# The Artifice of Modernization: Postcoloniality and Beyond

## Vivek Bhandari

Of the 158 nations that currently map the world, over a hundred were at some point in the past two centuries a part of European empires.  In other words, the history of the modern world, or of at least three-quarters of its population, has to be understood in terms of its resistance to colonial forms of control, and the degree to which the latter are still prevalent today.  For populations of the post-colonial world, the ideas, attitudes, institutions, and ideologies of empire are comprehensively intertwined with the present, and determine the parameters that shape socio-political identity.  Partly in order to grapple with these concerns, a group of scholars often described as 'postcolonial critics' have begun to articulate new ways of unpacking the legacy of colonialism, and the ways in which this legacy continues to shape the lives of not just the de-colonized peoples of the world but also western notions of subjectivity.  The contributions of postcolonial criticism have to be viewed in relation to questions raised by poststructuralist and postmodern critics who raise similar questions about the Western world, and the problems inherent in modernist claims about the construction of knowledge.[1]  In the following article, I will make an effort to explore these connections, and how these might help us to formulate a viable agenda for the future.

Initially, the implications of poststructuralist approaches were not fully apparent to postcolonial critics. Mary Louise Pratt has recently pointed out that when the term 'postmodern' began circulating in the world in the 1980s, this elicited essentially two reactions among intellectuals in the 'developing;' world, both of them ironic.  One was: "Dammit, we haven't even got to modernity yet, and they've already called it off!"  The other reaction was:   "Fragmentation?   De-centeredness?   Co-existence of incommensurate realities? ...If that is postmodern, we're ahead of the game. *They* are catching up with us!" Aside from the fact that these reactions are symptomatic of the incredulity of people towards postmodernism, what is interesting about them is that they revealed the degree to which people in the 'developing' world measured the scope of their own modernity in relation to the West, a 'place' where modernity was assumed to be total, universal, complete.  While postmodern critics have made concerted efforts to demonstrate the contradictions and lapses characteristic of the universal claims of modern constructions of knowledge, writings on postcoloniality in the past two decades have taken the discussions further by addressing two interrelated themes:  the nature of modernity, and the need to de-colonize knowledge.

The interdependence of postcolonial critiques and poststructuralist writings operates at many levels.  The latter have tried to unpack the assumptions that have shaped the construction of modern ways of thinking, and have done so by challenging the foundational principles of modernity, for instance the Enlightenment truths of scientific progress, the use of instrumental conceptions of reason, and the primacy accorded to the state.  A fundamental characteristic of these writings has been an ongoing discussion on the relationship between power and knowledge.  This discussion, in turn, has provoked a rethinking of modern history in terms of how the entrenchment of modernist institutions

has led to the dis-empowerment and exploitation of marginal groups. Some of these themes are the focus of the Subaltern Studies group of South Asianist scholars, many of whom were pioneers of postcolonial criticism. These scholars narrate a 'history from below', that salvages the voices of women, peasants, lower-caste groups, and minorities. Despite the problems these scholars have faced in finding ways to 'make the subaltern speak' (i.e., to find forms of subaltern articulation and agency), these approaches have opened-up spaces for the exploration of new ways of knowing, and structuring life; new ways that cut across the boundaries imposed by the legacy of colonialism.

**WHAT ARE THE ANALYTICAL STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY POSTCOLONIAL CRITICS?**
First, post-colonial critics emphasize the need to 'de-center' categories of knowledge by demonstrating their embeddedness in specific historical locations. The concept of 'modernity' has become the focus of analysis, in part because most claims about global inequality are couched in rhetoric that distinguishes between 'the modern world' (where modernity is assumed to pervade every facet of life), and 'the modernizing world', places where 'modernization' (as a process) is unfolding and is 'developing' those societies that had somehow remained 'outside' or 'peripheral' to THE 'modernity' of metropolitan Europe. Questions about the universal validity of European notions of rationality, science, justice, and perhaps most importantly, the nature of modernity itself, are fundamental to these critiques. The classification of the world into places that are characterized by unequal degrees of progress ('developed' versus 'developing', or 'modern' versus 'modernizing') is also being vehemently critiqued by postcolonial critics. Implicit in these critiques are concerns about the philosophical assumptions, moral legitimacy, and efficacy of those categories that, until recently, were taken for granted by newly emerging nation-states.

The next step of this critique is a compilation of a long list of those features that are constitutive of the metropolitan modern world. These features play a critical ideological role in reinforcing the 'feel good' self-perceptions of dominant modernist groups. The list includes — to mention a few elements — the rise of liberal democracy, a free market, the nation-state, class formation, industrialization, and the bureaucratization and 'management' of society and economy (through 'planned' growth). The list also privileges notions of individualism, which, when combined with the need for 'mass' democracy, set the stage for the rise of mass culture, mass education, and the denial of 'cultural values' and 'traditions' (unless these can be repackaged as conforming to facile dichotomies like high/low culture). These lists become the constitutive elements in the construction of histories that describe the development of these elements in 'metropolitan' centers of the world (invariably in the West). 'Origins' are delineated in narratives that trace the development of modernity, and the writing of history becomes a celebration of the 'progress' that the world has made in reaching the apex of civilization. Wars, famines, histories of discrimination, and imperialism are treated as subtexts that are uncritically relegated to the status of footnotes in the narratives of the rise of Western progress.

Although the above tropes of progress and civilizational growth do not, in and of themselves, necessarily imply that they are inherently connected to the history of

colonialism and imperial rule in the past three centuries, many critics have pointed out that modernizing agendas can only be understood *in relation to* their 'others', i.e., the world of 'primitive', 'irrational', or 'underdeveloped' and 'backward' cultures. Edward Said's writings on 'orientalism' have played a crucial role in foregrounding these assumptions of western historiography. Said points out that the existence of these 'others' lends credence and authority to the voice of modernizers stepping forward to 'develop' the world into something resembling their own image. Indeed, what remains constant is that every account with a modernizing mission **has** to have an 'other', something for modernity to measure itself against.

The existence of such "others" in itself may seem quite normal in today's world where social groups constantly invoke national, ethnic, and cultural signifiers of identity. However, what sets these identifications apart from the strands that characterize the hegemony of Western modernity is that the latter retains control over the *nature* of these categories. This is most apparent in the ways that many post-colonial notions of identity as articulated through nationalism, and notions of cultural autonomy that continue to use static, 'modernist' notions of identity to legitimize themselves. Nationalist ideologies, as these are articulated today, do not allow for dissension or much disagreement on the underlying principles that shape them; nor do they leave room for negotiation. Scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Ashis Nandy have repeatedly demonstrated that the reasons for the breakdown of contemporary Indian social and political structures have to be sought in the schizophrenic efforts of postcolonial politicians to derive their constructions of identity from the West, and more disturbingly, in their attempts to 'catch-up' with Western nations.

## WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US?
Following the lead taken by some postcolonial critics, the next step requires us to identify the ways in which the legacy of colonial rule continues to shape life, and then to move beyond them. One way around this is by outlining, in very specific terms, how some of the categories that were employed by the early nationalists to challenge colonial authority may in fact have succeeded in doing very little to change postcolonial society for the better. A strident dichotomizing--that contrasts colonial control with national control, cultural imperialism with cultural resistance, and so on—was characteristic of these pronouncements. Early postcolonial critics clearly adopted this rhetoric to demonstrate the hegemony of Western imperialism. These 'us-versus-them' discourses of nativism, such as *indigenismo* in Latin America, and *Africanite* in Africa are however no longer as persuasive as they once were. This is because, in their postcolonial manifestations, they still tend to reproduce the underlying logic and power structures of the colonial project. They also fail to move beyond essentialism and end-up creating postcolonial nations that continue to resemble colonial society in disturbing ways. When looked at from this perspective, it comes as no surprise that characteristics of colonial society such as dysfunctional or self-serving bureaucracies, gross inequality, and educational institutions that are based on the 'factory-model', continue to exist in the postcolonial world. This does not mean that we de-legitimize *all* the changes that have taken place in postcolonial societies. What this does mean, however, is that we look for a deeper malaise that stems from our colonial legacy.

We have to make a genuine effort to decolonize knowledge, and this requires the identification of analytical tools that move beyond confrontational dichotomies (nationalism/nativism) or essentialist binaries (East/West). These tools also have to resist the pressure to legitimize the fragmentation and proliferation of particularisms (*Hindutva*, being a very unfortunate manifestation). What is important here is not that we reject *all* claims that are considered 'modernist', but that we retain a critical perspective that makes it possible for us to distinguish between the hegemonic and emancipatory potential of the diverse strands of modernity. Our tools need to be inclusive, so that they are able to address the epistemological, political, and economic concerns of hitherto disenfranchised groups. In the end, these approaches have to treat Western ideologies as historically embedded, not as the 'operating system' of global politics. Resurrecting those voices and forms of knowledge that have been silenced because of the totalizing claims of Western ways of knowing is likely to be a very difficult task in the context of a jingoistic, market driven 'globalization', but it is a critically important one. This is because the recognition of these voices is intrinsically intertwined with our ability to address issues of social and economic justice.

The creation of new learning societies, that are not weighed down by hegemonic forms of knowledge—most of which acquired their contemporary forms during the period of colonial rule—is imperative. This means, for instance, challenging the assumption that markets and mass production, the foundational tropes of India's 'development regime' since Independence, can generate real growth. Taken further, this implies the replacement of the logic that all problems can be solved using a technocratic 'fix', and the recognition that the adoption of technology is profoundly connected with the (ab)uses of power. Perhaps most important of all, this means undermining our obsession with the rhetoric of 'national interest' that focuses entirely on issues of power at the expense of questions of ethics and morality. Creating new learning societies requires a serious reassessment of all strands of modern 'development' from a perspective that accomodates the critical voices, agendas, and agency of disenfranchised groups and their dis-empowered forms of knowledge.

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1 Structuralism was an interdisciplinary movement of the 1960s and 1970s which has left its most durable mark in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, sociology and literary theory. What unites structuralists is the principle that cultural norms, belief systems, social structures and discourses of every kind can be understood in terms of immanent structures. In other words, structuralists believe that all facets of human

life are governed by certain foundational principles that help us to unearth the most basic configuration of the human mind.

The term postmodernism is used to refer to those positions that critique the foundational principles of the Enlightenment, and in this way question modernist claims about knowledge and truth.  In this sense, some postmodernists and poststructuralists argue that categories used to structure and explain human behavior, such as the state or culture are linguistically inscribed, and at the most fundamental level, serve the interests of dominant groups in society.  Of these scholars, those writers who derive their ideas from Michel Foucault, engage in a counter-Enlightenment critique that demonstrates the relationship between power and knowledge.  Such writings often involve strong critiques of the so-called 'foundational principles' delineated by structuralists.  In this sense, postcolonial positions share a great deal with poststructuralist writings because they stress the inherently hegemonic quality of  'modernization', which in the context of global inequality (economic, political, and epistemological) — is viewed as a form of neo-colonialism.