



essay

Of Hyphenology: Metropolitan Postcolonial Gramscism

by Azfar Hussain

CONTEMPORARY postcolonial cultural studies, characterized as it is by an amorphous set of discursive poetics, politics, practices, and problematics, has variously explored and exploited theoretical and conceptual resources from the work of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist-Leninist activist and theorist. For instance, to begin with, what might be viewed as an ongoing dialectic of the Gramscianization of postcoloniality and the postcolonization of Gramsci can be located immediately in the critical *œuvres* of the trinity of contemporary postcolonial cultural theorists — Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. Indeed, among many others located both in the metropolis and outside it, Said, Spivak, and Bhabha have all meanwhile appropriated Gramsci with varying degrees of intent, interest, and impact.

Also, what has come to be known as the "Subaltern Studies Project" in India lays claim to a Gramscian inheritance, reminding us of Derrida's recent pronouncement on assuming "the inheritance of Marxism" (*Specters of Marx* 54): "Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task" (*Specters of Marx* 54). The "subaltern," for instance, is a crucial Gramscian category. And it is this very category which constitutes the task of the aforementioned project — a project involved in contesting and re-writing Indian elitist-nationalist historiographies. The task of the project is also intended to recuperate and recover the silent and the absent in history to the extent that such recuperations and recoveries are at all possible. In fact, for those engineering the "Subaltern Studies Project" in India, the Gramscian "subaltern" serves primarily, if not exclusively, as a high-voltage metaphor, or as an alternative trope, envisaged and engaged in the service of an alternative hermeneutic.

Moreover, Said's subsequent works dealing with his own Gramscian theory of the text — a theory that Said espouses and evolves in his tellingly hostile reactions against the general economy of textual fetishism that the Euro-American poststructuralist project, as Said argues, tends to produce and re-produce — certainly constitute a proof of Said's own brand of neo-Gramscism. For instance, Said's emphasis on the wordiness of "texts" — and his plea for the *wording* of texts as events-in-the-world, or as "a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (*The World, the Text, and the Critic*) — readily remind one of the Gramsci of "Real Dialectics," the Gramsci of the pronouncement that "Events are the real dialectics of history" ("Real Dialectics"). This Gramscian notion of "event" that Said seems to incorporate into his analysis of cultural texts or productions can further be exemplified in his *Culture and Imperialism*.

Indeed, as Liu Kang observes, "Antonio Gramsci's concepts of 'hegemony' and 'subalternity' have enjoyed a high currency in contemporary cultural studies and postcolonialism." Marcia Landy also notes that Gramsci has hitherto "remained a crucial barometer in a quest to understand configurations of subalternity" in various discursive spaces, including postcolonial studies and cultural studies, while Chantal Mouffe goes on to underline "an unprecedented development of interest in the work of Antonio Gramsci" ("Gramsci Today"). Mouffe maintains, "If the history of Marxist theory during the 1960s can be characterised by the reign of 'althusserianism', then we have now, without a doubt, entered a new phase; that of 'Gramscism' (Gramsci Today). Although Mouffe's inaugural celebration of 'Gramscism' in the metropolis can be traced back to the late seventies, the range and scale — rather the discursive territories and trajectories — of that very 'Gramscism' have only kept expanding since then."

But, in what follows in this introductory chapter, we do not intend to map out the huge hermeneutic horizon of the kind of "Gramscism" spelled out in Mouffe's enthusiastic and celebratory idioms as such, nor do we intend to ferret out the details of all possible discursive tensions and transactions between Gramsci's work and contemporary theory as a whole. Such undertakings, as they involve what might be called the genealogy and archaeology of Gramscian and Gramsci-inflected discourses, do not constitute our purpose here. But, at this point, we are interested in a brief — and, indeed, a quick but a critical — overview of what I would like to call, partly following Mouffe, *metropolitan postcolonial Gramscism*, a Gramscism represented here by the trinity of postcolonial cultural theorists already mentioned — Said, Spivak, and Bhabha. And such an overview is necessary for marking and making our own point of departure which would be to propose in this chapter — and subsequently perform in Chapter Two — a

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contextualist-historicist-dialectical re-reading of Gramsci prompted by the postcolonial condition itself.

In fact, Said's *Orientalism*, established by now as a paradigmatic "postcolonial" text, draws discursive-theoretical-conceptual cues and clues not only from the Foucault of the power/knowledge network but also occasionally from the Gramsci of "hegemony," "civil society," and "consent." The hyphen between Foucault and Gramsci that Said keeps writing — if not always rigorously and sustainedly — in the text of *Orientalism* is, however, not always a case of a happy *rapprochement* or truce, but the fact remains that Said openly acknowledges the usefulness of certain Gramscian concepts and categories in his study of "Orientalism" as a hegemonic power/knowledge relation or construct. For instance, Said emphatically maintains in his "Introduction" to *Orientalism*: "Gramsci has made the useful analytic distinction between civil and political society.... In any society not totalitarian, then, certain cultural forms predominate over others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is hegemony, rather than the result of cultural hegemony at work, that gives Orientalism the durability and the strength I have been speaking about so far."

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Also, Said's well-known Gramscian notion of "oppositional criticism," including his part-Gramscian part-Chomskyan paradigm of the intellectual's critical role in what has come to be known as *cultural politics* today (a politics that is involved in unmasking and unsettling the forms and forces of hegemony — or the networks of power-relations — that are at work not merely at the Marxian base or at the level of economy but, more importantly, in the spheres of cultural productions and ideological formations, and in other institutional sites), further attest to the useability of a Gramsci in certain postcolonial discursive spaces — a Gramsci who is, of course, Foucaudianized and partly Chomskyanized in the Saidian way.

Now Spivak, who might be seen as the most playful hyphenist of the trinity mentioned — Spivak, for instance, playfully keeps hyphenating Marxism-deconstructionism-feminism-postcolonialism in her works, and it's no wonder that Colin MacCabe writes his introduction to Spivak's *œuvres* with a trembling hand — traverses those discursive sites in Gramsci which can facilitate a "free reading" (*Imaginary Maps*). Also, she relentlessly revisits Gramsci in order to respond to, and critically engage, the Indian "Subalternists" themselves. One significant consequence of such re-visits for Spivak is that she has been able to point up — and problematize — the gendered subaltern space, a space that is otherwise diminished or deleted even in the counter-historiographical *topos* of the Indian "Subalternist" project. For instance, in her essay called "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," Spivak makes the point thus: "The [Subaltern Studies] group is scrupulous in its consideration towards women. They record moments when men and

women are joined in struggle... when their conditions of work or education suffer from gender or class discrimination.... But I think they overlook how important the concept metaphor woman is to the functioning of their discourse".

Moreover, Spivak's Foucault-and-Dileuze-bashing-but-Derridean formulation of the very question — "Can the Subaltern Speak?" — including her well-known catachrestic strategy of "reversing, displacing, and seizing the apparatus of value-coding" ("Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value") continuously exhibit the tonal and textual traces of a Gramsci playfully postcolonized-post-structuralized-postmodernized today. In fact, by posing the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak keeps playing with a hyphen between Gramsci and the Subaltern Studies Group itself. This is a hyphen that the Group writes and re-writes through its appropriations of certain Gramscian historiographical tools and apparatuses. But Spivak keeps playing with that very hyphen in the sense that she foregrounds the question of the "subaltern woman's consciousness" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?"), suggesting that the Gramsci of the Subaltern Group needs more and alternative hyphens today: i.e., Gramsci's subaltern — the Group's subaltern — the female subaltern. But, then, Spivak renders this hyphenated space more discursively problematical than genuinely praxis-prone on the ground that this very space, through Spivak's theorizing, remains profoundly implicated in non-recoverable, non-representable, unspeakable silences that perpetually problematize any male historiographical "radicalism" as such.

In other words, Spivak's Gramsci is certainly a hyphenated one (and so is Said's) — a Gramsci who, of course, keeps floating in the metropolitan space, or in the American academic site, from where Spivak generates and mobilizes her highly playful hyphenological discourses (we will turn to a theory of hyphenology soon), of course involving (or hyphenating) other sites/sub-sites/counter-sites that relentlessly range, for instance, from Columbia through Mahasweta Devi's "India" (as exemplified, among others, in Spivak's *Imaginary Maps* to "coastal Bangladesh" (as exemplified in her "Acting Bits/Identity Talk").

But, while Said's and Spivak's engagements with Gramsci are openly acknowledged, directly foregrounded, and are also occasionally sustained with certain rigor, Homi Bhabha's encounter with Gramsci seems to be more mediated and tangential than otherwise. In fact, his is a Gramsci who, almost like a Derridean *trace*, now and then slips and slides — and who is also curiously refracted — into the kind of postcolonial counterhegemonic project that Bhabha envisages through his Fanonian-Lacanian psychosemiotic lenses on the one hand, and through, as Shaobo Xie rightly maintains, "re-launching Derridean *difference* on postcolonial terrain", on the other. But Bhabha directly invokes at least the category of the "subaltern" in his attempt to define the contours of his project in *The Location of Culture*: "Driven by the subaltern history of the margins of modernity — rather than by the failures of logocentrism — I have tried, in some small measure, to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial".

Thus, in his postcolonial rewriting of postmodernism-poststructuralism — in other words, in his densely "post"-marked postcolonial project — Gramsci (more specifically, Gramsci's "subaltern") appears as a referentially driving, if not a dominant, "force" (again in the shape of a discursive trope) that eventually gets imbricated in, and hyphenated with, a relation of discursive forces as constituted by a host of poststructuralists, particularly Lacan. Given this relation of discursive forces, it is also possible to argue that in Bhabha's mode of discursive production Gramsci does not merely inhabit a hyphenated space as such, but he is also sometimes marginalised — or *subalternised*, if you will — or even vitally missed, as is particularly exemplified in Bhabha's reading of Fanon. Sekyi-Otu's recent

book called *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* demonstrates that Bhabha "prefers his Fanon to be a precocious postmodernist" (45), and indeed, taking cues from Sekyi-Otu, it is possible to argue that in the Bhabhaian postmodernism — rather in the Bhabhaian Lacanisation — of Fanon, the vital connections between Gramsci and Fanon are indeed pathetically lost! For, as one can see, Bhabha's Fanon remains mostly caught up in a non-Gramscian space characterised more by a play of *écriture* than by any attempt to formulate a "subaltern praxis" as such. But thanks to Sekyi-Otu for restoring the connections, hitherto lost sight of by Bhabha, between Gramsci and Fanon; Sekyi-Otu justly maintains, "I'm tempted to call Gramsci a precocious Fanonist" (119).

Towards a Theory of a Metropolitan Postcolonial Hyphenology

In order to come to terms with what we have earlier called the Gramscianisation of the postcolonial and the postcolonialisation of Gramsci, we can now move towards a theory of *hyphenology* of discourse. And for formulating and contextualising such a theory of hyphenology with regard to contemporary metropolitan postcolonial Gramscism, we can profitably cite Derrida's own pronouncement on the very issue of the hyphen itself, while also bearing in mind the fact that at least two postcolonial theorists — Spivak and Bhabha — time and again fall back upon their poststructuralist guru Derrida for necessary theoretical cues and clues and also for re-inscribing their respective diacritical marks (hyphen is certainly one of them) on the very postcolonial terrain itself:

If I say that the hyphen is not only an emblem, a motto, a coat of arms or an armorial crest but the symbol, this is so as to recall that any symbol is, *stricto sensu*, a hyphen, bringing together, according to the *symballein*, the two pieces of a body divided in contract, pact, or alliance (235).

Notice how Derrida here emphasises, *inter alia*, the dynamic — rather the praxis — of the *symballein* actualised in a hyphen which is capable of bringing together the two pieces of a body — a body that is, in fact, "divided". One can also see how Derrida characteristically does not forget to write *splits* in the body. But, as Derrida seems to suggest, the force of the hyphen lies in its active *symbolicity* that is able to negotiate the very "divided" space itself through a contract or a pact, as it were. In other words, for Derrida, a hyphen is not a noun but a verb — a verb that itself writes a contract, bringing together the two parties, while also not dispensing with the traces of fractures/splits represented by those parties — or by the two "pieces of a body", to use Derrida's own phrase. In fact, to put it more simply, the hyphen itself can write both "togetherness" and "splits", while it also needs a site — "the body", for instance — to inscribe or write them on.

Interestingly, on the very verb verb-like *energeia* of the *symballein* (and, for that matter, of the hyphen itself), Umberto Eco also maintains: "The verb *symballein* thus meant to meet, to try an interpretation..." (9). Now the Derridean trope of "contract" or "pact", if combined with the Ecoesque suggestion of "meeting", seems to point up a hermeneutic imaginary, wherein, indeed, one can think of the discursive *juxtapositionality* of the metropolitan postcolonial with the Gramscian "subaltern".

Following the Derridean-Ecoesque logic of "contract"/"meeting", it is possible to argue that "the two pieces of a body" — the metropolitan postcolonial and the Gramscian subaltern, for instance — are "brought together" does not necessarily erase the marks of "dividability" readable in the signatures of those two parties. Even if "dividability" itself is provisionally put *sous rature* or under erasure, what is still likely to remain is the trace of "the effaced trace," to use Spivak's Derridean phrase ("Introduction" to *Of Grammatology* 1vii). Indeed, the entire space of the postcolonial intellectual in the American academy and the subaltern space in the much backward zone of capital, as discursively cobbled up into an apparently radical conjuncture, can certainly

be seen as being marked by a whole set of differences — or even by a kind of *difference* — in terms of class-race-gender-positions and power-relations. But, then, these two parties/spaces are brought together with the very agenda of initiating a hermeneutic — the agenda of "trying" an "alternative" hermeneutic procedure in the service of unmasking "hegemony" in its various forms and forces that very much characterise the "postcolonial neo-colonised world," to use Spivak's phrase ("The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic" 290).

Here, also, because of Foucault's characteristic archaeological-genealogical (in a sense, also hyphenological) preoccupations with the microphysics of power-relations (operating, for instance, in the domain of discursive practices as well as in the biological microcosm, namely the body), the hyphen between Foucault's "power/knowledge" and Gramsci's "hegemony/ideology" becomes important for some metropolitan postcolonial cultural theorists to rewrite, a point that we have meanwhile raised with regard to Said's hyphenological "Foucauldian-Chomskyian Gramscism," if you will.

We are, of course, deliberately fashioning a theory of hyphenology not only for our proposed re-reading of Gramsci in the contemporary postcolonial context as such, but also for making an attempt to characterise and even historicise what we have earlier called *metropolitan postcolonial Gramscism*, a Gramscism that is necessarily hyphenological, contractual, pact-oriented yet divided, and interdiscursive. But then, this *hyphenologic* does not operate *in vacuo*. Following Gramsci's theory of "real dialectics," *metropolitan postcolonial Gramscism* is an event, of course a discursive event, which is a function of its being embedded in the very history of discourses in which Gramsci can be located and re-located.

In other words, Gramsci is not only appropriated but is also adjusted in response to the rhythms and pressures of a history that marks the theoretical explosion of poststructuralism-postmodernism-postcolonialism in their hyphenated relations. But, then, it is also true that such hyphens, under other historic-cultural circumstances, would simply resist underwriting either a politics or a *polis* of the kind of pacts/contracts we have hitherto identified, simply because numerous and conflicting versions of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism are currently emanating from different geographical spaces with different political vectors and valences. For instance, one can readily think of Aijaz Ahmad's antipostmodern yet "postcolonial" Marxist discourse; or one can also think of Akhtaruzzaman Elias's anti-poststructuralist, anti-Anglo-European postmodernist yet "postmodernist-postcolonial" fiction.

But, then, we are here speaking of Gramsci in relation to contemporary theoretical discourses circulating in and from the metropolis from the sixties onward. Indeed, such discourses, broadly known as "postmodernist" — with their characteristic Lyotardian-Foucauldian-Derridean total war on "the European-Enlightenment project" and globalisation or totalising epistemological schemes and teleological master-narratives or *grand récits* (Hussain, "Rereading Marx: His Dialectical [Anti] Materialism" 3) and on essentialism-foundationalism-reductionism-determinism — understandably invite and accommodate the Gramsci of non-foundational, anti-positivist cultural criticisms, if not the Gramsci of the organised, organic, programmatic struggle for socialism/communism. In other words, Gramsci in the metropolis is very much caught up not only in the interdiscursive, hyphenological spaces of poststructuralism-postmodernism-postcolonialism as such, but also in their ideological-ethical matrices emerging out of, and shaped by, a historical time that experiences, on the one hand, the unprecedented spread of global capitalism and, on the other, the postmodernist-poststructuralist-postcolonialist kinds of resistances to, and complicities with, that global mode of produc-

tion. Liu Kang, who has recently made some illuminating connections between Gramsci's cultural politics and Mao's theory of *Makesizhui zhongguohua* ("making Marxism Chinese"), justly makes the point:

... Gramsci's cultural theory is widely regarded as non-reductionist, anti-essentialist, and relevant to contemporary social life in both the industrial or

"postmodern" West and the "post-colonial" or "Third-World non-West" (69).

Now the theory of hyphenology, although briefly formulated and quickly historicised so far, does not fail to suggest that Gramsci affords a host of interdiscursive possibilities in the "postmodern West" as well as in the "Third-World non-West." In short, what Gramsci seems to offer the metropolitan postcolonialist is more a hermeneutic procedure than anything else. This very procedure has, of course, yielded some positive consequences. For instance, the mobilisation of certain Gramscian insights has enabled postcolonial critics like Said, Spivak, and Bhabha to engage the dynamics of "hegemony" and the possibility/problematics of the "subaltern" in the metropolis.

However, most of this postcolonial Gramscism, sometimes blinded by the discursive *jouissance* of the postmodernist kind (in Said's case), is the occasional spell of near-liberal-humanist cultural criticisms), does not necessarily provide workable strategies whereby a postcolonial-Marxist-Gramscian-class-race-gender-based subaltern struggle for a "new socialist culture" can gather its momentum not only through encompassing cultural productions in terms of texts or discourses, but also through relating them to organised mass movements, street actions, and so on — in other words, to the core of the "real dialectics of history," namely "events." Indeed, such "events," as Gramsci would suggest, are not only meant to be taken as "images" in the way that Walter Benjamin's *historiographical imagination* is likely to indicate (indeed, Benjamin is a kind of imagist known for his famous formulation, "History breaks down to images, not into stories"), but such "events" are also to be reckoned as mobilising energies which constitute necessary preconditions for producing changes (Gramsci, indeed, inspires us to combine a Benjaminian materialist *imagination* with a phenomenology of concrete events).

Our overview of metropolitan postcolonial Gramscism now enables us to recognise the very fact that much of the mainstream postcolonial theory, in its discursive hyphenated alliances with certain versions of textcentric poststructuralism, has abandoned the praxis of a local and global "socialist movement." Said, Spivak, and Bhabha have all, in their different ways, participated in mobilising certain Gramscian insights, but none of them seems to be sustaining an interest in, and a commitment to, that crucial "hyphenated" praxis, namely the Marxist-Leninist-Gramscian materialist-dialectical praxis, a praxis that aims at building — or "creating," to use Gramsci's own materialist-phenomenological verb of *ergergia* — a "new socialist culture" out of concrete, everyday practices and performances, or out of "real events," in and through history.

We would do well to recall here that Gramsci himself exemplified a life-long commitment to a cultural politics that would not merely produce theory but would also produce change in favour of a socialist culture, to appropriate Stuart Hall's quasi-Marxist/Gramscian phrase in the present context. And this production of change, certainly, is a function of the process of social revolution that Gramsci time and again underlines. Carl Boggs rightly points out, "For Gramsci, socialist transformation was more a process than an event or a series of events" (Gramsci's *Marxism* 53). This process, of course, is a process of events — not just events as frozen or finished products in time and space (perhaps we can think of a Gramscian hyphenology of process-event here.) But many contemporary postcolonial theorists do not seem to be adequately sensitive to this process-event of what Gramsci calls "creating a culture" (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks* 325) — a socialist culture, to be more specific. Liu Kang rightly makes the point:

The theoretical currency of Gramscian theory thus betrays a fundamental contradiction or paradox: the revolutionary theory of the Italian communist

leader is now appropriated by the academic left of the West (including contemporary metropolitan postcolonial theorists) to address contemporary cultural issues that have little to do with social revolution (69).