

# Actually existing postcolonialism

**Bill Schwarz**

From the start, there has always been an ambiguity in the academic literature on the postcolonial. Does the term 'postcolonial' refer to a historical process that has already occurred, such that we are currently living in a historical epoch 'after colonialism'? Or does the idea of the postcolonial refer not to the past but to the future; to a more intangible notion, encapsulating a desired state of affairs in which postcolonial times are yet to come? Are we already postcolonial? Or have we yet to become so?

From a strict historiographical point of view the answer might seem clear – and might explain, too, the impatience many postcolonial theorists seem to experience with history. The classic age of colonialism indisputably has come to an end. Whatever the continuing neocolonial or imperial dispositions of global power, and whatever the concomitant unevenness in the distribution of health, wealth and happiness, colonialism on the old model – the rapacious annexation of territories – has not only ceased, but the majority of once-colonized states have themselves won political sovereignty. We indeed inhabit a world 'after' colonialism.

But whatever the evident truth of historical reasoning like this, it is clearly too hard-boiled to resolve the dilemma. Although much postcolonial theory may have been prompted by the momentous historical experiences of Bandung, Algeria, Vietnam, and by the epoch of decolonization they collectively represent, carried too in the postcolonial critique is the insistence that the internal mental structures of colonial power outlive their epoch. Habits of thought, from the most inconsequential practices of everyday life through to the most highly formalized systems of philosophical abstraction, still reproduce inherited and often unseen colonial mentalities. In matters of race and ethnicity, most of all, these older systems of thought gather and accumulate, allowing – in our contemporary postcolonial times – a bewildering variety of putatively racial truths to hold their ground in the

metropolitan civilizations, apparently immune to the fact that the historical conditions which originally gave them life have come to their end. Postcolonial critiques have been most effective when they have been able to demonstrate this continuing afterlife of colonial mentalities.

This, then, might seem to resolve the underlying ambiguity. On the one hand, an orthodox historiographical solution is clearly too narrow and positivistic in inclination. It can't convincingly be asserted that postcolonialism has 'happened'. On the other, the founding assumptions of postcolonial theory are based on a complex understanding of historical time, in which past, present and future ('dreaming forwards', in Ernst Bloch's conceptualization) work not as discrete, isolated units, but as a complex, interacting unity. Yet postcolonial theorists have only ever been weakly concerned with 'what happened', and in practice overwhelmingly tend to work in a narrow (textual, literary) vein.

This resolutely anti- or ahistorical mode of thought is something I still find scandalous. But it is a complaint heard often enough before and doesn't require repeating here. The point, though, is not to admonish the theorists because in their telling of this or that story they miss the fine texture of an incident, or because historians can show them that what pertained in Northern Rhodesia didn't in Southern Rhodesia. To suggest this is to imply that everyone should work like a historian – which truly is not a sensible or desirable line to press. It is, rather, the tendency to attribute to others (to historians) a primitive conception of historical time which is the source of the problem. Ironically it is the postcolonial theorists themselves who are most likely to flatten the complexities of the relations between past and present into a series of thin abstractions. In so doing they compromise their own best intentions. Indeed, it is nowadays historians, with an entire historiographical literature devoted to the practices of memory and to the coexistence of

competing historical times, who often appear the more conceptually sophisticated. It is the historians who are thinking most deeply about *memories* of empire: not – or not just – about the presence of obvious social representations (fulminating against yet another bank holiday television replay of *Zulu*), but in the more complex sense of memories which work by displacement and repression, and which always possess a mobility and quickness that compel them to disavow what they are.

And the questions ‘Are we already...?’ and ‘Have we yet to become...?’ are properly historical matters: they can’t be *resolved* conceptually, working only at a high level of abstraction. They suggest that what confronts us politically is less the postcolonial than ‘actually existing postcolonialism’ – a conceptual strategy which carries known political antecedents.

To think historically requires forsaking the singular abstraction – increasingly common – of ‘the postcolonial’. To think about divergent historical forms of postcoloniality means working through the political configurations of specific conjunctures. As the example of ‘actually existing socialism’ reminds us, the fusion of contradictory elements – progressive and regressive; democratic and authoritarian; popular and administered – is ultimately what proves most significant.

In the large corpus of academic writing on the postcolonial there is the assumption that the work of conceptual critique is allied to a democratic and popular politics. At their best, these critiques have been grounded in a true sense of emancipation. Principally, again, this has turned on questions of race and ethnicity. Conceptual critique has endeavoured to prise open the master-categories of race, in order to create alternative systems of narration from which non-racial futures can be imagined. But it is not only a matter of race. Postcolonial theorists have sought to identify the interlocking capacities of colonial authority – in all their manifestations, private as well as public – in which the will to colonize and conquer has been cast. In this dimension of postcolonial theory lies the democratic promise underwriting its founding wager.

This, in turn, is linked to the issue of the popular. Implicit in some of the theorizations is the belief that postcolonial situations signal the opening of new possibilities for popular life. This is a line of argument which has been put with differing degrees of sophistication. At worst, it opens the way for an unthinking, banal populism. At best (in my view) it is as smart as anything around. The basic trajectories of this approach are familiar: in opposition to older structures of colonial authority (it is proposed)

appear new inventive popular forms, diasporic and hybrid, symbolically canny, unpicking with unexpected bravura inherited master-systems of power. This is a mode of argumentation which has proved easy to traduce or parody – its most banal manifestations used to exemplify its most sophisticated. There are critics from many quarters. Even so, the basic drift of this approach seems to me right. And it seems to me that the figure who has thought this through in its most theoretically complex forms and who provides it with the most convincing emancipatory grounding is Stuart Hall. In effect, his post-Marxist reading of postmodernism converged with, and is now largely displaced by, his commitment to what is inadequately but reasonably summarized as postcolonial critique. Through Marxism, through various poststructuralist procedures, through postcolonialism comes a complex recasting of the popular. Given Hall’s characteristic emphasis on the redemptive – popular and democratic – possibilities of the world decolonized, his conception of the postcolonial is one which looks to the future, as the promise or possibility of better things to come, albeit with anticipations in the present. Indeed he often appears to suggest that the break-up of the colonial world *released* the potential for the creation of new vernacular forms whose outcome we have yet to witness.

We may also recall, however, that at a different moment in his public career Hall argued powerfully the degree to which in the Thatcher years the Right had won a political victory on the terrain of popular life and reconstituted its emotional economies. Thatcherism, he indicated at one point, represented a new instance of ‘regressive modernization’.

Perhaps only in metropolitan England was it necessary to point out the potentially regressive features of modernization. But, in much the same way, there is no reason to assume that the popular dimensions of the postcolonial are necessarily progressive (if we can recoup, for a moment, an older vocabulary). This has proved obvious enough in the former colonies, where the many horrors and barbarisms visited upon peoples who have recently freed themselves from colonialism have a variety of different causes, not all of which can be attributed to the machinations of the neocolonial managers of the new global capitalist institutions. It has been less obvious in the commentaries on the erstwhile metropolitan nations.

Habits of mind are difficult to break. There is a kind of academic common sense now that assumes postcolonialism to be synonymous with a larger democratic project, subverting the legacies of the colonial epoch. It

may be, at some point, that this habit becomes a conscious intellectual choice, although I think I doubt the wisdom of such a move. But while this habit of mind still holds, it is instructive to be reminded of contrary historical experiences in which the bid to leave behind the colonial epoch rested not on the dismantling of the colonial epistemes, but on their reassertion.

### England's coming home

Imagine a scene outside a modest suburban house on the south coast of England in October 1941. A young army officer, having recently completed a short spell at the Staff College at Camberley, is about to take up a posting in North Africa. He takes leave of his mother. In full uniform he marches the few paces to the front gate, about-turns in order to salute his parents, and then marches off up the street. This is the same man who, a few years earlier, took to concluding the letters he sent home from Sydney with the imperative 'GOD SAVE THE KING' and who – from the moment of appeasement – insistently referred to Neville Chamberlain as a 'traitor'. By the end of the following year, by then posted to India, his closing refrain in his letters had been extended: 'GOD SAVE THE KING (and Emperor of India)'.

Native readers will not be surprised to hear that the young soldier in question was Enoch Powell. In the 1930s and 1940s he embraced empire with a fervour which those with whom he worked professionally – in the academy, in the army and in politics – found puzzling, if not embarrassing. The empire entered deep into his inner life and represented an attachment which can only be described as passionate. He fell in love with India, 'head-over-heels in love' as he put it himself, schooling himself in the languages and civilizations of the colony. It was in India that he decided that his future had to lie in politics: following Edmund Burke, he came to the conclusion that India's destiny was to be decided at Westminster. He did indeed embrace a desperate desire to be viceroy. For a long time I thought this was no more than the usual hyperbole which surrounds Powell, but it turns out to be true: he wanted to be Lord Curzon reincarnated. In February 1946 – after a more tearful leave-taking, this time with his Indian bearer – he flew to Brize Norton; within twenty-four hours he had made contact with Conservative Central Office to begin his new career as a politician.

By the middle of the following year, however, India had been 'lost' (as convention had it in the metropolis). 'The premise of Powellism', wrote a political admirer, T.E. Utley, much later, 'is quite simply that the Indian

Empire has been lost'.<sup>1</sup> For the next decade Powell lived with this defeat, his inventive mind looking for all manner of ways in which the empire, without its crowning jewel, might be revived. By the time of the war with Egypt in 1956 he realized the game was up. 'It's over', was his new refrain. In one respect Powell was not alone in this. There were many mutterings, over too many whiskies, that it was all finished: a lachrymose self-indulgence ('It's all going to the dogs') is evident in the private sentiments of the political elite of the time, and produced the raw material for a new boom in satire. But politicians and state officials nevertheless continued energetically, well after Suez, to pursue imperial ambitions. (Suez, I should emphasize, did not mark the historical termination of empire.) Powell was distinct in organizing a politics, with its appointed philosophy, which *explicitly* sought to re-imagine the postcolonial nation. Four months after Suez he declared: 'The Tory Party must be cured of the British Empire, of the pitiful yearning to cling to the relics of a bygone system ... the Tory Party has to find its patriotism again, and to find it, as of old, in "this England"'.<sup>2</sup>

Between 1956 and 1968 (the year of his notorious 'Rivers of blood' political speech) Powell hesitantly but systematically created a political language which (as Utley understood) took as its premiss the end of British colonialism. In this – making 'after empire' *publicly* speakable – Powell, as politician, was unique. This is the first reason, symbolic or discursive if one chooses to argue in these terms, for regarding Powellism as postcolonial: not merely in the empirical sense that it appeared 'after empire', but that it took the predicament of the metropolis decolonized as its *raison d'être*.

I'll argue this by looking at two of his speeches. The first comes from April 1961, and was delivered to the arcane institution of the City of London branch of the Royal Society of St George.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, it was this speech that the *philosophes* of Middle England at the *Daily Telegraph* chose to publish in its entirety on the occasion of Powell's death, nearly forty years after he first delivered it.

The argument is simple: historically, Powell asserted, colonial England was an aberration. In the beginning, there was England 'herself', coeval with the soil and mulch of the landscape, in which liberty – 'a thing called "Parlement"' – slowly, uniquely, took root. In the late nineteenth century, however, in the age of Rudyard Kipling and Sir John Seeley, a newfangled colonial nationalism was invented, driven by the conviction that the truest Englishman was to be found

not in the home nation, but on the frontier of distant colonies. It was this England, colonial England, which in 1961 Powell was fast coming to perceive as a false, fabricated aberration from a history altogether more rooted, providential and true. And because this brought the end to an essentially false or *ersatz* conception of nationhood, Powell could claim it to be a moment of emancipation, not freeing the English from their history but, on the contrary, *returning* them to it:

So we today, at the heart of a vanished empire, amid the fragments of demolished glory, seem to find, like one of her own oak trees, standing and growing, the sap still rising from her ancient roots to make the spring, England herself. Perhaps after all we know most of England who only England know.

There was this deep, this providential difference between our empire and those others, that the nationhood of the mother country remained unaltered through it all, almost unconscious of the strange fantastic structure built around her...

Thus our generation is one which comes home again from years of distant wandering. We discover affinities with earlier generations of English, generations before the 'expansion of England', who felt no country but this to be their own. We look upon the traces which they left with a new curiosity, and the curiosity of finding ourselves once more akin with the old English.

England's diaspora, Powell was proposing, had come to its end. History and place had converged once more to allow a primal return to all that was true. The English, at last, were able to return home.

By any reckoning, this is a bizarre historical reconstruction. A while later Powell's conclusions came to be yet more curious, for he arrived at the belief that, in fact, the English had never really had an empire at all (in the traditional sense of things). (For those puzzled by the place of India in this new schema, Powell possessed a ready answer: India, of course, was 'the exception which proves the rule'.<sup>4</sup>) Imperial England was only ever a myth, or dream.

Critics of Powell have largely ignored the fact that his thought possessed a rudimentary conception of collective mental misrepresentations. This owed less to the traditions inaugurated by Destutt de Tracy (leading to modern theorizations of ideology), and more to the elusive and tantalizing metaphors of Plato's *Republic*. English public life after empire, according to Powell, was dominated by those who could not *see*: by those whose vision was blocked as a consequence of living in a world of dream, nightmare, mirage, fantasy, hallucination, unreality, madness, schizophrenia – in a world, in other words, incapable of noticing that

things had moved on. He, on the contrary, stood as a lone visionary, a tribune with the capacity to see the truth which everyday political rhetorics worked systematically to conceal. (On occasion this too could take a populist term: if the old ruling order were still constrained by the myopia of empire, the people had privileged access to the true historical situation.) The capacity to see was predicated on recognition that the colonial epoch had closed. In other words, to employ a rather different conceptual idiom, postcolonialism brought with it certain epistemological, or cognitive, possibilities.

In the Powellite *mise-en-scène* the royal road to truth depended on paying obeisance to the positioning of the nation, unencumbered by colonial excrescences, as the absolute index of what differentiated truth from falsehood. In the old conservative ideologies of the colonial period, nation, crown and empire were deemed to exist beyond the realm of politics: they were what civilization *was*, and thus could not be opened to political negotiation. It was basically these inherited beliefs that Powell recast in the 1960s. At the very moment in which the colonial legacy was repudiated, this bid to reaffirm the transcendent virtue of (English) nationhood reproduced at a stroke the basic cognitive structures of colonial thought. At this moment in the Powellite odyssey, as Karl Marx might have put it, everything came to be inverted; everything turned into its opposite. Colonialism transmuted into postcolonialism, which by a vivid alchemy turned back into the essentials of colonialism. Or, to draw from a different theoretical system, which in our own times has perhaps a greater currency, while Powell gave every indication that he was *working through* the requirements of postcolonial civilization, he was in fact *acting out*, or repeating, an unconscious history which was only too well known. It is at this point that the profane – dangerous and authoritarian – consequences of these adventures in postcolonial abstraction can be seen for what they were: irrepressible.

### 'The enemy within'

We can, at this point, fast-forward from 1961 to 1970, to look at the second of Powell's speeches that concerns me here. The setting was Northfield, in Birmingham, the neighbourhood – just the other side of the Bristol Road – in which he had lived as a child. Here memory, Powell's own, was peculiarly located, or its dispositions concentrated.<sup>5</sup> Yet he opened his address not with Birmingham, but with Singapore. 'When the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* disappeared beneath the waters of the Gulf of Siam, at least we knew that Britain had

suffered a defeat', he told his West Midlands audience, referring to the disasters which presaged the collapse of Singapore in 1942. He continued:

Britain at this moment is under attack. It is not surprising if many people find that difficult to realise. A nation like our own, which has twice in this century had to defend itself by desperate sacrifice against an external enemy, instinctively continues to expect that danger will take the same form in the future. When we think of an enemy, we still visualise him in the shape of armoured divisions, or squadrons of aircraft, or packs of submarines. But a nation's existence is not always threatened in the same way. The future of Britain is as much at risk now as in the years when Imperial Germany was building dreadnoughts, or Nazism rearming. Indeed the danger is greater today, just because the enemy is invisible or disguised, so that his preparations and advances go on hardly observed.<sup>6</sup>

The theme of the speech, and the name by which it goes in compilations, was 'the enemy within'. There was, Powell proclaimed, an enemy inside the nation, invisible to the people, and wilfully or unwilfully, ignored by those charged to govern the state. This enemy was depicted by Powell in the third person singular, in the masculine form, in the manner of antique military manuals: 'he' determined to destroy here, to outflank there, all the while seeking to secure ascendancy over 'his' victims. The tale told at Northfield was lurid, extravagant and wild in its putative appeal to a homely reasonableness. The enemy, plague-like, was all around, winning victories when nobody was looking, and breaking the moral foundations of the nation. The speech rehearsed the convictions which in these years Powell was making his own: that madness was reason and reason madness; that truth was lies and lies were truth. 'The public are literally made to say that black is white.'

The terminology of black and white was, of course, not fortuitous. It lay at the heart of the matter. Powell was outraged that there were those who could bring themselves to deny that 'the English are a white nation'. This he regarded as a 'heresy', the product of 'a sinister and deadly weapon' which entailed 'brain-washing by repetition of manifest absurdities'. In his overarching scenario of decline and anarchy, black immigration constituted a significant factor:

'Race' is billed to play a major, perhaps a decisive, part in the battle of Britain, whose enemies must have been unable to believe their good fortune as they watched the numbers of West Indians, Africans and Asians concentrated in her major cities mount towards the two million mark, and no diminution of the increase yet in sight.

But race signified more than immigration. It was, in Powell's imagination, the issue which bound together all the arenas of disorder, the single principle with the capacity to articulate all that threatened 'the peaceable citizen'. 'The exploitation of what is called "race"', claimed Powell, 'is a common factor which links the operations of the enemy on several different fronts.' Race, in this larger sense, became a means for signifying ethics itself, for 'the battle of Britain' was to be 'fought and won in the moral sphere'. As in April 1968, Powell believed that he had no choice but to speak out. In the forthcoming election, he informed his audience, 'the people have it in their hands, perhaps for the last time, to elect men who will dare to speak what they themselves know to be the truth'.

This vision of decline and racial conflagration was predicated on memories of imperial loss. The sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* represented a dramatic, definitive moment in the collapse of Britain's colonial power. The loss of Singapore more than a quarter of a century before gave life to the anxieties expressed by Powell in Northfield in 1970. Memories of Singapore ran deep in his imagination. Like many of his generation, he experienced the defeat inflicted by the Japanese on the colony as a terrible blow. Intellectually, he had always been aware of the magnitude of the defeat. In 1986 at a seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, in London, he revealed that at the end of 1942, while serving as a military intelligence officer, he had prepared a report entitled 'Peace with Germany now', in which he advocated two courses for future action. He argued, first, that the German theatre of war should be evacuated by the British (leaving 'the German people to deal with the German government'); and second, that all the empire's military forces should be turned to the Pacific, in order to recover Singapore and forestall any future threat of US hegemony in the far eastern regions of the British empire.<sup>7</sup> Early in 1943, he sought a posting in the east so that he could be close to what he believed to be the decisive arena of the war.

Powell's memories of Singapore, however, also had a deeper subjective dimension. In 1938, preparing to take up his new post as professor of Greek at Sydney University ('at 25 the youngest professor in the Empire': this was his proud boast), he was one of two passengers to travel on the first scheduled Imperial Airways flying-boat service from Poole Harbour to Singapore, and thence by Qantas Empire Airways from Singapore to Sydney. While travelling he read not the classics, as one might have expected, but a little Nietzsche. This journey – in which he witnessed

his ‘world expanding with explosive speed’ – was, he remembered in his seventies, ‘a deeply formative experience. How formative I can understand now in retrospect.’<sup>8</sup> It is not clear whether his departure followed the conventions of the colonial romance, with his mother on the quayside waving farewell to the disappearing son – though we do know that she organized his packing and ensured he took with him a warm cardigan and overcoat. His grief at leaving underwrites his published poems of the time, collected in the anthology *Casting Off*.

I wish the wound would bleed  
Bleed till the flesh was white  
For then the world could read  
Our woe aright<sup>9</sup>

Between Crete and Indonesia all but one leg of his journey was conducted through the lands of the empire: ‘one was witnessing the ubiquity of a power on which the sun had not yet set’. ‘I saw; I felt; I marvelled.’ It was to Singapore that he kept returning. On a later trip, in March 1939, he recalled living ‘through the most horrible parting of my life. A friend in the Malay Civil Service, with whom I stopped over, was departing to China to acquire Cantonese at the same time as I departed for Australia. We both knew that we would never see one another again. He was killed when the Japanese stormed Singapore island.’<sup>10</sup> The story of this parting was repeated on a number

of occasions by Powell, including in the foreword to his *Collected Poems* some half a century later. This friendship marked an early love affair. Indeed, it is clear that the first stirrings of his desire to be transferred to Singapore derived from emotional, rather than strategic, considerations, ‘beckoned by the ghost of Thomas, living or dead’.<sup>11</sup> Long before he came to fall ‘head over heels in love with India’, Singapore and the imperial possessions of the Pacific – including Australia – had been active, passionate even, in his imagination.

In the old Labour heartlands of Midlands motor manufacturing in 1970, allusion to Powell’s memories of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* might not have evoked much for the younger generations who were listening. But in other respects his audience – if we can extrapolate from shifts in voting structures and from other manifestations of popular politics – might well have proved more receptive. Powell was returning to the streets of his childhood. In his memory, as he told interviewers often enough, his childhood had been an idyllic time of emotional plenitude. In adult life, however, these same streets presented to him an image which he found altogether more alarming. Black immigration (he believed) had transformed his own remembered home. These streets, and many like them in adjacent neighbourhoods, he thought were ceasing ‘even to be England’. What once had been experienced as real and homely had now transmuted into a more



dangerous state of affairs which he experienced as unreal and unhomely. Given the psychic power of these feelings, only an authentically radical solution would suffice. When, in the myriad of letters Powell received in these years, and in the popular clamour one could hear incessantly in the media, he was eulogized as a saviour of the nation, it was obvious that he was being called upon to *do* something, just as St George slew dragons and King Richard faced the evil barons. What he had to do was clear enough: extirpate the problem, by removing the unwanted (non-white) immigrants from the territory of the nation.

This represented, in psychoanalytical terms, a confrontation with the uncanny. It was, however, more than a personal idiosyncrasy of Powell's. Powell encoded these experiences, powerfully, in expressly postcolonial terms, such that *all* turned on his memories of empire. If we were to follow his reasoning we would see that just at the moment when the English were able once more to imagine their nation, not as diaspora, but as home, they were confronted with a presence at home which could not have been more unhomely. But such memories of empire – or, more particularly, half-conscious, displaced memories of *being white* – were the common inheritance for many of those who felt affective ties to the nation and to its history. Between 1968 and 1970 race did indeed become the articulating principle in which all manifestations of disorder and *dislocation* could be thought. The aftermath of Powell's so-called 'Rivers of blood' speech in 1968 produced an authentic crisis of the state, in which post-imperial decline suddenly seemed to be an issue in popular life, as it hadn't before. Kobena Mercer is right to insist that in Britain Powell was the representative figure in the making of that 'other' '68.<sup>12</sup>

If the first reason for regarding Powell as a post-colonial thinker – albeit an apostle of the *other* post-colonialism – was his endeavour to craft an appropriate political and philosophical language, then the second is that his was a politics which incontrovertibly triggered a crisis of state. Powellism was not a matter of some free-floating discourse, in which his eccentric, mind-bending readings of English history were a question only of academic disputation. On the contrary, Enoch Powell became, in Gramscian terms, a political party in his own right. Powellism is the name we use to describe the first 'organic' crisis in the domestic polity *produced* by decolonization – by the historic process of Britain becoming postcolonial.

A third reason for seeing Powellism in this light is more speculative. The single most striking thing about

Powell (and the principal reason why it is necessary to return to him) was the extraordinary popular irruption which accompanied his political experiments in the period after April 1968. It is difficult to think of any other comparable moment in twentieth-century Britain in which popular discontent intervened with such immediacy in the theatre of high politics, overriding convention and recasting what politics was. Powell told the stories of whites who believed themselves to have become racially dispossessed, and who believed their whiteness delivered not (as before) a certain grandeur, but instead a peculiarly acute sensation of homelessness and loss. They too told their own tales, in their own words, as never before, in letters to Powell and to other public figures, in letters to the press, on television and radio, and in the countless informal, private and fleeting conversations which compose civil society. No one has been able adequately to explain this phenomenal release of popular energies. The high points of Powellism do seem to have been driven by a popular momentum which earlier had been inchoate, lacking in organization, channels or outlet. In part, this was a question of the movement from private to public: Powell himself broke open a space in public life in which these popular voices carried a new authority. But it is also tempting, though difficult to demonstrate convincingly, to establish a connection between the significance of these new vernacular forms and the disintegration in the metropolis of traditionally colonial structures of authority – politically, morally and intellectually.

To suggest more broadly that Powell can be regarded as a theorist of the postcolonial might seem (on the one hand) merely descriptive, without much analytical force, or (on the other) unnecessarily provocative. Much turns on definition. But minimally one could hold to the fact that postcolonialism in England was first definitively, popularly experienced as Powellism. To think in these terms disrupts the formalism which my opening questions – 'Are we already...?' or 'Have we yet to become...?' – invite. It requires us to think about actually existing historical forms, in all their contradictory, often unwelcome, complexities. More particularly, it necessitates inquiry into *conjunctural* histories. I think it could be shown that the crisis of Suez in 1956 was relatively under-determined, while the Powellite crisis of 1968 was spectacularly overdetermined. The year 1968 was exactly an occasion of organic crisis, which broke across the society as a whole, not as an external rupture – 'out there' – but at the very core of the domestic metropolis.

## The postcolonial proconsul

This history cannot be reconstructed here, but a more abstract gloss may be appropriate. I suggested earlier that a great virtue of postcolonial theory (in its formal protocols at any rate) was the attempt to theorize the complexity of historical time, and that in this memories of empire played a defining role. In discussing Powell, I tried to indicate how his political philosophy was governed by his own memories of empire, both memories which were systematized as ‘proper history’, and those too which were more elusive, fragmentary and which derived from his inner life. In arguing for the importance of a conjunctural reading of postcolonialism, I implied that in the crisis brought about by Powellism at the end of the 1960s, the past was peculiarly active in the present.

This, too, is difficult to argue convincingly. But if we return to the most celebrated attempt to think through the related issues of conjuncture and overdetermination – Althusser’s essay ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’ – it should come as no surprise to see that a prominent theme is that of historical memory.

Althusser set out to explore the conceptual means for thinking the interconnections between competing, or composite, historical times. This was what the concept of overdetermination promised. Its origins, we should recall, were in psychoanalysis and, more specifically, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, linked to the subordinate concepts of displacement and condensation. It was employed by Freud to explore the connections between the manifest and the latent in dream-work, suggesting a kind of structuralist endeavour to uncover modes of historical time which remain subterranean and unseen. But just as in Freud, so too in Althusser: the concept of overdetermination is intimately connected to the work of memory. If, as Althusser claimed when he opened the essay, there existed an ‘ambiguity’ in Marx’s inversion of Hegel, such an ‘ambiguity’ was reproduced in his own, *marxisant* appropriation of Freud. Althusser found Hegel’s belief that ‘every consciousness has a suppressed-conserved *past* even in its present’ too choreographed a formulation. He was sceptical also of the Hegelian obsession with ‘memories’ and ‘phantoms’. Yet, essentially, Althusser’s own reading of overdetermination depended not only on memory, but on the subjective dimensions of the inner life in which memories work. ‘The past’, he wrote, ‘survives in the form of memory.’ Or, in a wonderfully suggestive phrase, some distance from the expected materialist rendition, he identified the

past as ‘a whispered promise’. Necessarily, Althusser concluded, the present ‘feeds off the shades of its past’.<sup>13</sup>

Whispered promises; shades; phantoms. (‘The ghost of Thomas, living or dead...’) This is as much the terrain of Freud as it is of Marx. But precisely the provisional, or incomplete, status of this theoretical exercise may well be a virtue, for it may anticipate a historical imagination which can pay due heed to interior as well as to exterior historical times. If the past does not merely shape the present, but is in some manner an active constituent *in* the present, then the preeminent site where this occurs is in subjective memory or, by extension, in Nora’s *les lieux de mémoire*. And as I indicated at the outset, the most compelling concerns of postcolonialism are those which highlight the ‘phantoms’ of the colonial past in the present. In introducing Powell I have suggested that these memories of empire, especially in the period after colonialism, could assume unnervingly heterodox forms. But not only that: collective memories can intervene and dislocate the present, which is precisely what occurred in the Powellite moment at the end of the 1960s when the colonial past – remembered, repressed, displaced – was active in the present with peculiar intensity.

There is a paradox at work here. Powell was resolutely postcolonial, in the meanings I have described – more so than any comparable public figure. Yet he also reproduced with the greatest assiduity the essentials of his colonial past. He acted out, through his memories of empire, a properly proconsular mentality in which he took it upon himself to remind those at home – slack and compromising – of the first principles which they were abnegating. The oxymoron carries the truth of this: he was a postcolonial proconsul. England, decolonized and ethnically plural, did not at all conform to Powell’s heated, impossible imaginings of what home should be. Those who governed, and whom he believed should have been responsible for rectifying the situation, seemed to be appeasing the forces of dislocation. In such circumstances England was no longer England, the *heimlich* transmuting into the *unheimlich*. Powell’s salvation lay in County Down, Northern Ireland. There at least (he surmised) the principles which had made English civilization English survived. 1688 and King Billy and the protestant heritage and Unionism: together they formed the dynamo which made politics in County Down work. As he told a Unionist rally in Newtownards in County Down in May 1972: ‘Every English Member

[of Parliament] who has had the honour to address an audience in this province realizes at once that he has been catapulted out of a world of make-believe into the world of reality.<sup>14</sup> Two years later Powell made the political journey from the unrealities of postcolonial England to a providential land whose citizens lived the truth of history. In this journey we can see a dramatic example of thought being required to do impossible things. (History, of course, is replete with such manoeuvrings.)

This impossibilism of Powell's should not be written out of the historical record, as something so eccentric or idiosyncratic that it has only particular relevance. He was, in more ways than we care to think, representative. The way in which colonialism lived in his memory and infused his politics, even when he determined to repudiate every last vestige of the colonial past, is both unnerving and instructive. It reminds us of the contingent and unexpected presence of the colonial past in the postcolonial present, and of the *mobility* of these memories.

This is not to suppose that he possessed the last word. If the high point of Powellism, as a popular movement, occurred in the specific historical conjuncture of 1968–70, thereafter there occurred a 'second' postcolonial irruption with the domestic life of the erstwhile metropolis. In 1981–82, as a response to the prevailing Powellite ordering of the public cultures of postcolonial England, there arose out of a seemingly repetitious, infernal history a new set of historic possibilities, created precisely from that indigenous black culture which felt itself to be most cornered. A powerful cultural renaissance emerged, specifically attuned to the peculiarities of British life, which only tangentially touched the formal institutions of political society. From the specificities of this historical experience there appeared new intellectual means for conceptualizing the workings of ethnicities, and of the civilizations in whose name they worked. Though these theories had been formed from a specific historical experience, they could also serve more general purposes – not only for the first-generation sons and daughters of black immigrants to Britain, but for the white inhabitants too. In a word, abstracting from the immigrant experience provided a means for imagining what England decolonized might look like. Different memories could come to life and interrupt historical patterns of repetition.

This history, too, forms part of the postcolonial present.

## Notes

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1. T.E. Utley, *Enoch Powell*, William Kember, London, 1968, p. 50.
2. Quoted in John Ramsden, *The Making of Conservative Party Policy: The Conservative Research Department Since 1929*, Longman, London, 1980, p. 213.
3. I have used the text as published by the *Daily Telegraph*, 9 February 1998. The date of this address (22 April 1961) is often cited wrongly.
4. Powell's critical speech in this regard was delivered in Dublin in 1964; it is reproduced in Enoch Powell, *Freedom and Reality*, Batsford, London, 1969. Tom Nairn's early essay, 'English Nationalism: The Case of Enoch Powell', first published in *New Left Review* in 1970 and reprinted in his *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism*, Verso, London, 1981, remains one of the best accounts.
5. I have been influenced here by the work of Pierre Nora, though I draw different conclusions here. See Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, 2 vols, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996 and 1998. For a fine reading, see Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe*, Berg, Oxford, 1999.
6. Enoch Powell, 'The Enemy Within', in John Wood, ed., *Powell and the 1970 Election*, Elliot Right Way Books, Kingswood, Surrey, 1970.
7. Enoch Powell, 'British Conservatism, 1951–1960', seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 21 May 1986.
8. Enoch Powell, *Reflections of a Statesman*, Bellew, London, 1992, p. 97; and Enoch Powell, 'Long Haul Back to a World Apart', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 October 1988.
9. Enoch Powell, *Casting Off and Other Poems*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1939.
10. Powell, 'Long Haul Back'.
11. Quoted in Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1998, p. 70.
12. Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1994.
13. Louis Althusser, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination', in his *For Marx*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969. An impressive conceptual reading of postcolonialism conjuncturally can be found in David Scott, 'The Permanence of Pluralism', in Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg and Angela McRobbie, eds, *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, Verso, London, 2000.
14. Speech at Unionist rally, Queen's Hall, Newtownards, County Down, 6 May 1972; typescript in the library of the London School of Economics.