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Reading Edward Said in Myanmar: Traveling Theories after *Culture and Imperialism* (1)

Abstract I: Twenty years after its publication, *Culture and Imperialism* continues to be seen as part of the defining moment of postcolonial readings of our contemporary world. The anniversary marks an opportunity to revisit the landscape of culture and imperialism as envisaged by Edward Said, but also to discuss the productiveness and limitations of its applicability to our contemporary world. This article's first part focuses on the relevance of Said's critique of culture and imperialism today, while the second part addresses how its legacy can be used as a point of departure to examine one of the lesser discussed Anglophone postcolonial sites.

Abstract II: A vent'anni dalla sua uscita, *Culture and Imperialism* continua ad essere visto come parte del momento di definizione delle letture postcoloniali della nostra contemporaneità. Il suo anniversario costituisce un'opportunità per rivisitare il panorama della cultura e dell'imperialismo così come li immaginava Edward Said, ma anche per discutere produttività e limiti della sua applicabilità al nostro mondo contemporaneo. La prima parte di questo articolo si concentra sull'attuale rilevanza della critica di Said alla cultura e all'imperialismo, mentre la seconda riflette su come la sua eredità può essere usata quale punto di partenza per esaminare uno dei luoghi meno discussi della postcolonialità anglofona.

The twentieth anniversary of the publication of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) – a work which invoked the legacy of empire as a clearly

identifiable thread, determining the political and cultural lives of former colonies – is an opportune moment to consider changes to the way in which we now conceive both empire and colony, and north and south. In this article I will initially situate *Culture and Imperialism* in the broader landscape of worldwide changes it sought to address, then examine the extent to which its arguments can be deemed relevant to international relations in 2013, and finally consider one specific location, from which a more contextualised reading of this contemporary global landscape can unfold. My own first visit to Myanmar in December 2012, immediately after Barack Obama, brought my attention to Myanmar, which was a relatively peripheral colony. I read *Culture and Imperialism* on the beach in Myanmar as part of my preparation for the AISCLI conference in Rome.

The world seems to have rapidly distanced itself from the decolonisation and emancipist thought paradigm which was characterised by its leading proponents including Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Amílcar Cabral, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, George Lamming and Chinua Achebe. Although their successors have contributed to the complexities of decolonisation writings, and the dismantlement of empire – this last is now becoming a distant reminder of a colonially derived hierarchical ranking of cultures (2).

Portugal, which held the last major European empire, faces the fortieth year since the collapse of its rule in 1974; its former colonies are preparing for the anniversary of their independence. As these preparations occur, the Mozambican government attempts to avoid a wave of Portuguese migrants, who are fleeing the financial crisis and the resulting austerity measures and consequent lack of opportunities. The situation illustrates how dramatically some post-imperial relations have altered, as well as the continuity (rather than any severance) of those relationships. This example raises the broader question of how, in light of our greater temporal distance to colonial times, we might read contemporary cultural texts set in former colonial locations.

Culture and Imperialism's Setting

A large proportion of *Culture and Imperialism* involves detailed engagements with canonised literature of British and French imperialism. Even if that represents an important step in understanding how imperialism depends on cultural formations to sustain it, the discussion becomes uneven in its analysis of European imperialism. Yet Said, at other moments within the same work, writes of 'European cultures' as if they operate by extension from the British and French imperial experience, which he has at other instances designated as unique, because of its scope (particularly, of course, that of the British empire).

There is an inconsistency which haunts *Culture and Imperialism*, and which has, when Said's *Orientalism* is also considered, annoyed various other postcolonial discourses, most notably in the Hispanophone world, where some see postcolonialism as a domain of English literature studies on the American East Coast. Though I regard this critique as reductive and misguided, there is a point in recollecting that the British and French empires were culturally determined by their literature in comparison with other forms of European colonialisms, where it was not primarily through literary concerns that colonialism was supported or discussed. Historiography, geography, anthropology and more generally science (as also mentioned by Said) have played, in some contexts, a far more important role. The inference, which Said also draws, is that there is a danger in looking only for manifest imperialist modes of thinking, modes of producing academic texts about the colonial subjects and the imperial self. What others have labelled the colonial archive is a much broader phenomenon and the ways of accessing this often far more indirect, but still formative. To engage with *Culture and Imperialism's* vision in 2013 requires accommodating (much better than *Culture and Imperialism* was able to do at its moment of conceptualisation), the heterogeneous yet also hegemonic pan-European narrative of imperialism.

The second issue I raise in connection with reading *Culture and Imperialism* relates to the engaging matter of how we understand the question of legacy. Said points out that contemporary European culture is also shaped by the historical experience of colonial rule, and the sense of privilege it bestowed upon Europeans, regardless of whether they were directly involved or indirectly implicated in colonialism – there were no alternative spaces to these two positions. Yet he devoted little discussion to show how this sense of privilege continues after the end of empire. Whereas his reading enables an initial mapping out through the ambiguous positions offered by the archetypal imperial texts, it does not develop beyond this mapping, because it then considers the emergence of the US as the new imperial power. This shift is easily sustained by the historical shift in power from Europe to the US, or what can also be described as a readjustment of the power balance between Europe and the US in the transatlantic hegemony. However, it nonetheless historicises European imperialism, and as such underplays the realignment of Europe within a transatlantic axis of a now more transatlantic hegemony dominated by the Americans. This realignment is easily detected in European support for American led imperial campaigns from Korea to Afghanistan, with the notable exception of Vietnam.

In the reconfigured relationship, Europe occupies a clearly supporting role with limited influence, as Tony Blair discovered in the preparations to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But simultaneously with the loss of military power, which was always hampered by intense inter-European rivalry, Europe has acquired a new position as a major global economic power block through the rise of the EU. The destructive agricultural policies vis-a-vis the global South demonstrate a continued imperial dominance. That this is currently accompanied by domestic destructive policies in crisis-struck Europe underlines the significance of the empire is never being merely about dominance abroad, it is also about imperial thinking at home. The EU as a power block has replaced the national post-

empires, whose increasingly impotent brinkmanship had become a source of political embarrassment (from the Suez Crisis, over the Falkland War to Berlusconi and Sarkozy's friendship with Gaddafi).

The military decline of national post-imperial European governments and rise of Europe as an economic power block has become dramatically clearer after *Culture and Imperialism* was published. But parts of this development could also not be foreseen in Said's book, because of the way he identified the nature of the British-French empires and the American empire. *Culture and Imperialism* devotes considerable attention to their differences. Said detects the cultural connectedness yet separateness that governs the European empires (captured for example in the parting shot of Fielding and Aziz in *A Passage to India*), regarding an American approach based on detached rule. These identified differences create a problem for Said's desire to treat the two forms of empires within the same narrative framework. Because to read complex literature's flaws and inconsistencies, as they produce a narrative of empire, is a very different exercise from analysing books on policy, media discourse and similar types of texts, which are used to produce the American understanding of their rationale for empire building.

Other types of texts about the British empire would seem to be more immediately on a par with the American situation. It appears much harder to find an American match for the way imperial culture was produced in Britain and France in the 19th and early 20th centuries; Melville, Twain and Said's other candidates don't convince him of a similar American way of producing imperial sensibilities to that of the British or French. Yet, within a British imperial context there are popular fictions, imagery, colonial shows, advertisements and which have been discussed, for example, in the work of Patrick Brantlinger (whom Said does mention) and in Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather*. Brantlinger and McClintock's writing provides two useful reference points in terms of producing imperial sensibilities through popular culture in ways more immediately on a par

with the American situation. What remains enabling about Said's anti-imperialism work is that it serves the crucial purpose of showing empire for what it was, what it continues to do, and how it continues to be supported – most stridently and profoundly disturbingly – in academia. It is clear from Said's writing that academia serves an important nurturing role for imperialism in providing supposedly neutral and impeccable evidence, in support of the cause of empire. The question is, what is empire today, when it can neither be seen as exclusively European or American, but is describable as neoliberalism disguised as 'the market' that determines the fate of governments, democratic as well as undemocratic, while it destroys the social fabric of societies.

This system appears quite disconnected from the way in which the historical empires produced cultural sensibilities, whether in the form of a European superiority to be 'mimicked' by the colonial during the European reign of the first global imperial phase, or during its second phase, when the American way of life became the model to strive for. This model can be most clearly seen when it is launched by Truman in his four point speech in 1949 widely understood as the inauguration of the development regime of thought. While *Culture and Imperialism* identifies the three phases of empire, it deals with them inadequately collectively. To elaborate: the European imperial phase is complex, the American imperial phase is relatively flat and the third phase is discussed primarily in terms of signs of an emerging new order. Yet if we wish to understand the three phases, we need to know each of their dynamics, and how they relate to the same overall structure. *Culture and Imperialism* does not quite provide that, even if it does gesture towards some of the driving mechanisms of the comprehensive imperial framework; whiteness, discourse on terrorism, ecological planetary crisis, economic destruction of societal structures (in particular Said's reference to the urban American crisis). These issues, which have provided the main reference points of a critique of the current neoliberal order, are clearly singled out by Said as both emerging and emergency driven

reference points. It is also notable that they have become even more urgent reference points within the emergent new imperial structure.

This brings us to the point of the Europe imagined by Said in the early 1990s and its position in relation to this new structure. *Culture and Imperialism* hints at rather than produces a reading of a reconfigured Europe. It uses *gast arbeiter* and other terms to indicate a broader pan-European moral panic concerning the migrant other, as the imperial confrontation has moved from colonial periphery to the former metropolitan centre. 'Former' because the European colonial regime is no more, nor has Europe built new metropolitan centres, even if it has maintained its instrumental centres of capitalism, such as the City of London and Frankfurt.

It is becoming difficult to identify a metropolitan centre, or metropolitan centres, as global capitalism annihilates the remnants of a former colonial order, driven by a taken for granted Eurocentricity, and replaces it with a new system. Yet what is this new order in terms of its cultural controls? Said's reading of Europe of the early 1990s is limited by his chosen framework. His European empires remain historical, and they remain Britain and France. It is as if they are weighed down by an excess of history. A more contemporary focus in *Culture and Imperialism* would have enabled a more thorough consideration of the different ways in which racism has become reconceptualised as cultural racism, as the rebirth of the no longer tenable position of biologically informed ways of articulating racism deeply connected to colonialism.

The complex issue of race is related to the question of how to engage with the notion of white privilege in the face of the provincialisation of Europe (and the West), demographically (already) and in terms of declining control over the global South. It is to this question of how the global North's presence in the global South can be understood in the aftermath of European imperialism that I now turn.

Reading Culture and Imperialism in Myanmar

The new imperial formation, the neoliberal order, is one way of bringing the focus to the realm of the former colonies in the global South. The neoliberal order has in former colonies replaced the colonial hegemony introduced by the Europeans, who also provided the colonials with a distorted form of European modernity, whose deliverance was always conditioned by the need to preserve European presence and interests in the colony. The colonial power sought to protect its involvements by orchestrating its inevitable withdrawal in such a way that colonialism as a distributive system of privilege was not disrupted by the process of decolonisation.

Myanmar represents one of the most intriguing postcolonial sites. Its colonial position inside the British Empire was subordinate to that of India. It achieved, as Thant Myint-U has pointed out in his history of Myanmar, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, its independence in the wake of the wider South Asian independence. The process of emancipation ended in one of the contemporary world's longest reigning military rules which may be coming to an end. Two books have in very different ways sought to capture the complexity of contemporary Myanmar in a form of political and culturally informed travel writing. Both of them point clearly to the importance of history as the backdrop against which contemporary developments can be understood. Emma Larkin, in her *Finding George Orwell in Burma* (2004), uses George Orwell's writing on Burma, particularly *Burmese Days*, to look for traces of Orwell, but also of British colonial remains in Myanmar. Thant Myint-U, in his second book on Myanmar, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia* (2011), reads contemporary Myanmar as not only a product of its national history, but also as a local contemporary product of historical, contemporary and emerging tensions between Asia's two demographic giants, India and China. These two books prove useful points of departure in a discussion on what role may still be assigned to (European) empire in the postcolonial, but also neoliberal, world.

Orwell is a largely absent figure in *Orientalism* and of merely marginal interest in *Culture and Imperialism*. Hence my argument here is not premised on an overlapping concern or claims between Larkin's search and Orwell's presence in Burma as an 'orientalist' and colonialist in Said's work. What I want to question instead is how Larkin's search for traces of Orwell can be understood in the context of contemporary Myanmar's political reality. Larkin is looking for remnants of Orwell's presence and through this her book becomes infused with a nostalgic search for a lost Burma (Larkin 2004: 187). This can be easily established as the desire for an alternative to the dismal picture she paints of a contemporary Myanmar, where political oppression takes place on an egregious scale. Yet, this potentially disturbing resurrection of the ghost of colonialism as offering a 'better world' than the present regime is counterbalanced with passages addressing Orwell's racism and his role as an active participant in the colonial administration of Burma. A considerable amount of the book is taken up by her tracing the influence of Burma on Orwell's writing after his return to Great Britain.

Larkin finds in particular in *Animal Farm* and *1984* representations of a political system to be a chillingly accurate prevision of contemporary Myanmar with its 'thugocracy' of generals and extreme forms of repression that penetrates every person's daily life. This reading, however, produces the current regime in Orwell's prevision as a mere projection of the colonial regime. This enables a flaw in the narrative, because if the current regime is simply evil, as she suggests, and if it is the result of an Orwellian vision caused by his experience of British colonialism in Burma, then colonialism is also necessarily unmitigated evil, and runs counter to the ambiguous space she creates for British colonialism.

Larkin traces the footsteps of Orwell's stay in Myanmar and looks for places he has either described in *Burmese Days* and/or mentioned in other writings, or where others have placed him through local cultural memory. But she also embarks on a collective reading exercise with local Burmese interested

in Orwell's work. Or, as we don't really know this as readers, we are at least persuaded by her to read his writings with her. This produces in the book a curious blend of tracing Orwell's presence in Burma, but also of reinstating Orwell as a figure in Myanmar. This represents a familiar dilemma similar to that produced by the establishment of 'colonial tourism' in South East Asia more generally, but also in Myanmar more specifically (3).

Colonial tourism operates as a trope through which Westerners, and Europeans in particular, are strangely familiarised with local settings through the remnants and reconstructions of colonial architecture, which they recognise as European in origin, and supported by multitudes of underpaid staff catering to the tourist's whim. While the practice of rereading Orwell in a Myanmar context with the locals is obviously not a manifestation of that kind of colonial nostalgia, it still privileges Orwell in Myanmar for Larkin's reader as a figure of identification. It resurrects Orwell in his Burmese context, when colonialism and even Burma itself are no longer there. The book then, in spite of its also critical distancing from certain aspects of Orwell's racist acts in Burma, involuntarily makes colonialism more palatable than the sheerly evil the current regime. Yet, how will we measure which of the two regimes is more oppressive?

Larkin preserves an ambiguous space for power relations in colonial Burma premised on how we read ambiguities more freely into power relations of the past, against a monolithically evil contemporary present day regime. This juxtaposition again invites comparisons with the reading of regimes elsewhere in the postcolonial world, which have betrayed the ideals of emancipation. This begs the question about whether colonialism was such a bad thing, after all, and leaves a space to entertain the idea that European colonialism did bring about an order, even if it was hierarchically race based and, because of this, repressive. Yet, revisiting that colonial history would immediately bring to the surface atrocities from Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean to the Belgian machinery of genocide in the Congo. In Burma such a history of British atrocities

can be drawn up. It is this wider history of British atrocities in Burma that Larkin keeps away from while focusing on the repressions of the contemporary regime.

Remnants of colonial history, in the shape of colonial architecture or the English gardens in colonial highland areas – say in Darjeeling, Shillong and Ooty in India; White Highlands in Kenya; Cameron Highlands in Malaysia – produce an image of colonialism accompanied by nostalgia and a guilt-free zone, because they are exonerated from the practice of alienating colonial subjects from their own land to make way for the tea and coffee plantations for colonialists eager to escape the heat of the lower lying tropical areas. In a similar fashion contemporary tourism trading in colonial nostalgia reproduces a relationship between the tourist and the local underpaid staff that is reminiscent of the relationship between the colonists and their colonial subjects that it is impossible not to read it as an eager re-embrace of an order where 'white' European equalled unquestionable superiority. In particular, as Europe's grasp of its 'always on top' (4) position is slipping away, because the neoliberal order that has replaced it entails no automatic recognition of culture based superiority, but instead inserts a globalised affluent elite wherever it comes from.

Thant Myint-U in his recent travel, history and contemporary politics book, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*, also makes reference to hill stations Maymyo in Myanmar, and Shillong, in Assam. In his book, grand scale civilisation history of the entire region from India across China works as a backdrop against which he situates contemporary Myanmar (which he refers to as Burma) in a politically contested landscape. Shillong as a small footnote in a time limited albeit vastly scaled British Empire becomes a local parenthesis in the long term evolution of his regional history. This is, of course, one way of provincializing British imperial history, to capture Dipesh Chakrabarty's warning against even critical accounts of the European empires' tendency to exclude other narrativisations of regional and national histories in Asia.

The mouldy buildings of mock English Tudor from the later part of the colonial era that also clutter the landscape at Pyin-Oo-Lwin/Maymyo immediately east of Mandalay (Myint-U 2011: 56) become in Myint-U's narrative remnants of an alienating colonial presence that has long since been overtaken by other presences, with possibly much further reaching consequences. His reading of contemporary Myanmar seeks to locate it within the broader region of Southeast Asia and more specifically as an emerging prominent location as the result of demographic, political, and economic changes brought to the region by a globalising world, which no longer has the North Atlantic as the sole axis of political power, influence and eventually affluence. China and India are already demographically the world's centre. The political and economic change reworking their societies has caused in Myint-U's view a reorientation towards the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait. Myanmar provides access to the Malacca Strait and has enormous potential for becoming a site for enormous resource extraction and capital investment. This would make the country the major land connection between the two regional power houses.

The British Empire and its aftermath is in Myint-U's account primarily a phase that risks to be overplayed in the context of rapidly changing cultural-political landscapes of South and Southeast Asia. The military regime that has ruled Myanmar since 1962 has not so much eradicated a prior British colonial presence as it has made it redundant. The dramatic but short-lived Japanese presence during the second world war had a profound impact on the direction of the Burmese journey towards independence, in what was in Myint-U's reading a British imperial outpost, whose main purpose was to work as a buffer zone to protect the real British interest – India (Myint-U 2011: 63).

To question what culture and imperialism might mean in contemporary Myanmar in the context of Myint-U's book is to ask about the imperial-cultural aspirations of China and India in Myanmar, and to what extent they are a continuation of the Western imperial presence, and to what degree they are

something else. Myint-U's vision is of Myanmar as the result of a vacuum after the departure of the British, rather than seeing the British empire as merely another phase in the long-term regional history. While the British Empire is not a parenthesis yet in Myanmar's history, Myint-U's book emphasises the importance of looking at the other civilisation historical movements that predate and follow the presence of the British empire. The rise of some of these empires took place over hundreds of years, a couple of them originated in Myanmar itself. This provides an important corrective against over-emphasising the impact of British colonialism in Myanmar. This has, of course, to be balanced against the displacement of the kings and elite of Myanmar during colonialism, which destroyed the fabric of Burmese society. And it has to be measured against the colonial military training, which continued as a model post-independence, and from which current political leaders were recruited. Ironically, the Myanmar political top brass trained at the former British hill station, Pyin-Oo-Lwin.

To ask what *Culture and Imperialism* means in contemporary Myanmar is a far more difficult question to answer, and my insights are clearly limited by what I have read and what I have seen on my recent journey in Myanmar. Orwell's significance for contemporary Burmese identity formation is easily exaggerated, as is Kipling's importance in his texts on British Burma. Here, such texts too easily end up as European/Western projections of a European historical presence that lends weight to a later Western presence, through tourism and other travel. Even within such generalising categories as the European or Westerner it is an open question, what Kipling and Orwell mean to the average Scandinavian, Italian or German traveller/tourist. Even more so, when the tourist gaze upon Myanmar becomes more globalised.

What Myint-U so interestingly maps out through his travels is not so much in relation to Myanmar itself, as in the interrelations between Myanmar and its emerging global powerhouse neighbours. He describes interesting overlaps that are historically configured, and one of the limited tropes within this universe, is

British colonialism in India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Yet this history remains clearly a sideshow to the relationship with China, whose history can, of course, be understood as a reaction against first European imperial encroachments and then American intimidation. However, China also manifests a completely different kind of globalisation in the making that can be read critically as a neoliberal regime which a communist party somewhat paradoxically has chosen to align itself with.

Myint-U identifies the Chinese presence as far more consequential than the Indian at the moment, but even if India should elevate the gateway to the East in terms of its importance to the Indian political-economic system, it is hard to see that Indian presence in terms of an aftermath of the British Empire. This is where *Culture and Imperialism* is marked, as perhaps such books inevitably are, because it seeks to capture a moment in history, as it is disappearing, as defining criteria of the contemporary. This perspective doesn't make postcolonialism (or for that matter imperialism) a redundant term, but both terms need to be seen in the light of a vanishing historical horizon, which nonetheless, defined modern institutions such as states and how they are still understood and accepted in the post-1945 world order. This has, however, to be balanced against the massive transformations that are taking place within that order. 'Culture' as an analytical category is one way to capture continuities and transformations. This is where *Culture and Imperialism* can most productively be read in the light of Said's essays, 'Traveling Theory' (1993) and 'Traveling Theory Reconsidered' (2000), where he seeks to understand how theories are transformed as they are relocated to deal with other contexts, the same obviously goes for transformations across time. My article is a small contribution towards this relocation of *Culture and Imperialism*.

I finish this essay with the following insight delivered by Thant Myint-U, which I think captures the dilemma of reading too much or too little into *Culture and Imperialism*'s identification of the importance of the pillars of power left

behind after a British colonial era and a pax Americana influence on the world generally, and the region of Southeast Asia more specifically:

The relative decline of the West is often exaggerated. The West is still far richer, its universities second-to-none and the armed forces of the United States have no parallel. But here, in this small but strategic slice of Asia, the post-Western world is perhaps more evident than anywhere else. Walking around in Maymyo, the West seems more a memory and something very far away, sanctions and boycotts having kept out businesses and aid programmes that would otherwise exist, leaving the landscape to be crafted by others. The money to be made, the fears to be addressed, the relations that need to be fostered, have become Asian, and close at hand. And in this intra-Asian world, relations with China are paramount. Neither India nor the countries of southeast Asia have so far been able to compete with what China is offering and able to deliver (Myint-U 2011: 74-75).

NOTES

1. There is much debate over whether to use the official name, Myanmar, or to use the colonial name Burma as a point of non-recognition of the regime which renamed the country. As a postcolonialist I can think of arguments for and against both names, and similar debates have taken place in other places as colonial names have been replaced (the debate over Mumbai versus Bombay is one of the more protracted ones). I have decided to stay with the official name, because it is the official name, and because it seems to me that reverting to the colonial name involves its own problems.
2. Notably when Said wrote *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* decolonization had occurred within living memory.
3. This is clearly brought out in a passage, where she contrasts the boisterous days of colonial social life in the hills east of Mandalay with the dull

experience of staying in one of the surviving colonial buildings in Pyin-U-Lwin (Larkin 2004: 38-45).

4. My reference here is to Said's review article in 2003 of Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects*, where he begins the review by pondering why European self-assertiveness in terms of what its empires were and did has been on the rise again, not least in the work of Niall Ferguson.

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