

The Use of Postcolonial Theory in Social Studies Education

Some Implications

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Abstract: In this essay I explain the basic tenets of postcolonial theory and its possible implications for teaching social studies and global issues in American high schools. The use of this theory is becoming increasingly significant, given the growing Islamophobia and Orientalism in the United States, the ongoing uprisings in the Middle East, and the divide between East and West at the political levels. Also, it recognizes the right of the Other for appropriate representation, self-determination, and justice. The essay allows scholars, teachers, and educators to enrich their strategies of critique, and their pedagogical repertoire, and to prepare critically and globally informed citizens.

Key words: Orientalism, othering, postcolonial theory, pedagogy of critique

Postcolonialism is an interdisciplinary field which encompasses the fields of anthropology, political science, linguistics, history, comparative literature, and cultural studies (Ashcrof, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). A review of the literature indicates that very few scholars have tried to make the connection between postcolonial theory and educational critique (Andreotti, 2011; Burney, 2012; Merryfield, 2001). In this essay, I join efforts to clarify the meaning of this critical theory (Asher & Crocco, 2001; Merryfield & Subedi 2001; Rizvi & Lingard, 2006; Subedi & Daza, 2008; Willinsky, 1998), and I focus on its possible implications for teaching social studies at the high school level.

What is Postcolonial Theory?

Postcolonialism is a contested term, and it is used by different scholars to denote different cultural, economic, and political circumstances of countries which share history of European colonialism (McEwan, 2009). For the purpose of this essay, I adopt the definition suggested by Schwarz (2005), which sees post-colonialism as “a radical philosophy that interrogates both the past history and ongoing legacies of European colonialism [and American imperialism] in order to undo them” (p. 4).

Other scholars have used the terms imperialism (Said, 1993), or neocolonialism (Ashcrof et al., 2007; Loomba, 1998), when they talk about postcolonialism, and to describe the asymmetrical relationships between the West and East. These scholars show that neo-colonialism, or imperialism, can function without formal colonies or without direct colonial rule, because “the economic [and social] relations of dependency and control ensure both captive labour as well as markets for

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European industry as well as goods” (Loomba, 1998). It is assumed that the end of colonialism and the European invasion of other people’s lands and resources (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007), led to “a relatively minor move from direct to indirect rule, a shift from colonial rule and domination to a position not so much of independence as of being in-dependence” (Young, 2003, p. 3). Said (1993) suggested the distinction between colonialism and imperialism, in which colonialism refers to the expansion of European countries to include and build up real colonies in distant lands and territories, and imperialism connotes the power of colonialism as a political ideology. Young (2003) added that even when many former colonies got their independence in the last century, they continued to be informally controlled by local elites, who served the interests of western countries.

In this regard, I use the theory of postcolonialism in order to refer to people’s resistance to colonialism, or to colonial discourses (Said, 1978) produced within western societies.

The idea of discourse analysis from the knowledge/power perspective was developed by Foucault (1977; 1985) and was later used by Edward Said (1978), in order to describe the practices, methods, and strategies used by western scholars, ethnographers, explorers, and travelers in order to define, control, and exploit the “East.” Colonial discourse works to maintain and to justify the superiority of the West compared to the East, through viewing the West as advanced, modern, rational, and developed, and the East as primitive, barbaric, inferior, and childlike. According to Rizvi and Lingard (2006), “By knowing the Orient, the western metropolitan centre came to learn how it could dominate distant territories and cultures not only militarily, economically, and politically, but also culturally in a range of hegemonic ways” (p. 296).

It is worth clarifying that the East in Oriental discourse refers to Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures. But I use the East here to indicate the relationship between the United States and Middle Eastern and Islamic countries. Colonial discourses such as Orientalism, Eurocentrism, and ethnocentrism serve the imperial agenda of western countries, and this may lead to processes of othering not only against people in the Middle East but also against immigrants who come from this region and establish their own diasporas in western societies (Burney, 2012; Spivak, 1991; Young, 1990).

I believe that social studies teachers and global educators in the United States can work with their students in order to bring to light the discourses of colonialism, and to use postcolonial theory in order to understand global issues, particularly the complicated relationship between the United States and the Middle East. In addition, social studies teachers can discuss and analyze issues of marginalization, subalternity, and othering as they are manifested in the curriculum, the media, pop culture, and historical texts. Edward Said (1978) introduced this line of thinking in his seminal book *Orientalism*, through which he clarified that Orientalism is the representation of the East in the eyes of the West through the “social construction of the Orient, as the ultimate other in history, literature, art, music, and popular culture” (p. 23). In addition, according to Said (1978), Orientalism is a colonial discourse which supports the self-representation and self-definition of the West through the Othering of the East. In the rest of this essay I bring some examples of using postcolonial theory in social studies and global education.

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Implications of Postcolonial Theory in Social Studies and Global Education

The Ambivalent Relationship towards Democracy in the Middle East

Social studies and global educators can use Egypt as a case study in order to explain the historical relationships between the United States and the Middle East, and how American foreign policy is influenced by the desire to construct and control the Orient. For instance, Barack Obama announced that he is “deeply concerned” about the military coup in Egypt, the suspension of the constitution, and the house arrest of the president Muhammad Mursi. These events evoke many questions regarding U.S. policy in the Middle East, its commitment towards democratic principles and values, the future of U.S. aid to Egypt, and how Obama’s administration will interpret/apply the American law¹ which prevents the United States from financially supporting countries after a military coup.

I argue that the recent uprising in Egypt is a great opportunity for global educators and social studies teachers to discuss with their students the historical role of the United States at the international level and its ambivalent relationship toward the recent uprisings in Middle Eastern countries. Samuel Huntington (1996) argued that since the collapse of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology in 1991, there has been a new clash, between western civilization and the values and ideals of the Islamic world. Huntington’s work and the work of the Orientalist Bernard Lewis (2003) were adopted by neoconservative politicians, the media, and right-wing parties in order to justify American foreign policies and American’s military intervention in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Stonebanks, 2010).

However, a careful review of these policies shows that the American public has been misled to believe that the world is divided between “us” and “them,” and that the war in Iraq is part of the global campaign against terrorism. In addition, a historical analysis will show that the United States was in fact active in producing “its future enemies,” such as supporting the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein before the First Gulf War, and Osama bin Laden in the Afghan war against the Soviets (Kincheloe et al., 2010). Studying history from critical and postcolonial perspectives will help students become aware of the politics of knowledge in their society and how the intersection between the media, politics, and capitalism produced and reproduced U.S. imperial policies through discursive and institutional practices.

Some social studies teachers may argue that the situation in Egypt is not clear yet, and that they cannot therefore take a stance with regard to American foreign policy in the classroom. My point is not to direct students toward specific answers, but to let them investigate and understand the unequal power-relationships between the United States and Arab countries in the Middle East, and to establish a critical understanding of Orientalism and how they might be engaged to achieve peace and democracy for people in this part of the world.

When students investigate the dynamic relationships between the United States and Middle Eastern countries, they will learn how Oriental discourses are produced through the media, politics, culture,

¹ See Section 7008 of the FY2012 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 112-74).

and the cinema industry, and how they may challenge or understand critically the imperial agenda of the United States in the Middle East. Social studies teachers and students may analyze with their students different resources, such as primary documents, political speeches, historical artifacts, maps, and the media, in order to learn about the politics of knowledge and how it has served western imperial agendas (Willinsky, 1998).

Applying postcolonial theory in social studies education will encourage students and teachers to challenge the dichotomy between East and West, and to understand, for instance, that democracy, with free and fair elections, which gives real representation for all citizens, can be produced in Middle Eastern countries as well. I believe that democracy is context-based, and each society may develop its own understanding of democratic values, processes, and culture. In the case of Egypt, the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in the last election may promote students to question the role of religion in non-western societies and to ponder if the separation between church and state, which is a basic characteristic of many western democracies, fits the evolution of democracy in Islamic societies. In fact, there are some scholars today who believe that political Islam has its own weight in Islamic and Arab societies, and therefore it should not be excluded from the deliberative process of defining Arab democracies (Bishara, 2012; Roy, 2013).

The Media and Producing the Other

Students may discuss the growing fear of Islam, or Islamophobia, after September 11 (Esposito & Kalin, 2011), its roots, and how it is constructed through ideological stereotyping and demonizing Muslims in order to justify the war against Iraq and Afghanistan (Kincheloe et al., 2010). In addition, when students, for instance, watch the movie *Reel Bad Arabs*, which is available in YouTube, they get a better sense of how the cinema industry in the United States is used to produce an image of Arabs as “irrational, menacing, violent, untrustworthy, anti-western, and dishonest” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2006, p. 296) people. Learning about the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in American society may help students to develop informed perspectives and to become more responsible as American and global citizens.

The biased view of Islam as the source of terror in the world (Said, 1997) is a very narrow-minded and deterministic approach towards this religion, and it serves the politics of hostility between the East and the West. That is, it presents the ideological production of dichotomy between Europe and the United States as modern, liberal, and democratic, and the Middle East or, more accurately, Islamic societies, as pre-modern, under-developed, and non-democratic. This kind of Eurocentric thinking feeds United States and European imperialism, which has supported Arab dictators for many years, and this, I assume, has limited the development of democracy in the Middle East.

At the local level, the discourses of Othering and Islamophobia in American society, which have increased since September 11 (Esposito & Kalin, 2011), may lead to a further focus on national security and patriotism, and this may affect a school’s efforts to educate for critical thinking and a better understanding of ideological stereotyping, cultural politics, representation of the Other, and America’s role in international conflicts. If schools aim to prepare students to become citizens of the

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world, then they need to see how discourses of power and misrepresentation are produced within their own country, and how they promote injustice at the local and the global levels.

It is important that American students develop critical and global awareness, through which they can question American foreign policy and understand that their country can be not only part of the problem in international conflicts but also part of the solution to these conflicts. For instance, not taking a clear and assertive decision against the Israeli illegal settlements in the West Bank leads to the continuity of the Israeli occupation and the everyday suffering of thousands of Palestinians in this region of the world. The argument of the United States right-wing parties about Israeli security does not justify the Israeli illegal settlement; in fact, these settlements and the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian land since 1967 are the source for Palestinian's resistance and their request for freedom and justice.

Capitalism, Worlding, and the Myth of Cultural Binarism

When western powers impose their own definition of democracy and morality on other states and societies, they in fact are engaged in a process of "worlding" (Spivak, 1990), which means putting western culture, values, and standards at the center of understanding and appreciating human development, by ignoring "the history of imperialism and the unequal balance of power between the 'first' and 'third' worlds² in the global capitalist system" (Andreotti, 2006, p. 44). According to Dobson (2005, p. 261),

The global does not represent the universal human interest; it represents a particular local and parochial interest which has been globalized through the scope of its reach. The seven most powerful countries, the G7, dictate global affairs, but the interests that guide them remain narrow, local and parochial.

When students start to see the dynamic relationships between the local and the global, and how they are influenced by the myth of "civilizing" the Other, or how the North or the West claim responsibility for developing the South or the East, then they become critical global citizens.

Students who study international events from a postcolonial perspective will be able to refute the dichotomies of "us" versus "them," which have been produced for many years through colonial, historical, and political discourses in western societies. They will learn how power relationships work at the international level to produce inequalities among nations and cultures, and they will know that the divide between the East and the West serves the idea of imperialism and the expansion of western culture and its capitalist system. As argued by Loomba (1998), "Colonialism was the midwife that assisted the birth of European capitalism, or that without colonial expansion the transition to capitalism could not have taken place in Europe" (p. 4).

² Although some scholars use the terms first, second, and third world countries in their analysis, I think this terminology is part of the discursive discourses of "making the Other," and I prefer using terms such as developing and developed countries.

It is worth noting that it is not appropriate to homogenize either the western or eastern cultures, because they are all diverse in terms of language, ethnicity, race, and religion. According to Said (1993), all cultures are “hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (p. xxix). In addition, historically there are mutual influences between East and West in many fields and across history. For instance, “It is important to remember that during the Middle Ages, the Judeo-Christian West borrowed heavily and learned a great deal from Muslims, both in the appreciation of arts and the humanities as well as in scientific and technological innovation, just as Muslims had done earlier from Athens and Rome” (Rizvi, 2005, p. 175).

Also, the patterns of global immigration between the East and the West, the establishment of diasporic communities in western countries (Knott & MacLoughlin, 2010), as well as the increased use of advanced technologies, such as the Internet, smart phones, and social media, have produced citizens with transnational and hybrid identities. The success of the American girl Jennifer Grout to reach the finals of Arabs Got Talent, and the inspiration that The Occupy Wall Street movement got from the protests in the Middle East, are two more examples of the mutual and the dynamic relationships between East and West.

When students learn to appreciate other cultures and nations and to realize that there are multiple epistemologies and perceptions of life in the world, they may become more tolerant because they will appreciate the richness of the world and the colorfulness of human experiences. By so doing, students may become more critical about the clash of civilizations described by Huntington (1996), or between Islam and the West, which was emphasized by the media and right-wing parties after the terror attack of September 11, 2001. Adopting “the clash of civilizations” theme has led, I think, to demonizing Arabs and Muslims, and it contributes to the continuity of misunderstanding between West and East.

Epistemic Violence versus Listening to the Other

Learning about the Other from his/her own perspective may eliminate what Spivak (1994) named as “epistemic violence.” This means not to apply western standards and values on the way people in the non-western cultures understand and interpret their lives. Epistemic violence is an act of oppression through which some elites in western societies may judge and interpret the Other based on their colonial desire and their Eurocentric perspective. Epistemic violence legitimizes the supremacy of western culture, compared to other modes of living, and it stems from universalizing western values, beliefs, and traditions, and from putting them at the center of evaluating concepts of modernity, progress, and development. For instance, people in western societies may consider wearing the *Hijab* or the Islamic headscarf as an indication of males’ control over females in Islamic societies. This is an example of epistemic violence because it ignores the inner voices of females who decide to do so on their own, based on their own understanding of religious practice and piety.

In addition, the western support of secular elites in the Middle East before the recent uprisings took place can be interpreted as silencing the Orient and people’s desire for freedom, justice, and democracy. The ambivalent attitudes of western countries towards the possibility of Arab

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democracy do not recognize the likelihood that Islam, which is the major religion in the Arab World, can be used as a mechanism for postcolonial resistance. I am not arguing that Islamic democracy is the appropriate way to achieve justice and freedom in Egypt or the Middle East, but Arabs and Muslims have the right to produce their own democracy based on their own history, culture, and priorities.

One possible method of bringing the voices of the Other is what Said (1993) called “contrapuntal³ analysis.” This allows teachers and students to figure out the implicit meanings of the text, its social and political context, the author’s intentions, and what is excluded from it (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Burney, 2012). It assumes that each cultural, historical, and educational text has an embedded ideology that contributes to processes of Othering and Orientalism in the larger society. Thereby, American and European history should be read “in relation to its spatial and political relations to empire, as well as in counterpoint to the works that colonized people themselves produced in response to colonial domination” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2006, p. 301). This kind of geographical and geopolitical sensitivity may help students to question the implicit meaning of historical and political events, how they are related to the historical construction of the Orient, and how they validate the exercise of imperial power.

In supporting the need of contrapuntal pedagogy, Merryfield and Subedi (2001) added that “it is not surprising that social studies texts frequently use terms, such as ‘Third World,’ that teach students to reduce 85% of people on the planet to a single category whose only shared characteristic is that they are not of European heritage” (p. 282). Contrapuntal analysis, according to Burney (2012), has the potential of interrupting the representation of the “East as exotic or remote, or timeless, lost in time and space, but sees it in terms of present worldly reality” (Burney, 2012, p. 140). In addition, listening to the Orient’s real voice may challenge its representation as alien, barbaric, uncivilized, and sensual (Said, 1978) in western cultures. For instance, teachers may encourage their students to investigate how the social studies curriculum, popular culture, media, and historical documents produce the image of the dark and poor Africa, the “mysterious Orient,” or the “terrorist Muslim” (Nealon & Giroux, 2012; Said, 1978).

In order to challenge these images of the Other, social studies educators may include in their teaching stories and experiences of people from previously colonized nations and societies, in order to bring in the voices of these people, how they understand their identities, and to recognize their struggles against colonialism. The inclusion of literature from other cultures and nations will help students to recognize “the relationship across culture, power, and knowledge construction” (Merryfield & Subedi, 2001. p. 285). For instance, students may read and discuss some of the work by Mahmoud Darwish about the Palestinian resistance, Ngugi’s book *The River Between* (1965), Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (2006), *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe, and Salih’s *Season’s of Migration to the North* (2009). These books help to re-present the Other’s “culture and

³ A word used by Said (1978) which is related to music but it means here the expression of counterpoints in history and literature which creates a new understanding and knowledge.

identity through its own voice and vision" (Burney, 2012, p. 112), and they show the tensions between colonialism and traditional cultures in different places in the world. Also, these books may challenge narratives of colonialism in western societies, and they move the voices of the colonized from the margins to the mainstream of knowledge production.

Challenging the Empire Within

Citizenship education from a postcolonial perspective requires a broader understanding of Othering, which is not limited to interpreting the power relationships between the West and the East but also includes achieving more justice in democratic and western countries (Young, 1990). In other words, each society has its own regime of truth which defines what is normal, and acceptable, and who is the Other or the subaltern who is not allowed to speak or to express his/her own needs. The concept of subalternity, which was produced by Gramsci (1999) and advanced later by postcolonial scholars (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1994), refers to marginalized groups who are silenced by discourses of power in their societies.

Social studies teachers in American schools can promote their students to conduct discourse analysis in order to see how minorities and ethnic groups have been marginalized throughout the different periods of American history. Furthermore, they can investigate how discourses of Othering have been produced against African-Americans, Jewish, Chinese, and women, and how these discourses were changed through minorities' struggles for equality and equity. Deconstructing discourses of Othering and how they function through the media, popular culture, literature, history, and politics is pivotal in developing students' critical thinking and their justice-oriented citizenship. Social studies education, which encourages students to analyze discourses of Othering at the local/social level, may allow students to become more informed, critical, responsible, and sensitive to the voices of marginalized groups, and perhaps to develop more empathy towards other cultures and nations.

Other resources

I would like to recommend some useful books for social studies teachers and global educators who might be interested to expand their knowledge of postcolonial theory in general and its possible implications for education. For instance, the book *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concept* gives a great introduction to the major postcolonial concepts, their meaning, and their historical roots. The book *Pedagogy of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique* focuses on the major contributions of Edward Said and other postcolonial scholars and the possible implications of this theory to educational critique. The book *Actionable Postcolonial Theory in Education*, which received the AERA (American Educational Research Association) Award in Curriculum Studies-2012, shows how a postcolonial framework may inform research and educational practices. For teachers who would like to learn more about the current uprisings in the Middle East, I recommend reading the books *The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolution*, which has in-depth sociopolitical analysis of the causes of Arab upheavals and their possible consequences, and the book *The Arab Springs: What Everyone Needs to Know*, which answers basic questions about the Arab uprisings in the Middle East.

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Conclusion

The purpose of this essay is to encourage social studies and global educators to use postcolonial methods in their teaching, and to help American students recognize the asymmetrical power relations between western powers and the Middle East (Andreotti, 2006). Also, I encourage both teachers and students to think critically about the structures of Orientalism, how they function and are reproduced in the larger society, with the hope to create a just ground for equal dialogue between the North and the South. Listening to the voices of the Other while discussing local and global issues has the potential of empowering students so that they reflect critically on their own cultures and the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind their actions. In other words, it may allow them to realize how they are positioned, and how they position others, and to realize the complex relationships between power and knowledge at historical, social, and international levels (Foucault & Gordon, 1980). This is with the hope that students will understand better their status as global citizens, and will take more responsibility for their decisions in the future.

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