PINS, 2006, 34, 51-53

AGAINST POST-COLONIALISM IN PSYCHOLOGY: BEWARE MACLEOD AND WILBRAHAM

Ian Parker
Discourse Unit
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester

What could be worse than that work in what now pretends to be "critical psychology" is taken up uncritically and that radicals who have struggled for years to make sense of what the discipline does ideologically eventually learn to speak proper English? It would be gratifying perhaps to those of us churning out critical work from Manchester to imagine that the birthplace of capitalism could also provide the tools for those in the colonies to dismantle it. It would be gratifying in the short term, but it is a form of gratification cruelly denied by Macleod and Wilbraham's response to my work. This is so far, so good, and all the better for a genuinely critical perspective in psychology. But wait a minute; if what I have written so far has been of some use to these South African criticals precisely by virtue of the simplifications and lacunae that characterise it, surely the most robust critical response to their critique might also be useful to them. It is in that spirit of admiration for what they have produced as they resist being taken in by my work so far that I want to tackle some problems with one of the main theoretical resources Macleod and Wilbraham mobilise against me.

It is true that I do not take on board "post-colonialism" and employ it as a theoretical resource, and it is certainly true that I am selective with the range of writers that are sometimes grouped together under the banner of post-colonialism. Macleod and Wilbraham acknowledge that this post-colonial theory is a diverse and contradictory collection of writings, but then – and here is the problem – they seem keen to wield it as if it was always already a necessarily radical resource. They know, of course, that theoretical systems emerge and operate alongside other dominant and marginalised ideas, and those theoretical systems that are so radical at one moment are liable to become reactionary at the next. On the one hand, then, post-colonial ideas have operated as powerful counter-memories, practices that destabilise the "centres" of the world. The paradoxical reclaiming of "tradition" that is understood to be constituted by the very forms of dominant ideology that it resists – identities summoned into being as (to use a phrase once-favoured by Spivak) "strategically essentialist" positions to open a different space for alliances that recognise the heterogeneity of the oppressed – are aspects of post-colonial work that are valuable. But they are also, in some contexts, more problematic.

In professionalized academic discourse the most radical aspects of post-colonial theory are already quite quickly neutralised, and turned into a series of code-words to ensure entry into certain departments, and badges of identity from which to declaim against all the old identities. In the sector of academic life that is supposed to devote itself to forms of identity, post-colonialism in psychology offers a pharmacological resource that functions as poison that addles the brains of those who could and should have refused to buy into psychology in the first place. It might not be psychology as we know it, but in present-day conditions of academic life that require theoretical innovation every five minutes and the claim to provide novel upgraded ideas, "post-colonialism" fits the bill.

What should be emphasised here is that I am not warning against taking seriously accounts of the lived experience of those who suffer colonial rule (in its old or new guises), but the academic construction of "post-colonialism" that is then adverted to as a theoretical framework. Psychologists, of course, are the kind of folk who are tempted to elide the lived experience and theoretical framework; somewhere along the line they imagine that their task is to get inside people's heads. The problem lies in the summoning up of a theoretical framework that is supposed to be equivalent to the lived experience of others, others who are admired and exalted – idealised and romanticised in precisely the ways described by Said – and finally, in a typical psychologising of political practice, spoken *for*. Bearing that in mind now we move from the all-too brief outline of the problem (à la **Critical discursive psychology**) into the points that could be in a little text-box (as in **Qualitative psychology**).

First, it provides a framework that is not, of course, reducible to postmodernism but it does serve to reflexively intensify a postmodern stance (in which attempts to analyse or dismantle ideology or power are ruthlessly parodied, and, in psychology, treated as some kind of pathological pursuit driven by illusions that such things as ideology and power actually exist). Post-colonial rhetoric offers another speaking position – most typically the "subaltern" – from which to question assumptions made in every other discourse, and thereby extend the field of academic discourse (in seminars, conferences, journals devoted to the elaboration of a particular esoteric terminology).

Second, it is apparently suspicious of a "meta-language" but at the same time (like "deconstruction" in the hands of some discursive psychologists at the very least) it operates as an overall vantage point from which to diagnose and comment upon other positions (and note that this is also exactly the way that Macleod and Wilbraham use it in their article, as another perspective from which to read a theoretical position and thereby to improve it). While of course it is necessary to turn the tables and "provincialise" the colonial centres, showing that they provide a partial limited viewpoint conditioned by their history of hegemonic control over those they once ruled, what "post-colonial" discourse actually does so often is to surreptitiously displace analysis of the historical political-economic conditions for ideological representations with a new abstruse academic discourse.

Third, while it pulls the carpet out from under rival political positions, drawing attention to the moral high-ground proponents speak from, post-colonialism also smuggles in an even more effective and insidious moralising narrative (which also

reduces the statements it focuses on in the writing of those it analyses to the nature of the bodies and locations of those who produced those statements). There is thus an essentialising of the analysis of discourse (conveniently traced to authors of the discourse) combined with one of the least attractive features of contemporary academic moral discourse, the competitive circulation of agonised liberal white guilt.

Fourth, post-colonialism recruits and then, through a peculiar act of ventriloquism, speaks for the constituencies that global capitalism is now most keen to work with (and so, as with "feminisation" used to draw women into the workforce and set them against "old-style" trades union activists, post-colonialism reaches the parts of the world that other ideological practices in capitalism have so far failed to reach). This approach exoticises certain kinds of subjects – as long as they remain outside psychology departments – and operates as the academic equivalent of world music (promising enjoyment for those who buy into it without examining its conditions of production).

Macleod and Wilbraham are not wrong about the shortcomings of my work, but they are, I think, mistaken when they turn to post-colonialism as a theoretical resource through which to read it. Does it occur to them that there may be better analyses of the racist practices of contemporary neoliberal capitalism than "post-colonialism"? In that respect I would go further than them, and I want to provoke them to go further. Insofar as my work might be problematic in South Africa now, redeploying it "post-colonially" will only make it more so. Seriously, there are tendencies in my work (particularly the use of ideas from deconstruction, discourse theory and psychoanalysis) that are susceptible to a post-colonial reading, a post-colonial twist. This, perhaps is what makes it attractive to some "critical" psychologists in the first place, and this is exactly what needs to be questioned and surpassed. Beware, for Macleod and Wilbraham's response threatens to turn Parker from something bad into something worse!