

A Conversation with E. San Juan Jr.

Introduction and interview by Michael Pozo

E. San Juan Jr. is one of this country's most notable cultural theorists. Born in Manila, Philippines, he has taught at the University of Connecticut, Tamkang University in Taiwan and Washington State University among others. He received his PhD from Harvard University. San Juan has written extensively on race, gender, ethnicity, Marxism, Post-Colonial theory, literature and on his native Philippines. He was a Fellow of the Center for the Humanities, Wesleyan University, and director of the Philippines Cultural Studies Center. This Spring he will be a Fulbright Lecture in American Studies at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.

E. San Juan Jr.'s most recent books include:

Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

Beyond Post Colonial Theory. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Hegemony and Strategies of Transgression. Albany: State University Of New York Press, 1995.

After Post-Colonialism: Remapping Philippines –United States Confrontations. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2000.

The Philippine Temptation: Dialectics of Philippine-U.S. Literary Relations. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

Reading the West/Writing the East: Studies in Comparative Literature and Culture. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1992.

On Becoming Filipino: Selected Writings of Carlos Bulosan. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.

From Exile to Diaspora: Versions of the Filipino Experience in the United States. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.

MP: Can you describe what Post Colonial Theory means to you? Can you describe how you use a Marxist perspective to critique it?

SJ: Based on the orthodox tenets laid out by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak--the "founding fathers" of this discursive territory, postcolonial theory seeks to explain the ambivalent and hybrid nature of subjects, their thinking and behavior, in the former colonies of the Western imperial powers, mainly the British Commonwealth societies. It seeks to prove that the colonial enterprise was not just a one-way affair of oppression and exploitation, but a reciprocal or mutual co- or inter-determination of both metropolitan master and "third world" subaltern. Whatever the subtle differences among mainstream postcolonial critics, they all agree that colonialism, for all its terror and barbarism, presents a rhetorical and philosophical anomaly: the postcolonial subject as identical and different from the history textbook's portrayal of the submissive and silent victim of imperial conquest. It claims to be more sophisticated or "profound" than the usual left or even liberal explanation of colonialism. Obviously this is a riposte to the conventional view that imperialism produced the dehumanization, if not decimation, of colonized peoples. Not just Marxists, but liberals and enlightened people generally subscribe to this view. First of all, one should reject the "Cold War" view of Marxism as equivalent to economic determinism, Stalinist tyranny, and the like. Marxism cannot be reduced to such inanities. Synoptically, the Marxist critique is multi-leveled: first, post colonialists obscure or erase historical determination in favor of rhetorical and linguistic idealization of the colonial experience; second, the post colonialist mind refuses to be self-critical and assumes a self-righteous dogmatism that it is infallible and cannot be refuted; and third, the practical effect of post colonialist prejudice is the unwitting justification of, if not apology for, the continued neo-colonialist--"globalizing" is the trendy epithet--depredation of non-Western peoples, in particular indigenous groups, women, and urban poor in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

In sum, post colonialism rejects the historical-materialist critique of imperialism in favor of a highly suspicious and even demagogic claim to rescue the postcolonial subject from its own abject past. Have they

succeeded? I doubt it. I find this kind of postcolonial theory an alibi for intellectual acquiescence to current hegemonic pieties.

MP: Is Post Structuralism/Post Colonial Theory, in fact, ineffective for "third world" or "minority" critics of what you today call, neo-colonialism? If so, why?

SJ: This question is an excellent posing of the strategic value of any theory purporting to advance the interests of those marginalized or subordinated by the global status quo. It can only be answered in terms of specific situations and protagonists. Let me try a general answer. I should emphasize that my focus is on the orthodox brand of postcolonial theory that is safely marketed in the classrooms and scholarly conferences. Now, the postcolonial approach of Edward Said is to be distinguished from the scholastic verbal magic of Bhabha and Spivak for its clarity of historical reference and political thrust. Its resonance is clear: its critique of U.S. imperialist hegemony, esp. in the Middle East, cannot be doubted (although it is silent about "internal colonialism" in the U.S. itself). It has provided weapons for oppositional "minority" intellectuals. It has been useful in "conscientizing" (Paulo Freire's term) a larger audience than those addressed by Derrida or Foucault. But, to my mind, it is less post-structural or postcolonial idealization that drives Said's discourse; rather, it is his sensitive and informed understanding of neocolonialism as a political regime and behavioral pattern (or "habitus", to use Pierre Bourdieu's term) of continued dominance of nominally independent nation-states through neoliberal, transnational disguises, as mediated through the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization.

MP: What exactly is meant by Neo-Colonialism?

SJ: I understand neocolonialism as the domination of peoples and societies by capital (primarily Western, but including Japan) through the liberal market and other ideological means, not through direct political rule. It is the practice of exploitation and oppression of the majority of the world's laboring masses under the guise of democratic access to markets, the free flow of commodities, technology, ideas, bodies, and so on. We need to translate the abstraction "neocolonialism" into concrete empirical situations. We have to specify various neocolonialist practices in every region or place where the ascendancy of corporate transnational capital generates effects of misery, violations of human rights, rape, malnutrition, genocide, and so on. There are probably as many neocolonialisms as postcolonialisms. Contradictions produce opposites, the exploiter and his gravedigger, as the dialectic works its way remorselessly, through our own collective and individual actions.

MP: In your book *Beyond Post Colonial Theory*, you describe a possible alternative to this theory. By re-examining writers/revolutionaries in the "post colonial" world, do you find validity in Nationalist movements unlike say Edward Said and his role as a diasporic intellectual?

SJ: In arguing with orthodox postcolonialism, one has to operate on the same discursive terrain, unfortunately, just as Milton had to use the same Christian framework in trying to upset and subvert it from within. This is not a novel insight. It is, one might say, a law of dialectics. My method is open to conflicting interpretations. Of course, my attempt to reaffirm the moment of national-liberation struggles within the postcolonial period can be grasped either as a repudiation of postcolonialism entirely, or a re-articulation of its original vision. In any case, I am not alone in doing this; my colleagues Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus, Neil Larsen and many others have accomplished this move brilliantly. I refer your readers to the recent volume edited by Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus entitled *MARXISM, MODERNITY AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES*.

Although I have criticized his inadequate views on Marxism, I consider Edward Said's commitment on behalf of Palestinian self-determination--a "nationalism" different from Arafat and the bourgeois elements--as a progressive one that should be supported in the face of Israeli state terrorism. (Said's situation, of course, is very complex and cannot be discussed here in depth.) In this context, Said's status as a diasporic intellectual is very much defined by his actual political and ethical activities.

As for the nationalist thematic: One needs to be reminded again that the nationalist struggles of Puerto Ricans or Filipinos against U.S. imperialism is not the same as the nationalism of the PATRIOT ACT, of George W. Bush and the streamlined chauvinism underlying American Studies scholarship.

MP: Can you then further describe the differences/similarities between U.S. nationalism and that of "third world" nationalism?

SJ: I already responded to this earlier. But this bears repeating: the most important criterion is whether the sense of national unity benefits the majority of laboring citizens, or this sense is utilized by the ruling class, a small minority of rich folks who control the business world, to promote their own profit-making interests. There will always be group solidarity; it's a fact of sociality. But the question is: for what? What's the meaning of this togetherness and belonging? As I said, the nationalism (if you can call the sovereignty struggle nationalist) of native Hawaiians, for example, cannot be equated with the nationalism of the white and/or Japanese elite in Hawaii. Nor can the nationalism of the Moral Majority, of Pat Buchanan and Cheney, be similar to the nationalism of the East Timorese, or for that matter to the nationalism of the Zapatistas, the guerillas in Colombia, the New People's Army in the Philippines (the last one recently declared "terrorist" by Colin Powell).

All nationalisms are similar in that they try to arouse the sense of ethnic togetherness and solidarity. But the difference is: for whose benefit? What is at stake? Who are victimized? What goals of human liberation are promoted or damaged by nationalist activities? Again, we need to be historically concrete and specific, as we should be when answering questions about theory, literature, and so on.

MP: Recently, you have described U.S. nationalism as the "opium of the masses", Could you elaborate on this?

SJ: The allusion here is of course to Marx's famous ambiguous quote on religion. U.S. nationalism--that the United States is superior to any society or that Western Civilization as embodied in the institutions of the U.S. has privileged position over others--has operated as the means of exacting consent from the majority of citizens. Of course, it operates subtly. It does not proclaim itself as such. When anyone speaks of how U.S. representative democracy should be the pattern in other countries, there you have an example of the "opium" working.

In general, as many have noted, U.S. movies do it all the time, especially as the chief agency of propaganda--education, if you feel that's too harsh a comment--that exercises enormous influence on the consumers in the dependencies and peripheries. Now, just as Marx called religion "the opium of the masses," it has another side: it offers consolation, strength, and hope of renewal in the interstices of civil society. Unfortunately, like drugs, the feeling of consolation doesn't last. Now, the postnationalist Americanists argue that this nationalism no longer exists. I wonder what they would say about the PATRIOT ACT and state measures after September 11? Are we postnationalist yet?

MP: Furthermore, in your most recent book *Racism and Cultural Studies*, you speak about the "forced diaspora of migrant workers" and the "import of uneven and combined development globally" as further evidence of the futility or inability of Post Colonial Theory. Can you say more about this?

SJ: In so far as mainstream postcolonial theory cannot explain, say, the phenomenon of 10 million Filipinos working abroad as "overseas contract workers," poorly paid, maltreated, raped and killed--this observation also applies to Sri Lankans, Bangladeshi, Mexicans, and millions of African and Latin Americans--then it is useless for any emancipatory politics. It will simply be an academic exercise to advance careers, and of course to reinforce ongoing plans for a war on Iraq, North Korea, and other societies deemed accomplices or accessories to the "axis of evil," in the words of the current "helmsman" of the only remaining superpower. Please correct me if I am wrong: I don't see Bhabha or his numerous epigones and acolytes being too much disturbed by the current outrageous racist violence against Arab Americans, or anyone suspected of being linked to Osama bin Laden. In this moment of emergency, with

"friendly fascism" rearing its head behind neoliberal slogans, there is a great opportunity for post colonialists to demonstrate that they care, that they have historical efficacy and ethical conscience (which they celebrate at every chance they get).

But what I see, instead, is a call to return to aesthetics, to form, to the tired and empty clichés about humanism, which one would think has been laid to rest by the three decades of deconstruction, poststructuralist innovations, etc. Signs of the contradictory milieu we live in. Unfortunately we've returned to the time of the terrible metanarratives, this time the metanarrative of United States triumphalism.

MP: Much of your work has dealt with Cultural Studies (CS), however, you're originally from a Literature background. Given the shortcomings of Post Colonial theory, how would you conceive of a manner to study Literature from the perspectives of "third world" and "minority" readers, students and scholars?

SJ: I think this is being done gradually--one can cite Paul Lauter's heroic attempt to diversify or democratize the U.S. literary canon, though it is by mechanical addition, less a thoroughgoing decentering of a monolithic and hegemonic exceptionalism. The numerous projects of transnationalization of American Studies, the fashionable conferences on postnationalism and cosmopolitanism, the continuing debates on multiculturalism—these are all symptoms of the crisis of the old "common culture" dispensation. Everyone participating in the intellectual conversation on the transformation of the humanities is aware that there is no going back, that we need to be answerable and responsible. However, the neoconservatives have temporarily won under the regime of the war on terrorism, don't you think? But they have not eliminated the contradictions, esp. the contradiction between labor and capital.

I believe literary study and scholarship can be reinvigorated through a comparative and interdisciplinary approach--nothing radical, to be sure. Unfortunately, comparativist and interdisciplinary scholars still cling to a belief that their "civilization," in short, the liberal democracy based on private ownership and the exploitation of surplus value--the liberalism of the market--is the necessary foundation of all these revisions and changes in the academy. You can detect this in many oppositional critiques of current scholarship and intellectual fashions. As long as one clings to this belief in private property and the right to exploit others--the sacred rules of the free market--any reform in literary or cultural studies will suffer from what Georg Lukacs has called "reification." In short, it is not just using a "third world" or minority perspective that is necessary or essential. For such "third world" mentality might just be mimicking consumerist values and habits, as they often do (I just visited the Philippines where "mallng" is the prime occupation of millions, thanks to globalizing corporate blessings.) First things first. What is needed is the overthrow of the "free market" rooted in inequality, private property, and hierarchy. That is the pre-requisite to any genuine and creative transformation of the human sciences dedicated to the liberation of the spiritual and material energies of every individual on this endangered planet. I hope this is not to sound too prophetic or evangelical in the pejorative sense.

MP: Lastly, what are some of the questions/issues students and professors interested in CS should ask concerning the notion of "multiculturalism" which for many in this country may *sound* like a good thing?

SJ: This question deserves a long substantial answer. Here I can only begin with a preliminary remark: I agree with Manning Marable that we should fight for a multicultural democracy. In contrast to the belief current in the Fifties and earlier that the U.S. is a homogenous society founded on Anglo-Saxon culture and Western civilization (Christianity, the Great Books of the Western World, etc.); the idea of multiculturalism is a refreshing and potentially liberating one. U.S. society cannot be subsumed by one ethnic group or culture. That is historically false, completely unwarranted, besides mortgaging the future to the destructive tribal idols. Unfortunately, the ideal of multiculturalism has been hijacked by sweet-talking neo-liberals. As I have argued in my earlier book, *HEGEMONY AND STRATEGIES OF TRANSGRESSION* (SUNY Press), multiculturalism has been appropriated to vindicate neo-liberal policies and instrumentalities. In short, the U.S. ruling class takes pride in the world hegemony of the United States because it is multicultural, diverse, open, sensitive to differences--difference as a guarantee of uniformity and democratic oneness. This multiculturalism is an alibi for predatory globalization, which is the euphemism

for the further extension of corporate exploitation everywhere. If this is multiculturalism, then we can all stop reading Foucault and Lacan and instead go shopping and marvel at the infinite variety of multicultural goods--not just food but ideas, fashions, styles, images, simulacra, etc. Baudrillard may still be right about the terrorism of the marketplace.

However, if multiculturalism signifies a sensitivity and openness to the Other so that the notion of identity is itself problematized--I am thinking here of Alain Badiou's critique of identity politics and alterity--I have no quarrel with such a program of genuine, creative multiculturalism.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that in all my works I try to apply a historical-materialist approach that considers human labor (both mental and physical) as the key to the critical transformation of society. It is a point of departure, not the answer to every question. In this I join other socialists and radicals working within the intellectual tradition of Benedict de Spinoza, Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg, Walter Benjamin, CLR James, and others in advancing the cause of all those through out the world who continue to be victimized by the "free market". Is there any other feasible alternative?