
How do we think modernity through its uneven and entangled histories of Empire and capitalism, racism and migration? How do we disrupt its universalising assumptions and un-think its naturalised Eurocentric categories? Iain Chambers addresses these and other key concerns of postcolonial scholarship in *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*. These questions remain essential, Chambers aptly notes, because while postcolonial studies might have “lost the edge of a paradigm shift in the Anglo-American academy, this is certainly by no means the case in continental Europe, where its critical cut and disruption of the agenda of the social and human sciences has still largely to be registered” (p.25). *Postcolonial Interruptions* is divided into six chapters that do not offer a neat, teleological narrative nor a straight-forward argument. It is indeed a “rough, undone and frayed web that sustains the arguments in this book” (p.3). This style of writing is part of the argument. As Chambers insists, this is not a scholarly paper or monograph, but essayistic prose that interrupts and fractures illusions of “discursive rationality” (p.13). Indeed, the book reads like an extended meditation on the making and (potential) unmaking of Euro-American dominated modernity. It maps pulse points of postcolonial studies, synthesises and pushes further different strands of postcolonial argument, and offers a rich resource of thought and method. It throws up questions and suggests avenues for investigation, rather than giving definite or final answers. Chambers’ syncretic and almost poetic approach thus does not lend itself to summary, and therefore this review offers commentary on what I consider to be Chambers’ most interesting contributions, and notes aspects of his argument that I believe could be pushed further.

*Postcolonial Interruptions* and Chapter 2 in particular offer an important reminder of what “postcolonialism” means for the “West”. Chambers’ postcolonialism
disposes with homogeneous and teleological assumptions of time and universalising imaginations of space. He traces modernity’s fractured, uneven and shifting geographies and entangled and networked histories to show that connections with its Others have always been central to the making of “Europe”. That is, “European modernity” has always been a global story with crucial impulses not necessarily or even primarily originating in Europe. Rather than re-inscribing the West as centre and central, Chambers thus scrutinises the idea of the “West” through a postcolonial lens and suggests “an ethnography not of the elsewhere, but of the West itself” (p.89). This is a decidedly present concern. Postcolonial analysis remains relevant exactly because Europe mostly fails to consider and learn from its Imperial past. The postcolonial for Chambers thus never becomes a way to simply rectify the historical record, but, crucially, the imperative is to imagine and shape alternative futures. It is such a multi-focal and non-teleological postcolonial sensibility that renders Chambers able to recognise that nothing is secured, anywhere. Consequently, for instance, “the kind of state that Egypt has become represents one potential secular future towards which Western democratic states are moving” (p.68).

Another important contribution is Chambers’ explicit thinking together of processes of colonialism and capitalism, culture and political economy. Political economy, Chambers insists, especially in Chapters 2 and 3, is a decidedly postcolonial matter as “the political economy of capitalism, modernity and colonialism have been so tightly bound into each other trajectories” (p.14). As he argues: “This is not about adding the equations of culture and power to the economic formula. It is about an altogether more complex coming together in a precise political economy” (p.4). This also implies rethinking our spatial assumptions and “to change our very understanding of what constitutes the contemporary polity, its wealth, culture and population” (ibid.). Chambers highlights the importance of thinking postcoloniality and neoliberal capitalism together. This means understanding the political order that still underlies capitalism as grounded also in the brutal negation of non-property recognising peoples
and their epistemologies (p.30) and secured by the brutal oppression of resistance, as in
the case of the police killings of South African miners resisting the employment
conditions of a London-based company in 2012 (p.53). The everyday (re-)making of our
political economy and the on-going accumulation of wealth continue to thrive on the
postcolonial production of difference and on colonial divisions of the planet. Yet, the
contemporary nature of this process also implies real potential for its interruption and
this, Chambers argues, is ultimately the job of critical scholarship.

Throughout the book and principally in Chapters 4-6, Chambers turns to the
potential of art to provide methodological openings, and disrupt and enrich our
conceptual vocabulary. His engagement with art follows on from a recognition that
“Who, in the present political economy of the world, has the power to pronounce, to
archive and exhibit?” is a central political question (p.88). When writing critical
histories of the postcolonial present, the concept of the archive thus needs to be stretched
to include other memories, stories and perspectives. The archive is never merely there or
finished; its assemblage is always bound up with wider power struggles, and the very
idea of an archive is culturally and politically situated. The archive, then, is what needs
to be under discussion: What is legitimated as an archive? Which and whose memory is
drawn on in producing knowledge? Such questions imply that new methodological and
analytical approaches should be key to postcolonial scholarship. The aim is to change
the very conditions of knowledge production, “to stretch and rework our understanding
of the archive and leave it open to the uninvited guest and her unrecognised histories”
(p.86). In this context, art allows us to uncover and appreciate Other histories and
stories. But art offers more. Crucially, as Chambers suggests, we should not rely on
received vocabulary to analyse what we might recognise as art, but enlist art to scrutinise
and enrich the categories and languages we deploy for scholarly analysis (p.97). For
instance, considering remix as a method, just like jazz improvisation or the DJ’s cut, “we
can confront and configure the sedimented and intersectional composition of a
modernity that does not move to a single beat or uniform pulse” (p.102). Art, then, adds
to the broken archive of modernity and offers the potential to help us understand and learn from “unauthorised modernities”.

Throughout Postcolonial Interruptions, migration is a key theme, both literally and metaphorically, as event and episteme. Chambers centrally mobilises the figure of the migrant to disrupt modernity’s narratives and categories: “concentrated in the stranger, today embodied, above all, in the contemporary migrant, is the profound interrogation and subsequent interruption of a precise cultural and historical formation that now finds its practices and definitions disturbed” (p.72). Chambers thus proposes “learning, in the profoundest manner, from the modern migrant” (p.9). But who is that migrant that Chambers proposes we should learn from? Sara Ahmed (2000: 82) critiqued a slippage between “literal” and “metaphoric” migration, noting that it “assumes that migration has an inherent meaning: it constructs an essence of migration in order to theorise that migration as a refusal of essence”. Moreover, Ahmed (2000: 81) argues, working with the migrant as a figure conflates different kinds of journeys and “erases and conceals the historical determination of experiences of migration”.

Throughout Postcolonial Interruptions contemporary migration is equated with South-North movement and the contemporary migrant is a priori vulnerable, inhabiting “the abject world of contemporary migration” (p.39). It is from an already geographically situated and racialised “migrant” that presumably disruptive subaltern knowledge springs. Many migrants, of course, do move from the souths of this world to its norths. Some of them struggle, experience violence, marginalisation and exploitation. Yet, if these dimensions come to define the “migrant” as such, they create a homogenised and essentialised figure that risks naturalising socially constituted experiences with specific histories—exactly the contrary of what Chambers advocates. That which becomes seen as a normal, even natural, part of being “migrant” goes easily unquestioned, and even becomes unquestionable. The matter in need of explaining becomes the supposed explanation. Such a reified “migrant” also easily obscures dimensions of marginalisation or subjugation that might have less to do with “migrant” status than with wider
racialised, classed and gendered inequalities.

Further, the “migrant” as already poor and exploited renders invisible those migrants that in no way struggle, disrupt or transgress, but take part in, benefit from and advance contemporary power formations, also through their migrations. Accordingly, Chambers speaks of “the altogether more systematic and aggressive migration of Europeans towards the rest of the planet over a period of centuries, now suitably forgotten” (p.38). However, the past tense seems misplaced here. Postcolonial capitalism still relies on the migration of its most privileged avatars. Similarly, Chambers states that there is “barely a whiff of interest in the immigrant as a human, social and historical being” (p.76). Yet, arguably only some migrants are denied such interest and the crucial question here is who and why—and how the selective application of the label “migrant” takes part in this politics. As Chambers notes in an aside, “while whites who migrate today are apparently expats, the term ‘migrant’ is racially reserved for those who arrive from the so-called global South” (p.84). Yet, rather than fundamentally critiquing this “categorical” distinction, Chambers himself largely adheres to it. Arguments about the “contemporary denial of the right to movement and migration” (p.75) and figurations of the “migrant” as per se disruptive and imbued with critical perspective render invisible privileged migrations, their productions and effects. Chambers’ figure of the migrant not only opens but also closes analytical doors. Accordingly, in Chapter 4, walking through Nairobi’s “Electric Avenue” in “the heart of Nairobi club land” prompts Chambers to think about emergent public spheres, a discussion that leads him to “illegal immigrants in the backstreet of Naples, rapping in Arabic” (p.63). Instead of reviving such received imaginary, Chambers could have asked how Nairobi’s Euro-American migrants working unlawfully while on visitor passes and enjoying Nairobi’s night life right in front of him do not become “illegal immigrants” in imagination and social positioning.

Chambers’ figure of the migrant thus largely mirrors that of Western public and political discourses. Yet, postcolonial critique should interrupt this category “migrant”, “illegal” or otherwise, not rely on it analytically (see also Bigo 2002).
political discourses a classed and racialised figure of the “migrant” is made to do highly problematic political work. Migration is becoming a key site for the development of new forms of governmentality, social difference and inequality. As Chambers notes, Northern countries are selectively securing and proliferating their borders, devising new and intensifying old technologies of control and surveillance, all ostensibly in response to migration. Right-wing groups and governments are (again) able to justify and popularise racist and xenophobic agendas, by framing them as “concerns” about “migrants” who are fast becoming the quintessential Other. At the same time, citizens of the global North and to some extent wealthy Southern citizens are able to move around the globe ever faster and more unrestricted—also because they are not positioned as “migrants” but as “expats”. We thus need to work to dissect migration categories’ veneer of neutrality, understand their racialised operations, and examine the multiple logics of power that work through them. Ultimately, Postcolonial Interruptions provides ample resources for such a project. As Chambers rightly notes, “the ‘south’ as a political and historical question is, above all, about the power exercised on those held in its definitions” (62). Academic categories, while being presented as though timeless and given, are rather the historically situated products of a continual working up of the world into a particular conceptual register that reflects a culturally elaborated set of social relations and power. The naturalisation of such terms and their subsequent global application underwrites a colonial enterprise. (p.19)

This insight also needs to be applied to the figures and categories of migration.
References


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