



# Postcolonial Criticism and Southeast Asian Studies: Pitfalls, Retreat, and Unfulfilled Promises



Rommel A. Curaming

## [ *Abstract* ]

This paper reflects on the relationship between postcolonial criticism (PC) and Southeast Asian Studies. The emphasis is on the apparent premature retreat from PC as well as its unfulfilled promises and persistent pitfalls. I argue that it is premature to abandon PC because it remains relevant, even essential, in the context of the much ballyhooed age of “knowledge economy” or “information society.” There is a need to take another look at its promises and to work towards fulfilling them, but at the same time be conscious of its persistent problems.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Southeast Asian Studies, Postcolonial Studies

## I . Introduction

It was about fifteen years ago when I first encountered Postcolonial

---

Programme Leader, Historical and International Studies, University of Brunei Darussalam, rommel.curaming@ubd.edu.bn.

Studies (PC hereafter) in a MA-level class at the National University of Singapore. To many of my classmates, I recall, the ideas of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, among others, were strange or hardly intelligible. To others who had grasped some of its key tenets, the sense of distrust or adverse reaction was palpable. Perhaps because of my long-standing fascination with alternative rationality espoused by a number of Asian philosophies such as Buddhism and Taoism, the fundamental ideas behind postcolonial theory readily appeared sensible to me. I remember having this feeling of wonderment: what took the supposedly superior minds of European philosophers so long to realize that? Wasn't it that Siddhartha Gautama and Lao Tze (or other Taoists, if Lao Tze was indeed mythical) already knew that over two thousand years ago!? By that, I mean the anti-Enlightenment sentiments of several continental philosophers, their deep distrust of a particular form of rationality that undergirded European modernity, which has been the basic target of the postcolonial critique. I was not surprised to find out later that Nietzsche and Heidegger, among other European philosophers, were exposed to and may have been profoundly influenced by Asian philosophies, Buddhism in particular (Parkes 1987; 1991).

Convinced that there was something fundamentally correct, or politically and ethically necessary, in the postcolonial and poststructuralist critique, I was then hoping the sense of excitement I felt in that class would have an extension or a parallel within the field of Southeast Asian Studies more broadly. It was not to be. The initial tide of rising interests within the Southeast Asian Studies community in the *posties* in the 1990s and early 2000s ebbed as the decade wore on. While doing a PhD in Australia (2002-2006), I observed the initial excitement in certain quarters quickly evolved into caution and later weariness, even hostility, towards them. Erstwhile proponents backtracked from their earlier postcolonial pronouncements, the most stunning example for me being the case of my former lecturer in the class I mentioned above. The mounting level of inhospitality to anything that has a "post" in it, both among self-proclaimed right-conservatives and left-liberals, made me wonder about the deep source of suspicion

or aversion towards them. Joan Scott bluntly calls the celebratory pronouncements by critics about the supposed death or demise of poststructuralism “not only premature but foolish” (2007: 20). She reiterated the call for a continued sharpening of history as a form of critique.

Unlike in South Asian Studies where the Subaltern Studies Collective proved crucial in developing PC, there is an impression that it did not make as much headway in Southeast Asian Studies. A special issue of the journal *Postcolonial Studies* in 2008, for instance, banners the title “Southeast Asia's absence in postcolonial studies.” The Guest Editor, Chua Beng Huat, observed that for a region that was among the most colonized in the world, and if I may add, where some of the most spectacular and painful episodes of decolonisation happened, it was rather curious that Southeast Asia hardly figure in global scholarly exchange on postcolonialism (2008: 235-6) For instance Chua (2008) wryly noted that only 43 pages or three short articles of the 2,000-page, five-volume handbook by Routledge, *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (Brydon 2000), were from or about the region.

By no means, however, has PC been really ignored in Southeast Asian Studies. There were scholars who have done notable works that follow PC analytics, most of whom did not explicitly identify with PC but nevertheless were employing approaches, concepts, or theories compatible with PC. Fine examples include the works of Aihwa Ong (1987; 1999), Anthony Milner (1995; 2008), Ann Stoler (1995), Ariel Heryanto (2005), James Siegel (1986), Joel Kahn (1993; 1995; 1998; 2006), John Pemberton (1994), Patricia Pelley (2002), Reynaldo Ileto (1979; 1998; 1999), Susan Bayly (2007), Thongchai Winichakul (1994), Trinh Minh-ha (1989; 1991), Simon Philpott (2000), S. Lily Mendoza (2002), Vicente Rafael (1988), and Wendy Mee and Joel Kahn (2012), among others. If we include anti-colonialism (both liberal and Marxist streams) as postcolonialism’s disavowed forebear but, as Brennan (2004) argued, it fits to be acknowledged as such, this list expands considerably to include the work of Jose Rizal (Morga & Rizal 1890), Renato Constantino (1975; 1978),

Teodoro Agoncillo (1956; 1960), D. N. Aidit (1958) and Jose Ma. Sison (1971) and Syed Hussein Alatas (1977a; 1977b). The presence of PC in Southeast Asian Studies is far from insignificant but it is insufficiently recognized, limited, or concealed. Also, a drumbeat of retreat from PC (or at least from its “classical” version) was heard in the field even before it matured, as expressed perhaps most pointedly in Goh Beng Lan’s introduction to *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies* (2011), to which I shall return below. For the purpose of this paper, I limit my scope to the works that explicitly have been identified with PC, and refer to the works of scholars such as Spivak, Said, Bhabha, Chakrabarty, etc.

In this paper, I seek to reflect anew on PC with emphasis on what I consider a premature retreat from it, as well as its unfulfilled promises and persistent pitfalls. I shall delineate first what I mean by postcolonial critique to frame the scope of my reflection. Cognizant of the fact that PC is wide-ranging and expanding, and it consists of various and at times conflicting streams of thoughts and approaches, each of which has evolved through the years, it is very challenging to pin it down. Any attempt could easily result in a straw man. I can only select a few aspects which are sufficient to illustrate my argument that it is “premature” and “foolish”, taking a cue from Joan Scott, to abandon PC because it remains relevant, even necessary, in the context of the much ballyhooed age of “knowledge economy” or “information society.” There is a need to take another look at its promises and to work towards fulfilling them, but at the same time to be conscious of its persistent problems.

## II. Making Sense of PC

That PC and related theoretical approaches such as poststructuralism are often misunderstood may be understandable. Some of the major proponents write in a manner that defy easy comprehension<sup>1)</sup>, which is partly due to the naturally complex

---

1) Homi Bahba, for example, won in 1998 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize in the journal *Philosophy and*

theoretical issues they tackle. More crucial is the nature of PC itself. Its radical skepticism that rejects outright the many long-established views about the nature of knowledge and scholarship can only baffle, even enrage, many scholars (e.g. Ahmad 1992; Dirlik 1994). Sometimes, one has to turn one's beliefs inside out in order to make sense of PC criticism. On the other hand, the reasons why it is controversial and is widely rejected, and I think this is more important, lies in its profoundly political implications. Critics complain bitterly against its alleged tendency to culturalize and depoliticize many deeply political issues such as identity, inequality, oppression and thus emasculate progressive politics (e.g. Chibber 2013; Kaiwar 2014; San Juan 1998).

Fluidity is integral to PC since its formative years in the 1980's. Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) offers a very clear expression of the built-in auto-criticism or self-reflexivity of PC as a scholarly project. Other proponents may not have been as explicit and demanding as Spivak on this aspect, but being a key tenet of PC theorizing, it is one of the driving forces for PC to continually change to prevent it from becoming what Bourdieu calls a *doxa*, an established authority "beyond question". This stance springs from the "nature" of PC as a critique of knowledge. It is a stance anchored largely on Nietzsche's and Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, which underpins Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), as well as Derrida's deconstruction, which became a defining element of PC through the works of Gayatri Spivak (Derrida trans. by Spivak 1976; Spivak 1996). From the epistemological standpoint, many proponents of PC subscribe to non-foundationalism. As opposed to foundational or realist epistemology which assumes reality "out there" can be directly accessed by observers and that human tools such as language are able to capture and represent it, non-foundational epistemology posits that access to reality can only be possible through

---

*Literature's* contest for bad writing, for passage in his book *The Location of Culture*. Incidentally, the top prize went to Judith Butler, who also has been invoked or cited often in PC writing. See [http://denisdutton.com/bad\\_writing.htm](http://denisdutton.com/bad_writing.htm) , accessed on 10 April 2015

human-made or socially constructed mechanisms such as language. This is the reason for PC's tendency to be idealist, discursive, and textualist in orientation, as evocatively captured in Derrida's (1976) claim that "There is no outside-text" (commonly quoted is Spivak's translation: "There is nothing outside the text.") While this feature enables powerful critiques not possible otherwise, it is also a source of persistent problems or confusion within and beyond PC, as will be discussed further below. The fact that among proponents of PC, there are those who emphasize the Foucauldian-Derridean approaches, while others downplay them and uphold instead the materialist analytic trajectory, contributes significantly to the malleability and tensions within PC.

The deep Marxist roots of the anti-colonial intellectual movement in pre- and postwar years was a major factor that defines PC (Bartolovich and Lazarus 2004). The various shades of Marxist orientations that influence or were adapted within PC contributes to its shifting characteristics. Brennan (2004) has shown in his analysis of intellectual development in the interwar decades of 1920s and 1930s that the impact of the 1917 Russian Revolution was not only significant to the growth of anticolonial thoughts but also served as a bedrock for later development of PC. Interestingly, this deep roots, Brennan further notes, is being elided by PC theorists who are keen to emphasize instead their disavowal of Marxism. The convergence of the Marxist emphasis on political economy and materiality on the one hand, and Derridean-Foucauldian highlighting of epistemology and textuality on the other, ensures tensions and contradictions within PC. It should also be noted that Marxists or Marxism-inspired scholars proved the most virulent and trenchant critics of PC, particularly its non-foundationalist epistemology, culturalism, epistemological difference, ambivalence and hybridity (Ahmad 1992; Kaiwar 2014; Parry 2004; San Juan 1998; 2000).

Another strand of analytic approach that infuses PC is psychoanalysis. It has found its way into PC largely via the works of Franz Fanon (1963; 1967) and Homi Bhabha (1990; 1994). Why psychoanalysis proved useful for PC is summed by Greedharry (2008: 5-6) in these words:

psychoanalysis offers some methodological advantages...(I)t explains either some particular aspects of colonial culture or that it is an approach that allows colonialism to be seen in a deeper or broader perspective than other disciplines...Since Fanon, focusing on subjectivity, identity or the relational dynamic between colonizers and colonized, through psychoanalytic language, has allowed postcolonial criticism to insist and demonstrate that there are devastating cultural and personal manifestations and effects of colonialism that strictly economic and political accounts of colonialism have not, in the past, been able or willing to reveal.

What psychoanalysis did in effect was to enshrine, even celebrate, in PC the ambivalence, hybridity, and instability of the self or subject. By implications, if the self is in itself unstable and exists “merely” in relational form (always in reference to its Other), it casts doubts on the many long-standing and taken-for-granted views and approaches in scholarship which are grounded on the assumed integrity of the self. The notion of the fluid self perhaps captures accurately the theoretical approximation of reality but it also stretches to the utmost the tenuousness of any description of critique. I will return to this point below.

For the purpose of this paper, I take PC primarily as a non-foundational critique of knowledge and not as basis for producing alternative knowledge, such as those from the Marxist perspective. As a second-order approach, it focuses on the level of discourse and seeks to uncover power relations that are deeply imbedded in a knowledge claim. It exposes hidden assumptions that lend knowledge the appearance of naturalness, accuracy, certainty and transparency. What PC seeks to do is to free knowledge from the invisible “prison house” of power by exposing the supposedly non-existent or disguised link between the two. The ultimate aim seems to render knowledge transparent, and to democratize the use of, or access to it. With everyone aware of the potentially vicious link between power and knowledge, it will render knowledge less useful for the powerful to perpetuate their interests. The general public will then gain more space to exercise their freedom to design their own lives as knowledge will be transformed as everyone’s own<sup>2</sup>)—as a tool for

or as a site of resistance; a location of struggle rather than as an instrument of control. It is important to clarify this point because PC contains other tendencies, which could be contradictory, and these opposing tendencies emanate from theoretical traditions not epistemologically compatible with poststructuralism.

### III. Pitfalls and Retreat

One of the major pitfalls that dog PC lies in the tendency of proponents to use it for the purpose that it was not really suitable. As noted above, it is best treated as a critique, not basis, of knowledge, as most clearly exemplified by Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978). As such, it problematizes the representation of reality—how scholarship, journalism, and literature represent the real. It cannot, strictly speaking, lay claim to it. The trouble is that the use of PC has been extended to problematize or cast doubt on reality itself, suggesting by implication that there is no reality or that the real cannot really be known as it is supposedly relative, fragmented, fluid, shifting, ambivalent, randomized, etc. This horrifies many including those who have progressive or humanistic advocacies as integral part of their scholarship. They complain that PC denies the platform to ground critique based on the stark reality of inequality and exploitation. Vasant Kaiwar captures the sentiment clearly when he claims that PC amounts to a “sophisticated apology for global and class polarization” and that it constitutes an “aestheticisation of poverty and human misery” (2014: 166).

One of the reasons for PC's tendency to be used for purposes other than what it is best suited for lies in its contradictory relations with other elements that converge in it. As noted above, Marxism and psychoanalysis coexist rather uneasily with poststructuralism in PC. Despite the fundamental epistemological differences between, say, the realist Marxism and the non-realist poststructuralism, scholars identified with PC such as Gayatri

---

2) I derive this point from Jenkins' (1995) interpretation of Hayden White's historiography.

Spivak have tried to integrate them in one analytic frame, thus, gives the impression that things are fine. Spivak's endorsement, for example, of strategic essentialism in the famous article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 1988) may have emanated from her leftist sympathy for the truly marginalized, but it goes directly against her poststructuralist aversion for essentialism. Despite her categorical conclusion, reached after a very careful analysis, that the subaltern cannot speak, that someone who has a greater power such as scholars have to speak on their behalf, its damning implication that all knowledge is power-driven has not been pursued to its logical end, but was tamed and kept within what proponents of PC believe to be analytically manageable domain. In fairness to Spivak, she tries really hard to push the logic of deconstruction and power/knowledge in her analysis of knowledge politics, but others seem unwilling to follow.

In addition, the postmodernist or poststructuralist inflection in PC does not fit squarely with the inherently modernist nature of scholarship which it seeks to critique but within which it cannot but insert itself. This scholarship relies on a form of logic or rationality that is traceable to the long intellectual traditions of "modern" Europe. While PC scholars call for the rupturing of the deterministic binaries in thought and category-formation, they cannot but make use of the Cartesian logic that presupposes such relationship. On one side, they reject correspondence theory of language and representation but, on the other, they are left with no choice but use in their analysis the same language system inherent where the goal is to capture a meaningful essence. (Otherwise, how can they explain what they mean or how can they launch a meaningful critique?) They chide traditional scholars like historians for their "certaintist" belief in the ability to represent reality out there and suggest instead that rather than "reality", discourse should now be the object of study. At the other end of the line, however, in order for discourse to be analyzed it also requires some kind of pretension that it is a "reality" out there. One can cite contradictions after another and I think this only goes to show how heavy the price *postie* scholars have had to pay for postmodernist aspirations while

operating at the same time within the modernist scholarship. Many scholars have dealt with this awkward position by invoking and integrating self-reflexivity, about which I will return below, into their analytic practice.

Against the backdrop of complaints noted above, it seems easy to understand why drumbeats of retreat from postcolonialism or poststructuralism have ensued. While it is true that postcolonial studies has gained institutional presence with at least two major international journals and programs in several major universities in the US and Europe, it remains at the margins in Southeast Asian Studies, as noted by Chua Beng Huat in the special issue of *Postcolonial Studies* in 2008. The most stunning example for me was Goh's (2011) lengthy introduction to the book *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies*. Exasperated by the support inadvertently lent by PC key ideas to conservative high jacking of the progressive agenda for human rights, justice, freedom and racial equality in Malaysia and other parts of the region, Goh offers a theoretically grounded but ethico-politically dubious justification for regional/national perspective and in effect downplayed or abandoned altogether PC's critiques of East/West binary, nationalism, essentialism, and power/knowledge. In her words:

...I realized how the expansion of postcolonial politics into the political sphere had increasingly debilitated progressive politics as the struggle for freedom from oppression became quickly associated with Western ideology and rejected...One is called to develop pedagogic directions which are responsive to local social and material conditions, based on a recognition of different ethical imaginations... (Goh 2011: 35).

Having sat in Goh Beng Lan's class on Postcolonial Perspectives on Southeast Asia in 2000-2001 which was characterized among others by her enthusiasm and by a high dose of anti-metanarrative, anti-East-West binary and post-nationalist discourses, it induced vertigo in me to read the rather lengthy pages (35-45) Goh devotes to justify the resuscitation of the East-West divide and of the national framework on the ground

that they are needed and are real if viewed from the existential local experience. Knowing how committed she has been to ethico-progressive scholarship, it stunned me how easy those pages could be read as an apologist for conservative politics which she sincerely deplored. I strongly doubted if those were in fact the solutions to the problems she so clearly identified. In my mind, what Goh Beng Lan did amounted to turning her back on the core tenets of postcolonial critique. While one can easily concede the many problems with PC, what she did was like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. As I will show below, despite problems with PC, its core tenets remain valid and the shortcomings lie in the failure of scholars to take a heed to its promises that remain unfulfilled.

#### **IV. Promises: Delivered and Unfulfilled**

A major thing that postcolonial-poststructuralist critique has bestowed upon Southeast Asian Studies, among many other fields, is the centrality or the elementary role of power in knowledge production. Power is what lends the otherwise floating and fleeting signifier (knowledge) stability and the appearance of correspondence to reality. That this idea is often missed and if it is not missed, its full implications are ignored, may be due to the strong pull of realist epistemology in the scholarly community. It may also be due to the narrow conception of power that blindsides scholars into seeing only powers in political institutions and political leaders. Foucault's plea for the need to cut off the king's head in political theory has been ignored by many analysts of politics. But those who were influenced by PC with strong poststructuralist bent made it one their major starting points.

The deeply political, and often concealed, nature of knowledge is clearly demonstrated in, say, Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Foucault's several works (1966; 1978; 1980). While the entwining or mutually constituting or reinforcing relation between power and knowledge, as indicated in power/knowledge, is oft repeated

and in fact has become so trite by now, its implications have nevertheless not been taken to its full conclusion. That is, all knowledge regardless of form, whether it is true or not, is enabled or driven by power. What scholars including proponents of PC do is accept this postulate only up to an extent—to the extent that it will not obviously undermine the foundation of their analysis or scholarship in general. I shall return to this point below.

As noted earlier, one way scholars address the recognition of the deeply political nature of knowledge is via the call for self-reflexivity. It refers to the reasonable demand for scholars to be self-conscious of everything (including cultural and class background, subject position, stakes at power relations, ideological leaning, theoretical proclivities, epistemological vantage point, etc.) about themselves, and factor them in interpretive and analytic exercise. This is usually done via a lengthy preface or epilogue, or it is integrated into the introduction and conclusion, or the whole body of the study. By laying explicit the author's background, readers are informed of the factors that might affect the author's analysis and conclusion. This helped in deciding whether to accept a knowledge claim or not. This has been a common practice among anthropologists, but even non-anthropologists who have been influenced by PC have incorporated this practice in their own scholarly work. In PC, Spivak's works (e.g. her introduction to Derrida, 1976; Spivak 1988; 1996; 1999) exemplify perhaps the best and clearest illustration of how to be self-reflexive.

Reflexivity at the scholar's personal level is no doubt a welcome practice. Partial or individualized as it is, however, it may give a false sense of adequacy that lulls everyone into complacency. As one expects not all scholars are convinced or willing to concede that their scholarly practices are affected by their personal and locational context, the act of honesty of some might be construed as sufficient to address the problem. A form of collective reflexivity needs to be pursued by the scholarly class as a whole. This is one of the promises of PC that remain unfulfilled. As scholarship is like a machine that generates social and intellectual capital for the scholarly class, it must not be

treated as impartial or transparent. It is the scholars' main well-spring for power and influence. Full reflexivity is necessary to foreground the power of scholars and the scholarly community as a whole as an important factor in the analysis of production and transmission of knowledge. The analysis of power-knowledge usually focuses on how the powerful (elites, state, interest groups, leaders) control or influence knowledge production and how in the process it disempowers or marginalizes others in the community. The Marxist-inspired dominant ideology thesis exemplifies this approach. Other analysts make the marginalized and other less powerful groups their subject of interest. James Scott and Subaltern Studies are a good example. In either case, we hardly see the creator or the custodians of knowledge as an important factor in the analytic and accountability equation. Notwithstanding professional training, they cannot claim innocence or impartiality in the whole undertaking simply because it is the stamp of professional imprimatur that they provide that lend knowledge claim the appearance of believability of acceptability.

The development of nationalist historiography in postcolonial societies can illustrate the need for a collective reflexivity. Nationalist historiographies developed primarily as a response to colonial historiography that preceded it. Easy to see was the relationship between power holders, the elites who run the newly established independent states, and the growth of nationalist historiography. The latter served to legitimize and strengthen the position of the new leaders in the same way that colonial historiography underwrote the interests of the colonizers. Later, there came critics such as the Subaltern Studies of nationalist historiography. They say that it is elitist and that it utterly disregards the views, knowledge, and aspiration of the subaltern sectors. Such criticisms have been substantiated by studies purporting to speak for these marginalized groups. Ileo's *Pasyon and Revolution* (1979), for instance, has earned rave reviews for its alleged success in allowing the Tagalog peasants to speak with their own voices through folklore, songs, myths, and legends, etc. The claim to fame of the Subaltern Studies group also rests on the same foundation. Granting that these scholarly works have

captured accurately the voices of the subalterns, it is rather disconcerting that it required passing through the scholarly “machine” before such folk knowledge could be recognized. Folk knowledge has been there since time immemorial. The question about the need for scholarly validation for such knowledge foregrounds the concealed power of scholarship to determine things.

It is worrisome to take notice of the absences in the whole equation. While it is very clear that elitist historiography serves the interest of the dominant groups in the society, one wonders whether shifting the gaze to the subaltern would really be to the subalterns’ advantage. It seems rather comic and has all the patronizing air to tell them “Hey your knowledge is a valid kind of knowledge after all. You and others can now use it to empower the marginalized!” For all we know, as far as scholarly success in terms of representing the voice or knowledge of the subalterns is concerned, such knowledge could be used by the already more powerful to control or oppress them even more. Their inscrutability is their last and sometimes only defense. Being known may just be a few steps away from being controlled. A question, therefore, is inevitable: Who could be the beneficiary of the whole subaltern project? Critics such as Arif Dirlik (1994), Epifanio San Juar Jr. (1998) or Vasant Kaiwar (2014) suggest that it is the PC scholars themselves, among others. With mastery of scholarly tools, they have the power and authority to chart the course of knowledge production. By speaking about or on behalf of the subaltern, they generate intellectual capital and in the process privilege their position. They have a huge stake in the whole scholarly enterprise which enable, validate, and perpetuate the forms of intellectual capital they accumulate. It is precisely on this account that I follow Bourdieu in treating scholars, as a class in themselves, alongside the powerful “elite” in the analysis of power-knowledge relations. One may argue that the scholars are part of the elite and thus should be lumped together. However, there are also scholars who not only refuse to identify with, but also actively oppose, the interests of the elite, and that their power derives primarily from their role in

knowledge production, rather than material wealth as in the case of the elite. Given these considerations, it is appropriate to regard them as a separate analytic entity. Besides, for all our concerns about inequality—social, political, and economic—there is a kind of inequality that, before the notion of knowledge economy or knowledge society became a buzzword, had often been ignored—the knowledge-based inequality. Given that all inequalities are probably based on or reinforced by various forms of knowledge, there is a need to fully recognize and understand its implications in scholarly practice.

Pushing the logic of power/knowledge to its conclusion is the major promise that remains unfulfilled in PC and similar critical theories. It refers, among others, to the logical and ultimately ethical requirement to regard all forms of knowledge, accurate or not, to be power-driven. There has been enormous amount of opposition to this idea. For the most part, the important thing about knowledge is the question of veracity or accuracy, whether a knowledge claim is true or not. From this standpoint, suggesting power relations as determinant of knowledge is perverse. There seems to be two closely related reasons for this rejection. The first is epistemological and the other is political. From the epistemological standpoint, pushing the logic of power/knowledge denies the long-standing belief in a possibility of concrete foundation for knowledge. As an extreme form of epistemological skepticism, this nihilistic position is easily rejected by scholars whose very existence validates the possibility of knowledge. In my view, one cannot say outright that nihilistic stance is wrong because for one, how do we know it is wrong if we haven't tried it as our basis for "knowing". Any attempt to prove nihilism wrong will only emphasize the validity of its opposite, and not the incorrectness of nihilism because we would only be judging the latter based on the former. In addition, the kind of logic we use in our analysis operates on dialectical, binary relationship. That is, if there is such a thing as knowing or knowledge, it automatically presupposes the existence of its opposite, not-knowing or non-knowledge. Since we cannot really prove nihilism wrong, and it seems to be a part of the logical

scheme of things, we have to allow it to occupy its rightful place in the spectrum of logical possibilities—that which range from the most positivistic on the one hand to the nihilistic on the other. Allowing such move does not necessarily erase all the foundations of knowledge, as feared by many. It does not necessarily mean that the world will be plunged into the state of absolute anarchy or chaos. This is because power precedes knowledge in circular power/knowledge relations. Knowledge can reinforce and help maintain power, but power is the starting point. Since society is always characterized by unequal distribution of resources and power, such inequality will always serve as the bedrock of knowledge production. Hypothetically, it would only be under a perfectly equal society where nihilistic state can operate. Does it suggest that there is no reality or truth at all? No, it only means that the existing power relations will decide whether the representations of truth and falsehood will be taken as an area. The extent of distortion from the transcendental truth serves as measure of power differentials between competing stakeholders.

From the political standpoint, scholars' outright rejection of nihilistic possibility may be due to the loss of power and privilege for scholars. As noted earlier, scholarship is the scholars' bread and butter. As long as society believes in scholarship, the scholars' main source of social capital is ensured.

What are the consequences of pushing the logic of power/knowledge and of allowing nihilism to occupy its rightful logical position? First, they facilitate full reflexivity in scholarly undertaking, as already noted earlier. It would mean that scholars will be afforded a chance to step back and see not just their position within scholarly community, which is a kind of partial reflexivity, but also the privileged position of scholarship in the scheme of things. While it is useful to see things from within, it is also limiting. Being able to see it from afar will pave the way for a better, more complete understanding.

Second, there is as much need for some kind of cartography and accounting of power/knowledge relations, aside from the

pursuit of empirical accuracy, conceptual clarity, and theoretical sophistication. For so long, scholarship has been mostly preoccupied by the latter and not enough attention has been given to the accounting of the different sources of power that gave rise to various forms of knowledge and the mapping out of the contexts and modalities of actual knowledge use. This imbalance, I argue, reflects the need for scholars (including PC proponents) to push the logic of power/knowledge to its logical end.

Goh's retreat from the core tenets of PC, which I have noted earlier, seems to be a consequence of the unwillingness to push the logic of power/knowledge. It may also have proceeded from an unwarranted expectation of PC to play a role that it was not meant to do. Had she pushed the logic of power/knowledge instead, the critical-analytic approach could have consisted in mapping out the dynamics and account for power relations that enabled the persistence of racial politics, the impasse on human debates, and the weakening of progressive politics as whole. In doing so, people will be in a better position to see why such kind of politics persist and who gets empowered and who gets marginalized by it. If a progressive scholarship has a main task, it is to inform or enlighten people and persuade them of a better alternative. The debilitated progressive politics in Malaysia or elsewhere cannot be addressed by resuscitating East-West binaries and regional/national perspective simply because these perspectives have long before been proven to suppress pro-people agenda and justify elitist interests in Malaysia or elsewhere.

## V. Conclusion

Despite serious problems with PC, there are compelling reasons for upholding its key tenets, particularly non-foundationalism and power/knowledge. Not only do they remain relevant but they seem to be politically and ethically necessary. Progressive scholarship cannot seem to do away with the possibility that knowledge is cryptically political and that scholarship is deeply implicated in establishing, maintaining, and enhancing unequal

power relations in society. It is unfortunate that rather than pushing the logic of power/knowledge to its conclusion so as to open up new and potentially promising avenues for a more effective progressive politics, erstwhile proponents like Goh Beng Lan resuscitate politically dubious ideas such as the East-West divide and region/national perspectives. She also chides PC for emasculating efforts to promote pro-people agenda such as human rights and racial equality. Retreat is counterproductive. Deeper engagement is called for.

The continuing attacks on PC as vividly shown in the books of Vasant Kaiwar (2014) creates an impression of the lack of understanding of the nature of PC as fundamentally a critique of knowledge. It is a second-order theoretical project with aims and epistemological bases that are different from the realist-oriented, first-order theoretical approaches like Marxism. Rather than the war of attrition, therefore, it seems better to have a détente between them to allow productive critical engagements between their proponents. It is for the interest of general public to have both approaches in place.

## References

- Agoncillo, Teodoro. 1956. *The Revolt of the Masses: The Story of Bonifacio and the Katipunan*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines.
- . 1960. *Malolos: The Crisis of the Republic*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. 1992. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso.
- Aidit, Dipa Nusantara. 1958. *Indonesian Society and the Indonesian Revolution*. Jakarta: Jajasan Pembaruan.
- Alatas, Hussein. 1977a. *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*. London: Cass.
- . 1977b. *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of*

- Colonial Capitalism*. London: F. Cass.
- Bartolovich, Crystal, and Neil Lazarus, eds. 2004. *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bayly, Susan. 2007. *Asian Voices in a Post-Colonial Age: Vietnam, India and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhabha, Homi K., ed. 1990. *Nation and Narration*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- . 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Brennan, Timothy. 2004. Postcolonial Studies Between the European Wars: An Intellectual History. *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus, eds. 185–204. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Brydon, Diana., ed. 2000. *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*. 5 v. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Chibber, Vivek. 2013. *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. London: Verso.
- Chua, Beng Huat. 2008. Southeast Asia in Postcolonial Studies: An Introduction. *Postcolonial Studies*, 11(3): 231–40.
- Constantino, Renato. 1975. *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*. Quezon City: Tala Pub. Services.
- . 1978. *The Philippines: The Continuing Past*. Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty. Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dirlik, Arif. 1994. The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism. *Critical Inquiry*, 20(2): 328–56.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- . 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1966. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences*. New York: Random House.
- . 1978. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vol. 1.

- New York: Pantheon.
- . 1980. *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Edited by C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Meplam, and K. Soper. Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press.
- Goh Beng Lan. 2011. Disciplines and Area Studies in the Global Age: Southeast Asian Reflections. *Decentring and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region*. Goh Beng Lan, ed. 1-59. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.
- Greedharry, Mrinalini. 2008. *Postcolonial Theory and Psychoanalysis: From Uneasy Engagements to Effective Critique*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heryanto, Ariel. 2005. *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging*. Politics in Asia Series. London: Routledge.
- Ileto, Reynaldo. 1979. *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*. Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press.
- . 1998. The Unfinished Revolution in Political Discourse. *Filipinos and Their Revolution*, 177–201. Quezon City: Ateneo De Manila University Press.
- . 1999. *Knowing American Colony: A Hundred Years from the Philippine War*. Occasional Paper Series 13. Honolulu: Center for Philippine Studies.
- Jenkins, Keith. 1995. *On "What Is History?": From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Kahn, Joel S. 1993. *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture, and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia*. Providence, RI: Berg.
- . 1995. *Culture, Multiculture, Postculture*. London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- , ed. 1998. *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*. New York : Singapore: St. Martin's Press ; Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/>.
- Kahn, Joel S. 2006. *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism*

- in the Modern Malay World*. Singapore: Singapore University press.
- Kaiwar, Vasant. 2014. *The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincialising Europe*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Mee, Wendy and Joel S. Kahn, eds. 2012. *Questioning Modernity in Indonesia and Malaysia*. Singapore: NUS Press in association with Kyoto University Press.
- Mendoza, Lily S. 2002. *Between the Homeland and the Diaspora: The Politics of Theorizing Filipino and Filipino American Identities: A Second Look at the Poststructuralism-Indigenization Debates*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Milner, Anthony. 1995. *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2008. *The Malays*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Pub.
- Morga, Antonio de, and José Rizal. 1890. *Sucesos de Las Islas Filipinas Por El Doctor Antonio de Morga,; Obra Publicada En Méjico El Año de 1609*. Paris: Garnier hermanos.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- . 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. ix, 322 p. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Parkes, Graham, ed. 1987. *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- , ed. 1991. *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Parry, Benita. 2004. *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Pelley, Patricia M. 2002. *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Pemberton, John. 1994. *On the Subject of "Java."* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Philpott, Simon. 2000. *Rethinking Indonesia: Postcolonial Theory, Authoritarianism and Identity*. New York: Macmillan.

- Rafael, Vicente L. 1988. *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge And Kegan Paul.
- San Juan, Epifanio. 1998. *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- . 2000. *After Postcolonialism: Remapping Philippines-United States Confrontations*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Scott, Joan. 2007. History-Writing as Critique. *Manifestos for History*. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow, eds. 19–38. London; New York: Routledge.
- Siegel, James T. 1986. *Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Sison, Jose Maria. 1971. *Philippine Society and Revolution*. Hong Kong: Ta Kung Pao.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1996. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Donna Landry and Gerald M. MacLean, eds. New York: Routledge.
- . 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1988. Can the Subaltern Speak? *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. 271–316. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 1995. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Trinh, T. Minh-Ha. 1989. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1991. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Winichakul, Thongchai. 1994. *Siam Mapped: A History of the*

*Geo-Body of a Nation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Received: Sep. 15, 2015; Reviewed: Oct. 30, 2015; Accepted: Dec. 1, 2015

