

Moralizing in Deep Time

The concept of “deep time” dates from the late 18th century, when geologists trying to estimate the age of the Earth diverged dramatically from the Biblical account of the Creation. Eventually they arrived at the conclusion that the Earth is more than 5 billion years old. That is a very large number, and as is often pointed out, it makes the period of history we care about interpreting and changing seem very, very small. As John McPhee put it, if you “consider the Earth's history as the old measure of the English yard, the distance from the King's nose to the tip of his outstretched hand,” then “one stroke of a nail file on his middle finger erases human history.”

Playing games of scale like this may not seem the best possible way to take up the subject of postcolonialism and ethics. I begin here because I think for better or worse deep time is here to stay. And because I want to suggest that we have been led into deep time by the postcolonial paradigm, the subject that gathers us together today. And because there will be ethical consequences.

Edward Said's premise in his 1978 classic Orientalism was the existence of “an ontological and epistemological distinction” between Orient and Occident, or the West and the rest” (2). More precisely (I'm still quoting) it was “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (7). This proposition named a primal and ongoing injury inflicted by Europe on the rest of the

world, an injury which was part of Europe's historical self-constitution (one zone of research) while it has also continued to impose various constraints on the development and expression of non-European peoples and cultures (another zone of research). I don't need to tell you how much material scholars have uncovered to corroborate and enrich these insights; I'm sure you could tell me a great deal about why and how they continue to be productive in the European context. I will not enter into the debate over whether, with the passage of time, colonialism and the sufferings it imposed have become less central to or representative of the total spectrum of injustices. Simon During has raised this point in a response to Robert Young, and it's worth raising. To judge from the titles of recent and upcoming conferences in the US, we may be entering a new stage vis-a-vis the postcolonial. But I'm not going to play trend-spotter. What concerns me more for the moment is the logic by which the critique of Eurocentrism, which threw into question our maps of the world, also overthrows what the historian David Christian calls our "maps of time."

In the wake of Orientalism, there was a predictable rush to pay more attention to cultures that had been misrepresented, excluded, or marginalized. Little by little, this entailed recognizing that many of them, like China and India, had canons and traditions that go back thousands of years. It is self-evident that you cannot do justice to such cultures without attending to their full history. The problem is that much of that history belongs to the period before European power had had any significant impact on them. Thus the great historical injury of European colonialism finds itself marginalized. And such cases appear to be less the exception than the rule. As Alexander Beecroft has

argued in New Left Review, the modern politicized model of European core, non-European periphery works well enough for the recent past, but it simply doesn't apply for most of the world's culture during most of the world's history. It would be temporally provincial, therefore, to take the particular inequalities and injustices of the recent past as if they were universal. In this way cosmopolitanism in space-- as a relationship to what Edward Said called the world of nations-- mutates into cosmopolitanism in time.

In a sense, then, it's not too much to say that postcolonialism is self-subverting. It begins with a demand to respect non-European cultures that have been disrespected. But to supply the missing respect is to find oneself moving away from the postcolonial premise of a unique and defining European injury to those cultures. All cultures must be listened to. But when you listen, what do you hear? For most of them, most of the time, Europe was not what they were speaking about. And when they were, were they less prone to caricature those not like themselves than Europeans were to caricature them? Did the Persians think in less stereotypical terms of the Greeks than the Greeks thought of the Persians? I note in passing that speaking up for hitherto silenced cultures was not Edward Said's own method in Orientalism, as a number of his critics complained at the time; he did not counter Western stereotypes about the East by letting Eastern cultures speak for themselves. And in retrospect, this looks like a smart move. When these cultures do speak for themselves, there is no guarantee that they will sound any more secular, or humanist, or humane in what they say about the West, or about each other, than the West has sounded when it talked about them. Would it be surprising to find appreciable amounts of essentialism, poisonous misrepresentation, and what would have

to be called racism? The charge of Orientalism in reverse, or “Occidentalism”--a symmetrical stereotyping of the West by the rest-- has not been slow to arise. [A Google search last spring uncovered dozens of books with the word “occidentalism” in their titles.] You could always answer that Orientalism was different because of the greater power it wielded. But turning from culture’s content to its power would not end the conversation, especially if you were willing to talk about earlier periods, other empires, non-European empires. Is there such a thing as an empire without the coercive exercise of power--less euphemistically, without slaughter, enslavement, rapine, pillage, and plunder?

Watching pre-modern and non-European empires slowly swim into scholarly focus, as I did at an excellent conference last year at the University of Massachusetts, my instinctive reaction was a certain skepticism about the political motives behind this enterprise. Why are we global northerners suddenly so interested? Is this perhaps a backhanded way of letting ourselves off the hook, absolving Europe of the guilt acquired during the centuries when it violently conquered and exploited so much of the planet? Worse, is it part of the same reactionary backlash as the Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik, who called his anti-immigrant manifesto “2083,” thereby commemorating the 1683 defense of Vienna against the advancing Ottomans? Can it be coincidence that it’s so often proponents of ethnic cleansing who are most prepared to leap in a single bound across hundreds of years as if the slow accretion of months, weeks, days, and hours had no moral effect on their pent-up anger, as if the passage of time were irrelevant to their sense of victimhood? Surely this is not what we’re training for.

Surely not. And yet I don't believe this temporal expansiveness is merely a cynical or sinister ploy on the part of European intellectuals to achieve European self-forgiveness. On the contrary, it seems a logical if perhaps unexpected outgrowth of lines of thought that have their own autonomous momentum and command respect in their own right. For example, ecological thought.

“What enables the perception of postmodernism-as-past,” Mark McGurl writes, “is a new cultural geology, by which I mean a range of theoretical and other initiatives that position culture in a time-frame large enough to crack open the carapace of human self-concern” (380).¹ For McGurl, this self-humbling geological time-frame has been forced on us by global warming and the realization (only since the year 2000) that human beings have become non-negligible factors or actors in natural history, with effects on the planet so decisive that the period since the Industrial Revolution is on its way to being renamed the Anthropocene. McGurl does not say, but I will, that in the last 12 years Greenland has lost 15% of its territory to global warming. McGurl cites Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2009 essay “The Climate of History,” which lists climate change among processes that “may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations” (212).² Common sense has long held that early non-European empires were fundamentally different creatures from later European empires because only the latter combined imperialism with capitalism. In making the case for what he calls “deep history” (212), history on a scale

¹ Mark McGurl, “The New Cultural Geology,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 57:3&4 Fall/Winter 2011, 380-390.

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 2009), 197-222.

of 10,000 or hundreds of thousands of years, Chakrabarty fights off all attempts to save the hypothesis that capitalism is to blame for the state of the planet, and he makes it clear that his expanded temporal frame will necessarily result in some new global apportioning of blame, or at least a backing off from the old politics of blame, such as it was or is. [Chakrabarty does not say, but I will, that the struggle against capitalism today is in no way undermined by admitting, as I think we are forced to, that capitalism's degree of impact on ordinary people is not unprecedented--that earlier empires too emptied out farmland and closed off grazing land, produced ferocious transformations in the habits and possibilities of everyday life.] If there is a choice of (I quote) “[w]hether we blame climate change on those who are retrospectively guilty—that is, blame the West for their past performance— or those who are prospectively guilty (China has just surpassed the United States as the largest emitter of carbon dioxide, though not on a per capita basis)” (218), then even if the effect of global warming is to exacerbate existing inequalities both within and between states, blame can no longer be calculated in the same old way.

This magnification of time-scale coupled with a blurring of colonial blame can also be traced back to another, entirely distinct logic: the emergence of indigenous peoples as an international political movement. In an article in boundary 2 some years back, I tried to come at this topic from a literary angle. The Algerian-French writer Assia Djebar, writing a history of the French conquest of Algeria in the nineteenth century in her book Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade (1985), chose to forget the earlier conquest of the Berbers, many centuries earlier, by the Arabs. That earlier conquest would have been a distraction, as would the conquest of the Arabs by the Ottomans in 1510. On the other

hand, Djébar did not *entirely* forget them. The Ottoman conquest is mentioned in the “Chronology” that stands just outside the text—in fact it’s the first date mentioned. And the Berbers are alluded to when Djébar talks about writing her book “in a foreign language, not in either of the native tongues of my native country— the Berber of the Dahra mountains or the Arabic of the town where I was born” (204). There were good reasons for Djébar’s almost complete forgetting of these earlier acts of conquest: they would unavoidably relativize the European conquest, and it was the European conquest that made the most urgent political demands on memory, especially since the actions and sufferings of the women who fought against the French occupation very largely remained unmemorialized. And yet there were also good reasons for remembering the conquest of the Berbers by the Arabs. The reasons are present and political: indigenous peoples of North Africa have now mobilized in political movements demanding self-determination or linguistic and cultural equality. The Berbers or Amazigh have brought their second-class status in a predominantly Arab culture before the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. One former member of the Permanent Forum, Hassan Id Balkassm, is himself a Berber.

The temporal pulling back that allows a conquest that happened in the 19th century to appear in the same frame with a conquest that happened in the 7th and 8th centuries has an obvious effect on the meaning of colonialism. The term has not been abandoned; on the contrary you could say that indigenous peoples have reinvigorated it, holding open a colonial moment that was in some danger of closing. But they have also obviously stretched the concept in the sense that those accused of being colonizers are no longer

exclusively Europeans. That could not be the case for a movement that includes not just the Ojibwa of the US and the Maori of New Zealand but also the Berbers of Algeria and Morocco, the Masai of Kenya and Tanzania, and the Chakma people in the Chittigong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. It seems unlikely that colonialism will ever count again as an exclusively European phenomenon. At the United Nations, some states have argued that colonialism is only colonialism if it involved the crossing of water in a boat. Conquest by land would not be colonialism. Unsurprisingly, this so-called “salt water” or “blue water” hypothesis has been strongly urged by China, which posits that it has no indigenous peoples.³ But it has not gotten a lot of traction even in Asia. This position would of course deny the convergence between America’s westward expansion in the nineteenth century and Russia’s symmetrical eastward expansion, each of them resulting in the conquest of many local populations. The effort to maintain the unique guilt of Europe would force us to declare that European Russia was not a colonial power. This absurdity would sacrifice the indigenous status of the peoples of the Caucasus and Siberia along with all the indigenous peoples of Asia who are currently striving to protect themselves against the majorities around them.⁴ That’s too big a sacrifice.

So. It’s too late for anyone to cling to the European monopoly of blame-- which is of course also a mode of European self-aggrandizement. If this ethical blurring or dispersion and the expanded time-frame associated with it are conclusions we are led to

³ Other Asian nations, like the Philippines, Japan, and Indonesia, have rejected this idea, at least theoretically, and even China has muted its references.

⁴ Yes, there is a long, dirty history of imperial powers courting indigenous minorities in order to divide and conquer. And no, it shouldn’t be forgotten. But it does not make the subject go away.

by three such different lines of thought, each compelling in its own right-- the international indigenous movement, attention to climate change and the degradation of the planet, and the internal logic of postcolonialism itself, which responds to Orientalism with cultural inclusiveness-- it seems to follow that this destination is not optional, whatever the inconveniences. It is a landscape we will have to learn to move around in. That's the goal to which I'll devote the remainder of this talk.

In proposing that we might have to mention the Arab conquest of the Berbers in the same breath with the French conquest of Algeria, I'm not at all sure I was speaking as a temporal cosmopolitan. I was not affirming, with the Native American writer Leslie Silko, that what happened five hundred years ago should be as real to everyone as what happened five minutes ago. I was not agreeing that ancient claims to victimhood should always be honored, like that of the Serbs against the Muslims. My criteria were flagrantly presentist. I think it is now something like common sense that the crucial distinction between indigenous claims to victimhood and, say, the claims of the Serbs of the 1990s to be responding to the treachery of the Bosnian Muslims in the 14th century is the existence of oppression *in the present*--that is, *ongoing* victimhood. That was not the case for the Serbs, but it is the case for the indigenous, amongst others. If I may quote from a recent interview with the Israeli journalist Amira Haas, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor: "The difference is, with the Palestinians, it continues and continues and continues."

But this position does not lead directly toward any consistent politics of time. Nor does it clarify what if anything might be helpful about the phrase "cosmopolitanism in

deep time.” That phrase is intriguing to me in part because it names a slot, even if that slot remains uninhabited for the moment, that’s different from the cosmopolitanism with which we are most familiar. The cosmopolitanism with which we are most familiar is programmatically and unashamedly presentist. One might almost say that the dominant strain of liberal cosmopolitanism has defined itself against the pull of origins, temporal priority, depth of temporal field. Think of the philosopher Anthony Appiah, the legal theorist Jeremy Waldron, and the literary critic Walter Michaels. All are champions of cosmopolitanism, all have spent time denying the claims of indigenous peoples, and all identify cosmopolitanism as that denial-- as a refusal of any restraint on the present by an always rapidly receding past. I’m in search of an alternative that would inhabit time differently.

Let us agree with them, however, that the passage of time *does* matter, and *should* matter. Still, it is very hard to talk about *how much* it should matter. Is it self-evident that time should not be allowed to erase the debts to Germany incurred by Greece since it joined the euro, on the one hand, but on the other hand that the theft of money by Germany from Greece to finance the Nazi occupation of Greece fifty years earlier, during World War II-- an amount estimated at \$14 billion, without interest-- can and should be erased, that it cannot be legitimately remembered? Greek governments have been trying to raise that question with Germany for the last two decades. The prevailing view seems to be that it was always already too late for this debt to be registered and repaid. If there exist unofficial statutes of limitation restricting the validity of claims, one would like to

know more about how and where and by whom they are formulated and what understandings of time they embody.

But yes, the passage of time does matter. The most obvious way it matters, as in the case of the German theft from the Greek treasury, is by separating off past actions from present liability, protecting those past actions by making the present act of judging them seem not so much wrong as irrelevant, not worth doing, a waste of time. It's strange that something so obvious should also be so mysterious. Blame is time-sensitive. It has an invisible sell-by date. It expires, goes bad, starts to smell. If there is an account of this process and the rules governing it, I don't know where to find them. Especially as the time-frame expands and this process accelerates, it would be useful to have a name. For the moment, borrowing from Milan Kundera, I will refer to it as the acceleration of presumptive forgiveness. Reflecting on Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence, Kundera wrote in The Unbearable Lightness of Being that without such recurrence, we end up being reconciled with our worst enemies; he finds himself looking at a photo of Hitler with nostalgia. Because time is linear and passes irrevocably, "everything is pardoned in advance and therefore cynically permitted."

Under the heading of cynical permissiveness I will speak briefly about some articles in the Journal of World History, one place where questions of large spatial scale and large temporal scale have come together. The journal's founding editor, the late Jerry Bentley, argues in an essay entitled "Hemispheric Integration, 500-1500 CE" that modern nation-centered history has neglected the considerable cross-cultural interaction and "integration" that happened in the pre-modern period. He's therefore interested (I

quote) in “processes, such as long-distance trade, biological diffusions, and cultural exchanges, that profoundly influenced the lives of individuals and the development of their societies throughout the eastern hemisphere during the millennium 500-1500 CE” (239].

“From the viewpoint of structures that supported cross-cultural interactions,” he writes, “the period 500-1500 CE falls into two fairly equal halves. For the first half-millennium, both political and economic foundations facilitated cross-cultural interactions. Political foundations were the large, stable societies organized by centralized imperial states--particularly the Tang empire in China and the Abbasid empire in southwest Asia, and to a lesser extent the Byzantine empire in the eastern Mediterranean basin and even the Carolingian empire in western Europe. The economic foundations were the overland trade networks linking east Asia and the eastern Mediterranean region by the silk roads and the emerging maritime trade networks of the Indian Ocean basin. The imperial states promoted overland trade and communication in a way similar to the Han, Kushan, Seleucid, Parthian, and Roman empires of an earlier era, but they promoted a great deal more cross-cultural interaction than their classical predecessors... Large imperial states continued to promote cross-cultural interaction in the half-millennium from 1000 to 1500 CE., but the states in question were transregional nomadic empires rather than political structures arising from settled agricultural societies. From the tenth through the sixteenth century, nomadic Saljuqs, Khitans, Jurchens, Tanguts, Mon and others embarked on a remarkable round of empire building that shaped Eurasian affairs from the China seas to the Danube River. The nomadic empires had a mixed legacy for

long-distance trade” (240-1).

What unites the agricultural settlers of the first half-millennium to the nomads of the second half-millennium is the activity of empire-building. You will note that words like “empire” and “imperial” appear here without any ethical or political inflection of the sort that would be expected if we were discussing the modern European empires. If their ethical neutrality seems entirely natural and normal, I suppose it’s because we assume that ethical or political judgments would be anachronistic. After all, this happened a long time ago. In that time, wasn’t it literally unimaginable for such ethical or political judgments to be formulated? Was there any language in which they could be formulated? Could any notion exist of refraining from the full exercise of powers of conquest, with all that exercise entails, including the attendant massacres of what had not yet come to be called civilians?⁵

Bentley claims that he is virtuously rejecting presentism by refusing to use the ethical vocabulary of the as yet unborn nation-state, the vocabulary of democracy and freedom. As he argues in another essay in the same journal, too much world history is in fact patriotic world history, its endpoint something like American democracy.⁶ We don’t want that. But does he really avoid presentism? It’s true that presumably anachronistic political objections to empire have no place in his account. On the other hand, trade,

⁵ I had a brief look at the literature on “ancient genocide,” and the record is not inspiring either in the period of the Hebrew Bible or that of classical Greece. I’m sure you know juicy examples from both traditions.

⁶ “Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History,” Journal of World History 16:1 (March 2005), 51-82

circulation, cross-cultural contact, and integration, which are all ethically positive terms for us now, are also positive terms for Bentley--in fact, they are his *key* terms. What he wants to show is that a kind of cross-border or large-scale inter-cultural contact that we value positively now but think is quite recent actually began much longer ago. He likes the idea of a world that is united, but is trying to get it united faster, to show that it was united earlier. In this sense he is not being any less “presentist” than anyone else, he’s just dropping one set of value terms while retaining another: unity, cross-cultural contact, integration, a very American-globalist sense of peaceful integration by means of commerce. Why is it that “cross-cultural interaction” can be a positive for us but massacre, say, can’t be a negative? From the perspective of core-periphery, West/rest models, Bentley is trying to equalize things, but he equalizes them by eliminating the element of coercion *on both sides*. Empire is not about coercion; it’s about the free circulation of commodities. In offering us one thousand years of empire, but with not one drop of blood to be seen, he is offering us a picture of globalization today exactly as its champions wish to imagine it: all commerce, creative interaction, and free choice, with no coercion anywhere.

One way to rehabilitate European empire is to delegitimize the terms of moral scrutiny usually applied to it. Those terms can be delegitimized by simply speaking and acting as if they did not apply to *non-European* empires. The implication will follow little by little that these terms don’t apply at all--that they are no longer serviceable, or no longer needed.

Bentley's version of the turn to a larger time-scale leaves the contemporary as was and, instead of re-positioning it, merely provides distant antecedents for it. In showing that pre-modern non-Europeans were more like us, it forgives them their sins-- the sorts of bad behavior that once upon a time would have gotten them called "barbarians"-- but does so within an immense exercise of *self*-forgiveness. It's not clear here that abandoning a power-laden core-periphery model for neutral-sounding talk of decentered "networks" represents any moral or political improvement. One would not like to think that the conceptual fashion for "networks" has arisen to as to discourage us from realizing that coercion was a decisive part of the history of empires, and remains decisive today. But this may also be one hidden intention behind the turn from economic to environmental metaphors, another aspect of the new expansion of temporal scale. Because the environment is itself such an urgent ethico-political issue, you never notice that the ethico-political and the dynamic of power to which it responds are suddenly missing, evacuated not just from the account you are reading, but from the *kind* of account you are reading.

Alexander Beecroft, whose critique of the core-periphery model I quoted a few minutes ago, lists some languages that have been powerful without the backing of a powerful country of origin: Chinese in Japan, Persian in the Mughal and Ottoman courts, and Greek in the eastern Mediterranean, which (I quote) "likewise has little to do with imperial power" (95). The implication is that yes, there were empires, but it didn't matter *to the literature* that they were empires. It's as if the fact of literature coming into

existence within an empire somehow had a weaker effect on it than the fact of its coming into existence within a nation-state—as if it were miraculously more autonomous within an empire and therefore didn't become a vehicle for imperial values. Welcome to the new imperial planet. If empire is everywhere, then we don't really have to talk about it anymore. And in any case, we *can't* talk about it, at least not with the sort of political vocabulary we're used to.

For a scholar, the worst thing about this temporally accelerating forgiveness is its blunting of scholarly curiosity. If there truly existed no vocabulary for resistance to empire during the thousand years from 500 to 1500 CE, no vocabulary that could serve to condemn not just those attempting to conquer us but also our own attempts to conquer others, then we would have at least two options. First, we could self-consciously impose that vocabulary from outside, knowing that in so doing we are being no more presentist than the celebrators of circulating commodities and cross-cultural contact. Second, we could treat the emergence of such a vocabulary as a major event around which history could then be organized, and this even if the language of resistance to empire was honored only selectively and intermittently. But my preference goes to a third option. We know that as attention shifts from “us-and-them” to “them,” a certain degree of bad conduct arises in the foreground as characteristic of “them” when “we” were not around. But perhaps we should be more curious about the *good* conduct. After all, why should we assume that the history of colonial self-criticism, as in Multatuli's 1860 publication of Max Havelaar, was a uniquely European phenomenon? It is true that even Tolstoy could

not publish in his lifetime his astonishing novella Hadji Murat, which described the destruction of indigenous villages of the Caucasus by the Russian army. But there is at least one Japanese novel about the slaughter of civilians during the Japanese invasion of China that came out within months of the 1936 Rape of Nanjing. And if we were to look, it seems possible that we would find more of this sort of thing in other colonialisms. other empires-- in Turkey, in Persia, in China, in North Africa. Perhaps even among the Mongols. In order to know, of course, we would have to forego the infinite forgiveness or condescension that takes ethical and political considerations out of play and seek resistance to empire in places where we wouldn't expect to find it.

There is a parallel here with the history of secularism. In South Asia, among other places, secularism was long treated as an alien import that came with the colonizers. More recently, however, a native pre-history has been exposed; secularism has been established as a tendency of Indian thought that developed through the cohabitation of Hindus and Muslims. It seems to me that it would make a difference in current debates over European immigration and identity if secularism were no longer seen as the exclusive possession of Europe. And it could not be a bad thing to try out the same hypothesis with regard to anti-imperial self-critique. It may not be there. But we won't know unless we look.

“Every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism”. With historians of the Roman Empire frantically trying to find out whatever they can about the so-called barbarians, it seems opportune to note that Benjamin's famous line

did not reject either the idea of barbarism or the idea of civilization. Both are ethically loaded terms. If civilization means anything, it would surely mean critique of the barbarism of colonial conquest. As a cosmopolitan project, that is to say in a field that has expanded both in space and in time, the so-called history of civilization would surely include a number of highly interesting exhibits of resistance to empire, outside as well as inside Europe. Perhaps it helps to think of this research project as the price that has to be paid for the moral leveling I have been talking about, the relativizing of Europe's colonial crimes and colonial shame. [THIS ENDING IS PROVISIONAL AS OF 12/11/13]