



ON THE PARTICULARITIES OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES, OR HOW POSTCOLONIALISM HAS BECOME OBSOLETE

*SOBRE AS PARTICULARIDADES DO PÓS-COLONIALISMO,
OU DE COMO SE TORNOU OBSOLETO*

*SOBRE LAS PARTICULARIDADES DEL POSTCOLONIALISMO,
O DE CÓMO SE HAVUELTO OBSOLETO*

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ABSTRACT:

I draw first on Vivek Chibber's argument that postcolonial studies fails to provide an adequate basis for a theory of human rights and a practice of global solidarity. I then introduce the Warwick Research Collective's elaboration of a new theory of world literature constructed around the concept of "combined and uneven development." I conclude by proposing a way out of the limitations of postcolonial studies.

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial studies; World Literature; Intersectionality.

On postcolonial studies particularities

For a while now I have been writing articles of literary analysis in which I comment on the particularities of postcolonial theory and its limitations. I should like to begin this essay with an anecdote. As we are taught in academic seminars, this may not be the most appropriate way of introducing my topic, but, as I hope this article will show, conventionality also has its own limitations.

My first confrontation with postcolonial academics happened almost three years ago when I attended a conference where I was scheduled to present a paper on a novel by Mozambican writer João Paulo Borges Coelho. In my presentation I intended to argue that postcolonial theory was not enough to explain and to understand the writer's novels. I had become convinced that postcolonial studies had devolved into nothing else than an academic brand, which most academics proudly wear, but which solves no literary

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problems — much less problems in the real world. I suspected that I would be alone in challenging of institutional thoughts and minds, and my suspicions were confirmed.

The session was well attended and, as I finished my presentation, I could feel the tension in the air. Soon enough, a group of loud voices were raised in consternation. They felt that I had not just attacked that precious antitoxin — the much praised theory of postcolonial studies — that counteracted dominant (Eurocentric and imperialist) ways of conducting literary and social scientific research. They also felt that I had attacked postcolonial theory's most faithful guardians. The reaction was a typical example of what I, and others (since I am not alone in the global arena of cultural critique), consider the negation of the evolution of thought. Postcolonial academics have become some kind of religious group: superior, close-minded, and untouchable. Change is off-limits, just like in most religions. At the end of the conference session, a “black sheep” broke away from the group and approached me wanting to know the name of the book to which I had referred in my presentation in support of my argument. I mused that some hope for the future still existed in academia after all.

This unconventional way of broaching serious matters brings me not only to the book that has opened my eyes regarding the pitfalls of postcolonial studies but also to the subject under consideration here: how postcolonial studies and theory have become obsolete. In the next section of my essay I will draw attention to Vivek Chibber's critique of postcolonial studies as developed in his recent book *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. In the following section, I will introduce the new theory of world literature being elaborated by the Warwick Research Collective from the perspective of the concept of combined and uneven development. WReC's work resonates deeply with Chibber's ideas and critique. The final section, I will concentrate on the concept of “Intersectionality” and how it avoids the worst consequences of the kinds of “identity politics” that have become so fashionably dominant in the academic world. These contributions serve to frame and to enable my subsequent conclusions on how the study of World Literatures, especially those of the developing world, can benefit if we expand the repertoire of our theoretical and critical toolkit.

First, however, and since postcolonial studies also had/have positive aspects that should be recognized and respected, I should like to acknowledge various strengths of a number of postcolonial theorists.

Postcolonial studies as a positive theory and also as a radical critique have been around for quite a while. Its most important non-European figures — Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Ranajit Guha, Anibal Quijano, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty — share a salient feature: they all broke ties with Marxism in the 1970s. In Portugal, much the same can be said — although in some cases to a lesser extent — of the virtuoso community of scholars centered around and led by Boaventura Sousa Santos in Coimbra.

There is much to admire in postcolonial studies. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) forcefully exposed the ideologies of exoticism and *inferior* difference imposed on the East by most Western writers — from anthropologists to travel diarists to literary and cultural critics. His work, mainly Foucauldian in methodology and effect, should be considered as foundational for postcolonial theory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose theoretical work has been inspired mainly by deconstructionists (Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man in particular), has claimed throughout most of her career equal and parallel allegiances to feminism and to communism. Her seminal — or perhaps better, “disseminal” — essay on “Can the subaltern speak?”

(1988) was itself foundational for institutionalizing the term “subaltern.” Ultimately, of course the notion of “subalternity” derives from Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, but with Spivak it acquires centrality within a major branch of postcolonial studies (especially the Subaltern Studies Group).

Following the Derridean impulse, Homi Bhabha emphasized what he, rightly or wrongly, considered to be the *aporia* (undecidability; intractable contradictions) of the subaltern’s position and stressed the (at least symbolic) potential for subverting colonial power through subaltern discourses, insofar as these may appropriate and resignify colonial logics. Ranajit Guha, whose work informed and inspired the Subaltern Studies Group, stressed the importance of anti-essentialism in the construction of subalternity, as well as the need to write “history from below.” And the art historian Siva Kumar contributed fundamentally to the notion of what he calls “contextual modernity.” This view of modernity can be seen as a forerunner to the rearticulation in Marxist terminology by Chibber and WReC of the unevenness of modernity. Within postcolonial studies proper, Paul Gilroy’s discussion of “double consciousness” also reverberates with Marxist understandings of contradictory class locations and contradictory class consciousness. Originally set forth in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The souls of black folks* (1903), the term “double consciousness” anticipates the feminist-marxist concept of “intersectionality.”

In Latin America, the Grupo modernidad/colonialidad (a.k.a. Grupo decolonial) has produced major academic contributions from the perspectives of decolonization and opposition to imperialism and colonialism. This multidisciplinary group includes such prolific figures as the sociologists Aníbal Quijano, Edgardo Lander, Ramón Grosfoguel and Agustín Lao-Montes, the semioticians Walter Mignolo and Zulma Palermo, the education theorist Catherine Walsh, anthropologists Arturo Escobar and Fernando Coronil, the literary critic Javier Sanjinés, and philosophers Enrique Dussel, Santiago Castro-Gómez, María Lugones and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. These scholars represent especially important influences in the development of the theories and practices of “Southern Epistemologies.” And their main postulate—namely, that colonialism is not the opposite of modernity but rather part of its central dynamic (its “dark side”)—can be made to dialog with the Marxist idea of “combined and uneven development.”

The research context of Portuguese postcolonial theory is dominated by researchers who are also broadly engaged with the project of identifying and elaborating “Southern Epistemologies.” These include such brilliant scholars as Boaventura Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses. Nonetheless, and as stated by Sousa and Lewis,

Global solidarity will not result from privileging an allegedly “Southern” epistemology over an allegedly “Northern” epistemology any more than it has resulted from imposing “Northern” science-for-profit (that is, science subordinated to capitalism and imperialism) on the global South. Rather, global solidarity will result from the interactions between a human epistemology (ways of knowing) dedicated to discovering the means for achieving social justice, on the one hand, and, on the other, it will emerge from internationally shared struggles and the democratic forms of organization that prove capable of channeling such knowledge globally into emancipatory political practices. (SOUSA, LEWIS, 2014, p. 44, own translation)

This last quotation brings me to the inadequacies of postcolonial studies based on some of its most enlightened critics.

On the obsolescence of postcolonial studies

As previously mentioned, Vivek Chibber’s critique of postcolonial studies, which he developed in



his recent book *Postcolonial theory and the specter of capital* (2013a), is arguably one of the most inspirational arguments for those who have become dissatisfied with the modus operandi of postcolonial studies.

Chibber focuses his critique of postcolonial studies primarily on works by Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, all of whom are founding and key members of the Subaltern Studies Group. According to Vivek Chibber in *Postcolonial theory and the specter of capital*, it was natural for these academics to take Marxism as their primary interlocutor. Nonetheless, he argues, “the primary source of the engagement with, and rejection of, Marxism has been political: a sense that the world has moved on; that dilemmas of late capitalism, particular in the Global South, cannot be apprehended by the categories of historical materialism; even more, that the failure of liberation movements in the twentieth century was, in substantial measure, the result of Marxism’s abiding theoretical inadequacies” (CHIBBER, 2013a, p. 2). As Pranav Jani explains:

Upon examining the work of Guha, Chatterjee, and Chakrabarty, Chibber claims that the key pillars of postcolonial theory are: (1) the West and the East are fundamentally different from one another, and (2) any theory seeking to understand these spaces under a common global framework is doomed to be Eurocentric. Imperialist, liberal, and even Marxist theories of global capitalism and modernity, goes the argument, end up taking the history of capitalism in northwestern Europe as the template for what has happened in the rest of the world, and all of the categories used assume that parallel. But in reality, they say, colonial capitalism was completely different than capitalism in the West and produced entirely different societies and cultures. For postcolonialists, according to Chibber, the stark difference between regions in the world proves the limits of what Marxists call capitalism’s “universalizing tendency” (its tendency to go global) and that European theories like Marxism cannot provide the theoretical or historiographical tools to discuss that difference because they either ignore cultural and historical diversity or posit narratives and subjectivities that do not exist in the Global South. (JANI, 2014, [s.p.])

In the past three decades, postcolonial studies has acquired, certainly like no other literary critical trend, an outstanding visibility. Migrating quickly from literary analysis to other subjects such as history and anthropology, and carrying with it a deep and abiding interest in culture and ideology, it substituted itself in the place previously occupied by Marxism. Thus, the main goals of postcolonial theory would be to explain in a different way the function of capitalism and to enable a contrasting critique of its resulting inequities. Asserting itself not only as a theory, but also as a radical political practice, the fascination with postcolonialism spread all over, and it continues to thrive.

Chibber comments, however, that “the challenge faced by postcolonial studies is strikingly similar to the one accepted by Marxism a century ago—to generate a theory adequate to the needs of a radical political agenda” (CHIBBER, 2013a, p. 2). He calls, nonetheless, attention to the differences:

[...] the most obvious one being that Marxism’s initial development and spread was almost entirely based in working-class organizations and political parties, while its foothold in universities was infinitesimally small. Postcolonial studies is its mirror image, having developed entirely within the university and, though drawing some inspiration from movements, rarely in more than symbolic contact with them. (CHIBBER, 2013a, p. 2-3)

Chibber highlights one of the major problems with this field of studies, i.e., the lack of a research agenda and its presentation more as a political orientation than as a theory per se. Postcolonial studies does not offer a coherent methodology, but merely a political agenda and perception. And Chibber adds:

It is not that postcolonial studies is an assemblage of theories while Marxism was not — in fact, Marxism always comprised an eclectic range of theories, much as does the former. The difference is that Marxism always sought internal coherence and systematicity, while postcolonial studies resists any compulsion to bring together and assess its various strands. Thus, as its influence has spread, the variations in what falls under its rubric have tended to increase. From literature and cultural studies, to historiography, the philosophy of history, and anthropology, it is now possible to find postcolonial theory in all these areas and elsewhere besides, but with the common “theory” increasingly hard to discern. (CHIBBER, 2013a, p. 3)

It is then easy to understand why Chibber criticizes postcolonial theory. From his point of view, it tries to do the same as Marxism — i.e., to explain the world and how to proceed in order to change it — and it fails in both realms. Postcolonial theory not only fails but also has serious conservative implications. For example, it revives such Orientalist ideas as that the West profoundly differs from the East: “it relentlessly promotes Eurocentrism [by portraying] the West as the site of reason, rationality, secularism, democratic culture, and the like, and the East as an unchanging miasma of tradition, unreason, religiosity, and so on.” According to Pranav Jani, we can compare Chibber’s formulation with that of Sarkar, a founding member of *Subaltern Studies* “who famously left the editorial collective after it turned decisively toward postmodernism” (JANI, 2014, p. 108). Jani adds:

In “The Decline of Subaltern in Subaltern Studies,” Sarkar argued that the “detachment from socio-economic contexts and determinants” in *Subaltern Studies* had led to a simplistic vision of the “subaltern” (the marginalized, the oppressed) as being frozen in time, outside of modern life. As both Chibber and Sarkar contend, postcolonial theory and subaltern studies take us back to the same orientalist representations the colonizers peddled—now repackaged by this movement in the language of radical theory. (JANI, 2014, [s.p.])

By setting itself as an opponent of the universalization propagated by Marxism, postcolonialism claims that people are not influenced by their culture, but *fully constituted* by it. In Chibber’s words, “That means their socializations is so strong, their culture and cultural indoctrination so overriding, that it can erase their understanding of their basic needs and interests, like the importance of physical well-being or individual harm” (CHIBBER, 2013b, p. 41). For Chibber, a lot is at stake if we accept this statement, since any conception of human rights stops making sense. Chibber asserts that culture is always an important element of subjectivity, but it can’t be taken as the essence of subjectivity if it makes people ignore their overall well-being.

Another argument put forward by Chibber in *Postcolonial theory and the specter of capital (PTSC)* is that, while Marxism positions itself as part of an international and universal struggle against capitalism — defending the idea that, beyond religion, color, gender, etc., the oppressed populations of the planet have interests in common in the struggle against capitalism — postcolonialism asserts that workers from non-western societies are not motivated by the same concerns as westerners, that they don’t even think in terms of their interests, i.e., that they have a consciousness essentially different from westerners. For Chibber, this conception is reminiscent of the one used by the imperialist and colonizer countries when they deny rights to Asians and Africans. In this sense, Chibber’s argument rests on the clearest of principles:

If you think people in post-colonial cultures deserve the same rights as people in rich countries do, you can only make that argument if you also believe they have the same needs and interests as the latter. To deny this is to insist that Easterners and Westerners live in different worlds. Such a theory can’t possibly sustain and support international movements as internationalism within the working class. (CHIBBER, 2013b, p. 42)



Chibber also addresses and challenges the claim made by postcolonial theory — one which is arguably one of its major fallacies — that Marxism is not different from colonial ideology because it is as Eurocentric as the latter was. Nothing could be more false, however, if one looks at Marxism’s history during the twentieth century. Chibber argues that, in fact, Marxism is the only theory that inexorably and incessantly engaged the eastern world. In his words, “The idea that it is a theory that ignores the nonwest or that it imposes western categories artificially, or that it is blind to the realities of the nonwestern world, is pretty far-fetched” (CHIBBER, 2013b, p. 42). As Jani states, “*PTSC* offers a defense, from a left-wing perspective, of universalism, totality, reason, truth, reality, progress, knowledge, and other terms and concepts that have been denigrated and caricatured by postcolonial theorists and others [...]” (JANI, 2014, [s.p.]).

Regarding the lack of internal coherence in postcolonial theory, Chibber explains the analytical confusion of postcolonialism in terms of a phenomenon typical of university culture:

This is the eagerness among academics to appear *au courant*, at the cutting edge, to display familiarity with the very latest conceptual advances. The most common means of so doing is to roll for the latest neologisms in order to pepper one’s work with them, even if only for symbolic purposes. The result is a kind of conceptual inflation, in which the substantive influence of a framework appears to extend far beyond its actual reach. (CHIBBER, 2013a, p. 3)

Moreover, the accusations levelled by postcolonial theorists against Marxism are only a way to build their own credentials: “[I]f you want to establish yourself as a radical in academia, and you don’t want any of the hits to your career that come with being a ‘Marxist,’ the first thing you have to do is say something negative about Marxism. It establishes that even though you’re on the left you’re not ‘one of them’” (CHIBBER, 2013b, p. 43).

By way of summarizing Chibber’s proposals, and beyond the positive aspects that he finds in postcolonial studies — such as the maintenance of the idea that colonialism was extremely destructive and that it engendered a pernicious ideology — what happens in general with postcolonial theory is that we are served a quantity of scholarship and argumentation that is interested in criticizing the dominant order, but which is not itself anti-capitalist. In the end, Chibber underscores, this is all that postcolonial studies has to offer. Chibber goes even further by claiming that what we have is a theory that imports from leftist academic culture the empty and presumptuous verbosity that one can find in graduate seminar rooms. According to Chibber, it is necessary “to push back against some of the silliness and obscurantism that has been propagated by postcolonial theory” (CHIBBER, 2013b, p. 44). And, as Jani once again points out, “Chibber also reinvigorates debates about universalism, asserting that in order to understand a world brought together by capitalism we need to see the world as one — not by ignoring diversity across regions but by explaining how capitalism *thrives* on the creation of difference and heterogeneity” (JANI, 2014, [s.p.]).

Literary studies: combined and uneven devopment

Chibber’s perspectives allow us to see that at least two of the presuppositions of postcolonial theory prove devastating to any attempt at establishing a coherent concept and theory of “world literature.” These are: (1) postcolonialism’s anti-universalism, and (2) its detachment of literature and culture from socio-economic contexts. Nevertheless, without a valid theory of “world literature” that enables comparative analyses of works drawn from the different “national” or “regional” literatures, it becomes impossible to

develop—much less to sustain—any explanation of “literature,” “literary practice,” and “literary criticism” in the eras of capitalist expansion, globalization, and crisis.

In their collaborative work, which recently appeared under the title *Combined and uneven development-towards a new theory of world-literature* (2015), the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) proposes a new way to redefine and to reinvent the field of literary studies such that it can emerge out of its current crisis and fall into disrepute. WReC first lends support to Chibber’s understanding of the significant ways in which postcolonial studies has failed, arguing in turn that,

[i]f [Raymond] Williams’s identification of a crisis in literary studies in 1981 can be taken to mark the emergence of various new initiatives — among them, postcolonial, ethnic and women’s studies, cultural studies itself, the epistemological and methodological interventions of poststructuralism, postmodernism and deconstruction — perhaps the current moment is marked by the recognition that these “new formations” have themselves now passed their sell-by dates. (WReC, 2015, p. 4)

WReC then moves to resituate the problem of “world literature” by “pursuing the literary-cultural implications of the theory of combined and uneven development” (WReC, 2015, p. 6)². This paradigm shift involves re-conceptualizing the notion of modernity, which means “de-linking it from the idea of the ‘west’ and yoking it to that of the capitalist world-system” (WReC, 2015, p. 15). The theory of combined and uneven development originated in the work of Engels, Lenin and Trotsky³; more recently, Frederic Jameson has described the world literary system as “one and unequal” (JAMESON, 1982; 2013). As WReC authors remark: “The theory of ‘combined and uneven development’ was therefore devised to describe a situation in which capitalist forms and relations exist alongside ‘archaic forms of economic life’ and pre-existing social and class relations” (WReC, 2015, p. 11). So, in the first instance, WReC defines “world literature” as “*the literature of the world-system* — of the modern capitalist world-system, that is” (WReC, 2015, p. 8). This implies that we need to understand modernity as always governed by *unevenness*: in other words, as

the historically determinate ‘coexistence’, in any given place and time, of realities from radically different moments of history [...]. The multiple modes in and through which this “coexistence” manifests itself — the multiple forms of appearance of unevenness — are to be understood as being connected, as being governed by a socio-historical logic of combination, rather than as being contingent and asystematic. (WReC, 2015, p. 12)

In the same manner, WReC argues that we need to recognize that capitalist development does not “smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course” (WReC, 2015, p. 12). Another key element is that “modernity is neither a chronological nor a geographical category. It is not something that happens — or even happens *first* — in ‘the west’ and to which others can subsequently gain access” (WReC, 2015, p. 13). Capitalist modernization entails development, “but this ‘development’ takes

2 See also Davidson, 2014; Trotsky, 1906.

3 The authors explain that Trotsky amplified Marx and Lenin’s work by formulating an “elaborated theory of ‘uneven and combined development’, by way of analyzing the effects of the imposition of capitalism on cultures and societies hitherto un- or only sectorally capitalized. In these contexts — properly understood as imperialist, as Trotsky noted — the imposed capitalist forces of production and class relations tend not to supplant (or are not allowed to supplant) but to be conjoined forcibly with pre-existing forces and relations. The outcome, he wrote, is a contradictory ‘amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms’ — an urban proletariat working in technologically advanced industries existing side by side with rural populations engaged in subsistence farming; industrial plants built alongside ‘villages of wood and straw’; and peasants ‘thrown into the factory cauldron snatched directly from the plow’ (1967: 432)” (WReC, 2015, p. 10-11).



the forms also of the development of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development” (WReC, 2015, p. 13). WReC thus emphasizes that the “idea of some sort of ‘achieved’ modernity, in which unevenness would have been superseded, harmonized, vanquished or ironed out is radically unhistorical” (WReC, 2015, p. 13). “Alternative” modernities, as they have been attempted in recent state projects (for example, in Mozambique or Cubanized Angola), thus do not really represent a solution, since they derive from an “assumption as to the ‘western’ provenance of modernity — rather than [from] situating it in the context of *capitalism as a world-system* — ... both misguided and unnecessary” (WReC, 2015, p. 14). These modernities are better understood, in the authors’ perspective, as “peripheral modernities (as long as peripheral is understood only as a relationship to the centers of capitalism [...]), in which all societies shared a common reference provided by global capital and its requirements”⁴ (WReC, 2015, p. 14). According to WReC, such an understanding “should challenge our uncritical habit of conflating epistemological and chronological primacy (‘modernity happened in Europe first and best, and then in other places’, etc.), and get us into the habit of systematic thinking in terms of non-linear conjunctions” (WReC, 2015, p. 15).

Two main ideas drawn from WReC should be kept in mind: 1) capitalism should be understood to be the substrate of world-literature (its “political horizon”; 2) modernity should be understood as constituting world-literature’s subject and form: “modernity is both what world-literature indexes or is ‘about’ and what gives world-literature its distinguishing formal characteristics” (WReC, 2015, p. 15)⁵.

WReC’s argument can be condensed into the following summary assertions: “a single but radically uneven world-system; a singular modernity, combined and uneven; and a literature that variously registers this combined unevenness in both its form and its content to reveal itself as [...] world-literature” (WReC, 2015, p. 49). World-literature is thus an analytical category and not one centered in, or by, aesthetic judgement.⁶ On WReC’s view,

the value of literary-world systems theory lies in the fact that it enables comparison of discrepant literary subunits and social formations of the world-system, both at the same point in chronological time and at congruent conjunctures in the recurring rhythmic cycles of capitalism — Russian and Brazilian novels of the 1880s, for instance, or those from the Austro-Hungarian empire and Ireland in the early twentieth century [...]. (WReC, 2015, p. 68)

In my opinion, it is only by following WReC’s proposed reconceptualization of world-literature that a comparative perspective is possible without falling into the same, well-known pitfalls of postcolonial theory (anti-universalism and detachment from socio-economic contexts). I indicated above that, in the same way that Chibber foresees alternative forms of globalization and affirms an authentic form of universalism (solidarity) — forms which are capable of countering capitalist forms of globalization and fraudulent ideologies of “universalism” — so also WReC’s theory of “world literature,” with its new way of practicing “comparative literature,” counters the Eurocentrism embedded in older theories of “world literature” as well as in the institutionalized discipline of “comparative literature.” Indeed, the concept of

4 WReC here is following Harroootunian insights that “If modernity is understood as the way in which capitalism is ‘lived’ — wherever in the world-system it is lived — then ‘however a society develops’, its modernity is coeval with other modernities, ‘is simply taking place at the same time as other modernities’” (WReC, 2015, p. 14-15).

5 On these questions also see Jameson 2013 and Jameson 1981.

6 In their analysis, they treat “the novel paradigmatically, not exemplarily, as a literary form in which combined and uneven development is manifested with particular salience, due in no small part to its fundamental association with the rise of capitalism and its status in peripheral and semi-peripheral societies as an import which is in Jameson’s words ‘as much a component of modernization as the importation of automobiles’ (202:476)” (WReC, 2015, p. 16).

“combined and uneven development” intertwines not only the socio-economic contexts but also the literatures and cultures of the East and the West, and the North and South, in dynamic, interactive relationships within a singular, contradictory, and unequal modernity. WReC’s theory, unlike postcolonialism, thereby facilitates emancipatory political practices.

Intersectionality

The anti-universalism of postcolonial theory leads it to divide the literatures and cultures of different nations and regions into four incommensurable worlds: First World (US, UK, Europe); Second World (white-skinned Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa); Third World (India, Africa, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia); Fourth World (indigenous and aboriginal populations).⁷ Because postcolonialism entails the premise that almost every significant dimension of “lived experience” differs from one “world” to another, a focus on the constitution of identities and subjectivities predominates as the effect of postcolonial theory upon postcolonial literary criticism. The detachment of literature and culture from holistic socio-economic contexts then determines that postcolonial literary criticism becomes reluctant to, and indeed incapable of, discerning relationships among the lived experiences of individuals and groups in socio-economic contexts defined by a combined and uneven process of capitalist expansion, development, and crisis.

“Intersectionality” is a concept whose full relevance to the argument of this essay will be made clear in my conclusion. Yet I wish to indicate at this point that “intersectionality” preserves postcolonialism’s anti-Eurocentrism and its anti-imperialism, while at the same time solving the theoretical and political problems created by postcolonial literary criticism’s anti-universalist concern with identity, as well as with its consequent abstraction of subjectivities from processes and phases of capitalist modernization. “Intersectionality” thus provides a concrete buttress to WReC’s theory of “world literature” and the cultural implications of the concept of “combined and uneven development.”

As a way of introducing “intersectionality,” let us consider cases of what is often termed “identity politics.” These will illustrate and confirm two points: (1) the symbolic creation of new identities requires materialization in political practices, and (2) identities are never singular, and that fact opens up the possibility of solidarity.

For example, the recognition, celebration, and appreciation of Afro-American culture within the African-American population in the United States helped centrally to consolidate an Afro-American identity. But Black liberation would have been impossible without the organized struggles carried out by The Universal Negro Improvement Association, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, The Black Panthers, or The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, as well as by other lesser-known groups. In this way, the formation of Afro-American identity during the twentieth-century required materialization in social practice as a condition for Black self-emancipation.

And what is true for the forms of struggle that powered the 1960s Black liberation movement — creating new Afro-American identities from older Afro-American subjectivities — is also true for other self-determining assertions of identity (Black Lives Matter today; the National Organization for Women; the LGB-

⁷ On the question, for example, of the concept and existence of “Third World Literature” and “Indian Literature,” see Aijaz Ahmad, *In theory: classes, nations, literatures*, London: Verso, 1992. p. 43-72 and p. 243-286.



TQ movement; Aztlán and the Chican@ movement; the American Indian Movement). Indeed, the successful emergence of such identities requires materialization in social practices, and in that sense the mobilization of social movements can precisely be said to transform “subjects” (individuals and groups as passively defined by a social system) into “agents” (individuals and groups as actively transforming a social system).

There subsists, of course, a certain reification of “identity” in what we have just affirmed. Even in the case of identities based on self-determination — ones that are articulated for the purpose of self-emancipation — these in fact lack seamless homogeneity. They may be said to embody their own (stronger or weaker) contradictions in particular historical conjunctures, such as tensions between women of color and white women, Cuban-American Hispanics and Mexican-American Latinos, gays and lesbians, Native Americans who continue to live on reservation territories and those who have relocated, full-time workers and the precariat, Oprah and Sojourner Truth.

Moreover, and now in a positive sense, identities lack seamless homogeneity because aspects of any individual subject’s identity simultaneously converge with other social identities, even when the individual’s subjectivity is constructed by an identitarian discourse as, in its essence, divergent. That is why it is necessary to introduce the concept of “intersectionality” into any discussion of “identity.” And, indeed, for our purposes “intersectionality” has much to contribute to a discussion of the relations between the identities of the global North and West “vs.” the global South and East in the context of postcolonial theory.

“Intersectionality” is a concept put forward by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw and developed in various ways by Patricia Hill Collins, the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith, Angela Davis, and others. It is meant to capture two realities: (1) an oppressed individual, such as a Black woman, experiences multiple forms of oppression simultaneously (gender, race, and, in the majority of instances, social class); and (2) systems of oppression transcend singular identities. Thus Black men are ensnared in the same practices of racism that afflict Black women. Forms of oppression and exploitation based on sexual preference, social class, religion, and ethnicity similarly cut across gender boundaries, nationalities, races, and creeds. In all of these cases, the isolation and vindication of a singular identity masks (1) the fact that multiple oppressions are integrated into an overall social system; and (2) the fact that those who suffer a particular form of oppression which others do not suffer still have an interest in allying with those others, since at some point(s) the oppression(s) each one experiences intersects with the oppression(s) experienced by others.

Views of knowledge and of politics based on “intersectionality” thus avoid the worst consequences of the kinds of “identity politics” that have become so fashionably dominant in the academic world. “Intersectionality” means precisely that one has an interest in fighting against all forms of oppression and exploitation. Moreover, it means that one does not need to personally experience a specific form of oppression (racial, gender, national, class) in order to become an effective fighter against that oppression. In this sense, “intersectionality” reveals the limits of social movements based on “identity,” including nationalist or regionalist movements whose politics reify the identities on which they are based.

Here is an example of how “intersectionality,” because of its alternative understanding of identities, can provide for different kinds of reading and interpretation than those allowed by postcolonial literary criticism. In his most recent book, *Água, uma novela rural*, Mozambican writer João Paulo Borges Coelho portrays the tragedy that drought and flooding cause in all southern Africa. The plot of the novel can be

situated in Mozambique, but since there are no specific references to names of towns or villages, the reader can cross the bridge of location and actually compare it with other literary (or real) cases that allude to the lack of water, food and sanitation of poor populations. To my mind, for example, comes the Angolan writer Ondjaki's book *Os transparentes*, where water, or its lack, is also continuously mentioned. Many more examples could be given, but one should suffice. Even though the two novels are written in completely different styles, their authors touch on some common basic concepts which can be, in this case, summed up in a simple expression: the misery and invisibility of certain groups of the African population caused by the negligence of a small, elite social fraction engaged in the unequal capitalist distribution of wealth. Similar comparisons could be constructed for writers addressing water problems in Latin America (e.g., Bolivia, Brazil) as well as in the so-called First-World (e.g., Flint, MI; Owens Valley, CA). The point here is that the concepts of "intersectionality" and of "world literature as combined and uneven development" enable *cognitive* apprehensions of the processes and effects of capitalist globalization. Thus these concepts empower effective forms of anti-capitalist political practices (including Feminist Marxism, anti-imperialism, and non-corporate forms of environmentalism).

Conclusion

"Intersectionality" is thus key to understanding the very real limits of postcolonial theory, not only with regard to its false philosophic-political assertion of the cognitive and political insularity and incommensurability of North and South and East and West, but also with regard to its inability to promote new cultural knowledge aimed at understanding world literature as a system and modernity as a process historically enmeshed within capitalism. Intersectionality; *world* literature as a function of combined and uneven development: these ideas not only strengthen postcolonial studies but they also strengthen Marxist literary and cultural theory. As Sharon Smith argues, intersectionality as an approach to "fighting oppression does not merely complement but also strengthens Marxist theory and practice — which seeks to unite not only all those who are exploited but also all those who are oppressed by capitalism into a single movement that fights for the liberation of all humanity" (SMITH, 2013-14, p. 21). Smith adds:

As an additive to Marxist theory, intersectionality leads the way toward a much higher level of understanding of the character of oppression than that developed by classical Marxists, enabling the further development of the ways in which *solidarity* can be built between all those who suffer oppression and exploitation under capitalism to forge a unified movement. (SMITH, 2013-14, p. 22)

It would seem that the impossibility of solidarity (East vs. West; North vs. South) that has been institutionalized by postcolonial studies can be overcome and surpassed by ways of reading and thinking about literature and the social world that bring together writers, books and readers from different, yet *intersected*, spaces and histories within a common effort to overpower the inequalities created by capitalism.

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RESUMO:

Em primeiro lugar, concentro-me no argumento de Vivek Chibber de que os estudos pós-coloniais falham em fornecer uma base adequada para uma teoria de direitos humanos e uma prática de solidariedade global. Posteriormente, apresento a elaboração de uma nova teoria de literatura-mundo fornecida pelo Warwick Research Collective e construída em torno do conceito de “desenvolvimento combinado e desigual.” Concluo propondo uma saída para as limitações dos estudos pós-coloniais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Estudos pós-coloniais; literatura-mundo; interseccionalidade.

RESUMEN:

En primer lugar, me centro en el argumento de Vivek Chibber, que defiende que los estudios postcoloniales no ofrecen una base adecuada con vista a una teoría de los derechos humanos y a una práctica de solidaridad global. Posteriormente, presento la elaboración de una nueva teoría de literatura-mundo, facultada por el Warwick Research Collective y construida alrededor del concepto de “desarrollo combinado y desigual.” Propongo, en la conclusión, una salida para las limitaciones de los estudios postcoloniales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Estudios postcoloniales; literatura-mundo; interseccionalidad.

