Decoding the 'Bandung Moment'

Aijaz Ahmad on decolonisation

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Aijaz Ahmad's work traversed several disciplines: literary criticism, history, Marxist theory and philosophy, politics and political economy. His book *In Theory* navigated the intersections of class, nationalism and literature, offering a critique of postcolonial theory at the height of its popularity.[10] His insights in essays like 'Imperialism of our time' were a thought-provoking commentary on the continuities of imperialism written as the US and its allies launched a second war on Iraq following years of deadly sanctions.[11] In this work, Ahmad centred historical analysis, while offering astute observations on the influence of the US knowledge industry in shaping global elites after World War II. Such analysis was critical to the burgeoning anti-war movement and the debates surrounding the concept of the 'new imperialism' at the time. In what follows, I reflect on two aspects of his writing that offer valuable insights for contemporary debates around decolonisation: first, his analysis of the historic Bandung conference in 1955, which brought together leaders from newly independent or soon-to-be independent Asian and African states, marking a significant moment in the history of decolonisation. Second, his critique of the academic operationalisation of the term 'Orientalism' and its implications.

The Bandung Moment

Ahmad's attention to colonialism and imperialism is striking, particularly in contrast to certain Western Marxist perspectives that neglect their role in the development of capitalism. He insisted that 'colonialism was not an incidental, epiphenomenal or episodic feature of the development of capitalism', adding that 'neglect of this fact has marred much Marxist theory of capitalism'.[12] Like other scholars shaped by and through anticolonial struggles, he understood both analytically, but also at a visceral level, the place of colonialism in shaping the world we live in. Unable to reclaim Indian citizenship due to legal provisions that prevented those who became Pakistani citizens after partition from doing so, Ahmad was acutely aware of the contradictions and power struggles within postcolonial states and the array of elite formations that emerged through anti-colonial struggles.

Amidst the renewed interest in uncovering the neglected histories of decolonisation, including the place of the Bandung conference in consolidating Afro-Asian solidarity, Ahmad's work helps us to move beyond a hagiographic retelling of that moment. First, it is relevant to note that the contemporary effort to uncover anticolonial histories emerges in the face of a persistent historical amnesia and 'post-imperial melancholia', particularly prevalent in England, where the loss and legacy of formal Empire remain unaddressed.[13] This act of historical erasure perpetuates the misconception that anticolonial movements ultimately resulted in failed experiments, corrupt states and dictatorial regimes – flattening the terrain of decolonisation and reducing it to a simplistic narrative of Cold War politics. In this sense, I consider Ahmad's analysis essential in helping us to decipher and reconstruct a more nuanced understanding of the past, one that goes beyond mere narration, serving as a valuable resource to inform our present aspirations for decolonisation.

In his chapter 'Three Worlds Theory and Bandung' (*In Theory*, chapter 8), Ahmad methodically endeavours to decode the official language employed in Bandung and situates the conference within the regional dynamics of the time. For example, he notes that China and India, two of the major actors of the conference, 'both needed a forum where they could assert their leadership – part

collaborative part competing – in the region.'[14] He writes that, in this context, the term Third World 'does not come to us as a mere descriptive category, to designate a geographical location or a specific relation with imperialism alone. It carries within it contradictory layers of meaning and political purpose', noting that 'in the conception of its chief nationalist exponents – Nehru, Nasser, Sukarno – the term was indissolubly linked to the containment of communism and a "mixed" economy of the private and state capitalist sectors'.[15] In this way, Ahmad captures the ambitions of decolonisation, but also the tragedy of its truncation by nationalist priorities within the context of 'mixed' economies.

Ahmad's examination of the term 'Third World' thus urges us to delve into the internal political dynamics of the main proponents of Bandung, including centrally Egypt and Indonesia under Nasser and Sukarno, respectively. He argues that decoding the language used at the conference is essential, as 'words constantly exceeded their intended meanings, simultaneously slippery and hermeticised.'[16] Through this act of decoding, Ahmad masterfully highlights the inherent contradiction of the 'Bandung moment' – its dual character – acknowledging the genuine aspirations and anti-imperialist objectives, while cautioning against its elevation of Third Wordlist nationalism, especially as its key figures were waging domestic battles, often very deadly, against internal opposition movements composed largely of mass communist parties. This is an important thread in the writings of Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney and Samir Amin, who were similarly attentive to the utilisation of nationalism and anti-imperialist rhetoric to consolidate national capital and 'mixed economies' that helped newly cohering national bourgeoisies to further projects of accumulation in international capitalist circuits.

Ahmad's approach to the Bandung Conference thus goes beyond simplistic celebration or dismissal. Rather, he invites us to conduct a nuanced examination of the competing regional powers, oppositional movements and ideological currents that were contending for hegemony during that period, emphasising that the outcomes were never predetermined. The scope of this analysis and his attentiveness to both regional and internal political dynamics is valuable beyond the Bandung moment of course. It invites us to always consider multiple scales and to reflect on the disparity between official anti-imperialist rhetoric and the actual actions of states in relation to local opposition. In the contemporary political landscape, attending to this distinction is crucial.

Orientalism and after

Ahmad's rejection of an essentialised Third World aligns with his critique of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (articulated in chapter 5 of *In Theory*). Ahmad was particularly concerned by the imposition of a binary between East and West and especially by the placement of Marxist theory within this binary. More specifically he took issue with Said's dismissal of Marx as being part of the Orientalist canon. This specific chapter of Ahmad's work was met with both acclaim and controversy. Benita Parry saw it as 'a critique mishandled'.[17] In hindsight, the tone and framing of the debate appears to have been a missed opportunity for a more 'reparative reading' that could have fostered a constructive engagement between Said and Ahmad.[18]

However, to fully understand the contentious nature of the debate, it is important to consider the historical context in which Ahmad was writing. This period was characterised by the neoliberal turn that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. There was a prevailing perception of dissolution and a belief that Marxism had become irrelevant, leading to its dismissal as an orientalist relic of the past. Ahmad's critique, therefore, exhibited a noticeable defensiveness that, at times, overshadowed the central arguments put forth. These arguments around postcolonialism, presented differently by various scholars, point to the shortcomings of the West/East binary in Said's writing, which can lead to overlooking the dynamics of class and racial hierarchies within postcolonial states as well as the long history of oppositional Marxist movements in the process of decolonisation.[19]

Despite disagreements over Ahmad's approach to *Orientalism* as a text, there is a crucial lesson in this chapter that I continue to find very useful. Even as it sometimes conflated Said's use of the term 'Orientalism' with its subsequent usage, the essay highlighted its instrumentalisation by elite scholars from the global South to assert their putatively subaltern status in the metropolitan academy while disregarding the internal hierarchies within their societies (and their own place

within them). This observation remains relevant today as it pushes us to consider how terminologies that emerge within a certain context can go on to have different lives. For example, this can be gleaned in the widespread embrace of Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony', which at times overlooks his focus on the role of subaltern classes. Similarly, terms such as 'intersectionality' and 'decolonisation' have been reduced through their popularisation to a superficial understanding focused solely on diversity.

Ahmad's analysis of 'orientalism' prompts us to trace the trajectory of concepts and critically assess how they are later operationalised and assimilated within the context of neoliberal university settings. This is particularly relevant today when considering the various understandings of decolonising the curriculum, for instance. On the one hand, radical student demands advocate for a transformed university system that encompasses free education and anti-racist curricula. On the other, lies a shallow approach that aligns well with market-driven education, treating the process as a mere marketing exercise aimed at appealing to diverse audiences. Ahmad's approach is useful for navigating the inherent tensions within such concepts.

Aijaz Ahmad fearlessly explored a wide range of subjects, capturing the essence of the political moment and movements beyond the classroom. Through his writing, he ignited critical debates that, even amidst disagreement, proved instrumental in enhancing our analytical perspectives. His insights will continue to be invaluable in understanding the nuances and intersections of class, nationalism and literature.

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Notes

10. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1994).
11. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Imperialism of our time', *Socialist Register* 40 (2004), 43–62.
12. Ahmad, 'Imperialism of our time', 53.
13. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
14. Ahmad, *In Theory*, 294.
15. Ahmad, *In Theory*, 307.
16. Ahmad, *In Theory*, 297.
17. Benita Parry, 'A Critique Mishandled', *Social Text* 35 (1993), 121–133.
18. Rahul Rao, 'Recovering Reparative Readings of Postcolonialism and Marxism', *Critical Sociology* 43:4-5 (2017), 587–598.
19. Sadik Jalal Al-'Azm, 'Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse', *Khamsin* 8 (1981), 5–26; James Clifford, Review of *Orientalism* in *History and Theory* 19:2 (1980), 204–23; Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004); Neil Lazarus, 'The Fetish of "the West" in Postcolonial Theory', in *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43–64.

Reading 'the Signs of Our Times'

Aijaz Ahmad on literature and the world

Rashmi Varma

With the publication of *In Theory* in 1992, Aijaz Ahmad threw a spanner into the works of what seemed at the time to be the relentless march of postcolonial theory within departments of English and comparative literary studies in the Anglo-American academy.[20] The increasing power of this purportedly new field of study was made possible, Ahmad would argue, because postcolonial theory had been comprehensively and uncritically hitched