

Caution: Disciplinary Intersection

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Review Article

Civilising Barbarians: Missionary Narrative and African Textual Response in Nineteenth-Century South Africa
by Leon de Kock.

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Civilising Barbarians is concerned with 'cultural exchange' (p. 3) in a colonial context that dictated the terms of dialogue with such violence that oppressed interlocutors were forced to interpellate themselves within the deafening monologue of the coloniser. This involves tracing the interstitial 'mediation, subversion or mimicry' (p. 27) of the essentialising 'discursive edifice' of colonialist discourse. De Kock's project joins the work of those attempting to develop Edward Said's discourse-oriented approach to colonial history, and shares with Robert Young's *White Mythology* (1990) and *Colonial Desire* (1995), and Saul Dubow's *Illicit Union* (1995) a preoccupation with the doxography of colonialist discourse. The theoretical works of Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, Hayden White, Richard Rorty, Homi Bhabha, Mary Louise Pratt, and the American New Historicists are invoked to legitimate a focus on 'colonialist discourse on its own terms, and not as an adjunct to material history' (p. 22). Like Foucault, De Kock is concerned with the domination of human behaviour through the regular procedures imposed by the civilising process, here in form of the educative control of the Lovedale missionaries who implemented knowledge as power.

De Kock discusses the signifying dimensions of cultural exchange in a confessedly general and introductory work aiming 'to reveal the historical contingency and the literary constructedness of earlier attempts to pass discourse off as reality' (p. 27). His approach to the 'South African colonial order as a discursive event' (p. 21) is explicitly situated within the field of

colonial discourse analysis that has produced John and Jean Comaroff's, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (1991), and Clifton C. Crais's, *The Making of the Colonial Order* (1992). The Comaroffs in particular are valued for their insistence on 'the subtle interplay of mutual influence and counter-influence between missionaries and their African interlocutors', a discourse in which 'hybrid forms of colonial identity emerged' (p. 13f,18). This approach is contrasted with an 'earlier emphasis on capital, class, and official politics' and is thought to be of more use than 'monolithic models such as a theory of class struggle' (p. 3,13). The new approach proceeds on the basis of 'a relationship between the "textual" and the "material" facets of history which recognises the discursive basis of historical depiction' (p. 25). Working with the 'more thoroughgoing sense of "historicism"' (p. 37) associated with New Historicism is felt to be an improvement on ideology critique.

Despite being impatient with the category of class, De Kock is concerned to draw on the powerful Marxist critique of 'South Africans of English persuasion [who] have enjoyed the perception of themselves as purveyors of liberal cosmopolitanism' because

if you listen to debates today, in the post-apartheid age, within organisations such as the English Academy of Southern Africa, for example, that benign history, and that convenient liberal opposition to apartheid, is still called upon as though the Marxist debate about English capital's deep collusion with apartheid never occurred. 'English' in its institutional forms often still wishes to present itself as innocent of a coercive colonial history for which it should bear any responsibility whatsoever (p. 191f)

He could have gone on to mention the neo-liberal stranglehold on English literary journals in this country. The critique of liberal complacency has marked out the best of De Kock's previous work which has shown him to be one of the more astute advocates of a critical engagement with theory. The present book shows his commitment to using theory to render explicit the presuppositions that underlie critical discourse. Whereas English literary studies looks at the results of colonisation in the form of 'black literature', De Kock significantly turns to 'describe some of the prior representational processes in which colonial subjectivity was negotiated' (p. 19) and from which 'black writing in English' and African nationalism emerged.

He attempts to fit theory to local concerns while problematising the referential presuppositions of standard histories, and so differs from those South African literary academics who dismiss theoretical concerns as marginal and congratulate themselves on having unmediated access to the primary materials that metropolitan theorists lack. This 'Disciplinary Intersection'—'the positioning of my research between literary theory and socio-historical enquiry' (p. 7)—is the contentious field he attempts to map

in an ambitious and challenging work that invites debate. In taking up this invitation I am going to break with the usual protocols of reviewing since the interest of De Kock's primary material speaks for itself and will guarantee a readership. Rather I will limit my remarks to the following questions: What argument is made for the recognition of 'the discursive basis of historical depiction' and what does this mean for the 'material facets of history'? Once material history is marginalised what prevents the reduction of general social conditions to the experience of individual subjects taken to represent a commonality of experience? What is the genealogy of the focus on discourse?

De Kock concedes that *Civilising Barbarians* is one narrative among others, but one that can claim a 'greater degree of discursive reflexivity', 'the (unfair) advantage of metacritical awareness' (p. 27). Relativism is avoided because '[n]ot all accounts are equal', and De Kock claims 'certain affirming values' (p. 27) for his own account. He gives two reasons for this, firstly a claim to linguistic self-consciousness:

there are important interpretive turns in my argument in which I fashion my own literary tropes to reconfigure the history under discussion in terms opposed to and different from its surface narratives (p. 26).

Secondly, an argument from historical omniscience:

That is, one has the advantage of hindsight and review along with developments in theories of knowledge and historiography (which are historically embedded) (p. 27).

In discussing such an order of discourse from the point of view of the late twentieth century, one has the advantage of sharing in theoretically sophisticated skepticism about metanarratives and totalising discourses in general (p. 76).

Affirming the value of writerly self-consciousness before the rhetoricity of language is itself a familiar trope with a history—one which always has its own blind-spot. However, isn't self-consciousness more than a writerly trope when the documents to be studied are the artifacts of black reaction to a colonising oppressor discourse? Surely methodological issues are joined by a moral imperative to respect the particularity of these counter-hegemonic traces; an imperative that is in tension with the pedagogical and theoretical need to use these texts as evidentiary *exemplum* and to generalise rules and norms of the greatest explanatory value? Isn't this situation itself historically and institutionally structured since the authorised academic persona is itself part of the historical process of oppression and dispossession under scrutiny? Even when one writes 'against the grain of that history's own legitimating

terms' (p. 26) one is still writing with the historically complicit institutional validation of one's authorship.

With this in mind I am unclear as to why De Kock claims that 'metacritical awareness' is the preserve of contemporary writers and 'never available to historically embedded subjects who feature in this study' (p. 27). This contentious proposition effectively elides the very subject De Kock claims to be addressing, namely 'the orthodoxy of English as a dominant medium of educational discourse in South Africa', and the institutionalisation of this discourse 'that was won by blood' (p. 29f). Surely the presumption of 'metacritical awareness' by the interpreter pre-empts the

question of how institutional forms of English teaching, including university teaching, continued to be a central facet in the colonising process (p. 191).

The answer to this question is already prejudged: the 'metacritical awareness' that comes with theory can enable the contemporary author to transcend ideological complicity. This is a challengeable position, not least because the vantage point of historical presentism is itself a trope of teleological supremacy integral to colonialist discourse. It also begs the question of the institutionalisation of theory in the specific disciplinary context of the South African academic division of labour; the institutionally amenable role of theory as a discourse of mastery, with its own canon of representative theorists, in the bureaucratisation of knowledge in the university.

De Kock limits the field of investigation to 'narratives of what are taken to be facts and not unmediated facts themselves', correctly pointing out that 'history is both discourse and event', and stresses that there is 'always *some* purchase on reality' (p. 25):

But the point bears emphasising that there is often an artificial distinction between the 'text' and its 'background', and between 'texts' and 'history' (p. 37)

Such a New Historicist approach is contrasted with 'the historian's socio-empirical analysis'. Unlike the latter, the new historicism 'does not pretend to offer strictly diachronic and meticulously detailed empirical research on a micro-area of study' (p. 77,19). Now, the problem is that socio-historical analysis forms the basis for the Marxist revisionist historical accounts that De Kock wishes to supplement with analysis of discursive representation. De Kock draws on the explanatory power of the Marxian critique of liberalism at the same time as he questions its legitimacy. What is surprising is that no discussion of the limitations of revisionist arguments is given; they are simply homogenised as reducing everything to class and taken to be

superseded by a more powerful hermeneutic model that takes as its object 'discourse' rather than 'materialist history':

To understand the constitution of the country as a particular configuration of differential relations involving land, power and culture, one needs more than the materialist version of history in which relations and forces of production and their articulation in social classes are explained (p. 8)

Apparently one doesn't need to argue for post-Marxism any more. Indeed the representation of simplistic Marxists with their reductive oppositions and monological narrative curiously resembles the strategy of the Lovedale missionaries who, though they were making empirical reports, were really enmeshed in metaphorical constructs determined by a rigid binary structure:

Typical of neo-classical, empirical rendering of knowledge, their [the missionaries] mission was never to discover heterogeneity, but always to confirm pre-existent notions of the nature of 'reality' which they regarded as objectively true (p. 82f).

A linear narrative of academic progress assures that the revisionists, like the missionaries, have given way to more sophisticated theorists, and the Comaroffs and Crais have supplanted Legassick *et al.* But this narrative can cut the other way, as when Legassick's critique of liberalism is reduced to a recent publication so that he can said to be 'following' (p. 191) Crais and Keegan: Legassick, of course, published his seminal work in 1972 and 1974. A footnote pointing to Legassick's (1993) *South African Historical Journal* review of Crais's book claims that Legassick responded with 'apparent approval' to the 'fresh synthesis' (p. 200) in South African history. This is one possible interpretation of Legassick's muted and troubled review, but is hardly enough to justify the presupposition of discourse theory superseding materialist historiography. Neither does it take account of the more critical responses of Shula Marks and Jeff Peires to Crais's hermeneutic, which evidence the uneasy relationship between materialist historiographers and the newer discourse-oriented approach; 'nagging doubts', as Marks (1993:314) calls them.

The place of discourse analysis in South African historiography is treated by De Kock as if it did not have any history. In fact resistance to materialist analysis has formed an important thread in South African socio-historical debates. In *The Shaping of South African Society* (1979) Elphick and Giliomee advanced a modified frontier tradition thesis, Fredrickson's *White Supremacy* (1981) emphasised racial attitudes, Rich focused on the tension between *White Power and the Liberal Conscience* (1984) and Thompson's *Political Mythology of Apartheid* (1985) linked ethnic identity and national

identity. These historians looked at the historical dimension of ideas of ethnic and national supremacy integral to the ideology of apartheid, and distanced themselves from the reductionism of the materialist historians. J.M. Coetzee (1991) continued this line of argument by appealing to Thompson in his elaboration of the personality of apartheid to criticise the materialist reductionism of Marxist historiography. Put bluntly, the emphasis on the doxography of racist conceptions and the genealogy of the colonialist discourse, rather than its material context, is a thread that links writers marginalising the role of socio-economic forces to those currently foregrounding regimes of representation. The usefulness of the discursive approach in a South Africa marked by the nonracial aspects of colonialism, in which non-discursive forces still structure a nonracial version of apartheid, is questionable.

Awareness of the disciplinary context to Foucault's work suggests that De Kock's dehistoricisation of the Foucauldian inspired New Historicism is a way of granting it an unwarranted authority. The *ecole des Annales*, founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, foregrounded the arbitrariness of the sign and drew out the interconnected nature of cultural forces of an epoch in terms of *mentalites*, a code word for culture. The *nouvelle histoire* of the *Annalistes* was a sociocultural history that attempted to uncover the deep structure of an epoch, and followed in the idealist tradition of cultural history rooted in the work of Burckhardt and Huizinga on the role of value forming elites. These historians prefigured the concerns and methodology of Foucault's *epistemes*, Geertz's cultural anthropology, Greenblatt's New Historicist wall to wall textuality, and the Comaroff's dubious co-option of Gramsci's notion of hegemony for their historical anthropology. Although Foucault rejected the linkage of his project to the structuralism of Levi-Strauss and Piaget it is clear that the notion of 'discourse formations' extends the notion of epigenetic system to historical research, and so fulfils the mid-1960s hopes of Lucien Goldmann and A.-J. Greimas that structuralism would revolutionise historiography. The rethinking of historiography has a history which reveals that the stress on discourse was, and is, but one highly contentious option among others.

De Kock omits to mention the substantial critiques of Michel Foucault¹,

¹ Gayatri Spivak (1983) goes so far as to argue that Foucault's strategy amounts to a complicity with dominating ideologies, and Homi Bhabha (1994:243) also notes the 'Eurocentricity of Foucault's theory of cultural difference [that] is revealed in his insistent spatializing of the time of modernity'. For Said (1988:9f) Foucault's 'Eurocentrism was almost total, as if history took place only among a group of French and German thinkers'. De Kock (p 200) references Foucault's theory of madness without any engagement with Derrida's well-known critique of Foucault's own binarism. Trenchant objections by MacIntyre (1990) and others to Foucault's genealogical method are simply excluded

Geertz, and New Historicism². The work of anthropologist Geertz shares New Historicism's preference for 'thick description' (i.e., anecdote) and is the theoretical source for the New Historicist perception of the 'artificial distinction between text and context'. For Geertz (1973) the text of culture and cultural exchange enables us to see a dimension of our own subjectivity, and culture is both text and context at the same time. In Geertz's approach interpretive meaning swallows causal analysis and might serve a conservative political function. Perhaps theoretical reflexivity or metacritical awareness is not the only motivation behind the shift away from socio-economic analysis and towards cultural analysis. After all New Historicism has flourished in the period of ascendant U.S. hegemony that marked the conclusion of the cold war; a period in which the dominating super-power may have an interest in drawing attention away from the military and socio-economic elements of its domination. My point is that the very theories that De Kock draws upon are decontextualised to a degree that their filiations with Western hegemony and neo-liberal quietism are obscured³.

² The central importance of Hayden White to de Kock's (p. 179-81) confusing theory of 'metaphorical discourse' as structuring antagonistic identities also raises questions. White's 'New Historicism' of the analytic tradition reduced history to written history, to the texts and practices of the historian. And what of the positive sense of metaphor stressed by Derrida, its drawing different elements into analogic participation on the basis of resemblance *rather than* identity an equivalence integral to translation? Those engaged in 'historical materialism' have sought to challenge the demotion of agency in Greenblatt's New Historicist Renaissance studies. The British theorists Jonathan Dollimore (1989) and Allan Sinfield (1992), in the tradition of Benjamin's 'historical materialism' and Raymond Williams's 'cultural materialism', have distinguished their programme of cultural studies from New Historicism on the grounds that without some form of Marxian materialism aiming at the transfiguration of existing material conditions historicisation simply confirms the omnipotence of ideology. Put at its most schematic New Historicists normalise their historical conjectures by contiguity, while cultural materialists seek to establish some form of causality. As Lynn Hunt (1990:102) notes of New Historicism the general stress on culture 'was a way of disengaging oneself from Marxism, or at least from the most unsatisfactory versions of economic and social reductionism'. From this perspective Robert Young's (1996:170) criticism of New Historicism for containing 'difference, but not deferral', and of being in need of 'a certain dislocating time interval', may not be the most incisive objection.

³ Recall that for the New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt (1991:9) 'the momentous events of 1989 and 1990' mean that 'it is easier than at any time since the late fifteenth century to perceive all of the ways that Europe has a common culture and destiny'. This unifying narrative of the events of 1989 is less convincing than accounts that focus on the complex mixture of imperialism, nationalism and class alignments in the context of the collapse of the Eastern Block. Greenblatt's grand narrative is an ideological component that contradicts Jameson's (1991:184) view that it is 'a shared writing practice rather than any ideological content or conviction that seems to mark [new historicism's] various participants'.

One is, of course, free to take whatever is useful from the various theories on offer but one still needs to respect differences and engage in critical discussion of theories which have material and discursive contexts that shape their production and reception. Otherwise one risks granting authority and legitimacy to theorists who also function as reactionary ideologues. A striking example of this danger is De Kock's (p. 45) reference to the philosopher Richard Rorty, the libertarian champion of U.S. cultural supremacy, as the authority for the proposition that language is contingent. For Rorty what is right and just is pragmatically determined by what those in the dominant culture decide is right and just: the constitutive values of a culture and its traditions, which are always local and ethnocentric, determine what is and is not of value, and there are only ever good or bad ethnocentrisms. Rorty's cultural libertarianism, and the hypothesis of contingency, is linked to the fact of U.S. economic and military supremacy, and is part of an ideological position concerned to ensure that any 'common culture and destiny'⁴ is one sanctioned by the U.S. Why the sensitivity of the South African academic to the ideological function of domestic intellectual discourse deserts him when reading metropolitan theorists is puzzling, particularly when the subject of analysis is supposed to be Western hegemony.

These disappointments in combination with the following infelicities suggest De Kock's poor treatment at the hands of his editors: 1) the lack of distinction between 'Western metaphysics', 'Western Enlightenment', 'Renaissance humanism' and 'Western modernity', 2) the presentation of 'race', 'representation', 'narrative' and 'metaphor' as if they too lacked a history, 3) the rudimentary philosophical error of conflating 'identity' with 'sameness' in the conceptualisation of Self and Other, 4) and the limited discussion of the gendered nature of colonial identity.

It seems to me that the massive task of disentangling the complex threads of Western discursive and material domination must also involve problematising the notion of 'exchange' in 'cultural exchange'. 'Exchange' here appears to operate by analogy with economic exchange but is in fact dependent upon *the prior institution of the socio-economic system* with its structuration by class and discourses. The very notion of 'cultural exchange'

⁴ The prognosis of an emerging 'common culture and destiny' facilitated by an imperialising capitalism has precedents that include Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (1910), and the 1914 work of the Czech Karl Kautsky who gave a Marxist interpretation to Angell's optimistic scenario of the Great Powers realising that war was not in their economic interests. In 1915 Lenin (1986-198) offered the following observation the notion of 'ultra-imperialism' 'implies a tremendous *mitigation* of the contradictions of capitalism' The same can be said of Greenblatt's vision of a common European culture and destiny

condenses an analogy that erases the history of economic discourse, and the relation of aesthetic and critical discourse to the commodification of the market and emergence of 'value'. If one wants to avoid complicity with neo-liberals acting as though the Marxist critique of English liberalism never occurred, then socio-economic analysis must remain an important element in any account of hegemonic ideologies aiming to demonstrate that racial capitalism was as much a cultural system as an economic one. Otherwise discourse analysis is likely to join the liberal-pluralist project of revaluing the identities of dominated social groups on the evidence of testimony and personal experience, a project that can all too easily reduce politics to representation and deteriorate into an identity politics which loses sight of the social conditions that constrict subject positions.

Other theorists have learnt this lesson, perhaps too late. In the conciliatory introduction to his *Torn Halves*, Robert Young (1996:7) belatedly concedes that his own anti-Marxist work may have 'participated in a movement that became too successful. Oppression, exploitation, and poverty now strike without risk of systematic challenge'. This cautionary example should be borne in mind by those working towards the production of a theoretically informed study of oppressive discourses. But what I find more worrying is the dangerous lack of discourse between those of us sharing that goal with De Kock. This danger is, I think, attributable to the defensive and balkanised functioning of the various South African academic communities that makes negotiating disciplinary intersections so hazardous and so necessary. As 'historically embedded subjects' ourselves, English literary theorists cannot lay claim to anything but the most bitter historical irony when asserting 'metacritical awareness'.

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