

New York Poqo 1

Postcolonialismo

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On the subway, on our way to the Università di Milano, Bicocca

You often read random statistics about people's lives, such as the fact that the average person during their lifetime spends 25 years asleep. But I've never read any estimate of how long the average person in any society spends waiting in a queue. Of course the statistics would vary widely—imagine calculating for shoppers in the former Soviet Union—but in any society it must be a respectable number of years for most people. A friend of mine, archly alluding to the fact that I have been giving lectures recently about migration and asylum seekers, suggested that if I enjoyed queuing (does anyone?), then I should take up travelling as a hobby—for it is there that the experience of the queue can be enjoyed most insistently—when you arrive at the check-in desk, line up dutifully to put yourself through the curious undressing ritual of the hand luggage inspection, then to get on the plane, then to get off the plane, and then, best of all, in the long slow suffering queue at immigration control, before the final queue at baggage, the taxi rank.... As I stood in the 80-degree heat of the immigration room at one of the terminals at JFK airport in New York, listening to the announcement telling me that I could not use the waiting time usefully by calling home on my cell phone, I determined to try do something productive nevertheless with this enforced piece of empty homogeneous time. Normally while waiting or in any kind of vacant situation, I find a piece of paper and start writing, something, anything, but it's difficult to write in a shuffling queue of that sort, especially when you are holding a heavy bag stuffed with computers balanced on top of a large plastic bag with a shiny new Adidas football in it for your son. While I was making this resolution, as yet unfulfilled, I caught the eye of the man who was right beside me, but in the next line down of the lines of the snaking queue, the kind in which guided by ropes, you shuffle forward, then make a 180 degree turn, and shuffle back again. I immediately recognised him as the former Governor of Hong Kong, European commissioner and current Chancellor of Oxford University, John Patten, someone I had met by chance a year or so earlier at a posh dinner at Wadham College, Oxford. He eyed me warily with that look of recognition, but doubtless with no idea where he had ever seen me before.

Before I could remind him of our former riveting encounter on the other side of the ocean, the queue had moved and we parted in opposite directions. At least, though, I thought, here the immigration queue levels all—even John Patten is not grand enough to be whisked away on arrival and taken through some special VIP route, as he no doubt certainly has been many times in his life at other places. As these reflections on the democracy of the queue, or the line as they say here, developed, I resolved to try in future to use any such moments of unproductive time in composing monthly reflections from New York, the city to which I moved several months ago to take up a position at New York University, having taught for many years at Oxford in England. Though during the planning of what turned out to be the complex architecture of this website I decided not to succumb to the temptation of a daily blog (as yet at least), I also began to feel that there is inevitably something almost institutional about the fixity of the form of a website that creates the need for more informal arenas. A regular column should allow a living set of reflections to develop around the writings posted on the site.

As I walked out of the customs hall into the usual medley of people waiting for other people holding up their signs, I saw one that said “John Paten” [sic]. “He’s just coming,” I said to the weary sign holder, and he, mistaking my greeting, immediately said, ‘come this way, sir’. It was a tempting thought that I could have become John Patten for the day, though, on second thoughts, perhaps not. No doubt a string of formal dinners awaited him.

I had just flown back from Italy, via London, where I had gone to give a lecture at the Università di Milano Bicocca, an amazing example of the university as a manifestation of contemporary modernism rising in the old heartlands of industrial Italy, of knowledge as the new industrial commodity of the West, and then to participate at a *convegno* or conference in Rome organised by my Italian publisher, Meltemi, details of which are posted on the conference page on this website. At Rome, I met up with my friend Homi Bhabha who had just given a series of three lectures at the Università L’Orientale in Naples. I have lectured in Italy several times this year, and the frequent appearance there of what one Italian newspaper memorably called ‘il filosofo indiano’, prompts the interesting question as to why there has been such an explosion of interest in the postcolonial in Italy. So though the title of this column suggests that it is supposed to be concerned with postcolonial New York, let us start with Italy, of which of course a memorable metonymic part, Little Italy, resides in New York, just a few blocks away from my apartment here in Greenwich Village.

The different European absorptions of and responses to the postcolonial are an example of the kind of heterogeneity which is often invoked in postcolonial discourse itself. What different, interrelated cultures, the cultures of old imperial Europe after all, have made of the postcolonial is itself a subject of historical interest for postcolonial critics. The variety is enormous, but there have, I think, been three main reactions, and none of them has reduplicated the forms of the postcolonial in India, Britain or the US (which are themselves in turn all distinct). One reaction has been ‘this speaks to us, because we are postcolonials too’—evident in Eastern Europe, and also in Spain, which is still in the process of recovering the heterogeneity of its different languages and cultures after the

dead, homogenizing hand of Franco's fascism. This means that there is currently scant reflection on Spain as an imperial power or of the appalling history of the Spanish invasion of the new world. Given that they lost most of their empire successively a hundred and two hundred years ago, perhaps it is not surprising that Spain is not riven by postcolonial guilt or melancholia. France too remains largely in denial of its colonial past. Despite the recent, belated beginnings of discussions about the trauma of the Algerian war, and, memorably, the official admission of the bombings at Sétif in 1945, French culture has yet to absorb the implications of a postcolonial perspective. Those for whom those issues were central—Bourdieu, Derrida—have gone. The result is that in France, like Germany, which cheerfully more or less ignores its admittedly short colonial history, the academic area which could be designated as postcolonial studies, whether francophone or anglophone, actually involves something more like an old Commonwealth Literature approach, focussing narrowly on the work of individual writers around the world. Ato Quayson always describes this as a 'contentist' approach, where you write an article or give a conference paper which for the most part involves telling the story of a book that you assume your audience has not read. Nowadays, there is usually some gesture towards postcolonial theory, so that you get what I call the 'X in Y' kind of paper, a formula recognisable in innumerable presentations given at conferences every year around the world with titles like 'Hybridity, Transgression and Regression in *The God of Small Things*'. Typically, such a paper will have a paragraph or two of general observations that mention a bit of theory, and invoke the authority of a name ('as Stuart Hall reminds us...'), before the author moves into a contentist analysis of the single particular text that has been chosen for analysis, from which you never re-emerge. When I hear such papers, I often wonder whether it wouldn't be more interesting, not to say more pleasurable, just to read the book itself.

Italy, on the other hand, is developing in a completely different direction, and one which is altogether the most interesting amongst what is happening in this field anywhere in Europe, Britain included. In the first place, Italy still has what might be called a living culture of the left, and remains haunted by the continued long-term effects of the political turmoil of the eighties. In the second place, it has been producing some of the most interesting work in political theory in the past ten years—Agamben and Negri are themselves testimony to that. In the third place, its position in the front line of the migration flows from Albania, Libya and elsewhere means that the same past decade has witnessed the transformation of Italian cities and an explosion of interest in issues of migration and multicultural matters. Fourthly, a productive environment exists for the analysis of these developments, given that Italy was the European country perhaps most sympathetic to the anti-colonial movements after World War II. You have only to think of Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, and the deep links between the partigiani and anticolonial movements that Pontecorvo's own career exemplifies. This link goes back much further—to the fact that the Italian Risorgimento was itself—and seen as such round the world—the first major national anti-colonial struggle in modern times, a legacy that remains very evident in the work of Antonio Gramsci and accounts for the fact that he was the only major European Marxist thinker for whom anticolonialism was a central part of the political struggle. It seems to have been the combination of these factors that has led to an extraordinarily serious, political and committed response to the postcolonial

in Italy by intellectuals such as Sandro Mezzadra, Federico Rahola, Carla Pasquinelli, Iain Chambers, Miguel Mellino, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, and many others. There is a real sense in Italy that the postcolonial offers a politics, and an evident excitement about its provocative possibilities, and this amongst those on the activist left. No tedious and unending arguments here coming from bookish academic Marxists complaining that the postcolonial doesn't conform to the time-honoured formulae of traditional male class politics driven by the party as the vanguard of the people. Of course it doesn't—which is precisely why it is able to offer a politics and forms of political analysis that are addressed to the realities of today's, not yesterday's, world. What is particularly noticeable in this formation in Italy is that this interest has far more often emerged in Departments of Anthropology and Sociology than in Literature, and, in a complementary way, it is striking that almost all books in this area in Italian are being published by the remarkable publishing house Meltemi, run by Luisa Capelli, a former PCI activist, whose list, centered in anthropology and sociology, has shown itself to be particularly alert to what is going on outside Italy as well as to the most interesting areas that are developing within the country despite or perhaps because of the ossified institutional state of the Italian academy.

Speaking of institutional ossification, it is noticeable that unlike the Communist Party in France which remained steadfastly committed to an *Algérie française* throughout the war in Algeria, the PCI, the Communist Party of Italy, led by the redoubtable Togliatti, was by contrast always actively committed to the freedom struggles. And so it was, that I found myself dragging my colleague Emily Apter late one stormy afternoon down past the Colloseo and the Forum to the charmingly named Via delle botteghe oscure, to look at the old headquarters of the Communist Party of Italy. Typical, she said, that of all the sights of Rome, this is the one you want to see. When we found it, by that time in the middle of a thunderstorm, it proved to be a vast building that could not be described as anything other than a pukka palazzo, the staggering size of which made me realise how the PCI could so easily have generously offered the Algerian FLN an office inside. I wanted to see the communist palazzo not because of the PCI as such, but because it was there, at the FLN office somewhere inside, that Frantz Fanon used to stay on his frequent visits to Rome. And it was there that Sartre would come to visit him for their long and passionate talks that went on right through the night. Strange status of place, to all appearances now indifferent to its past, and to the inarticulate haunting memories of those unyielding doors.



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