

# A Marxist Critique of Latin American Colonial Studies



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By

Malcolm K. Read

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## PREFACE

It is sometimes said that in politics a week is a long time. And it is certainly true that, had I been writing this preface but a short time ago, its tone would have been far more apologetic and self-deprecating. Notwithstanding its explanatory capacity and the continued vigour of its research programme, the Althusserian problematic, I would have been conceding, now enjoys only a marginalized status within the context of an Anglophone Hispanism whose colonialists appear to have embraced wholeheartedly the postmodern consensus as to the exhaustion and irrelevance of the traditional left. But at the time of writing, global capitalism still teeters on the brink of total collapse, following the implosion of its banking system, the latter salvaged only by hand-outs of public money on an unprecedented scale. Was it really only yesterday that the heavens rang out to the triumphal cries of the neo-liberals? There is a certain satisfaction in seeing a culture of greed and selfishness get its come-uppance, but we would be wise not to over-indulge. To begin with, nobody should underestimate the recuperative powers of capitalism, least of all Marxists, who, on the evidence of history, have exhibited a distinct penchant for celebrating prematurely the arrival of a post-revolutionary, that is to say, post-class, post-gender, post-ethnic, post-racial society. Further to which, it could well be argued, these same Marxists would have been well advised to heed the message of the Master himself, to the effect that capitalism would not enter into terminal crisis until the global dominance of the market was complete. Proclamations as to the imminence of its fall have too often occurred at points when, to all but the most willfully self-deceived, capitalism was clearly girding its loins in preparation for one more giant leap forward. That said, there can be no doubting the fact that, with the onset of the current chaos, something has gone and, hopefully, gone for good. There can be no easy return to 'business as usual'. The spectre of 'austerity' still stalks abroad and productivity continues at a low ebb; large sections of a de-industrialized society, condemned to a low-wage 'gig' economy, have begun to register their discontent. Who is to say how it all might end? Perhaps, then, the moment is ripe for assessing more actively than we were doing yesterday, and with the benefit of hindsight, the historical role of the various postmodernisms and post-structuralisms. Could it be that their main function was to provide left cover for a multinational capitalism that was in the process of imposing

its economic agenda? If that is so, then it is not only the pathologies of global capitalism that now need to be scrutinized for their irrationalism but also those of the intellectual movements that helped grease the relevant economic mechanisms.

The present work gathers together a series of articles published since 2000 in a variety of journals, together with several inedited pieces that belong to the same period. While some degree of cross-referencing was possible, this serial mode of production resulted in a certain amount of repetition, self-imposed to some extent, as I sought to spell out on each occasion the theoretical underpinnings of my work, but also dictated in part by editorial fiat. My first thought, when considering the idea of a collected volume, was that some kind of rationalization would be required. And such has proved indeed to be the case: the most obvious redundancies have been surgically removed. However, I gradually came around to the view that any kind of radical reconstruction would be not only impractical but also inadvisable. Impractical because it could never have been a question of simply omitting seemingly otiose passages, given the structurally destabilizing effects that were bound to ensue; and inadvisable because there did appear to be definite virtues to the periodic restatement of my theoretical position, within an unfolding narrative. I have therefore chosen to leave each contribution more or less as it stands, reworking only those passages where I felt the argument to be faulty or in need of clarification.

This is an opportune moment, at the end of my academic career, to thank, firstly, those graduate students who, over the years, have taken an interest in my ideas, critically embraced them, and lent me their support, sometimes at not inconsiderable personal cost to themselves; secondly, those colleagues without whose ongoing support the present project would never have been completed. In this latter respect, special thanks are due to Lou Charnon Deutsch, at Stonybrook, New York, who presided over my introduction to the North American academy and ensured my survival in it over many years.

Chapter 1 first appeared as 'From Organicism to Animism: (Post)colonial or Transitional Discourses?' *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 77 (2000), 551-70; chapter 2, as 'Changing the Subject: Towards a Re-Configuration of Latin-American Colonial Studies', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 79 (2002), 499-523; chapter 3, as 'Reconsidering the Other Ways: Issues of (In)Commensurability in Spanish Colonial Studies', *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, 37 (2003), 537-68; chapter 5, as 'The Colonial Criticism of José Rabasa: A Marxist Critique', *Modern Language Review*, 100 (2005), 673-94; and chapter 6, as 'Benítez Rojo and Las Casas's Plague of Ants: the Libidinal versus Ideological Unconscious', *Diacritics*, 32.2 (2002), 60-85.



I am grateful to the journals concerned for permission to reprint the articles in the present volume.



# INTRODUCTION

## I

At its origin the present work took shape, firstly, as an act of resistance, vis-à-vis the ‘post’ movements that began to dominate Spanish colonial studies from the mid 1980s, and secondly, as a project that puts to the test a theoretical approach refined in the study of 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spain. More specifically, and simplifying somewhat, it could be said to be the product of a specific conjuncture, involving three major texts: Steven Stern’s ‘Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World-System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean’, Robert Paul Resch’s *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory*, and Juan Carlos Rodríguez’s, *Teoría e historia de la producción ideológica*. Stern set out to review the scholarship on modes of production to come out of the ’70s and ’80s, on the occasion of the publication of the second volume of Immanuel Wallerstein’s classic *The Modern World System*. His focus was upon the latter’s relatively unenthusiastic reception in Latin America, to be explained by the continent’s prior familiarity with Andre Gunder Frank’s dependency theory, which, Stern argued, detracted somewhat from the novelty of Wallerstein’s work. The lesson to be learned, with respect to Spanish colonialism, was that entrepreneurs were driven to experiment with diverse forms of labour relations, which frequently co-existed on the same site. In Stern’s own words: ‘Repeatedly in colonial Latin America and the Caribbean, one encounters a shifting combination of heterogeneous relations of production in a pragmatic package’ (Stern 1988, 870). Labour strategies that were exclusive and sequential in Europe were, the argument ran, typically combined in more variegated patterns in its colonies, and possibly with greater variation than was to be found in the ‘long’ early modern period of European history.

In a key footnote to his article, Stern noted the extent to which the innovations of ‘our Latin American colleagues’ had been largely neglected in the United States, whose historical profession, he suggested, was strongly anti-theoretical compared with its Latin American counterpart (836) and whose intellectuals were rather more reluctant to identify their work as ‘Marxist’ (842). He does concede, however, that, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, ‘a certain disillusionment with the mode of production

concept set in among some intellectuals on the left, including Latin Americans, who had once used the concept more readily' (872). No reasons are offered for the apparent shift in 'scholarly fashion' (872) – in 1988 the relevant developments were still barely discernible – although with the benefit of hindsight the extent of the change and identities of its protagonists are clear enough. The key theoretical move was made by Ernesto Laclau, who began by critiquing the dependency theory of Frank as insufficiently attentive to the relations of production (Laclau 1971). At this point, the terms of reference remained recognizably Marxist, and were still contained within the economic sphere, but by the time of his later work, co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, Laclau had entered a recognizably post-Marxist phase. The struggle for socialism became not so much a class struggle as a more diffuse 'democratic' campaign, organized along non-class lines. The focus of attention was displaced onto ideology, now increasingly identified with the 'discursive' and burdened with the task of bringing about unity where no prior unity existed. From the Marxist perspective, such a political tactic could only be viewed as deeply suspicious, if not specifically reformist, and requiring refutation in the strongest possible terms. Which brings us, by virtue of an intertextual linkage, to the second book that I have singled out as decisive to the writing of the present text, namely Paul Resch's interdisciplinary re-assessment of Althusserianism.<sup>1</sup>

As is well known, Althusserianism falls emphatically within the mode of production analysis, indeed, defines a social formation as a 'totality of instances articulated on the basis of a determinate mode of production' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, 207n5). The 'instances' in question are distinct levels of social relations, principally economic, political and ideological, each characterized by a relative degree of autonomy but bound together in a contradictory ensemble by the matrix effect of the whole. The relevance of such considerations to situations of 'dependency' should be obvious, and explains Resch's attempt to play down the opposition between global approaches (whether of the dependency or world-system variety) and his own version of Althusserianism: 'The problematic I am defending here has a place for both levels of analysis; indeed, despite important and obvious differences between national, regional, and global structures, this approach insists on the necessity of analysis of each of them for exactly the same reasons it insists on different structural levels of analysis within individual social formations' (Resch

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<sup>1</sup> *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (1992). Resch refers to Stern's text in his discussion of 'Feudalism and the Transition to Capitalism' (131 ff).

1992, 375n12).

By way of contrast, Resch rejected emphatically Laclau and Mouffe's view of political and ideological discourses as free-floating, autonomous systems, detached from the class struggle and unrelated to economic determination. Such an irrationalist view of discourse, he argued, was not only unable to explain the absence of democratic control over the means of production and the distribution of the social surplus but was also 'unable to move beyond the level of postmodern populist sloganizing or even to begin to articulate the material conditions for an alternative vision' (369-70n13). More specifically and, from our perspective, more crucially, Laclau was guilty of 'grossly misrepresenting the subtle indirect determination of the matrix effect', which, while far from *reducing* the other levels of the social formation to the economic instance, assigns to politics and ideology their 'relatively autonomous' positions, together with their secondary and tertiary roles, within the context of the complex whole (370n13, 386n2).

These were not the only insights to be gleaned, through Resch, from Althusserianism, and carried over into our study of Spanish colonialism. Also relevant to our own concerns was the importance attached to the co-existence of multiple modes of production within a single social formation. Perforce our own interests focus upon the transition from feudalism to capitalism, in terms of the uneven development and shifting relations of domination and subordination between the two modes. Possible articulations, according to Resch, include situations in which feudalism might occupy first a dominant and then a subordinate position, although every allowance needs to be made for periods of regression, in which feudalism re-asserts its dominance. We will follow the lead of Althusserianism in attending closely to the *internal logic* of each mode, through which to capture the processes of development and dissolution, but not to the exclusion of an *external logic*. The latter is of relevance to a situation in which the conditions of one mode influence the internal rhythms of the other, decisively so in the case of the subordinate mode, whose operations may be circumscribed by a dominant mode set upon raising the level of exploitation.

Clearly, then, there was much to be gained from a rehabilitation of Althusserianism with respect to colonial studies. But it was in the sphere of ideology that its contributions promised to be most important.

## II

Ideology was conspicuous by its absence from Stern's article, in which it was relegated to a footnote reference to García Márquez's humour (Stern

1988, 845-46n43), as from mode-of-production analysis in general. The same is true of dependency theory as practiced by Gunder Frank, not to mention Wallerstein and the World System theorists, who had insisted explicitly and, one is bound to say, somewhat astoundingly, that the early world system had operated without the support of an ideology (see Shannon 1992, 205-07). This was doubtless a state of affairs only to be expected from bodies of research indebted for the most part to historians, as opposed to literary or cultural critics. But it was one that was to have lamentable consequences, not least of all when, against the backdrop of the sudden reversal of political fortunes, Marxism found itself challenged by a post-Marxist tradition more than willing to pick up the slack. The exception that proved the rule when it came to ideology was Althusserianism, which counted among its students, even as it failed to appreciate his achievements, the Spanish scholar Juan Carlos Rodríguez, whose *Teoría e historia de la producción ideológica* (1974, 1990) is the third of my seminal texts.

Rodríguez made a number of crucial contributions to the Althusserian schema briefly adumbrated above. His first was to radically historicize them. Each mode of production – slave, feudal or capitalist – is characterized, he argued, by its own *ideological matrix*, which possesses an *internal logic* of its own, sustained by certain key notions. Thus, the slave mode operates in terms of a master/slave opposition, together with the notion of what constitutes a ‘natural slave’; the feudal mode foregrounds the notion of ‘service’, rendered by a serf/servant to a lord, the latter characterized by his ‘blood’ and ‘lineage’; whereas capitalism imposes the notion of the ‘free subject’, free, that is, to exploit (in the case of the employer) and to be exploited (in the case of the employee). Bourgeois ideology needs, it follows, to turn the slave and the serf into the proletarian, that is, into a free subject that possesses his/her own interior truth, otherwise their own labour power, to be sold in exchange for a wage. Rodríguez elaborates: ‘si la lógica del sujeto sólo puede existir a partir de las condiciones objetivas inscritas en tal matriz ideológica, si el “sujeto”, pues, es una invención de esta “matriz”, resultará perfectamente inútil tratar de encontrar tal lógica en el interior, por ejemplo, de la ideología “esclavista”’ (Rodríguez 1990, 7). By the same token, it will be impossible to find the same logic at work in feudalism: ‘substantialism’, the latter’s dominant ideology, does not operate via the notion of the subject. This subject only begins to appear in the form of the ‘beautiful soul’, otherwise the key category of ‘animism’, the ideology of the emergent bourgeoisie, in the transition from feudalism to mercantile capitalism. At this point the contradictions internal to each mode of production, which find the serf,

say, rebellious in the face of lordly exploitation, are compounded by the presence, during a period of transition, of other modes.

Rodríguez's next crucial intervention concerned the Ideological State Apparatus, regarding which his chief complaint is not so much with Althusser as with some of his followers, notably Renée Balibar and her associates. His target was not their claims regarding the relationships between culture and class structure, between literature and the public-school system, and between all of these and ideological hegemony. On the contrary, he was the first to admit that, in the light of their work, nobody could seriously doubt the role of schools and subsequently universities in the maintenance of the class structure. But as Rodríguez explains, there is a fundamental objection to their fixation upon the school, qua ideological state apparatus, and, to be more precise, upon the way in which the critics in question extrapolate from the individual case of Marsault/Camus:

En una palabra, la objeción básica a tales planteamientos no puede ser más que ésta: *¿quién educa a los educadores?* O de otro modo, y más drásticamente aún: si la 'escuela' es un aparato Estatal no es ella la que 'crea' la ideología, sino, en todo caso, y únicamente, la que la materializa y reproduce. (23)

The point, Rodríguez believes, cannot be emphasized enough: in the last instance it is not the *experience* of individual agents that counts as much as the relevant ideological unconscious, operative on an ontological level that transcends that of the individual. Thus:

[...] la dialéctica inscrita en los textos literarios (la que los produce como tales, su lógica interna) es la plasmación de un *inconsciente ideológico* que no 'nace' en la Escuela, sino directamente en el interior de las relaciones sociales mismas y desde ellas únicamente se segrega, etc. (23)

From Balibar's emphasis upon the school, as the original site of ideology, the royal road lies open to the 'institutionalist sociology' of Weber, which completely cuts the ground from beneath Althusserianism, as from beneath any Marxism worthy of the name. The school, Rodríguez insists, is more appropriately envisaged as one of sites at which the ideological unconscious is *formalized, legitimized* and, needless to say, *inculcated* through the appropriate disciplinary mechanisms. Other sites include the family and the church, under whose influence an ideological unconscious is accepted and admitted by everyone as their own 'skin', as the truth of nature.

One final contribution of Rodríguez: his emphasis upon the importance of contradiction, which follows logically from the above. The ideological

conflicts that characterize any society, he will demonstrate through his analysis of literary texts, are as contradictory as those of the relations of production themselves, which, to repeat, are internally and externally conflictual.

Such, then, were the major influences to weigh upon me during the writing of the present work, although some mention should also be made of the work of Roy Bhaskar and, through Bhaskar, the tradition of Critical Realism with which Bhaskar's name is associated. It was Critical Realism that proved crucial in immunizing me against the plague of discourse theory to which I was exposed, on a daily basis, through my readings of what currently passes for Hispanic colonial theory. While specific references are duly recorded, my more indirect debts to the realist philosophical tradition will be obvious to anyone at all familiar with the body of works in question, since they are in evidence on virtually every page of my work.

### III

The nature of the present project defines itself in the light of the above. We set out to critique a body of Spanish colonial criticism that, drawing upon the post-Marxist tradition, embodied in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), defines political and ideological discourses as free-floating, autonomous systems. Such a view, we will be arguing, promotes a species of political voluntarism that, by collapsing the base into the superstructure, regresses to the liberal view of history as the 'story of liberty', in which 'indigenous peoples' find themselves pitted against their European cultural masters. The tactic in effect is to invert the process of 'othering' characteristic of the masters, so as to homogenize a European society that, its internal differences notwithstanding, finds itself circumscribed by a common cultural horizon. In place of this horizontal, geographical split, which opposes the colonizer to the colonized, we have theorized, from an Althusserian standpoint, the reality of vertical, social divisions, in a way that complicates the European legacy. The latter, we insist, should be understood as consisting of social formations structured on the basis of conflict, which manifests itself at the ideological level in the struggle between dominant and emergent ideologies.

The first task, then, in chapter one, is to retrieve the thread of mode-of-production analysis where it was prematurely curtailed, in the 1970s and '80s, and to do so through an engagement with the work of the Spanish Althusserian, Juan Carlos Rodríguez. Spanish history, the latter argues, is to be understood not in terms of some Hegelian spirit, pervasive of each



and every phenomenon within the social totality, but as the product of contradiction, between (at least) two modes of production, namely feudalism and mercantilist capitalism. This contradiction is generative in turn of an opposition between the public and private spheres, favourable in the long term to the dynamics of capitalism but conducive in the short term, through the nobility's control over the public sector, to a resurgence of the forces of feudalism. The latter, we insist (following Rodríguez), privileges not the ideological category of the subject but those of the serf/servant and lord/Lord. These constitute the ideological matrix of *substantialism*, Rodríguez's term for the dominant ideology of feudalism. The workings of substantialism largely escape the comprehension of recent colonial theory, which may be described as subject-centred. As an ideological category, the subject first appears in the form of an individualized 'beautiful soul', within the context of *animism*, Rodríguez's term for the emergent bourgeois ideology that was to compete with a dominant substantialism. The defining characteristic of animism was its capacity to view reality in *literal* terms, as opposed to *reading* it, in the substantialist manner.

The conclusions reached in our first chapter prepare the ground for our second, in which we press the need, logically enough, to 'change the subject', not simply in the sense of refocusing the discussion of subjectivity but of reconfiguring Latin-American colonial studies, to which end I consider, by way of critique, a number of articles by Rolena Adorno. Theoretical leverage is sought and found, as in chapter one, in the Althusserian project of Rodríguez, which, by breaking with dominant categories of Kantian-inspired scholarship, has arguably been able to avoid the ahistorical and consequently idealizing dichotomies that recent (post)colonial criticism continues unthinkingly to assume and to deploy. I then proceed to extend my critique of colonial studies through a consideration of Beatriz Pastor's *The Armature of the Conquest*, which, like the aforementioned articles of Adorno, is considered for its paradigmatic status.<sup>2</sup> The focus of discussion is the famous account by Pedrarias de Alместo and Francisco Vázquez of the Marañón expedition down the Amazon, which, I argue, needs to be understood as a fundamentally literalist work, of animist provenance, but one that is over-determined by

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<sup>2</sup> The same applies to the work of other scholars to be discussed in the pages that follow. Texts are valued to the extent that, through the sheer rigour of their argument, they concentrate and bring into focus contradictions that are more broadly based. Further to which, we take seriously the principle that history is a process without a subject, which makes a nonsense of any attempt to personalize our narrative.

substantialism. The claim is that Rodríguez's concepts of 'animism' and 'substantialism' offer greater objective purchase on the relevant texts than the corresponding traditional, ultimately phenomenological categories of 'Medieval', 'Renaissance' and 'Baroque'. The effective demise of animism in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in the face of a resurgent feudalism, leads to further discursive compromises, notably a non-organicist Aristotelianism that, as illustrated with reference to Diego Durán's *Historia de las Indias*, can be made to further a variety of ideological strategies.

Chapter three completes our first tour through Spanish colonialism by focusing on a concept that has figured prominently in recent postmodern scholarship, namely incommensurability, specifically in the form of the opposition between the 'European' and its 'Other'. While recognizing the damage inflicted by the various imperialisms through the marginalization and suppression of regional cultures, we warn against the converse danger of riding roughshod, firstly, over the very real capacity of people from different cultures to overcome linguistic barriers on the basis of a shared humanity, and secondly, over the equally real structural similarities that historically characterized absolutist states envisaged as a world-wide phenomenon. In order to problematize still further the modish insistence upon cultural diversity across geographic space, we proceed to focus upon the existence of ideological incommensurabilities *within Europe* or, more specifically, within Spanish culture, whose forced resolution, in favour of the metropolis and the dominant social classes lodged within it, was every bit as inhumane and, on occasions, genocidal as anything to be found overseas.

## IV

The remaining chapters review the work respectively of four leading colonialists within the field of Hispanic studies. We begin with what is, in effect, a sequel to an earlier piece on Walter Mignolo that addressed the semiotics of culture.<sup>3</sup> From the mid 1980s, colonial studies surrendered its interest in modes-of-production analysis for an emphasis upon issues of identity, viewed from the perspective of a discourse theory of Foucauldian and, ultimately, of Nietzschean extraction. The shift was politically, as opposed to intellectually, motivated – it was a period of terrible defeats for the left – and the present chapter does not hesitate to undertake a retrospective evaluation of the new paradigm from the perspective of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Read 2005.

old, whose riches were far from being exhausted and which continued to be mined, albeit from a more marginal location. One effect of the linguistic or discursive turn, I argue, was to transform ontological questions into epistemological questions about knowledge – what Roy Bhaskar refers to as the ‘epistemic fallacy’. Politically, this fallacy translates into a species of voluntarism that assumes the form of an obstreperous, seemingly revolutionary rhetoric that has, at the same time, shunned involvement with the mass political movements traditionally associated with the socialist left. Amongst other things, it is unable to sustain the notion of science or, for that matter, the existence of an external world, other than in the form of an implicit ontology, of positivist extraction, consisting of ‘things’ and ‘events’.

Chapter five further locates the new discursive turn within the context of a globalizing capitalism. Our attention will focus on the neo-Kantian claim that what is involved in the comparison of one theoretical paradigm with another is the simple juxtaposition of one ‘fiction’ with another. Whether post-structuralists always mean exactly what they say is a moot point, but the fact that they feel the need to talk in such terms is undoubtedly significant. Discourse theory argues that social practices are structured as an arbitrary and autonomous system of differential signifiers that are related only obliquely, if at all, to an objective reality. We will be critiquing this post-structuralist position, given particular prominence in the work of the colonialist, José Rabasa, from the standpoint of a critical realism that theorizes the existence of social structures irreducible to, although necessarily mediated by, discourse. Such structures, it will be argued, following Roy Bhaskar, are separated from the discursive realm by an ontological hiatus, recognition of which precludes their conflation with language.

In chapter six we turn to consider the colonialist, Anthony Pagden, whose work enjoys considerable prestige among certain sectors of the North-American academy. While Pagden has not been able to remain entirely aloof from the so-called ‘linguistic turn’, the several nervous references to Lacan and Foucault, who symptomatize that turn, never amount to anything more than intellectual ‘cover’, which fails to mask the historian’s fundamental allegiance to that other branch of the classic idealist tradition, namely British empiricism, as it is mediated through the work of Locke, Berkeley and Hume. The present chapter explores the details of this allegiance, as it operates through the agency of the ideological unconscious, by way of contrast with its Althusserian counterpart. The latter’s relationship to historiography, even of a Marxist variety, has been fraught with difficulties, ever since, it will be recalled,

Althusser condemned the discipline's illusion that it could do without *theory* (see Althusser and Balibar 1970, 109). The reaction of historians was immediate and, in the case of E. P. Thompson, brutal, which in turn provoked a heated exchange among British Marxist historians, notably Perry Anderson and Christopher Hill. From within Althusserianism, the most thoughtful response came from Rodríguez, who argued that the British historians were collectively culpable of failing to break with the notion of the subject as the source of history (Rodríguez 1990, 379-84). As might well be anticipated, subjectivity, and the empiricism that underpins it, figures even more prominently in the liberal historian, such as Pagden, with consequences that we proceed to weigh through a comparative analysis with Rodríguez's work.

Our final chapter focuses on the question of slavery under Spanish imperialism and, more specifically, on the work of Las Casas, as received by Benítez Rojo. In this particular case, the influence of the new 'post' movements manifests itself in the importance attached to the libidinal unconscious, which the Cuban critic deploys in an attempt to throw light, psychoanalytically, upon a number of Las Casas' private obsessions. The Dominican Father, it is argued, is haunted by his unwitting contribution to the imposition of slavery in the Caribbean and by the castration complex that shadowed his relation to his Father in Heaven. Our own approach has been to utilize the same textual evidence to substantiate the notion of the ideological unconscious and, by way of elaboration, to throw into relief those social mechanisms that transcend the psychology of the individual.

# CHAPTER I

## FROM ORGANICISM TO ANIMISM

In many respects Patricia Seed's review essay, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Discourses' (Seed 1991), together with the 'Commentary and Debate' (Seed 1993) it called forth from several of North America's leading colonialists, captures the state of the art, with respect to Hispanism, in the 1990s. A common thread is a post-structuralist decentring of the subject, combined with a postmodernist concern for 'otherness' and popular, as opposed to high, culture.<sup>4</sup> Seed's argument is that only the theorization of the fragmented subject can offer the necessary purchase for the analysis of (post)-colonial societies, particularly when it comes to salvaging local histories and identities. While they expressed some doubts as to the relevance of recent theories to earlier periods, respondents failed to challenge Seed's basic post-structuralist assumptions. Indeed, there was an almost clubbish, self-congratulatory air to the ensuing exchange, a sense that discussion was being carried on very much among the like-minded. Somewhat emboldened by the reception of her work, Seed proceeded to posit the superannuation of traditional leftist discourse, as a viable oppositional force:

Communism has collapsed, and along with it the powerful political force undergirding the major moral critique of capitalism. But the story of the

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<sup>4</sup> 'Postmodernism', unlike 'post-structuralism', is not addressed as such by Seed, although standard postmodernist works are listed in her footnotes. Among her commentators, Hernán Vidal is critical of the uninhibited application of the term 'postmodernism' to Latin America, whereas Rolena Adorno is sceptical of its value as applied to Bernal Díaz. See Vidal (Vidal 1993, 113); Adorno (Adorno 1993, 142). For a particularly insightful discussion of the relationship between postmodernism and post-structuralism, see Huyssen (Huyssen 1988). Huyssen argues convincingly that European post-structuralists are best seen as the theoreticians of high modernism, on the grounds that few of them have shown much interest in postmodern art. He believes that, in contrast, there are definite links between the ethos of postmodernism and the North American appropriation of post-structuralism (Huyssen 1988, 178-221 and *passim*).

collapse of communism cannot be explained by the heroic efforts of a few 'resisters'. Although Anglo-American journalists have tended to mythologize 'resisters' according to the conventional hero-worshipping framework, a sense of unease lingers about the way in which these tales cannot explain why communism failed and why its power to engender moral critique has simultaneously been exhausted. (Seed 1993, 150)

Seed largely has in her sights essentialist notions of the stable, autonomous subject, which, she rightly argues, is of limited use when it comes to theorizing the pan-European demise of the hitherto dominant forms of historical Communism. But what exactly is implied by the 'exhaustion' of 'communism' as a source of critique? Clearly, there can be no gainsaying the splintering of traditional parties of the working class or the loss of political leverage that this has brought about. But if more is implied, if the very viability of class politics is being questioned, if, more importantly, an attempt is being made to implicate Marxism in the fate of a moribund Stalinism, then much more is called for in the way of detail and substantiation.<sup>5</sup> We prefer to see the failure of the political dynamic of the Third International as an opportunity not to bury communism but to assess Marxism's theoretical heritage, on the assumption that the analytical value of social class for understanding the political processes of imperialism, past and present, remains undiminished.

A Marxist tradition that has proved, and continues to prove, particularly productive is that associated with the name of Louis Althusser, among whose most gifted students is numbered Juan Carlos Rodríguez. The association between Rodríguez's research programme and Althusserianism meant that his *Teoría e historia* had virtually no impact on North-American Hispanism even in the 1970s, when the climate was more propitious to Marxist scholarship. The particular conjuncture of the 1980s, not excluding the 'fall' of structural Marxism (and the personal fate of its progenitor), obscured the continuing vitality of Rodríguez's programme, a

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<sup>5</sup> For what any such attempt would betray is, firstly, a remarkable degree of historical amnesia *vis-à-vis* the long tradition of Marxist critiques of Stalinism, which include, for example, Leon Trotsky (Trotsky 1991, 1937); secondly, a lamentable ignorance of the diverse Marxist analyses of the collapse of Stalinism, such as, for example, Callinicos (Callinicos 1991), which demonstrates Marxism's capacity for comprehending the very political and ideological processes that Seed believes to be beyond its methodological scope; and thirdly, a politically motivated refusal of the class-riven nature of capitalism's continued global depredations, which include the 'occasional' (!) occupation of, and intervention in, parts of Central and South America by the USA.

situation compounded by the eventual implosion of Stalinism.<sup>6</sup> The entrenched conservatism of Anglo-Hispanism also determined that Spanish scholar failed to benefit from the resurgence of interest in Althusserianism in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

We will be deploying Rodríguez's work to prosecute the claim that, when it comes to theorizing Spanish '(post-)colonialism', which necessarily involves the analysis of pre-modern societies, the post-structuralist preoccupation with historical macro-schemes – from Plato to Heidegger – offers little purchase on the relevant phenomena. The focus of our attention will be on the 'ideological unconscious', which, as theorized by Rodríguez, secretes a number of ideological discourses, not all of which operate through the category of the subject. Necessarily, questions will be raised not simply regarding the 'free' subject (including its fragmentation) but also regarding the very status of the subject, as an ontological category. Our conclusion will be that Rodríguez's 'transitional discourses', taken together with the conceptual framework of Althusserianism, offer the possibility of a far more insightful analysis of Spanish (post)colonial culture than does the notion of 'postcolonial discourse', as proposed by Seed. There is also a moral to be extracted, namely that in moving forward, theoreticians do not always advance.

### **Modes of Production Analyses: the Latin American Tradition**

As was to be expected, Hernán Vidal was the first of Seed's respondents to take issue with her uninhibited, uncritical enthusiasm for the most recent Parisian intellectual fashions. Leaving aside its questionable separation of social, cultural and political dimensions, he reasonably argues, colonial and postcolonial discourse ignores long-established categories of Latin American historiography and literary criticism, whose achievements it is important to weigh against more recent, still largely unsubstantiated claims (Vidal 1993, 114). However, Vidal also gives evidence of a certain reticence, a reluctance or inability to carry the attack to his opponents, in the face of what is, within the academy, a triumphant postmodernism. Our

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<sup>6</sup> The exception that proves the rule is George Mariscal's *Contradictory Subjects* (Mariscal 1990). Although Mariscal was heavily influenced by Rodríguez, he was significantly unable to take on board the Spaniard's notion of an ideology that is not subject-centred.

<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, the collection of essays entitled *Depositions: Althusser, Balibar, Macherey, and the Labor of Reading* (1995).

first task, therefore, must be to give some idea of the range and direction of this proven tradition, as a springboard to our subsequent discussion.

Fortunately, our task has been made somewhat easier by the existence of Steve Stern's excellent review of Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System* within a Latin American and Caribbean context, a review that offers a panoramic perspective on the long tradition of scholarship towards which Vidal gestures rather ineffectually. As Stern describes it, an emphasis in the nineteenth and early twentieth century on the feudal-like past of Latin America gave way to a reaction in the 1940s, which, side-stepping the traditional thesis, focused on the commercial enterprise of the original colonizers. This reaction culminated in the 1960s in 'dependency theory', which found its most eloquent exponent in the person of Gunder Frank. Frank emphasized the exploitative chain of international commerce that linked feudalizing regions of Latin America to European capitalism from virtually the beginnings of colonization. Ernesto Laclau was one of the first to undermine Frank's position by suggesting that underdevelopment was caused not only by the extraction of surpluses but by tying relations of production in Latin America to an archaic mode of extra-economic coercion. The focus since Frank, as Stern proceeds to explain, has been on the manner in which archaic technologies and social relations in the Third World were harnessed to the First World economy. Increasing importance is attached to the interaction between local conditions and the pressure of the international market, to which, even at an early stage, the Latin American economy was undeniably bound. Stern argues persuasively in terms of the tendency to combine diverse relations of production (slavery, share-cropping, wage labour, etc.) into an optimal package, determined by local conditions.

The value of Stern's work lies in the problems that it perceives in any emphasis upon the capitalist component of the American colonial economy. For given this emphasis, how does one explain the subsequent appearance, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of the classic features of the transition to capitalism (involving the substitution of forced by wage labor and the development of an internal commodity market)? Moreover, and more importantly in the context of our own concerns, there is the question of an apparent feudalization of some agrarian regions earlier in the nineteenth century. How precisely is one to conceptualize such cases of regression? Their very possibility is something that neither Wallerstein nor his critics, including Stern, seem conceptually prepared to contemplate. Cyclical, periodic crises are one thing, reversions to feudalism are another. The latter 'would make capitalism a concept so elastic as to border on meaninglessness' (Stern 1988, 867).



Stern does not elaborate his argument, which clearly relates to the complex problem of theorizing social formations in transition or characterized by the absence of a consolidated mode of production in the usual sense. It is not clear to me why the kind of regression in question is not feasible, at least in the early stages of a transition. After all, have not the former degenerate socialist states of Russia and Eastern Europe recently undergone precisely such a regression, in their case from communism to capitalism. Less debatable – after all not all would agree by any means as to the exact nature of the former Soviet system – and more relevant to the present context, is the case of Spain, which, following the *Comuneros* rebellion (1520-21), exhibits all the features of a regressive system, involving mercantile capitalist and feudal formations. Such at least is the conclusion of an ongoing research programme within Spanish scholarship, led by Juan Carlos Rodríguez, which I intend to review below. The time is ripe, I believe, for a serious attempt to weigh the explanatory power of this tradition against the more modish claims of the various ‘post-Marxisms’. Anticipating our final assessment, we will take our cue from Stern's own concluding remarks: ‘The old universal theories were replaced not by conceptual break-throughs commanding broad assent but by a plethora of theoretical schemes and political agendas whose rapid multiplication and varied quality reinforced a sense of intellectual fragmentation and limited comprehension’ (Stern 1988, 872n103).

## Spain in Transition

It is not my intention here to enter into the complexities of Rodríguez's programme, sustained through a series of major works, but simply to sketch in its general parameters and to isolate those aspects of it that are germane to the current colonial debate among Hispanists. In typically Althusserian fashion, Rodríguez conceptualizes a social formation as a hierarchy of heterogeneous, unequal, yet interrelated instances or levels, on the basis of a mode of production. In the case of 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, there is one dominant structure: a public/private dialectic operative at the political level but impacting upon social relations at other levels. The economic function exerts an ultimate determination, not directly, in reflexionist terms, but indirectly, through the ‘matrix’ effect of the structured whole on its elements, whose distinct and unequal effectivities are simultaneously at work. The single public/private dialectic is complicated in the case of the transitional social formation that existed in Spain by the presence of two ideological optics, that of the bourgeoisie and that of the nobility. Even as it controls the state apparatus, the nobility

is unable to neutralize the impact of the bourgeoisie, whose incontrovertible presence not only explains the formation of the Absolutist State but the existence of the public/private dichotomy. Such are the circumstances to which each class must adapt. The result is a body of literature, that of the Golden Age, which consists, fundamentally, of at least *two* literatures, corresponding to the existence of two optics:

Sólo en las formaciones de transición se da el fenómeno que venimos analizando porque en ellas no hay propiamente hablando una sola matriz ideológica (esto es, una contradicción fundamental localizada en el nivel de las relaciones sociales), sino una lucha de modos de producción, que sólo logra su configuración en las relaciones sociales gracias a la cohesión que impone el especial funcionamiento del nivel político. (Rodríguez 1990, 56-57)

While the transitional formation is tendentially favourable to the bourgeoisie – the public/private dichotomy is particularly amenable to the latter's mode of operating – the nobility is able to delay and block development ('con la amenaza incluso de retroceso al viejo sistema' (57)). In fact, the political defeat of the bourgeoisie opens the way in post-Tridentine Spain to a resurgence of feudal values to the extent that, while the nobility lacks the power to liquidate the public/private split, it is sufficiently hegemonic to fill existing forms – the theatre, for example – with its own ideology of 'blood', 'honour', etc.: 'El verdadero problema de las relaciones sociales mercantiles (burguesas) en España radicará siempre en su incontrovertido sometimiento a la hegemonía feudalizante social sobre el espacio de lo público' (353). In other words, development at the economic level will be constantly thwarted at the ideological and political levels. The result, in textual terms, is a constant interaction and over-determination of forms, such that it becomes difficult to distinguish between residual, dominant and emergent ideological currents.

Within Althusserianism, history is a process without a subject, in the sense that the real protagonists of history are the social relations of economic, political and ideological practices. It is the latter that assign contradictory places to the human protagonists within the complex and unevenly developed structure of the social formation. However, contrary to claims by its opponents, structural Marxism, in its broad design, does not ignore problems of agency. Rather, it explores the different ways in which we are constituted as social and historic individualities, including the tensions and contradictions between the forces of submission, inherent in our adaptation to the roles assigned to us, and the forces of empowerment, stemming from our capacity to exert power and influence by virtue of our structural locations. It was Rodríguez's contribution to this

theoretical debate to radically historicize its terms of reference, with regard to the Transition. Fundamental to his work is the distinction drawn between two basic ideologies, *organicism* or *substantialism* and *animism*, associated respectively with a dominant feudal nobility and an emergent capitalist bourgeoisie. Animism is distinguished by the production of a 'beautiful soul', subsequently to become the 'individual' or full subject. Rodríguez insists that 'la *matriz burguesa* se califica siempre [...] por su producción continua de la noción de "sujeto"' (59). This animist proto-subject will subsequently pass through various transformations, encompassing Galilean mechanicism, Cartesian rationalism, Roussonian naturalism, British empiricism, not to mention the classic Kantian and Hegelian traditions and, eventually, structuralism and post-structuralism.

The contrast with feudalism is stark. Here, the ideological notions that define historic individualities are those of noble, vassal, serf, sinner, member of the faithful, etc., all contained within the serf (servant)/lord relationship. Rodríguez explains: 'La *matriz feudal* podemos decir que se detecta en primer lugar por su específica visión de la sociedad como *cuerpo orgánico*' (59). This organicism is lent a substantialist bias through the notion of forms that tend towards their natural place and consequently towards a condition of rest. (The importance attached to stasis by Aristotelian science will be increasingly contested by neo-Platonism, whose predilection for movement will be incorporated into the new science.) The emphasis is not upon the subject but upon the notion of reading: 'Este sustancialismo había permitido, además, la *lectura orgánica* de los signos inscritos tanto en el *libro de la Naturaleza* como en el *Libro Sagrado*, en cuanto que entendidas tales "Escrituras" como sustancias aparenciales reenviando siempre a una estructura – la voz de Dios – superior que las desvelaba' (60). The body, as the place where signs are most confused but most urgently in need of interpretation, occupies a key position within organicism, since it is dominated by the notion of 'blood' and lineage.

## Subject to Change

Before proceeding to unpack these notions of literature as ideological production, with respect to certain colonial texts, we might pause to consider the contrasting direction taken by post-structuralists. The exchange within Hispanic colonial scholarship, to which we referred earlier, begins with Seed's celebration of Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and Rorty, loosely grouped under the rubric of post-structuralism, in the context of a review of a number of books, including Beatriz Pastor's *The*

*Armature of Conquest*. The demise of narratives of resistance and accommodation, Seed argues, has taken place as writers have become more alert, under the impact of the above-mentioned scholars, to the 'polysemic character of language'. She emphasizes (a) the extent to which the new emphasis upon discursivity 'has enabled natives of colonized territories to appropriate and transform the colonizers' discourses' (Seed 1991, 183); and (b) the way post-structuralism has dislodged the author's 'intention' or 'original meaning' from a central role, 'allowing literary critics and others to consider ways in which the text is appropriated by different textual communities' (184). It has been the tendency of imperial critics, Seed continues, to privilege the authorial intentions behind texts, at the expense of the reception of texts by colonized cultures.

The problems regarding 'intention', it has to be said, are complex (see Hawthorn 1987, 74). Provisionally, it does not seem wholly eccentric, except perhaps to a few stray post-structuralists, to claim that part of our humanity, as individual agents, consists not only in having intentions but also in acting upon them. Indeed, intentional behaviour is traditionally held to distinguish the social from the natural sciences. The task is not to ignore it, as post-structuralism wishes to do, but to theorize its status, *vis-à-vis* the intransitive effects of structural causality, operative through the matrix effect of the social formation. From such a standpoint, the significance and range of the recent skirmishes that so excite Seed seem rather less impressive. Consider, to begin with, the frequency with which post-structuralists relinquish the subject and its intentions in one move, only to reintroduce them with their next (see Hawthorn 1987, 68), not to mention the fact that, as Rolena Adorno rightly argues, the current demise of the subject seems to be of greater relevance to the ideological complexities of modern society than to colonial texts.

Such is the basis from which Seed proceeds to posit an antithesis between the production and reception of literary texts. We are asked to choose between a production model that (allegedly) favours imperialists and a reception model that (allegedly) facilitates colonial resistance to imperialism. Framed in these terms, of course, the choice is already made. Rather less obvious is what these terms exclude as opposed to what they include. We have in mind, firstly, the notion of the text as a determinate production, in the sense of being dependent upon conditions of existence that are profoundly ideological, and secondly, the fact that the relationship between the text and reality has, arguably, nothing to do with what contemporary readers feel about the text. We would further suggest that, by focusing exclusively upon the text's interpellative function, the reception model empties it (the text) of any relation to the real, to the

extent that, to judge by Seed's comments, any sense of objective existence simply dissolves into a hermeneutic fog of subjective interpretation (cf. Resch 1992, 290).

The confusions to which Seed's approach gives rise are particularly apparent in her discussion of Pastor's work. Initially, Seed appears to hint at some objective sense in which the *conquistadors* themselves exhibit, within their narratives, a blindness towards the colonial other: 'The problem with all of the forms of critique *identified by Pastor* is that they clearly reside within the limits established by sixteenth-century Spanish colonial orthodoxy. The critique of the grasping *encomendero* plays on a traditional Hispanic critique of motives of "interest" typical of a lament for an imagined earlier, less materialistic world' (Seed 1991, 188, italics added). Soon, however, the fault seems to lie not in any objective properties of the text but with the manner of its reception, notably by Pastor herself: 'But *in characterizing* these narratives as those of failure and rebellion, the perspective remains wholly European; they fail or rebel against European ambitions. As in all Orientalist discourse, the natives in these narratives remain a blank slate on which are inscribed the frustrations as well as the longings of the Europeans for the imaginary lost Eden of their own past' (188, italics added). That Pastor herself is considered to be at fault is indicated by the unfavorable comparison drawn by Seed between her and Peter Hulme, whose *Colonial Encounters* is also under review. Hulme, it seems, is more alert to the political subtext in each work in the canon, 'which emanates not from the author's biography [...] but from the political and historical position of the state in which the texts were composed' (189). The irony of this position is that Hulme's work is the product of a British tradition of cultural Marxism, a Marxism that Seed wishes to disqualify along with equally outmoded forms of Humanism.

Seed's impatience with Pastor is rooted in a post-structuralist and hermeneutic tradition that demands a criticism capable of revealing the phenomenal essence of art (its openness to other 'interpretive possibilities'), of the kind that transcends the vagaries of time and circumstance. The result is an overarching 'aesthetic experience' that enables the critic to move with ease between different 'textual communities'. Unfortunately, the drawbacks are considerable. What goes by the board is not simply the scientific concept of literary product, but of literary effect. An aesthetics of reception flows in to fill the gap and to mark the site of the class struggle in art: 'The corollary effect of this criticism has been to open the door to examining the ways in which a colonized people's reception and appropriation of a text has been shaped by different social and political experience from that of the authors of a text and its orthodox "high-

culture” interpreters’ (184).

Let us be clear exactly what we are objecting to. Not to the undeniable claim that colonial texts have been systematically requisitioned by ideological apparatuses to reproduce prevailing class or imperial relations. What is wrong with Seed’s approach is that it is blind to all internal contradictions within the dominant ideology, as a consequence of which the colonialist succumbs to a species of political voluntarism. In turn this voluntarism leads her less to *explain* texts, in terms of their cognitive relation to the real, than to *value* them, as experiential and, consequently, as ideological statements. Attention has been displaced from authorial intention, but only to the conscious designs of a (collective) reader(ship), as the critic, in her desire to emphasize the imperial struggle, simply reduces literature to its modes of reception. It is at this point that the post-structuralist is joined by the Marxist critic for whom literary practice is not so much pervaded with evidence of the class struggle as it is itself a direct expression of class dominance (see Resch 1992, 289 ff). For such a Marxist, literature is, reductively speaking, an attribute of ruling-class domination. The damage thereby wreaked upon materialist positions cannot be sufficiently emphasized. The way is open to irrationalist, *gauchist* positions that valorize political practice at the expense of objectively real conditions of existence.

### Salvaging the Subject

Adorno is the interlocutor who most clearly senses the drift of Seed’s bias towards reception, which she herself counterpoises with a productive model: ‘If the “linguistic turn to the human sciences” is to mean anything to scholars in literary studies, it is precisely to avoid divorcing texts *from the circumstances that produced them* – however irretrievable these circumstances may be’ (Adorno 1993, 139, italics added). One might object to this as an interpretation of a postmodernist approach notable for its ontological scepticism, towards which Adorno darkly alludes, but not to the critical leverage that it furnishes. Seed, Adorno perceptively observes, faults the author of *The Armature of Conquest* ‘for what are precisely her virtues’ (144). Rather than range across the entirety of some imagined tradition, in a typically hermeneutic fashion, Pastor has confined herself to a ‘coherent’ phase of Spanish political, cultural and literary history and avoided a theoretical ground ‘that does not require the writings she studies to respond to perspectives that they could not possibly reflect’ (144). Hence Adorno’s own critical restraint before the various post-structuralisms. By her own reckoning, she has retreated from her former