

## AFRICAN STUDIES AND THE POSTCOLONIAL CHALLENGE

RITA ABRAHAMSEN

### ABSTRACT

Postcolonial theory is frequently dismissed as too theoretical and esoteric, and hence irrelevant to the study of contemporary African politics and society. This article challenges this dismissal of postcolonialism, and argues for a more constructive dialogue between African studies and postcolonial approaches. Recognizing that postcolonialism cannot be regarded as a uniform body of theory, or a school of thought in the conventional academic sense, the article focuses on certain key themes and problematizations of relevance to contemporary Africa. In particular, it elaborates on postcolonialism's conceptualization of power, and argues that the recognition of the relationship between power, discourse and political institutions and practices has much to contribute to the study of African politics. These insights are further investigated through a discussion of development, hybridity and resistance. The article concludes that both African studies and postcolonial approaches stand to benefit from a more constructive engagement.

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'WHO'S AFRAID OF POSTCOLONIALITY?' Gyan Prakash asks in a well-known essay.<sup>1</sup> A flippant, but not entirely unjust answer could be 'African studies'. More than twenty years after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the book often credited with having spawned the field of postcolonial studies, such perspectives occupy at best a marginal position in explanations and investigations of contemporary African politics and society. By contrast, postcolonial interpretations of India abound.<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive account of this curious anomaly would be difficult, and will not be attempted here, but two main lines of criticism underpin the lack of

Rita Abrahamson is lecturer in African and Postcolonial Politics in the Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. She is grateful for helpful comments from two anonymous reviewers. The article has also benefited substantially from the kind and constructive assistance of Michael C. Williams.

1. G. Prakash, 'Who's afraid of postcoloniality?', *Social Text* 14, 4 (1996), pp. 187–203.

2. See, for example, P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A derivative discourse* (Zed Books, London, 1986); R. Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and power in colonial India* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997); G. Prakash, 'Writing post-orientalist histories of the third world: perspectives from Indian historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32, 2 (1990), pp. 383–408. I use 'African studies' in this article to refer primarily to the study of contemporary African politics, development and international relations.

engagement with postcolonial theories among Africanists. Firstly, postcolonialism is regarded as too theoretical and too preoccupied with textuality and discourse to have anything meaningful to contribute to the study of the continent. The study of African politics, particularly in its Anglophone version, has constituted itself as a largely empirical discipline, dedicated to assisting and facilitating the continent's economic and political development. As time went by and the fruits of independence failed to materialize, this 'developmental imperative' turned to an increased sense of urgency, and since the 1980s perceptions of the 'African crisis' have led to calls that scholarship should be dedicated first and foremost to solving that crisis.<sup>3</sup> To this end, postcolonialism is deemed ineffective. Secondly, postcolonialism is frequently perceived to be a cultural product of the West, pertaining to late capitalism and thus of limited relevance to developing countries. Even more pointedly, it is often perceived as politically passive, and perhaps ultimately politically conservative, and for those devoted to solving the African crisis postcolonialism accordingly seems to have little to offer.

The result has been a marginalization of postcolonialism, and a reluctance to engage seriously with its central tenets, its epistemology and methodology. At present, postcolonialism seems to exist primarily as a position extraneous to the study of African politics and society, useful not so much for the insights it offers as for the opportunities it awards to define oneself *against* something. This article seeks to approach this body of literature in a more constructive and dialogical manner. It is not my purpose to defend postcolonialism as such, nor all the claims made in its name, in part because I believe there is no such unified school or theory, and in part because I do not think that all of its claims are necessarily defensible. Nor do I attempt a comprehensive review of, or a 'beginner's guide' to, postcolonialism.<sup>4</sup> From a rich body of literature I focus on only a few of postcolonialism's central issues, and aim in particular to clarify its conceptualization of power. I argue that this conceptualization of power and the recognition of the relationship between power, discourse and political institutions and practices have cast new light on colonial and postcolonial experiences, and that they provide for a more comprehensive understanding of how past and present relations of inequality are constructed and maintained than commonly found in African studies.

The article thus seeks to encourage a more active engagement with postcolonial theory among students of contemporary African politics, and

3. C. Leys, 'Confronting the African tragedy', *New Left Review* 204 (1994), pp. 33–47.

4. Good introductions to postcolonialism as a field of study include A. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Routledge, London, 1996); B. Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, practices, politics* (Verso, London, 1997); R. Young, *Postcolonialism. An historical introduction* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 2001).

attempts to give some examples of how postcolonialism's theoretical and conceptual resources can expand and enrich our understanding of the continent and the functioning of modern power. But while this is a call for a more theoretically informed and engaged African studies, it is not my suggestion that this is a one-way process where African studies is the sole beneficiary of an intellectually superior field of study. On the contrary, for postcolonialism the encounter with a more empirically oriented discipline may help expand its focus and field of enquiry away from a preoccupation with the past and with representation, towards critical analyses of contemporary institutions and practices of power.

### *Postcolonialism and its critics*

Like postmodernism and poststructuralism, postcolonialism is not a conventional theory in any traditional academic sense of the word, and it cannot sensibly be treated as one unified body of thought. It is, instead, multiple, diverse and eschews any easy generalizations. For this reason, I approach postcolonialism not as a single theory, but as a set of ideas and problematizations of major areas in contemporary social and political theory of particular relevance to Africa. A useful way into these debates is provided by postcolonialism's critics (of which there are many). The intensity and sometimes even vitriolic character of these critiques have two main sources. Firstly, critics react to postcolonialism's rejection of metanarratives and traditional political positions and categories such as class, race and nation. Secondly, critics object to the often theoretical language and the focus on text and discourses. A brief review of the main lines of criticism will open up the space for the ensuing exploration of postcolonialism's epistemological and theoretical underpinnings.

One of the most common dismissals of postcolonialism is that it is 'pure theory', and that it shows no engagement with the 'world out there'. Postcolonialism is perceived to be too theoretical, and its language impenetrable and esoteric. Arif Dirlik accordingly accuses postcolonial writers of 'mystification' and 'obfuscation', while Adebayo Williams charges them with 'aimless linguistic virtuosity'.<sup>5</sup> Postcolonialism is also perceived to be almost singularly preoccupied with words, textuality and discourse, and to be either disconnected from the world of raw politics and economics, or to mistake the textual for the 'real world'. Benita Parry, for example, argues that postcolonial writers tend to subsume the social and the political in textual representation, while Alex Callinicos similarly observes an inclination to

5. A. Dirlik, 'The postcolonial aura: third world criticism in the age of global capitalism', *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994), p. 331; A. Williams, 'The postcolonial *flâneur* and other fellow travellers: conceits for a narrative of redemption', *Third World Quarterly* 18, 5 (1997) p. 830.

reduce social processes to questions of semiotics.<sup>6</sup> At best then, post-colonialism may have something (vaguely) interesting to say about cultural practices such as paintings, sculptures, cinemas, atlases and museums, but little of relevance to the world of social and economic suffering is to be gained from such investigations. Many, like Russell Jacoby, therefore lament 'how few political insights or conclusions these emphatically political theorists offer', and assign postcolonialism to the domain of literary criticism and cultural studies, — or worse, to the wasteland of incomprehension.<sup>7</sup>

A second common criticism contends that postcolonial approaches are apolitical and fail to engage with power in any satisfactory manner. The starting point of such criticisms is frequently the 'post' in postcolonialism, which seems to indicate a chronological periodization and linear progression through the stages of precolonialism, colonialism, and finally to the postcolonial present. For many, and particularly those on the political left, this appears at best politically naïve, at worst collusive with Western imperial power. The situation of contemporary Africa and most other ex-colonies, according to the standard position of the political left, is one of neo-colonialism, imperialism, and continued subservience in the international system as expressed, for example, in the debt crisis and the erosion of sovereignty implied by the imposition of structural adjustment programmes.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, this relationship would be better described as a continuation of imperialism, and Ella Shoat maintains in her pointed critique that a key effect of postcolonialism is precisely to keep at bay more sharply political terms such as 'imperialism' or 'geopolitics'.<sup>9</sup> Dirlik's critique follows similar lines, arguing that by denying foundational status to capitalism, postcolonial approaches gloss over global imbalances of power. The world is rendered 'shapeless', and the inequalities of global capitalism are obscured. The ideological limitation of postcolonialism is hence that it 'provides an alibi for inequality, exploitation, and oppression in their modern guises under capitalist relationships'.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, this critique is taken even further and postcolonialism becomes an active tool of oppression. Williams, for example, asserts that 'postcolonialism appears like a strong ally of global

6. B. Parry, 'Signs of our times: a discussion of Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*', *Third Text* 28/29 (1994), pp. 12–13; A. Callinicos, 'Wonders taken for signs: Homi Bhabha's post-colonialism', *Transformation* 1 (1995), p. 111.

7. R. Jacoby, 'Marginal returns: the trouble with post-colonial theory', *Lingua Franca* September/October (1995), p. 36.

8. For a selection of views along these lines see, for example K. Danaher (ed.), *50 Years is Enough: The case against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund* (South End, Boston, MA, 1995); J. Hanlon, *Peace without Profit. How the IMF blocks development in Mozambique* (James Currey, Oxford, 1996); B. Onimode (ed.), *The IMF, the World Bank and African Debt. Vol. 2* (Zed Books, London, 1989); D. N. Plank, 'Aid, debt and the end of sovereignty: Mozambique and its donors', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 31, 3 (1993), pp. 407–30.

9. E. Shoat, 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial"', *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), p. 99.

10. Dirlik, 'The postcolonial aura', p. 347.

capitalism rather than its profound foe'; it is 'an intellectual facilitator of a new mode of colonisation'.<sup>11</sup>

Postcolonialism is also frequently attacked for privileging the colonial experience and relying on a sharp dichotomy between the colonial and the postcolonial period. By starting their inquiry with the colonial encounter, postcolonial analysts are perceived to continue the Eurocentric attitude of much conventional social science where the 'emerging areas' are presented as 'people without history'.<sup>12</sup> Critics assert that postcolonial writers risk reinforcing the perception that nothing worth recording happened before the arrival of European explorers, traders, missionaries and settlers, and that in postcolonial accounts the colonies become empty spaces, a void simply waiting to be inscribed with meaning by the European. Aijaz Ahmad opposes this periodization of history because it 'privileges as primary the role of colonialism', and implies that 'all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath'.<sup>13</sup> Terence Ranger's critique follows similar lines, arguing that postcolonialism develops an essentialized contrast between colonial Africa and postcolonial Africa. This colonial/postcolonial dichotomy is misplaced, Ranger argues, as 'colonialism was much less coherent, simple and lucid than such dualism suggests'. He concludes that colonial Africa 'was much more like postcolonial Africa than most of us have hitherto imagined'.<sup>14</sup> The thrust of such criticisms is accordingly that postcolonialism is unable to capture the continuities of African history and that it privileges the arrival and actions of the white man over indigenous cultures and practices.

A final strand of criticism asserts that postcolonialism is a variant or derivative of postmodernism and hence of very little relevance to Africa. This critique comes in many different guises, and also underpins some of the above objections. Postmodernism is perceived as Western, relativistic and apolitical and these characteristics are similarly seen to dominate postcolonialism. Patrick Chabal, for example, argues that the postmodern is a particularly Western condition and while postmodern scholarship might capture some aspects of this social formation, it bears no relation to life on the African continent. For Chabal, Africa is best understood as premodern and he insists that the continent is currently undergoing a process of re-traditionalization.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, postmodernism can find no application

11. Williams, 'The postcolonial *flaneur*', p. 834.

12. The phrase comes not from a critique of postcolonialism, but from Eric Wolf's excellent study, *Europe and the People without History* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1982).

13. A. Ahmad, 'The politics of literary postcoloniality', *Race and Class* 36, 3 (1995), pp. 6-7.

14. T. Ranger, 'Postscript: colonial and postcolonial identities', in R. Werbner and T. Ranger (eds), *Postcolonial Identities in Africa* (Zed Books, London, 1996), pp. 273, 280.

15. P. Chabal, 'The African crisis: context and interpretation', in Werbner and Ranger, pp. 32-3, 42-3.

and yield no insights on the African condition. In a sharp dismissal along similar lines, Dennis Epko observes that 'nothing stops the African from viewing the celebrated postmodern condition . . . as nothing but the hypocritical self-flattering cry of the overfed and spoilt children of hypercapitalism. So what has hungry Africa got to do with the post-material disgust . . . of the bored and the overfed?'<sup>16</sup>

In this view, then, postcolonialism is a reflection of the West, or of post-modern societies, rather than a reaction to 'external' realities in Africa or elsewhere. It is, in other words, narcissistic. The postmodern condition of fragmentation and diasporic identities is seen to have given birth to post-colonialism, which is in turn perceived as the attempt of the privileged few to theorize and come to terms with their own position as Third World intellectuals inside the Western academe. Dirlik thus dates the beginning of the postcolonial to the arrival of the Third World intellectual in the First World academe, regarding 'postcoloniality as the condition of the intelligentsia of global capitalism'.<sup>17</sup> On a similar note, Chabal contends that the turn towards the postcolonial reflects more a need of the West to come to terms with its colonial past and its multicultural, multiracial present than a sincere attempt to understand contemporary Africa. Postcolonialism, then, is rebuked as more 'a concern about ourselves [Western intellectuals] than about those who do live in actual postcolonial societies'.<sup>18</sup> What is more, the political implications of postcolonialism, like postmodernism, are perceived as nihilistic and 'extremely conservative'.<sup>19</sup> Through its critique of unitary categories such as class, gender and nation postcolonialism is seen to abolish the possibility of a politics of emancipation, making resistance a purely internal and individual act. Postcolonialism, it seems, belongs to Third World globetrotters and frivolous Western intellectuals, not to those with a real concern for politics, poverty and injustice.

### *The 'post' in postcolonialism*

There are undoubtedly valuable insights in the above critiques, and it is not my intention here to suggest that postcolonialism is above criticism. As with most fields of study, there is good and bad scholarship, and it is

16. D. Epko, 'Towards a post-Africanism', *Textual Practice* 9, 1 (1995) cited in Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, p. 248.

17. Dirlik, 'The postcolonial aura', p. 356. K. A. Appiah makes a similar point, regarding postcoloniality as the condition of a 'comprador intelligentsia'. Appiah, 'Is the "post-" in post-colonial the "post-" in postmodern?', in A. McClintock, A. Mufti and E. Shoat (eds), *Dangerous Liaisons. Gender, nation and postcolonial perspectives* (Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1997), p. 432.

18. Chabal, 'The African crisis', p. 37.

19. R. O'Hanlon and D. Washbrook, 'After orientalism: culture, criticism, and politics in the third world', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (1992), pp. 141-67. See also G. Prakash's reply, 'Can the "subaltern" ride?' in the same volume.

certainly the case that some postcolonial writings are linguistically and theoretically obscure and ambiguous, overly self-referential and reflexive, and focused on textual interpretation rather than empirical exploration. But while this is true of some work published under this broad rubric, it is not applicable to the entire body of literature, nor does it mean that postcolonialism's theoretical insights cannot be applied in more concrete settings or policy-relevant analyses. Nor is it correct, in my view, to portray postcolonialism as apolitical or concerned with 'words only'. This criticism stems from a misrepresentation of the conception of power and discourse employed within postcolonialism, and prevents an appreciation of one of its most crucial points, namely, the relationship between power, discourse and political institutions and practices. In order to clarify the issues at stake in this conception of power it is useful to start with an investigation of the term postcolonialism itself.

Much ink has been spilt on debating exactly what the postcolonial means and when it begins, and many of the criticisms surveyed above arise from the fuzziness and ambiguities of the term and the vision of history that it employs. While the 'post' in postcolonialism signifies the end of colonialism and imperialism as *direct* domination, it does not imply *after* imperialism as a global system of hegemonic power.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak maintains that 'we live in a post-colonial neo-colonized world', while Homi Bhabha regards postcoloniality as 'a salutary reminder of the persistent "neo-colonial" relations within the "new" world order and the multi-national division of labour'.<sup>21</sup> In short, colonialism, as conventionally defined in terms of formal settlement and control of other people's land and goods, is in the main over, but many of its structures and relations of power are still in place. The post in postcolonialism is not therefore to be understood as a clearly dividing temporal *post*, but rather as an indication of continuity. Postcolonialism, in the words of Gyan Prakash, 'sidesteps the language of beginnings and ends'.<sup>22</sup> It seeks to capture the continuities and complexities of any historical period, and attempts to transcend strict chronological and dichotomous thinking where history is clearly delineated and the social world neatly categorized into separate boxes.

The colonial experience is nevertheless regarded as crucial to an understanding of contemporary politics. By the 1930s, colonies and ex-colonies covered 84.6 percent of the land surface of the globe, and colonialism formed a key transformative encounter for both the colonizer and the colonized.<sup>23</sup> Colonial power not only changed the ways of imposing and

20. Young, *Postcolonialism*, p. 57.

21. G. C. Spivak, 'The political economy of women as seen by a literary critic', in E. Weed (ed.), *Coming to Terms* (Routledge, London, 1990), p. 166., H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, London, 1994), p. 6.

22. Prakash, 'Who's afraid of postcoloniality?', p. 188.

23. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, p. xiii.

maintaining rule over the colonized, but also changed the terrain within which Africans could respond to domination.<sup>24</sup> The global reach of Western imperial power also brought new peoples and places into the world capitalist economy, and compelled them to remain, even after their formal independence, within this economic system. The colonial encounter is thus seen to mark a crucial reordering of the world, and many postcolonial writers argue that the return to a pristine, unspoilt precolonial culture is impossible and have warned against such 'nostalgia for lost origins'.<sup>25</sup> Crucially, however, this does not mean that the precolonial came to an abrupt end, but rather the present is regarded as a complex mix and continuation of different cultures and temporalities.

The connections between the past and the present, as well as the interconnectedness, rather than the separateness, of the colonial and the postcolonial and the North and the South thus emerge as a key focus of postcolonial investigations. Rather than pointing to fixed temporal and geographical periods and spaces, postcolonialism draws attention to continuities, fluidity and interconnectedness, or what Robert Young refers to as the economic, political, cultural and diasporic 'imbrication of the north and the south'.<sup>26</sup> The constitutive relationship of the North and the South, the way in which the two produce and reinforce the identity of each other both in the colonial past and the postcolonial present, are key insights and concerns of postcolonial thinking.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the meaning of 'Africa' and 'Africanness' cannot be regarded as fixed, and has no essence. By the same token, an understanding of the 'West' can only emerge from a recognition of its relationship to the 'other'. During colonialism, for example, the claims of 'civilization' came to rest on the deficiencies of 'barbarism', with the description of African 'savages' reinforcing the 'civilized' character of Europeans and legitimizing the authoritarian nature of colonial rule. This constitutive relationship continues today, and Achille Mbembe has observed that 'Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origins of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what is supposed to be its identity'.<sup>28</sup>

24. See D. Scott, 'Colonial governmentality', *Social Text* 43 (1995), pp. 191–200.

25. G. C. Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 271–313; see also K. A. Appiah, 'Out of Africa, topologies of nativism', in D. LaCapra (ed.), *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on hegemony and resistance* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1991), pp. 134–63.

26. Young, *Postcolonialism*, p. 8.

27. Chabal hence misstates a crucial point when he argues that the postcolonial is 'more a concern about ourselves than about those who live in actual postcolonial societies'. Chabal, 'The African crisis', p. 37.

28. A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2001), p. 2; see also V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1988).

*Power and postcoloniality*

The emphasis on fluidity, interconnectedness and constitutive relationships that characterizes postcolonial scholarship is not merely indicative of a flimsy passion for 'linguistic virtuosity' or 'reflexivity', nor does it signify a lack of concern with power or the political. On the contrary, it stems from a deep engagement with the role of power in the formation of identity and subjectivity and the relationship between knowledge and political practices. This broader interrogation of power is one of the few commonalities that makes it possible to speak, if only tentatively, of postcolonialism (in the singular), and it is also here that we see most clearly postcolonialism's relationship and indebtedness to poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers. This is not to say, however, that there is *one* postcolonial approach, or that postcolonialism is reducible to postmodernism or poststructuralism. These two points merit a brief elaboration before pursuing the inquiry into postcoloniality and power.

The inherent danger of any attempt to discuss a diverse body of literature lies in constructing a misleading uniformity out of the multiplicity of voices that co-exist under the same label. Postcolonialism is precisely such a multifarious mode of analysis, where writers draw their inspiration and conceptual resources from a wide variety of political and philosophical traditions and thinkers. My suggestion that postcolonial analyses share a broadly similar conceptualization of power is not intended to erase or 'tame' such differences, but rather seeks to provide a starting point from which to understand their various modes and themes of inquiry. Similarly, to point to the affinities with poststructural and postmodernist perspectives is not to imply that postcolonialism is merely a derivative or a straightforward application of these theoretical positions to postcolonial situations and relations. Several authors have argued that postcolonialism is to be distinguished from postmodernism, primarily because of its explicit political commitment to the marginalized.<sup>29</sup> While this view might entail a too uniform dismissal of all postmodernist approaches as relativistic and deprived of political or ethical engagement, it points to the important attempt of postcolonialism to recover the subject position of the 'subaltern'. That said, the debate about postcolonialism's presumed 'Western' identity appears at times obsessed with classification and categorization in a manner that runs contrary to postcolonialism's attention to interconnectedness, fluidity and constitutive relationships. While thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan figure prominently in the pantheon of

29. Appiah, 'Is the "Post-" in postcolonialism?'; A. J. Paolini, *Navigating Modernity. Post-colonialism, identity and international relations* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1999). I am mindful of the risk of treating poststructuralism and postmodernism as one and the same, but a discussion of these 'disciplinary boundaries' is of minor relevance to this analysis.

postcolonialism, so do non-Western writers like Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Mahatma Gandhi. At the same time, the Western origin of post-structuralism is ambivalent. Robert Young, for example, has argued that if poststructuralism is the product of a single historical moment, then that moment is not May 1968 but the Algerian War of Independence, with key figures like Sartre, Derrida, Lyotard and Cixous all having strong links to Algeria.<sup>30</sup> To pose the question of postcolonialism's 'Western' identity, or its poststructuralist/postmodernist origin is, in my opinion, to pursue the wrong line of inquiry, as its strength stems precisely from its hybrid character, from its eclectic mix of theories and positions.

One of the insights that postcolonialism borrows and develops from post-structural and postmodernist perspectives is a view of power as productive of identities and subjectivities. An instructive starting point for understanding this conception of power is provided by the work of Michel Foucault.<sup>31</sup> Emerging from Foucault's thinking is a 'new conceptual architecture of power' that seeks to displace the conventional identification of power with domination.<sup>32</sup> Power is no longer perceived as only repressive, nor is it understood in purely material or institutional terms. Instead, power is productive, and creative of subjects. It is also intimately linked to knowledge, not in the purely instrumental sense that knowledge is always in the service of the powerful, but in terms of the production of truth and rationality. For Foucault, the possibility of a positivist, objective science is a myth, and the problematization of a particular aspect of human life is not natural or inevitable, but historically contingent and dependent upon power relations already having rendered a particular topic a legitimate object of investigation. The sciences then do not merely describe the world as they find it, but instead construct it and create the manner in which it is perceived and understood. Any object of scientific investigation is simultaneously its effect, and there can be no objects of knowledge in the absence of a method for their production. Truth, in short, cannot be found objectively, but is the *effect* of discourse.

It is important to note that Foucault's conception of discourse is not simply a substitute for 'the ideological superstructure' of traditional Marxist accounts. Discourses, in the Foucauldian sense, are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak', practices that have material effects.<sup>33</sup> It follows that analyses informed by such insights cannot accept

30. R. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing history and the West* (Routledge, London, 1990).

31. See, in particular, M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An archeology of the human sciences* (Tavistock, London, 1970); *Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison* (Allen Lane, London, 1977); *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings* (Harvester, London, 1980); 'Governmentality', in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in governmentality* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1991), pp. 87–104.

32. M. Dean, *Governmentality: Power and rule in modern society* (Sage, London, 1999), p. 46.

33. M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (Tavistock, London, 1972), p. 49.

at face value any particular categorization of the world. Instead, they seek to establish *how* certain ways of understanding and representing the world became dominant and acquired the position to shape the manner in which a particular aspect of social reality is imagined and acted upon.

The centrality of 'how' questions also leads to a focus on how human beings are shaped by power, or by different techniques and practices of government, as various types of agents with particular capacities and liberties. Foucault's notion of governmentality characterizes modern power as 'the conduct of conduct', and draws attention to the ways in which a multiplicity of authorities and agencies seek to shape our behaviour by working through our desires, aspirations and interests.<sup>34</sup> In particular, power in the modern age has come to work through what we know as 'the social', or the construction of a space of free social exchange, and through the construction of a subjectivity normatively experienced as the source of free will and rational agency.<sup>35</sup> This entails a radical rethinking of power, which is no longer centred exclusively in the state, or with capital, but works through micro-strategies and practices at both the local, domestic and the international level.

Much postcolonial scholarship is informed, in one way or another, by this rethinking of power, and the concept of discourse and the power/knowledge nexus have found particular resonance in analyses of colonial and postcolonial relationships. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, arguably the *locus classicus* of postcolonialism, was inspired in large part by a Foucauldian understanding of power/knowledge. Arguing that there is 'no such thing as a delivered presence; there is only a *re-presence*, or a representation', Said's central contention was that Orientalism was a 'systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period'.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of the Orient, knowledge and power went hand in hand, and there was no such thing as an innocent, objective academic standpoint. This is not to say that knowledge was produced in advance as an instrument to justify colonialism, but rather that it is in discourse that power and

34. Foucault, 'Governmentality'.

35. On 'the social', see J. Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (Pantheon, New York, 1979); J. Danzelot, 'The promotion of the social', *Economy and Society* 17, 3 (1988), pp. 395–427.

36. E. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin, London, 1979), pp. 21, 3. V. Y. Mudimbe's study, *The Invention of Africa* makes a similar observation, in that he identifies complementary genres of 'speeches' that contributed to the invention of a primitive Africa: the exotic texts on savages, represented by travellers' reports; the philosophical interpretations about a hierarchy of civilizations; and the anthropological searches for primitiveness (p. 69). The signifier 'Africa' is, in other words, constructed by the West. Mudimbe uses this observation to reflect upon the possibility for an African knowledge, or the decolonization of academic knowledge on Africa.

knowledge are joined together.<sup>37</sup> Said provided a compelling demonstration of how the West had managed to establish an authoritative and dominant knowledge about the Orient and its peoples, and argued that the study of the Orient was ultimately a political vision whose structure promoted a binary opposition between the familiar (the West/us) and the strange (the Orient/them). The Orient, in other words, is revealed as central to European self-understanding and identity, and this in turn has contemporary consequences. The primary significance of Said's study, however, is perhaps that, by drawing attention to the intimacy of power and knowledge, he made a first step towards challenging the hegemonic narratives of the West, a process which has been referred to as 'the Empire writing back' in an attempt to destabilize the discourses that construct the 'other'.<sup>38</sup>

*Orientalism* draws primarily on travel writings and literary texts, and this focus has been continued in many subsequent studies of colonial discourse inspired by Said.<sup>39</sup> Given postcolonialism's origin and continued location within departments of literature and cultural studies, this is no surprise. But if reflections on Shakespeare's Caliban or Conrad's Marlow were all postcolonial analyses had to offer, critics would perhaps be justified in dismissing them as politically limited. A focus of discourse, however, does not dictate a purely textual or literary inclination. Foucault's conception of discourse, it will be recalled, stresses the materiality of language and regards discourse as a *practice* like any other. One of Foucault's key concerns was to identify the material and institutional conditions of possibility of discourses, and their material effects and the practices they made possible.

Several studies have made use of this approach to discourse to cast light on the practices of colonial power and thus make colonial discourse analysis more than 'just another form of literary criticism'.<sup>40</sup> Such studies draw attention to the 'worldliness' of discourses and make the connection between discourses and particular political practices and social experiences. Stressing the disciplinary aspects of power Megan Vaughan, while critical of certain aspects of Foucault's thinking, shows how medicine in colonial Africa constructed 'the African' in particular ways that were intrinsic to

37. It should be mentioned that Said at times comes very close to describing Orientalism as a misrepresentation or an ideological construct, and as such his interpretation differs from Foucault's more material approach to discourses. Said derives his theoretical framework from both Foucault and the writings of Antonio Gramsci, a combination which has led to charges that *Orientalism* is theoretically inconsistent. The barrage of criticisms and responses to *Orientalism* is testimony to the importance of Said's text. For an excellent review of the debates see Young, *Postcolonialism*.

38. E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, London, 1993); B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* (Routledge, London, 1989).

39. See, for example, Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Empire Writes Back*; P. Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the native Caribbean 1492-1797* (Methuen, London, 1986).

40. Young, *Postcolonialism*, p. 394.

the operation and maintenance of colonial power.<sup>41</sup> Roxanne Lynn Doty demonstrates the relationship between representational practices and actual policies in colonial Kenya, and shows how various disciplinary practices designed, for example, to 'get the natives to work' constructed particular kinds of identities for the colonial population.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in a wide-ranging investigation of socio-medical science from the Renaissance to the 1990s, Alexander Butchart demonstrates how the African body has been created and transformed as an object of knowledge, and how these changing constructions have in turn rendered the African amenable to analysis and domination.<sup>43</sup> Mining medicine, to take but one example, helped fabricate the African mine workers as visible objects possessing distinct attributes that provoked particular strategies for their management in health and disease.

Such studies illustrate how colonial power resided not only in the state, or with capital, but operated through micro-technologies at specific locations to condition and constitute the minds and bodies of the colonized. Power, in other words, is not only repressive, but also productive of subjectivities and identities. This form of discourse analysis accordingly demonstrates how intellectual, economic and political processes worked together in the formation and maintenance of colonial power, and how ideas and institutions, knowledge and power cannot be understood separately.

#### *Power and the critique of development*

This reconceptualization of power has not only helped to broaden our understanding of colonial relations, but has also generated powerful critiques of current political structures, institutions and practices of power. This is particularly the case in the field of development, and an important work in this context is Arturo Escobar's *Encountering Development: The making and unmaking of the third world*.<sup>44</sup> Employing a Foucauldian conception of the power/knowledge nexus and the politics of representation, Escobar shows how development and its opposite, underdevelopment, are not self-evident or preordained categories. Instead, they are discursive

41. M. Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial power and African illness* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1991). A similar analysis of colonial India is provided by D. Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State medicine and epidemic disease in nineteenth-century India* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1993).

42. R. L. Doty, *Imperial Encounters* (Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1996).

43. A. Butchart, *The Anatomy of Power: European constructions of the African body* (Zed Books, London, 1998).

44. A. Escobar, *Encountering Development. The making and unmaking of the third world* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1995). For related critiques of development see J. Crush (ed.), *Power of Development* (Routledge, London, 1995); J. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1994); A. Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the making of modern India* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1998); D. Slater and M. Bell, 'Aid and the geopolitics of the post-colonial: critical reflection on New Labour's overseas development strategy', *Development and Change* 3, 2 (2002), pp. 335–60.

constructs, particular ways of seeing and acting upon the world that reflect not only the conditions they describe but also the constellations of social, economic and political forces at the time of their emergence. This does not entail a denial of the material condition of poverty or the disparities between rich and poor, but rather a challenge to their conceptualization and the political practices that they make possible. With the problematization of 'underdevelopment', which is frequently dated to President Truman's inaugural speech in 1949, social reality became ordered into new categories such as underdeveloped, malnourished, illiterate, etc. This established Third World countries as objects of intervention, and normalized the right of the North to intervene and control, adapt and reshape the structures, practices and ways of life of the South. Development discourse thus helps legitimize interventions in the Third World in order to remodel it according to Western norms of progress, growth and efficiency, and whenever a new problem of underdevelopment is identified new practices of intervention are devised to rectify the deficiency. In this way, development can be regarded as analogous to the realm of 'the social' in domestic politics, as through its interventions the underdeveloped subject becomes known, categorized, and incorporated into statistics, models and graphs, which in turn legitimate practices and facilitate the emergence of the developed, disciplined subject.

The disciplinary aspects of development can be illustrated through the sudden inscription of democracy as a necessary condition for development assistance in the early 1990s.<sup>45</sup> The so-called good governance agenda, spearheaded by the World Bank and adopted by most bilateral donors, was heralded at the time of its emergence as a radical break with a development tradition tainted by its frequent support for the strong or authoritarian state, due both to a pervasive Cold War logic and to a conviction that democracy was suited only to industrialized societies. The conventional explanation of the change in development discourse was accordingly twofold. On the one hand, the West was 'free at last' from the perceived need to turn a blind eye to the domestic excesses of African Cold War allies.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the good governance agenda was seen as the result of a learning curve within development thinking. In the words of the World Bank, 'History suggests that political legitimacy and consensus are a precondition for sustainable development'.<sup>47</sup> On closer inspection,

45. For a more detailed analysis, see R. Abrahamsen, *Disciplining Democracy: Development discourse and good governance in Africa* (Zed Books, London, 2000).

46. J. A. Wiseman, 'Introduction: The movement towards democracy. Global, continental, and state perspectives', in J. A. Wiseman (ed.), *Democracy and Political Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Routledge, London, 1995), p. 3; M. Clough, *Free at Last? US policy toward Africa and the end of the Cold War* (Council on Foreign Relations Press, New York, 1992), p. 2.

47. World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From crisis to sustainable growth* (World Bank, Washington, DC, 1989), p. 60.

however, the good governance agenda appears to be less of a radical break with the past, in that it reproduces the hierarchies of previous development theories whereby the Third World is still to be reformed and delivered from its current stage of underdevelopment by the West. Through such representational practices, industrialized countries retain the moral high ground, the right to administer development to the South.

The manner in which democracy is constructed within the good governance discourse has disciplinary effects. Democracy is constructed as intimately connected to liberal economic policies, and in this way alternative conceptions of democracy are marginalized and silenced. The good governance agenda also serves to shield the West from democratic scrutiny. The rich countries are automatically regarded as democratic and able to democratize Africa as part of the larger development effort. Moreover, the good governance agenda constructs democracy as relevant only *within* countries and not within international institutions and relations. Domestic relations must be democratized, but international relations are left untouched and protected from the reach of the good governance discourse. In this way, the good governance agenda rewrites and reinvents the right of Western countries to intervene in Africa in the post-Communist era. Development discourse can be seen as part of the global governance of the African continent, and one of the ways in which present international structures and relations of power are maintained and reproduced. Despite all its proclamations in favour of democracy, then, contemporary development policies help maintain a world order that is essentially undemocratic. Seen in this context, the concept of discipline is not reducible to 'ideology' or to economics, but unites them and derives its force precisely from this unification. The discipline of the good governance agenda works materially to produce processes and forms of political subjugation that help maintain Western hegemony.

Through its interventions, development also produces new identities, new subjectivities and new ways of seeing and acting upon the world both at the state and at the individual level. Akhil Gupta's brilliant study of rural life in India shows how underdevelopment has become a form of identity in parts of the postcolonial world. According to Gupta, who people think they are, how they got that way, and what they can do to change their lives have been profoundly shaped by the institutions, ideologies and practices of development.<sup>48</sup> Underdevelopment, in other words, is not merely a structural location in the global economy; it is also an identity, 'something that informs people's sense of self'. Similarly, Kamran Ali's ethnography of a family planning campaign in Egypt involving USAID and internationally funded NGOs suggests that one of the potential outcomes of the project

48. Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments*, p. ix.

is the production of a newly atomized 'modern' subject, a new, but still 'Egyptian', citizen.<sup>49</sup> These studies once again draw attention to the interconnectedness of the world, the 'imbrication of the north and the south', and show how the power of development cannot be understood merely in repressive or economic terms, but must take account of the manner in which it produces subjects and identities.

*Hybrid identities, different futures*

The understanding of power as not merely domination, but also as productive of subjects and identities through various micro-technologies and relations, explains in large part the focus on hybridity within postcolonialism.<sup>50</sup> While critics argue that the notion of hybridity reflects only the privileged condition of the diasporic Third World intellectual, of the Spivaks, Bhabhas and Appiahs of this world, postcolonial writers assert that the hybrid condition applies to everyone within postcolonial societies — and to all other peoples for that matter, as the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings.<sup>51</sup>

As Young points out, hybridity was first placed at the heart of postcolonial studies by Ashis Nandy's analysis in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*.<sup>52</sup> Nandy's starting point is the (controversial) proposition that 'colonialism is first of all a matter of consciousness and needs to be defeated ultimately in the minds of men'.<sup>53</sup> The focus, in other words, is on the psychological, and not only on the economic and political, aspects of colonialism. The notion of hybridity marks both the continuities of colonialism and its failure to fully dominate the colonized. In terms of continuity, identities and subjectivities were profoundly reshaped by the colonial experience and accordingly colonialism finds continued expression through a multiplicity of practices, philosophies, and cultures imparted to and adopted by the colonized in more or less hybrid forms. Hybridity thus draws attention to the way in which the colonizer and the colonized are forged in relationship with each other. Nowhere are these mutually constitutive identities better illustrated than in Franz Fanon's

49. K. A. Ali, 'The politics of family planning in Egypt', *Anthropology Today* 12 (1996); K. A. Ali, 'Making "responsible" men: planning the family in Egypt', in C. Bledsoe, S. Lerner and J. Guyer (eds), *Fertility and the Male Life-Cycle in the Era of Fertility Decline* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000).

50. See, for example, Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

51. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. On a similar note, Chinua Achebe, reflecting on his childhood and the competing influences of Christianity and African traditional beliefs, writes that we 'lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today.' C. Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected essays 1965–1987* (Heinemann, London, 1988), p. 22.

52. Young, *Postcolonialism*. A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983).

53. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, p. 63.

haunting statement that ‘the Negro is not. Any more than the white man.’<sup>54</sup> The white man’s self-perception as moral, rational and civilized required the image of the negro as barbaric and uncivilized, and the notion of hybridity in this way helps to break down the essentialized, binary opposition between the colonized and the colonizer, between black and white, self and other.<sup>55</sup>

From this perspective, there can be no pure or unsullied identity, no essential opposition between the colonizer and the colonized,<sup>56</sup> and this in turn has important implications for how postcolonialism envisages contemporary political dynamics, as well as possible future trajectories. Whereas for many nationalists hybridity is experienced as a regrettable loss of traditional culture and identities, often leading to attempts to recover ancient cultural practices and symbols, for postcolonial writers hybridity is not inherently bad, nor does it signify the total domination of the colonized. Instead, hybridity signifies the failure of colonial power to fully dominate its subjects, and shows their creativity and resilience. Where Said’s *Orientalism* at times seems to exaggerate the ability of the West to produce the Orient, Homi Bhabha’s treatment of hybridity demonstrates that the colonized were not passive victims whose identities were narrated in a one-way process by colonial authority.<sup>57</sup> The ambivalence of hybrid cultures and practices, the way in which they are ‘almost the same, but not quite’, is for Bhabha a sign of the agency of the colonized and their ability to resist domination.

A clue to understanding Bhabha’s interpretation of hybridity as a potential site of resistance and subversion is to be found in the manner in which it breaks down the symmetry of the self/other distinction. According to Bhabha, the exercise of colonial authority requires the production of differentiation — between the white man and the black, for example. Hybridity, however, disrupts this differentiation, as what is disavowed by colonial power is repeated back as something different. Hybridity thus rules out recognition, that is, the differences that were relied upon to justify colonial power are no longer immediately observable. Mastery is constantly asserted, but always incomplete, always slipping. Herein lies the menace of hybridity and mimicry; it discloses the ambivalence at the heart of colonial discourse and has the potential to disrupt its authority. From the ‘in-between’, hybrid identities can engender new forms of being that can unsettle and subvert colonial authority. More recently, the notion of hybridity has been invoked as a measure of local agency in the face of globalization. Hybridity is seen to signify the creative adaptation, interpretation and

54. F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Pluto Press, London, 1986), p. 231.

55. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 116.

56. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

57. See, in particular, the essay ‘Difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism’, in F. Baker, P. Hulme, M. Iversen and D. Loxley (eds) *The Politics of Theory* (University of Essex Press, Colchester, 1983), pp. 194–211, and *Location of Culture*.

transformation of Western cultural symbols and practices, and shows that formerly colonized peoples are not simply passive victims in the face of an all-powerful Western culture.<sup>58</sup> It has also cast light on the importance of the postcolonial within industrialized countries, especially in terms of the politics of diasporas. In the case of black Britain, for example, Paul Gilroy has shown how black culture is being actively made and remade, and how the culture and politics of black America and the Caribbean have become 'raw materials for creative processes, which redefined what it means to be black, adapting it to distinctively British experiences and meanings'.<sup>59</sup>

In terms of political choices, the notion of hybridity serves to refute political and cultural positions that advocate a return to 'origin' or 'tradition'. This view underpins Said's incisive critique of *négritude*, which he regards as not only reinforcing the imperial hierarchies between the colonized and the colonizer, but also as proposing an essentialized identity or 'African-ness' that is not only impossible, but also, politically, potentially dangerous and damaging. Said suggests that there is much to be gained from not remaining trapped in such emotional celebrations of one's own identity, and in this way postcolonialism's focus on hybridity is a warning both against nativist positions such as *négritude* and against the dangers of essentialism. It seeks to move beyond fixed identities, by drawing attention to their fluid and constructed character, and offers the 'possibility of discovering a world *not* constructed out of warring essences'.<sup>60</sup>

Recognizing the hybrid character of postcolonial societies does not, however, mean that nationality or local identities are unimportant. Hybridity is not, as Williams argues, 'the ultimate denial of origin, subject, race, class and indeed nation',<sup>61</sup> but recognizes that local identities are not exhaustive and that appeals to fixed identities (even if national or local) can contain their own dangers. 'Doesn't the idea of pure cultures, in urgent need of being kept free from alien contamination', Salman Rushdie asks, 'lead us inexorably towards apartheid, towards ethnic cleansing, towards the gas chamber?'<sup>62</sup> The question has a chilling relevance for Africa, where it is precisely in the name of such unified identities that the continent's most violent post-independence political projects have been conceived and

58. See, for example, B. Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformations* (Routledge, London, 2001); J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and translation in the later twentieth century* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997); R. Robertson, 'Globalization. Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity', in M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (eds), *Global Modernities* (Sage, London, 1995).

59. P. Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The cultural politics of race and nation* (Unwin, London, 1987); P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness* (Verso, London, 1995); E. Akyeampong, 'Africans in the diaspora: the diaspora and Africa', *African Affairs* 99, 395 (2000), pp. 183–215. See also the essays collected in the *Review of African Political Economy* 92 (2002).

60. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 277.

61. Williams, 'The postcolonial flaneur', p. 827.

62. Quoted in Ashcroft, *Post-colonial Transformation*, p. 25.

legitimized, the genocides and conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi providing the most brutal reminder of the ease with which identity appeals can degenerate into murderous hatred.<sup>63</sup> Through the emphasis on hybridity postcolonialism seeks to advocate a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world, where the possibilities for oppressive identity claims are minimized. As such, it speaks directly to the contemporary political situation in many African countries.

*The possibilities of resistance in the postcolony*

In postcolonial perspectives, hybridity is intimately connected to resistance, in that it signifies the creativity and adaptability of the subaltern in the face of power, and demonstrates that the colonial encounter as well as contemporary North-South relations cannot be understood in terms of a one-way relationship of domination and power-over. A preoccupation with resistance is a defining feature of postcolonial literature. Its commitment to the marginalized, or the subaltern, is frequently invoked to differentiate postcolonialism from postmodernism,<sup>64</sup> and the stated aim of many postcolonial writers is to give voice and make visible those who are not normally heard or seen. In the words of Prakash, postcolonialism seeks to ‘undo the Eurocentrism produced by the institution of the West’s trajectory, its appropriation of the other as History’.<sup>65</sup> In common with the subaltern school of Indian historiography, these perspectives seek to recover the subject positions of the marginalized and retell history from counter-hegemonic standpoints. As Spivak’s analysis in the essay ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ shows, this is not so much a case of speaking on behalf of the marginalized but rather an attempt to mark the space of the silenced in conventional imperial history.<sup>66</sup> This ‘writing back’ to the Empire is in itself a form of resistance, a way of destabilizing the hegemonic narratives through which the West has constructed the other.<sup>67</sup> In this way, postcolonialism has attempted to refigure the conceptual space in which we understand and act upon the world, and thereby create the space for alternative ways of being and acting.

Postcolonialism’s understanding of power as productive and ubiquitous has clear implications for the investigation of resistance. We have already seen how Bhabha locates ambivalence and resistance in hybridity, thus

63. See, for example, R. Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic conflict and genocide* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994); G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis 1959–1994: History of a genocide* (Hurst, London, 1995).

64. Appiah, ‘Is the “post-” in postcolonialism?’; Paolini, *Navigating Modernity*.

65. G. Prakash, ‘Postcolonial criticism and Indian historiography’, *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), p. 8.

66. Spivak, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’

67. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

showing how resistance operates within a structure of power and how it is not always or necessarily in a direct relationship of opposition and polarity (colonizer/colonized, white/black). Instead, resistance is frequently much more subtle, and as part of the recovery of subaltern subject positions post-colonial investigations have often focused on 'histories from below' and everyday forms of resistance rather than revolutions, armed struggles or large-scale political opposition. James Scott's explorations of everyday forms of resistance, for example, demonstrate superbly how the subaltern, despite oppression, frequently avoids and mocks power through 'hidden transcripts' and veiled forms of practical resistance.<sup>68</sup> By drawing attention to such resistance, Scott reveals the agency and subjectivity of the subaltern even in conditions of extreme domination.

Given postcolonialism's pervasive scepticism of meta-narratives and universal truths, such local-level micro-struggles take on a particular importance as they may give rise to alternative ways of organizing life. A crucial question accordingly becomes to what extent local-level struggles can bring about social and political change. For Scott, the 'weapons of the weak' are not only meaningful in the sense that they effect change in people's daily lives. These 'weapons' are also crucial to the construction of a resistance culture that may eventually become capable, at certain historical moments, of acting as a catalyst of broader, more openly oppositional liberation movements. 'When the first declaration of the hidden transcripts succeeds', he writes, 'its mobilizing capacity as a symbolic act is potentially awesome. At the level of tactics and strategy, it is a powerful straw in the wind.'<sup>69</sup>

The picture that emerges from Achille Mbembe's interpretation of power and resistance in postcolonial Africa is much more pessimistic regarding the capacity of such struggles.<sup>70</sup> According to Mbembe, power in the postcolony often has a strikingly grotesque and obscene character, as witnessed, for example, in the excesses of state ceremonies and official parades, the glorification of its leaders, their ostentatious display of wealth, and so on. Ordinary people are not fooled by or passive objects of this obscene display of power and wealth, but regularly mock and ridicule it through, for instance, vernacular rewritings of party slogans, through gossip, and through popular cartoons. Mockery and ridicule, Mbembe argues, enable ordinary people to avoid the repressive reactions that

68. J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of resistance* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1985); J. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden transcripts* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1990).

69. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, p. 227.

70. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*. It is perhaps worth quoting Mbembe's harsh indictment of conventional political science and development economics for having 'undermined the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts'. 'Mired in the demands of what is immediately useful', these disciplines are concerned not with 'producing knowledge in general, but with social engineering', Mbembe argues (p. 7).

outright rebellion and political opposition would invite, while at the same time making the state 'lose its might' and '[rendering] it powerless'.<sup>71</sup> But unlike Scott, Mbembe appears to leave little room for effective agency on behalf of the subaltern. Although mockery and derision may demystify power, 'it does not do violence to the *commandement's* [the authority of the state] material base. At best it creates potholes of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe.'<sup>72</sup>

Mbembe's conclusions regarding the possibilities for change are much more pessimistic than both Scott's and Bhabha's, and as such show that there is no common 'postcolonial' position on resistance. Two key general insights nevertheless emerge from these analyses. First, postcolonial approaches illustrate the inadequacy of the conventional binary opposition between domination and resistance, and show how resistance cannot be idealized as pure opposition to the order it opposes, but operates instead inside a structure of power that it both challenges and helps to sustain. Secondly, postcolonial perspectives have drawn attention to the epistemic aspects of colonial and postcolonial power and violence, and in this way the target of resistance has been problematized. The solution is no longer to be found simply in 'seizing' state power or the means of production. Instead, postcolonialism's project can be described as both material and epistemological, in that it entails a recognition that change of economic and political structures of domination and inequality requires a parallel and profound change of their epistemological and psychological underpinnings and effects.

### *Conclusions — or Bhabha at the Foreign Office?*

The harsh, everyday realities of life for the majority of people on the African continent lend an urgency to African studies, a deep-felt and sincere aspiration to make scholarship relevant and not simply an activity of the ivory towers. This sense of urgency and the desire to contribute solutions to the 'African crisis' in turn explain to a large extent the marginal position of postcolonial perspectives within African studies, which are frequently understood as too theoretical and as pertaining primarily to post-modern Western societies, rather than poor African countries. This article, however, has argued for a more active engagement with postcolonial theory and I have tried to demonstrate that, although there is no single post-colonial methodology and political stance, this does not mean that the critics' charges of political quietude or irrelevance are justified. On the contrary, I have argued that postcolonialism's concerns with the relationship between power and knowledge — and practices and institutions — provide theoretical and conceptual resources of particular pertinence to

71. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, pp. 108, 109.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

contemporary African politics. By making explicit, for example, the forms of rationality and the assumptions that underpin 'common sense' and that permeate languages and practices, postcolonialism not only helps to expose the contingency of the current social and political order. It also provides crucial insights concerning the maintenance and reproduction of current relations and structures, and through this critique postcolonial perspectives can help generate possibilities for transforming social and political conditions.

This argument challenges those who regard postcolonialism's reluctance to provide a political manifesto or a programme of action as an indication of its political irrelevance. It is certainly true that postcolonialism, like most perspectives informed by poststructuralist and postmodern sentiments, is deeply suspicious of programmatic political agendas and manifestos. But this does not necessarily represent a wholesale retreat from politics, nor is it automatically vulnerable to what are by now somewhat hackneyed accusations of nihilism or irresponsibility. Rather, it can represent an attempt to understand forms of struggle and practices of contestation that cannot be fully captured from more conventional perspectives. Foucault commented in relation to his own work that 'My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to hyper- and pessimistic activism.'<sup>73</sup> A postcolonial approach to African politics might well take this as its credo.

This critical project has much to offer African studies, and if the field is genuinely to address the 'African crisis' it needs to embrace and include the postcolonial project. While it is true that to date postcolonialism has not been particularly concerned to generate policy-relevant conclusions for foreign ministries and departments of development, this does not mean that its theoretical insights are devoid of political relevance, or that its methodological and conceptual resources cannot be put to work in more empirical investigations. It is at this point that the postcolonial perspective can also benefit from the encounter with African studies, as a more empirical focus can help give postcolonialism more contemporary relevance through investigations of current relationships between power, discourse and political institutions and practices. Through such an engagement, both postcolonial perspectives and their critics may have much to learn from each other.

73. M. Foucault, *The Essential Works 1954–1984*, Vol. 1. *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (ed. P. Rabinow) (The New Press, New York, 1997), p. 256.