

Colonialism and the Politics of Postcolonial Critique

In May 2000, Survival, a worldwide organization supporting the rights of tribal peoples, marked the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the first Europeans in Brazil by launching a campaign for land ownership for Brazilian Indians. Entitled 'Brazil: 500 years of resistance', Survival's publicity leaflets highlighted a *tristes tropiques* history of exploitation and genocide:

When the Portuguese set foot in Brazil, there were five million indigenous peoples. As the invaders introduced disease, slavery and violence, indigenous peoples were virtually wiped out. Today they number 330,000.

Indigenous peoples in Brazil still face eviction from their land, violence, and disease at the hands of loggers, settlers, goldminers and powerful politicians and business.

The contemporary gold rush in the Amazon has repeated the conditions of the rubber boom that occurred there at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1910, Sir Roger Casement, a former member of the British Consular Service, was asked by the British government to investigate allegations of atrocities committed against the Putumayo Indians by the Peruvian Amazon Company, a British company engaged in the extraction of rubber on the Brazil–Peru border. Casement was an Irishman who, with E. D. Morel, had earlier been instrumental in exposing the atrocities carried out in the so-called Congo Free State about which Conrad had written in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Michael Taussig has argued convincingly that Casement can be linked to Kurtz in that novel (Taussig 1986). While in Africa, Casement became sceptical towards the idea of the civilizing claims of imperialism, a scepticism that was only increased by what he found in the Amazon basin.

Treatment of the tribal people

These are not only murdered, flogged, chained up like wild beasts, hunted far and wide and their dwellings burnt, their wives raped, their children dragged away to slavery and outrage,

but are shamelessly swindled into the bargain. These are strong words, but not adequately strong. The condition of things is the most disgraceful, the most lawless, the most inhuman, I believe that exists in the world today. It far exceeds in depravity and demoralization the Congo regime at its worst.... The slavery under which they suffer is an abominable, an atrocious one.... It is appalling to think of all the suffering so-called Spanish and Portuguese civilization has wantonly inflicted on these people. (Casement 1997: 294–5)

On his return, he submitted a report verifying the atrocities to the British government. In a fine historical irony, Casement, the urbane colonized subject, found himself at the centre of a campaign for the human rights of ‘free’ postcolonial indigenous Brazilians. That historical irony was to be reinforced six years later when the same British government which had knighted him and persuaded him to go to Brazil on its behalf, executed Casement on a charge of High Treason on 3 August 1916. He had been arrested on Banna Strand in County Kerry, on his return to Ireland from Berlin in a German U-boat, hours before the Dublin Easter Rising. It is not only Latin America, therefore, that has operated within the disjunctive time-lags of colonial and postcolonial modernity. Nor, as this story shows, was there necessarily any political disjunction between anti- and postcolonialism. Whereas postcolonialism has become associated with diaspora, transnational migration and internationalism, anti-colonialism is often identified exclusively, too exclusively, with a provincial nationalism. From the Boer War onwards, however, it rather took the form of a national internationalism. Like postcolonialism, anti-colonialism was a diasporic production, a revolutionary mixture of the indigenous and the cosmopolitan, a complex constellation of situated local knowledges combined with radical, universal political principles, constructed and facilitated through international networks of party cells and organizations, and widespread political contacts between different revolutionary organizations that generated common practical information and material support as well as spreading radical political and intellectual ideas. This decentred anti-colonial network, not just a Black Atlantic but a revolutionary Black, Asian and Hispanic globalization, with its own dynamic counter-modernity, was constructed in order to fight global imperialism, demonstrating in the process for our own times that ‘globalization’ does not necessarily involve irresistible totalization.

By the time of the First World War, imperial powers occupied, or by various means controlled, nine-tenths of the surface territory of the globe; Britain governed one-fifth of the area of the world and a quarter of its population. ‘For the first time’, Lenin noted in 1916, ‘the world is completely divided up, so that in the future *only* redivision is possible’ (Lenin 1968: 223). With no space left for territorial expansion, the unsatiated empires turned inwards and attempted to devour each other. After the Great War, the two contiguous empires of Austria–Hungary and Turkey were broken up, and Germany was deprived of its overseas colonies. Germany subsequently tried to turn Europe itself into its colonial empire in an enormous act of migrationist colonialism reworked into the ideology of *Lebensraum*: it was the great Martiniquan writer, activist and statesman Aimé Césaire who first pointed out in 1950 that fascism was a form of colonialism brought home to Europe (Césaire 1972; W. D. Smith 1986). For the colonial powers the cost of liberation or victory over Germany was the gradual

dismemberment of their colonial empires, while defeated Italy lost all its pre-war colonies in 1945. Japan, which had fought a war of imperialist rivalry with the European colonial powers and, particularly, the United States over Southeast Asia and the Pacific, was deprived of its overseas territorial possessions.

Aside from the colonies of the fascist regimes of Spain and Portugal (which had remained technically neutral during the war), the increasingly fascist apartheid regime of South Africa, and the expanded empires of the Soviet Union and the United States, decolonization by the seven remaining colonial powers of 1945 (Britain, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Australia and New Zealand) occurred relatively quickly. Indian independence in 1947 began a process of European decolonization that is now largely complete, even if the list of colonies, dependent, trust and unincorporated territories, overseas departments, and other such names signifying colonial status in some form is still surprisingly long (still-extant colonies that enjoy a wide diversity of labels designating their subordinate status as dependent territories include British Gibraltar, the Falklands/Malvinas and a dozen other islands; Danish Greenland; Dutch Antilles; French Guiana, Martinique, Réunion, St Pierre and Miquelon, off Newfoundland; US Puerto Rico, Samoa, Virgin Islands; Spanish Ceuta, Melilla and the Canary Islands). Many of the islands of the Pacific remain colonies of France and the US. Although the United States, as a former colony, can according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) claim technically to be 'postcolonial', it soon went on to become a colonial power itself. The USA, the world's last significant remaining colonial power, continues to control territories that, without reference to the wishes of their indigenous inhabitants, were annexed (Hawaii in 1898, indeed the entire USA from the point of view of native Americans), taken during wars (California, Texas, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona and New Mexico, part of Colorado and Wyoming, Puerto Rico, Guam), or that were bought from other imperial powers, transactions which, on the analogy of the argument that the Elgin Marbles should be returned to Greece because they were bought by Lord Elgin while Greece was under foreign domination, can no longer be regarded as legitimate (the Louisiana purchase from France in 1803 (\$15 million), the purchase of Florida from Spain in 1819, Alaska from the Russian Imperial government in 1867 for \$7.2 million; in 1916, in what Tovalou Houénou described as a modern form of the slave trade, the Virgin Islands and their inhabitants were bought from Denmark for \$25 million).

The postcolonial era now involves comparable, but somewhat different kinds of anti-colonial struggles in those countries more recently occupied: East Timor, invaded by Indonesia when a Portuguese colony, now finally independent after a long war of resistance; Tibet by China, Taiwan by nationalist Chinese, Kashmir by India (since the initial dispute over the territory with Pakistan in 1947 was referred to the United Nations, India has stubbornly refused to carry out a UN recommendation to hold a plebiscite of Kashmir's largely Muslim population to determine whether Kashmir should become independent, or part of India or Pakistan; it continues to occupy the country by military force in the face of fierce local resistance); the Sarhaoui Democratic Arab Republic (Western Sahara) by Morocco, Palestine and the West Bank by Israel – and, as Rodinson (1973) argues, the state of Israel itself; those First

Nations seeking independence from sovereign nation-states (in Canada, Ethiopia, New Zealand, USA) or by indigenous peoples in border territories seeking independence (the Kurds, the Tamils, the Uyghur), or those suffering from the decisions of decolonization who seek union with an adjacent decolonized state (the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland who wish to join a united Ireland), or those tribal peoples who seek nothing more than their own survival, or those who were forcibly transported under colonial occupation, many of whom wish to but cannot return to their own country (the Koreans in Japan), or those fourth-world nations who seek the basic rights of legal and social equality (native Americans, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, the so-called denotified tribes in India, the hill tribes in Bangladesh, the Ainu in Japan), or those suffering from the social stigma of caste exclusion (the Dalits in India, the Burakumin in Japan), or disadvantaged ethnic minorities and impoverished classes in most countries of the world.

These struggles go on side by side while both Europe and the decolonized countries still try to come to terms with the long, violent history of colonialism, which symbolically began over five hundred years ago, in 1492: a history which includes histories of slavery, of untold, unnumbered deaths from oppression or neglect, of the enforced migration and diaspora of millions of peoples – Africans, Americans, Arabs, Asians and Europeans, of the appropriation of territories and of land, of the institutionalization of racism, of the destruction of cultures and the superimposition of other cultures (Chaliand and Rageau 1995; Ferro 1997). Postcolonial cultural critique involves the reconsideration of this history, particularly from the perspectives of those who suffered its effects, together with the defining of its contemporary social and cultural impact. This is why postcolonial theory always intermingles the past with the present, why it is directed towards the active transformations of the present out of the clutches of the past (Sardar, Nandy, Wyn Davies 1993). The postcolonial does not privilege the colonial. It is concerned with colonial history only to the extent that that history has determined the configurations and power structures of the present, to the extent that much of the world still lives in the violent disruptions of its wake, and to the extent that the anti-colonial liberation movements remain the source and inspiration of its politics. If colonial history, particularly in the nineteenth century, was the history of the imperial appropriation of the world, the history of the twentieth century has witnessed the peoples of the world taking power and control back for themselves. Postcolonial theory is itself a product of that dialectical process.

As a political discourse, the position from which it is enunciated (wherever literally spoken, or published) is located on the three continents of the South, that is, the 'Third World'. The disadvantages of the term 'Third World' have been well rehearsed. It has been subject to sustained criticism, either because identification with it has been perceived as anti-Marxist (Marxist states made up the 'Second World'), or because the notion of 'third' came to carry a negative aura in a hierarchical relation to the first and second, and gradually became associated with poverty, debt, famine and conflict (Hadjor 1993: 3–11). In this book, therefore, the term 'Third World' will be generally avoided, and the geographical, locational and cultural description of the 'three continents' and the 'tricontinental' (i.e. Latin America, Africa and Asia),

endorsed by the Egyptian–French political scientist Anouar Abdel–Malek after the first conference of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America at Havana in 1966, will be used instead (Abdel–Malek 1981, 2: 21; Gerassi 1971, 2: 745–60). It avoids the problems of the ‘Third World’, the bland homogenization of ‘the South’, and the negative definition of ‘the non-west’ which also implies a complete dichotomy between the west and the rest which two or more centuries of imperialism have hardly allowed. Above all, the tricontinental marks an identification with the great Havana Tricontinental of 1966, which initiated the first global alliance of the peoples of the three continents against imperialism, and the founding moment of postcolonial theory in its journal, the *Tricontinental*. The problems associated with the term ‘postcolonial’ will be discussed in chapter 5. Suffice it to say at this point that postcolonialism might well be better named ‘tricontinentalism’, a term which exactly captures its internationalist political identifications, as well as the source of its epistemologies.

Postcolonial – or tricontinental – critique is united by a common political and moral consensus towards the history and legacy of western colonialism. It presupposes that the history of European expansion and the occupation of most of the global land-mass between 1492 and 1945, mark a process that was both specific and problematic. The claim of this history is that there was something particular about colonialism: it was not just any old oppression, any old form of injustice, or any old series of wars and territorial occupations. Modernity theorists such as Ernst Gellner have objected that colonialism does not really merit particular attention in itself, in that its forms of oppression were really no different from those of any other conquest or assertion of power in the past, or indeed from those practised within either traditional and modern societies. Gellner argues that ‘the recent domination of the world by the west can be seen ... as primarily an aspect of the transformation of the world by a new technology, economy, and science which happens, owing to the uneven nature of its diffusion, to engender a temporary and unstable imbalance of power’ (Gellner 1993: 3). On this reading colonialism was merely the unfortunate accident of modernity, its only problem resulting from the fact that the west mistook technological advance and the power that it brought for cultural superiority. To sweep colonialism under the carpet of modernity, however, is too convenient a deflection. To begin with, its history was extraordinary in its global dimension, not only in relation to the comprehensiveness of colonization by the time of the high imperial period in the late nineteenth century, but also because the effect of the globalization of western imperial power was to fuse many societies with different historical traditions into a history which, apart from the period of centrally controlled command economies, obliged them to follow the same general economic path. The entire world now operates within the economic system primarily developed and controlled by the west, and it is the continued dominance of the west, in terms of political, economic, military and cultural power, that gives this history a continuing significance. Political liberation did not bring economic liberation – and without economic liberation, there can be no political liberation.

Whereas western expansion was carried out with the moral justification that it was of benefit for all those nations brought under its sway, the values of that spreading of

the light of civilization have now been effectively contested. This process has been going on for much of the twentieth century, particularly since the two world wars, the effect of which was not only to show that the imperial powers were militarily vulnerable, particularly to the non-western power of imperial Japan, but also to cause them to lose the hitherto unquestioned moral superiority of the values of western civilization, in the name of which much colonization had been justified. The west was relativized: the decline of the west as an ideology was irretrievable. Colonialism may have brought some benefits of modernity, as its apologists continue to argue, but it also caused extraordinary suffering in human terms, and was singularly destructive with regard to the indigenous cultures with which it came into contact. For its part, postcolonial critique can hardly claim to be the first to question the ethics of colonialism: indeed, anti-colonialism is as old as colonialism itself. What makes it distinctive is the comprehensiveness of its research into the continuing cultural and political ramifications of colonialism in both colonizing and colonized societies. This reveals that the values of colonialism seeped much more widely into the general culture, including academic culture, than had ever been assumed. That archeological retrieval and revaluation is central to much activity in the postcolonial field. Postcolonial theory involves a political analysis of the cultural history of colonialism, and investigates its contemporary effects in western and tricontinental cultures, making connections between that past and the politics of the present.

The assumption of postcolonial studies is that many of the wrongs, if not crimes, against humanity are a product of the economic dominance of the north over the south. In this way, the historical role of Marxism in the history of anti-colonial resistance remains paramount as the fundamental framework of postcolonial thinking. Postcolonial theory operates within the historical legacy of Marxist critique on which it continues to draw but which it simultaneously transforms according to the precedent of the greatest tricontinental anti-colonial intellectual politicians. For much of the twentieth century, it was Marxism alone which emphasized the effects of the imperialist system and the dominating power structure involved, and in sketching out blueprints for a future free from domination and exploitation most twentieth-century anti-colonial writing was inspired by the possibilities of socialism. The contribution of tricontinental theorists was to mediate the translatability of Marxist revolutionary theory with the untranslatable features of specific non-European historical and cultural contexts. Marxism, which represents both a form of revolutionary politics and one of the richest and most complex theoretical and philosophical movements in human history, has always been in some sense anti-western, since it was developed by Marx as a critique of western social and economic practices and the values which they embodied. The Bolsheviks themselves always identified their revolution as 'Eastern'.

If the bulk of anti-colonialist activism and activist writing in the twentieth century has operated from a Marxist perspective, for the most part it is a Marxism which has been aware of the significance of subjective conditions for the creation of a revolutionary situation, and therefore a Marxism which has been pragmatically modified to suit non-western conditions and which does not, as a result, altogether coincide with

that of the classical mainstream. As a result of that history, postcolonial Marxism does not necessarily come in recognizable universal western forms – though, in being a flexible Marxism, able to transform itself continually in response to specific historical conditions, without ever becoming dogmatically fixed, it remains close to the spirit of Marx and, particularly, Lenin. Lenin's 'orientation toward Asia and Africa' after the Bolshevik revolution, as the great Trinidadian socialist George Padmore observed, 'was a violent departure from orthodox Marxist strategy' (Lenin 1988: 233; Friedland and Rosberg 1964: 225). Postcolonialism incorporates a Marxism developed outside, and generally neglected in the west; a flexible Marxism responsive to local conditions in the three continents. There is no need to call this 'post-Marxism' – after all, capitalism transforms itself often enough without becoming 'post-capitalism' (and, it might be added, enough capitalist states have collapsed without it being subsequently assumed that this signals the end of capitalism). Postcolonial cultural critique integrates its Marxism with the politics of international rights, in doing so focusing on the central problematic for Marxism as a political philosophy, namely how socialism can be developed in a popular rather than coercive form. Human rights, including peoples' rights, should be recognized as an area of activism that supplements and supports the basic presuppositions and objectives of Marxist political theory and its commitment to human justice. It operates as an adjunct to the now recognized history of oppression by non-democratic states of all political persuasions – capitalist, socialist, militarist and fascist, in all their varieties – while also drawing attention to other marginalized forms of oppression.

Postcolonial theory is distinguished from orthodox European Marxism by combining its critique of objective material conditions with detailed analysis of their subjective effects. For this reason, it has also played a significant part in the growing culturalism of contemporary political, social and historical analysis. Some regard this culturalist tendency as a typical symptom of contemporary capitalist culture rather than an analysis that provides a critical perspective on its underlying dynamics. In this account, postcolonialism at best describes the effects of contemporary social and economic conditions, but does little either to unearth their causes or to change their basis. However, such an emphasis is not exclusive to postcolonialism: even western Marxism has been marked by increasing interest in the Frankfurt School and the British cultural materialists. In the case of the postcolonial, this development is hardly recent. Cultural politics is itself the product of the notion of cultural revolution first developed by Third World socialists and communists – by Connolly, Mariátegui, Mao, Fanon, Cabral – as a strategy for resisting the ideological infiltrations of colonialism and neocolonialism. The need for what Mao in 1944 called 'The United Front in Cultural Work' signalled the inadequacy of western Marxist economism and class politics for tricontinental societies in those situations (Mao 1965, III: 185–7). Although cultural politics was first developed as the highly visible project of the Gaelic revival by Irish intellectuals more concerned with constructing an anti-bourgeois Irish identity than with Irish independence (Foster 1988: 455), it was subsequently adopted in Ireland and elsewhere as an important means of developing anti-colonial consciousness that would unify anti-colonial struggle. It was widely promoted in

various forms by the liberation movements, while in the 1960s, cultural revolution, inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China, was adopted as a political model by feminists and black activists in the west and in the three continents. In 1969, for example, the Organisation of African Unity's First All African Cultural Festival, held in Algiers, affirmed in its Manifesto the important role of African culture in the national liberation struggle, and in the economic and social development of Africa:

Culture starts with the people as creators of themselves and transformers of their environment. Culture, in its widest and most complete sense, enables men to give shape to their lives. It is not freely received but built up by the people.... Africa's struggle has provided both material and spiritual structures within which African culture can develop and thus prove the natural dialectical correlation between national liberation and culture. For the African countries which won their freedom and for those that are in armed conflict with the colonial powers culture has been and will remain a weapon. In all cases, armed struggle for liberation was and is a pre-eminently cultural act. (Langley 1979: 791–3)

There is nothing to apologize for in the idea of cultural politics – it has always been central to the practice of liberation, and radical activists still have much to learn from its demonstrated political effectivity in developing broad-based mass movements (Mazrui 1990). For those on the left, particularly those working predominantly from an academic context, it may seem that culturalism involves a move away from more direct kinds of political action, but there are many positive theoretical arguments to be made for it: the culturalization of academic knowledges marks a shift towards a consideration of the subjective experiences of individuals, and socialized aspirations of groups and communities, that complements the traditional modes of analysis of the political and economic systems of which they form a part. The culturalization of knowledge and politics also involves a recognition of transnational and often gendered cultural differences and the significance of different forms of knowledge for different communities. This has enabled the beginnings of an international political dialogue between exponents of different systems and perspectives that rarely occurred in previous eras (Robbins 1999). One example would be the ways in which it has begun to transform the agenda and practice of mainstream political and economic activities such as Development Studies, where previously disregarded local knowledge and practices of indigenous men and women have at last begun to be taken seriously (Munck and O'Hearn 1999).

That dialogue often starts from a recognition that global power structures have not materially shifted since the end of the imperial era. Although this may seem to be self-evidently the case, this argument can run the risk of passing over the differences between the two eras, in particular by homogenizing 'the west' as well as the 'three continents' and undervaluing the economic, cultural and diasporic imbrication of the north with the south. Fanon followed Sartre's translation of Marx's dialectic of ruling vs. working classes, via Lenin's oppressed vs. oppressor nations, into a dialectic of colonizer vs. colonized. In a post-independence era this has sometimes been transformed into a further general global opposition between the first world (dominant)

and the third (subaltern). Apart from the extent to which the west includes millions of migrants, recent and not so recent, from the three continents, this simple division overrides and ignores the fact of class division within both: capitalism exploits western workers as it exploits migrant labourers, or workers in third-world factories. Postcolonial critics recognize that north-south divisions do not devalue the struggles of those oppressed through class or minoritarian status within the heartlands of contemporary capitalism. Colonialism always operated internally as well as externally, and the stratification of societies still continues. The radical political argument of a fundamental parity between those positioned at the same level in all societies was at the centre of the grand but simple internationalist slogan of the Communist Manifesto: 'Workers of the world unite!' With this injunction, Marx and Engels argued for a common approach to oppression that refuses the trap of getting caught up in nationalist oppositions and the elaboration of the narcissism of minor differences between the ideologies of nations and national identities, in favour of a collectivist activism by workers of subaltern classes around the globe. The liberation movements against the colonial powers worked in parallel, and in solidarity, with the struggles of the European working class in the metropolis, just as class struggle in India provided a historical model and well-developed practice for relations with the colonial and post-independence powers.

Today this historic international solidarity between workers against the forces of capitalism, central to any Marxist political practice, continues (Cohen and Rai 2000; Sinha, Guy and Woollacott 1999). It has also, however, often been abandoned through a simplistic assumption that 'the west' and all who live in it (including migrants who may have become postcolonial critics) are the agents of capitalism, while the non-west and all who live in it (including even the wealthy neocolonial elites) are not (Pasture and Verberckmoes 1998). This simplification is particularly evident in historical accounts of colonialism and imperialism, where it sometimes seems to be assumed that all Europeans were *ipso facto* imperialists, and all non-Europeans the victims of imperialism. In fact, the United States was the only democratic government which participated in colonial expansion (Schneider 1982: xix). In France, women did not get the vote until 1945. In the British case, a minority elite, the ruling upper class, controlled Britain as well as the British Empire well into the twentieth century: Britain and the British people were their first imperial realm (Riddell 1993: 69; Trotsky 1970). As Goldwin Smith, the radical Regius Professor of History at Oxford, argued in 1863, it was not the people but the parasitical 'imperial class' in Britain that benefited from the Empire (Smith 1863: 74). Universal suffrage was finally conceded in Britain in 1928, only three years earlier than it was granted in the colony of Ceylon, and historically coincides in fact with the beginnings of decolonization (de Silva 1981: 422). Even now, at the time of writing, Britain is not constitutionally democratic: the upper chamber of the British parliament (the House of Lords) still contains aristocrats whose right to vote on the affairs of the country is determined solely by the accident of their 'noble' birth. In the colonial era the British ruling class was as indifferent to its own working class as it was to colonized peoples: both were subject to persistent devaluation of their own cultures and both were used instrumentally for the creation

of private wealth. 'For what else was the British people', asks A. P. Thornton, '— in 1908 a population of 30 million, of which only 1 million earned above £3 a week, and wherein some 30,000 gentlemen owned 96 per cent of the land — but the largest "native race" of which imperialism had cognisance?' (Thornton 1985: 269). The oppressions carried out by colonial regimes on colonized peoples were callous and brutal, but no more so than the slaughter of millions of conscripted European soldiers — 'the mass destruction of the European proletariat', as Rosa Luxemburg observed — alongside hundreds of thousands of conscripted as well as recruited colonial soldiers from Africa and India, ordered by the European ruling classes during the First World War in the furtherance of their own interests (Carrère d'Encausse and Schram 1969: 145).

In this situation, the Bolshevik revolution that emerged from the deprivation and destruction of the First World War changed the whole dynamic not only of European class politics, but also of imperial and colonial relations: for the first time, a government of a powerful state was explicitly opposed to western imperialism in principle and practice. It was Lenin's Comintern that in 1920 offered the first systematic programme for global decolonization in its 'Theses on the National and Colonial Questions'. Since then, most Marxist states have been physically located outside Europe: in Russia, Asia, Africa and South America. Postcolonial critique incorporates the legacy of the syncretic traditions of Marxisms that developed outside the west in the course of anti-colonial struggles, and subsequently in the development of the further forms of emancipation, of gender, ethnicity and class, necessary for liberation from bourgeois nationalism. As a result, it is theoretically and historically fundamentally hybrid, the product of the clash of cultures that brought it into being; it is interdisciplinary and transcultural in its theory and has been in its effects (Bhabha 1994). Postcolonial critique is therefore a form of activist writing that looks back to the political commitment of the anti-colonial liberation movements and draws its inspiration from them, while recognizing that they often operated under conditions very different from those that exist in the present. Its orientation will change according to the political priorities of the moment, but its source in the revolutionary activism of the past gives it a constant basis and inspiration: it too is dedicated to changing those who were formerly the objects of history into history's new subjects.

The historical formation and theoretical production of these very diverse origins constitute the main subject of this book. Given the extensive range of material, this account makes no claim to be comprehensive: at best, it signals avenues for further study and research. The process of the full retrieval of revolutionary anti-colonial history still has far to go. These histories involve many distinct narratives, products of particular situations and contexts. If they have given rise to comparable political and theoretical accounts, then this is the result of the structural homology of domination by an exotic power. At the same time, since anti-colonial revolutionaries were themselves increasingly in touch with each other in different ways during the course of the twentieth century, a political and theoretical convergence took place that laid the basis for the field of 'the postcolonial'. What becomes clear from this history is that both intellectual and political positions have always been situated in relation to

contemporary entrenchments of power; when detached from these, theories do not necessarily carry their radical political effectivity with them. They must always be reshaped, resituated and redirected according to the specific, contingent location of the moment. The politics of theory conceived as a form of activism will always be that it intervenes in a particular institutional, social or cultural framework against the presuppositions or politics of its adversary. Once that context has passed, or been changed, then for the most part, the political impact of a strategic intervention is lost. Theories also have a history, and must be historically situated if their politics are to be understood. Without such directedness, postcolonial theory can easily find itself making anti-imperialist arguments that have already become part of the new dominant ideology of transnational capitalism. Theory cannot operate politically if it is conceived as operating only at a disembodied synchronic level, as if it exists in an atemporal space, without consideration of its impact in relation to specific conditions at a particular moment.

Postcolonial critique focuses on forces of oppression and coercive domination that operate in the contemporary world: the politics of anti-colonialism and neocolonialism, race, gender, nationalisms, class and ethnicities define its terrain. Interest in oppression of the past will always be guided by the relation of that history to the present. In that sense, postcolonial theory's intellectual commitment will always be to seek to develop new forms of engaged theoretical work that contributes to the creation of dynamic ideological and social transformation. Its object, as defined by Cabral (1969), is the pursuit of liberation after the achievement of political independence. It constitutes a directed intellectual production that seeks to articulate itself with different forms of emancipatory politics, to synthesize different kinds of work towards the realization of common goals that include the creation of equal access to material, natural, social and technological resources, the contestation of forms of domination, whether economic, cultural, religious, ethnic or gendered, and the articulation and assertion of collective forms of political and cultural identity. Above all, the assumption guiding postcolonial critique is that it is possible to make effective political interventions within and beyond its own disciplinary field by developing significant connections between the different forms of intellectual engagement and activism in the world today.

