# Drawing the colour line

K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1996. 191 pp., £23.00 hb., £11.95 pb., 0 691 02661 0 hb., 0 691 05909 8 pb.

Suppose that you subscribe to the view that only a racist society could generate a belief in the existence of different human races. Thus, you might be tempted to strive for a society whose morality is colour blind. In such a case, as Amy Gutmann argues in her contribution to this book, you should try to bring about this ideal state of affairs by means of the sort of colour-conscious public policies which are necessary in our imperfect societies. Also, as K. Anthony Appiah claims in the other piece that makes up the volume, you might accept that collective political identities, such as racial identity, are a necessary step in the resistance to oppression. And yet, like Appiah, you might also believe that it would be better if you could 'treat [your] skin and [your] sexual body as personal dimensions of the self'.

These conclusions, however, appear premature. We are reminded of their demoralizing effects when we read Frantz Fanon's comment about Sartre in *Black Skin, White Masks*. He quotes Sartre, who said, 'negritude is the root of its own destruction, it is a transition and not a conclusion, a means and not an ultimate end.' To this Fanon adds: 'When I read that page, I felt I had been robbed of my last chance.'

Some of the arguments presented by Appiah and Gutmann are reminiscent of Sartre's claim, and in my opinion these authors should have paid more attention to the sentiments expressed by Fanon. In particular, Appiah's defence of American individualism and his denial that African-Americans constitute a community manifest a surprising naivety in light of recent work in race studies. Nevertheless, this book contains several powerful arguments which make it an important contribution to the philosophical and political study of race.

Appiah is justly renowned for his nominalism about race. In his essay for this volume, he has traced the history of the concept of race from racialist thinking to current post-Darwinian evolutionary biology. Appiah holds that the concept, in all of its manifestations, lacks a reference. There are no races in the racialist sense because the moral, literary and psychological characters of individuals cannot be explained in terms of the essence or nature they share with other members of their 'racial' group. The biological concept of race is equally in trouble. There is no way of classifying people which has explanatory power in the biological sciences *and* corresponds to racial classifications. Hence, Appiah concludes, the concept is empty. There are no races.

Appiah had already presented a similar argument in *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1992). But the argument is now strengthened by the addition of a detailed genealogy of the concept. Appiah's interpretation of W.E.B. Du Bois's position on race has also been significantly modified. In his earlier writings on this topic, Appiah had claimed that Du Bois was engaged in the project of substituting a socio-historical conception of race for the traditional biological one. This move for Appiah merely buried the biological conception just below the surface, but did not truly replace it. Appiah now takes Du Bois to have engaged instead in the project of characterizing racial identity. This is an identity which, like all other political identities, can exist despite the absence of a corresponding essence or nature.

Appiah's account of socio-historically constructed political identity is highly sophisticated. He argues that identities have two components. First, they are a matter of ascription by others to an individual. This social component could perhaps be glossed in terms of attributions of a specific social role to individuals. The second component is psychological; it is a matter of identification. Identities, in this sense, are scripts that shape our life plans. Appiah rightly remarks that political identities so conceived have a normative dimension. In other words, they carry commitments of a moral and political nature. Identifying as black or as gay involves taking on oneself several distinctive political obligations.

This normative dimension of identities is a source of concern for Appiah. He worries that identities can be too tightly scripted, that they can undermine personal autonomy. I find these concerns to be, at least in part, misguided. They are generated by Appiah's

political liberalism and by his views about norms. Appiah is certainly right to believe that collective identities can 'go imperial'. Nevertheless, this problem is avoidable. The normative dimension of identities should not be equated, as Appiah does, with a set of expectations imposed on us by others. There is no reason to believe that to endorse for oneself an identity is the same as accepting the forms of behaviour that others believe are proper for people of one's kind. If this were so, counter-hegemonic identities would never have emerged.

Rather, when one identifies as black or as gay, one endorses a set of responsibilities and commitments for oneself, and claims that others ought to facilitate one's attempts to fulfil these responsibilities. Further, endorsing a collective identity is also a matter of standing in solidarity with other people. These responsibilities, commitments and acts of solidarity can differ from those that societies at large, or even members of one's own group, expect of one. Political identities need not be static; endorsing them is one way of contributing to changing their character.

Gutmann raises similar concerns about identity politics. Although she recognizes the role identities can play in the struggles against oppression, Gutmann takes identities to be divisive, and to put excessive obligations on the oppressed. She reaches this conclusion because she adopts Appiah's account of political identity. However, if we understand identity endorsements as a matter of taking on responsibilities for ourselves, combined with the claim that others ought to facilitate our endeavours, we can avoid these problems. In this account, everybody has a responsibility to do their share to eradicate racism. However, the obligations for whites are likely to be different from those for blacks. We play different roles in this struggle. This is also Gutmann's conclusion; her worries about identity can, thus, be placated.

Gutmann's contribution to this book consists mainly in a sustained argument in favour of colour-conscious public policies. Although colour blindness is for her a principle of an ideal morality for an ideal society, in the current situation justice as fairness requires colour consciousness. She illustrates her point in her sustained discussion of two famous US legal cases.

The first concerns the firing of a white woman by Piscataway High School in 1989. This school had to sack one of two women teachers. These two women had the same level of seniority; one was white, the other was black. The school decided that, rather than flipping a coin, they would take into account the fact that there were no other black teachers in the whole department. This case made the front page of newspapers in the USA over the years, until in August 1996 the 3rd US Circuit Court of Appeals found in favour of the white woman plaintiff. Subsequently in November 1997 civil rights movements settled out of court with the plaintiff to prevent the Supreme Court from deciding on the case. They took this totally unprecedented action because they believed, with reason, that the Supreme Court would find in favour of the plaintiff, and that this ruling would have been formulated so as to put an end to affirmative action in the whole of the United States. Gutmann's piece was written before these events took place. In it, she makes a passionate defence of the school's decision. Unfortunately, she was not listened to.

The arguments Gutmann marshals in favour of the school's decision are often familiar in their general outline, but she presents them with admirable clarity and with attention to several possible objections. Thus, she rebuts the US media's presentation of this case as an example of preferential hiring. The black teacher was not retained purely in virtue of her colour; rather, the school rightly believed that in this case being black was an added qualification for the job. Being black meant that the teacher could provide a role model as well as promote a respect for diversity in the students.

Gutmann accepts that one might disagree with this evaluation of what counts as a qualification, but, since the school's criteria are not unreasonable, we enter the discretionary realm left to the school's authority.

The other example discussed by Gutmann concerns redistricting plans in North Carolina. The redistricting plan was conceived with the view of creating electoral districts in the South with a majority of black voters. Gutmann argues for the moral defensibility of the plan because in this case one can legitimately invoke the aim of reducing racial injustice in legislative outcomes. The new districts would be likely to elect candidates who had race issues at the top of their political agendas, and would thus contribute to addressing injustice. Gutmann admits that this mode of proceeding is not ideal, but she thinks it is the best solution for a very bad situation. Nevertheless, the Supreme Court ruled against the plan.

These are difficult times for colour-conscious public policies in the United States. The two cases discussed by Gutmann have had negative resolutions. Also, in 1997 the state of California put an end to affirmative action in admissions to state universities. In light of these developments, it seems all the more certain that this is not the time to wish that colour could be only a personal dimension of the self.

**Alessandra Tanesini**

# Postcolonialism's straw man

Russell A. Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln NE, 1998. xii + 272 pp., £43.00 hb., 0 8032 1284 4.

Russell A. Berman is certainly right in his observation that much postcolonial analysis of imperialism in English has concentrated on the history of the British Empire, and that German imperialism has received comparatively little attention. Within Germany, however, one would want to argue with Berman that there have been some very impressive analyses: Jürgen Osterhammel's brilliant *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (1995), Helmuth Stoecker's very useful *German Imperialism in Africa* (1977), to say nothing of Wolfgang Reinhard's definitive *Geschichte der europäischen Expansion* (1983–90), the best account of European colonialism in any language. Notwithstanding these, in the postcolonial context of the Anglophone world, Germany ranks in terms of neglect with Spanish or Portuguese imperialism, or Dutch, Belgian, Italian, Turkish, Russian, Japanese or even American imperialism in its pre-1939 varieties: only the French get anything like comparable attention to the British. There is certainly a lot of colonial and imperial history out there, particularly when broadened to include the cultural formations of both colonizers and colonized.

German imperialism is distinguished by its extraordinarily brief life span. If we set aside the role played by Prussia in the Western subjugation of China from the 1850s onwards, German imperialism began with the occupation of Alsace-Lorraine and the foundation of the German nation itself after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, and, as far as the world outside Europe was concerned, ended with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, less than fifty years later. Even within that period, Bismarck was initially opposed to the establishment of German colonies, no doubt as a result both of his belief in free trade and of the fact that it was the Germans, starting with Herder, who had most fully developed the ideology of the nation-state as an integrated whole, with an authentic identity which distant colonial possessions would always dilute or endanger. German imperialism was for the most part focused on Africa as a result of its substantial commercial interests in the continent. Having benefited enormously from the British policy of free trade, Bismarck was convinced by a new wave of protectionism in the 1880s that, without African colonies, Germany would end up without any means of access for direct trade with Africa at all. The new imperial interest in Africa by the new European power led to the partition of the continent at the Congress of Berlin of 1884–85. Germany was to end up with Togo, Kamerun (Cameroon), German South West Africa (Namibia), and German East Africa (Tanganyika, now Tanzania). In terms of imperial activities, there was also some serious intrigue in Morocco, the Middle East (the Berlin–Baghdad railway), and an extension of earlier commercial interests in Latin America and the Pacific.

After 1919, Germany was stripped of its colonial territories, but the story did not end there. Analysts such as Aimé Césaire pointed out long ago that fascism

in many ways simply involved bringing the practices and racialist ideologies of colonialism home to Europe: not only were concentration camps inspired by colonial practices in Southern Africa; even the Holocaust was given a first-run with the *Vernichtungskrieg* ('War of Destruction'), or genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples of German South-West Africa in 1904–07. Hitler's Third German Empire was in practice largely European in the orientation of its expansion – even the Russian invasion never got further than the borders of Eurasia. At the same time, however, Nazi Germany also revived the policies of its imperial predecessor. Before the Second World War broke out, Hitler made increasingly vocal demands for the return of the German mandated territories; this was not simply strategic, for the upper echelons of the Nazi party, in collaboration with the Deutsche and Dresdner Banks, also engaged in meticulous planning for the future annexation of virtually all of tropical Africa, whose resources, and peoples according to Nazi racial theory, were to be exploited for the benefit of the fatherland. As is well known, the French colony of Madagascar was also chosen in the original 'final solution' as the site for the deportation of the Jews to a Jewish state that would be run under Nazi supervision.

During the heyday of imperialism, analysts used to like to contrast the different colonial systems, generally in order to argue for the superiority of their own, but usually also with some admiring glances at their rivals. Berman follows this practice, placing his account of German colonialism in a comparative national framework. What, therefore, aside from its brief history, was specific to German imperialism? A historical answer might be its combination of exploitative commercialism with a racialism unabashed by what Ernst von Weber characterized as the 'soft' policies of the British, caught up in their ideology of liberalism. According to Berman, however, 'the key question' in any analysis of German colonial discourse 'is one of space, not race'. Drawing on the influential work of the best account of German imperial discourse and ideology, John Noyes' *Colonial Space: Spatiality in the Discourse of German South West Africa 1884–1915* (1992), Berman examines a number of writers, both German and 'Greater' Germans such as Freud and Kafka, whom he brings into the Germanic cultural living space, in relation to texts concerned with travel and other forms of the construction of what is problematically called a 'mulatto geography'. On their own, as individual essays, these analyses offer very interesting interpretations of particular textual configurations, particularly of Freud and Kafka (whose incorporation into imperial Germanic culture many today would want to question). I am grateful to Berman for his insights into something that has for long puzzled me – Freud's curious fantasies about Hannibal and Bismarck. The larger claims and basic comparative framework of the book are, however, less satisfactory. Berman's predominant focus is on 'how German travelers in the non-European world … encountered alterity and came to grips with it (or not)'. This genuine encounter with the other, rather than its Orientalist stereotyped representation, he suggests, is what distinguished German colonial discourse from the British or French. Could this really be altogether so neatly so?

It soon becomes clear that Berman is referring not so much to the comparable historical texts as to contemporary postcolonial theory, which forms the subject of much of the discussion of the introduction and final chapter. It turns out, however, that this aspect of the book represents a sally not into postcolonial theory as such, but rather into the continuing academic war between the rival empires of French and German philosophy and theory (Habermas versus Derrida, etc., though without reference to the main debates or recent *rapprochements*). Berman attacks contemporary postcolonial theory on the grounds that it is against the Enlightenment, claiming that 'much of contemporary criticism' equates 'the Enlightenment's legacy of reason and science with the systems of domination for which reason might be taken to stand…. Enlightenment thereby becomes just another name for Empire'. However, this equation of Enlightenment and empire seems to be largely his own: he produces not a single reference or citation to substantiate this generalization. The widespread use of Adorno by Said and others is not mentioned. Even when Berman discusses Derrida, whose work and influence is clearly the target of much of his criticism, directly in the final chapter, he cites only a single essay on apartheid and moves on, after less than two pages, to concentrate on Sartre's Preface to Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* of 1961 – a text which was not even historically postcolonial in relation to the Algeria on which it was focused. The book therefore opens by setting up a straw target, summarizing an argument that Berman claims represents postcolonial deconstructive criticism, but which seems if anything to be taken more from the debates about modernism and postmodernism initiated by Lyotard (who is never mentioned). Having equated postcolonialism with postmodernism, and conflated both with Sartre, in order to equate Empire and Enlightenment, Berman concludes that 'Deconstructive antilogocentrism is therefore a

fraudulent basis for a critique of empire, and imperialism is simply not an essential or necessary feature of Enlightenment'. The straw man of 'antilogocentrism' has been puffed down.

The other side of this set-up is a reductive strategy in which Berman sometimes characterizes his enemy by the very reverse of their own position, and then claims their arguments as his own. Take the following: 'Where Sartre and Derrida operated with neat distinctions between colonizer and colonized … the German material – Sacher-Masoch, Nolde, and Kafka – displays a more complex and transgressive relation between the poles of the colonial dialectic.' To assert one's material to be more complex than a Derrida whose distinctions are too neat is at the very least a bold move, even when it is that of a Kafka who is (here) German – Berman does not mention Derrida's analyses of Kafka. Exactly where, though, does simplistic Derrida ever make these alleged 'neat distinctions between colonizer and colonized'? We are never told; nor could we be. Or take this: 'by understanding how the exoticization of the non-Western world is a consequence of historical forces, we can see how the postmodern celebration of the other – the mythic, the primitive, the non-Western – is deeply implicated in a system of global segregation.' Setting aside the conflation of the postmodern and the postcolonial here, the exoticization of 'the other' is the very thing that postcolonial criticism above all has subjected to stringent and effective critique.

Or, the final example, take the paragraph which begins with the suggestion that, despite the reservations about deconstructive criticism expressed above, the ideas of hybridity and transculturation of Homi K. Bhabha and Berman's colleague at Stanford, Mary Louise Pratt, have been a strong influence on his work. Berman then goes on, perhaps not surprisingly, to express his reservations about even these two writers, and stakes out the difference of the German from the British and Latin American material. In the work of both critics, he argues,

> General statements about Europe are made on the basis of particular national events. The underlying assumption of post-colonial theory appears to be that British imperialism is the normative imperial structure. The point of this book, on the other hand, is to argue that the German experience was quite different, displaying alternative possibilities within the Enlightenment and, more importantly, quite different notions to alterity. The less stable and more permeable notion of 'German', which allows one to include Freud and Kafka in this discussion, results in a greater permeability towards other cultures. The potential for hybridization is consequently not primarily postcolonial but immanent to the colonial situation itself, at least where the colonizing nation has the requisite flexibility of identity. In the German case, however, the understanding of empire requires a deep revision. Although it can entail aspects of violent domination, it also allows for transgression, mixing and plurality. To represent the colonial scene solely as a Manichaean separation may be an adequate description of British imperialism, but as a general account it is a sorry misrepresentation and ultimately simply a political effect of a politicized anticolonialism, polemically distorting the scope of differentiation.

The Anglophone representation of imperialism here begins as hybridity but ends as a Manichaean separation, so that German imperialism can be 'quite different' in allowing for 'transgression, mixing and plurality'. In arguing that hybridity was 'not primarily postcolonial but immanent to the colonial situation itself', Berman passes over the fact that Bhabha's theory of hybridity was developed precisely to describe the 'colonial situation' of British imperialism in nineteenth-century India. In showing 'how German travelers in the non-European world … encountered alterity and came to grips with it (or not)', in arguing for possible 'fruitful border crossings' and in chastising contemporary criticism for failing 'to imagine the alterity that is at the core (not the margins) of colonial discourse: the possibility of exploring the world

and experiencing something new', Berman is hardly convincing in his main thesis that German colonial discourse is very different from any other.

In one respect, however, he does show that he is a long way from the central argument of Bhabha's theory of hybridity, namely that hybridity involves a cultural crossing that does much more than just inflect European culture with the sympathetic experience of alterity. The translations of hybridity are significant, Bhabha suggests, because they reverse the subject positions and above all the power structure between the antagonistic actors in the colonial scene. The German empire, we are told, was different because it was 'organized around tropes of empathy with the colonized'. In Berman's account, it is always the German traveller or explorer alone who 'comes to grips (or not)' with alterity – a metaphor that significantly echoes the grasping process of imperial appropriation itself. To this extent, the basic colonial perspective of his writers is never threatened, disoriented, reversed or resisted, by a switch into the subject position or experience of the surviving Africans who escaped extermination and so generously provided all that alterity.

**Robert J.C. Young**

# See

Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY and London, 1997. xii + 171 pp., £15.95 hb., 0 8014 3454 8.

Charles W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY and London, 1998. xx + 244 pp., £31.50 hb., £13.50 pb., 0 8014 3467 X hb., 0 8014 8471 5 pb.

These books deserve a wide readership. They pose a fundamental challenge both to mainstream philosophy and to some of the more radical alternatives to that mainstream. Mills argues that 'Philosophy has remained remarkably untouched by the debates over multiculturalism, canon reform, and ethnic diversity racking the academy; both demographically and conceptually, it is one of the "whitest" of the humanities.' This whiteness, he maintains, is confirmed by the fact that philosophy is very largely blind to both the historical and the contemporary realities of race:

> As almost any introductory textbook can confirm, mainstream philosophy has no room for race as a reality that significantly affects in any way such traditional divisions of the field as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of law, history of philosophy. The writings of the classic Euro-American authors are treated simultaneously as canonical and as raceless and universal.

While the two texts deal with similar problems, they have different aims. *The Racial Contract* offers a panoramic survey of the causes of the racial blindness of philosophy and a searching analysis and critique of some of the consequent problems and weaknesses in the subject. In opposition to the traditional theory of the social contract, he develops his own alternative theory of the *racial* contract. In *Blackness Visible* a number of themes and issues are dealt with in more detail, developing the more concise discussion in the earlier work and extending the range of subjects covered by Mills's critique. Thus the two works complement and mutually reinforce each other. The result is a vigorous critical challenge to contemporary philosophy which, while flawed in some respects, is generally effective and persuasive.

*The Racial Contract* argues that the historical experiences of colonialism, slavery and imperialism in the last five hundred years have profoundly affected European and North American philosophy. Native Americans and, later, Asians and Africans were subjugated and dispossessed as European powers established their domination over large parts of the world. This global process of colonial conquest was accompanied by the development of theories of race which assigned qualitatively inferior status to the conquered. Not only did such theories have an influence upon philosophy; in some cases leading philosophers made an important contribution to their elaboration. The impact of European colonialism and imperialism in the writings of major figures in the canon of modern Western philosophy is clearly demonstrated. For example, Locke defended the slavery which results from 'the state of war … between a lawful conqueror and a captive' (*Second Treatise of Government*, para. 24), and used this argument to justify black slavery in America in his advice over the drafting of a constitution for Carolina. Other leading figures, such as Hume, Voltaire, Hegel and J.S. Mill, are also dealt with critically for their various statements concerning

the alleged inferiority of certain races, or arguments in defence of colonialism. Furthermore, Mills points out that Locke had a direct financial interest in the slave trade, to which it can be added that J.S. Mill was substantially involved in the colonial administration of India.

Mills's principal example of a philosopher who made a major contribution to developing the theory of race and racial inferiority is Immanuel Kant, whom he discusses briefly in *The Racial Contract* and at greater length in *Blackness Visible*. Mills cites the little-known essay 'On the Different Races of Man' (written in 1775 and recently made available in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, Blackwell, 1997) in which Kant develops a biological theory of race according to which humanity is divided into four distinct races. Not only are physical characteristics taken to be inherent in each race, but also 'temperament', for example 'the Negro is … lazy, soft and dawdling'. Mills draws this together with other remarks of Kant's concerning the inferior mental capacities of non-white races to argue that 'full personhood for Kant is actually dependent upon race'.

However, while Mills is right to draw attention to the generally overlooked, even suppressed, racist aspects of Kant's thought, he does not take into account other, countervailing features: for example, Kant's condemnation of colonial conquest and enslavement. And this omission highlights an important weakness in his method. The argument is advanced with broad brush strokes, but with too selective an attention to significant detail. To some extent this is justifiable in developing a distinct theoretical position from which to challenge orthodoxy, but the challenge is weakened unnecessarily by oversimplification and exaggeration.

This is evident in Mills's reluctance to admit the existence of much genuine dissent and critique in European thought. For example, Diderot is not mentioned in either work, despite his passionate condemnation of colonial conquest and slavery, and his forthright defence of the right of the colonized and enslaved to wage violent resistance against their oppressors. Mills does consider, but only to reject, the possibility that Rousseau might be an exception to his general argument. Rousseau's condemnation of slavery, defence of national independence against colonialism, and profound critique of European society and culture are given insufficient consideration. Especially disappointing is Mills's treatment of Marx and Marxism, to which I shall return below.

Mills argues for an objectivist theory of race according to which race is not a biological phenomenon but a socio-political construct which is therefore socially real. His work is intended as a contribution to 'critical race theory'. Distinguishing his position from post-modernist views, and drawing parallels with some feminist theory, Mills argues that 'Race is not foundational.… Race is not essentialist.… But race is a *contingently* deep reality that structures our particular social universe, having a social objectivity and causal significance that arise out of *our* particular history'. In theorizing the objective social reality of race as a product of human history rather than nature, Mills's general approach has considerable plausibility. The specific form in which Mills develops his argument is his theory of the racial contract. According to this theory, 'white' and 'nonwhite' were brought into existence as social categories by a 'set of formal or informal agreements' (contracts) between some people (Europeans) in order to categorize a vast mass of humanity 'as "nonwhite" and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons'. The purposes of this racial contract are the allocation to non-whites of 'a subordinate civil standing in the white or white-ruled polities.… the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them'.

Non-whites are not parties to this contract. Neither are all whites, though according to Mills they all benefit from it. It is a global contract which established 'white supremacy' as 'the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today'. But while the murder, enslavement, colonial subjection and imperialist exploitation carried out by white supremacy have been devastating for the world's non-white peoples, the racial contract was also historically contingent. It carries no essentialist implications about the attributes of the different races. For 'we could have had a yellow, red, brown or black Whiteness: *Whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations*.'

The theory of the racial contract is not presented as an elaborate and striking metaphor for the global hegemony of white European and North American interests. Mills makes it clear that he intends the theory to be taken literally and that the racial contract is a historical reality located in the codification of global conquest through agreements, treaties, and so on. Here an important question arises: how can Mills explain how and why the racial contract is made?

According to Mills's theory there cannot be any distinctively white interests predating the racial contract, since whiteness as a socio-political category is brought

into existence only by the contract. The racial contract is responsible not only for racial exploitation but also for the political construction of race itself: '*the Racial Contract constructs its signatories as much as they construct it*'. Therefore Mills has to explain the origins of the racial contract in non-racial terms. Here his argument is less clear, but he seems to suggest that the global expansion of European capitalism through the colonial suppression and exploitation of non-European peoples is the fundamental factor. This seems to be confirmed by the general emphasis Mills gives to powerful economic interests as providing the driving force behind the contract: 'the economic dimension of the Racial Contract is the *most* salient … since the Racial Contract is calculatedly aimed at economic exploitation.' Thus, it seems that the racial contract is an agreement reached between the ruling powers to maintain their economic dominion by (among other methods) the oppression and exploitation of non-white peoples supported by theories of their racial inferiority. Yet if the economic imperative of European capitalism to expand through a worldwide process of conquest and colonization does indeed produce the historical circumstances for the social construction of race, Mills's position would appear to have a good deal in common with some Marxist approaches to race. However, unfortunately, Mills appears more inclined to dismiss Marxist social and political thought than to engage in any serious discussion of what it might contribute to an understanding of race.

In *The Racial Contract* Mills criticizes Marx (among others) for having done too little 'to denounce the great crimes inseparable from the European conquest'. But Marx argued that the growth and spread of European capitalism was both progressive *and* destructive, and this analysis is vigorously developed in his writings on India. Most of Mills's criticisms of Marxism are for its alleged attempts to reduce everything to class: 'For orthodox Marxism, the United States is basically a class society and race is unreal and ideal, attributable to the instrumentalist manipulations of the bourgeoisie to divide the innocent workers and is scheduled to disappear with class struggle' (*Blackness Visible*, p. 133). Yet Mills never attributes such crude reductionist views, so it is hard to know who is being criticized. Many Marxists (e.g. Lenin and Trotsky) have not taken this view of race. And C.L.R. James has contributed much to the development of a non-reductionist Marxist theory of race, as Mills acknowledges. In fact, Mills accepts the affinity of James's theory with his own, yet he avoids a constructive engagement with such a form of Marxism.

There is far more of value and interest in Mills's books than I have been able to discuss within the confines of this review. Whatever their weaknesses, they develop a forthright and penetrating critique of much modern philosophy. Mills rightly calls for 'a transformation of the mainstream curriculum … by the explicit incorporation of race'. These texts will be valuable resources in that endeavour.

**Barry Wilkins**

# A racist's dream?

Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes*, Verso, London and New York, 1998. x + 337 pp., £22.00 hb., 1 85984 873 7.

Ranging across a period from the early nineteenth century to the present day, Howe's book is a valuable contribution to a much neglected aspect of the history of ideas. The book is split into three parts which seek to complement each other in the effort to assess the intellectual credibility of modern Afrocentric claims, such as the primacy of ancient Africa in the formation of modern Western civilization, the existence of a unitary transhistorical 'black perspective', and even the racial superiority of Africans. Howe makes clear from the start his hostility to the overwhelming majority of Afrocentric ideas, and his intention is to show 'that the views of writers usually labelled Afrocentric are largely erroneous'. By a survey of the historical formation and present articulation of Afrocentric claims, he seeks to test their 'truth-value'.

Part One, 'Ancestors and Influences', plots the evolution of modern Afrocentrism from its earliest origins. Encompassing such ideologies as Francophone Caribbean 'negritude', pan-Africanism, diasporic images of Africa as the seat of human origins and civilization, black nationalism, separatism, and black power, and figures such as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, John Henrik Clarke, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Stokely Carmichael and Louis Farrakhan, Howe cuts an immensely broad swathe across the history of black political thought. As with his later assessment of present-day Afrocentric theorists, Howe finds much of this proto-Afrocentric work woefully inferior scholarship and on occasion even intellectually fraudulent. Notable exceptions to this general malaise are found in the truly scholarly engagements of Fanon and Rodney.

Howe makes a laudable and convincing effort to recover Fanon and Rodney from the interpretations of cultural nationalists and Afrocentrists. In a very short space, he demonstrates how Fanon, in actuality, rejected the 'racialisation of thought' and the identity politics which Howe believes to be the trademarks of Afrocentrism. In a similar fashion, he forcibly argues that Afrocentrists who seek to press Rodney's ideas into the service of their cultural politics divest them of the central importance of Rodney's economic analysis of world capitalism and his identification of the common interests of all oppressed peoples in wealth redistribution.

In his introduction Howe, I think correctly, notes that 'Afro-American problems are above all problems of economic deprivation and cannot be remedied by approaches which entirely ignore economics.' In light of this analysis, he is undoubtedly right to criticize Afrocentrists' preoccupation with identity politics, but in his efforts to identify embryonic Afrocentric ideas in an immense diversity of black political, historical and social thought, Howe is in danger of discrediting by association much theory which ought to be central to this modern economic analysis.

Part Two, 'Visions of History', sets out to gauge the accuracy of Afrocentric claims about African history. Rather than their own professed objective to be recovering the truth about the African past from colonial historians' claims of Africa as 'historyless', Howe suggests that Afrocentrists are themselves a new wave of myth-mongers. In his survey of historical and archaeological evidence, Howe finds no support for Afrocentric claims to the Pharonic state as a 'Black' state. He argues, rather, that anxieties concerning evidence of Black historical achievement, and a well-founded desire to counter racist images of Africa as historyless, have prompted Afrocentrists to make wildly inflated claims about the intellectual, cultural and social achievements of ancient Africa. Perhaps one of the most destructive of these Afrocentric myths is that of African history as a unified whole both culturally and intellectually. Howe argues that this belief, labelled 'unanimism' by the philosopher Paulin J. Hountondji, does a great disservice to the cause of reclaiming African history from colonial interpreters:

> The unanimist, diffusionist model of African history proposed by Diop and by modern American Afrocentrists, ironically enough, results in a disparagement of African cultural creativity.… If, as they tend to believe, cultures, institutions and ideas across the whole continent are merely copies of originals developed in ancient Egypt, then Africans have created nothing new for four thousand years or more: quite evidently a ridiculous as well as demeaning view.

The issue of the provenance of African philosophy comes in for the same treatment. Ethnophilosophers such as Griaule, Kagame and Mbiti have suggested that there exists a singular 'African mind' embodying a shared system of metaphysics extending across the whole continent and the Diaspora beyond. This view has difficulty in accounting for the obvious diversity of belief systems African peoples express. Howe argues further, however, that assuming that all Africans – rich and poor, male and female, rural and urban, etc. – 'share the same beliefs is to subscribe to a myth … of the very kind shared by colonial discourse and conservative forms of nationalism alike', and may even indulge racist views of African intellectual inferiority.

It is in the third and final part of the book, 'Afrocentrism in the Present', that Howe meets the excesses of modern, 'wild', Afrocentricity head-on. The Afrocentrism of modern theorists such as Ben-Jochannen, Molefi Asanti and Frances Cress Welsing is variously described as 'idiosyncratic', 'dogmatic', 'whimsical', 'fantastic' and even 'racist', and there is no doubt that the views that Howe documents in this section (including Cress Welsing's view that AIDS is a genocidal attempt by the white race, aware of its own genetic inferiority, to eradicate Black people) often earn such labels with ease. Howe's fears are not fuelled solely by the wildness of these claims, but also by the fact that their proponents in many cases hold academic posts which lend their views respectability and a wide audience. Howe's conclusion is one of great pessimism:

> Extreme Afrocentrism and associated theories are the white racist's dream come true … Within the group which has been perhaps the most consistently oppressed of all victims of racial thinking, a new structure of such thought has emerged, the mirror-image of that which for so long attacked those for whom it claims to speak. It is all unutterably sad.

Howe is not alone in noting the degeneration of black liberation politics, but his 'history of ideas' approach is partially culpable for the impotence of his conclusion. In his genealogy of Afrocentrism Howe too often blurs the distinctions between different political movements. His account of Black nationalism is a case in point. As Angela Davis, herself an active 'nationalist' in the 1960s and 1970s, has noted: 'Contemporary

representations of nationalism … are far too frequently reifications of a very complex and contradictory project that had emancipatory moments leading beyond itself.' Howe pays insufficient attention to contemporary voices of dissent to the cultural nationalism he identifies as ancestor to Afrocentrism, and subsequently loses a vital resource for a modern economic analysis, not only of Afro-American problems, but those of all oppressed and exploited people. Genuinely progressive trends in black nationalism containing 'emancipatory moments leading beyond itself' slip from the historical record in Howe's account in much the same way as they do in the popularizations of the mass media and the mythologies of Afrocentrism.

While Howe does much to discredit Afrocentrism, he pays insufficient attention to the pan-Africanism of Du Bois and the revolutionary nationalisms of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, which, unlike inward-looking Afrocentrism, went beyond one-dimensional racial identity politics and sought a common programme for social and economic justice among other oppressed social groups, providing an invaluable legacy with which to combat the absorption of collective political action by the obscurantism of Afrocentrism.

**Carl Talbot**

# Oh yes

George Yancy, ed., *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*, Routledge, New York and London, 1998. 358 pp., £21.99 pb., 0 415 92100 7.

This is a great book, and a book to which no generic classification can do justice. In it, George Yancy asks each of his interviewees a series of similar questions and the product is a multi-(auto)biographical social and political history of some of the African-American experiences of – and contributions to – the discipline of philosophy in the United States. What is to be learned from this book emerges both from the range of opinions expressed on a variety of explicit topics, and from the piecing together of the biographical fragments and the social historical accounts, beginning, most often, in the Jim Crow 1940s and 1950s.

One notes, for example, that all of these philosophers, without exception, are able to trace the conditions of possibility for their achievements to a relatively privileged middle-class background, to strong parental support for and encouragement of their educational aspirations, exceptional and dedicated teachers in poor and often segregated schools, or precocious exposure to texts of formative influence. Adrian M.S. Piper reading Spinoza's *Ethics* at fifteen, Howard McGary Junior reading W.E.B. Du Bois as a child, Lewis R. Gordon (oh happy man) reading Hegel and Marx in high school, Michele M. Moody-Adams reading Paul Tillich and Martin Buber 'very young … 11 or 12'. For once these attestations are meant to bear witness not to the innate genius of gifted children, as is so often suggested in the 'I read voraciously, books were my world' genre of Sunday-supplement intellectual biography, but to the almost insurmountable obstacles in the way of the young child who happened *not* to be so lucky. To the extent to which this is still true (and becoming truer?) in, for example, the UK primary and secondary educational systems, this is an issue in which economic factors cut across racial lines – a fact that is recognised by most of those interviewed here – alongside the necessity to understand racially inflected social injustices within a broader analysis of capitalism and its social apparatus.

Continually at issue throughout is the relationship between philosophy and politics. For some, like Angela Y. Davis, philosophy as critical theory remains by definition a basis for the development of the critique of society and of strategies for its radical transformation. Other descriptions of negotiating the relation between the study of philosophy and participation in the civil rights movement are surprisingly diverse. Albert Mosley, for example, chose philosophy over mathematics because only the former, he felt, would allow him the freedom to be 'more directly involved in the social changes that were going on … [philosophy] provides an extraordinary amount of latitude in terms of legitimate professional interests and involvements.' More commonly, however, interviewees describe a clash between mainstream philosophical practice and political activism. There is Anita L. Allen, for example, worrying about the uselessness of 'thinking about nonexistent objects and how to tell when they are the same' in the midst of civil rights abuses, or Bernard R. Boxill arriving at UCLA the year after the Watts riots and losing interest in the study of logic.

Yet, however this relation is perceived or lived, almost all of the philosophers in this book make some significant connection between their experiences as African-Americans and their philosophical inclinations. This is true quite generally, for example with Angela Y. Davis's attribution of her own philosophical disposition to 'my parents' encouragement to think


critically about our social environment [segregated Birmingham, Alabama], in other words, not to assume that the appearances in our lives constituted ultimate realities.' There is also, however, a strong sense of the ways in which 'the African-American experience' has motivated the questions that these thinkers began to ask once within the world of philosophy. This would be, most obviously, the foregrounding of 'race issues', but also, as Laurence Thomas says, 'the insights that come with the Black experience', an experience which is understood in terms of historical and social context, leading to a broadly non-essentialist consensus against the idea of a specifically African-American methodology or metaphysic. What emerges most forcefully from these discussions is a solid appreciation of the deep cultural embeddedness of philosophical practice. Perhaps the most important point, implicit throughout, is that this embeddedness has always been true of the mainstream, hegemonic practitioners of philosophy who have, historically, fancied themselves inhabiting a standpoint of Olympian neutrality in which 'White' means standard and non-raced. It is this same standpoint from which the issues raised by African-American philosophers are denounced as unphilosophical because 'particularist'. If only people would try actually reading some of this stuff.

In each interview Yancy questions his interlocutors about the details of their respective philosophical projects, but also about general philosophical issues. Unsurprisingly, the question of the status of 'race' looms large. Although Anthony Appiah is not interviewed, the terms of the debate seem now to have been set by his disagreement with Lucius T. Outlaw Junior. Naomi Zack, for example, argues that '[i]t may be that racial designation opens the door to racist action', whilst Albert Mosley is adamant that abandoning the concept of race, whatever its status, 'would preclude the possibility of restitution for exploitation and denied opportunities' and allow no 'legitimate means of identifying the victims of racism'. The centrality of 'race' as a category structuring both conservative/reactionary and progressive political movements in the USA and UK makes this a crucial debate. And even those who can only bear their philosophy to be defined as conceptual analysis should be able to join in on this one.

Institutionally, the acceptance of the issues raised by African-American philosophers into the mainstream depends on a willingness to look at non-mainsteam sources for inspiration and illumination. It is, after all, not implausible that Frederick Douglass's slave narratives, for example, may have something to teach us about the nature of freedom or the being-human of being human. Similarly, if Anita L. Allen is right that the idea of 'justice' viewed from within the minimalist terms of a libertarian philosophy 'is much too skinny to accommodate the realities of the African-American predicament', then the realities of the African-Ameri-

can predicament have something to teach about the idea of justice. That these 'realities' might be found in the novels of Toni Morrison or the tragicomic tradition of the Blues (as some here suggest) means that philosophy must learn to prise itself open and breathe some new air. Who knows, we may even enjoy it, although, as Lewis R. Gordon points out, it may be that our masters 'have an interest in mainstream philosophy's continuing to be a boring, ahistorical, and nonpolitical enterprise.'

It is also the case, of course, that this book is itself an example of these non-mainstream sources, and as good a place to start as any. Apart from anything else, it is actually an outstandingly *enjoyable* read. The bibliographic elements in particular are fascinating. Yancy's judicious editing allows these people to appear, speech patterns and all, alive and kicking. I don't know why it should be so fascinating to learn the names of Leonard Harris's best friends at school, but somehow it is. Perhaps it is part and parcel of the tremendous humanizing of philosophy that this book achieves. Whatever it is, I don't think we can afford to ignore it.

**Stella Sandford**

# Just say no

Chetan Bhatt, *Liberation and Purity: Race, New Religious Movements and the Ethics of Post-modernity*, UCL Press, London, 1997. xx + 306 pp., £45.00 hb., £13.95 pb., 1 85728 423 2 hb., 1 85728 424 4 pb.

Chetan Bhatt's scepticism towards the claims made on behalf of a textual invocation of 'politics' and its relation to actual political struggles produces a text modest in its claims for its own importance, but with a lot to say that is of contemporary political relevance. Focused on various authoritarian religious movements – in particular, recent Islamic and Hindu revivalisms – *Liberation and Purity* also addresses a more general set of political, ethical and philosophical questions which only the reactionary or the arrogant can afford to ignore. Insisting that these so-called fundamentalisms be understood as mass *political* movements, Bhatt asks: what is the nature of these movements, and how can the Left react to them?

The inadequacy of a certain 'traditional' Left response is briefly but quite convincingly argued through a demonstration of the inapplicability of various socio-economic categories to the novel nature of, for example, the fundamentalist Muslim movement and the sort of subject-identity formed in and through it. This political identity, demonstrated and consolidated in the Rushdie affair, transcends boundaries of nation, class and race. The appeal made to, and on behalf of, *umma* (the global Muslim community) invokes an imagined space irreducible to a single nation, civil society or community: a 'social referent' which, Bhatt argues, no available oppositional political language can even describe, let alone fight.

Furthermore, there are striking *formal* similarities between this mass social and political movement and the mass movements that have tended to exemplify progressive Left politics in the West – feminism would be a good example. This indicates, Bhatt argues, that the anti-statist, pro-civilian tendencies of the Left (the radical social-democratic demand that civil society should dictate to the state) here leave it high and dry: 'what political strategy can the left advocate when the adversary is not the state but (some of) the institutions of civil society'; when, indeed, it may be the state itself that stands as the major progressive guard against anti-secularism?

If that characterization of Left politics looks more like the sort of anti-state, right-wing social movements gaining ground in the UK and the USA, that would, in part, be Bhatt's point: new social formations and movements necessitate a realignment of Left thinking in order to distinguish itself from the Right. If for some the answer lies in what Bhatt calls – rather vaguely – 'postmodernism' (and its poststructuralist, postcolonial, deconstructionist cousins), Bhatt is by no means sympathetic. Not only, he argues, has 'postmodernism' (or 'the ethics of postmodernity', as the subtitle has it) proved itself singularly unsuccessful in challenging religious authoritarianism in political actuality; it has often found itself complicit with it by virtue of some shared epistemological assumptions. Most significantly, what Bhatt sees as the romantic postmodern attachment to the valorization of difference and its concomitant epistemological commitment to the incommensurability of discourses is characterized as both the moral poverty of postmodernism (its political toothlessness) *and* the last refuge of religious authoritarianism in securing itself against critical assessment or political challenge.

This and other parallels between authoritarian religious movements and postmodernism aim to illuminate aspects of both parties. Contemporary Khomenism, for example, is described as reliant on features that are commonly said to characterize postmodernism, such as the space–time compression of mass electronic

communication for the dissemination of information and the formation of religious–political identity. This serves both to demonstrate the arch modernity (as opposed to premodern irrationality) of Khomenism, and the hollow nature of claims for the inherently progressive political formation of postmodernism.

When Bhatt engages with specific thinkers and ideas taken to be part of the postmodern tendency, his critique is often nuanced and strong; the debates with Spivak and Bhabha, in particular, are well worth reading. Objections to Bhatt, however, will spring from the overinclusive and thus oversimplified characterization of the enemy, 'postmodernism'. The identification, for example, of deconstruction as postmodernism does justice to neither term. It overlooks Derrida's attachment to the rigours of a logic, a practice of reason, that makes deconstruction possible, and characterizes postmodernism as a genre of theorizing in a way that dehistoricizes some of its more specific claims. (Whether postmodernism, or its legion of practitioners, is itself to blame for encouraging such interpretation is, of course, another matter…)

This overgeneralization also leaves one unable to distinguish clearly between postmodernism and ('failed') Left politics. For many on the Left this would be felt as no less than an affront. Others, unaccustomed to thinking of Bernie Grant MP as a postmodernist, might find it simply unpersuasive. But when Bhatt demonstrates the 'considerable underdevelopment in secular thinking within multiculturalist and antiracist efforts in Britain' with details of the left-wing Greater London Council's well-meaning but misguided funding of far-right Hindu and Muslim organizations in the 1980s, it is impossible not to sit up and take notice.

Without offering programmatic solutions to the problem of a Left response to religious authoritarianism, Bhatt's commitment to the notion of a universal principle of reason and morality – the basic Enlightenment ideal – suggests a position more 'traditional' than his critique of the 'traditional' progressive Left might suggest. For Bhatt this universalism seems to be both logically compelled and politically exigent; he insists, for example, that it *in fact* surreptitiously underpins any coherent anti-racist demands that postmodernism of whatever stripe is wont to make. One might similarly suggest that Bhatt's ability to theorize contemporary religious authoritarianism in ways unavailable to the 'old' Left in fact owes more to some of the insights from the broad field of 'postmodernism' than he seems prepared to admit. But those whose knees don't jerk to the tune of anti-universalism, it will be precisely this blend of familiar Left thinking *and* its critique that is most promising and interesting in Bhatt's book.

**Stella Sandford**

# Sex and lies

Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East*, trans. Liz Heron, with an introduction by Mladen Dolar, Verso, London and New York, 1998. 222 pp., £40.00 hb., £14.00 pb, 1 85984 816 8 hb., 1 85984 122 8 pb.

At the heart of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, the hub of the Ottoman Sultanate, lies the seraglio of the Great Lord. The modern tourist enters through the Gate of Felicity and is led – no deviation is permitted – through a series of poorly lit, claustrophobic chambers which, whetted by the guide's oration, rouse lascivious thoughts of endless pleasure and of uncontrolled power. As tourists leave the seraglio they pass through the Council Chamber, a relieving burst of light and colour, where they are shown a small balcony, perched precariously half-way up the wall, from which the sultan, taking time out from his pleasures, issues orders to his Supreme Council. The imagination needs little further assistance: it is through this hole in the wall, this narrow defile, that the absolute power of the sultan radiates, and through which, in the opposite direction, flow the human and material riches of the sultan's domains, feeding his insatiable desires and confirming his absolute mastery. By now the tourist is thoroughly immersed in an age-old fantasy, fed by generations of European travellers and commentators going back to the seventeenth century, reinforcing an image of absolute and arbitrary despotism that, as long ago as Aristotle, has been seen in Europe as the 'natural' condition of Asiatic rule. It is a dream of power unbounded by law, impelled by an incredible lust for goods which constantly stream into the despot's court, a place of supreme enjoyment, and above all of boundless sexual lust where the despot copulates endlessly with an endless stream of women.

These stereotypical images clearly betray their rootedness in the West's own troubled psyche. Here they have long been exploited both to feed the suppressed libido with forbidden images of unconstrained desire, and to serve 'to question the principles of [the West's] own political institutions, the goals of education, the role of the family, and the enigma of relations between the sexes'. Such images, formulated at the very time when the political and philosophical

structures of modernity were first being laid down in Europe, depicting the exotic Other both as a place of unalloyed pleasure and as an insane counterpoint to true Enlightenment – a warning of the mad excesses of absolute monarchy – certainly do not correspond to any Asian reality. As Alain Grosrichard shows in this rich and detailed study, they represent only a 'surface mechanism', for the despot's supposed omnipotence, political and sexual, disguises almost total impotence and annulment: there is a void at the centre of power, and – as Hegel has already revealed – the tyrant is the slave of his slaves. The despot's power is, effectively, in the hands of others, first of the eunuchs who control the women (and who, surprisingly, contribute to the pleasuring which the Lord is incapable of providing), and above all of the Queen Mother, 'who alone – a dagger in her belt, surrounded by her female janissaries and her eunuchs – holds in her hands all the threads of the Empire'. Even the seraglio, a cliché for unalloyed masculine sexual power, is a place in which the difference between the sexes evaporates and hierarchical relations are inverted, 'a hell of debauchery and perversion … where the master, far from being the all-powerful male that he seems, is only a name for masking a contemptible effeminate creature'.

So, in a universe supposedly saturated by sex and power we find a systematic contradiction between appearance and reality, a persistent reversal of expected roles, in which the aggressively masculine phallocentric order of the seraglio turns out to be an illusion. But is there anything beyond these appearances other than more appearances? Are we now better informed, all fantasies expunged, all myths exhausted? Recent relationships between the West and the Middle East suggest that we are still trapped in a mental seraglio, still bewitched by fantasies of political, if not sexual, monstrosities. Through the narrow defile of a claustral press our fantasies are still nourished with self-serving tales of oriental horror. An inevitable comparison can be made with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published a year before the first edition of *The Sultan's Court*, in 1978. But while the former offers us a many-faceted study of the question of imperial power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an argued thesis of great breadth which has provoked a deluge of controversy, the latter focuses more precisely on a quite specific Western fantasy of power and lust as it emerged into European consciousness in the preceding centuries. It is a fiction which played a role in Europe's own self-understanding at a key moment in the mobilization of the idea of a rational society, yet in Grosrichard's narration it bequeaths us, finally, the unravelled paradox of power, a signifier which, like a Freudian fantasy, leaves us without a ground on which to decide firmly between the real and the imaginary. In a parody of a Magritte painting, the author rounds off his fascinating exploration with an Epilogue entitled 'This is Not a Story', an ending which finally frustrates us in our desire to penetrate effectively beyond that hole in the wall into the mysteries of the seraglio, that 'impossible real' which, as in the case of despotic power, is both revealed and veiled at the same time.

**John Clarke**

# Ameliorate this

Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1998. x + 200 pp., £12.95 pb., 0 7486 1104 5.

This book presents a diagnosis of the present state of postcolonial theory in the context of its intellectual and political origins. It underlines the need for an 'ameliorative and therapeutic theory' that will enable the 'subjects of postcoloniality' to come to terms creatively with the globalization of cultures and histories. Creativity, rather than authenticity, is the guiding idea, as both M.K. Gandhi and Frantz Fanon would have emphasized. The book proposes a 'non-violent reading of the colonial past' and advocates a spirit of democracy in the dealings of former 'political antagonists'. The central ethical message – put across clearly amidst a useful survey of the field taking us in several different directions – is that if we want to reorient ourselves with respect to our colonial past we must be equipped with the twin virtues of humility and generosity.

No reading of the past that overplays one's privilege as a theorist, and thus falters on the count of false pride, can achieve a balanced view of the possibilities that the future holds for us. Towards those 'subjects' on whose behalf the theorist speaks, she must maintain the stance of respect. An overzealous postcolonial theorist mistakenly invests unwarranted hopes in the power of anti-colonial textuality. Leela Gandhi joins voice with Aijaz Ahmad in reminding us that the struggle against colonialism is not just about capturing the imagination. There are real struggles that are fought on other grounds than the literary one. To concentrate exclusively on the formation of the colonial mind, in the writings of, say, the English novelists, or that of

the anti-colonial mind in the counter-narratives of the postcolonial writers, is to overlook the importance of those everyday confrontations that emerged and were negotiated in the exigencies of colonial government and the resistance to it. A postcolonial literary theorist ought, therefore, to be humble about the contribution that can be made in thinking 'a way out of the epistemological violence of the colonial encounter'.

Likewise, an intellectual generosity is in order towards those other theorists, past as well as present, whose role in colonial 'subjection' it is the heart of the postcolonial theorists' labours to uncover. A dumbing-down of one's opponents may lead to transitory victories but it cannot effect a long-term transformation in one's relationship to them. Nowhere in the book does Leela Gandhi digress from this ideal of intellectual generosity that she recommends to her readers. She practises the 'ethical hybridity' she preaches.

Gandhi's aim is to 'name' postcoloniality. She argues that postcolonial theory suffers on account of its unresolved relationship to Marxist humanism and poststructuralist anti-humanism. The chapters on 'Thinking Otherwise' and 'Postcolonialism and the New Humanities' trace this uncomfortable bind. In a few rapid moves, several only partially explained links are made between Descartes' 'self-centred philosophy', the 'violence' of 'Reason' as the 'weapon of Enlightenment philosophy', Nietzsche's archaeological discovery of 'malice' at the start of human history and, finally, the postmodern rejection of the 'overcoming' of particular cultural identities in favour of a 'universal civic identity'. The general fault lies, I think, in the lesson learnt from this intellectual history. Reason and 'devotion to truth' may have been born of the 'reciprocal hatred' and 'spirit of competition' of scholars, as Foucault notes; nonetheless, Gandhi, along with other allies of postmodernism, risks committing the fallacy of thereby limiting the role of reason to these uses. Ironically, her own commitment to thought is evident when she asks, 'Is it possible to think non-violently?' Uncharacteristically, the self-reflectiveness that marks the rest of the book is less evident in her tracing of the Enlightenment philosophy and its critique.

A fascinating discussion of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, to which a chapter is devoted, leads her to conclude that it is a 'limited text' because Said 'defeats the logic of his own intellectual egalitarianism by producing and confirming a reversed stereotype: the racist Westerner'. Likewise, Spivak, Trinh and Talpade Mohanty are accused of a 'reversed ethnocentrism' in their efforts to critique Western liberal feminisms. Gandhi dwells on the complexity of the variously gendered nature of the colonial encounters, especially on the way in which the making of the anti-colonial nationalist movements enlisted the woman question. This leads her to 'the question of nationalism'. The most important lesson that postcolonial theory needs to learn in this context is that 'people-who-comprise-the-nation' are distinct from the 'state-which-represents-the-nation', as Jayprakash Narayan, the Indian socialist leader, pointed out. The postcolonial state is geared to suppress 'vestigial traces of different imaginings struggling to find expression within' it. Therefore, a new vision of postnationalism, of 'one world', needs to be theorized.

Ashis Nandy's analysis of the symbiotic relationship of the colonizer and the colonized informs the vision of a postcolonial ethic which can ground genuinely collaborative politics and is aimed at the reduction of 'institutionalized suffering and oppression'. It is important, however, to heed the warning of premature celebration. Once-colonized nations need to 'engage with the differences between internal histories of subordination'. Instead of engaging in *realpolitik*, the manner in which the literary theorists go about articulating the postcolonial counter-narrative is by an uncritical valorization of the postcolonial/migrant text as necessarily subversive. Gandhi questions this presumption and in the most detailed chapter of the book, on 'Postcolonial Literatures', she sets out to argue that not all colonial texts are repressive and not all migrant writings are insurrectionary. Thus the celebrated 'hybrid' text of Salman Rushdie is rightly charged with having 'exacerbated the very polarities and binaries which it is discursively obliged, if not equipped, to refuse'.

This book is everything an introduction should be. It is focused, informative, thought-provoking, enjoyable and student-friendly. As an invitation to a first engagement with its now sprawling subject, it is timely and welcome.

**Meena Dhanda**

# Whose confusion?

E. San Juan, Jr, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, Macmillan, London, 1998. x + 325 pp., £30.00 hb., 0 333 73108 5.

Most of us who speak in one way or another under the influence of postcolonial theory are all too ready to

name hybridity, ambivalence and a lack of teleological certainty as the principles which provide our sense of 'postal' possibility. Accepting, as postcolonial theory tends to do, a world which can only constructively be seen through multiple and contingent lenses, it has become something of an orthodoxy to assume that wider angles of understanding are warped and ineffective when it comes to the 'real' stories of resistance to colonialism. We are primed, in other words, to emphasize what is ambivalent and encoded in texts and in historical interpretation. As a result, postcolonial theory tends to dismiss the models which might simplify this picture, seeing them as totalizing or essentializing extremes on the spectrum of scholarly and political error.

San Juan's restatement of a bigger picture profoundly challenges this 'postcolonial' orthodoxy. Openly opposing the best-known theorists of postcoloniality, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, San Juan argues that resistance to imperialism need not be seen as either fundamentally complex or text-based. In the series of essays which make up *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, San Juan makes a refreshingly tactile and historiographical case in support of the struggle against uneven development, convincingly demonstrating the appropriateness of reading individual lines of resistance as its explicit – rather than ambivalent or textual – chords. The examples which San Juan gives of such resistance are powerful: he reads the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiche Indian from Guatemala, as part of a unifying telos and introduces the poetry of Filipina revolutionary and feminist Maria Lorena Barros as part of a quest for solidarity and rational critique in the struggle against American imperialism. Similarly, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James and Paulo Freire all come out well in San Juan's terms as writers who can be taken 'at their word' rather being read as unsituated, textual strategists.

The result is that *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* is a powerful depiction of inequity and those who fight against it. In making his case, San Juan draws heavily on a Gramscian model of organization, which helps set him apart from the postcolonial/poststructuralist mainstream which rejects – with some cause – any Marxian metanarrative, as inadequate to notions of cultural difference. However, San Juan does seriously foreground this critique by suggesting that while it is necessary to keep hold of the idea of cultural difference as an end point, it is important to remember that, in the mean time, a whole range of 'culturally different' populations suffer from the same forms of exploitation. The plural and heterogeneous, in San Juan's terms, come out looking like other names for the confusion of the metropolitan (rather than revolutionary) subject, and the privileging of them on postcolonialism's part to date as an articulation of the *counterrevolutionary* tendencies of liberal democracy.

In spite of its refreshing ethical certainty, *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* is a sophisticated and challenging commentary on the unfolding world order. In this sense, while pursuing a feisty engagement with postcolonial theory San Juan does indeed go well beyond it.

**Christina Lupton**

David Theo Goldberg, *Racial Subjects: Writing on Race in America*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997. xi + 259 pp., £45.00 hb., £ 13.99 pb., 0 415 91830 8 hb., 0 415 91831 6 pb.

In this collection of essays Goldberg employs the theoretical framework he developed in *Racist Culture* (Blackwell, 1993) to explore popular themes (e.g., the O.J. Simpson trial) in an accessible style. Goldberg provides analyses of the racialization of social subjects in America by looking at the history of the racial categories adopted in the US Census, and by discussing the current interest in mixed race. Since he believes that racialization is, mostly, a consequence of racism, Goldberg's analyses of racial subjects are informed by an account of the variety of racisms. Goldberg rejects the increasingly widespread view of racism as a matter of hate speech. Instead, he argues that racism is to be understood as a multiple phenomenon which emerges from exclusionary relations of power.

In the last four essays in the collection Goldberg deploys his accounts of racisms and of racial subjects to address issues concerning race and law, affirmative action, the relations between blacks and Jews, as well as the rise of the black public intellectual. In each case, he attempts to provide suggestions as to which 'counter-to-racism' practices could be effective responses to the specific kinds of exclusion at work, and avoids the trap of searching for a single generalized solution to the problems of racism.

**Alessandra Tanesini**