

Introduction

The constellation of postcolonial criticism—for which this book will attempt to draw some guidelines, with the point of departure being a constant comparison to some canonic themes of European philosophy—is informed by a complex and variegated field of studies. This critical movement was established over the course of the 1980s on United States soil in the wake of the publication of Edward W. Said’s celebrated *Orientalism* (1978) and has enquired and brought back into question some (suppressed) Eurocentric presuppositions at the foundation of the (Western and modern) codification of key concepts in philosophical, historiographical, literary and political theory and practice. Over the years this field of studies has significantly demonstrated the widening of its own range of enquiry (from literary texts to analysis of the constitution of cultures as much larger symbolic systems, from the load-bearing theories of social theory to an interest in historiographical practice and its methodological modules) together with the growth of figures who have donned the clothes of true and proper “founders”: as well as the above-mentioned Said, intellectuals of Indian origin such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Guha have acquired growing importance. These authors introduced into international theoretical debate themes and concepts that are undoubtedly crucial, such as the idea of a substantial “hybridism” of cultures, or the appeal to attempt a radical (and liberating) “provincializing of Europe.” The “postcolonial paradigm” gradually faded out in its politically subversive

drive within the cultural panorama of the United States, but it has recently met with renewed and reinvigorated interest in Europe, coming to a critically fruitful confluence with the experience (at times dramatic) of transnational migrations, the reconfiguration of the urban fabric beginning with the movements that upset (and overwhelm) the peripheries, and the more general process of the recomposition of European identity that had discussion of limits and boundaries (geographical, geopolitical, cultural) as its point of departure. In this sense it appeared legitimate for some to speak of a genuine “colonial fracture” that today runs through European societies, marking the *return of the suppressed*, which—presenting itself as a *symptom* of a past that has not yet been fully received and recognized by Europe—requires a genealogical perspective, aimed at investigating the “long run” beyond the individual national narratives (see Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire, eds. 2005). It is from this point of view that a reconstruction of the postcolonial paradigm appears useful, and in particular a reconstruction of its most significant theoretical moments, enclosed for example within what is known as Subaltern Studies (of Indian origin). This not only with the aim of highlighting the “blinding effects” induced by a given conception (Western and Eurocentric) of reason, of humanism and of universalism, but also—on the constructive *lato sensu* level—in order to elaborate a conception of “contamination” that allows for a visualization according to new parameters of key concepts such as that of identity or subjectivity. And this while remaining constantly faithful to the critical–hermeneutic potential enclosed in the gaze of subjects who are (and understand themselves to be) always “in the wrong place” or, to borrow the words of the title of Edward Said’s evocative autobiography (1999), “out of place.”

In line with these premises, the pages that follow aim to configure themselves as a sort of map, or better, as a *mapping* (equipped with elements of dynamism and forms of theoretical–conceptual recursivity) organized around thematic polarities whose center of gravitation is enclosed in the hendiadys that lies in the two terms–concepts of “history” and “subjectivization.” The principle of selectivity that has oriented the delimitation of

the analytic “outlines” set up and explored each time corresponds, as mentioned, to the attempt to fathom, in its presuppositions and in its implications, all that has gathered together over the decades under the lemma “postcolonial”: a new configuration of the “world,” become materially *one* and yet today more than ever run through with cracks, turbulences, and fracture lines; a radical bringing into question of the universals that emerged at the dawn of the European Enlightenment (*in primis*, the idea of “uni-versally” oriented history). This configuration takes the form not of a mere “critique of ideology” but of a subversion—or rather, to be precise, a *sub-version*—immanent in the fabric of Western identity; a repositioning, ultimately, of the theoretical enquiry into categories such as “subject” and “identity” on the terrain of the experiential and political dynamics of subjectivization. This will not involve, however, the tracing of simple genealogies of *concepts*, but a more ambitious facing up to “figures” or “constellations,” obeying the critical need to proceed by conglomerates of categories that are, at the very least, doubles (history/border, writing/memory, translation/transition, etc.). And this because of the fact that each of the categories examined, far from referring to a univocal meaning or a stable and predefined referent, underpins an entire *process*, the articulation and the conflict of which must be explicated theoretically at the same time. This condition of *conceptual dynamicity* is moreover shadowed by the very term “postcolonial” itself, which on the strictly epistemological plane, alludes to a state of transition of the systems of knowledge that does not flow into a mere need for “interdisciplinarity” but rather indicates a *transdisciplinary* program: a program that—in Said’s words—knows how to evolve in a virtuous way through a constant “crossing of boundaries, a smuggling of ideas across lines” (Said 1988, x). The inaugural epistemological gesture of postcolonial criticism in fact, departing from Said’s seminal work, is to bring into question *disciplines* as realities with pre-established contours, and the concomitant denouncement of the complicity between “theory” and the political–economic history of the world: beginning with the awareness that the very *boundaries* that are at the basis of academic specializations and disciplines

have very often represented “an extension of the imperialism that decreed the principle of ‘divide-and-rule.’” (ibid.)

And nevertheless, the term “postcolonial” indicates in the first instance a *historical threshold*, that yes finds its material well-spring in the albeit alternating events linked to the processes of decolonization, but which at the same time refers—on a plane that, quite rightly, can define itself as *global*—to a more encompassing reconfiguration of the spatial and temporal vectors that organize the experience of the present or, in a Foucauldian manner, the *actualité*. A historical threshold marked not so much by a mere process of “de-centralization” (or of “loss of the center”) as by a considerably more radical and disorienting “loss of the periphery” (Sloterdijk) or, even, a condition of *mixed periphery* that destroys the historical and institutional device organized around the coordinates of “internal” and “external,” or of “inclusion” and “exclusion.” The time of the “post”-colonial thus appears not as a generic time of the “after” (*after* colonialism, *after* imperialism, or *after* the modern) but rather as a time of *passages*, of conceptual and material transits that redraw the territorial and symbolic geography of the world, making a place for a space that is no longer classical, no longer Euclidean: a space in which forms of dominion and of confinement, features of the colonial experience, extend throughout the entire globe, stymieing all attempts at drawing a linear cartography of the current devices of power and the correlated subjective practices of liberation and of “resistance.” In this light, the “postcolonial” condition acquires a *symptomal* character in the strict sense: it remarks on something *suppressed* which, casting a shadow on the processes of globalization, renders clear the inscription of the colonial form on the very heart of the European idea of civilization. Indeed, the colonies appear as a “founding non-place” (de Certeau) of the Western theoretical-political and historiographical operation: a “non-place” that is codified as a *beginning* or *zero degree* of time and has constituted (from Hegel up to Marx himself) the condition of possibility of every historicization, configuring the entire Eurocentric historical narrative as a form of *écriture en miroir*: a history, that is, organized from its very inception on the *duty to end*. Nevertheless, it is pre-

cisely on the “surreptitious and altering power of the suppressed,” on the “worrying familiarity” of a past that the present has sought to erase, that the best postcolonial criticism has gained leverage to open again a theoretical and political discourse on *modernity* in its entirety: distant from any flatly relativistic party stance and at the same time able to set out the universal categories that claim to include those social and cultural formations that are in a state of suspension, of unresolved tension: to set them out, in other words, “under erasure.”

In line with this “double regime”—which assumes the semantic constellation of European modernity (with the keywords that distinguish it, such as State and civil society, citizens and individual) as a *necessary and yet incomplete* referent—this work approaches, critically, some thematic knots whose analyses allow for a prismatic breakdown of categories that constitute the fundamental vocabulary of Western theoretical identity. Beginning, in the first instance, with the concept—long deposited as sediment along the entire temporal arc of modern philosophy—of History, or better, of a well-determined *codification of historical time*, which has made of it not only the *medium* of an entelechy of universal Reason that in the West finds its own riverbed and its own point of arrival, but also the vector—this time fiercely material—of the impulse toward the annexation and the conquest of the geopolitically other. From Ranajit Guha to Dipesh Chakrabarty, to Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the main postcolonial critics indeed embark on a fierce battle on the terrain delimited by the notion of *Weltgeschichte*: that is to say, by the idea of a “world-history” understood as a globally-oriented process, characterized by the two vectors of *unidirectionality* and *linearity*. The bringing into question the semantic constellation of the *Geschichte*—as a reunion, in a single lemma, of the *res gestae* and of the *historia rerum gestarum*—nevertheless does not resolve itself in the simple gesture of the overturning of the *reduction ad Unum* which, at the dawn of modernity, gave rise to the “collective singular” of History (Koselleck). Rather it aims at unhinging the epistemological presuppositions, with the goal of not only *historicizing history*, but also

of casting light on the “shadow cone” that this constellation has produced—and continues to produce—when it is translated into the Eurocentric ideas of “modernization” and “development.” Through a comparison with the philosophy of Hegelian history (Guha) or with the ambiguity of Marxian prose (Spivak, Chakrabarty), post-colonial studies draw a line between a purported *temporal excess* (or *deficit*)—codified under the ethno-anthropological classification of “retardment,” of the “archaic,” of the “anachronistic”—and a manifest *critical excess* enclosed in the need (at once theoretical and ethical) for “restoring the gaze” to the imperialist West. This is how History appears, to paraphrase Spivak, like a *catachresis*, a metaphor without a literal referent, an *empty form* in the interior of which temporal “rhythms”—sometimes dissonant—clash and articulate themselves. And nevertheless, this *dissonance*, far from leading to a linear opposition between History and histories, is at the basis of a project of theory that assumes the *enabling violation* (Spivak), the *contemporaneity of progress and catastrophe* introduced into the non-European space of the colonial enterprise, as an outline within which the parameters of *universalism* can be renegotiated. From here there is drawn up a *geography of subalternity* (this last being a term deriving from Gramsci’s work) that operates as a karstic activity *within* the limits and *through* the limits of European thought. Beginning with the codes of belonging and citizenship, unsheathed from the denouncement of the constitutive ambivalence of national authority (Bhabha) and from the immediately *translocal* yearning of the movements of subjectivization of minorities otherwise subjugated and racialized (Gilroy). Then moving on to a revision of the entire architecture of the historiographical enterprise, denouncing its intimate complicity with individualism and realism, or the “royal-empiricism” (Rancière), on which European political philosophy was constructed. This up to—though not last of all—the shift of theoretical enquiry from the destinies of the Subject to the conjunctural and unforeseen dynamics of the *political subjectivization* of the social subjects: a theme that finds in postcolonial feminism its most emblematic cipher, in the form of a radical rearticulation of relationships between politics and an

ontology only apparently paradoxically *historicized*.

The key stake for postcolonial criticism—and on which these pages intend to dwell—is thus, yes, a denouncement of the “geopolitically differentiated” structures of European humanism (in its declension of citizenship, of rights, of the individual). But all this departing from a hermeneutic horizon that Étienne Balibar has named, effectively, an *aporetics of the universal*: a horizon, in other words, that far from erasing the conquests of universalism that arose with European modernity, subjects them constantly to stress, recognizing at the same time their indelible *historicity* and their inescapable *indispensability*.