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Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.) *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000).

alterity Alterity is derived from the Latin *alteritas*, meaning 'the state of being other or different; diversity, otherness'. Its English derivatives are alternate, alternative, alternation, and alter ego. The term *alterité* is more common in French, and has the antonym *identité* (Johnson and Smith 1990:xviii).

The term was adopted by philosophers as an alternative to 'otherness' to register a change in the Western perceptions of the relationship between consciousness and the world. Since Descartes, individual consciousness had been taken as the privileged starting point for consciousness, and 'the "other" appears in these [post-Enlightenment] philosophies as a reduced "other," as an epistemological question' (xix). That is, in a concept of the human in which everything stems from the notion that 'I think, therefore I am', the chief concern with the other is to be able to answer questions such as 'How can I know the other?', 'How can other minds be known?' The term 'alterity' shifts the focus of analysis away from these philosophic concerns with otherness—the 'epistemic other', the other that is only important to the extent to which it can be known—to the more concrete 'moral other'—the other who is actually located in a political, cultural, linguistic or religious context (xix). This is a key feature of changes in the concept of subjectivity, because, whether seen in the context of ideology, psychoanalysis or discourse, the 'construction' of the subject itself can be seen to be inseparable from the construction of its others. [...]

In post-colonial theory, the term has often been used interchangeably with otherness and difference. However, the distinction that initially held between otherness and alterity—that between otherness as a philosophic problem and otherness as a feature of a material and discursive location—is peculiarly applicable to post-colonial discourse. The self-identity of the colonizing subject, indeed the identity of imperial culture, is inextricable from the alterity of colonized others, an alterity determined, according to Spivak, by a process of othering. The possibility for potential dialogue between racial and cultural others has also remained an important aspect of the use of the word, which distinguishes it from its synonyms.

authentic/authenticity The idea of an authentic culture is one that has been present in many recent debates about post-colonial cultural production. In particular, the demand for a rejection of the influence of the colonial period in programmes of decolonization has invoked the idea that certain forms and practices are 'inauthentic', some decolonizing states arguing for a recuperation of authentic pre-colonial traditions and customs. The problem with such claims to cultural authenticity is that they often become entangled in an essentialist cultural position in which fixed practices become iconized as authentically indigenous and others are excluded as hybridized or contaminated. This has as its corollary the danger of ignoring the possibility that cultures may develop and change as their conditions change.

Significantly, this was not as common a feature of the work of the early anti-colonialist writers working with a Marxist model of culture ... Later post-structuralist models have found the issue much more difficult to resolve, reflecting, perhaps, the political problem of discovering a firm ground for material practice in an analysis that emphasizes the radical instability of signs and the fundamental and persistent difficulty of 'grounding' systems in an objective, material, extra-discursive 'space'. In some respects, cultural essentialism, which is theoretically questionable, may be adopted as a strategic political position in the struggle against imperial power. Clearly, certain kinds of practices are peculiar to one culture and not to others, and these may serve as important identifiers and become the means by which those cultures can resist oppression and oppose homogenization by global forces.

However, the emergence of certain fixed, stereotypical representations of culture remains a danger. The tendency to employ generic signifiers for cultures that may have many variations within them may override the real differences that exist within such cultures. Markers of cultural difference may well be perceived as authentic cultural signifiers, but that claim to authenticity can imply that these cultures are not subject to change. The use of signifiers of authenticity may be a vital part of the attempt by many subordinated societies to argue for their continued and valid existence as they become inevitably hybridized and influenced by various social and cultural changes. But too rigid a definition can militate against such resistance if they are used to police and license the determining boundaries of the culture by the dominant group (Griffiths 1994:6).

binarism From 'binary', meaning a combination of two things, a pair, 'two', duality (*OED*), this is a widely used term with distinctive meanings in several fields and one that has had particular sets of meanings in post-colonial theory.

The concern with binarism was first established by the French structural linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who held that signs have meaning not by a simple reference to real objects, but by their opposition to other signs. Each sign is itself the function of a binary between the signifier, the 'signal' or sound image of the word, and the signified, the significance of the signal, the concept or mental image that it evokes. Saussure held that although the connection between the signifier and signified is arbitrary (that is, there is no necessity in nature for the link between the word 'dog' and the signified dog), once the link is established, it is fixed for everyone who speaks that language.

While signs mean by their difference from other signs, the binary opposition is the most extreme form of difference possible—sun/moon; man/woman; birth/death; black/white. Such oppositions, each of which represents a binary system, are very common in the cultural construction of reality. The problem with such binary systems is that they suppress ambiguous or interstitial spaces between the opposed categories, so that any overlapping region that may appear, say, between the categories man/woman, child/adult or friend/alien, becomes impossible according to binary logic and a region of taboo in social experience.

Contemporary post-structuralist and feminist theories have demonstrated the extent to which such binaries entail a violent hierarchy, in which one term of the opposition is always dominant (man over woman, birth over death, white over black), and that, in fact, the binary opposition itself exists to confirm that dominance. This means that any activity or state that does not fit the binary opposition will become subject to repression or ritual. For instance, the interstitial stage between child and adult—'youth'—is treated as a scandalous category, a rite of passage subject to considerable suspicion and anxiety. Subsequently, the state between the binarism, such as the binary colonizer/colonized, will evidence the signs of extreme ambivalence manifested in mimicry, cultural schizophrenia, or various kinds of obsession with identity, or will put energy into confirming one or other side of the binarism, e.g. Anglo-centrism or nationalism.

The binary logic of imperialism is a development of that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance. A simple distinction between centre/margin; colonizer/colonized; metropolis/empire; civilized/primitive represents very efficiently the violent hierarchy on which imperialism is based and which it actively perpetuates. Binary oppositions are structurally related to one another, and in colonial discourse there may be a variation of the one underlying binary—colonizer/colonized—that becomes rearticulated in any particular text in a number of ways, e.g. colonizer : colonized, white : black, civilized : primitive, advanced : retarded, good : evil, beautiful : ugly, human : bestial, teacher : pupil, doctor : patient.

The binary constructs a scandalous category between the two terms that will be the domain of taboo, but, equally importantly, the structure can be read downwards as well as across, so that colonizer, white, human and beautiful are collectively opposed to colonized, black, bestial and ugly. Clearly, the binary is very important in constructing ideological meanings in general, and extremely useful in imperial ideology. The binary structure, with its various articulations of the underlying binary, accommodates such fundamental binary impulses within imperialism as the impulse to 'exploit' and the impulse to 'civilize'.

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It may be argued that the very domain of post-colonial theory is the region of 'taboo'—the domain of overlap between these imperial binary oppositions, the area in which ambivalence, hybridity and complexity continually disrupt the certainties of imperial logic. Apart from illuminating the interstitial spaces, post-colonial theory also disrupts the structural relations of the binary system itself, revealing the fundamental contradictions of a system that can include, for instance, the binaries civilized/primitive or human/bestial along with doctor/patient or enlightener/enlightened. In this way it uncovers the deep ambivalence of a structure of economic, cultural and political relations that can both debase and idealize, demonize and eroticize its subjects.

Perhaps one of the most catastrophic binary systems perpetuated by imperialism is the invention of the concept of race. The reduction of complex physical and cultural differences within and between colonized societies to the simple opposition of black/brown/yellow/white is in fact a strategy to establish a binarism of white/non-white, which asserts a relation of dominance. By thus occluding the vast continuum of ethnic variation, relegating the whole region of ethnicity, racial mixture and cultural specificity to one of taboo or otherness, imperialism draws the concept of race into a simple binary that reflects its own logic of power. The danger for anti-colonial resistance comes when the binary opposition is simply reversed, so that 'black', for instance, or 'the colonized' become the dominant terms. This simply locks the project of resistance into the semiotic opposition set up by imperial discourse. Much contemporary post-colonial theory has been directed at breaking down various kinds of binary separation in the analysis of colonialism and imperialism. [...]

An important consequence of this disruption of imperial binary systems is a particular emphasis on the interactive and dialectical effects of the colonial encounter. Imperial binarisms always assume a movement in one direction—a movement from the colonizer to the colonized, from the explorer to the explored, from the surveyor to the surveyed. But just as post-colonial identity emerges in the ambivalent spaces of the colonial encounter, so the dynamic of change is not all in one direction; it is in fact transcultural, with a significant circulation of effects back and forth between the two, for the engagement with the colonies became an increasingly important factor in the imperial society's constitution and understanding of itself.