but as its final negation, spelling out the impossibility of either the thinking or the making of History as an emancipatory project in any foreseeable future.

Let us be more precise, though. For much of the **leftwing** philosophy that came of age in Western Europe between Petrograd and Munich, especially around the years that brought the Depression and the **Hitlerite** triumph, political reality was grim three times over: Nazi barbarism, surely,

but also the dashing of Bolshevik possibilities and revolutionary hopes in Stalin's USSR, and the descent of what one knew as 'liberal capitalism' into the Depression on the one hand, great intensification of consumerist fetishism on the other. Faced with such a history, and even though he probably did not quite comprehend the extent of Stalinist revision of Bolshevism, Gramsci, in the loneliness of a fascist prison, did remain attached to the formula he had made his own, 'optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect'. In contrast, **Adorno**, who himself seems never to have been intrinsically part of a mass movement, even a defeated one, could identify 'optimism' only with the aesthetic intensities and narrow plenitudes of avant-garde Art; History, in the older philosophical sense of a project in which the emancipation of some was inextricably linked with the emancipation of all, seemed now to have virtually no prospects.

This avant-gardist and academic elitism as a reaction to political disillusion was of course to return on a much wider scale, this time among the Parisian intellectuals who became dominant in the aftermath of May 1968, especially as many of them moved from the Far Left to make their peace with a new and neo-liberal conservatism. The striking feature of this return of cultural elitism, however, was that all those themes of the Frankfurt School – antinomies of the Enlightenment, Eclipse of Reason, the ambiguities of Progress, the massification of culture, the decline of revolutionary possibility – which had produced such disturbance and even moral pessimism for **Adorno** and Benjamin, were now re-staged as sources of pleasure and signs of a new freedom, as if this new sense of living in the aftermath of the end of meaning, the death of the social, etc., produced an unprecedented range of possibilities for play – as if **Adorno** was being re-read through Daniel Bell, Marshall **McLuhan**, and Donald Duck. In one major aspect, the hallmark of the postmodern aesthetic is that what was experienced as a source of anguish in the Modernist aesthetic is now staged in the register of infinite gratification. Furthermore, the postmodern is posthistorical in the precise sense of being a discourse of the end of meaning, in the Derridean sense of infinite deferral of all meaning in language and philosophical labour alike, as well as in the Lyotardian sense both of what he calls 'incredulity toward the metanarratives of emancipation' as well as the assertion that there can be no criteria for choosing between different 'language games' that are external to the respective 'games' as such. Characteristically, this postmodern philosophical consciousness distinguishes itself from an earlier, largely existentialist sense of meaninglessness and the Absurd by positing its own discourse of the end of meaning as a happy liberation from the Logos as such.

We thus have not one but two claims regarding the End of History. There is the quasi-Hegelian claim put forth by Fukuyama which itself makes a strong gesture of reconciliation with Nietzsche, as we shall see.

But there is also the deconstructivist, postmodernist claim which has a much more complex lineage: connected not with **Hegel** but with Heidegger – and through Heidegger, with the philosophical atmosphere of post-Weimar Germany – and descended more or less directly from Nietzsche, but from a Nietzschean strand rather different than the one that Fukuyama invokes. These are philosophically different claims, with distinct modes of argumentation. Yet there are resemblances as well, the most striking of which is that neither is able or willing to think of a possible future for humanity that would be basically different than today's neo-liberalist triumph and consequent universalisation of commodity fetishism. But, then, how is it that philosophers as different as Fukuyama and the postmoderns reach more or less the same conclusion? A common commitment to the existing modalities of capitalist democracy is obviously the more substantial link, but there are also commanding influences, notably that of **Kojève**, that remind us of some shared philosophical origins for the two strands in posthistorical thinking today, however divergent they may be in other respects.

Now, Fukuyama himself foregrounds his debt to **Kojève**, and the fact that this influence has been filtered through Leo Strauss and **Allan Bloom** is also well known. That **Kojève** should exercise his influence on a section of the U.S. intelligentsia through such solidly reactionary interlocutors is itself significant, and goes some way in explaining how Fukuyama's argument which purports to take seriously **Hegel's** Master-Slave Dialectic does nevertheless move effortlessly to the jubilant conviction that capitalist democracy, headed by the United States, had not only triumphed over its chief adversaries, principally communism, but had also proved itself to be something of a terminating point in the political evolution of humankind.⁴ What is less widely appreciated is the extent and contradictory nature of **Kojève's** influence in Paris, from the early 1930s onward. His Seminar on **Hegel**, mainly on the Phenomenology, which lasted from 1933 to 1939, was one of the defining events that made **Hegel** so central a figure in French philosophical debates for the next two decades or so. But it was a very special reading of **Hegel**, filtered equally through Marx and Heidegger; **Kojève** may well be credited with introducing Heidegger to the French intelligentsia. Indeed, the pairing of Marx and Heidegger, which became such a convention in Derridean deconstruction, is traceable directly to **Kojève**, with the key difference that the deconstructivists tend to drop **Hegel** altogether and claim to 'radicalize' Marx through the superior authority of **Heidegger**.⁵ This 'radicalization' of both **Hegel** and Marx through the application of Heidegger – whose thought Karl Jaspers, **Kojève's** teacher and Heidegger's own one-time friend, was to find 'in its essence unfree, dictatorial, uncommunicative'⁶ – was one side of the story. During that same phase, **Kojève** had been, along with Baudrillard, a

Communist? Meanwhile he was also in sympathetic touch with the well-known far-left group, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which included both Lyotard and Castoriadis, and which Walter Benjamin was also to contact through Georges Bataille, a key member of Kojève's seminar. Indeed, **Kojève** was to have a decisive influence on both Bataille and **Lacan**, who were among his favourite students and were to emerge much later as seminal figures in poststructuralist thought."

What we are tracing here is not something as direct as a uniform intellectual or political lineage but a certain milieu, a complex ideological matrix, almost an atmosphere, and certain modes of thought that coalesced and collided with each other in complex ways. Heidegger seems to have been a central figure (**Kojève** conducted his seminar on **Hegel** in one auditorium while **Henri Cobin** expounded on Heidegger's *Being and Time* in an adjoining one). Even though Fukuyama's book has merely one index entry for Heidegger it is safe to say that he too is connected, through the influences of Bloom and Strauss, with precisely that intellectual milieu of radical conservatism during the interwar years in Germany whose ideological moorings *Niethammer* illuminates and which included Heidegger and Schmitt as quite central figures. Kojève himself was greatly influenced by Heidegger's philosophy but there is no indication that he ever drew close to National Socialism, even though his intellectual relations with Carl Schmitt, his close partnership with Leo Strauss, and his philosophical fascination with violence" would seem to indicate that the matter of Kojevian formation is not easy to disentangle from that whole intellectual climate that smacks of a widespread authoritarian temper. The matter is rendered even more complex by the fact that if Lyotard and Derrida, whom no one can conceivably accuse of Nazi sympathies, have led the campaign in France to protect Heidegger against any discussion of his work for the Nazis and his subsequent refusal to publicly account for that association, in Germany that same role has been played, among others, by **Ernst Nolte**. Nolte also takes up specific themes from Heidegger's pro-Nazi political declarations in the course of his revisionist effort to 'normalize' the Nazi experience as an 'understandable' response to the rise of **Stalin** in the Soviet Union and as one element among others in what Nolte, echoing many Nazi apologists in the past, calls 'an international civil war'.

Finally, there is the matter of the fundamental shifts in Kojève's own career and outlook, which reminds one of so many others. The **Kojève** that we first encounter as the teacher of the legendary seminar fancied himself a communist, interpreted **Hegel's** treatment of the twin histories of religion and philosophy through Marxist categories of alienation, false consciousness and, above all, labour. As Roth puts it about that period in his thought, 'For **Kojève** the dynamic of mastery and slavery is the motor

of History: domination sets history in motion and equality will end it.'¹² In that reading, we actually get two versions of what **Kojève** calls *fin de l'histoire*. In one version, we are said to be living in a posthistorical period in the sense that a project of Equality has been set in motion historically by the French Revolution and philosophically by **Hegel**, and all that remains is the practical completion of that project – to which in any case there are no alternatives. In a stronger version, the End of History could only come with the end of class struggle and the triumph of 'slave ideologies', i.e. the triumph of equality over hierarchy, which is then identified squarely with the **EndState** of 'classless society'.

By the 1950s, as **Kojève** recreated himself in the guise of an illustrious civil servant, three major shifts took place. One, class struggle and with that the struggle for 'recognition' was now said to be essentially over in countries of advanced capitalism where most of the surplus value, he said, was returned to the worker: '... the United States has already reached the final stage of Marxist 'communism', since, in effect, all the members of a 'classless society' can appropriate whatever appeals to them, without working more than they feel like doing,' and 'the American way of life was the one fitted for the posthistorical period.'¹³ Second, however, this End of History was identified with a Weberian sense of complete rationalization of society and a sense of nausea, emptiness and boredom of the kind that was made fashionable in France at that time through disparate fictions of **Sartre**, **Camus**, **Françoise Sagan** et al. Third, **Kojève's** interests shifted increasingly from the philosophy of History to the making of Discourses, and the tonality of his prose also shifted, accordingly, to a register distinctly non-Hegelian and surprisingly similar to that of the **poststructuralists**: "'The definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called" also means the definitive disappearance of Discourse (Logos) in the strict sense,' he was to write in a note to the 1969 edition of his book on **Hegel**.¹⁴

Two features of this career are worth reiterating. On the one hand, the vertigo of these shifts reminds one, inevitably, of the careers of those luminaries of French postmodernity whom Daniel Singer once bluntly called 'bastards of May' and 'Maoist turncoats.'¹⁵ But, then, it also clarifies for us that Fukuyama, who picks up one strand of Nietzsche while the postmoderns pick up several others, is loyal to **Kojève** twice over: he picks up **Kojève's** treatment of the Master-Slave Dialectic from the 1930s but then severs that account from Kojève's Heideggerian Marxism of that period, recombining it with the two-faced quality of Kojève's thought of the 1950s: the celebration of the United States as the **EndState** which terminates History, but also a lament for the End of History as a Weberian rationalization and the reign of mediocrity. It is on this ground of Kojevian doubleness (duplicity?) that Lyotard's End of all Metanarratives meets

Fukuyama's End of History, and that postmodernity itself becomes yet another version of *fin de l'histoire*, not in **Hegel's** sense of History discovering its Vocation as Pursuit of Equality and Freedom but in the much more recent and tawdry sense of living, jubilantly, in the aftermath of the end of meaning **itself**.¹⁶ This complexity in the philosophical lineages of 'The Post Condition' suggests to us that Fukuyama's thought is by no means *sui generis* and that much of his intellectual formation, political **conviction** and worldview he in fact shares with some of the dominant strands in postmodernity, whether or not he is in any obvious sense sympathetic to those modes of Parisian brashness. It is not only that Lyotard repackages in French philosophical language what we once used to hear from Daniel Bell and others; it is also the case that **Kojève's** influence in Paris and beyond has included a lot more than Fukuyama, so that if one of the main registers of Fukuyama's declaration of the End of History sounds somewhat like **Lyotard's** declaration of 'the end of all **metanarratives**' or **Baudrillard's** announcement of 'the death of the social', the resemblance is not merely incidental.

This is of course not to deny that Fukuyama's discourse is very peculiarly knotted, with an **unbridgeable** inner contradiction; for, he attempted to reconcile two contrasting tendencies within the larger philosophical tradition, as they are indicated even by the two terms that he took into the title of his book, 'The End of History', and 'The Last Man'. It might appear, at first sight, that the figure of '**the** Last Man' seamlessly represents the moment at which History itself comes to an End. In the actual structure of Fukuyama's argument, however, there is a considerable slippage. The rhetoric of the 'End of History' he takes from **Hegel**, to assert that what we are witnessing in our own time, in the **1990s**, is that **much**-awaited outbreak of liberty which **Hegel** had first glimpsed in the figure of the Man on Horseback at Jena and which has now taken, on Fukuyama's account, its final form in the global triumph of neo-liberal capitalism, and in the terminal defeat of its adversaries. The rhetoric of 'the Last Man', by contrast, is descended from the Nietzschean rejection of the intellectual lineages of Humanism and the Enlightenment, as well as his elitist rejection not only of what later came to be known as 'consumer society' but also popular power of any kind. In this way, the narrative of Modernity itself becomes a secular, enraged, agnostic narrative of the Fall of Man, and a narrative, therefore, of the **coming** of universal mediocrity, the bleakness of it all hardly relieved by the persistence of a spiritual aristocracy comprised of a few such as Nietzsche himself, not to speak of latter-day Nietzscheans.

That Hegelian starting-points in Fukuyama's thought should eventually lead to Nietzschean conclusions is a paradox almost too delicious. Upon reflection, though, this upshot seems less surprising since **Hegel** and even

Kojève are filtered, in Fukuyama's thought, through an intellectual tradition whose own structure was inseparable from that ideological crucible of the 1930s when not only a hatred of communism but deep distrust of liberal democracy itself became quite compelling in sections of the European intelligentsia under pressure from National Socialism. The figure of 'The Last Man', in Fukuyama's configuration, is thus somewhat Janus-faced. Thanks to the coming of liberal democracy, this Last Man, in his Occidental location, has known true liberty, in the form of a universal recognition granted by the liberal state, and, supplementing the satisfactions of socio-political recognition, he has known also the satisfactions that come with consumerist plenitude. He now seeks emancipation not through Reason but from Reason, not through History but *from* History, in the shape of that Dionysian and privatized Freedom which Foucault has more recently called 'regimes of pleasures.' These satisfactions of universal recognition and consumerist plenitude have, however, even within the ultimate self-realization of the Occident, a catch built into them. The dilemma of liberal democracy, the secret even of its eventual self-destruction, is, according to Fukuyama, that any practice of universal equality can only produce a state of universal mediocrity, because mutual 'recognition' of each by all can be universalized only by accepting the lowest possible denominator for what merits equal recognition. The triumph of liberal democracy is thus for Fukuyama an end of history in two quite different senses.

One very strong sense, of course, is that the Occidental states and societies of advanced capitalism are said to be entirely comfortable in their affluence and the liberal order; that they are relieved by the defeat of their adversaries and no longer imagine any other future for themselves; that the triumph of liberal capitalism is, so far as one can see, definitive. But the second sense then immediately follows: this very End of History seems to produce nothing but an infinity of futurelessness, mediocrity, consumerism, a levelling of all distinctions, equalizing of all political wills in the form of universal franchise, a desert-like future of full homogeneity. He cites Leo Strauss's telling interrogation of **Kojève**: is it really possible to dissolve **Hegel's** Master-Slave opposition without producing sheer equality and homogeneity? Fukuyama indicates his support of Strauss's position through three key assertions. One, that since equality can only be based on universal mediocrity, what the human will truly wants is a belonging not to universal equality but to a special community of its own, within a complex system of numerous such communities; not the liberal democracy of universal citizenship, but a heterogeneous system of mutually exclusive communities wherein one takes the satisfaction of recognition only by those whom one recognizes as one's peers. Second, quoting Nietzsche's description of the state as 'the coldest of all cold

monsters', Fukuyama asserts that there is far greater human satisfaction in membership in an immediate, directly experienced community than in the equal citizenship within a state; 'politics' is thus dissolved into 'society' and 'society' itself into its constituent units, in an infinite play of heterogeneities. So far does Fukuyama go in this direction as to suggest that the authoritarian regimes which have supervised such stupendous capitalist growth in East Asia may well be humanly more satisfying in so far as they rest not on universal equality in the political domain but on integral and mutually discrete communities within the larger capitalist society.

Far from being a purely triumphalist account, thus, Fukuyama's discourse is in fact self-divided between profound allegiance to liberal capitalism and equally strong temptation to reject it in favour of dictatorial regimes; and the discourse is self-divided also between the polarities of a certain Hegelian optimism about the March of History as an unfolding of the Idea of Liberty on the one hand, and, on the other, the overwhelming Nietzschean scepticism about the very conceptions of History and Liberty as possible or even desirable emancipatory collective projects. These contradictory *philosophical* positions he tries to uphold, simultaneously, in view of his own central propositions, which, as it happens, tend to mutually cancel out each other. Ideologically, he is fully committed, in the first instance, to an unrestrained celebration of the free market and its global triumph; in *this* rhetoric, 'free market' is the essence of Liberty as such. At the same time, however, he also declares that the emergence of *consumption* as the primary ground for the exercise of freedom in today's mass capitalist society, whether in the Occident or in East Asia, degrades the Idea of Freedom as such. The Last Man that has been produced at the End of History, thanks to the global triumph of neo-liberal capitalism, is then, by Fukuyama's own account, a mass of humanity beset by mediocrity, authoritarian rule, and voracious appetite for sheer consumption. Thus it is that even the textures and tonalities of his prose oscillate between a neo-liberalist triumphalism and a posthistorical melancholy. This too is logical, since this bureaucrat-philosopher of the American Empire thinks of himself, formally, as a Hegelian, but encounters at the End of History the figure not of **Hegel** but of Nietzsche.

Now, Fukuyama takes himself to be neither postmodern nor postcolonial. Unlike so many postmoderns and postcolonials, from Derrida to Spivak, he claims for himself no radical, **leftwing** credentials in the politics of today. Unlike Lyotard, **Kristeva**, **Glucksman** and many other 'New Conservatives' of French postmodernity, Fukuyama has no past as a Trotskyist, Maoist or whatever. He has no qualms about the fact that he is, and has always been, a man of the Right and an advocate of neo-liberalist capitalism; much of his life has been spent, after all, between the U.S. State Department and the Rand Corporation. I begin with Fukuyama in this

context for somewhat different reasons.

The first of these reasons is, in today's intellectual climate, the hardest to state, namely that I find Fukuyama as a thinker comparatively more substantial and engaging than those, such as Lyotard and Baudrillard, who have provided so much of the jargon of postcolonial theory. This I say despite the fact that Fukuyama strikes me as being, in the final analysis, wrong on virtually every major count. He is right, for instance, though hardly original, in asserting that capitalism is more universally dominant and more securely entrenched today than at any other point in this century; but he is wrong to equate this capitalist triumph with the outbreak of Equality and Universal Recognition. What has been universalized is neither a universal state of the common good, nor an equalized access to goods and services, but integrated markets for the circulation of capital and the expropriation of labour, and, in the cultural domain, universalisation of the ideology of commodity fetishism.

Indeed, if you subtract commodity fetishism, hardly anything remains in the culture of actually existing capitalism that is fundamentally universalistic. Indeed, the history of this capitalism shows that the dissolution of traditional communities and the mobility of populations under capitalist pressures produce not a universal culture of broadly shared human values and radical equalities, but highly malleable processes of decomposition that constantly recompose identities of nation, race, ethnicity, and religious group, not to speak of freshly fashioned claims of tradition and **primordiality**. One might even speculate that the great intensification of identity politics and of multi-culturalist ideology and policy demonstrates, in some crucial respects, the living reality of how much contemporary capitalism is in the process of giving up on the idea of Universal Equality even in its advanced zones. The modern state even in these zones may well get reorganized as so many islands of ethnic identity supervised by the benign but ever vigilant gaze of the one ethnicity that is so dominant that it need not define itself as ethnicity. Thus, Fukuyama is wrong even on this count: communitarian ideology as a complement of industrial capitalism is by no means an attribute of East Asia alone; it is ascendant within North America itself; meanwhile, the more strident versions of communitarianism are blowing apart legacies of secular civil government in countries as diverse as Algeria, Egypt and India; and yet, the idea of self-governing religious communities as an alternative to secular citizenship in the modern **nation-state** is gaining ground in that branch of postcolonial theory which calls itself Subaltern Studies, as is clear from the recent writings of its principal figures."

This is a reversal, in fact, of historic proportions. The idea of universal equality was until quite recently the most potent ideological force in the struggles against European imperialism and against the Eurocentric

racisms which have been the necessary supplements of that imperialism. Now, Fukuyama of course advises us that it is precisely the aspiration for universal equality that is producing a culture of universal mediocrity, while Lyotard and his postcolonialist followers such as Gyan Prakash, a late entrant in the Subalternist paradigm, have taken to assuring us that the idea of universality is itself Eurocentric and simply one of those metanarratives of Emancipation that have been rendered obsolete by the entry of the world into postmodernity, and that the only refuge from Eurocentricity and racism is to be sought in philosophical and cultural **relativism**.¹⁸ For all his Hegelian starting-points, Fukuyama's idea that recognition from one's exclusivist community is the only recognition worth having belongs squarely in the postmodernist world of relentless relativism, absolutisation of difference, and refusal to acknowledge that anything other than goods and services could define a horizon of universality or normative value.

Fukuyama thus shares many of the themes and convictions of philosophical postmodernity, especially the ones that are the most valued in postcolonial theory, as, for example, his conviction that the heterogenous is intrinsically superior to values of universality and equality; his wavering but eventual preference for self-referential communities over the integrative projects for creating a modern, democratic and secular state; the Nietzschean tenor of his conclusions about the Modern, etc. Even so, his sustained engagement with **Hegel**, though mediated through **Kojève**, still strikes me as being philosophically more arresting; and, in the political domain, he is quite evidently not much worse than the postmodern kinds of American pluralism and pragmatism as represented, for example, by Richard **Rorty**.¹⁹ Meanwhile, there is something very honest and almost charming about Fukuyama's somewhat belated perception that what he took to be the outbreak of Liberty has produced a human condition fundamentally dehumanized and sordid, so that *his* declaration of the End of History, poised as it is against the narrative of the Fall of Man, appears to be far more ambivalent, bordering almost on the tragic, as compared to the celebratory tones in which Lyotard and his postcolonialist followers speak of the end of all metanarratives. But then, keeping with the temper of the times, Fukuyama's eclecticism quite matches that of the postmoderns; and, just as the typical postcolonial theorist routinely invokes contrary systems of thought to uphold a singular position in something of a philosophical pastiche, Fukuyama too finds it equally plausible to invoke, within a single line of argument, **Hegel** and Nietzsche together, not only in their generality but with reference precisely to those ideas about History and Reason in which the two are the most opposed.

This extended comment on Fukuyama has seemed necessary because the fact of so substantial a convergence between postmodernity, which purports to be a discourse of the Left, and Fukuyama, who confidently

announces himself as a partisan of neo-liberal conservatism, should give us, I believe, some pause. Lyotard's posthistorical euphoria and Fukuyama's posthistorical melancholy are rooted in the shared conviction that the great projects for emancipatory historical change that have punctuated this century have ended in failure. When they speak of this failure, both have in mind, I think, the same three markers – anti-imperialist nationalism; **leftwing** social democracy; and communism – which Lyotard dismisses contemptuously as mere metanarratives of Reason and Progress, and Fukuyama regards as threats to Occidental civilization itself; what they do share is a sense of immense relief at the defeat. That the defeat of these three projects for positive historical change, these three ways of conceiving the universality of our common needs, has been decisive is, I think, beyond doubt. And, a charitable way of thinking about postmodernism and postcolonialism may well be that the prefix 'post' in these terms not only partakes of a generalised '**post-**' condition but contains within it a sense of that ending, even if that sense of endings produces in most of them not a sense of loss but a feeling of euphoria.

What is striking about this euphoria, however, is that while the collapse of those three projects of universal emancipation is celebrated so very inordinately, postmodernity and its postcolonial offshoots hardly ever name that which has triumphed in consequence of those defeats. Even if we grant the word 'metanarrative', it is, I believe, necessary to state that only the metanarratives of Emancipation have met with defeat; the most meta- of all metanarratives of the past three centuries, the creeping annexation of the globe for the dominance of capital over labouring humanity, has met, during these same decades, with stunning success, in a very specific form, namely the form of neo-liberal conservatism. During precisely the period when the great struggles for redistribution of incomes downwards were defeated, the offensives for redistribution of incomes upwards did succeed – and succeeded spectacularly. The defeat of the so-called 'Metanarratives of Emancipation' produces among the postmoderns not mere incredulity towards them, as Lyotard puts it, but also great pleasure; indeed, what was lived as loss, tragedy and disorientation in the aesthetics of Modernity, is lived in the postmodern philosophy and aesthetics as pure pleasure, and perhaps even as a postmodern equivalent of the Kantian Sublime. By contrast, the triumph of the Metanarrative of Universal Subjugation produces in most of the postists no great disturbance. Fukuyama is superior on all counts: he *names* the victor, namely liberal capitalism; he *identifies* openly with that victory, camouflaging nothing; and yet, unlike the postists, he experiences this victory of his own side as if a handful of ashes had been thrust into his mouth. You can't really expect much more from a conservative, when so many radicals grant you so very little.

AIJAZ AHMAD

My main reason for so extended a comment on the basic formation of this 'Post Condition' can now be stated more directly: if philosophical postmodernity is by now at least one of the dominant if not the dominant form of Euro-American social and political thought, what is now called 'postcolonial theory' is itself one among many of the contemporary postmodern discursive forms – or, more accurately, a self-reflexive cultural style within philosophical postmodernity. Chronologically, of course, the term 'postcolonial' first arose much earlier, during the 1970s, in a wide-ranging political discussion, in which a number of people, from **Hamza Alavi** to John Saul, had participated, and to which I had myself contributed, in the 1980s, something of a footnote. Details of that discussion need not detain us at present. However, I did recapitulate the main contentions in a recent ~~essay~~²⁰, mainly to show how very different and how much more specific the meaning of this term had been before it was appropriated for literary and cultural studies and was then put to work as a cross-disciplinary **postmodern** hermeneutic. Participants in that debate had been concerned with, first, a specific temporal moment, namely the wave of decolonisations in the aftermath of the Second World War; second, a specific structure of power, namely the type of state that arose in the newly independent countries; and, third, the theoretical problem of **re-conceptualising** the Marxist theory of the capitalist state with reference not to the state of advanced capital but to the state that arose out of the histories of colonial capital, in the moment of decolonisation. The whole debate was centred, in other words, on a very specific problem of political theory, pertaining to a particular historical conjuncture.

The striking feature of the culturalist theory of postcoloniality as it arose more recently, after the Euro-American academy had been worked over by French Poststructuralism, is that it had none of the virtues of that debate but all its defects – and many more besides. The **colonial/postcolonial** binary is now used as a foundational category not just for certain states in particular countries but for trans-continental, **trans-historical** making of the world in general. The range of citations may be omitted for now. Suffice it to say simply that as one reads through a variety of postcolonial critics – Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, Vera Kutzinski, Sara **Suleri** Goodyear, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Ann **McClintock**, Gayatri Spivak, and others – the term gets applied to virtually the whole globe, including, notably, the USA, Australia, New **Zealand**, South Pacific Islands, the states arising out of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, not to speak of the whole of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In some usages, the term applies to the historical period inaugurated, more or less, in 1492; in more outlandish writings, it applies to much older formations, such as the Incas and the China of Imperial dynasties. A number of the critics claim that any resistance to colonialism is always,

already postcolonial, so that in these usages postcoloniality envelopes colonialism itself as well as all that comes after it, becoming something of a remorseless universality in which certainly the whole of the modern experience, sometimes the pre- and postmodern experiences as well, appear as some many variants of this universality.

When applied to the world, in other words, this remarkably elastic 'postcoloniality' seems to encompass virtually everything. When applied as a designation for theories and critics, however, the same term 'postcolonial' contracts very sharply, and refers to not all theoretical work done today, nor to all critics writing in these postcolonial times, but to a very small number of critics with recognisably shared points of theoretical departure. We thus have a telling discrepancy: immense globalisation of the object of analysis on the one hand, and, on the other, the constitution of a very small academic elite for deciphering that globalised object. This discrepancy leads then to a situation in which at the end of so huge a dispersal, 'postcolonialism' becomes, at least in one version, simply a hermeneutic of reading, a cultural style. As Helen Tiffin would have it:

postcolonialism too might be characterized as having two archives. The first archive here constructs it as writing (more usually than architecture or painting) grounded in those societies whose subjectivity has been constituted in part by the subordinating power of European colonialism – that is, as writing from countries or regions which were formerly colonies of Europe. The second archive of postcolonialism is intimately related to the first, though not co-extensive with it. Here the postcolonial is conceived of as a set of discursive practices, prominent among which is resistance to colonialism . . .

Very often it is not something intrinsic to a work of fiction which places it as postmodern or postcolonial, but the way in which the text is discussed."

The way the two terms 'postmodern' and 'postcolonial' get conflated here as virtual synonyms, both constituted as such not by some quality intrinsic to the text but simply by the mode of discussion, is indicative of a much broader postcolonialist procedure. Then, there is the characteristic literary critical habit of construing postcolonialism itself as an 'archive' as well as the typical gesture of treating resistance to colonialism as a 'discursive practice' which is already 'postcolonial.' Gareth Griffith says something similar, in a similarly expansive tone:

postcoloniality of a text depends not on any simple qualification of theme or subject matter, but on the degree to which it displays postcolonial discursive features. What these features may be is again open to interpretation as are those of any discourse which seeks to constitute itself as discrete, but I might suggest that such concerns as linguistic displacement, physical exile, cross-culturality and authenticity or inauthenticity of experience are among the features which one might identify as characteristically postcolonial.²²

Now, it is not at all clear to me why the phenomenon of physical exile or the philosophical issue of authentic experience, which far exceed the historical experience of colonialism, should be regarded as 'characteristi-

cally postcolonial.' What is nevertheless striking about these later formulations by both Tiffin and Griffiths, who had earlier co-authored with **Ashcroft** the founding text of Australian **postcoloniality**,²³ is that both regard postcolonialism as a kind of textual hermeneutic. The entire field of the application of this hermeneutic, regardless of subject matter, becomes postcolonial by virtue of its being read in a certain way; and both Tiffin and Griffiths regard postcolonialism itself as a specific discourse which nevertheless has neither a specific object nor definable set of non-discursive features; it is, at any given point, what it says it is.

That postcolonial theory is a postmodern hermeneutic Homi Bhabha has stated with uncharacteristic clarity: 'I have chosen to give poststructuralism a specifically postcolonial provenance.'²⁴ We may recall also that the three most influential postcolonial critics – Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha – derive their respective inspirations, if not wholesale methodologies, from three quite distinct but more or less equally influential tendencies in French poststructuralism: Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Derridean deconstruction, and **Lacanian** psychoanalysis. Said of course has become far more equivocal about Foucauldian invocations since the writing of *Orientalism*; even so, the mark of their mutual difference, not in just methodological preference but even in the texture of their respective prose styles, is precisely that each subscribes to a different tendency in the arrangements of the postmodern hermeneutic hagiography.

What, then, is postcolonial theory? **As** a starting-point I would suggest that to the extent that it is a theory at all, postcolonial theory is marked not by the specificity of its object, since its object is infinitely dispersed and indeterminable, but by its hermeneutic procedure, above all as style. With regard to literary postcoloniality, then, we could say that the emergence of postcolonial theory since the late 1980s signifies the dissolution of certain limited pedagogical objects – such as Third World Literature, Colonial Discourse, New Literatures in English, even Comparative Literature in the strict sense – and their reconstitution under the signs of cultural and philosophical postmodernities. This involves extending the meaning of 'postcolonialism' to include any and all structures of power and domination, while, in another direction, also dissolving the difference between procedures of literary study and methodologies of historical study, so that Subaltern Studies, whose founder, Ranajit Guha, was quite aptly described by Edward Said as a **poststructuralist**,²⁵ itself gets renamed as, 'Postcolonial Criticism' by one of the younger members of the Group, Gyan Prakash, who directly invokes the authority of Lyotard, Derrida and Spivak as he, and others, move to assimilate Subalternism to Postmodernism and Postcoloniality. This postcolonialist dissolution of the category difference between History and Literature, although in this case philosophically much more naive, reminds one nevertheless of Habermas's

telling criticism of **Derrida's** similar dissolution of the category difference between Literature and Philosophy, which has the effect of expanding the sovereignty of rhetoric over the realm of the logical and greatly privileging the poetic function of language over other cognitive functions.

I just referred to the dissolution of such things as Third World Literature or Colonial Discourse Analysis, and their re-constitution under the sign of postcoloniality. How recent this process is can be gauged from the fact that, while Robert Young's very up-to-the-minute book of 1990 has separate chapters on Said, Spivak and Bhabha, it has no index entry for words like 'postcolonialism', 'postcolonial' etc, even though it does have twelve entries for the term 'third world' and twenty-two for the term 'colonial discourse'.²⁵ Within a couple of years, however, **Arif Dirlik** was noting in *Critical Inquiry* that '*Postcolonial* has been entering the lexicon of academic programs in recent years, and over the last two years there have been a number of conferences and symposia inspired by related vocabulary.' He also notes, again quite correctly, that intellectuals hailing from one country, namely India, 'have played a conspicuously prominent role' in the 'formulation and dissemination' of this vocabulary, pointing out that

Postcolonial is the most recent entrant to achieve prominent visibility in the ranks of those 'post' marked words ... claim[ing] as its special provenance the terrain that in an earlier day used to go by the name of the Third World. It is intended, therefore, to achieve an authentic globalisation of cultural discourses by the extension globally of the intellectual concerns and orientations originating at the central sites of Euro-American cultural criticism ... The goal, indeed, is no less than to abolish all distinctions between center and periphery as well as all other 'binarisms' that are allegedly a legacy of colonial(ist) ways of thinking and to reveal societies globally in their complex heterogeneity and contingency."

This formulation of Dirlik reinforces at least three points I have emphasized. That 'postcoloniality' is only the latest of the concepts arising within 'The Post Condition'. That the object is not to produce fresh knowledges about what was until recently called the Third World but to re-structure existing bodies of knowledge into the poststructuralist paradigms and to occupy sites of cultural production outside the Euro-American zones by globalizing concerns and orientations originating at the central sites of Euro-American cultural production. And, that the objective in much of this criticism, notably that of Homi Bhabha, is to dissolve all enduring questions of imperialism and anti-imperialism into an infinite play of heterogeneity and contingency.

This latest turn in cultural criticism is something of a point of culmination in a much longer process, starting in the mid-1970s, which I examined at very great length in my book, *In Theory*. I shall not try to recapitulate that argument here. Suffice it to say merely that my own book of course came much later, but a sense of menace – the sense that postmodernist appropriation of non-European histories and texts would be the

inevitable result of postmodernist dominance within the Euro-American academe – had been there much earlier, virtually inscribed in the very making of that dominance, and one of the earliest to read the signs was the Indian feminist scholar, Kumkum Sangari, in her essay 'Politics of the Possible,' published in 1987 but first drafted, judging from the footnotes, three years **earlier**.²⁸ Toward the end of that essay, she speaks first of what she calls

the academised procedures of a peculiarly Western, historically singular, postmodern epistemology that universalizes the self-conscious dissolution of the bourgeois subject, with its now famous characteristic stance of self-irony, **across** both space and time.

She then goes on:

postmodernism does have a tendency to universalize its epistemological preoccupations – a tendency that appears even in the work of critics of radical political persuasion. On the one hand, the world contracts into the West; a Eurocentric perspective (for example, the post-Stalinist, anti-teleological, anti-master narrative dismay of Euro-American Marxism) is brought to bear upon 'Third World' cultural products; a 'specialized' scepticism is **carried** everywhere as cultural paraphernalia and epistemological apparatus, as a way of seeing; and the postmodern problematic becomes the frame through which the cultural products of the rest of the world are seen. On the other hand, the West expands into the World; late capitalism muffles the globe and homogenizes (or threatens to homogenize) all cultural production – this, for some reason, is one 'master narrative' that is seldom dismantled as it needs to be if the differential economic, class, and cultural formation of 'Third World' countries is to be taken into account. The writing that emerges from this position, however critical it may be of colonial discourses, gloomily disempowers the 'nation' as an enabling idea and relocates the impulses of change as everywhere and nowhere...

Further, the crisis of legitimation (of meaning and knowledge systems) becomes a strangely vigorous 'master narrative' in its own right, since it sets out to rework or 'process' the knowledge systems of the world in its own image; the postmodern 'crisis' becomes authoritative because... it is deeply implicated in the structure of institutions. Indeed, it threatens to become just as imperious as bourgeois humanism, which was an ideological maneuver based on a series of affirmations, whereas postmodernism appears to be a maneuver based on a series of negations and self-negations through which the West reconstructs its identity ... Significantly, the disavowal of the objective and instrumental modalities of the social sciences occurs in the academies at a time when usable knowledge is gathered with growing certainty and control by Euro-America through advanced technologies of information retrieval from the rest of the world.

I have quoted at some length because a number of quite powerful ideas are summarised here, even though some phraseology (e.g., 'the West reconstructs its identity') indicates the Saidian moment of their composition. Kumkum Sangari was in any case possibly the first, certainly one of the first, to see how a late capitalist hermeneutic, developed in the metropolitan *zones*, would *necessarily* claim to be a *universal* hermeneutic, treating the whole world as its raw material. This goes, I think, to the very heart of the point I made earlier about the aggrandizements of postcolonial theory as it takes more and more historical **epochs**, more and more countries and **conti-**

nents, under its provenance, while it restricts the possibility of producing a knowledge of this all-encompassing terrain to a prior acceptance of postmodernist hermeneutic.

The work of Homi Bhabha is a particularly telling example of the way this kind of hermeneutic tends to appropriate the whole world as its raw material and yet effaces the issue of historically sedimented differences. Indeed, the very structure of historical time is effaced in the empty play of infinite heterogeneities on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the relentless impulse to present historical conflicts in the terms of a psychodrama. In the process, a series of slippages take place. The categories of Freudian psychoanalysis which **Lacan** reworked on the linguistic model were in any case intended to grapple with typologies of psychic disorder on the individual and familial plane; it is doubtful that they can be so easily transported to the plane of history without concepts becoming mere metaphors. This problem Bhabha evaporates by offering a large number of generalizations about two opposing singularities, virtually manichean in their repetition as abstractions in conflict: the coloniser and the colonised, each of which appears remarkably free of class, gender, historical time, geographical location, indeed any historicisation or individuation whatever. Both of these abstract universals appear as bearers of identifiable psychic pressures and needs which remain remarkably the same, everywhere. The colonizer, for example, is said to always be unnerved by any of the colonised who has in any degree succeeded in adopting the colonizer's culture. Translated into concrete language, it would mean that colonizers were not afraid of mass movements resting on the social basis of a populace very unlike themselves but by the upper class, well educated intellectual elite that had imbibed European culture.

What historical evidence is there to show any of that? Bhabha is sublimely indifferent to such questions of factity and historical proof presumably because history in that mode is an invention of linear time invented by rationalism, but more immediately because one allegedly *knows* from psychoanalysis that the Self is not nearly as unnerved by absolute Otherness as from that Otherness that has too much of oneself in it. What is truly unnerving, in other words, is seeing oneself in mimicry and caricature. That the hybridized colonial intellectual mimics the coloniser and thereby produces in the coloniser a sense of paranoia is, according to Bhabha, the central contradiction in the colonial encounter, which he construes to be basically discursive and psychic in character. The mimicry that Naipaul represents as a sign of a sense of inferiority on the part of the colonised, becomes, in Bhabha's words, 'signs of spectacular resistance.' The possibility that revolutionary anti-colonialism might have unnerved the colonial power somewhat more than the colonial gentlemen who had learned to mimic the Europeans, Bhabha shrugs off with

remarkable nonchalance: 'I do not consider the practices and discourses of revolutionary struggle as the other side of "colonial discourse."' ²⁹

Alongside this particular notion of 'mimicry' as 'spectacular resistance', the other idea that is central to Bhabha's discourse on postcoloniality is that of hybridity, which presents itself as a critique of essentialism, partakes of a carnivalesque collapse and play of identities, and comes under a great many names. In essence, though, it takes two forms: cultural hybridity, and what one might call philosophical and even political hybridity. The basic idea that informs the notion of cultural hybridity is in itself simple enough, namely that the traffic among modern cultures is now so brisk that one can hardly speak of discrete national cultures that are not fundamentally transformed by that traffic. In its generality this idea can only be treated as a truism, since a generalisation of that order cannot in any specific sense be wrong. The steps that follow this truism are more problematic, however. At two ends of this same argument, this condition of cultural hybridity is said to be (a) specific to the migrant, more pointedly the migrant intellectual, living and working in the Western metropolis; and, at the same time (b) a generalised condition of postmodernity into which all contemporary cultures are now irretrievably ushered. The figure of the migrant, especially the migrant (postcolonial) intellectual residing in the metropolis, comes to signify a universal condition of hybridity and is said to be the Subject of a Truth that individuals living within their national cultures do not possess. Edward Said's term for such Truth-Subjects of postcoloniality is 'cultural amphibians'; Salman Rushdie's treatment of migrancy ('floating upward from history, from memory, from time', as he characterizes it) is likewise invested in this idea of the migrant having a superior understanding of both cultures than what more sedentary individuals might understand of their own cultures.³⁰ By the time we get to Bhabha the-celebration of cultural hybridity, as it is available to the migrant intellectual in the metropolis, is accented even further:

America leads to Africa; the nations of Europe and Asia meet in Australia; the margins of the nation displace the centre ... The great Whitmanesque sensorium of America is exchanged for a Warhol blowup, a Kruger installation, or Mapplethorpe's naked bodies."

In Bhabha's writing the postcolonial who has access to such monumental and global pleasures seems to have a taken-for-grantedness of a male, bourgeois onlooker, not only the lord of all he surveys but also enraptured by his own lordliness. Telling us that 'the truest eye may now belong to the migrant's double vision',³¹ we are given also the ideological location from which this 'truest eye' operates: 'I want to take my stand on the shifting margins of cultural displacement – that confounds any profound or 'authentic' sense of a 'national' culture or 'organic' intellectual...'³³ Having thus dispensed with Antonio Gramsci – and more generally with

the idea that a sense of place, of belonging, of some stable commitment to one's class or gender or nation may be useful for defining one's politics – Bhabha then spells out his own sense of politics:

The language of critique is effective not because it keeps for ever separate the terms of the master and the slave, the mercantilist and the Marxist, but the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of 'translation': a place of hybridity ... This is a sign that history is *happening*, in the pages of theory...³⁴

Cultural hybridity ('truest eye') of the migrant intellectual, which is posited as the negation of the 'organic intellectual' as Gramsci conceived of it, is thus conjoined with a philosophical hybridity (Bhabha's own 'language of critique') which likewise confounds the distinction between 'the mercantilist and the Marxist' so that 'history' does indeed become a mere 'happening' – 'in the pages of theory' for the most part. These hybridities, cultural and philosophical, lead then to a certain conception of politics which Bhabha outlines in his essay 'The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency' where we are again told that 'The individuation of the agent occurs in a moment of **displacement**'³⁵ because 'contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural **displacement**.'"³⁶ This pairing of hybridity and agential displacement then calls forth a politics of 'contingency' while contingency is defined 'as the defining term of counter-hegemonic strategies'. This elaboration of hybrid, displaced, contingent forms of politics is accomplished with the aid of a great many writers including **Ranajit Guha** ('Guha's elaborations of rebel consciousness as contradiction are strongly suggestive of agency as the activity of the **contingent**')³⁷ and Veena Das. The latter reference should detain us somewhat, since it comes with a direct quotation from Das, greatly approved by Bhabha, which denies that there may be such a thing as an enduring caste consciousness to which one might refer in order to understand any particular caste conflict, of the kind that is so common in present-day India. I therefore quote both Bhabha and Das as she herself is quoted by Bhabha:

In her excellent essay 'Subaltern as perspective' Das demands a historiography of the subaltern that displaces the paradigm of social action as defined by rational action. She seeks a ~~form~~ of discourse where affective and iterative writing develops its own language... This is the historical movement of **hybridity** as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time lag of **sign/symbol**, which is a space in-between the rules of engagement. It is this theoretical form of political agency I've tried to develop that Das beautifully fleshes out in a historical argument: 'It is the nature of the conflict in which a caste or tribe is locked which may provide the characteristics of the historical moment; to assume that we may know a priori the mentalities of castes and communities is to take an essentialist perspective which the evidence produced in the very volumes of *Subaltern Studies* would not support.'"

Setting aside the matter of the 'a priori' (no one has argued in favour of 'a priori' knowledges), the striking feature of Das' perspective is its

advocacy that when it comes to caste conflicts each historical moment must be treated as *sui generis* and as carrying within itself its own explanation – unless one is willing to be accused of that dirty thing, 'essentialism'. That any understanding of a particular conflict must *include* an understanding of its particularity is so obvious as to be not worth repeating. What Das is advocating here is not just that obvious point but that the understanding of each conflict be *confined* to the characteristics of that conflict. What she denies radically is that caste mentalities may indeed have historical depth and enduring features *prior* to their eruption in the form of a particular conflict. What is denied, in other words, is that caste is a structural and not merely a contingent feature in the distribution of powers and privileges in Indian society, and that members of particular castes are actual bearers of those earlier histories of power and dispossession, so that the conflicts in which castes get 'locked' (to use Das's own telling word) are inseparable from those histories, no matter how much a particular expression of that enduring conflict may be studied in its uniqueness.

In terms of his own logic, though, Bhabha is right. Das's denial that there might be such a thing as a caste mentality and her assertion that all historical moments are *sui generis* is entirely consistent with Bhabha's own assertion that explanations for human action must be non-rational and that historical agents are constituted in displacement. Such premises preclude, I would argue, the very bases of political action. For, the idea of a collective human agent (e.g., organised groups of the exploited castes fighting for their rights against upper caste privilege) presumes both what **Habermas** calls communicative rationality as well as the possibility of rational action as such; it presumes, in other words, that agencies are constituted not in flux and displacement but in given historical locations.

However it may look from North America, and whatever 'the truest eye' of the migrant may choose to see, the fact of the matter is that History does not consist of perpetual migration, so that the universality of 'displacement' that Bhabha claims both as the general human condition and the desirable philosophical position is tenable neither as description of the world nor as generalised political possibility. He may wish to erase the distinction between commerce and revolution, between 'the mercantilist and the Marxist', and he is welcome to his preferences; but that hardly amounts to a 'theory' of something called postcoloniality. Most individuals are really not free to fashion themselves anew with each passing day, nor do communities arise out of and fade into the thin air of the infinitely contingent. Among the migrants themselves, only the privileged can live a life of constant mobility and surplus pleasure, between **Whitman** and Warhol as it were. Most migrants tend to be poor and experience displacement not as cultural plenitude but as torment; what they seek is not

displacement but, precisely, a place from where they may begin anew, with some sense of a stable future.

This discussion of Bhabha came up in the context of my suggestion that the core of postcolonial theory, as it is enunciated by its principal architects, Bhabha and Spivak in particular, is a major instrument for establishing the hermeneutic authority of the postmodern over cultural materials retrieved from outside the advanced capitalist countries. The realignment of the **subalternist** paradigm, in the field of historical research, with the core of postcolonial theory, and the immense approval that the paradigm now receives in the United States, is a significant element in this particular globalisation of the postmodern. This I shall now want to illustrate with some observations about Gayatri Spivak's famous – possibly most famous – essay, 'Can the Subaltern **Speak?**'¹² It is a very long essay, and summarizing it is in any case not my intention. I simply want to trace a certain logic within **Spivak's** broader purpose.

Spivak begins with a long and spirited criticism of Foucault and Deleuze on the ground that their delineations of the structures of Power are fatally flawed because they treat Europe as a self-enclosed and **self-generating** entity, by neglecting the central role of imperialism in the very making of Europe, hence of the very structures of Power which are the objects of analyses for such as Foucault and Deleuze. The point is unexceptionable and Spivak argues it with much verve, though in justice it must be said that Said had made precisely that point about Europe a decade earlier, at great length, in *Orientalism*; and that by the time Spivak published her essay in 1988, Said had also criticized Foucault for neglecting the issue both of European imperialism and of the resistances to imperialist power outside Europe. Spivak was right but she was basically extending a well-known argument. The criticism of Foucault and Deleuze was then followed, in another section of the essay, by a considerable discussion of widow immolation, a discussion inspired by **Lata Mani's** earlier research on what she has called the Colonial Discourse on *Sati*.¹³ There are of course several other digressions, on **Marx**, Freud, First and Third World feminisms, essentialism, Ranajit Guha and so on. It is only after reading over two-thirds of the essay that we begin to sense the real object of the writing – which is as follows.

It may be difficult now to recall that in the **mid-80s**, when this essay was written, the chief authority of French poststructuralism in the Anglophone countries was not Derrida but Foucault, and claims were often made about how much Foucault helped us understand history and politics. It appears from Spivak's quotations that this praise of Foucault was frequently coupled with some unfavourable reference to Derrida. She quotes Eagleton, Said and Perry Anderson as emphasizing Derrida's lack of engagement with politics. It now transpires that the whole object of

Spivak's own essay is to show that even though Foucault does talk about politics frequently he nevertheless presents arguments that are constitutively flawed, and that although Derrida is usually unconcerned with history or politics his deconstruction nevertheless provides a far superior way of reading into historical and political archives. The discussion of the British colonial ban on widow immolation in the early 19th century is organised, thus, to demonstrate the superiority of the Derridean hermeneutic over the Foucauldian.

The clinching argument comes in the last two pages of the essay, however, where Spivak summarises what little she knows about the suicide of an unmarried Bengali woman during the 1920s, about whom she has heard through, as she puts it, 'family connections.' The evidence is, in other words, non-archival and so little is known of the event that the motive behind the suicide must remain indeterminable; we only know that when she died she was menstruating, which shows that it was not as if she had had illicit sex and killed herself because of having become pregnant. This dead woman, whom Spivak calls 'the suicide text', becomes for her, in the first instance, the final proof of Derrida's insistence on the limits of textuality, on the undecidability of meaning, on how much readers need to be ironically aware of their own role in assignment of final meanings to any text at all. In the second instance, the woman, or rather 'the suicide text,' illustrates for Spivak how the real subaltern can never speak, so that any claims about subaltern consciousness are always a rationalization exceeding what can be known. In the third instance, however, and even though we have no access to the consciousness of this 'suicide text,' the fact that she was menstruating at the time of her suicide shows that she had with her own body inscribed herself as the very opposite of the immolated wife in rituals of *sati*, since menstruating wives are ritually forbidden from immolating themselves. We are then told in a more or less triumphal tone at the end of the essay that this acute understanding of the 'suicide-text' Derridean deconstruction makes possible in a way that Foucauldian discourse theory cannot.

Now, what I find most striking about this essay is the two-way operation of this postcolonialist hermeneutic: on the *one* hand, the deaths of unknown Bengali women who were unable to leave behind them any evidence about their own actions can nevertheless be staged in the language of high theory as evidence to settle a dispute which is internal to high theory, the dispute about the relative merits of Derrida and Foucault; on the *other* hand, the superiority of deconstruction can be established over the 'suicide text' by reading it both as absolute silence and as insurgent inscription. Equally striking, of course, is the fundamental thesis of the essay, namely that the true subaltern is the one who cannot speak for herself and whose history therefore cannot be written. This conclusion

about the **generalised** condition of subalternity is certainly excessive in relation to the evidence produced in the essay, in the sense that most people would not want to draw so extreme a conclusion on the basis of some stray remarks about widow immolation and a brief **resumé** of a particular suicide. But the issue of the silence of the subaltern and the consequent impossibility of a history of the subaltern gets invoked among the **subalternists** frequently. So, it might be useful to ask who the subaltern is and how Spivak defines it. Indeed, since the term 'subaltern' comes into contemporary parlance from a Gramscian variety of Marxism and since Spivak identifies herself as a Derridean Marxist feminist, we may want to approach her definition of subalternity through a brief reference to her treatment of a theme familiar in Marxism.

'Imperialism,' Spivak says, 'establishes the universality of the mode of production **narrative**.'¹⁴ Here we encounter, of course, the astonishing literary-critical habit of seeing all history as a contest between different kinds of narrative, so that imperialism itself gets described not in relation to the universalisation of the capitalist mode as such but in terms of the **narrative** of this mode. Implicit in the formulation, however, is the idea that to speak in terms of modes of production is to speak from within terms set by imperialism and what it considers normative. In the next step, then, Spivak would continue to insist on calling herself an 'old-fashioned Marxist' while also dismissing materialist and rationalist accounts of history, in the most contemptuous terms, as 'modes of production narratives'. This habit would also then become a regular feature of the 'subaltern perspective' as Spivak's gesture gets repeated in the writings of Gyan Parkash, Dipesh Chakrabarty and others.

This distancing from the so-called 'modes of production narrative' then means that even when capitalism or imperialism are recognised in the form of an international division of labour, any analysis of this division passes 'more or less casually over the fully differentiated classes of workers and peasants, and identifies as the truly subaltern only those whom Spivak calls 'the paradigmatic victims of that division, the women of the urban **sub-proletariat** and of unorganised peasant labour.'" It is worth saying, I think, that this resembles no variety of Marxism that one has known, Spivak's claims notwithstanding. For, there is surely no gainsaying the fact that such women of the sub-proletariat and the unorganised peasantry indeed bear much of the burden of the immiseration caused by capitalism and imperialism, but one would want to argue that 'the paradigmatic victims' are far more numerous and would also include, at least, the households of the proletariat and the organised peasantry. Aside from this definitional problem, at least three other moves that Spivak makes are equally significant. First, having defined essential subalternity in this way, she answers her own famous question – Can the Subaltern Speak? – with the proposition

that there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak." What it means of course is that women among the urban sub-proletariat and the **unorganised** peasantry do not assemble their own representations in the official archives and have no control over how they appear in such archives, if they do at all. It is in this sense that the sati, the immolated woman, becomes the emblematic figure of subaltern silence and of a self-destruction mandated by patriarchy and imperialism alike. As Spivak puts it: 'The case of suttee[suti] as **exemplum** of the woman-in-imperialism would . . . mark the place of 'disappearance' with something other than silence and non-existence, a violent aporia between subject and object status.'"

Now, it is not at all clear to me why the self-immolating woman needs to be regarded as the 'exemplum of the woman-in-imperialism' today any more than such self-immolating women should have been treated in the past by a great many colonialists – and not only colonialists – as representing the very essence of Indian womanhood. Why should the proletarianization of large numbers of poorer women, or the all-India productions of the *bhadramahila*, or the middle class nationalist woman, not be treated as perhaps being at least equally typical of what Spivak calls 'woman-in-imperialism?' Even so, the argument that the essence of female subalternity is that she cannot speak is itself very striking since in this formulation of the situation of the subaltern woman, the question of her subjectivity or her ability to determine her own history hinges crucially not on her ability to resist, or on her ability to make common cause with others in her situation and thus appear in history as collective subject, but on her representation, the terms of her appearance in archives, her inability to communicate authoritatively, on one-to-one basis with the research scholar, perhaps in the confines of a library. This is problematic enough. But, then, the implication is that anyone who can represent herself, anyone who can speak, individually or collectively, is by definition not a subaltern – is, within the binary schema of **subalternist** historiography, inevitably a part of the elite, or, if not already a part of the elite, on her way to getting there." This is of course remarkably similar to the circular logic we find in Foucault, where there is nothing outside Power because whatever assembles a resistance to it is already constituting *itself as* a form of Power. But it also leaves the whole question of subaltern history very much in the lurch. If the hallmark of the true, the paradigmatic subaltern is that she cannot speak – that she must always remain an unspoken trace that simply cannot be retrieved in a counter-history – and if it is also true that to speak about her or on her behalf when she cannot speak for herself amounts to practising an 'epistemic violence', then how does one write the history of this permanently disappeared?

Spivak seems to offer four answers that run concurrently. First, there seems to be a rejection of narrative history in general, often expressed in

the form of much contempt for what gets called empirical and positivist history, even though it remains unclear as to how one could write history without empirical verification; nor is it at all clear just how much of what we know as history is being rejected as 'positivist'; at times, certainly, all that is *not* deconstructionist seems to be categorised as positivist or some such. Second, in the same vein of emphasizing the impossibility of writing the history of the *real* subalterns, Spivak criticises those earlier projects of subalternism, including implicitly such writings of Ranajit Guha as his works on peasant insurgency", which sought to recapture or document patterns of subaltern consciousness even in their non-rationalist structures. She criticises such projects on the grounds, precisely, that any claim to have access to subaltern consciousness and to identify its structures is *prima facie* a rationalist claim that is inherently hegemonizing and imperialist. As she puts it, 'the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativised into logic,'⁴⁰ and 'there is no doubt that poststructuralism can really radicalize the old Marxist fetishisation of consciousness.' That scornful phrase, 'old Marxist fetishisation,' on the part of someone who often calls herself an 'old-fashioned Marxist' and whom Robert Young unjustly rebukes for taking too much from 'classical Marxism,' of course takes us back to the *Derridean* claim that deconstruction is a 'radicalisation' of Marxism and Bourdieu's retort to this Heideggerian 'second-degree strategy.'

Be that as it may. In terms of method, the previous formulation is of course the more arresting, so let me repeat it: 'the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativised into logic.' The programmatic move of theoretical anti-rationalism is stated here in methodic terms: while the statement appears to be merely anti-Hegelian, what it in effect rejects, in relation to subalternity, is the very possibility of narrative history, with its reliance on some sense of sequence and structure, some sense of cause and effect, some belief that the task of the historian is not simply to presume or speculate but to actually find and document the patterns of existing consciousness among the victims as they actually were, and a dogged belief, also, that no complete narrative shall ever be possible but the archive that the dominant social classes and groups in society have assembled for their own reasons *can* be prised open to assemble a *counter-history*, 'people's history', a 'history from below'. E. P. Thompson's great historical narratives on the Making of the English Working Class, on patterns of 18th Century English Culture, on the social consequence of industrial clock time for those who were subjected to it, come readily to mind in this context. I don't think it would serve Professor Spivak's purposes to dissociate herself from that tradition altogether, but the actual effect of her deconstructionist intervention in matters of writing the history of the wretched of this earth is to make radically impossible the writing of

that kind of social history, whether with reference to the social classes of modern capitalism or in the field of literary analysis.

Such, then, are the burdens of the Post Condition, even for those who may recoil at the Fukuyamaist variant.

NOTES

1. This is the text of a lecture delivered at York University, Toronto, on 27 November 1996. Footnotes and some clarifications have been added for publication.
2. Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* (London, 1992) [German original, 1989].
3. Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, Summer 1989; and F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, 1992). Fukuyama's version is much tamer than Kojbve's lectures of the 1930s on **Hegel's Phenomenology**, from which he draws the interpretation of the Master-Slave Dialectic. By the 1950s, Kojbve too had come to view the postwar United States as the **EndState** of equality and liberty, as we shall see.
4. Niethammer is particularly good on this second category of the posthistorical intellectuals. Heidegger hardly ever uses the term but his enthusiastic participation in the Nazi project and subsequent withdrawal into what I have here called 'clericism of Being' is illustrative of the sociological shift from one category to the second. On ambiguities of this episode, Habermas's criticism has never been properly answered, even though the literature on the subject is vast. See his chapter on Heidegger in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., translation copyright 1987) and, especially, his later essay 'Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective', in Jurgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989). See also Pierre Bourdieu's *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (London, 1991; French original 1988) which deserves to be better known. Both authors are notable for engaging the question of the relationship between Heidegger's thought and his Nazi affiliation in a manner that neither denies nor absolutizes the autonomy of philosophical thought. It needs also to be said that there is hardly anything in Heidegger's later and much overrated writings on the question of technology which is not already prefigured in **Spengler's Man and Technics**, first published in 1931, roughly at the time when Heidegger was strengthening his association with such other conservative thinkers of fascist political orientation as Carl Schmitt and the Junger brothers.
5. See Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, pp. viii, 49, 96.
6. Allan Bloom, Fukuyama's teacher, was an intimate of Leo Strauss and the English editor of Kojbve's work on **Hegel**. See, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nicholls Jr. (ed.), Allan Bloom, Ithaca, N.Y. 1969. Strauss, in turn, had been a friend of Kojbve's since the 1930s (the two sharing an early admiration for Heidegger) as well as of Carl Schmitt, legal theorist and one-time fascist. When Strauss published his famous work on **Tyranny**, Kojève responded, on his friend's invitation, with his essay, 'Tyranny and Wisdom' to which too Strauss then replied. For relevant texts of this interlocution, see the edition of *On Tyranny* prepared by Victor Gourevitch and Michael Roth (New York, 1991). Kojbve declares in that essay that 'of all possible statesmen, it is the tyrant who is incontestably the most apt to receive and apply the advice of the philosopher.' The observation unwittingly offers a curious commentary on the fact that Kojbve spent roughly the last two decades of his life as an official of the French government and that Fukuyama, the self-declared disciple of Kojbve, works for the Rand Corporation and the U.S. State Department.
7. Demda reasserts this status of deconstruction as a 'radicalization' of Marxism in his

recent *Spectres of Marx* (London and New York, 1994). But the claim goes back to Heidegger himself. As Bourdieu remarks: 'Of all the manipulative devices in *Letter on Humanism* none could touch the 'distinguished' marxists as effectively as the second-degree strategy consisting in ... talking the language of a 'productive dialogue' with Marxism, the typically Heideggerian strategy of an (artificial) *overcoming through radicalization*' (Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, p. 94; italics and parentheses in the original). For my own brief comment on Demda's use of this Heideggerian device, see my 'Reconciling Demda: "Spectres of Marx" and Deconstructive Politics', in *New Left Review*, no. 208, November-December 1994; reprinted in Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present* (New Delhi, 1996).

8. Cited in Habermas, *The New Conservatism*, *op. cit.*, p. 142, from a report that Jaspers submitted in 1945 to the denazification committee established at the University of Freiburg, where Heidegger had served as a rector under the Nazis.
9. After the War, however, a commission of the French Communist Party was to indict Kojve's philosophy for a 'fascistic tendency.'
10. For Kojve's influence on Lacan, see Anthony Wilden, *Language of the Self* (Baltimore, 1968). As Wilden aptly remarks: 'Lacan's early use of the Hegelian notion of desire repeats Kojévian formulas. There are, in fact few contemporary readings of Hegel which do not owe a considerable debt to Kojève's commentary, and he himself owes an equal debt to Heidegger ... Although it is sometimes difficult to tell whether it is Kojve, Heidegger or Hegel who is speaking. Lacan's works seem often to allude directly to Kojve' (pp. 193-4). See also the brief excursus on Kojve in Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co., A History of Psychoanalysis in France 1925-1985* (London, 1990). Remarkling on the fact that Kojve's reading of Hegel was so 'original' that it often bore little resemblance with what Hegel had actually written, Roudinesco goes on to say: 'It was not by chance that Lacan discovered in Kojve's discourse the wherewithal to effect a new interpretation of an original body of thought. At Kojve's side he learned how to make Freud's text say what it does not say.' (p. 138)
11. Niethammer refers to Kojve's account of the structures of the modern world as 'blood-thirsty' (p. 91) and Descombes speaks of his 'terrorist conception of history.' See Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge, 1980 (French original 1979); p 14.
12. Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: The Resurgence of French Hegelianism from the 1930s through the Postwar Period* (Princeton, 1988), p. 102.
13. Cited in Niethammer, p. 67.
14. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, *op. cit.*, p. 160n, (italics and parentheses in the original).
15. Daniel Singer, 'Be Realistic: Ask for the Impossible.' *Nation* (31 May 1993).
16. The jubilation is itself is in fact characteristically postmodern. Nietzsche himself had a much more grim and ironic sense of it all. As he put it in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in the section from which Fukuyama takes part of his title:
 'One has one's little pleasures for the day and one's little pleasures for the night: but one has a regard for health.
 "We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink.'
17. See, for instance, Partha Chatterjee, 'Secularism and Toleration,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXIX, no. 28, 9 July 1994. For a critique of a whole range of narrow communitarianisms prevailing in India today, see KumKum Sangari, 'Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume XXX, nos 51 & 52, 30 December 1995.
18. Gyan Prakash, 'Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography,' *Social Tat*, no 31/32, 1992.
19. For a discussion of the convergence between pragmatism and postmodernity, see Sabina Lovibond, 'Feminism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review*, no. 178 (November-December 1989) and 'Feminism and Pragmatism: A Reply to Richard Rorty', *New Left*

Review, no. 193 (May-June 1992).

20. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Postcolonialism: What's In a Name?' in Roman de la Campa, E. Ann Kaplan & Michael Sprinker (eds.), *Late Imperial Culture* (London, 1995).
21. Helen Tiffin, in Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *Past the Last Post* (Calgary, 1990), p. vii.
22. Gareth Griffiths, 'Being there, being There, Kosinsky and Malouf,' in Adam & Tiffin, *ibid.*, p. 154.
23. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Literatures* (London, 1989).
24. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), p. 64.
25. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1993), p. 296. In an extraordinary pair of hindsight within a single sentence, Said first describes Guha's book of 1963 as 'archeological and deconstructive,' thus taking in both Foucault and Derrida quite nicely, and then goes on to specify 1826 as the year when the Act of Permanent Settlement was passed.
26. Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London, 1990).
27. Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1994, p. 329.
28. Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', *Cultural Critique*, no. 7, Fall 1987.
29. The argument on the next few pages follows closely a section of my essay 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality' in *Race & Class*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1995.
30. The quoted phrases here are from Said's essay 'Third World Intellectuals and Metropolitan Culture,' in *Raritan*, Winter 1990; and from Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (New York, Vintage edition, 1984), p. 91.
31. Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 6.
32. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, Routledge, 1994), p. 5.
33. *Location*, p. 21.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3. Das is quoted from R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989).
39. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Goldberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago, 1988).
40. One among many published versions of this material may be found in *Cultural Critique*, no. 7, Fall 1987.
41. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *op. cit.*, p. 298.
42. Gayatri Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur,' in Francis Barker *et al* (eds.), *Europe and its Others* (Colchester, 1985).
43. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *op. cit.*, p. 308.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 306.
45. As she puts it elsewhere, 'If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more.' See Sarah Harasym (ed.), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London & New York, 1990); p. 158.
46. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983).
47. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York & London, 1988), p. 207.