Eurocentrism: Postcolonial Theory

Through the 1980s and 1990s, numerous ‘special issues’ on postcolonial theory and politics were published in the journals; but not in the sociology journals, where only a very few individual articles on these themes appeared (Mouzelis 1997, Parker 1997). Meanwhile, popular textbooks on the sociological classics (Hughes et al. 1995, Craib 1997) barely touched on the questions that Seidman and Lemert were raising about Eurocentrism in the founding fathers. And until the late 1990s, otherwise up-to-speed reviews of modern sociological theory (Maynard 1989, Craib 1992, May 1996, Ritzer 1996, Layder 1997) were devoid of mention of the postcolonial issues that seemed so pressing elsewhere. Throughout this period, cultural studies once again raced ahead of sociology as the discourse of contemporary existence, by fully taking on board those theorists of postcolonialism that were conducting explicit ‘disruptions’ of Western modernity and its disciplinary discourses.

In this chapter, I develop a critical engagement with postcolonial theory in that ‘disruptive’ genre. As pointed out before, this series of positions has been modulated in various ways since the statements that I will examine were written. But it is striking that even now few properly critical engagements with the main postcolonialist authors and concepts can be found. In formulating one kind of argument in response, chiefly in relation to the figuring of sociological understanding in postcolonial theory, my intention is not to deny that sociology is, in some important sense, an ordering and classifying enterprise, born into the world to scientifically and politically master the social structures and social problems of modern urban life in the West. But when this point is generalized to the effect that any kind of concern with classification is Western, modernist and oppressive, we are in the realms of sheer obscurantism. And if sociological theorists have
not managed to embrace postcolonialism because of its close association in some minds with *postmodernism*, which many sociologists are cautious about, then that may just mean that there is a bit more yet to hammer out.

In some ways, the characterization of postcolonialism as not only part, but the very essence, of postmodernity itself is an attractive proposition. Thus Bauman says that the typically postmodern traits of pluralism, ambivalence and decentredness are condensations of ‘the erosion of the global structure of domination upon which the self-confidence of the West and its spokesmen has been built’ (Bauman 1992: 96). Against this stands the point, made by several postcolonial authors, that postmodernism is but the latest form of self-privileged Eurocentric theory, obsessed with the dilemmas of epistemologically challenged metropolitans (Williams and Chrisman 1993: 13, Ashcroft *et al.* 1995: 2, During 1995, Ahmad 1997: 365, Rattansi 1997: 494). Both these views have something going for them: postcolonialism is not *equivalent* to postmodernism, but nor are these syndromes fundamentally *antithetical* to one another.

Partly as a result of unresolved debates of this kind, the field of postcolonial studies has been reported, for about a decade, as having reached something of an impasse (Slemon 1994: 29, Young 1995: 163, Moore-Gilbert 1997: 186). One aspect of the standstill concerns postcolonial theory’s prevailing textualism, its tendency to evade the constraints of structural investigation into the divisions of labour of our times (Hall 1996a: 257). It is in that context that cultural studies people reach to recover the sociological part of their make-up, alarmed by ‘the repudiation of foundations and objective validity’ that literary deconstructionism is thought to entail (San Juan 1998: 8). What is needed, some think, is the revival of Marxist notions of totality and universality within the contemporary global analysis of culture (Lazarus 1999: 29). Similar notes, more guardedly struck, can be found throughout Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), the verbose convolutions of which seem otherwise to confirm rather than relieve the troubles within postcolonial thought.

With those guidelines in mind, I want to reconstruct and appraise the way that sociology’s ostensible Eurocentrism is brought to light in the work of Hall, Bhabha, and Young, the three principal interpreters of the postcolonial problematic. Sociology, we should note straight away, is seldom referred to explicitly or at any length in these statements, but overall the logic is damning: sociology, unlike postcolonial theory, is assumed to be constitutively Eurocentric because of the structural(ist)