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## The Failure of Success? Postcolonial Analysis and Its Spread

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### Abstract

Postcolonial theory has 'colonised' many more disciplines now than its origins in literary and political studies. This has produced challenges of application within academe and hostility from media commentary. I canvas some benefits and shortcomings of this situation and argue for a carefully nuanced articulation of discipline focus and interdisciplinarity.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial, literary and political studies, academe, media commentary, Interdisciplinary.

Postcolonial studies has come under sustained attack in recent times, perhaps especially in Australia, The USA and Britain, but there will be echoes across other countries as well. Using the pretext of reviewing Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay's *Cynical Critical Theories: How Universities made everything about race, gender and identity* (2020), the erstwhile editor of Australia's national newspaper, Paul Kelly, laments 'the dismantling of universal liberalism based on respect for each person regardless of identity' (11). Identity politics (or what he labels Social Justice Theory) are taken as hostile to the liberal humanist ideal, and all the fields of scholarly analysis spinning off from postcolonial/ postmodern critique result in religiously adopted orthodoxies that run counter to 'science and reason' and turn against the benefits of progress and modernity (16). Helen Daniell in the same paper (owned by the Murdoch who condones the Trumpist nonsense of Fox TV in America) reports: 'campaigns to decolonise history, philosophy and literature curriculums, Pluckrose and Lindsay write, have morphed from demands that neglected perspectives be included into "drive to decolonise everything from hair to English literature curricula, to tear down paintings and smash statues and erase history.' And they argue for 'a return to classical liberalism that encourages difference of opinion, while acknowledging that racism, sexism and discrimination against minorities and serious problems that must be analysed through serious scholarship rather than "sophistry".'

One might respond by noting that there is considerable sophistry among adherents of such views, when they turn 'political correctness' from a phrase indicating an interest in social equity and making it a derogatory label denoting doctrinaire left-wing elitism. One can also point out that postcolonial studies emanate precisely from the Enlightenment values of 'science and reason' that also included liberty, community and equality, and produced the French and American revolutions. I can, however, agree with those detractors of postcolonial analysis on one point: the one about how it has percolated through institutions and into societies. As a criticism, this is not a new idea and one that has been argued by adherents of the decolonising project themselves. It is the worry that a simple binary model of power differentials both opens up everything to inspection and simultaneously reduces everything to a level of banality. A theory is in essence universalist in trying to get to the fundamental principles of some system that account for all instances of relevant patterns and phenomena. Thus, we should not be surprised when, from origins in decolonising literatures and

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discourses arising from British imperialism, there is an academic 'me too' movement in which countries and cultures from Eastern Europe and Latin America discover that they too were 'othered' and devalued under different regimes. Such breadth of application can have the virtue of showing up differences which help clarify the nature of each particular instance. Misused, it can reduce everything to repetitions of victimhood and familiar patterns of colonialist culture, and we learn nothing new.

Then, besides geographic spread, there is the intellectual spread of postcolonial studies from one or two disciplines (say, literature and politics) out to history, geography, anthropology, archaeology, the visual arts, media studies, even economics and mathematics, and now also to epidemiology in discussions of the disproportionate effects of Covid 19 on underprivileged minorities. On the one hand, this is testament to the validity of the general model that inspects the workings of cultural politics and the dynamics of creating and maintaining power differentials and exposing the blind spots in the practices and assumptions of each discipline. On the other hand, translations for one discipline to another can destroy the particular insights and cogency of the original critical model and reduce analysis to simplistic binaries and critical clichés (everything these days in literary commentary seems to be converted into 'third spaces', and reciting the terminology of the theory becomes a stand-in for genuine liberatory practice and exceeds a realistic awareness of what can be done within each disciplinary space). At a practical level within academe, the expansive influence of postcolonial studies is a success story, but at the same time, its dissemination blurs its visibility in the curriculum, and certainly in my own experience, results in the reduction of qualified postcolonial scholars and of the range of the literatures they teach in departments of English. As we have seen, too, the proliferation of postcolonial analysis can be seen as a threat to conservatives and any group whose unquestioned privilege is opened up to critique.

One aspect of the backlash against decolonising scholarship is the place of nation and political uses of nationalism. It was OK for postcolonial studies to flourish while they were largely confined to opening up the Eurocentric/ Anglocentric literary canon and while they promoted the independence of far off countries of little economic or political clout, but once they started pointing to the reproduction of colonialist patterns of policing power differences in the nation itself, privileged voices, both black and white, began turning on the critical apparatus, bad-mouthing it as postmodernist nihilism, and taking its spread across different intellectual fields as a totalitarian device for suppressing a variety of opinions. In several areas of literary criticism there has been a turn away from previous frameworks of national cultural value and identity to the idea of the transnational (and by this I mean simply the idea that national literatures are always already engaged with and by international flows). This results partly from the search for new approaches to texts, but is also an attempt to get around some of the identity politics that remain central to postcolonial studies and thereby deflect attacks from the strategically wounded pride of nationalist neoliberals (who otherwise rely on global capital). It is worth asking whether reemphasis of the teaching of literatures within national frameworks might not be a strategy of apparent appeasement of the conservative push under which decolonising analysis might sneakily continue.

Critics of the postcolonial worry about the all-encompassing encroachment of 'intersectionality', but obviously good scholarship needs to retain an understanding of how nationality, race, gender, ethnicity, class, caste, are all interwoven and how the specific dynamics of one strand can determine the workings of another. Equally, the generation of new knowledge relies on cross-disciplinary appropriation of materials as we import literary metaphors into philosophy and take models from, say, biology and translate them into literary studies. We need such collaborations and borrowings, but creative misappropriations can also lead to mistaken understanding of what is actually possible: the psychology and politics of Franz Fanon, for example, was productively made to do cultural work for decolonising

literary projects, but the textual theorising by Homi Bhabha (to pick only one example) has been misread as socio-politics, which produces not only criticism for not doing what it was never meant to do and use beyond its actual remit to wrap socio-political analysis in clever-sounding jargon.

Thinking of the 'axiology' (the flexible articulation of different projects such as political activism and deconstruction theory) of scholars like R. Radhakrishnan, I suggest that we need to hold to productive cross-fertilisation of disciplines while returning to a sharper focus on exactly what we do and can hope to do within our immediate disciplinary spaces. Broadly, postcolonial studies (understood as a multiform project of decolonisation) need to keep at their centre the dynamics arising from imperial/colonial systems. These can intersect with and inform power patterns in wider race, gender, sexuality, diaspora studies and so on, but those do not always have at their core the same defining focus of imperialist histories and their current legacies. In my own field, I see some validity in holding to examinations of cultural politics both within and around literary texts while getting back to consideration of the literary qualities of those texts (and of the systems producing them as such). Too often poems and novels are reduced to social documentary or political polemic and analysed for their limitations as such rather than critically assessing how they use language to create an effect (or an affect) in the reader.

Attacks on the Humanities draw some punch from the fact that we too often defend them on the turf and in the language of the attackers — arguing for the economic value of artistic productions packaged as 'industries'; pointing to the number of graduates who find good jobs. The cultural politics of postcolonial studies lie surely in their value for promoting community rather than personal benefit and in their capacity to improve society, even if that means critiquing those who run our countries. The Humanities must hold to being both useless and dangerous knowledge; it is their particular strength and weakness. After all, they are useless in the same way that astrophysics does little to alter our lives, and it is really only our cultures that allow one area of knowledge to garner millions in research money while politicians bicker over allocation a few thousands to the other. I guess we can also add that even within our disciplinary spaces, we should persist in international networking but be clear that systems of understanding will be read and applied differently depending on where they gain hold. The general discussions of the history and use of postcolonial theory in the United States, for example, often seems quite alien to my sense of its origins and uses in Australia.

We might return to an acceptance of what postcolonial analysis was criticised for early on: that it lacked a theory. In doing so, we might be able to avoid the dismissive linking of what we do with the right's disparaging homogenisation of 'theory' as obfuscatory and elitist. We could hold to decolonising analysis as project, process and praxis, but in doing so pay attention to the kinds of specificities that Gayatri Spivak has insisted on: not just historical and social but also disciplinary.

The last point to be made here is that it is not enough to keep trotting out a backward-looking inspection of colonial times and texts. It is indeed comforting to be able to look at a novel and say 'see, I told you it was colonialist/racist/sexist', but that is not enough. We should stick with the uncomfortable project of postcolonial analysis, which is to promote difference (new voices, cultures and knowledges that do not receive regular attention in our reductively globalised and national spaces). It is also to use our skills in discourse analysis to dismantle (that is, expose and disassemble) the traditions and inequities that continue to challenge us today: the travesty of a Buddhism used as hyper-nationalist and ethno-centric politics; Han imperialism in Tibet and Xinjiang; Israeli imperialism in relentless state encroachment on Palestinian land and lives; national suppression of refugee groups, settler and caste imperialism in relation to downtrodden minorities, and, of course, the imperialism of neoliberal capitalism and its aggressive nationalist exponents.

This paper draws on a wide range of standard works on postcolonial (literary) theory without relying on any specific references.

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### Bio-note

As both an acclaimed researcher and engaged educator, Prof. Paul Sharrad has not only made a significant and sustained contribution to scholarship in his field, but also to the University's international reputation and engagement.

Prof. Paul joined UOW in 1987 as a Lecturer in English, beginning a 27-year career with the University that culminated in his appointment as Associate Professor in 2000 and Senior Fellow in 2014. He shaped research, teaching and administration through a number of executive roles including Head of Department, Head of Postgraduate Studies and Associate Dean (Research), and through his considered contributions to numerous committees at Faculty and University level.

Prof. Paul is internationally renowned for his research in the field of English literature, and for his great impact on the development of the discipline here and abroad. A world-leading expert in postcolonial literary study and writing, he was at the forefront of developing postcolonial studies in Australia. He has dedicated his academic life to creating courses to nurture and showcase the work of postcolonial writers and critics, building an intellectually rigorous and world-class program and championing strong linkages between research and teaching. He has in no small part influenced UOW's global reputation for excellence in the field.

As a researcher, Prof. Paul's body of work is extensive and authoritative. He has authored three books on Indian English fiction, 67 book chapters and 71 journal articles, and co-edited countless other written works. He has delivered in excess of 100 conference papers internationally and been a visiting lecturer and fellow at universities in Europe, North America and Asia. His creative and innovative approach has attracted significant competitive grant funding and several prestigious appointments, including the National Library of Australia's Harold White Fellowship, supporting his research for a literary biography of Thomas Keneally AO.

Building deep connections across national boundaries for scholarly exchange, curriculum development, conferences and publication is a hallmark of Paul's career, and his commitment to advancing UOW's local, national and global engagement is outstanding. A student of India and its rich and complex literatures and cultures, he is considered among the most eminent scholars of Indian literature in English and has worked with passion and purpose to establish meaningful and highly productive relationships with a number of Indian universities. He also forged deep connections across the South Pacific, United Kingdom, Europe and the Americas to foster and advance postcolonial studies globally. He worked with postgraduates across the globe on the expansion of English Literature to include Australian, Commonwealth and postcolonial writing.

Prof. Paul has directed considerable energy to encouraging literary endeavour in the

community through leading events for writers, and has been particularly supportive of Aboriginal writers in the Illawarra and the south-east of Australia. He has acted as a reader for respected international scholarly journals and publishers and a judge for many creative writing prizes, and organised the international Commonwealth Writers Prize. Beyond this, he has organised donations of library books for earthquake-damaged campuses in Pakistan, school supplies for tsunami-ravaged Samoa and Australian study resources for Indian libraries.

Prof. Paul has rightly gained a reputation for his collegiality and great intellectual and personal generosity. He has carefully nurtured many early-career scholars and research students, and his record for supervision of higher degree researchers to completion is exemplary within the discipline. A respected leader both within the English literature program and across the University more broadly, he has been sought out by colleagues at all levels for inspiration, advice and links to the many connections he has cultivated across the globe. Though he retired from UOW in mid-2014, he continues to research and write, and to champion the University's reputation and external engagement.

Prof. Paul Sharrad's contribution to the strength and reputation of the English literature discipline at UOW, and to the international body of scholarship in the field, is extraordinary. His legacy is rich and lasting, spanning a diversity of intellectual cultures, societies and geographical regions.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to present Prof. Paul Sharrad for admission as a Fellow of the University of Wollongong.