

COMMENTARY AND DEBATE

THE CONCEPT OF COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE: A Perspective from Literary Criticism*

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Periodically, Latin American literary criticism discusses new themes that, on reaching some degree of generalization, indicate possible directions for longer-term research. For example, a concern has emerged lately about defining and applying the term *postmodernism* to Latin American symbolic production. In essence, promoting these discussions means creating intellectual events that tacitly promise to introduce new theoretical and methodological dimensions to our field, perhaps generating studies that may enrich it. Hence, reflecting on the way in which these labels are adopted ought to be a matter of professional responsibility. Years ago we saw the efforts and resources spent on transferring the term *magical realism* from painting to literary criticism and its meager legacy. Today seems to be the turn of *colonial and postcolonial discourse*. Discussing this concept takes on special importance in the current circumstances, when we as intellectuals find ourselves caught up in a double crisis. On one hand is the crisis affecting the status of literature as an institution and academic literary criticism as a profession. On the other hand, we must face up without excuses to the extreme violence generated by neoliberal capitalism and the political vacuum left by the collapse of the socialist bloc. Hence the acknowledged eclipse or waning of the narratives of human

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redemption, which not long ago lent a utopian sense to Latin American political struggles. These two factors should be a part of critical reflection on the concept of "colonial and postcolonial discourse."

Thanking Patricia Seed for the platform of discussion that she has offered us, my own reflection will take as a point of departure a review essay entitled "Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse," published by *LARR* in 1991 (in volume 26, number 3). In her essay, Seed elevates the group of works reviewed to the category of noteworthy intellectual accomplishment. Given the prestige of this publication of the Latin American Studies Association, it is possible that Seed's review essay may thus contribute to institutionalizing what she considers a new "intellectual movement." I will point out the implications of this construct by placing it within an outline of what, in my judgment, has been the recent evolution of Latin American literary criticism. I will begin my argument with this outline and close by discussing the need to study the symbolic production of marginalized groups. What I hope to accomplish here is to profile more clearly the problems raised by introducing the critical category of "colonial and postcolonial discourse."

The current crisis in Latin American literature as an institution and literary criticism as a profession must be seen in the context of its origins. In Latin America, both the institution and the profession arose out of a long process that began soon after the nineteenth-century revolutions for independence, in which literature acquired the rank of official high culture with the task of shaping master narratives of national identity. These works were gradually disseminated via the educational system, with the aim of consolidating the loyalty of the people to the new nation-states. The use of various literary genres as components of these master national narratives was closely related to a process that is still affecting us today: the liberal struggles over the linking of the local economies to the international capitalist market that had been forming over the past century. A symbolic universe was thus founded that has continued to articulate the changes and permutations of elements throughout history. These changes and permutations have given a distinctive profile to the literary projects of different social sectors that have sought to become dominant in our countries. Throughout this process, certain works were favored by academic literary criticism and were exhibited as monuments of Latin American cultural development. This canon has been the raw material and the professional *raison d'être* of our literary criticism. Its origin is therefore found in a conception of literature as a tool for social construction and an indirect weapon in political struggles. In contrast to this older function, it is quite evident that literature today is a narrow and irrelevant fringe within official culture. With its limited circulation, literature cannot compete with the mass media in the symbolic constituting of social identities that seek to modify the cultural models of each nation. As proof, let us note that

after the narrative of the Boom, we as a profession have had problems in continuing to canonize literary texts with the same organic clarity.

We must take into account nevertheless that this understanding of literature as a social instrument has witnessed "technocratic deviations" since the mid-1960s. They were the consequence of the attempts to modernize Latin American capitalism, an effort intensified by the Alliance for Progress. That program represented the U.S. response to the challenge of the Cuban Revolution. Literary criticism was affected as a field by the scholarships for study abroad made available to Latin American university personnel. Thus the theoretical and methodological baggage of Latin American literary criticism was enriched by the importation of North American New Criticism, Russian formalism, German phenomenology, and French structuralism. Later came archetypal criticism based on psychoanalysis, various semiotic trends, and the theory of reader reception. Thus cycles of renewal of Latin American literary criticism were initiated based not on the social problems of the cultures being studied but rather on the new critical theories periodically introduced into the publishing market. This kind of literary criticism has either tended to reinforce the study of the monuments of the literary canon by applying the new approaches or sought to canonize new works that responded best to them.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, efforts were taking hold and expanding toward a return to the social understanding of literature. All this was a consequence of the cultural problems introduced by the Cuban Revolution, the militarized populism in Peru in 1968, the fascist dictatorships in the Southern Cone, the Nicaraguan Revolution, and the civil war in El Salvador. The theoretical bases of this literary criticism expressed various modalities of historical materialism such as the Frankfurt School, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, Fredric Jameson, and especially the implications of Latin American dependency theory for analyzing culture. In my judgment, the most important contribution of this kind of literary criticism was setting as its goal direct contributions to the cultures from which its material for study comes, addressing itself to the academic establishment only as a very secondary interlocutor, which in extreme cases did not matter at all. According to this view, the literary critic was supposed to abandon the identity of technical analyst of privileged texts in order to take on the identity of producer of culture from a consciously defined political position. In another direction, highlighting the cultural problems of these societies gradually went beyond the study of literature as the exclusive domain of literary criticism. This critical trend created conditions for expanding the professional field in the direction of the ideological study of the mass media, music, rituals of daily life, the logic of cultural discourses, intellectual history, and the administrative institutions of cultural production. In yet another direction, it appears to me that this understanding of the artifacts of culture as human construc-

tion-created the original conditions for defining more precisely a feminist literary criticism focused on the problem of sexual genders as social production. This literary criticism finally evolved into a “culturology,” understood here as the study of the ways in which symbolic production in general empowers social agencies of historical transformation. Literary criticism thus moved closer to symbolic anthropology, sociology, and political science.

During the last few decades, these two modalities of development of Latin American literary criticism—the one technocratic and the other culture-oriented—have tended toward a frank enmity. One indication is the fact that the literary critical technocracy tends to congregate at the meetings of the Modern Language Association, while the culturalists gravitate toward the Latin American Studies Association. To my mind, this enmity is symptomatic of the fact that literary criticism has not managed to become a paradigmatic discipline, in the sense defined by Thomas Kuhn. In other words, we as a profession have not been characterized by orienting our work according to analytic and interpretative paradigms that set research tasks for the longer term. In paradigmatic disciplines like the natural and social sciences, research tends toward continuity and an accumulation of topics and knowledge that either authenticate or discard the basic hypotheses. It is obvious that in comparison with the sciences, no basis exists for thinking that literary criticism can or should turn itself into a paradigmatic discipline. I am sure that many academic literary critics would consider that the mere idea of thinking about a paradigmatic continuity in the profession would imply a dangerous limitation on academic freedom and freedom of thought. This understanding of freedom finds its optimum expression in a technocratic approach that keeps going by emphasizing technical novelty and not Latin American social needs. Just as in the past we had theoretical models like those of Roman Ingarden and Claude Lévi-Strauss, today there are the models of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault. On the contrary, the closest impetus to a paradigmatic continuity has been the culturally oriented literary criticism because of its preoccupation with the meaning of the great historical junctures in Latin America for symbolic production in general.

Now to return to the question of colonial and postcolonial discourse and Patricia Seed’s review essay. Within the historical parameters just outlined, creation of this category as an area of research can be understood as an effort to unify terms that, whether consciously or unconsciously, endow technocratic criticism and culturally oriented criticism with some degree of affinity that they have not previously had. Actually, Seed attributes the formulation of this research area to a basically technical concern that stems from recognizing the implications of the work of Lyotard, Barthes, Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, and Richard Rorty:

In reflecting on the linguistic framework in which the politics of colonial rule have been elaborated, writers have observed the limitations of European political discourses as well as the way in which the polysemic character of language has enabled natives of colonized territories to appropriate and transform the colonizers' discourses. A related critique of the language of independence movements and postcolonial nationalism, referred to as postcolonial discourse, has been examining how popular discourses, high literature, and political pamphleteering have all constructed anticolonial and nationalist vocabularies. (P. 183)

Starting with the technical concerns, Seed establishes the political agenda of these works that deconstruct colonial discourse: "The aim of the critique in each of these disciplines is different—economic relations of authority, cultural relations of authority (the canon), conventional political relations of authority. But the basic target of critique remains the same—the relations of authority in colonial and postcolonial states—and it is thus an enterprise of cultural and political criticism being carried out in a resolutely postcolonial era" (p. 200).

The unification of terms I refer to can be seen when the trajectory of technically oriented renovation finally results in a political concern, as described by Seed. Yet it would be necessary to dispel many doubts on this score. For example, Seed names only one literary critic within the group of works that she examines. Certainly one case alone is not enough to found a "movement" in this discipline. Nevertheless, if her description is correct and really involves a more significant number of literary critics, perhaps the category of "colonial and postcolonial discourse" signals the entrance into cultural criticism of a sector of researchers who previously were characterized by excluding the political. The rapprochement of both groups could contribute positively to a certain continuity of efforts with a paradigmatic semblance. Nevertheless, it is necessary to raise two objections to the manner in which Seed argues this seemingly new category.

The first objection has to do with the perspective in which this unification is visualized. Given that it is being conceived of as a technical innovation, such unification conveys the image characteristic of technocratic literary criticism: the presumption that when a new analytic and interpretive approach is being introduced, the accumulation of similar efforts in the past is left superseded and nullified. The past as inescapable fact seems to rise up again, supposedly out of nothingness and disguised in a new jargon. This idea of the obsolescence of the past is suggested in two key passages in the conclusion of Seed's review essay:

Both the colonial and postcolonial discourse movements signify a revival of politics and its return to the center of intellectual debate after decades of being relegated to a secondary position in the predominantly social and cultural realms of history, anthropology, and literary theory. . . . But the concern with language and rhetoric, the ethics and strategies of representing anthropological others, or those of representing historically distant cultural others are crucial and unprece-

mented questions with which this new work on politics must contend. We do not repeat the past, as Santayana claimed, we only reinvent it continually. (P. 200)

Leaving aside the questionable separation of the social, cultural, and political dimensions, my first objection is that in the effort to call attention to the new label of “colonial and postcolonial discourse,” which originated in Hindu cultural studies following independence after World War II, categories cannot be ignored that have been firmly established for more than twenty years in historiography and Latin American literary criticism regarding specific social conditions. I refer here to the concepts of dependency and ideological analysis. In fact, Beatriz Pastor, the only Latin American literary critic mentioned by Seed, had already made earlier forays into the ideological analysis of literature. Furthermore, Pastor is far from associating her work with the ideas of Lyotard, Barthes, and Derrida.

My second objection is that an awareness of the political dimension in cultural analysis and interpretation cannot be reduced to the textual deconstruction of authority under the guise of a crisis in the notion of social subjectivity. Seed takes this position in pointing out two of poststructuralism’s attractions for critics of colonialism. The first is the “questioning of traditional humanism ‘by exposing its hero—the sovereign subject as author, the subject of authority, legitimacy, and power.’” The second attraction she describes is poststructuralism’s “dislodging the author’s ‘intention’ or ‘original meaning’ from a central role, allowing literary critics and others to consider the ways in which the text is appropriated and used by different textual communities” (p. 184). The absolutism of this judgment ignores the fact that the most important advances of recent studies of Latin American literature as a social phenomenon have been achieved by stressing the ways in which literary representation has contributed to constructing massive agents of social transformation. In this regard, I want to make it clear that it is not a matter of favoring construction over deconstruction because both are key moments in recognizing the cycles of dependency that have characterized Latin American history. This point becomes evident when we focus on the social problem of greatest significance currently facing contemporary Latin American societies: the socioeconomic marginalization of large sectors of national populations as a consequence of neoliberal economic policies imposed militarily during the last few decades.

As is well known, socioeconomic marginalization is characterized by chronic unemployment and underemployment. This outcome is compounded by the limited political significance of these sectors. It stems from their incapacity to create organizations that can appeal effectively to the state and the political system in demanding redress. Even so, their large numbers are a threat to social stability. Hence the governments of neoliberal bent as well as opposition parties and institutions of social

welfare are all concerned with influencing the organizations of solidarity created by the marginalized themselves. This tendency affects the artistic and symbolic production with which these sectors organize their own public sphere in order to articulate their economic, social, and political interests. This is the reason why culturalist literary criticism has recently reoriented itself toward studying the institutional organization and production of workshops on poetry, theatre, handicrafts, body language, and religious and feminist consciousness-raising associated with creating this public sphere for the marginal. Implicit in these studies is the imperative of introducing comparative parameters that may exert ideological pressure on the meaning of the work of great contemporary authors favored by the official culture. Thus the study of the construction of a social subjectivity becomes a necessary previous step to deconstructing the canonical authority of the official culture. By taking such a step, we would achieve a much richer understanding of the historic dynamics of the national cultures than if we pay attention only to deconstructing the monumentality of their canonical texts.

In closing, I think we must be grateful for opportunities for an exchange like this. They help us define our own identity and thought amidst multiple divergent voices. I believe that part of the truth is in each voice, while the whole truth is in the framework of conflict among all of them.