
Bayart's Broken Kettle

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It is always a depressing moment when a respected scholar launches into a blanket denunciation of a new field that appears to him or her to be in some way threatening. In the humanities and social sciences, it is typically the appearance of new forms of theory that touches the raw nerve of the status quo in this way. The distinguishing mark of such rituals comes with the use of the epithet “fashionable,” an imagined put-down that is duly attached to the offending work whose crime is to have aroused a wider interest among the academic community and the general public than the work of the accuser has.

For Jean-François Bayart, for example, the problem is that postcolonial studies has generated huge interest all around the world, while its belated appearance in France has contributed, as he puts it, to “the image of a France marginalized on the international scene.”¹ Portraying France as the innocent target of postcolonial accusations means that it manages to end up taking over the place of suffering formerly occupied by its colonial victims.² His invective, “Postcolonial Studies: A Political Invention of Tradition?” forms an extension of his earlier polemic, *L'illusion identitaire*, for his fundamental target beyond postcolonial studies is the perceived “cultural turn” in the humanities and social sciences.³ Insofar as Bayart deems postcolonial studies guilty of espousing cultural arguments on the basis of identity politics, then for him it represents a symptom of a larger evil. If he cared to look more closely at the writings of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, or Paul Gilroy, however, he would discover that postcolonial theory comprises a critique of identity politics, not its espousal, just as

1. Jean-François Bayart, “Postcolonial Studies: A Political Invention of Tradition?” in this issue, 55.

2. The historian Linda Colley also employs this strategy. See Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004), 103.

3. Jean-François Bayart, *L'illusion identitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

it critiques nationalism. Bayart's rejection of theory from the English-speaking world—whether from the United States or India—and defense of the honor of France by espousing an indigenous French tradition that has no need for it could be seen as simply nationalist or xenophobic or both. Does France have to be always perfect, intellectually self-sufficient like a preglobalized economy, with no interest in forms of intellectual exchange with anything that comes written in English or other languages? Or is that only a defensive post–Second World War phenomenon, itself a symptom of its postcolonial melancholia?

The immediate object of Bayart's ire is the recent emergence of writing about postcoloniality in France, signaled most publicly by the publication in 2005 of *La fracture coloniale*, which claimed to reexamine French society and French history through a postcolonial lens, a lens that displaces the Western center and observes from the margins according to a strategy similar to that of Jacques Derrida with respect to philosophy.⁴ As Bayart recognizes, the current French interest in postcoloniality, so long delayed compared to the rest of the world, itself draws on the development of postcolonial studies in Australia, Great Britain, and the United States (perhaps symptomatically, he does not mention India in this list). To make his local argument against the former—the emergence of postcolonial studies in France—he must therefore also attack the latter—the anglophone postcolonial studies from which it derives. He seems to be relatively uninformed about the latter and therefore frequently resorts either to the commentary of others or to generalizations about what he claims “it” (postcolonial studies) says. Bayart himself accuses those who work in postcolonial studies of making “often exaggerated overgeneralizations.”⁵ Yet his whole polemic is based on exaggerated overgeneralizations. Bayart's method is to set up straw targets that he then criticizes: “Postcolonial studies also shows a marked lack of interest in a variety of colonial or parcolonial situations” (67). Given the vast range of research in postcolonial studies, this would be extraordinary if true. Is he really claiming that postcolonial studies does not distinguish among the historical situations of, say, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Algeria, and Nigeria? “Postcolonial studies sees colonialism as one-dimensional, restricting it to an exclusive relationship between the colonized and the colonizer and the colonizer's metropolis” (78). Reified, essentialist, and indulgent, postcolonial studies, he suggests, never leaves the binary of the colonizer and colonized. What has he been reading, apart from

4. Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *La fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005).

5. Bayart, “Postcolonial Studies,” 65.

Albert Memmi, to make the blanket claim of one-dimensionality, essentialism, and reification? In any case, the whole point of Memmi's book was to undo any static colonizer-colonized binary—the book starts out from the situation of the Jew in Tunisia, who is neither colonizer nor colonized.⁶ “Most of the issues it [postcolonial studies] has explored had been explored previously or were simultaneously being investigated by other theories, which often managed to avoid the pitfalls into which postcolonial studies fell.”⁷ Such as? If this is really so, then it is perhaps curious that postcolonial studies has generated so much more interest across the disciplines than those “other theories” have, a phenomenon that clearly represents an underlying problem for Bayart. “Thus it gets trapped in the catastrophic concept of ‘identity’ and reifies a postcolonial condition onto which it confers a quasi-ontological status in accordance with a kind of tropical or diasporic Calvinism.”⁸ Whose work are we talking about here? Who reifies a “postcolonial condition” onto which they confer an ontological status? Said? Spivak? Bhabha? Gilroy? Achille Mbembe? Robert J. C. Young? The description fits none of the work of these authors. The only reification that is given ontological status is Bayart's own account of postcolonial studies. However, I would not follow him by describing this as “catastrophic.” It's just wrong.

Bayart suggests that postcolonial studies began around 1990, the year of the publication of *White Mythologies*.⁹ Much as I would love to believe that coincidence, in fact its generally accepted inception as an academic activity came in 1978 with the publication of Said's *Orientalism*.¹⁰ *Orientalism* inspired a new kind of work on the basis of its argument that there was a determinate link between the history of orientalist scholarship and European colonialism, a link that has continued up to the present day with respect to European and American politics in the Middle East. Said himself drew on the work of Michel Foucault with respect to the connection that he traced between knowledge and power. As a result of Said's work, researchers and activists around the world, particularly those from outside Europe, were inspired to develop new arguments about the relation of knowledge to power and to look again at all aspects of what had been claimed as objective

6. Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé; Précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1957). (Albert Memmi, *The Coloniser and the Colonised*, with an introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Howard Greenfield [New York: Orion, 1965]).

7. Bayart, “Postcolonial Studies,” 65.

8. Bayart, “Postcolonial Studies,” 65.

9. Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990; London: Routledge, 2004).

10. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

knowledge in the humanities and social sciences in the academy, at the same time as developing new forms of knowledge, counterknowledges, some of which had previously been denied validity, largely on account of their non-European provenance. In simple terms, all postcolonial studies is saying is that there can be other points of view than the European one. Bayart's polemic seems to be based on a belief that such a situation is (for him) intolerable, especially it would seem if such other points of view come from the suburbs or the wider suburbs of the non-Western world, where the cultural and political history of the anticolonial movements has not been subject to the kind of amnesia and erasure of colonial history that in France followed the Treaty of Evian in 1962. The knowledge that has been examined and analyzed over the past thirty-odd years has been very varied and very wide-ranging—cultural, economic, geographic, historical, linguistic, literary, philosophical, political, sociological, and theological. The link among the many different kinds of work that have been affected by the emergence of postcolonial studies is the questioning of the older Western academic claim that its particular knowledge was disinterested and universal—rather than Western, in some form. The problem was that its universalism was not universal enough, just as its humanism was not human enough. This challenge has been addressed to the Left as well as to the Right, for the record of the European Left with respect to the non-European world is patchy at best. In that sense postcolonial studies has been indeed a political invention of a new tradition, positioned against the political traditions of Eurocentric academia, past and present. Postcolonial studies constitutes the reorganization and reinterpretation of the knowledge of the world away from the Western bias on which academic knowledge has been organized since the eighteenth century. This general questioning is what links the varied range of work in postcolonial studies together, but its practitioners do not necessarily agree on how this reorganization can best be achieved. The idea, as Bayart assumes, that postcolonial studies represents a single project with a particular point of view that can be summed up with generalizations about what “it” says represents a complete misunderstanding of what postcolonial studies has been about for more than thirty years. “Postcolonialism,” as the legal and human rights scholar Upendra Baxi remarks, “is a troubled continent of contested conceptions.”¹¹ It represents a field of debate, not a single project; its areas of inquiry are multiple. Researchers from different disciplines challenge one another constantly. To try to refute it in general betrays a basic misunderstanding of the field itself. Bayart misreads it

11. Upendra Baxi, “Postcolonial Legality,” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwartz and Sangeeta Ray (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2000), 540.

according to the logic of an identity politics that he finds everywhere and claims to refute. In the title of the book-version of his essay, *Les études postcoloniales: Un carnaval académique*, Bayart suggests that this long-lived and increasingly influential body of work known as postcolonial studies represents a “carnival.”¹² This is presumably meant as a form of mockery. Yet like many forms of mockery, the mockery turns on the mocker. If we recall the work of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin on the idea of carnival,¹³ then we can say that, yes, postcolonial studies does contain certain carnivalesque qualities — namely, its function is to turn the world upside down, in Christopher Hill’s famous phrase, to provide a perspective on the previously hegemonic status quo from below, to provide a perspective on this planet of slums from the favela rather than Elysée or the elite Western ivory tower, to offer an account of knowledge without the baggage of certain values hitherto endemic in Western perspectives. One of the first forms of knowledge to be rethought was the construction of political, cultural, and human values according to the former “science” of race and racial hierarchy.¹⁴ As Bayart himself admits, the present French president has shown vividly that such values have not yet disappeared at the highest levels of the French state.

Even if Bayart considers postcolonial studies an academic carnival in the worst sense, it is simply a little late for him to jump in now, more than thirty years late, to try to refute postcolonial studies in toto, given that the problem for postcolonial studies today is that it has become virtually ubiquitous, having been taken up in almost every discipline in the humanities and social sciences, from anthropology to history to medieval studies to law to theology. Bayart’s polemic gets little further than his own local context of the academic insurrections currently going on in France. Beyond that, he declines to engage directly with the major theorists of postcolonial studies (he avoids doing so by claiming that there is no theory). Aside from Mbembe, the only work from outside France that he discusses in any detail is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*, much of which he says that he in fact agrees with. Although Bayart mentions Spivak, there is no attempt to offer any detailed critique of her work or that of other major postcolonial theorists, starting with Said himself, or Bhabha, to say nothing of myself. The general claims that Bayart makes, for example, of dehistoricization would not survive

12. Jean-François Bayart, *Les études postcoloniales: Un carnaval académique* (Paris: Karthala, 2010).

13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iwolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968).

14. Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

any detailed study of our work, with the exception perhaps of Bhabha, who has already been challenged on these grounds—but then he does not claim to be writing history. Not everyone working in postcolonial studies does. History is not the only way of thinking about the world. Nor is political sociology. This view is not surprising given that, transdisciplinary as it is, postcolonial studies originated in literature and comparative literature departments. No single academic discipline holds a monopoly on knowledge.

The lack of direct engagement with postcolonial theory constitutes the fundamental weakness of Bayart's argument. Let us take just two examples that demonstrate the extent to which, though he claims to have absorbed the ideas of postcolonial studies, he has not yet got the point. On the basis that Jean-Paul Sartre, together with Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, can be said broadly to belong to "French literature," Bayart makes the claim that "the essential questions of postcolonial studies are already found in the work of these writers."¹⁵ The French anticolonial precursors of postcolonial theory already comprise therefore the essence of postcolonial thought, which makes postcolonial studies "really rather superfluous."¹⁶ He omits to mention that these writers, largely ignored in France for years, have only been retrieved and put into the public view again by the interest in their work found in postcolonial studies: it only occurs to him now to think of the importance of colonial experiences for French theory. He also cites, as if no one had ever thought of it before, Foucault's stay in Tunisia and Pierre Bourdieu's research in Algeria. In *White Mythologies* I argued that French theory should rather be described as Franco-Maghrebian, for beyond Fanon, Memmi, Foucault, and Bourdieu we can add Derrida, Louis Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard, and Hélène Cixous to the list.¹⁷ The deep involvement of French intellectual life with its colonial past is much more extensive than Bayart has yet imagined. At the same time, while accusing postcolonial studies of not emerging "from the dependentist and nationalist dogma from which it claimed to have broken free," Bayart himself remains focused exclusively on his own francocentric narrative and perspective: that some of the sources of postcolonial studies are French leads him to an unquestioned assumption that this means that those writers constitute the only sources and that they

15. Bayart, "Postcolonial Studies," 60.

16. Bayart, "Postcolonial Studies," 61.

17. Young, *White Mythologies*, 32. See also Robert J. C. Young, "Foucault in Tunisia" and "Subjectivity and History: Derrida in Algeria," both in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2001), 395–410, 411–26.

have said it all *avant la lettre*.¹⁸ As a result, he passes by, apparently completely unawares, another effect of imperial globalization, the development of anticolonial and anti-imperial theory around the world, on which postcolonial theory is based. Strange as it may seem, the anticolonial theory from which postcolonial studies has developed was not just French: setting aside other European anticolonialists other than Sartre, such as Bartolomé de Las Casas, Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin, or J. A. Hobson, a list of the genealogy of postcolonial theory would include the writings, in no particular order, of Simon Bolivar, José Martí, José Carlos Mariátegui, the Tupamaros, Carlos Marighella, Subcomandante Marcos, Daniel O'Connell, Michael Davitt, James Connolly, Countess Markievicz (Constance Gore-Booth), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Duse Mohamed, Mohammad Hassanein Heikal, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, James Africanus B. Hortus, J. E. Casely Hayford, Lamine Senghor, W. De Graft Johnson, Jomo Kenyatta, Cheikh Anta Diop, Ousmane Sembène, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Julius Nyerere, Mario de Andrade, Amílcar Cabral, Olive Schreiner, Solomon T. Plaatje, Nelson Mandela, Joshua Nkomo, Zanele Dhlamini, Steve Biko, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, C. L. R. James, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, W. E. B. DuBois, Sri Aurobindo, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Annie Besant, M. N. Roy, Sarojini Naidu, Bhagat Singh, Aruna Asaf Ali, Subhas Chandra Bose, B. R. Ambedkar, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sun Yat-sen, Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh, General Vo Nguyen Giap, Zhou Enlai, Lin Biao, D. N. Aidit, Ti Kooti, and Donna Awatere. Some of them wrote in French. Many others did not. Bayart mentions the international colonial organizations; I would rather be interested in the international anticolonial organizations, particularly the Universal Races Congress (1911), the Internationals (1919–35), the Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East (1920), the Congress of the Toilers of the Far East (1922), the League Against Imperialism Congress (1927), the Fifth Pan-African Congress (1945), the Asian-African Conference (Bandung) (1955), and the Havana “Tricontinental” (1967).¹⁹

To prove French receptiveness to the postcolonial, Bayart offers us an extraordinarily eclectic list of “Third World” writers, musicians, and artists and their works that were well received in France in the second half of the twentieth century—in fact, some of these do not even exist, such as “Miles Davis’s *Black Is Beautiful*” (is he thinking of the album *Black Beauty* or just vaguely associating Davis with

18. Bayart, “Postcolonial Studies,” 83.

19. For an account of postcolonialism in relation to these anticolonial activist-writers, see Young, *Postcolonialism*.

the slogan of the Black Power movement?).²⁰ Much more could be said about this list, particularly with respect to the other list that is missing, namely, the missing list of imperial brutalities—Sétif, Yogandima, Madagascar, Charonne, et cetera, et cetera—carried out on colonial or immigrant populations by the French state over the same period, only recently acknowledged, if at all, and hardly unrelated to contemporary issues in the *banlieues* (suburbs), however much apologists might claim otherwise.²¹ What the list that is provided demonstrates is that Bayart draws no distinction between writing on the colonies from a colonial point of view and anticolonial writings that challenge that perspective. So having lauded Fanon, among the many others he then invokes is Octave Mannoni, author of *Psychologie de la colonisation*—apparently unaware that Mannoni's theory of a "dependency complex" forms the specific target of a stringent critique by Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs* precisely because it demonstrates the depth of a patronizing colonial mentality among French intellectuals.²² To invoke Mannoni proudly as "one of the Pontiffs of French psychoanalysis" to prove that France does not need postcolonialism instead proves its very opposite.²³

Bayart's argument against postcolonial studies resembles nothing so much as Freud's account of the mutually exclusive answers of the man who returned a broken kettle to his friend. When challenged, he said that (1) he never borrowed the kettle, (2) he returned it unbroken, and (3) the kettle was already broken when he borrowed it. So Bayart argues: (1) despite the huge interest that it has generated in France and around the world, the postcolonial studies that has come from the English-speaking world is "sterile";²⁴ (2) there is no postcolonial theory anyway; and (3) in any case, it's essentially French already, so it is entirely superfluous since we have already said it.

More than ten years ago, Terry Eagleton remarked on an initiation rite performed by those who work in postcolonial studies: the statutory requirement is that the newcomer denounces one or preferably several aspects of the work of those in the field, criticizes the very concept of the postcolonial, and then asserts

20. Bayart, *Les études postcoloniales*, 33.

21. Cf. Gilroy, *After Empire*, 109.

22. Octave Mannoni, *Psychologie de la colonisation* (Paris: Seuil, 1950) (Octave Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, trans. Pamela Powesland [London: Methuen, 1956]); Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952) (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann [New York: Grove Press, 1967]).

23. Bayart, *Les études postcoloniales*, 31.

24. Bayart, "Postcolonial Studies," 81.

that he or she stands outside it in a position of critique.²⁵ As Eagleton points out, this is how you demonstrate that you are “in the true” (*dans le vrai*), as Foucault put it, in postcolonial studies: you begin by attacking it. In performing this little ritual with some gusto, Bayart has shown that far from standing outside it, he has in fact acceded to the field, albeit somewhat late in the day. For whatever its drawbacks in his eyes, at the very least one minor achievement of postcolonial studies is that Bayart is now focusing on colonialism. When he stops his ridiculous general polemics and gets round to talking about the multiple modalities of colonialism, or its global reach, though hardly as innovative a topic hitherto unnoticed as he imagines,²⁶ he is quite interesting. M. Bayart, welcome to the field!

25. Terry Eagleton, “Postcolonialism and ‘Postcolonialism,’” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 1 (1998): 24.

26. It comprises the theme, for example, of one of the historians whom Bayart cites most frequently, Frederick Cooper. See Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

