THE POSTCOLONIAL UNCONSCIOUS

NEIL LAZARUS
The Postcolonial Unconscious is a major attempt to reconstruct the whole field of postcolonial studies. In this magisterial and, at times, polemical study, Neil Lazarus argues that the key critical concepts that form the very foundation of the field need to be reassessed and questioned. Drawing on a vast range of literary sources, Lazarus investigates works and authors from Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and the Arab world, South, South East, and East Asia, to reconsider them from a postcolonial perspective. Alongside this, he offers bold new readings of some of the most influential figures in the field: Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon. A tour de force of postcolonial studies, this book will set the agenda for the future, probing how the field has come to develop in the directions it has, and why and how it can grow further.

Neil Lazarus is Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick. He has published extensively in postcolonial studies and critical social and cultural theory. Previous books include Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction (1990) and Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World (1999). He is the editor of The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies (2004) and co-editor of Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies (2002).
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For all my family, inherited and acquired
Contents

Acknowledgements                                                                page viii

Introduction: The political unconscious of postcolonial studies                1
1 The politics of postcolonial modernism                                        21
2 Fredric Jameson on ‘Third-World Literature’: a defence                       89
3 ‘A figure glimpsed in a rear-view mirror’: the question of
   representation in ‘postcolonial’ fiction                                       114
4 Frantz Fanon after the ‘postcolonial prerogative’                             161
5 The battle over Edward Said                                                   183

Notes                                                                          204
Works cited                                                                   260
Index                                                                        290
As many of my friends and colleagues already know, I’ve been beset by illness over the latter half of this decade of the ‘noughties’. When I first began writing this book, my expectation was that it would be ready for publication by the end of 2007. It didn’t turn out that way. But the truth is that the book in its current form is not simply a delayed version of the one that would have been published if I had not fallen ill. I have benefited from the opportunity provided by periods of enforced inactivity to read more widely and to think some of my ideas through more deeply.

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Introduction: The political unconscious of postcolonial studies

Much of my own work since the early 1990s has taken the form of a contestation of particular ideas and assumptions predominant in postcolonial studies. I have sought, in general, to call into question concepts and theories that have seemed to me to lack accountability to the realities of the contemporary world-system that constitutes their putative object; and also to register my disagreement with the partial and tendentious ways in which the work of some key writers in the field has been taken up. In *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, however, I want to move from the ‘negative’ moment of critique to the more ‘positive’ moment of reconstruction. While I still believe that it is important to write in the mode of critique, I will be concerned here also to propose alternative readings and conceptualisations, to be set alongside and compared with those currently prevailing. Much of this book will therefore be devoted to an elaboration of concepts, methods, and substantive themes, upon which what I would view as a plausible ‘reconstruction’ of postcolonial studies might conceivably be based.

The work of reconstruction needs to begin, I think, with a periodisation of postcolonial studies, aimed both at situating its emergence and consolidation as a field of academic enquiry and at contextualising its distinctive emphases and investments. Concerning the latter, we can register immediately the supplementarity of postcolonial studies to post-structuralist theory. This supplementarity has often been noted; and some of the defining theoretical and ideological dispositions in the field have correctly been identified and assessed by critics, accordingly, through reference to post-structuralism. To ring true, however, our periodisation will need to do more than offer an intellectual genealogy of postcolonial studies; it will need in addition to supply a credible sociological account of the relation between the field’s problematic and developments in the wider social world.

Emerging at the end of the 1970s and consolidating itself over the course of the following decade and a half, postcolonial studies was very much a creature of its time – or, better, it was a creature of and
against its time. Just behind it lay the post-1945 boom – a ‘golden age’, as Eric Hobsbawm has called it, of a quarter-century or so of explosive global economic growth accompanied, in the core capitalist countries, by an historically unprecedented democratisation of social resources and, in the ‘Third World’, by insurgent demands for decolonisation and self-determination. This boom period had come to an end at the beginning of the 1970s, when the world-system stumbled into economic recession and attendant political crisis, from which it has yet to recover. The thirty-plus years since the puncturing of the boom – the ‘long downturn’, to use Robert Brenner’s term – have been marked, economically, by a steady decline of the rate of return on capital investment and, politically, by the global reassertion of US dominance (involving, among other things, the rolling back of the challenge represented by ‘Third World’ insurgency) and the brutal imposition of ‘the logic of unilateral capital’.

The social dimensions of the boom era must be emphasised here. In the core capitalist countries, the ‘welfare state’ was made possible by a strategic compromise between capital and labour. For a combination of reasons – among them the relative strength of organised labour and the relative weakness of ‘organised capital’ in the immediate postwar years, and an exhausted disenchantment on all sides with the politics of confrontation – postwar reconstruction in these countries took the form of social democracy. Economic growth on the one hand was complemented by the dispersal of social benefits on the other. During this period of thirty years or so, as Colin Leys has written, the industrialized countries experienced steady economic growth, distributed the benefits with a degree of equity (however modest) between capital and labour and between town and country, invested in their infrastructure, increasingly recognized and assisted disadvantaged groups and pursued all sorts of other social and cultural objectives, from gender equality to care for the environment, even if such goals were only very imperfectly attained.

Much the same point is made also by Jürgen Habermas, in a rather striking summary that warrants quoting at length:

Of course, the explosive growth of the global economy, the quadrupling of industrial production, and an exponential increase in the world trade between the early 1950s and the early 1970s also generated disparities between the rich and the poor regions of the world. But the governments of the OECD [Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development] nations, who were responsible for three-quarters of global production and four-fifths of global trade in industrial goods during these two decades, had learned enough from the catastrophic experiences of the period between the two world wars to pursue intelligent
domestic economic policies, focusing on stability with a relatively high rate of economic growth, and on the construction and enhancement of comprehensive social security systems. In welfare-state mass democracies, highly productive capitalist economies were socially domesticated for the first time, and were thus brought more or less in line with the normative self-understanding of democratic constitutional states.8

It is worth picking up on Habermas’s term ‘domesticated’ here and stressing that the welfare state was a political settlement, reflecting no magnanimous or ‘natural’ aspiration on capital’s part to harmonise its interests with those of labour but, on the contrary, the hard-won ability of organised labour to constrain capital.

If the social gains achieved under the rubrics of the ‘welfare state’ (in western Europe) and the ‘Great Society’ (in the United States) were made possible by a temporary truce or stand-off between capital and labour, those in the ‘Third World’ were powered by the struggle for self-determination. This was a struggle that had to be waged precisely against the core capitalist states, of course, whose domestic policies might have been ‘intelligent’, to use Habermas’s term – and ‘more or less in line with the normative self-understanding of democratic constitutional states’ – but whose foreign policies continued to rationalise colonial overlordship and to justify imperialist domination. In these terms, the sheer, irreversible advance represented by the achievement of decolonisation in the postwar years needs to be registered decisively. The articulation and elaboration of national consciousness; the mobilisation of popular will or support; the tempering of this will in the fire of the anticolonial campaigns, of campaigns for national liberation, when the least response of the colonial powers was intransigence and the arrogant refusal even to contemplate reform, and the more typical response (from Malaya to Vietnam, Kenya to Algeria) was to call out the police and very often the army to silence dissent and quell resistance – these developments, concerted in their nevertheless uncoordinated appearance across the globe in the immediate postwar period, were (and remain) of huge significance. ‘The world became a larger and happier place’, as Basil Davidson writes of the decolonising years in Africa9 – not ‘seemed to become a larger and happier place’, note, but actively became such. ‘[T]here were many reasons for optimism’, Davidson continues:

The old empires were falling fast and would not be restored. The social freedoms that had provided the real magnet behind nationalism were making themselves increasingly felt; and the grim silence of the colonial years was already shattered by a hubbub of plans and schemes for a more favorable future. People even talked
of a ‘new Africa’, and yet it did not sound absurd. A whole continent seemed to have come alive again, vividly real, bursting with creative energies, claiming its heritage in the human family, and unfolding ever more varied or surprising aspects of itself. (pp. 195–6)

It is important to recollect the energy, dynamism, and optimism of the decolonising and immediate post-independence era, both for the sake of the historical record and also to enable us to register the successes of this period, however slender, partial, provisional, or unsustainable they proved to be in the longer term. The Vietnamese army’s defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; the staging of the Bandung Conference itself in 1955; Nasser’s stand on Suez in 1956; the acquisition of independence in Ghana in 1957 – these were all events that fired the imaginations of millions of people worldwide, in the global ‘North’ as well as the ‘South’, placing on to the world stage, perhaps for the first time, the principled and resolute figure of ‘Third World’ self-determination. Domestically, too, the newly inaugurated postcolonial regimes, initially at least, undertook all manner of ambitious projects intended to improve the livelihood and welfare of their citizenry, from literacy and adult education campaigns to the construction and provision of hospitals, from the building of roads and sewage facilities to irrigation schemes, and from the redistribution of land to the outlawing of feudal rights over the labour of others. Here, women were granted the right to vote and to own property. There, workers won the right to organise and strike. Still elsewhere, compulsory education of children was introduced. Constitutions were framed; new laws were passed; many tyrannical and bitterly resented colonial laws and edicts were struck down, and many equally bitterly resented precolonial customs and practices were officially scrapped or proscribed.

This new sense of uplift and regeneration proved to be of relatively short duration, of course. In The Black Man’s Burden, Davidson attempts to analyse the processes through which, in the postcolonial era, the gap between ‘people’ and ‘state’ widened rather than (as might have been anticipated, and was certainly hoped for) narrowed. Increasingly, he argues, ‘social’ imperatives – those concerning the distribution of capital, resources, and services – were subordinated to the ‘national’ requirements of elite entrenchment – that is, where they were not cynically jettisoned altogether. Not only was ‘the extraction of wealth from . . . already impoverished [societies] . . . in no way halted by the [ending of colonial rule]’. The “national conflict”, embodied in the rivalries for executive power between contending groups or individuals among the “elites” . . . [took] priority over a “social conflict” concerned with the interests of most of the inhabitants of
these new nation-states’ (pp. 219, 114). Although his commentary is focused on sub-Saharan Africa, what Davidson says is readily applicable elsewhere in the (post-) colonial world as well. For in territory after territory, leaders and ruling elites came to identify their own maintenance in power as being of greater importance than the broader ‘social’ goods of democratisation, opportunity, and equality, and they increasingly used the repressive apparatuses and technologies of the state (often inherited from the colonial order) to enforce order and to silence or eliminate opposition.

There are some excellent accounts bringing into clear focus the failures of postcolonial leaderships to extend and democratise the momentous social advance represented by decolonisation. Neil Larsen, for instance, has argued that in what he calls the ‘Bandung era’ there was an historic failure to steer the anti-imperialist movement worldwide in the direction of proletarian internationalism on the basis of ‘a strategic alliance of metropolitan and third world labor against capital as such’. The result of this was that, while the macrosocial schemes of ‘development’ (or ‘modernisation’) produced relatively impressive economic results throughout the ‘Third World’ in the quarter of a century following the Second World War, these typically failed to augur democratisation, either political or economic. Thus the introduction of ‘some aspects of a welfare state in health, social security and housing’ in various Latin American states in the post-1945 period, for instance, was never socially dispersed: as Jorge Larrain has written, ‘the benefits . . . continued to be highly concentrated and the masses of the people continued to be excluded’.

We should also note here that the Second World War ended with the definitive supersession of European political hegemony by that of the US, and that post-1945 developments unfolded, accordingly, on the frame of a pax Americana. It is not only that the ‘East–West’ conflict, the cold war, continually buffeted postcolonial states about, obliging them to present themselves in certain lights, to implement certain policies and to shut down or abort others, in order to secure favour or forestall disfavour; it is also that decolonisation – the emergence of new autocentric or would-be autocentric regimes in the postcolonial world – was from the outset viewed by the United States, the postwar hegemon, as a potentially dangerous development, to be monitored closely and crushed whenever it seemed too threatening.

There is a remarkable moment in Norman Mailer’s great novel of the Second World War, The Naked and the Dead (first published in 1949), in which the demented and rabidly right-wing American general, Cummings,
lectures his liberal junior officer, Hearn, about the historical significance of the war for the United States:

Historically the purpose of this war is to translate America’s potential into kinetic energy . . . When you’ve created power, materials, armies, they don’t wither of their own accord. Our vacuum as a nation is filled with released power, and I can tell you that we’re out of the backwaters of history now . . . For the past century the entire historical process has been working toward greater and greater consolidation of power . . . Your men of power in America . . . are becoming conscious of their real aims for the first time in our history. Watch. After the war our foreign policy is going to be far more naked, far less hypocritical than it has ever been. We’re no longer going to cover our eyes with our left hand while our right is extending an imperialist paw.¹⁵

As though performing to Cummings’s script, the United States in the post-1945 period made it its business to export counter-revolution, working ceaselessly, sometimes directly, sometimes covertly, to undermine, subvert, and overthrow regimes and movements which it deemed to stand in opposition to its interests and political philosophy.¹⁶ Brennan refers, in this context, to the ‘orchestrated mass killing of leftists in Indonesia, Chile, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Colombia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and elsewhere’;¹⁷ and any casual listing of the states and regimes which the United States actively worked to destabilise in the post-1945 era must give one pause: such a listing must start, of course, with Cuba; but it might then move outwards, to such ‘middle American’ and Caribbean nations as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Guyana, Grenada, and Haiti; then on to such properly continental Latin American states as Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru, and Chile; Africa (Angola, Congo, Libya, Ghana, for instance); the ‘Middle East’ (a wide arc from Somalia to Afghanistan, and including Iran, Iraq, and Syria) and South East Asia (most notably Vietnam, the Philippines, and Korea, but also Indonesia, Cambodia, and Laos).

The setbacks suffered by and the defeats inflicted upon progressive forces in the ‘Third World’ in the decades following the end of the Second World War were considerable. But even they register indirectly the insurgency, the restless dynamism, of the era. Writing at the end of the 1950s, Frantz Fanon spoke famously of ‘the upward thrust of the people’ of Africa, and evoked the ‘coordinated effort on the part of two hundred and fifty million men to triumph over stupidity, hunger, and inhumanity at one and the same time’.¹⁸ The term ‘Third World’ itself dates from this time, and was used, banner-like, to announce a consolidated platform of resistance to imperialism – one term among many in a distinctive lexicon

Beginning in the late 1960s, however, a series of related developments combined to bring the postwar boom to a shuddering halt. ‘The crisis manifested itself’, according to Amin, ‘in the return of high and persistent unemployment accompanied by a slowing down of growth in the West, the collapse of Sovietism, and serious regression in some regions of the Third World, accompanied by unsustainable levels of external indebtedness’ (Capitalism, p. 94). The key point to note here about this crisis is that it provoked capital into the promulgation of a raft of new policies aimed at arresting and turning around the falling rates of profit. As Peter Wilkin has written, these policies formed part of a consolidated attempt on the part of the neo-liberal political elite then rising to hegemony in the core capitalist countries and elsewhere ‘to overturn the limited gains made by working people throughout the world-system in the post-war period’.

What was labelled ‘globalisation’ and projected by neo-liberal ideology as a deterriorialised and geopolitically anonymous behemoth – or as a tidal wave (another favoured metaphor) of ‘technology and irresistible market forces’, ‘sweeping over borders . . . [and] transform[ing] the global system in ways beyond the power of anyone to do much to change’ – was, on the contrary, a consciously framed political project or strategy. A savage restructuring of class and social relations worldwide was set in train, in the interests of capital.

In the ‘West’, the practical effects of this restructuring, still ongoing, have been to privatise social provision, thereby crippling or even dismantling the welfare state and stripping vast sectors of metropolitan populations of security across wide aspects of their lives; to drive millions of people out of work, forcing them not only into unemployment but into structural unemployment; and to enact legislation that has made it increasingly difficult for people to represent themselves collectively, to campaign and fight for their interests and the rights formally accorded them. In the ‘Third World’ the effects have been analogous. Economically, ‘what was new about this recession and the period that followed it’, as Larrain explains, was that the anti-depression policies followed by most governments produced inflation without adequately stimulating the economy, thus provoking high levels of unemployment. Throughout the developing world the recession had damaging effects: it aggravated the chronic deficits of its balance of payments by bringing down the prices of raw materials and raising the prices of oil and other essential imports, thus producing inflation, unemployment and stagnation. This marked the beginning of the huge expansion of the Third World’s international
debt, which soon became an impossibly heavy burden for its very weak economies, with the result that several countries defaulted on their obligations. *(Identity and Modernity, p. 133)*

Even during the ‘boom’ years, the sheer size of the debts owed by ‘Third World’ states to foreign lending institutions posed a big problem. But once the global downturn commenced, any chance of their ‘catching up’ and keeping a clean balance sheet disappeared definitively, and probably forever. As John Saul has written, with respect to Africa:

Fatefully [the] ... debt came due, in the 1980s, just as the premises of the dominant players in the development game were changing. The western Keynesian consensus that had sanctioned the agricultural levies, the industrialization dream, the social services sensibility, and the activist state of the immediate post-independence decades – and lent money to support all this – was replaced by ‘neo-liberalism’. For Africa this meant the winding down of any remnant of the developmental state, the new driving premise was to be a withdrawal of the state from the economy and the removal of all barriers, including exchange controls, protective tariffs and public ownership (and with such moves to be linked as well to massive social service cutbacks), to the operation of global market forces.  

The African case is extreme but not unique. In Latin America, the crippling burden of debt repayment led such major economies as Mexico, Argentina and Brazil to the brink. Growing indebtedness contrived to render states ever more dependent on foreign capital at the very moment when foreign capitalists, themselves concerned with profitability, became unwilling to extend credit and eager to get the highest possible short-term returns on their loans and investments. ‘In the aftermath of the debt crisis’ of the early 1980s, as Gwynne and Kay have written,

the international financial institutions were by and large able to dictate economic and social policies to the indebted countries, especially the weaker and smaller economies, through structural adjustment programs (SAPs). While Brazil and Mexico were able to negotiate better terms with the World Bank and foreign creditors, Bolivia and other countries were unable to do so. Peru, during the government of Alan García, tried to defy the international financial institutions but was severely punished for it and, after a change of government, the country had to accept the harsh reality of the new power of global capital and implement a SAP. SAPs were used as vehicles for introducing neoliberal policies ... they had particularly negative consequences for the poor of Latin American economies as unemployment soared and wages and social welfare expenditures were drastically reduced.  

Throughout the postcolonial world over the course of the final quarter of the twentieth century, Structural Adjustment Programs were imposed as
conditions for the distribution of loans, which the recipient nations were not in any position to refuse. Typically mandating huge cuts in government spending and social provision, the slashing of wages, the opening up of local markets to imported goods and the removal of all restrictions on foreign investment, the privatisation of state enterprises and social services, and deregulation in all sectors to ensure that all developments were driven by the logic of the market rather than by social need or government policy, SAPs became a favoured means of disciplining postcolonial states, domesticating them and rendering them subservient to the needs of the global market. They also became a means of ensuring that postcolonial states would retain their peripheral status, neither attempting to delink themselves from the world-system nor ever imagining themselves capable of participating in it from any position of parity, let alone power.

Postcolonial studies emerged as an institutionally specific, conjuncturally determined response to these global developments. The emergent field breathed the air of the reassertion of imperial dominance beginning in the 1970s, one of whose major preconditions was the containment and recuperation of the historic challenge from the ‘Third World’ that had been expressed in the struggle for decolonisation in the boom years after 1945. After 1975, the prevailing political sentiment in the West turned sharply against anticolonial nationalist insurgency and revolutionary anti-imperialism. The substance and trajectory of the work produced in postcolonial studies was strongly marked by this epochal reversal of the fortunes and influence of insurgent national liberation movements and revolutionary ideologies in the ‘Third World’. The decisive defeat of liberationist ideologies within the western (or, increasingly, western-based) intelligentsia, including its radical elements – was fundamental to the emergent field, whose subsequent consolidation, during the 1980s and early 1990s, might then be seen, at least in part, as a function of its articulation of a complex intellectual response to this defeat.

On the one hand, as an initiative in tune with its times, postcolonial studies was party to the general anti-liberationism then rising to hegemony in the wider society. The field not only emerged in close chronological proximity to the enforced end of the ‘Bandung era’, the era of ‘Third World’ insurgency. It also characteristically offered, in the scholarship that it fostered and produced, something approximating a monumentalisation of this moment – not, indeed, a celebration, but a rationalisation of, and pragmatic adjustment to, the demise of the ideologies that had flourished during the ‘Bandung’ years. Especially after the collapse of historical communism in 1989, it was disposed to pronounce Marxism dead and buried also.
On the other hand, however, as a self-consciously *progressive* or *radical* initiative, postcolonial studies was, and has remained, opposed to the dominant forms assumed by anti-liberationist policy and discourse in the dark years since the mid 1970s – years of neo-liberal ‘austerity’, ‘structural adjustment’, and political ‘rollback’. What Homi K. Bhabha influentially described as ‘the postcolonial perspective’ might then be conceptualised (in analogy with the liberal cold-war discourse of ‘anti-anti-communism’) as ‘anti-anti-liberationism’. Itself predicated on a disavowal of liberationism, which it understands to have been rendered historically anachronistic by the advent of the new world order represented by ‘globalisation’, postcolonial studies has nevertheless stood as a firm opponent of ‘mainstream’ or politically institutionalised anti-liberationism, as expressed both in the frankly imperialist language of leading policy makers and intellectuals in the core capitalist states, and through the punitive policies enacted by such corporate agencies as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation.

A good place to start to unpack this complex placement of postcolonial studies might be to register that, before the late 1970s, there was no field of academic specialisation that went by this name. This is not, of course, to say that there was no work being done before the late 1970s on issues relating to postcolonial cultures and societies. On the contrary, there was a large amount of such work, much of it deeply consequential and of abiding significance. There were political studies of state formation in the newly decolonised countries of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean; economic and sociological studies of development and underdevelopment; historical accounts of anticolonial nationalism and of the various and diverse nationalist leaderships that had fought or campaigned against colonial rule and that had then themselves come to power when independence had finally been won; literary studies of the new writing that was being produced by writers from these territories; and so on. In every academic discipline, there were presses specialising in the publication of material relating to postcolonial issues. Moreover, in most disciplines, dedicated journals had latterly come into existence to carry the emerging debates and to sponsor wider scholarship.

The word ‘postcolonial’ occasionally appeared in this scholarship, but it did not mean then what it has come to mean in ‘postcolonial studies’. Thus when Hamza Alavi and John S. Saul wrote about the state in ‘postcolonial’ societies in 1972 and 1974, respectively, they used the term in a strict historically and politically delimited sense, to identify the period immediately following decolonisation, when the various leaderships,
parties, and governments that had gained access to the colonial state apparatuses at independence undertook to transform these apparatuses, to make them over so that instead of serving as instruments of colonial dictatorship they would serve these new leaders’ own social and political interests, whether socialist or bourgeois, progressive or reactionary, popular or authoritarian. ‘Postcolonial’, in these usages from the early 1970s, was a periodising term, an historical and not an ideological concept. It bespoke no political desire or aspiration, looked forward to no particular social or political order. Erstwhile colonial territories that had been decolonised were ‘postcolonial’ states. It was as simple as that. Politically charged and ideologically fraught terms were all around, and were fiercely contested – capitalism and socialism; imperialism and anti-imperialism; ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’; self-determination and neo-colonialism; centre and periphery; modernisation, development, dependency, underdevelopment, mal-development, ‘dependent development’ – but the notion of ‘postcoloniality’ did not participate, on any side, in these debates. To describe a literary work or a writer as ‘postcolonial’ was to name a period, a discrete historical moment, not a project or a politics.

It was far more usual to see writers and works characterised in terms of their communities of origin, identity, or identification. Thus Chinua Achebe was described variously as an Igbo writer, a Nigerian writer, an African writer, a Commonwealth writer, a ‘Third World’ writer, but seldom if ever as a ‘postcolonial’ one. To have labelled Achebe a ‘postcolonial’ writer would have been, in a sense, merely to set the scene, historically speaking, for the analysis to come.

To begin to appreciate how much things have changed in this respect, consider the following formulation, drawn from Homi Bhabha’s essay, ‘The Postcolonial and the Postmodern’, first published in 1992:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the ‘rationalizations’ of modernity. To bend Jürgen Habermas to our purposes, we could also argue that the postcolonial project, at the most general theoretical level, seeks to explore those social pathologies – ‘loss of meaning, conditions of anomie’ – that no longer simply ‘cluster around class antagonism,
break up into widely scattered historical contingencies’ . . . The postcolonial perspective . . . departs from the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or ‘dependency’ theory. As a mode of analysis, it attempts to revise those nationalist or ‘nativist’ pedagogies that set up the relation of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition. The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres. (Location of Culture, pp. 171, 173)

We can see straight away that in Bhabha’s thinking, ‘postcolonial’ has ceased to be an historical category. The term does not designate what it sounds like it designates, that is, the moment, or more generally the time, after colonialism. There are temporal words and phrases in Bhabha’s formulation – ‘no longer’, for instance – but these do not appear to relate in any discernible way to decolonisation as an historical event, that is, to decolonisation as a ‘cut’ or break in time, such that one could speak of a colonial ‘before’ and a postcolonial ‘after’. Bhabha writes that ‘postcolonial criticism’ concerns itself with ‘social pathologies’ that can ‘no longer’ be referred to the explanatory factor of class division: ‘postcolonial criticism’ is thus opposed to (and for Bhabha evidently comes after or supersedes) class analysis. But no explanation is given as to why the term ‘colonial’ is deemed to be implicated in the putative obsolescence of class analysis. Indeed, on the basis of what Bhabha says, ‘postcolonial criticism’ could as easily be called ‘post-Marxist criticism’.

Or indeed ‘post-modern criticism’, since Bhabha is at pains to emphasise that the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial criticism’ is directed against the assumptions of the ‘ideological discourses of modernity’, which are said to flatten out complexity, to simplify the sheer heterogeneity and unevenness of real conditions, to reduce these to ‘a binary structure of opposition’. For Bhabha, ‘postcolonial’ is a fighting term, a theoretical weapon that ‘intervenes’ in existing debates and ‘resists’ certain political and philosophical constructions. ‘Postcolonial criticism’, as he understands and champions it, is constitutively anti-Marxist – departing not only from more orthodox Marxist scholarship but even from ‘the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment or “dependency” theory’; it disavows nationalism as such and refuses an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics in favour of one that emphasises ‘cultural difference’, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp’ of what ‘modern’ philosophy had imagined as the determinate categories of social reality.

Between Alavi’s and Saul’s ‘post-colonialism’ and Bhabha’s, a sea change has occurred. What is at issue is not simply a matter of the
changing of the guard, the routine emergence of new theoretical concepts and emphases that supplant or sit alongside the old ones in accordance with shifting generational interests. Rather, there has been a decisive change of paradigms or problematics, such that the retention of particular terms (‘postcolonial’ itself, for instance) is in fact quite misleading. Aijaz Ahmad’s identification of a shift in ‘theoretical framework[s] . . . from Third World nationalism to postmodernism’ is powerfully suggestive here. Even more illuminating, because more precise, is Larsen’s observation that what tends, in the new discourse, to be referred to the ‘postcolonial’, is a ‘euphemism’ for what used to be referred to the ‘Third World’ – ‘euphemism’ because the political meaning of the ‘Third World’, which used to ‘conjure . . . up an entire historical conjuncture and accompanying political culture, in which one naturally went on to utter the . . . slogans of “national liberation,” etc.’ has now been eclipsed. ‘[W]e who once unself-consciously said “third world” now hesitate, if only for a second, to utter it in the same contexts. This hesitation reflects the decline of the national liberation movements of the “Bandung era” . . . leaving us with the question of why and with what effect this decline has occurred’ (‘Imperialism’, pp. 24–5).

In ‘East isn’t East’, a brief but important essay from 1995, Edward W. Said differentiated between the thrusts of what he called ‘post-modernist’ thought and the thought of scholars, writers, and activists from the ‘Bandung era’, whom he grouped together as ‘the first generation of post-colonial artists and scholars’: ‘The earliest studies of the post-colonial’, he wrote,

were by such distinguished thinkers as Anwar Abdel-Malek, Samir Amin, C. L. R. James; almost all were based on studies of domination and control made from the standpoint of either a completed political independence or an incomplete liberationist project. Yet whereas post-modernism, in one of its most famous programmatic statements (by Jean-François Lyotard), stresses the disappearance of the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment, the emphasis behind much of the work done by the first generation of post-colonial artists and scholars is exactly the opposite: the grand narratives remain, even though their implementation and realization are at present in abeyance, deferred, or circumvented. This crucial difference between the urgent historical and political imperatives of post-colonialism and post-modernism’s relative detachments makes for altogether different approaches and results.

I discuss this passage in detail in Chapter 5 below, drawing out the implications both of what it says and what it fails to say or to make clear. Here, however, I want to focus just on Said’s identification of a distinction between the historico-philosophical assumptions of ‘Bandung era’
and ‘post-modern’ discourse. The latter takes its warrant from the conviction that the ‘break’ between the post-1945 ‘boom’ (within which the ‘Bandung era’ unfolded) and the subsequent ‘long downturn’ is not to be understood as a crisis in analogy with the crises that have been regular features of capitalist history; nor even in analogy with the great depressions of 1873–93 and 1929–41. Rather, it is to be understood as marking an epochal transformation from one overarching world order (‘modernity’) into another (‘postmodernity’). Hence the suggestions that the ‘grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment’ (including, notably, the ‘grand narrative’ of capitalist history) are not merely arguable or susceptible to criticism, but have become definitively obsolete.

This ‘postmodernist’ assumption has been fundamental to postcolonial studies, structuring the discourse even of some of the field’s best-known dissenting voices. Thus Arif Dirlik, for instance, whose influential 1994 critique of ‘the postcolonial aura’ nevertheless concedes that what he calls ‘postcoloniality’ ‘represents a response to a genuine need’:

the need to overcome a crisis of understanding produced by the inability of old categories to account for the world. The metanarrative of progress that underlies two centuries of thinking is in deep crisis. Not only have we lost faith in progress but also progress has had actual disintegrative effects . . . The crisis of progress has brought in its wake a crisis of modernization . . . and called into question the structure of the globe as conceived by modernizationalists and radicals alike in the decades after World War II, that is, as three worlds. \(^{32}\)

Notwithstanding the astringency of his critique of postcolonial theory, Dirlik shares with its leading proponents key presumptions as to the eclipse of ‘modernity’ and the correlative ‘metanarrative of progress that underlies two centuries of thinking’.

Like them he takes it as read that Marxism has been obliterated as an enabling political horizon\(^{33}\) and that the eclipse of the idea of the ‘Third World’ as an historico-political project is part of a wider – epochal – shift. This shift is from the ‘old’ order of ‘modernity’ (whose constituent features and aspects – unevenness, revolution, the centrality of the nation, even imperialism – are seen to have lost their explanatory power) to the ‘new world order’ of fully globalised capitalism.\(^{34}\) These presumptions govern what, drawing on and adapting the resonant title of Fredric Jameson’s 1981 book, we might think of as the postcolonial unconscious.\(^{35}\)

I have argued against the general presumption of epochal change in postcolonialist theory on several occasions previously, and will not repeat those arguments here.\(^{36}\) What I would like to suggest instead (or in
addition), in grounding the central, reconstructive thrust of *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, is that developments in the first decade of our new century – above all the US-led and -sponsored invasion and occupation of Iraq and the sorry misadventure in Afghanistan – have exposed the contradictions of this established postcolonialist understanding to stark and unforgiving light. For, conjointing violence and military conquest with expropriation, pillage, and undisguised grabbing for resources, these developments have demonstrably rejoined the twenty-first century to a long and as yet unbroken history, wrongly supposed by postcolonial theory to have come to a close circa 1975. This is the history of capitalist imperialism.

It is not, of course, that scholars in postcolonial studies are prone to give any credence to the official rationalisations that present the colossal violence visited on Afghanistan and Iraq – and also the wholesale destruction of civil liberties on the ‘home’ fronts in ‘western’ societies – as measured, defensive, and corrective responses to the ghastly Islamist attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, or to the subsequent bombings in Bali, Madrid, London, and elsewhere. After all, the lie to this official version of events has been given definitively in any number of subsequent investigative or analytical counter-commentaries, scholarly and journalistic. David Harvey’s study of what he calls *The New Imperialism*, for instance, makes clear that ‘9/11’ would better be understood as the ‘Pearl Harbor’ of which an increasingly organised and powerful American neo-conservativism had long been dreaming, an event that enabled the neo-conservatives at one and the same time to disable liberal opposition, drive towards hegemony, and ‘impose [their] . . . agenda on government’. 37

Neil Smith, for his part, insists that ‘horrible as the loss of life was when those symbols of the military and economic power of the American empire were leveled’, the events of 11 September 2001 ‘did not change the world’; they ‘were exceptional . . . only for sweeping away the global insularity of the vast majority of the population cocooned within the national borders of the world’s one remaining superpower. People in most other parts of the world had faced similar if not far larger traumas’. 38 Writing in 2003, Smith added significantly that ‘October 7, 2001 may well come to change the world’, this latter marking the date on which ‘the US government unleashed what it called its “war on terrorism” by bombing an already devastated Afghanistan . . . From the halls of official state power around the world, but from nowhere more than Washington DC, old enemies were converted into terrorists and a hardening of nationally based state power commenced’. 39

Yet if scholars in postcolonial studies have clearly been critical of the ‘war on terror’ and reassuringly unimpressed by the sophistries purveyed
by the retinue of state ideologists and policy hacks attempting to justify it, they have not typically seen the contemporary developments as requiring them to do any rethinking themselves about the assumptions and common understandings prevailing in their own field. On the contrary, there has been a tendency to insist that what is urgently needed in the context of the debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan is more of precisely the kind of theory that had already been prevalent in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus Sangeeta Ray, who writes in 2005 that ‘[n]ow more than ever we need to pay attention to the work and role of specular, border intellectuals who have the courage to stand up against the evocation of the horror of alterity by calling attention to intellectually and ethically grounded work on the politics of alterity’. An unintentional irony marks this formulation, and others like it, it seems to me: even though the profuse postcolonialist scholarship on ‘the politics of alterity’ during the 1980s and 1990s had been predicated fundamentally on assumptions as to the obsolescence of imperialism (one of the most important of the received ‘modern’ categories for ‘accounting for the world’, after all), Ray now calls for yet more work in this idiom as the best means of addressing the (imperialist) violence unleashed since ‘9/11’.

Part of the necessary corrective to this way of thinking is provided by the editors of another recent volume, Postcolonial Studies and Beyond, who see the need, in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, to call domination by its name:

The shadow the 2003 US invasion of Iraq casts on the twenty-first century makes it more absurd than ever to speak of ours as a postcolonial world. On the other hand, the signs of galloping US imperialism make the agenda of postcolonial studies more necessary than ever. In a context of rapidly proliferating defenses of empire (not simply de facto but de jure) by policy makers and intellectuals alike, the projects of making visible the long history of empire, of learning from those who have opposed it, and of identifying the contemporary sites of resistance and oppression that have defined postcolonial studies have, arguably, never been more urgent. The editors’ generous suggestion – in their introduction to a large, diverse, and incorporating volume – that postcolonial studies has always been ‘defined’ as a field by ‘the projects of making visible the long history of empire, of learning from those who have opposed it, and of identifying the contemporary sites of resistance and oppression’ to it – is eminently contestable. My own view, as will be clear from what I have already written, is that it would be more accurate to maintain that postcolonial studies, in its prevailing and consolidated aspect at least, has been
premised on a distinctive and conjuncturally determined set of assump-
tions, concepts, theories, and methods that have not only not been adequate to their putative object – the ‘postcolonial world’ – but have served fairly systematically to mystify it. But Loomba and colleagues are surely correct to insist that the ‘urgent’ task facing those in the field today, in the wake of the invasion, occupation and, evidently, the long-term destabilisation of Iraq, is to take central cognisance of the unremitting actuality and indeed the intensification of imperialist social relations in the times and spaces of the postcolonial world.

The full historical significance of the contemporary developments has been well conceptualised in these terms, by Jonathan Schell, as follows:

In the past 200 years, all of the earth’s great territorial empires, whether dynastic or colonial, or both, have been destroyed. The list includes the Russian empire of the czars; the Austro-Hungarian Empire of the Habsburgs; the German empire of the Hohenzollerns, the Ottoman Empire, the Napoleonic Empire, the overseas empires of Holland, England, France, Belgium, Italy and Japan, Hitler’s ‘thousand-year Reich’ and the Soviet empire. They were brought down by a force that, to the indignation and astonishment of the imperialists, turned out to be irresistible: the resolve of peoples, no matter how few they were or how poor, to govern themselves.

With its takeover of Iraq, the United States is attempting to reverse this universal historical verdict. It is seeking to reinvent the imperial tradition and reintroduce imperial rule – and on a global scale – for the twenty-first century. Some elements, like the danger of weapons of mass destruction, are new. Yet any student of imperialism will be struck by the similarities between the old style of imperialism and the new: the gigantic disparity between the technical and military might of the conquerors and the conquered; the inextricable combination of rapacious commercial interest and geopolitical ambition and design; the distortion and erosion of domestic constitutions by the immense military establishments, overt and covert, required for foreign domination; the use of one colony as a stepping stone to seize others or pressure them into compliance with the imperial agenda; the appeal to jingoism on the home front.43

Analysis of these developments would clearly not be served by an extension of the established postcolonial discussion, in which the term ‘capitalism’ has tended to be conspicuous largely by its absence (that is, where it has not actively been disparaged as the linchpin in a Eurocentric ‘mode of production’ narrative), and the term ‘imperialism’ has tended for the most part to be mobilised in description of a process of cultural and epistemological subjugation, whose material preconditions have been referred to only glancingly, if at all. What is required instead, it seems to me, is a new ‘history of the present’ – a new reading, above all of the second half of the
twentieth century, liberated from the dead weight both of the cold war and of ‘Third-Worldism’ as its compensatory alternative.

_The Postcolonial Unconscious_ is intended as a contribution to this new reading. In the interests of establishing a research ‘archive’ different from the one currently prevailing – differently weighted and with different emphases – I adopt a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, critique of ideas and categories that have structured the field in its dominant articulations hitherto; on the other, elaboration and renewal of countervailing ideas and categories. Sometimes my aim is to contest the constructions that have been placed upon specific concepts, historical developments, and bodies of writing by influential scholars in the field – constructions that I believe are weak or untenable. At other times, I set out to present new concepts, to defend theories that have been abandoned prematurely, and to discuss writers whose work has either received little attention or else is in urgent need of reinterpretation.

The easiest chapters of the book to introduce, in this respect, are the final two, both of which involve revisionary readings of theorists central to postcolonial studies: Frantz Fanon and Edward W. Said, respectively. In the case of Fanon, I take David Macey’s ground-clearing biography, _Frantz Fanon: A Life_, as my point of departure. Macey argues that in the years since his death in 1961, the ‘meaning’ of Fanon has tended to be framed schematically. He identifies two conflicting and incompatible schemas – the insurgent ‘Third Worldist’ Fanon and the ‘Postcolonial’ Fanon. Each is in its own way historically determinate; yet neither plausibly registers the thrust and substance of Fanon’s thought or writing. Using ‘9/11’ and ‘Iraq’ as my pretexts, I re-examine Fanon’s writings, attempting to account for their continuing cogency, and discuss and evaluate some of the new approaches to these writings that have emerged over the course of the past decade. In the case of Said, I join a debate already underway between his ‘materialist’ and ‘post-structuralist’ champions. Building on the work of Timothy Brennan, particularly, I examine _Orientalism_ and Said’s work on intellectuals, exploring his theory of knowledge, his nationalitarian politics and his commitment to humanism, secularity and universalism.

The two longest chapters in the book are concerned with ‘postcolonial’ literature, and reflect my belief that there are vast intellectual resources available to us in this realm that have not remotely been plumbed by scholars working in the field. ‘The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism’, indeed, proceeds from the dispiriting observation that the range of literary works typically addressed by postcolonial scholars is not only remarkably
attenuated, but that, even with reference to this restricted body of works, the same questions tend to be asked, the same methods used, the same concepts mobilised, and the same conclusions drawn. In attempting to understand this state of affairs, I turn to Raymond Williams’s critique of literary modernism in his posthumously published *The Politics of Modernism*. There are some questions that have to be raised about Williams’s understanding of modernism. But I argue that, even so, his critique retains a striking cogency by analogy in the analysis and critique of postcolonial studies. To challenge the hegemony of modernism, Williams argued that it would be necessary to ‘search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century’. Pursuing this injunction in the postcolonial context, I propose some interconnected rubrics under which we might begin to reorganise our thinking about ‘postcolonial’ literature and suggest that thinking in terms of these rubrics would enable us to identify representational schemas that are pervasive, very widely distributed, often cardinal, and even definitive across its vast and hitherto unevenly and indifferently theorised corpus.

In my chapter on representation in ‘postcolonial’ literature, I demonstrate that in the consolidation of postcolonial studies in the 1980s and 1990s, the signature critique of colonialist (mis-)representation tended to broaden and flatten out. The struggle over representations gave way to the struggle against representation itself, on the ground that the desire to speak for, of, or even about others was always shadowed by a secretly authoritarian aspiration. The theoretical resort has then often been to a consideration of difference under the rubric of incommensurability. While the idea of incommensurability has been given an airing in some very well-known works of the ‘postcolonial’ corpus, I suggest that the vast majority of ‘postcolonial’ literary writings point us in a quite different direction, towards the idea not of ‘fundamental alienness’ but of deep-seated affinity and community, across and athwart the ‘international division of labour’. I also attempt to trace and evaluate some of the ways in which ‘postcolonial’ writers have approached and thought through the difficulties of ‘representation’ (variously conceived) in their work.

A bridge chapter between the two long chapters on ‘postcolonial’ literature offers a defence and justification of Fredric Jameson’s controversial and widely pilloried argument about ‘Third World’ literature. Jameson’s ‘sweeping hypothesis’ that ‘All third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories’ has been the subject of massive
repudiation in postcolonial studies, largely following the lines laid down in Aijaz Ahmad’s influential rebuttal. In reviewing the debate between these two Marxist theorists, I demonstrate the untenability of Ahmad’s reading, draw out the implications of this for subsequent treatments of Jameson by postcolonial critics, and show that it is quite possible to defend Jameson from the charge of ‘Third-Worldism’, at least as Ahmad lays that charge.