

The Anti-Establishment Impact of Postcolonial Studies

An Interview with Jacques Pouchepadass

Jules NAUDET

What are the challenges and limitations of postcolonial theory? The historian Jacques Pouchepadass reminds us that postcolonial studies do not constitute an academic discipline, but rather a critical school of thought, that calls on historians to stop celebrating the odyssey of Western modernity throughout the world.

Jacques Pouchepadass, a historian of modern and contemporary India, is an emeritus director of research at the CNRS. He has mainly worked at the Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud (Centre for the Study of India and Southeast Asia) and at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. His initial research into peasants and the struggle for independence in colonial India led him, as early as the late 1970s, to build up a relationship with the founding collective of historians behind *Subaltern Studies*, with whom he conducted debates that were at once amicable and critical. Over the past ten years, he has published numerous articles and contributions about subaltern and postcolonial studies, on the topic of which he is currently preparing a book.

Books and Ideas: *What is it that we call postcolonial studies?*

Jacques Pouchepadass: Postcolonial studies are a field of critical thought that appeared in Anglo-Saxon universities during the 1980s, mainly in the United States. It arises out of a major, well-known work by Edward Said: *Orientalism*, which was published in 1978, and which had the aim of studying and criticising Western discourse on the Islamic Orient. The chronological period that was studied by Said in this book covered the entire period of the colonial relationship between the West and the rest of the world, in particular the period of the second major European expansion, from the 18th century to the middle of the 20th century. In carrying out this project, Edward Said was inspired by the ideas of Michel Foucault. His study took into consideration all of the academic production, but also the literary works, in particular novels, written in the West about the East, and he stated the principle that this set of texts constituted, or rather represented, what Michel Foucault referred to as a discursive formation. This refers to a kind of mental and intellectual universe that is expressed through the entire intertextuality of the period. Of course, this focus on textuality was connected to what is known as the linguistic turn, which was a major revolution in the intellectual life of this period. For this very reason, it was subsequently quite vigorously criticised, in the same way as postmodernism was criticised almost everywhere in the world, and particularly in France. Said's *Orientalism* appeared as a complete innovation in academic discourse on the Orient and on the relationship between the West and its "others", and, in the wake of this, a great number of intellectuals started to work along the same lines. Most of these were

intellectuals who originated from countries in what was referred to at the time as the Third World, which we would tend to refer to today as Southern countries, and who were employed in Anglo-Saxon universities, in particular in the United States. The intellectual climate within which these intellectuals were living and working itself made them predisposed to adopt this position of reacting critically to the textuality of colonialism. Taking a contrasting stance to traditional anti-colonialism, which was more concerned with carrying out a political, economic and social criticism, they went into a more epistemic criticism, a criticism that was based on the textuality of colonialism. This is the genealogy that has led to the birth of what has since been known as postcolonial thought, as it is currently being developed in Anglo-Saxon and American universities, but also in many other places across the whole world.

Books and Ideas: *What connections can we draw between postcolonial studies and subaltern studies?*

Jacques Pouchepadass: Strictly speaking, *Subaltern Studies* is the title of a series of texts that were published in India from 1982, the twelfth and last of which was published in 2005. These texts were collective projects, collections of articles that were edited by a collective of young historians who gathered around them other historians working along the same lines, under the leadership of a much older Bengali Marxist historian, Ranajit Guha, who at the time was based in England. The perspective put forward by Guha and by his young comrades was inspired by the history from below of so-called “radical” English historians (the most famous of which is E. P. Thompson), who made the deliberate choice to focus on the “people” rather than on the elite. This is precisely what Guha and his disciples wanted to do: to change the dominant perspective in the historiography of colonial India, and to write a history from below of colonial India. The historiography that Guha was criticising was organised into two fields. On the one hand, you had colonial history in the classical sense of the term, a history that was largely English, and which consisted in establishing the history of English people in India, rather than the history of India during the colonial era. On the other hand, you had what one might call the official narrative of the genesis of the Indian nation, which could be found in all the textbooks used in Indian university teaching. This glorified the path taken by India’s nationalist elites during the struggle for independence, and showed how, following their example, the Indian masses had risen up and at last won their independence by following the directives of these elites rather than their own initiative.

Guha and his disciples took a completely different view. They intended to give back to the Indian people its dignity, its ability to take the initiative and to act, and its autonomy in relation to the elites, to show that in reality it was the people who should be thanked for having pushed the English out of India. The elites that the people had been forced to follow had taken hold of power at the end, by withholding the fruits of victory from the people. However, this approach involved, perhaps not quite errors in terms of its method, but at any rate some positions that were difficult to defend and that were quite quickly criticised: on the one hand, the fact that the people as an entity was to a certain extent essentialised, using general traits that did not allow for any distinctions to be made between the Indian popular masses; and on the other hand, and this was mainly a left-wing criticism, the fact that subaltern studies attributed all of the initiative to the people without acknowledging that it could not have done anything without an elite, an avant-garde, to provide a framework and directives. These were clearly powerful criticisms. As a result, the field of subaltern studies, or rather the team that was responsible for them, changed their focus somewhat. Instead of seeking to continue in the direction of establishing an apology for the people, they turned to

criticising the discourse of the colonial and Indian elites. From this point onwards, the issue was therefore to draw up a history that criticised the textuality of the time. In doing so, the subalternists found themselves straying into the field of postcolonial studies, which at the time was in full boom. In addition, it so happens that these subalternist historians, several of which were particularly brilliant, were recruited by American universities, and found themselves in the very places where postcolonial studies were born. A kind of junction was established between the two, and the field of subaltern studies, which stopped appearing as a separate editorial project in 2005, merged into the intellectual nebula of postcolonialism. A certain number of authors connected to the *Subaltern Studies* series have become stars of postcolonial thought: these include Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty and a few others, and the field of subaltern studies is now viewed as a part, perhaps not of the prehistory, but at any rate of the early history of postcolonialism.

Books and Ideas: *Can we say that postcolonial studies are truly cross-disciplinary?*

Jacques Pouchepadass: Postcolonial studies are not a discipline. They are a school of critical thought that we might describe as radical, and that has been defined from the start by the intellectual context within which it was born: that of poststructuralism, of postmodernism, of everything that was referred to at the time as French theory, because this philosophical attitude was largely drawn from the works of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze etc. This critical position is aimed at all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, and calls on them to undergo a kind of decentring, a conversion of perspective, and this in turn has played a big part in leading them to work on themselves, to detach themselves from a way of thinking which places the European reference model at the centre of everything, and instead to grant equal dignity to non-European ways of thinking. Simultaneously, postcolonial studies considerably extend the field of each of these disciplines. It is true that they were born in the field of literary studies, and that most of the first heralds of this school of thought were all literature or comparative literature lecturers in Anglo-Saxon universities. But the questions and the decentring that they propose are aimed at all disciplines, in particular at history, which according to them should no longer be the tale of the odyssey of modernity throughout the world, of the impact of Western-born capitalism on the rest of the world, or the story of the vexed, chaotic progression of countries with non-Western cultures towards the development model offered to them by the West. History should, on the contrary, give space to everything which, within the perspective of traditional history, we refer to as marginal histories, the history of the peripheries, precisely by giving up on this idea of there being a centre or a margin. There are only histories of equivalent value, of equivalent dignity, of equivalent interest, which all follow their paths in a relationship of greater or lesser dependence on global conditions, but without being fated to be similar to each other or to tend towards predetermined models.

Likewise, ethnology, a discipline which was for a long time, and is perhaps still, grappling with the taint of having originally been associated with the colonial project, has received a lot of input from, or at least has been substantially affected by postcolonial questions. Its aim is to write culture, and not history: but in reality, the problem is fundamentally the same. Literary studies, which were the starting point for postcolonial studies, were also profoundly shaken up. The canon of classic works that was at the centre of teaching programmes has considerably changed. To it was added, alongside classic European texts, works coming out of the literatures of formerly colonised countries. Traditional literary studies were seriously shaken up by this entirely new relationship to theory initiated by

postcolonial literary criticism, and by its conceptual and methodological tools. Most of the postcolonial studies departments in Anglo-Saxon universities were originally literature departments. But in reality, if we examine their teaching programmes, and the original disciplines from which their teaching staff is taken, we realise that these are departments where the social sciences are all more or less represented and where traditional aesthetic preoccupations are sometimes completely pushed into the background. There is a fundamentally cross-disciplinary aspect to postcolonial studies, and this is part of what constitutes their power both of destabilisation and of renewal in the social sciences and humanities.

Books and Ideas: What are the limitations of such a vast project?

Jacques Pouchepadass: Postcolonial studies have been greatly criticised, partly in proportion to the criticism which they have themselves directed at the disciplines concerned. We can perhaps make a distinction between two types of criticism, which also point to two major limitations of postcolonial theory. The first one is the fact that postcolonial studies mainly work on textuality. They were therefore very quickly criticised from a materialist perspective, often by Marxist intellectuals. Their idealism was held against them: staying within the bounds of textual criticism was viewed as a way of deserting the field of real social struggles, and also of betraying the poor and deprived people which the postcolonial intellectuals were claiming to speak on behalf of, since these people continue to fight every day for their survival or against oppressive regimes, and remain extremely dependent on the living conditions that are created for them. They are therefore far from indifferent – quite the opposite, in fact – to the struggle for modernisation, for progress, for real liberties etc., struggles for which textual criticism has nothing to offer them. Another aspect of the same criticism is that by criticising formerly colonised societies exclusively from the angle of what influence the West continues to wield over them, we do not mention, or we ignore the internal inequalities of these societies, the types of oppression whose origin is to be found within these societies themselves. Essentially, this textualist idealism of postcolonial studies supposedly has as a consequence that the oppressed masses are abandoned to their sorry material fate in favour of benefits that are purely of a cultural nature. This materialist criticism of the idealism of postcolonial studies has very often gone hand in hand with an indictment of the postcolonial intellectuals themselves. Many have said: “Look at these authors who live very comfortably in Anglo-Saxon universities, in Northern countries that pay a handsome wage. Their living conditions have absolutely nothing to do with those of the people that they claim to be defending.” This criticism seems to me not to be very admissible, in that it reflects a certain form of anti-intellectualism, however unconscious this may be. It implies the idea that only workers, for example, may validly talk about workers – a position which is not very Marxist, by the way, since Marxism has always put an emphasis on the collaboration between intellectuals and the masses. Marxism itself could be considered as null and void from this point of view, since Marx was a petty bourgeois, and not a worker, and Engels was the son of a major textile manufacturer!

The other major set of criticisms, and therefore of limitations that are acknowledged in or attributed to postcolonialism, is related to the way in which postcolonialists consider history. Historians have often criticised them for breaking with empiricism. Their obsession with textuality supposedly prevents them from seeing things as they are. Above all, they are accused of having a tendency to talk about colonial regimes as though they all had a uniform and unchanging style of domination all over the planet, and from the origins of European

expansion. In reality, the colonial regimes were different from each other, and colonial power was never monolithic and omnipotent. On the contrary, it was riven with contradictions, forced to constantly negotiate with indigenous societies, and also changed depending on external conditions. This criticism is absolutely valid. Very often, history as the postcolonialists seem to want to write it does not really take into account historical developments. This fault probably comes partly from the fact that postcolonial studies have a literary origin. Having said that, I believe this is a new expression of the constant tension in the relationship between literature and history. History is reluctant to take literature into account because it is fictional; but at the same time, it refuses to look at itself and to acknowledge that it too is fundamentally, both in terms of the imagination and of the writing that it involves, a literary discipline. It finds it hard to admit that it is a never-finished enterprise, whose works must always be reviewed and rewritten. The truth of history is itself a truth which I would not say is comparable to the truth that arises out of fictional works, but nevertheless is a fragile truth, and a truth that is also marked by textuality.

What is more, historians are not the only people criticising postcolonialism for its errors in terms of method. I would say that most of this type of criticism that has been directed at postcolonial theory by history has been taken into account by the postcolonialists themselves. There is no such thing as a fixed, immobile postcolonial theory that we might be able to criticise as a kind of doctrine or system. It is in a state of constant evolution. Postcolonialists in fact often talk about how tired they are of this kind of constant self-questioning, which comes in particular from their own ranks. What remains an unavoidable fact is that the questions raised by the postcolonialists about history are questions which everyone is asking and which everyone will continue to ask: is it acceptable that history always refers to the history of modernity and of the progression of the West? Is this progression the necessary model for the history of all people on the planet? Is capitalism really an exclusively European invention?

***Books and Ideas:** To continue on the subject of the criticism of postcolonialism, we saw recently that postcolonial theory has provoked some quite lively debates in France. Do these seem to you to measure up to the questions that are raised by this school of theory? What can postcolonial studies add to the French scientific debate?*

***Jacques Pouchepadass:** It would be worth first asking ourselves why postcolonial studies only broke through into the French public debate such a long time after they had been launched in the Anglo-Saxon world, around twenty-five years after the publication of *Orientalism*. Why such a long time lag? I see several possible reasons for this: one of them is certainly that France is a country where the idealism of Republican integration, which ignores ethnic and cultural differences in order to put its whole emphasis on the internal unity of the political body, is part of the basic culture of its citizens. This frame of mind leaves people ill-prepared to take on the kinds of questions that are put forward by postcolonial studies. There is another possible explanation, which has to do with the intellectual world. Postcolonial studies were from the start associated, either closely or more distantly, to postmodern schools of thought, and in France, postmodernism was very quickly, not quite reduced, but at any rate labelled with a very high level of scepticism by most intellectuals. This was what was dubbed “68 thought”. Postcolonial studies were not taken seriously for a very long time. There may also be a third reason, which is that people in France may have had a sense of déjà-vu when postcolonial studies came along. We had Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Sartre and Albert Memmi, Georges Balandier, all of these authors who were writing*

in the 1950s and 60s, and some of which continued to write until much later still. These authors were celebrated as icons or great forerunners by postcolonial intellectuals. People may therefore have thought, quite mistakenly, that we had already gone through this process in France and that there was no longer any need to go back over it. This is a fundamental error, since all of these francophone authors, while they are indeed quoted in postcolonial studies, are very often reinterpreted by the authors of the studies. To take one example: Frantz Fanon is recast by postcolonial studies specialists as a Lacanian working on the relationship to the other, when he was fundamentally a Third-Worldist activist, an ally of Algerian nationalism. Many of these authors were, like him, Third-Worldists who were in favour of supporting the modernist nationalist movements of the time, but also Marxists; all of these are characteristics that completely disassociate them from postcolonial theory.

What opened the door to postcolonialism in France was the crisis of the French model of integration, which exploded onto the public space in 2005, during the famous crisis of the *banlieues*. At the time, a certain number of legislative initiatives on the part of the French government were making some serious waves with regard to the question of the memory of colonisation. It was in this extremely stormy climate, with for example the statements of the “*Indigènes de la République*” (“Aborigines of the Republic”), that suddenly people started talking about postcolonial studies in France. The conditions were not at all right for a peaceful debate and dispassionate thought. The “postcolonial” label has been appropriated in a summary manner, and often inappropriately. I would say that this was above all the case with two categories of people. On the one hand, representatives of protest movements coming from a background of what we term, using a typically French euphemism, “diversity”, representatives of the “visible minorities”, who declared that they were postcolonial by saying: “What we experience today is a direct inheritance of colonisation. The ghettoisation and discriminations of which we are the victims reproduce what happened during the colonial period.” No historian can reasonably accept this use of the term. This is an exploitation of postcolonial ideas by minorities which are indeed experiencing very difficult conditions, but which are French populations, and not subaltern people in formerly colonised countries. They are perfectly legitimately using a symbolic capital connected to victimhood in order to defend their place within a democratic debate, but we are dealing here with a configuration that has absolutely nothing to do with what postcolonialism really is. Postcolonialism, in stark contrast, has had extremely lengthy debates about the meaning of the “post” in its title, out of which it has emerged that the “post” in question should precisely not be taken as meaning a chronological “after”, but rather an epistemological “beyond”. It does indeed involve criticising what remains of the ways of seeing and of thinking that prevailed during the colonial period in the social sciences today, and maybe in some common attitudes in our ways of considering people coming from other places. But it navigates the field of epistemology, not of contemporary sociology.

The other “pirating”, if I can call it that, of the postcolonial label, has been carried out by historians of colonisation who have defined themselves as postcolonial in order to “rebrand” what in reality is just the old leftist history of colonisation. This is a perfectly respectable way of viewing the history of French expansion, and one which I largely agree with; but it is a type of history that often stays within the register of denunciation, of scandal, of culpability, which is light years away from the highly refined and sophisticated questions asked by postcolonial studies.

So do postcolonial studies have something to contribute to the French debate? Yes, I am convinced they do. I believe we in France need to engage in some thorough rethinking, with the aim of redesigning our social contract and of examining whether French society is affected by a failure to analyse the colonial past that is eating it from the inside. We need these kinds of debates, these theoretical subtleties. The great experience that postcolonial studies have of the intellectual debate on these issues could help us. We should at all costs avoid simplifying them, reducing and instrumentalising them in debates with which they have almost nothing to do, as has often been the case up until now.

Books and Ideas: *Fifty years after the end of the colonial empires, do postcolonial studies still have a future?*

Jacques Pouchepadass: If we work on the basis that postcolonial studies are strictly articulated around a specific historical fact, meaning the colonial past of the Western world, then of course there is no future for postcolonial studies. However, if we acknowledge what they really are, namely a critical approach for calling into question the social sciences and humanities; if, above all, we see to what extent they never stop renewing themselves according to the spirit of the age or to any new questions that arise, then I think the answer is different. One of the big debates that took place within and around postcolonial studies in Anglo-Saxon countries during the 2000s was the question of whether the critical potential and the intellectual output of postcolonial studies would be able to survive globalisation, this considerable restructuring of power relationships all over the planet, which makes it seem as though the colonial relationship is no longer relevant. A certain number of postcolonialists themselves noted this, and predicted that the questions posed by postcolonialism were on the way to becoming extinct, and that they would soon give way to something else. We must understand that this perspective implies the idea that what we call globalisation is a radically new phenomenon. But the debate regarding this question is far from resolved. Many analysts highlight the similarities between colonisation, or rather the era of colonial dominations, and the globalisation we see today. For some, globalisation (I am using the English term for it¹) is nothing more than the extreme continuation of the imperialism of the colonial era. There is no doubt that we still have a lot of work to do to understand the world which we are living in today using the tools that we used to have to explain the order of the world as it was a century ago. But here again, the debate has not been resolved. Postcolonial studies are in the process of integrating a great number of studies (which are in reality profoundly connected to what postcolonial studies have been from the start) that take into account very contemporary phenomena. A certain number of postcolonial studies departments have changed their names, with postcolonial being replaced with transcolonial. It seems that we are moving from questions that focus on the issue of domination towards questions that are more concerned with the facts of circulation, of exchange, of coexistence, of flows. We are on the way towards a sort of fusion of these two fields: postcolonial studies and globalisation studies. In this shifting situation, we might think that postcolonial studies are in the process of mutating in a direction that will give them an unlimited, or at least a very long-term lease of life. The issue now is to establish whether we can still mark out the limits of a field of study that fluctuates so much. It is true that postcolonial studies have, from the start, developed in a cross-disciplinary climate and in a context of constant debate, and that they have always had the ambition of being the location for asking transversal questions aimed at investing

1 Translator's Note: Pouchepadass does indeed use the English term "globalisation" in French, instead of the more commonly-used "*mondialisation*".

disciplines from within, opening them up, removing them from their usual frameworks. Something similar has happened with gender studies. We can view them as being a particular field of study, but we can also take the view that the issue of gender applies to all disciplines, and that this is, in each discipline, a mode of questioning that calls into question the entirety of the field in question. We must acknowledge that, for their part, postcolonial studies mutate in yet another way that pushes at the limits of what is reasonable: we now see postcolonial studies being applied to areas of the planet which have never undergone colonisation, such as the Chinese or Japanese Far East. There is even a journal that has been launched in Stockholm University entitled *Postcolonial Europe*. It covers Central and Eastern Europe, and applies postcolonial studies to periods of history that are completely off topic. We now have postcolonial studies that are applied to Antiquity, and to areas that no longer have any identifiable relationship with the initial premise, such as postcolonial Biblical studies. We have postcolonialism in visual studies and in media studies. In this context, postcolonial studies have all the future they can wish for!

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