Navigating Modernity

POSTCOLONIALISM, IDENTITY & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Albert J. Paolini

Navigating Modernity

Postcolonialism, Identity, and International Relations

◇

Albert J. Paolini

edited by
Anthony Elliott
Anthony Moran

Foreword

Anthony Elliott

Contradiction, ambivalence, ambiguity, turbulence, and dispersal: These are key defining features, suggests Albert Paolini in *Navigating Modernity: Postcolonialism, Identity, and International Relations*, of intersubjective connections and affective ties in current social relations and global political processes. The intertwining of intersubjectivity, modernity, and globalization are central to Paolini's analysis of postcolonialism and the status of the Third World in the multinational world system of late capitalism. For Paolini, what is at stake in recent debates about modernity and postmodernism is not simply the navigation and renegotiation of ideologies of power but rather a profound reflexive encounter with the ontological and epistemological coordinates of the social-theoretical discourses that have underpinned the disciplinary terrain and political practice of international relations itself. In this sense, Paolini's book is deeply challenging: the sheer imaginative sweep of his argument advances beyond formulaic pronouncements about the "Westernization of the world" or the "end of history," and instead addresses head-on the momentous subjective and institutional transformations of individual life and collective experience in an age of thoroughgoing globalization.

Navigating Modernity is at the same time a work of international relations and social theory. Paolini writes passionately and with deep insight about the repressions and evasions that have marked the disciplinary boundaries of international relations; his focus is on questions of identity, subjectivity, and modernity, particularly as they apply to postcolonial discourses and the status of the Third World. In the process, he sets forth an outline for a reflexive, postmodern approach to international relations that can locate and map forces of globality, hybridity, and ambivalence in the structuring of the Third World and its relations to world politics. The revision of international relations that Paolini calls for may be defined as an interdisciplinary, critical, imaginative investigation of aspects of daily

political life, with a particular emphasis on the problem of ambivalence and resistance—that is, the ways in which individuals and groups develop strategies of appropriation and distance in response to modernity and its structures of domination.

Paolini challenges the discipline of international relations with the surprising claim that our reflexive understanding of society and politics— the practical social theory we all deploy as social agents—is essential to the ways in which we cope with the demands and dreads of contemporary political life. What this critical stance implies, in effect, is that international relations and political theory can no longer stand apart from society (as attempted in the high modernist tradition of academe), nor can they satisfactorily content themselves with offering generalized, universal pronouncements (an abstract system of impartial political knowledge) on the state of "world politics." Drawing from the theoretical current known as poststructuralism, especially the work of Michel Foucault, Paolini intends to show that power and knowledge always imply one another: "The study of power configurations must incorporate within its ambit the production and application of ideas, ideologies, moral world views, even accepted notions of power itself, as central to the operation of power. Given that dominant forms of discourse (language, knowledge, communication practices) create identities for people and define fields of action, they play a pivotal role in determining what can be thought or accepted as legitimate in politics."[1] Developing upon this poststructural approach to the relations between power and knowledge, Paolini elucidates the intersubjective and political conditions for globality in the context of postcolonialist and Third World discourses.

I have said that for Paolini ambiguity and ambivalence are central to the postmodern political condition. In social-theoretical terms, Paolini analyzes the ambivalences of modernity through a subtle interweaving of critical theory, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, sociological inquiry, and postmodernism. Beneath this theoretical complex, however, one can also discern a deep personal curiosity that informs his mapping of the individual and social challenges of ambivalence and its rooting and repression in contemporary political life.

Shortly after commencing work on this project, Albert Paolini was diagnosed with acute leukemia. The medical outlook was that he would be lucky to survive for six months. In his long and difficult struggle against the disease, he in fact lived for another six years. He died on September 30, 1996, at the age of thirty-three, some weeks after completing work on this manuscript, for which he was awarded a Ph.D. by the University of Melbourne. Writing a doctoral dissertation under the pressure of a terminal illness was impressive in itself; but what was even more astonishing to me—as his friend and colleague—was the manner in which he sought to

connect his personal circumstances to his broader intellectual and political interests. The fear, anxiety, and pain that he experienced in his journey with cancer operated, in part, as a stimulus for a deeper engagement with and reflection upon the multiple and shifting identities emanating from postcolonialism. Many writers have, of course, underscored the role of fragmentation, ambivalence, hybridity, and heterogeneity in modernist encounters between the West and its others. Stuart Hall of the Birmingham cultural studies movement writes, for example, of "the traumatic character of 'the colonial experience.' " It is this traumatic dimension of colonialism and postcolonialism as a process and discourse that Paolini firmly fixes his attention upon; he highlights the psychic stakes of resistance and opposition in African responses to globalization and modernity.

"Postcolonialism," writes Paolini, "has ridden the crest of an academic wave which has established the issues of identity and culture as central in the humanities and social sciences."[2] The political issue, he insists, is not whether it is possible to comprehend the postcolonial experience from the vantage point of a negative and simplistic antagonism that locks subaltern responses into a rejectionist mode. What are required instead are theories that allow scholars to analyze the constitution of the sociopolitical field around the issue of identity formation, theories attentive to the constantly shifting and ambiguous realm of Third World cultures and peoples, and an understanding that cultural processes of both incorporation and resistance are continually unfolding, evolving, and ambivalent. In *Navigating Modernity*, Paolini provides suggestive conceptual pointers (ranging from the sociology of "global culture" [Roland Robertson, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman] to intersections in poststructuralism and postcolonialism [Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak]) and uncovers promising sites (via readings of African studies and novelists) for mapping agency and structure and identity and difference in the colonial and postcolonial context.

NOTES

1. Albert Paolini, "Foucault, Realism and the Power of Discourse in International Relations," *Australian Journal of Political Science,* 28 (1), 1993, p. 111.

2. Albert Paolini, "The Place of Africa in Discourse About the Postcolonial, the Global and the Modern," *New Formations,* 31, 1997, p. 85.

Acknowledgments

Albert J. Paolini

Editors' Note

Contents

hold that it is open to rational comprehension, let alone the desire to change it, [is] dismissed as a contemptible attempt to construct 'grand narratives' and 'totalizing' (totalitarian?) knowledge."[41] In this light, the crucial question for Krishna is not, therefore, the postmodern impossibility of subjectivity, but how to politically garner the "emancipatory potential" of various subject positions.[42] Without this theoretical compromise, the possibility of agency and resistance under a postmodern and postcolonial banner is minimal.

According to this critique, then, hybridity potentially forecloses the space for meaningful action and even resistance. It does this both historically and in the present. As Loomba notes of the use of hybridity to reinscribe the colonial experience, it is "difficult to accept that any notion of hybridity will dilute the violence of the colonial encounter."[43] In the context of contemporary relations between North and South, there is the real danger that in completely closing off the construction of identity and subject positions based on some notions of community or tradition, hybridity as the representation of the postcolonial condition ossifies agency in the Third World. Shohat argues that the antiessentialist emphasis of hybridity comes dangerously close to dismissing all searches for community and identity and thus "appearing to sanctify the fait accompli of colonial violence." She asks "whether it is possible to forge a collective resistance without inscribing a communal past," especially for communities that have undergone a brutal rupture. According to Shohat, the "retrieval and reinscription of a fragmented past becomes a crucial site for forging a resistant collective identity": "Postcolonial theory's celebration of hybridity risks an anti-essentialist condescension toward those communities obliged by circumstances to assert, for their very survival, a lost and even irretrievable past."[44] Shohat's argument is suggestive of Chinua Achebe's view of himself as a teacher whose primary responsibility was to communicate and reconstruct an African identity (in this case, Igbo) in his novels precisely because of the colonial destruction of tradition. To move forward entails a knowledge of the past and an identity based on cultural antecedents. Obviously, when one looks at the wreckage of former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Somalia, there are also dangers in tapping this communitarian past. Hence Krishna's puzzle of how to garner the emancipatory potential of recourses to community, the past, or other essentialized expressions of identity. An emphasis on hybridity needs to address the issue of cultural survival and Third World futures for marginal and vulnerable communities navigating a distinctive space in the age of global capitalism.

The foregoing critique of postcolonialism suggests some of the pitfalls in postmodern representations of the Third World. Yet the postmodern turn, in highlighting hybridity and ambivalence and imparting a more critical approach to modernity, also opens up and directs attention to issues of

contemporary relevance to the position and prospects of the postcolonial or Third World. As the postcolonial discourse repositions itself under the umbrella of postmodernism and within the context of the late modern age, it incorporates the older motifs of resistance and difference but molds them to the contours of multiple, shifting identities and an overall reconceptualization of political space. This repositioning and the passage from resistance to hybridity and ambivalence are by no means smooth or always coherent. As evidenced by Dirlik and Krishna, there is an increasing din of dissenting voices, mainly from a more traditional Third Worldist perspective. Contradictions within the evolution of the postcolonial discourse are of intrinsic interest, yet from the point of view of this book, of greater importance is what sort of tool the postcolonial insistence on ambivalence and hybridity provides us with in assessing the unfolding of intersubjective identity in Africa. In the remainder of this chapter, I will take stock of some of the more recent themes under the postcolonial banner and the directions they give in illuminating the way forward, in particular the concern for cultural survival and Third World futures; notions of ambivalent, multiple identities; and a focus on the politics of the local and the everyday.

The combination of cultural survival and Third World futures initially seems an odd grouping. Yet in many respects it captures at least the implicit challenge of postcolonialism: We can move forward only after we have properly deconstructed and reconstructed the past. The emphasis, until now, has mostly been with the past. For all the benefits and lessons that can be garnered from a reinscription of the past, postcolonialism can be legitimately criticized for a reluctance to engage with the contemporary processes of modernity and an unwillingness, thus far, to look ahead and suggest concrete alternatives and strategies for postcolonial societies struggling under the weight of the modern and the global. In terms of the former criticism, postcolonialism has mostly been content to act as a critic of modernity. As for the latter criticism, postcolonialism has generally been more comfortable with the semiotic and discursive rather than the social and political in the everyday. However, a recognition of hybridity and ambivalence, accompanied by a postmodern reading of the modern, inevitably redirects attention to modernity and an emphasis on cultural plurality and heterogeneity, particularly in the face of a supposed global culture. It can be argued that postmodernism encourages the postcolonial critic not to reject modernity (a regressive, binary move under the postmodern) but to critically engage with its limits and its possibilities, particularly its more hybridized operation in the Third World. Although we are still far from more practical analyses offering specific ways ahead (except, perhaps, in the work of certain postdevelopmentalists such as Escobar), the nascent concern with the issues of cultural survival and Third World futures, however tentative and at times contradictory, indicates a

desire on the part of some postcolonialists to rework older notions of difference and resistance and reorient them to a hybrid, ambivalent reading of the competing processes of modernity and tradition in the Third World.

One writer who combines the two concerns and has attempted to (re)conceptualize the issues and dilemmas for postcolonial societies is Ashis Nandy. For Nandy, hybridity and ambivalence are natural and inevitable in the navigation of modernity and the continued relevance of tradition in the Third World. However, Nandy also recognizes the profound imbalance between the two and the increasing triumphalism of globalized modernity over older cultures and civilizations in the postcolonial and Third Worlds. Questions of modernity and the survival of traditional cultures go to the heart of self-other relations, in particular the constitution of the self in the Third World. Nandy sees the confirmation of a continued, distinctive subjective identity as a vital step for the survival of non-Western peoples in the future space of a more intensified global system. Although Nandy often employs essentialized concepts (particularly when he considers India and its relationship to the West) and language (for example, recovery), he is careful to concede both the full significance and relevance of modernity and the global world for the Third World. However, what particularly concerns Nandy is that "so many individuals and collectivities are willing and even eager to forego their right to design their own futures."[45] For Nandy, "unmixed modernism" (by which he means unadulterated and complete submission to modernity) as well as "unmixed traditionalism" are no longer fashionable, and the former subject to increased critique in the West (presumably by postmodern critics but also by the ecologists and environmentalists tapping into premodern values). Instead, Nandy puts forward a Gandhian fusion of critical modernism (informed by criticisms of modernity from both inside and outside the West) and critical traditionalism (informed by Mahatma Gandhi's refusal to romanticize the Indian past/history or blanketly defend traditions).[46] Yet before this critical engagement with the values and forces of the modern, the "victims of history" need to "rediscover their own visions of a desirable society" less burdened both by the "post-Enlightenment hope of 'one world' and by the post-colonial idea of cultural relativism" so that the "recovery of the other selves of cultures and communities, selves not defined by the dominant global consciousness, may turn out to be the first task of social criticism and political activism and the first responsibility of intellectual stock-taking in the first decades of the coming century."[47] This "intellectual stock-taking" has in many respects already taken place (especially in postcolonial fiction). What is of particular concern in the present context is the next step, what Nandy terms a rediscovery of postcolonial visions for the future.

There are certainly pointers in Nandy's analyses that are general yet intrinsic to the postcolonial project of moving forward with reference to both the past and the hybrid present. Although resistance, in particular that

toward the mystifications of Western notions such as development, ratio-
nality, and science, is still relevant, what is required is both an updating
of core traditions and an appropriation and reinterpretation of exogenous
ideas and values. The pull of hybridity is obvious; however, what Nandy
describes is in many respects pre-postmodern. Thus, he offers Gandhi as a
model of this updating and reinterpretation. Of India in general, Nandy ar-
gues: "This civilization has survived not only because of the 'valid', 'true'
or 'proper' exegesis of the traditional texts . . . but also because of the 'im-
proper', 'far-fetched' and 'deviant' reinterpretations of the sacred and the
canonical,"[48] in both India and the West, one might add. In particular,
Nandy contends that any project of cultural survival and reinterpretation
that is useful for a way forward must learn to "acknowledge and decode
three languages which often hide the implicit native theories of oppression
in many non-Western traditions": the language of continuity, the language
of spiritualism, and the language of self.[49] These languages are viewed as
specifically non-Western collective and individual skills that potentially
equip peoples of the Third World with self-strategies useful in mitigating
and guiding social transformation.

The language of continuity is counterposed to the modern Western
emphasis of change as disjunction and instead assumes that all change can
be interpreted as "aspects of deeper continuities. In other words, the lan-
guage assumes that every change, howsoever enormous, is only a special
case of continuity." This language is mostly articulated by the "victims of
the present global system."[50] Nandy is highlighting a crucial difference in
the perception of social transformation and thus suggesting that cultures
and civilizations with a strong grounding in a non-Western tradition are
able to absorb change and reincorporate it into an already existing world-
view. Change, therefore, does not merely become submission to an outside
force or an indication of Western superiority. By extension, hybridity be-
comes empowering, and ambivalence, an intrinsic, though not disabling,
condition of living with modernity. Similarly, the language of spirit serves
certain "this-worldly" purposes that allow a traditional culture to criticize
and defy encroaching cultures and invoke both an objective and subjective
frame of reference (for instance, myth) in contradistinction to a privileging
of objectivity and science in Western culture. Finally, the language of self
incorporates familiar Western psychoanalytic ideas of self-realization, self-
enrichment, and human creativity but also draws on a more traditional the-
ory of the not-self; that is, the self intervenes in the outside world and
vice-versa, so non-Western societies have at their disposal a vantage point
based on self-in-society, which gives them a social world with which to in-
terpret outside influences.[51]

There is a wealth of ideas and possibilities for individual and collec-
tive transformation in Nandy's critique. The psychoanalytic basis of his
thinking moves beyond the Lacanian limitations of Bhabha to embrace

pathways of reflexivity and subjectivity that are enabling and forward-thinking. Nandy is pointing both to the universal creativity of the human imaginary (and hence the capacity for reflection and change) and to a specific language and outlook in non-Western societies that create a space for a critical mediation of modernity and globalization. He is laying the basis for intersubjective relations based on the premises "(1) that we model ourselves in the world on our interventions in our own selves, and (2) that the world does to us what we do to ourselves."[52] Further, in embracing hybridity and ambivalence as the cornerstones of contemporary identity, he is placing cultural survival (incorporating critical traditionalism) squarely within the context of Third World futures in an increasingly global (that is, Western) world.

Beyond the enticing possibilities outlined, it is difficult to assess the more specific claims and representations advanced. Thus to what extent is the model of cultural survival outlined tied to the Indian experience without much application elsewhere in the postcolonial world (particularly in the Caribbean, where traditional cultures and civilizations are not so intact, and in most of Africa, where a common spiritual bond/language may well be missing)? Does Nandy's model take into sufficient account the asymmetry of power positions within and across the Third World? What is possible in India may not be so in Burkina Faso, for example. Certainly one can think of several instances of "intellectual stock-taking" and cultural and political reimaginings across the Third World that lend substance to Nandy's claims (from subaltern studies in South Asia to Escobar's description of more grassroots Participatory Action Research groups in Latin America and the appropriation of Western clothes as refashioned symbols of local status in the Sape culture in Zaire as outlined by Friedman). Yet one cannot help but think that the type of reinterpretation envisaged by Nandy, though certainly available to all of us as reflexive human beings, might be more effective in certain contexts and societies as opposed to others.

Finally, one could point to the lurking binarism and essentialism implicit in Nandy's critique. This is exemplified in the metaphor of the shaman provided by Nandy, which becomes the site of the Third World. In Nandy's account, the shaman, as prophetic and dissenting voice of the other, becomes "the only way out" for the Third World in the contemporary global culture, "the modest symbol of resistance to dominant politics of knowledge," with a "style of negation" whose "categories do not make any sense centre-stage but always seem to touch the disempowered in the wings." The shaman remains a testimony to a "transformative experience" with "one foot in the familiar, one foot outside; one foot in the present, one in the future or, as some would put it, in the timeless." This shaman represents the "repressed self of the society, articulating some possibilities

latent in a culture, possibilities which the 'sane', the 'mature' and the 'rational' cannot self-consciously express or seriously pursue." In the present global culture, this otherness remains the "least socialized articulation of values of freedom, creativity, multiple realities and an open future."[53] Extending his representation of the shaman as a metaphor for the Third World, Nandy argues that the Third World acts as "Other of the First," an otherness that "opens up—alas, only theoretically—many possibilities." The Third World can be seen as an upholder of traditions and cultures outside the present global culture, waiting for its prodigal brothers to come back and admit their profligacy. Or it can be redefined as "a concept of trusteeship," insomuch as the Third World holds in trust the "rejected selves" of the First and former Second Worlds. Alternately, it can act as a reminder that "all is not well with this, the allegedly best of all possible worlds."[54]

An openness for future possibilities is still apparent in Nandy's account, yet it seems to make a subtle retreat from the model of cultural survival outlined in his earlier piece. Thus the possibilities are now either in the wings or merely theoretical. As in Scott's "hidden transcripts" and Bhabha's reading of the British colonial authority, the challenge to hegemony and scope for agency seem trivial and marginal. Also, although the underlying focus on relations of self and other and ambivalence are evident in the shaman metaphor, the representation of the Third World's otherness comes across as distinctly essentialized ("timeless," "outside," "irrational"). Although Nandy's intention is to suggest that the other resides in the self and vice-versa, the concept of rejected selves and the binary representations of the First and Third Worlds seem to undercut his more clearly stated embrace of hybridity and multiple identity in his earlier critique. There seems to be little notion of upgrading and appropriation in the shaman, more an emphasis on discomfort and repression on the part of the Westerner. However, the concern for "creating a space at the margins of the present global civilization for a new, plural, political ecology of knowledge" is still the primary focus for contemplating Third World futures.[55] Compared with some other recent postcolonial attempts to address the issue of the future,[56] Nandy's attempt is a genuine and useful starting point.

Perhaps the central insight afforded by Nandy, in contradistinction to the earlier critique of hybridity advanced, is the enabling possibilities of hybridity. In learning to live with the hybridity and ambivalence of contemporary life, subjects can begin to carve out a space for future action and reflection. Rather than experiencing hybridity as a loss of authentic self and a diminishing of agency, the very movement between identities and traditions can entail a reclaiming of aspects and elements that are conducive to modern living.

Thinking about cultural survival and Third World futures is conditioned by a general embrace of the idea of multiple identity as constitutive of the postcolonial experience. The move toward multiple realities has its antecedents in notions about cultural difference in postcolonialism and more general postmodern reworkings of identity in social theory. Earlier notions of distinctiveness and difference, however, are reworked with an ambivalent overlay so that the emphasis has shifted away from the discrete and authentic to the plural and heterogeneous. This is the ground upon which Said signals his third topic of the postcolonial: the "revolutionary reality" of hybrid, multiple, plural identities. No longer are the positions of an earlier generation of postcolonial and nationalist writers attempting to build separate boundaries around notions of community, nation, or race seen as tenable in the contemporary world. This, of course, does not deny much evidence to the contrary of this postcolonial embrace of multiple identity. After all, there are countless instances of the reassertion of a singular identity in the Third World, especially evident in various ethnonationalist projects, ethnic cleansing, and communal and tribal conflict (consider Bosnia or Rwanda as two glaring examples). The allure of organic or premodern rationalizations of identity is still powerful in the late modern world. However, at least in contemporary postcolonial theorizing, there is a distinct break with such thinking. Even reconstructions around the idea of cultural survival are couched not in exclusivist, authentic terms, but in the manner outlined by Nandy as necessarily incorporating the outside and the foreign in reworkings of the self.

Although it is true that much that goes under the label of the "postcolonial experience" in the context of multiple identities relates to the condition of postcoloniality in First World cities and academia, there has been a discernible move to ground ideas about shifting and plural identity in the Third World. Certainly the emphasis on diaspora, multiculturalism, and the migrant situation, evident in the writings of Arjun Appadurai and Stuart Hall, for example, relate specifically to First World phenomena. In these writings the guiding influence of a postmodern sensibility is apparent. The following passage from Hall is illustrative:

> Thinking about my own sense of identity, I realise that it has always depended on the fact of being a *migrant*, on the *difference* from the rest of you. So one of the fascinating things . . . is to find myself centered at last. Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centered. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be the representative modern experience! This is "coming home" with a vengeance! Most of it I much enjoy—welcome to migranthood. It also makes me understand something about identity which has been puzzling me in the last three years.
>
> I've been puzzled by the fact that young black people in London today are marginalized, fragmented, disadvantaged and dispersed. And