

Revisiting Western Cultural Anthropology from a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

Western anthropology has always been concerned with intensive investigation of indigenous people and their cultures. By scrutinizing these people's rituals, traditions, ceremonies, religions and their tribal practices, Western ethnographers have sought to highlight the so-called civilizational gap between the white race and the „primitive“ other. For example, the works of Edward Burnett Tylor, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead and Clifford Geertz provide „thick“ descriptive ethnographic accounts of these societies, namely in Africa, Asia, the West Indies and the Pacific Ocean. These accounts and narratives were, on the one hand, highly instrumental for imperial hegemonic nations to legitimize the “civilizing mission” that was deemed a „noble“ duty; on the other hand, they are infused with the stereotypical lexicon that portrays the non-white as backward, uncivilized, irrational and, therefore, incapable of embracing Western moral, cultural and epistemological progress. This paper, then, addresses Western cultural anthropology from a postcolonial perspective. By drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism* Frantz Fanon's „neurotic“ experience of blackness, and Homi Bhabha's theory of Third Space, the paper seeks to expose, analyse, debunk colonial/stereotypical discourse embedded in Western cultural anthropology and critique the ramifications of colonialism which are clearly manifested in neo-colonialism or “epistemic violence.”

Keywords: Cultural Anthropology, Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Ethnography, Blackness, Third Space.

I. Introduction

Traditional anthropology is often accused of aligning with Western colonial project. Early anthropologists were engaged in collecting immense and substantial information about indigenous races and cultures through field- work or ethnographic research. By adopting immersive strategy through their mixing up with natives, they sought to pave the way to the colonial enterprise. The proliferation of ethnographic books, articles and travel narratives systematically represent the native other as uncivilized, backward, irrational, primitive and in need of the white man to bring him to “civility.” (Thiranagama et al, 2018).

The theory of “Evolutionism” went even further by attempting to scientifically demonstrate the indigenous physiological inferiority. It was claimed that only the white race reached the state of biological perfection; hence the white are endowed with „natural“ disposition for civilization, and it is their „noble“ duty to help other non-white races get out of their state of primitiveness (*Men to Men*, 2004).

In this context, anthropologists could not transcend their Eurocentric/Ethnocentric position. They adopted the same stance which bred a racial and civilizational dichotomy: White VS Other. Post-colonial writers and critics have drawn an analogy between anthropology and colonialism, as in the following quotation:

Few topics in the discipline of anthropology areas important, and controversial as colonialism. The historical origins of anthropology are rooted in the colonial enterprise, thus forever linking colonialism and anthropology. As such, colonialism is one of the most widely explored and written about subjects in the history of anthropology... Generally associated with European imperial powers, colonialism and the colonial project include political and legal domination over a subordinate people... and the construction of racial and cultural difference that privileged the colonial ruler over the population they ruled. (Kroll-Zeldin, 2021).

The historical correlation between anthropology and colonialism is undeniable. That anthropology was seriously entangled in the colonial project also stands uncontested. Colonial powers created racial and cultural hierarchies to subordinate indigenous/colonized people through political and cultural domination. Local cultures, languages and institutions were seriously and systematically vitiated,

leading natives to go through a process of alienation and cultural hybridization.

As a consequence, the colonized were compelled to reconsider the very core of their identity. They were dragged to a “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991) or in Bhabha’s terms a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) where natives experienced a new state, a state of ambivalence or power imbalance. Power was uncontestedly in favour of the colonizer who sought to impose his knowledge on locals through a series of practices and institutions targeting education, administration, public space and the media.

Anthropology and Colonial Expansionism

The colonial encounter was a driving force that transformed the world’s political and cultural map. Powerful cultures and languages extended their dominance and hegemony over subordinate/subaltern races (Spivack, 1985, p.66). Imperial forces created political and discursive/power - based systems to perpetuate their rule and control.

This colonial project was intrinsically consolidated by the works of Orientalists and Anthropologists who wrote books and narratives that framed natives in a state of symbolic lethargy/stagnation. That is to say, they are incapable of any intellectual or civilizational progress; they do not possess the same learning and power like the white man.

On the other hand, Western Anthropologists promoted a propagandistic discourse about the so-called „noble“ and civilizing aims of their colonial empires (Petitjean, 2006, p. 2). In this context, Edward Said points out that “every single empire in its official discourse... has said that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy... there is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires...” (Said, 2003).

Western intellectuals were strongly involved in the colonial enterprise. To consider colonialism a mere political and military process only would be sheer hallucination. Intellectuals, among them Anthropologists, played a decisive and epistemological role in the expansion of colonialism. They engaged in field-work, hired informants, made interviews and dwelt for months and years in “Third World” communities to end up by producing ethnographic narratives, documents and textbooks.

These ethnographic materials were instrumental in the colonial process; they provided the necessary knowledge about the native other through documenting and describing the very core of his social and cultural fabric. In Clifford Geertz’s theory ethnography must be engaged in “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), that is to comprehend both the practice of cultures and their symbolic signification for the Natives.

The correlation between anthropology and colonialism is, therefore, an evident historical fact. The “congruence between social science and imperialism was quite remarkable. Theoretical fidelity to colonial interests, to the forces of oppression was almost absolute” (Onoge, 1979, p.45). Definitely, social sciences served the interests of the colonial project; Western Ethnographers were conscious of the colonial establishment and “the mission of civilization” that the colonizer propagated to dissimulate his expansionist intentions.

In his anthropological project, Bronislaw Malinowski advocated the “colonial politics.” His aim was to enlighten the colonizer and to contribute in the realisation of his “mission of civilization.” He even appealed to the colonial forces to sponsor “anthropological investigation” for the sake of maintaining a strong grip over the colonized:

The conclusion of the anthropologist was that Europeans of “good-will” should expand their cultural charity in order the smooth incorporation of Africa and Africans not be impeded. The possibility that the “receptor” culture might refuse incorporation and synthesis, on any terms, is not readily accommodated into Malinowski’s methodology. (Onoge, 1979, p. 50).

One of the tasks of anthropology was to ensure “the stability of the colonial system.” To fulfil this aim, it provided theoretical and practical background knowledge that would consolidate colonialism as a practice and discourse. In his book *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Talal Asad argues that the “anthropologist...was prepared to accept the whole colonial system...because he was impressed by its obvious success in maintaining itself...” (Asad, 1995, p.114).

Anthropology in the Post-Colonial Age

In the post-colonial era, several disciplines and concepts have undergone profound changes in

their core meaning. Third World nations initiated a kind of cultural and academic revolution conducted by eminent scholars who decided to transform and reinvent Western epistemological and discursive assumptions. Many post-colonial intellectuals studied in the West, accessed Western scholarship, and experienced Western hegemony. At the same time, they became aware of the cultural and social inequalities that exist between the West and the Third World.

Post-colonial writing is, then, an attempt at destabilizing these inequalities through a body of literature produced by Third World writers. These writers seek to critique power relations underlying colonial texts and Eurocentric discourse. Post-colonial critics consider texts part and parcel of the colonial enterprise, embedding discursive practices that represent/essentialize the post-colonial subjects as inferior and uncivilized beings.

Colonial texts constitute the continuity of colonialism and Western cultural hegemony. They are sites of colonial discourse which positions the white man in the center and the non-white other in the periphery/margin. They should by no means be seen as dissociated from Western ethnocentric consciousness which internalizes the absolute superiority of the white race.

Post-colonial scholars, therefore, argue and write in favour of the other. Their outspoken aim is to dismantle colonial discourse and to write back to Western hegemony. Not only this, but also to give voice and agency to post-colonial subjects, to enable them to speak from the center, from a position of power.

They have seized “the language of the center” and adapted it to post-colonial context. They speak and write in the language of the colonizer in order to challenge him with his own “medium of power.” By doing so, they also attempt to foreground their distinctiveness and differences from the imperial center, as lucidly stated by Bill Ashcroft et al: “The idea of „post-colonial theory“ emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing. Indigenous theories have developed to accommodate the various cultural traditions...” (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1989, p. 11). It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial.

The post-colonial state is characterized by a spirit of challenge, revisionism and cultural decolonization. All that was held as absolute truth in Western discourse has been subjected to intensive scrutiny by post-colonial academics whose vociferous aim has been to revise and deconstruct stereotypical assumptions and tropes that fix Natives in a permanent state of inertia. They write to generate a counter-discourse, a discourse that seeks to „re- inscribe“/re-write the Natives“ voice and re-historicise their subject position from a post-colonial perspective.

Most post-colonial writers emanate from the Third World, but they often write from the center. Edward Said was among the firsts to launch, through his masterwork *Orientalism*, the post-colonial academic debate. Said adopted Michel Foucault’s power knowledge theory and discourse, Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, and Jacques Derrida’s method of deconstruction to reflect on and dismantle Eurocentrism. In *Orientalism* Said argues that the Orient is a Western construct, a re-invention and a fantasy of Western consciousness. He criticizes the systematic representation of the Orient as a land of primitiveness, exoticism, mystery, ignorance and backwardness or in Said’s terms “a living tableau of queerness” (Said, 1978).

For Said, the Orient was re-invented to suit Western domination and „systems of representations“: To restore a region from its present barbarism... to instruct ... the Orient in the ways of the modern West...to subordinate or underplay military power in order to aggrandize the project of glorious knowledge acquired in the process of political domination of the Orient; to formulate the Orient, to give it shape, identity, definition with full recognition of its place in memory, its importance to imperial strategy, and its “natural” role as an appendage to Europe... (Said, 1979, p. 86).

Indeed, the Orient was reconstructed to become a stage of Western fantasy, consciousness and imperial power. It was also framed to gratify or satiate Europeans“ voyeuristic visions/pleasures and knowledge that were nurtured by the myths of *The Arabian Nights*, Harem, belly –dancers, and Aladdin, circulated by Orientalists and Anthropologists. These latter endeavoured to depict a different Orient, depleted/deprived of its geographical, social, cultural and civilizational distinctiveness and plurality. The Orient has always been systematically homogenized as a historical and static entity. This is why Said

argues that Orientalists, Western Anthropologists and Artists were all engaged in perpetuating the same discursive and stereotypical image of Orient and Orientals.

Edward Said's post-colonial project was enhanced by other Scholars who contributed to making post colonialism a worldwide academic field of research. Homi Bhabha rose as an outstanding figure who gave postcolonial theory a new scope. He represents the voice of the Subalterns/Natives in the Western center. He is mainly concerned with investigating the state of post-coloniality, that is the ways post-colonial societies experience the impacts of colonialism and negotiate their ethnicities, cultures, languages and identities.

Bhabha believes that post-colonial experience is characterized by its complexity generated by the colonizer-colonized encounter. This encounter has led to a state of „ambivalence“ which is a psychoanalytical term employed by Bhabha to describe the colonized-colonizer fluctuating/ unstable relationships in the post-colonial space. Bhabha argues that Western ethnocentric discourse is disrupted/ molested by the compelling presence/resistance of the colonized/ native, leading the colonizer to lose his “absolute authority or un-questionable authenticity.” On the other hand, the colonized other is torn/split between two conflictual psychological positions. First, he is a „racialized subject“ produced by the experience of colonialism. Second, he has agency and power to denounce and refute dominant meanings and tropes. (Olson and Worsham, 1998)

Bhabha's contribution to postcolonial studies is mostly connected to the concept of “third space” which is a liminal and changing space. It is a space of in between where cultures and identities are in a state of constant formation, transformation, and becoming. Bhabha believes that cultures are not static or homogeneous; there is a continuous cross-cultural exchange between the colonized and the colonizer which leads to a state of hybridity and breeds “hybrid identities.” Bhabha blurs Edward Said's method of binary opposition. He considers the third space an open and dynamic site of negotiation between the colonizer and colonized, also a venue for resistance, agency and counter discourse. Bhabha's third space transcends unity and fixity:

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or „purity“ of cultures are untenable... It is that Third Space... which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensures that the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity. (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 54-55).

The transformative aspect of Bhabha's third space allows cultures and identities to engage in an unrelenting/continuous dialogic/interactive relationship between colonized and colonizer, producing new meanings and representations and creating a hybrid space, a continuously mutable space.

Fanon and the Experience of Blackness

Postcolonial theory gained momentum with Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytical investigation of “Blackness.” Fanon experienced French colonization of Algeria and its impacts on Algerian people. He deeply felt the psychological wounds of colonization and its cultural and racial ramifications which drove him both to support Algerian resistance and inspired him to conceptualise and theorize on the colonial experience, as a Black other and a scholar. Fanon was shocked by the violent and racist practices of the colonizer which led him to a state of disillusionment: “the order is given to reduce the inhabitants of the annexed country to the level of superior monkeys in order to justify the settler's treatment of them as beasts of burden. Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanize them.” (Fanon, 1961, p. 15).

Fanon, the Psychiatrist, used his medical and psychological knowledge to project onto Black consciousness and skin. Being colonized means being coerced/ compelled to adopt the colonizer's culture and language so as to compensate for the feeling of inferiority inflicted by the white man's racial prejudices. Speaking the colonizer's language means assuming his culture, and, thus, sinking into a state of alienation or psychological “disjuncture“/ disconnectedness between consciousness and black skin. Adopting the colonizer's culture and language is an attempt to escape from blackness which the colonizer associates with evil; it is a metaphorical white mask to cover the black skin, which Fanon

considers a “neurotic orientation.” (Fanon, 1986).

The following quotation clearly illustrates this neurotic conflict inherent in blackness as a result of the white man’s racial stereotypes:

The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority... The Negro’s behaviour makes him akin to an obsessive neurotic type, or, if one prefers, he puts himself into a complete situational neurosis. In the man of color there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence. Whenever a man of color protests, there is alienation. Whenever a man of color rebukes, there is alienation. (Fanon, 1986, p. 60).

Fanon reflects on the psychological tumult of colonial encounter. On the one hand, he criticizes the colonizer’s subjugation of the colonized consciousness by constructing a body of racial assumptions that fix Blackness as a signifier of evil and backwardness. On the other hand, Fanon laments Blacks’ obsession with their skin colour which they have internalized/accepted as a sign of inferiority, leading them to a neurotic/paranoic situation.

Fanon’s psychoanalytical approach is his major contribution to post colonialism. His theory of „double consciousness“ epitomizes the inward conflict experienced by the colonized that identifies himself through the colonizer. By feeling inferior, he endeavours to appropriate and mimic the culture of the white man, embracing, therefore, two identities which reflect a “divided self-perception.”

By conceptualising Blacks relationships with the White, Fanon has exposed the multiple facets of colonialism. He has unravelled the psychological, political and racial tropes that infuse the colonial discourse and Western cultural anthropology. Fanon’s scholarship has served as a landmark in the evolution of post- colonial studies and the revision of Western ethnographic writing.

This is the general framework where we can position cultural anthropology in the post- colonial age. The decolonization process also involves a direct dismantling and critique of the powerful Western discursive apparatus, anthropology. Post-colonial Scholars and Anthropologists have undertaken a deconstructive strategy in order to rethink ethnographic narratives in a globalized world where traditional concepts of nation, identity, culture, race and geography have been redefined. The world has been shrunk into a global space that subsumes multiple cultures, identities and ideologies; it is a space that has trespassed locality and physical boundaries, creating, thus, a new, fluid and porous landscape.

New digital technologies have largely contributed in shaping the global space we live in today. In fact, people have constructed virtual communities which transcend the defining constituents of traditional communities. These new online aggregations have generated new definitions, concepts, practices and mindsets that flow constantly on cyberspace and provide the very fabric of the new electronic society.

Since the outset of technological revolution, the media have always been a shaping force of people’s life. The media have been, gradually and pervasively, permeating all spheres of human activities. In this context, anthropology, or more accurately cyber anthropology, is now shifting online through the “netnographic” (Kozinets, 2020) study of virtual/electronic communities which could reflect new forms of power relations, eurocentrism and digital divide.

II. Conclusion

It is, therefore, imperative to deeply and conscientiously rethink Western anthropology and ethnographic narratives that were unquestionably dipped into the colonial enterprise and the cultural ramifications that followed suit. By fixing indigenous people within the same representational lexicon of backwardness, savagery and primitiveness, Western ethnographic texts did not only intentionally participate in the colonial expansionism. They still continue to work as discursive sites that nourish Eurocentric stereotypes about the non-white other, and provide, therefore, a substantial niche for neo-colonialism. Here comes the vital function of postcolonial writers and scholars, who have been engaged in a long, tedious, but valuable endeavour to expose, analyse and critique the colonial assumptions and stereotypes that intrinsically seep into Western ethnography. Edward Said’s work on Orientalism is by far a powerful breakthrough in the history and practices of colonialism. Said has, indeed, dismantled the myth of the superiority of the white race and culture by drawing on Foucault’s power-knowledge theory and discourse on the one hand, and Derrida’s concept of deconstruction on the other hand. Through the

implementation of binary opposition and Lacan's mirror- image theory, he unequivocally stated that power relations have always defined Western political and cultural agenda *vis-à-vis* the non- white other.

We have also seen how Frantz Fanon interpreted Blackness psychoanalytically through the experience of colonialism. For Fanon, the Blacks' trauma is a consequence of their inferiority complex towards the White colonizer's violent and racialized practices. To alleviate this psychological colonial turmoil, Blacks adopted white culture and language which Fanon epitomized as the "white mask." Colonial narratives and representations were further investigated and critiqued by the Indian Scholar Homi Bhabha who problematized the colonial- colonized encounter through the notion of "third space" where indigenous and Western cultures are in a continuous state of negotiation and liminality, where power relations are relentlessly at work. Hence, the complicity between Western anthropology/ethnography and colonialism is undoubtedly a historical fact that has also to be considered the backdrop of neo-colonialism.

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