Postcolonial history and the dismantling of coherent notions of identity

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The postmodern concern with dismantling coherent notions of identity has continued to influence postcolonial history written in the period 2000-2007. By ‘postcolonial history’, I refer to histories shaped by postcolonial theory as well as histories of empire, sometimes called ‘the new imperial history’, which have been written in postcolonial contexts and about the colonial experience. In dismantling coherent notions of identity, postmodern theory has destabilised the key binaries which have underpinned postcolonial history since its inception in the 1970s: centre/periphery; self/other; coloniser/colonised. In addition, the increasing diffusion of notions of identity in the postmodern era has weakened the social and moral imperatives of postcolonial histories and has coincided with the emergence of a spate of more conservative, neo-colonial histories. To some extent this has led to a shift away from questions of power in the colonial experience and a loss of connection to the ongoing reality of lived experience for peoples affected by the colonial encounter, even after decolonisation. This is a challenge that is particularly evident in the work of subaltern studies historians. However, on a more positive note, postmodernism has also helped to shape new directions for postcolonial historiography, encouraging the development of cultural histories of empire, and influencing global histories of empire in interesting and sometimes contradictory ways.
As part of its broader arguments about the socio-historical and linguistic specificity of ‘truth’, postmodernist theory has deconstructed Enlightenment constructions of subjectivity which positioned the self as fixed, unified and rational, and therefore capable of independent thought and action as an historical agent. The decentring of the Enlightenment subject forms part of postmodernists’ attempts to disassemble the grand narratives used to structure society and assign power. Jean-François Lyotard in ‘Defining the Postmodern’ invokes the atrocities of Auschwitz as a means of repudiating the claim that the idea of progress would lead to emancipation ‘profitable to mankind as a whole’. Indeed, postcolonial history has overturned the metanarrative of colonial superiority and the blessings of the civilising mission which was dominant in colonial historiography, though not universally accepted. As will be argued later, the fragmentary and deconstructive histories resulting from the demise of the grand narratives has led global historians of empire to utilise metanarratives in a way that reengages with issues of causation and the wider social and political contexts in which empires were situated ‘without reverting to excessively positivist master narratives’.

Postmodern theorists have attempted to dismantle the Enlightenment subject in a range of different and complex ways, from Foucault’s consideration of the subject as it is historically produced and constituted through discourses of power to Deleuze and Guattari’s denial of the ‘subject’ in its entirety, except as it is expressed through ‘collective assemblages of enunciation’ and their rhizomatic philosophy of becoming. These varied approaches to the postmodern subject have had strong implications for postcolonial history, particularly as definitions of collective identity, which were so central to the identity politics and history writing of the 1970s, were

1 Jean-François Lyotard, “Defining the Postmodern,” in The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, ed. Vincent B.  
challenged. For the purposes of this essay, cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s explanation of cultural identity is productive. Hall argues that identity is organised around points of similarity and difference and as such is an unstable, shifting and fragmented process of becoming, leading to the formation of multiple selves.⁴

The postmodern problematisation of identity undermines a number of assumptions of postcolonial theory. According to Chris Bayly, at the same time as postcolonial histories have been sceptical about grand narratives, they have also required the creation of new kinds of world histories to replace the old histories of empire which suggested that Western imperialism had a modernising function.⁵ One of the effects of this in earlier postcolonial histories was to create a counter narrative which tended to position the coloniser as an exploitative oppressor and the colonised as a passive victim of the colonial encounter. During the middle of the twentieth century, African, Asian and Latin American peoples who had previously been subject to European rule sought national self-determination and postcolonialism emerged out of this context. Understandably, its initial imperatives were anti-colonialist and promoted national identities for the emergent states. From this context, then, comes the assumption that that colonisation was a process of Western homogenisation; that Western imperial powers irrevocably changed indigenous cultures and societies, shaping them in their own image. This produced both positive and negative effects on the colonised peoples as they both resisted and accommodated aspects of the imperial presence, but the overarching impact was to destroy aspects of their traditional culture and society through domination. In this paradigm, the binaries of coloniser/colonised; centre/periphery; self/other are clearly invoked to structure the colonial experience.

Although influenced by both Foucault and to a lesser extent the post-structuralist Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of concepts such as centre/margin and self/other, Edward Said, in his seminal postcolonial work *Orientalism*, argues for a socially engaged criticism against the influence of linguistically oriented theories. Said focuses on the ways the West has represented the Orient in discourse and how this functions as a sign of the conquest and continued subjugation of the East. A strong Foucauldian influence can be seen in his interest in the complex inter-relations between culture, knowledge and power and his use of the term ‘discourse’ to argue about how these served imperial interests.\(^6\) Said attempts to show that ‘European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self’, invoking the binary opposition of self/other in order to analyse the ways in which discourses of orientalism operated in colonial contexts.\(^7\) Thus whilst Said’s work is influenced by aspects of postmodern and poststructuralist theory, he retains a humanist conception of identity and discusses European identity in a fairly cohesive manner.

Said’s work has been the subject of much criticism for its one-sided view of the impact of imperialism. For historians such as John Mackenzie and Chris Bayly, Said’s theory overemphasises the importance of European conquest in the construction of knowledge about non-Europeans and denies the possibility of views which saw value in Eastern cultures.\(^8\) In addition, Linda Colley challenges Said’s theory because it neglects to examine non-European empires, focusing exclusively on the West’s conception of the Orient. According to Colley, in failing to compare European and non-European constructions of empire, Said’s theory never moves beyond assertion.\(^9\) The influence

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\(^7\) Ibid., p. 1993.


of these debates can be seen in recent postcolonial histories which explore more dialogic and heterogeneous relations between coloniser and colonised as well as the appearance of comparative histories of empire.\textsuperscript{10}

Another assumption of postcolonial history that has been challenged by postmodern conceptions of identity is that postcolonial history should have an ongoing political and social purpose in giving voice to the experiences of the colonised and in suggesting ways in which the hegemony of the coloniser has been resisted with the view of empowering their descendants. While Said rejects the work of deconstruction, particularly Derrida and de Man, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak claims that deconstruction may act as a safeguard against repression and exclusion of alterities and thus may have in and of itself, an ethical function.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, she argues that by deconstructing the traditional hierarchies of binary oppositions such as West/East, it is possible for theory to enable radical politics. Introducing the concept of ‘strategic essentialism’, Spivak attempts to temporarily use identity categorisation as a means of advancing political goals which demand solidarity for effective protest.\textsuperscript{12} However, as the other is always relational to the discourse in which it is situated, Spivak cautions against the dangers of romanticising the colonial subject and situating it as victim, as this only perpetuates the dominance of western colonial discourses. In problematising the categories of self/other by introducing the notion of the subaltern, one who is at once at home in dominant discourse but also marginalised within it, Spivak suggests that identity is more complex, shifting and heterogeneous than Said had formulated: ‘the colonized subaltern subject is heterogeneous.’\textsuperscript{13} Spivak’s arguments have been strongly critiqued by claims that her work depoliticises postcolonial subjectivity. According to Benita Parry, the ethical function Spivak

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., pp. 135-137.
claims for her deconstructive approach has been undermined by its production of a ‘silent subaltern’ which is denied agency. This limits opportunities for political actions and resistance insofar as they are all implicated in discourse and therefore potentially damaging.

Homi K. Bhabha has challenged constructions of national identity and the colonial subject, instead putting forward the notion of hybridity as a way of understanding how identities evolve through the colonial experience and postcolonisation. Like Spivak, Bhabha draws on and adapts Derridean deconstruction to expose the inadequacy of the binary oppositions which have been used to structure colonial experiences. In particular, he contests the coloniser/colonised binary, suggesting that colonial identities are constructed dialogically. Through this interactive process, a complex in-between ‘third space’ opens up where hybrid identities are formed. For Bhabha, the goal is political intervention, and hybrid identities enable us to imagine a socialist community wherein cultural differences are acknowledged, not subsumed. While hybridity, as an analytical term, has the potential to be transgressive, it also risks being coopted into hegemonic narratives because Bhabha’s theory is grounded in textuality rather than lived experience. Adrian Carton argues that narratives of inbetweeness and hybridity risk oversimplification through celebratory and universalising narratives which romanticise the blurring of cultural categories while also privileging and essentialising hybrid identities through the ‘fetishism of fusion’ which effectively appropriates them back into dominant capitalist discourses.

Peter H. Hoffenberg’s An Empire on Display (2001) approaches imperialism as a cultural practice and social system through an examination of local, intercolonial and international

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exhibitions of the British Empire 1851-1914. Hoffenberg contends that exhibitions did not merely reflect society; they altered it and effectively constituted society. The crucial element is that these were sites of public history; the general public actively participated in these imagined communities in dynamic ways. The study draws on theoretical developments on the postmodern subject and hybrid identities; applying these ideas to the context of exhibitions as sites of dynamic interplay between centre and periphery. In choosing to focus on exhibitions at the centre (England), settler colony (Australia) and subject colony (India), Hoffenberg explores how exhibitions became a site of representation and an interesting social space wherein citizens at all levels of society and colonial subjects were able to participate in and explore identities and power relations. He suggests that exhibitions became ‘part of the self-conscious reworking of fluid national and imperial identities’.\(^{17}\)

The scale of his work and the places he selects for study enable Hoffenberg to examine border crossings, revealing the transnational system of the British Empire and the ways in which colonies represented themselves to the centre in different ways and how the centre responded to these.

As dynamic sites of representation, Hoffenberg contends that exhibitions offer the historian the opportunity to examine how hegemony, dissent, tension and consensus were played out between centre and periphery.\(^{18}\) As Catherine Hall has suggested, as movements across and between colonies have been increasingly addressed by postcolonial historiography, it becomes important to explore how ‘differentiated relations’ between diverse sites of empire operated.\(^{19}\) In moving away from the centrality of centre/periphery as a means of structuring the imperial experience, Hoffenberg suggests that exhibitions offer a range of complex and sometimes contradictory local, indigenous, regional, national and imperial identities. At times the symbols of these sites of Empire were evidence of tradition and incorporation into empire, at other times they

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. xvii.

were acts of independence or resistance. Australia, as a settler colony, was able to imagine itself through the ‘pioneer thesis’, a metanarrative of white settler directed progress, evidenced through the photographs of emergent cities, samples of gold and other goods which signified western notions of material advancement. In contrast, India, as a subject colony, was generally represented through the perspective of British or Anglo-Indian officials who constructed a restored past through tapestries and models of monuments celebrating ancient culture. However, Hoffenberg suggests ways in which the paradoxical ideas and culture of both the Commonwealth and colonial nationalism were able to coexist in exhibitions. In this sense he suggests that it was possible for exhibitions to simultaneously challenge and support imperial control.

Hoffenberg adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the research and construction of his history. This is informed, in part by the subject matter of exhibitions which was a collection of symbols, images and examples of ethnography, and also by his theoretical antecedents which situate the study of these in their relation to knowledge and power. He acknowledges debts to Edward Said’s theories of the literary and cultural representation of colonial power. At the same time, he also attributes his anthropological approach to the work of Bernard S. Cohn in India. Finally, Hoffenberg, situates his own work within the socio-cultural approach of John MacKenzie, which seeks to examine the workings of empire in aspects of society and representation in a broader sense than traditional, political imperial histories. The exhibitions are examined as social texts: ‘authored’ by officials and ‘read’ by those who visited the exhibitions. However, they are not merely situated in language but also analysed in terms of experience as a public textual experience. From the textual analysis undertaken, Hoffenberg suggests that there are many competing ways in which these texts may be interpreted through the guidebooks, classifications

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20 Hoffenberg, An Empire on Display, p.xiv
21 Ibid., pp. xiv-xv
22 Ibid., p. xviii.
systems and organisation of physical space and interactive, sensory displays. Hence these texts become an unstable site of both contest and control, revealing tensions between social groups and between England and its colonial subjects.

Hoffenberg’s research draws on primary and secondary materials from North American, Australian and English archives and libraries. Written sources include private and public papers of exhibitions officials, newspapers, memoirs, correspondence, diaries, exhibition catalogues and photographic albums provide a visual record of the layout of the spaces. The history is organised thematically and in case studies beginning with the conceptual underpinnings and context and exploring these in the exemplars. Interestingly, while Hoffenberg’s work takes account of the linguistic turn insofar as it seeks to examine exhibitions as sites of representation, as Antoinette Burton argues, the cultural analysis provided by Hoffenberg is underdeveloped when compared to the fairly conventional account of imperial and colonial bureaucracies in the first half of the book with its rigorous and empirical archival work.

The significance of exhibitions raises interesting questions about the value and contribution of cultural histories to the study of empire more broadly. Hoffenberg concludes that exhibitions were a conscious attempt to integrate colonial communities into Britain’s political culture and mythology, functioning as ‘spectacles of tangible fantasy, in which participants forged nations and the Empire, both imaginary and material’. Burton identifies the value of Hoffenberg’s examination of the ‘performative power of spectacle’ to constitute identities in a transnational, public context of empire. However, Catherine Hall comments that Hoffenberg claims too much for exhibitions, suggesting that they are a lens to examine economic, cultural and social forces at play in empire,

23 Ibid., pp. xx-xxxi.
25 Hoffenberg, An Empire on Display, p. xv.
26 Burton, “Reviewed work(s): An Empire on Display,” p. 849.
but not effectively exploring important issues such as gender which cut across these categories for study.\textsuperscript{27} She also questions why exhibitions should be studied in particular when there is a range of other sites for such analysis of the formation of national and imperial identities available such as churches or the home.\textsuperscript{28}

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s \textit{Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference} (2000) is an example of how subaltern studies has appropriated postmodern theory in an attempt to pursue a postcolonial agenda. A clear application of postmodern theories of subjectivity, this text uses strategies of deconstruction to examine the ways in which Western epistemology has structured colonial knowledge and thus continued to shape the hybrid identities of postcolonial India. The project of ‘provincializing Europe’ seeks to decentre ‘Europe’ as an imaginary figure in understandings of political modernity in South Asia.\textsuperscript{29} In theorising his practice of history, Chakrabarty critiques Western intellectual theories through his deconstruction of Marx and Heidegger and how their ideas are inadequate when applied to non-western contexts, specifically the South Asian context of Indian history.\textsuperscript{30} According to Chakrabarty, through the colonial encounter in India, the ideals of Enlightenment humanism, rationalism, science, equality and human rights, had on the one hand been preached by European colonisers to the indigenous population but simultaneously, those same rights had been denied them in practice. For Chakrabarty, the critique of colonisation is in itself part of the legacy of Western intellectual development and how it has been appropriated in India. Through his work, he aims to make subaltern historians more self-conscious of their Western intellectual tradition. He suggests ways in which postcolonial scholarship can be committed to engage and struggling with this tradition.

\textsuperscript{27} Hall, “\textit{Review of Books},” p. 648.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 648.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, p.18.
especially since accessing earlier forms of Indian critical thought is difficult due to cultural and language barriers.\textsuperscript{31}

Chakrabarty critiques historicism and its Eurocentric assumptions that the West was first and preeminent in history as an intellectual tradition grounded in colonial power. He also attempts to destabilise the abstract figure of the universal human in Marx’s work. Despite the clear influence of postmodernism, Chakrabarty attempts to distance himself from appearing to be directly derivative of it. His conclusion is that ‘categories and strategies we have learned from European thought are both indispensible and inadequate in representing this particular case of non-European modernity.’\textsuperscript{32} His methodology is theoretical, historical and ethnographic. His case studies include the peasants and tribal peoples of India, whom he terms ‘subalterns’ as well as the educated middle class Bengalis. He draws on case studies from his own ‘non-European life world’ in order to explore the capabilities and limitations of European categorisation in this context.\textsuperscript{33}

Unfortunately, the effect of postmodern theory on subaltern historians such as Chakrabarty has, arguably, been to create more intellectual tensions than solutions. At their height, the subaltern studies group was able to invoke collective identity, agency and resistance to promote political activism and to give voice to the subaltern in Indian history. However, postmodernism undermines these goals and has depoliticised their histories. Therefore, according to Richard Eaton, the movement has lost its ‘vitality’.\textsuperscript{34} The implications of Chakrabarty’s project to find ‘singularities’ or examples of specific social practices not subsumed into historicist narratives is a very challenging prospect which tends to encourage a shift towards micro-histories, if these ‘singularities’ can be identified at all. According to Weinstein, within the logic of Chakrabarty’s argument, it is difficult to

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p.5.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p.19.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p.20.
find a strategy which would shift the focus from Europe as centre to Europe as province, especially as the hybridised notions of Indian identity foreclose on the idea of a unified alternate narrative to the hegemonic colonial one.\textsuperscript{35} Therefore he is left with a micro-historical approach. The disadvantage of microhistories of postcolonial contexts is that they explore indigenous voices as local or fragmented and do not effectively address or challenge the macrohistorical narrative of colonial conquest which remains hegemonic.\textsuperscript{36} However, Steven Feierman, in his own project to ‘provincialise Europe’ takes a different point of departure to Chakrabarty. In his study of African history, he advocates multiple African macrohistorical narratives which privilege the history of bodily practices as alternative points of reference not defined by colonial metanarratives which may well be a productive direction from which to approach a regional history in a postcolonial context.\textsuperscript{37}

The shift to examining the ways in which those living in the empire actually experienced global identities has been the subject of much research and popularity in postcolonial historiography in recent times. This approach sees a return to more empirical methodologies and philosophies of history through the revitalisation of the metanarrative. Global historians have critiqued the postmodern tendency to lose the ‘central thread of the narrative’ through the process of fragmentation which results in ‘a confusing collage’.\textsuperscript{38} In Chris Bayly’s \textit{The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914} (2004), he contends that global uniformities increasingly characterisation the state, religion, political ideologies and economic life of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{39} Bayly suggests that the interconnectedness and interdependence of political and social changes across the world led

\textsuperscript{35} Weinstein, “World history and the Postcolonial Dilemma,” p. 87.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{39} C.A. Bayly, \textit{The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons} (Malden; Mass: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 5-12.
to ambivalent relationships between the global and local as hybrid forms of identity were developed at the same time as differences were accentuated.\textsuperscript{40} Duncan Bell’s *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (2007) and Tony Ballantyne’s ‘Empire, Knowledge and Culture: From Proto-Globalisation to Modern Globalisation’ (2002) attempt to situate histories of empire in a global context. These texts both endorse and challenge postmodern undermining of identity. In theorising the British Empire as a forerunner to globalisation of postmodern society with varying degrees of enthusiasm and effectiveness, these histories invoke complex notions of interconnected and dynamic identities for citizens of the centre and colonial subjects but at the same time, they attempt to resituate the colonial experience within a metanarrative that returns to questions of power: the history of globalisation.

The challenge for these histories of large scale is to situate the colonial and post-colonial experience within the broader and more totalising narrative of globalisation without minimising the experiences of indigenous peoples and colonial subjects at the local level. Duncan Bell focuses on the close analysis of the political theories of prominent male thinkers of the colonial centre.\textsuperscript{41} Thus, despite his claims for the more complex Understandings of national, imperial and global identity promised by a work about the project for colonial unity, and his discussion about overcoming the boundaries of space and scale, the thesis becomes homogenising instead of heterogenous insofar as the sources for analysis and the subjects of analysis are of the hegemonic group. Thus, while Bell is strongly resistant to aspects of postmodernism, he also limits the scope of his work to political history and the history of ideas at the expense of an examination of non-elite British citizens and the colonies. Bell attempts to draw parallels, not the common connection to the Roman empire, but to the United States and in that sense his work is related to the popular histories of Niall

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 9.

Ferguson which attempt to impose an anachronistic paradigm on the past wherein the United States is encouraged to look upon the British experience of empire as a model for their own empire building.

In his study of imperialism and globalisation, Tony Ballantyne, argues for the increased focus on representation and subaltern voices in postcolonial histories.\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, he advocates an exploration of the cultural aspects of imperial globalisation. Like Bell, Ballyntyne suggests that globalisation does not have a claim to uniqueness in a post-colonial world. Instead, its precursors can be seen in the overlapping networks of economic and cultural exchange of eighteenth and nineteenth century empire, wherein the peripheries provided as much intellectual development as the centre.\textsuperscript{43} This has also been argued by Chris Bayly in his study of archaic globalisation and the relations of consumers and producers between Europe and north Africa, China and the Pacific.\textsuperscript{44} Through the study of official, regional and local cultures, Ballantyne argues that colonial knowledge was established through a dialogic connection between these aspects of empire which led to ‘truly hybridized’ understandings which were neither European or indigenous.\textsuperscript{45} The sources for this project are diverse: the artefacts which circulated in ethnographic displays in museums and in exhibitions; travel writings; missionary pamphlets; ways in which cartography was being used to imagine empire and globe. He argues that European empire were ‘powerful agents of globalization, appropriating new lands and significant new sources of revenue, while moving people, commodities, technologies and ideas from colony to colony, as well as between the imperial centre and colonies in the periphery.’\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[43] Ballantyne, “Empire, Knowledge and Culture,” p. 133.
\item[45] Ballantyne, “Empire, Knowledge and Culture,” p. 128.
\item[46] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 116.
\end{footnotes}
Writing a postcolonial history which applies postmodern theory is a challenge few historians have been willing to take up in the period 2000-2007. Nevertheless, the influence of postmodernist attempts to dismantle coherent notions of identity can be seen in the postcolonial histories examined in this essay, albeit, often through resistance, rejection or modification rather than direct application. A common effect of postmodern theory seen in each of the works is the replacement of the Enlightenment subject with hybrid forms of identity, though how identity is constituted differs greatly from the extreme anti-essentialism of Foucault or Deleuze and Guattari. In the works of global historians of empire, there is a complete rejection of the demise of the grand narratives and an attempt to rehabilitate explanatory narratives as a means of exploring the increasing interconnectedness of the world and its relation to the imperial project. However, these histories consider the relation between multiple sites of empire and unlike imperialist narratives, they do not assign power to the imperial centre exclusively and consider the indigenous peoples as victims, instead the relationship is far more dialogic and heterogeneous. Cultural histories of empire examine how imperial identities have been represented through texts and in this sense are strongly influenced by postmodernism with its emphasis on textuality. However, in practice, Hoffenberg often employs empirical approaches to methodology and analysis which are reminiscent of political and social histories. Finally, the more deconstructive approaches of subaltern studies historians such as Chakrabarty are strongly derivative of postmodern theory, although this has undoubtedly restricted the capacity for these histories to offer possibilities for agency and resistance for the subaltern. In conclusion, it seems that postcolonial histories are turning away from the complexities and contradictions of postmodernism and, having learnt the dangers of essentialism, are returning to more traditional forms of history writing, with some modification.
Bibliography


