

Filipino Intellectuals and Postcolonial Theory: The Case of E. San Juan, Jr. (1)

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Introduction

The 1990s saw a remarkable transformation of the trends and directions in Philippine studies, in terms of the growing interest in colonial discourses in the historiography, political science and literature fields. This might be understood as part of a reflection of the phenomenal rise of cultural studies in the West since the 1980s. However, it is particularly important for us to understand these developments in the context of Philippine historical experiences before and after independence, or throughout the 20th century and beyond.

This paper discusses the distinctive features of the writings of Epifanio “Sonny” San Juan, Jr., with special reference to his interpretation of postcolonial theory. San Juan is a

Filipino scholar specializing in comparative literature and widely known as one of the most prominent Filipino critics in postcolonial studies. Considering the fact that the concept of the “postcolonial” is still ambiguous, in this paper, first I would like to clarify my way of understanding this concept. Second I critique San Juan’s approach toward postcolonial theory and the conceptual background from which he draws this approach. Third, I examine the positive linkages between postcolonial studies and new directions in Philippine studies.

The “postcolonial” from a Japanese Perspective

In Japan the concept of the “postcolonial” is still a novel one. From the mid-1990s, several approaches to postcolonial studies have been attempted from the areas of comparative literature, European philosophy and intellectual history. As of this writing, a few Japanese texts are available that explain to us what the postcolonial is clearly and comprehensively. Perhaps, the same situation in terms of confusion in the definition of this concept could be seen in the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia where hundreds or thousands of volumes are now available on this subject. Indeed, prominent scholars like Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha or Gayatri C. Spivak are lined up as the most notable postcolonial critics in the world. However, Said, the world-renowned scholar who successfully conceptualized and critiqued “orientalism,” uses the term “postcolonial” simply to mean “after the colonial period.” In the case of Spivak, who uses the term “postcolonial” in some of her works, she never defines this term clearly herself. Based on my limited reading of the English and Japanese literature or Japanese

translations of English literature on the subject, I would like to summarize briefly the features of postcolonial studies as follows.

Postcolonial studies discloses the pervasive colonial legacy in the way of thinking about peoples and cultural influences that has had detrimental effects on the once-colonized societies even after independence. The concept of the “postcolonial” presupposes the fact that “coloniality” exists even now and, looking at this situation critically, postcolonial studies seeks to find a way out of the many quandaries posed by coloniality long after its formal end. But the meaning of the “post” in the concept of the “postcolonial” also presumes the end of “coloniality” and this “post” has the common philosophical meaning of the “post” in the concept of the “postmodern” that critically marked the passing of modernism and modernity.

Adding to the above brief definition of the concept of the “postcolonial,” I wish to note that to discuss the “postcolonial” has strikingly different implications for us, Japanese, from those for the scholars in the Western world. For us, Japanese, to argue with “postcoloniality” means to look much more consciously into the contradictory process of the historical formation of our self-consciousness in the modern period. The Japanese, we might say, historically experienced postcoloniality as a “dual structure.” While the Japanese might have been “othered” in the eyes of Westerners, the Japanese looked down on neighboring Asian peoples as its own “others,” especially after the Meiji Restoration period. This distinctive dual structure of postcoloniality in Japan has been pointed out by notable postcolonial critiques, but I would like to address one more important aspect that seems to have been almost totally ignored. This is the fact that the

Japanese and neighboring Asian peoples have had the common experience of being placed as “others” by Western nations in the process of modernization, with the former as “colonist” and the latter mostly as “colonized.” Thus, it is significant for us to distinguish the common and uncommon elements in postcoloniality between Japan and other Asian countries, and by doing so we could indigenize the concept of the “postcolonial” in the historical context of Japanese and comparable Asian contexts. This is the positive way left for us to deploy the concept of the “postcolonial” for reconstructing the interpretations of Asian societies from our own perspectives.

E. San Juan, Jr.’s Critical Approach toward Postcolonial Theory

If I look into the new trends of Philippine studies from my understanding of the concept of the “postcolonial,” the following two features can be pointed out. First, new approaches have been tried to reconstruct fragmented histories under colonialism, critically examining the American hegemony and dominant world-view after WWII. Second, in acceleration of the 1990s’s “globalization” in the wake of the end of the Cold War, nationalisms or “collective memories” have been discussed critically as “dominant discourses” within nation-states. However, the concept of the “postcolonial” due to its critical nature against dominant discourses has a possibility to serve as a counterforce against the general trends of the discussion on nationalism or “collective memories” particularly in the cultural studies of the 1990s.

Although I classify several recent illuminating works on the Philippines as forms of postcolonial study, it does not mean that Filipino scholars in the fields of history,

political science, comparative culture or communication form a solid group or school such as “Subaltern Studies” for Indian historiography. They are rather working independently in their own respective areas and they often do not identify themselves as postcolonial critics, or scholars in postcolonial studies. In spite of this situation, tracing the uniqueness of their studies, I witness common points in their studies, understanding them as forms of postcolonial studies and critique.

Among Filipino scholars, it is Epifanio “Sonny” San Juan, Jr., who directly discusses the concept of the “postcolonial” and criticizes postcolonial theory from a distinctive perspective. Indeed, his works are widely known. For example, in the five volumes of *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* edited by Diana Brydon and published by Routledge (London and New York: 2000), the second part of “Marxist, Liberation and Resistance Theory” of the first volume includes one of San Juan’s essays. Having only recently read San Juan’s works and admitting to little confidence about my ability to discuss his works comprehensively, I would like to discuss some of his works on the concept of the “postcolonial” for some insight into the possibilities and limitations of postcolonial studies in this decade when applied to the Philippine case.

San Juan’s major works that discuss and critique postcolonial theory are two books titled: *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998) and *After Postcolonialism: Remapping Philippine-United States Confrontations* (Lanham and Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000). *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* includes an essay titled: “Postcolonial Theory versus the Revolutionary Process in the

Philippines” as its chapter 2. I believe this essay illustrates most clearly the view of San Juan on postcolonial theory and, in fact, it is included in the above-mentioned Diana Brydon’s multi-volume compendia.

In this essay, San Juan interrogates typical discussions by notable postcolonial critics. As is widely known, it was *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Aschcroft et al., published in Australia in 1989, that crystallized and synthesized postcolonial studies in the field of comparative literature. San Juan first criticizes this work, pointing out that the authors of the book consider “the United States as the first postcolonial society to fashion a ‘national’ literature.” According to San Juan, this is “an astonishing claim from the viewpoint of Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Hawaiians, native Americans, and other victims of Anglo/Saxon/European settlement in the post-Columbian America.” As San Juan claims, it means that “[n]ot only is it ‘first’ in this, but these experts also believe the United States can be ‘the model for all later post-colonial writing’” (San Juan, 1998, p. 56). Obviously for San Juan, it is beyond the scope of his imagination that the United States could be taken as the model of postcoloniality, itself having become the dominant empire after the reign of the European powers.

San Juan understands the above trend of the early postcolonial studies as a Western-oriented tendency and criticizes notable postcolonial critics like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, or Trinh Minh-ha, for their inattention to the discussions initiated by indigenous minorities in Asian and African societies and for concentrating rather on the deconstruction of Western logocentrism or the logic of Euro-American colonial discourses. Thus, according to San Juan, the “post” in the concept of the “postcolonial”

is nothing but the replay of the conservatism of the First World, and this concept could get recognition only from Western critics, but not from African, Asian or Latin American peoples. Postcolonial theory turns out to be, in his view, the mere product of post-Fordist capitalism, and postcoloniality ends as one of the language games of positionalities in global capitalism whose worn-out ideological apparatus functions to subjugate colored peoples (San Juan, 1998, pp. 56-57).

What then is the appropriate theory for San Juan in understanding Asian, African, and Latin American societies during the post-Cold War era? For him, the still valuable theory for the interpretation of today's world is Marxism. He continues:

In the world-system of historical capitalism, the relations between peoples and nation-states have been characterized by inequalities at all levels. Contradictions between oppressor and oppressed overdetermine cultural/ideological, political, and economic exchanges. What needs more conscientious application is the axiom of "uneven and combined development" that should orient all knowledge of metropolis-periphery transactions so as to avoid a one-sided fetishism of cultural trends. By applying materialist dialectics, we can also avoid the narrow focus on either market exchange or its obverse, local power relations. If one rejects (as postcolonialists would) this metanarrative of "uneven development," then how is comparatist study feasible? (San Juan, 1998, pp. 57-58).

As should be clear from the foregoing discussion, San Juan, using Marxist theory, emphasizes the fact that in the historical development of capitalism for several centuries, "uneven development" functioned as its axiom and the economic discrepancy between

the developed countries and developing countries widened and this discrepancy points up the political, cultural and ideological contradictions between the developed countries as the center and the developing countries as the peripheral areas. He thus considers how postcolonial theory born in the Western world does not take account of the historically developed uneven relations between the center and the periphery, serving only as an apparatus to absorb the peripheral elements into the inner parts of the center much more effectively than ever before.

Elsewhere, San Juan repeats his contestation that postcolonial theory is unable to grasp the actual problems confronting Asian, African and Latin American peoples today, even as it attempts to discuss the pressing political, cultural and ideological issues haunting these formerly colonized regions. In this context, his other essay titled: “Establishment postcolonialism and its alter/native others: Deciding to be accountable in regimes of permanent emergency,” should be invoked and considered. This essay is compiled in his book, *Mediations: From a Filipino Perspective* (Pasig City: Anvil, 1996). Published in the Philippines, it is obvious that this book is primarily addressed to Filipinos as its readers. This essay offers some valuable insights on the process by which postcolonial studies achieved wider acceptance in the United States in the early 1990s to the mid-1990s.

For San Juan, except for Ranajit Guha of the Subaltern Studies group, and Frantz Fanon whose French writings have been recently revalued as the beginning of postcolonial critique, none of the major postcolonialists actively writing in the United States or Australia today actually place or locate themselves within the more critical

terrains of postcoloniality. For San Juan, even if these scholars locate themselves postcolonially, this merely implies that the developed countries have successfully absorbed such acts of postcoloniality within the vortex of Western thought. He finds it doubtful that postcolonial theory as formulated by Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, or other scholars in Australia or Canada have more radical claims than the already established radical modernism of colored peoples who seek to preserve their indigenous traditions for resistance. This kind of postcolonial theorizing, according to San Juan, abandons the counterhegemonic project of recovering and reaffirming subaltern identities and undermines “any move to generate new forms of creative power and resistance against globalized inequalities and hierarchal domination” (San Juan 1996, 72-73).

At this point, it should be more or less clear for us why San Juan looks at postcolonial theory with doubtful and critical eyes. Here I would like to point out two reasons. First, most of postcolonial theorists in Australia, the United States or Canada pay primary attention to the audiences in these countries, rather than their counterparts in Asia, African or Latin America. Although they argue about the problems of identity crisis or historically constructed Western biases among the peoples in the formerly colonized countries, most of such discussions are not directly related to the actual problems in politics, economy, society and culture in the formerly colonized countries. Instead, they focus only on issues concerning the formerly colonized that these scholars in the United States, Canada or Australia are interested in by and for themselves. Observing these tendencies of postcolonial studies in Western countries, San Juan

contends that the developed countries have successfully absorbed the postcolonial question within their epistemological terrains.

The second reason is that San Juan is Marxist, thereby relying on dialectical materialism for his method. From a Marxist standpoint, it is understood that in the social formation or social structure, economy constitutes the “base level,” while politics, culture and philosophy make up the “superstructural level.” The base level of social formation determines the nature of the superstructural level, though the former is also influenced by the reflection from the latter, thereby requiring that we pay unceasing attention to interrelations between the two. However, if we try to understand postcolonial theory within this kind of theoretical frame, we naturally come to a deadlock. Postcolonial theory relies on heavily theoretical frames beyond dialectical materialism, that is, the poststructural deconstruction theory of “difference,” as the Japanese scholar of French philosophy, Satoshi Ukai, explains to us. In dialectical materialism that succeeds Hegelianism, the “*these*,” “*antithese*,” and “*synthese*” (thereby “*aufhebung*”) form three stages for solving problems or contradictions. In poststructuralist theorizing of “difference,” “difference” is defined as the more profound elemental unit than the “thesis.” In dialectical materialism, problems or contradictions should be totally solved through the three stages of “thesis,” “anti-thesis” and “sublation.” In the poststructural theory of difference, “difference” does not extinguish itself, but remains rather as the “residue” that continues to function effectively. Standing upon the theory of “difference,” we might reach to the recognition that the “residue” of colonialism could bring surprising effects in the future (even after the end of official

colonial rule), thereby triggering a contestation of discourses over postcolonialism (Ukai, 2000).

From Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), we can appreciate the argument on the necessity of transcending the epistemological framework of Marxism for understanding the significance of postcolonial theorizing. Said says: "there is no getting away from the fact that literary studies in general, and American Marxist theorists in particular, have avoided the effort of seriously bridging the gap between the superstructural and the base levels in textual, historical scholarship" (Said, 1979, p. 13). Or he also mentions: "my whole point is to say that we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were *productive*, not unilaterally inhibiting. It is this idea that Gramsci, certainly, and Foucault and Raymond Williams in their very different ways have been trying to illustrate" (Said, 1979, p. 14).

So while I appreciate what San Juan observes as a lot of problems with and confusion in postcolonial critique, I could however discern certain limitations of San Juan's argument itself and his critique of postcolonial theory drawn from Marxist epistemological frameworks. In this way, I differ in my perception of postcolonial theory from San Juan, particularly in terms of the future possibility of postcolonial studies. But San Juan's writings in comparative literature on postcolonial and cultural studies are very stimulating and through them we could learn much about the complex cultural milieu in the Philippines as well as its relation to the United States. What truly distinguishes his work from those of other critics in postcolonial studies is an

unwavering commitment to Marxist theory and critique, something that in itself is commendable in the context of shifting theoretical fashions.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to explain briefly why the new approaches that have emerged in Philippine studies in the 1990s in the fields of comparative literature, historiography or political science should be considered as forms of postcolonial study. These trends are co-extensive with the acceleration of de-Americanization in Philippine society after the withdrawal of US military bases from the Philippines in 1992. The Philippines, even after independence, had a so-called “special relationship” with the United States. However, the withdrawal of US bases in 1992 ended the Cold War period in the Philippines and new critical and scholarly trends seemed to be born for looking into the nature of Americanization that has shaped the way of thinking of Filipinos in the twentieth century. Another context involves the centennial celebration of the Philippine Revolution in 1996-98 which has served to found Philippine modern history in decolonizing work and a continuing politics of decolonization in Philippine historiography.

How should I appreciate the new trends in the Philippine studies as a Japanese scholar and in terms of Japanese interests? In my view, the relationship of postcolonial studies to Philippine studies could be the pretext for us to rethink our societies and our state of knowledge. One of the reasons for the persistence of certain kinds of impasse in Japanese society today is our ignorance toward the pervasive American influence on our

way of thinking and social values after World War II. In spite of the end of the Cold War, Japan has not yet discovered how to reconstruct its society. To open a new path, one should begin with the reexamination of the nature of the Americanization of the knowledge that we have generated after WWII. In this context, the various attempts of Filipino scholars to reexamine their history, culture or politics before and after independence might give us a clue about what to do in and with the field of postcolonial studies in Japan. As exemplified by the popularity of the recent Japanese translations of *Postwar Japan as History* edited by Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993) or the prize-winning *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* by John W. Dower (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), “rethinking postwar Japanese society or intellectual history” has now emerged as a new topic for research or discussion in Japan among Japanese writers/scholars. These developments are a good opportunity for us to begin to look deeply into our postwar society with historical and critical perspectives. Then could we find out the common ground between postcolonial studies for Filipino scholars and for Japanese scholars. I look forward to a future when these common and differing interests are elaborated and examined with care in our respective work.

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