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Introduction: hating tradition properly

Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World is a book about the social trajectories of culture in the modern world system. The book comprises individual chapters on modernity, globalization, and the “West”; the conceptualization of nationalism in postcolonial studies; cricket and popular consciousness in the English-speaking Caribbean; and African pop music. It is intended as a self-consciously Marxist contribution to the academic field of postcolonial studies – one capable of suggesting a credible historical materialist alternative to the idealist and dehistoricizing scholarship currently predominant in that field in general. If I were asked to summarize the sustaining argument of the book – to say in a single sentence or less what the book as a whole was about – I would propose the rubric of “hating tradition properly.”

I derive this notion of “hating tradition properly” from Theodor W. Adorno’s fraught yet inexhaustibly rewarding work, *Minima Moralia*, which was first published in Germany in 1951 (although it had been written in exile during the dark war-era years of the 1940s). A particular fragment in *Minima Moralia* is entitled “Savages are not more noble” (*Die Wilden sind nicht bessere Menschen*: literally, “Savages are not better men”). At one and the same time smugly condescending and explosively radical, irretrievably Eurocentric and urgently anti-capitalist, it features Adorno at his most enigmatic and Olympian:

There is to be found in African students of political economy, Siamese at Oxford, and more generally in diligent art-historians and musicologists of petty-bourgeois origins, a ready inclination to combine with the assimilation of new material, an inordinate respect for all that is established, accepted, acknowledged. An uncompromising mind is the very opposite of primitivism, neophytism, or the “non-capitalist world.” It

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presupposes experience, a historical memory, a fastidious intellect and above all an ample measure of satiety. It has been observed time and again how those recruited young and innocent to radical groups have defected once they felt the force of tradition. One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly.¹

“One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly” (*um sie recht zu hassen*). The proposition will no doubt strike many contemporary readers as being noteworthy chiefly for its elitism; and its unabashed cultural supremacism, too, will surely loom to politically progressive thinkers as a liability, embarrassing if not positively reactionary. Cosmopolitan German-Jewish intellectual that he is, Adorno clearly takes it for granted not only that he has “tradition” in him, but also that this “tradition” is the only one worthy of the name. For him, *there are no other traditions*. As Edward Said has observed, for mid-century Euro-American cultural critics like Auerbach, Spitzer, Blackmur – and Adorno – “their culture was in a sense the only culture.” “Even in discussions concerning culture in general that seemed to rise above national differences in deference to a universal sphere, hierarchies and ethnic preferences (as between European and non-European) were held to.”²

The elitism and Eurocentrism of Adorno’s position cannot be gainsaid. Yet his standpoint is by no means as uncomplicatedly retrograde as it might initially seem. Indeed, my suggestion in *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* will be that for all the various and ultimately crippling problems that attach to Adorno’s own mobilization of it, the Adornian conceit of “hating tradition properly” in fact represents a uniquely illuminating and enabling rubric under which to think in a politically engaged fashion about intellectual and cultural practice today, not only or preeminently in the “First World,” nor (correspondingly) merely or preeminently in the “Third World,” but globally: athwart, rather than across, the imperial divide in the modern (more specifically: capitalist) world system.

Let me begin my commentary in this Introduction, then, by attempting to tease out some of the wider implications of Adorno’s formulation. The problem, as he states it, is not only that “neophytes,” intellectuals of “petty-bourgeois origins,” and students from the “non-capitalist world” lack tradition, but also that *they fail to disavow it in the right way* even when they *are* belatedly exposed to it. We must be careful, as we rush to criticize the presumptuousness of the first of the claims made here, not to neglect the subversive thrust

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of the second, whose implicit logic, I believe, radically qualifies – perhaps even overturns – the elitism and Eurocentrism of what precedes it. As we shall see, the enigmatic reflexivity of Adorno’s argument is quite remarkable.

In a characteristically cryptic and provocative formulation at the beginning of his essay “Cultural Criticism and Society,” written in the 1950s, Adorno proposes that cultural critics must *in principle* presume themselves to be the bearers of “tradition.” Such a presumption is, as it were, an objective precondition of critical practice: “the cultural critic can hardly avoid the imputation that he [*sic*] has the culture which culture lacks.”³ At first glance, this might seem a mere rationalization of the elitism of the critic’s own standpoint. (It is quite clear, for instance, that Adorno himself is never led to doubt his own critical credentials.) But Adorno’s argument is that while the presumption of cultural privilege is a *sine qua non* of criticism, the critic’s task ought be to use this privilege *against* culture, to defetishize culture by way of puncturing its elitist pretensions.⁴

The same strategy in argument is also in evidence, I want to suggest, in the fragment in *Minima Moralia* on “hating tradition properly.” Adorno insists upon the indispensability of “tradition” not for its vaunted civilizational attributes but because he believes that it is only from the ground of this tradition that the thoroughgoing, preservative yet emancipatory critique of its social conditions of possibility can be staged. The point for Adorno – as it is *not* for Auerbach, Spitzer, or Blackmur – is that while the tradition of European bourgeois humanism has always insisted upon its civility, has always gestured toward – even made a promise of – a universalistically conceived social freedom, it has never delivered on this promise, except, arguably, to the privileged few, and even then only on the basis of the domination of all the others. To hate tradition properly is in these terms very different from championing this exclusive (and excluding: what Raymond Williams called “selective”⁵) tradition; on the contrary, it is to keep faith with true universality, with the idea of a radically transformed social order, and to oppose oneself implacably to the false universality of modern (bourgeois) sociality. It is to use one’s relative class privilege to combat all privilege, to shoulder the responsibility of intellectualism by “mak[ing] the moral and, as it were, representative effort to say what most of those for whom [one] say[s] it cannot see.”⁶ Adorno construes the privilege borne by intellectuals very solemnly. It is “false” inasmuch as it is premised on class domination. But it alone affords the social fraction of which

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intellectuals are comprised the freedom, the means, the institutional-ly sanctioned authority, to commit themselves to *thinking* as a sustained and systematic mode of social practice. An “uncompromising mind,” we have already seen Adorno asserting, “presupposes . . . an ample measure of satiety.” Intellectuals can see, hear, think, and say things that other social agents cannot, not because they are “better men” (*sic*) than they, but because they have been socially endowed with the resources, the status, the symbolic and social capital, to do so. Much the same argument has also been made recently by Pierre Bourdieu, who, like Adorno (from whom he is elsewhere concerned to mark an appropriate distance), pushes it home to a far-reaching conclusion:

among the specific products of the fields of cultural production are all the means of knowledge and objectification . . . which . . . offer to intellectuals the possibility of achieving self-consciousness and of inquiring into the principles of their own practices, interests, and disinterestedness, not least of all their interest *in* disinterestedness. These means of knowledge especially guarantee to them the *privilege* of being able to discover the particular economic and social conditions or, to be perfectly clear, the *privileges* (such as *leisure*, *skholé*) that form the basis of their claims to the universal. Thus, provided that they are able to pursue it to the very end . . . this *critical reflexivity* that they monopolize can offer them the means of justifying in practice their wildest claims to the collective monopoly of reason, truth, and virtue: by compelling them to discover the privilege on which their claim to the universal rests, it compels them, indeed, to associate the pursuit of the universal with the perpetual struggle for the *universalization of the privileged conditions of existence* which make the pursuit of the universal possible.⁷

The social figure of the intellectual as Adorno and Bourdieu address it is of course a paradigmatically *modern* one.⁸ Bourdieu identifies the exercise of “critical reflexivity” as central to the practice of the intellectual; Adorno speaks of “historical memory” as a prerequisite of the “uncompromising mind.” Both features – reflexivity and historical consciousness – are unthinkable outside of the universe of modernity. It is therefore something of a rich irony that, in the enigmatic passage upon which this Introduction is predicated, Adorno should characterize the bearer of these features as one who has *tradition* in him (or her). Clearly, “tradition” is not being used here in its conventional sociological sense, where it stands as the precise *antonym* of modernity. There can be no question about Adorno’s familiarity with this standard sociological usage. Indeed, he deploys the concept of tradition in just the conventional sense

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elsewhere, most notably in an essay entitled "On Tradition," which begins as follows:

Tradition comes from *tradere*: to hand down. It recalls the continuity of generations, what is handed down by one member to another, even the heritage of handicraft. The image of handing down expresses physical proximity, immediacy – one hand should receive from another. Such immediacy is the more or less natural relation of a familial sort. The category of tradition is essentially feudal . . . Tradition is opposed to rationality, even though the one took shape in the other. Its medium is not consciousness but the pregiven, unreflected and binding existence of social forms – the actuality of the past . . . Tradition in the strict sense is incompatible with bourgeois society.⁹

Anthony Giddens has correctly pointed out that tradition cannot think itself as such. "In traditional societies . . . especially in small oral cultures, 'tradition' is not known as such, because there is nothing that escapes its influence and, therefore, nothing with which to contrast it. 'History' is not understood as the use of the past to mobilize change in the future, but as the repetitiveness of 'reversible time'."¹⁰ Elsewhere Giddens observes that the category of tradition "receives its identity only from the reflexivity of the modern."¹¹ The concept of "tradition," that is to say, is itself a modern(ist) concept. The point is well taken. But it is evident that in enjoining the critical intellectual to hate tradition properly, Adorno is *not* advocating hostility toward "the actuality of the past" as mediated through "the pregiven, unreflected and binding existence" of (rather than through the "consciousness" of) superseded social or cultural forms. On the contrary, measured along the continuum that stretches between tradition and modernity on the orthodox sociological plane, his injunction must be understood rather as being to hate *modernity* properly. For it is precisely *bourgeois* society, *bourgeois* humanism, *bourgeois* culture that Adorno wishes us to learn to hate in the right way, rigorously and thoroughly – that is to say, to redeem by totalization. And since, as he says, "tradition in the strict sense is incompatible with bourgeois society," it can only be a modern tradition – what we might, indeed, however paradoxically, call *the tradition of modernity* itself – that is for him the fitting object of the critical (or hating) intelligence. Adorno is not merely being perverse here, giving the name of "tradition" to what is conventionally termed "modernity" and distinguished categorically *from* tradition. On the contrary, as in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that enlightenment reifies itself in (partially) realizing itself, so too in this instance

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his suggestion is that in the modern era, the social logic of modernity has taken on the attributes of "tradition"; its structures and tendencies have sunk so deeply down into the fabric of social life as to have ceased to be spontaneously intuitable. What tradition is said to have been, modernity has now become – a medium that is no longer reflected upon but is instead uncritically received as pregiven and unalterable.

"[E]nlightenment can only make good its deficits by radicalized enlightenment."¹² Jürgen Habermas's lapidary formulation from *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is anticipated in Adorno's scrupulously Marxist argument that it is only on the basis of a dialectical critique (one that is simultaneously immanent and transcendental in its focus) that the particularism of bourgeois ideology can be exposed and its concrete totalization plausibly imagined. For those opposed to bourgeois class domination, it is necessary, on Adorno's reading, to think *with* modernity *against* modernity. For no other kind of thinking possesses the capacity to drive the historically actualized globality of the existing social order beyond its own ideological limits.

I make this point by way of suggesting that, as with Marx – and Georg Lukács, for whom Marxism represents "the self-knowledge of capitalist society"¹³ – the dialectical aspect of Adorno's work resists and confounds the cynical or genealogical supposition that the radical contingency or situatedness of thought (historical, ideological, strategic) serves to render all and any *particular* ideas conformist, in the sense of being so inextricably "of their time" that they are of necessity *internal* to its categorical logic. As Fredric Jameson has cogently pointed out, in an explicit rejoinder to those, like Foucault, who have tended to construe Marxism in suffocatingly historicist terms as "a nineteenth-century philosophy" pure and simple, it would be just as plausible (and might in fact make better sense) to argue that "the dialectic is itself an unfinished project, which anticipates modes of thought and reality that have not yet come into existence even today."¹⁴ The point can be generalized: to hate tradition *properly* is not at all to hate it on its own terms. "Properly," as Adorno uses the term, does not mark a plea for conformity, orderliness, civility, or good manners. Adorno calls for something far more profoundly ruptural, far less contained or, indeed, containable, than this. By the same token, however, the specification that tradition be hated "properly" obviously indicates that it is not enough merely to hate it *thoroughly* (in the sense, for example, that the Luddites might

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be said to have hated machinery). To hate tradition properly is rather to mobilize its own protocols, procedures, and interior logic against it – to demonstrate that it is only on the basis of a project that exceeds its own horizons or self-consciousness that tradition can possibly be imagined redeeming its own pledges.

Capitalism paradoxically creates the material conditions of possibility for socialism. But it also creates the grounds for, and renders thoroughly irrepressible, a *socialist imaginary*, whose conception of emancipation both negates and preserves the bourgeois conception: preserves it in the sense of affirming what, following Hegel, we might still term its “rationality” and “universalism”; negates it in the sense of recognizing that neither this rationality nor this universalism – henceforth unforgeable – are feasible on the soil of bourgeois society.¹⁵ What is at issue here is, at one level, what Habermas has identified as the “ambivalent content” or, more accurately, the “utopian-ideological double character of bourgeois culture.” “In its claims to autonomy and scientific method, to individual freedom and universalism, to radical, romantic self-disclosure,” Habermas writes, bourgeois culture

is on the one hand, the result of cultural rationalization – having ceased to rely on the authority of tradition, it is sensitive to criticism and self-criticism. On the other hand, the normative contents of its abstract and ahistorical ideas, overshooting as they do existing social realities, not only support a critically transforming practice by providing some initial guidelines, but also support an affirming and endorsing practice by providing a measure of idealistic transfiguration.¹⁶

I have suggested that the *de facto* referent of Adorno’s injunction to hate tradition properly is not the *pre-modern* world but that of *capitalist modernity*. Conceived thus, the injunction seems to me to serve quite superbly as a heuristic device, making possible a boldly integrative theory of the social logic of contemporary cultural practice at the level of the world system. Yet it is precisely in this latter respect that the weaknesses of Adorno’s own mobilization of the idea of “hating tradition properly” become clear-cut. The problem is twofold. First there is the fact that, despite his recognition of the *globality* of capitalist social relations, Adorno tends to view *modernity* as corresponding only to developments in the metropolitan formations of Euro-America. (In a strict sense, indeed, he is so resolutely Eurocentric in his focus as to neglect the significance or irreducibility of developments even in America.) This means that for him, only European subjectivity can be said to be truly modern. Related to this,

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second, Adorno tends to construe the relationship between theory and practice in somewhat ultra-leftist terms, with the result that the Western working-class's failure to sustain or even consolidate a revolutionary socialist politics in the years and decades following 1917 (or the World War of 1914–18) is taken to signify the definitive miscarriage of the Marxist project.¹⁷

The great irony of the specifically Adornian (as distinct from the more generally Marxist) notion of "hating tradition properly" might then be said to consist in the fact that between Adorno's time and our own its truth has *manifestly* decentered itself, following the social logics of decolonization and "globalization." My suggestion in the pages that follow will be that recent historical developments have definitively stripped the burden of speaking in the name of humanity at large from such Eurocentrically limited figures as Adorno, and invested it in differently situated intellectuals – those capable of grappling, as Said puts it in *Culture and Imperialism*, with the "new integrative or contrapuntal orientation in history that sees Western and non-Western experiences as belonging together because they are connected with imperialism."¹⁸ When George Orwell wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier* that "[i]n order to hate imperialism you have got to be part of it," he was writing about himself.¹⁹ Said focuses, however, on such figures as C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, George Antonius, S.H. Alatas, Ranajit Guha, Amílcar Cabral, Anouar Abdel-Malek, and Frantz Fanon, radical politico-intellectuals committed to "an imaginative, even utopian vision which reconceives emancipatory . . . theory and performance." Other names could easily be added, starting with that of Said himself: such *novelists*, for instance, as Assia Djebar, Toni Morrison, V.Y. Mudimbe, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, Nadine Gordimer, Wilson Harris, Pramodya Ananta Toer, Chinua Achebe, George Lamming, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro. What is striking about the cultural and critical practice of such writers and intellectuals as these is their simultaneous commitment to the "philosophical discourse of modernity" *and* to its urgent critique, their extraordinary command of and respect for the European humanist (or bourgeois) canon existing alongside an equally extraordinary knowledge (and critical endorsement) of other cultural works, social projects, and historical experiences, the necessary consideration of which cannot be accomplished on the provincial soil of the European (or bourgeois) canon. Might it not be *these* figures in whom, paradoxically – since this was the last thing that imperialism was meant to achieve – contemporary history has encoded "tradition," and they,

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therefore, who, enjoined to find ways to hate it properly, are uniquely placed to do so? This, at least, is my hypothesis.

Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World is, very obviously, premised upon the conviction that it is more useful to reconstruct by totalization the generative Adornian rubric of “hating tradition properly” than to jettison or relinquish it in any sense. The general point is that for all its admirable criticism of just the kinds of Eurocentrism and cultural supremacism casually exemplified by Adorno, most of the work in the subfields of postcolonial studies and “colonial discourse theory” (and also, I would say, “ethnic studies” and “cultural studies”) currently being produced in cutting-edge intellectual circles of Europe and North America seems to me to compare very unfavorably with Adorno’s own work, paying a huge price for its own premature repudiation of systematic theory.

It is a commonplace that postcolonial studies – a formation that has emerged and consolidated itself within the Anglo-American academy over the course of the past decade and a half – has from the outset existed in a relationship of supplementarity to that of critical theory in its postmodernist and/or poststructuralist incarnations. This has meant not only that access to the field and – even more – visibility within it, has tended to be contingent on the presentation and display of the appropriate “post-” theoretical credentials, but also that the specific methodological and ideological investments of scholars in the field have tended to be attuned to those of “post-” theory. Hence, for example, Homi Bhabha’s asseveration that

the postcolonial perspective resists attempts to provide a holistic social explanation, forcing a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of the . . . often opposed political spheres [of “First” and “Third” Worlds] . . . It is from this hybrid location of cultural value – the transnational *as* the translational – that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project.²⁰

In its institutionally consecrated forms, at least, the field of postcolonial studies is deeply and constitutively informed by “post-” theoretical protocols and procedures. Such prominent figures in the field as Bhabha, Robert Young, Sara Suleri, and Trinh T. Minh-ha have all written at length to condemn as naive or, worse, tacitly authoritarian, any commitment to universalism, metanarrative, social emancipation, revolution.²¹ Yet as Edward Said has recently pointed out in a thought-provoking commentary, the tendential thrusts of

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“postmodernism” and “postcolonialism” really gesture in quite different directions:

The earliest studies of the post-colonial were by such distinguished thinkers as Anwar Abdel Malek, Samir Amin, C.L.R. James; almost all were based on studies of domination and control made from the standpoint of either a completed political independence or an incomplete liberationist project. Yet whereas post-modernism, in one of its most famous programmatic statements (by Jean-François Lyotard), stresses the disappearance of the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment, the emphasis behind much of the work done by the first generation of post-colonial artists and scholars is exactly the opposite: the grand narratives remain, even though their implementation and realization are at present in abeyance, deferred, or circumvented. This crucial difference between the urgent historical and political imperatives of post-colonialism and post-modernism’s relative detachments makes for altogether different approaches and results.²²

As a Marxist critic whose research interests have turned, methodologically, on the articulation of literature and culture with wider social processes, and whose substantive area of focus has mostly been cultural production in the modern “Third World,” with a particular emphasis on Africa, my own politico-intellectual investments lie with the definition of “postcolonialism” which Said presents in this passage. The obligation to frame what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in a felicitous phrase, has termed global “counternarratives of liberation”²³ seems to me, at least, quite transparently as pressing today as it has ever been (if, indeed, it is not more so). In specific terms, accordingly, my ambition in this book is to try to alter somewhat the existing balance of forces in the field of postcolonial studies, by way of making the field as a whole accountable to philosophical and political claims, interests, and demands, to which (to its own detriment) it is currently little attuned. To this end, a few further preliminary observations about the field in general and my own work in this field in particular might be in order.

First, it seems to me that precisely to the extent that the field of postcolonial studies *does* exist in a relationship of supplementarity to “post-” theory, it follows that the steeping and accumulating critiques that have been adduced in recent years against such theory are cogent and telling, too, in the narrower sphere, against what we might call “pomo-poco” scholarship. Over the course of the past six or seven years, especially, there has been a veritable burgeoning of materialist and/or realist and/or Marxist critiques of “post-” theory in its various forms. In detail and in their cumulative thrust, these