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# Against the System: Postcolonialism, Humanism, and the Humanities

DOMINIC DAVIES

## Things Fall Apart

This essay argues for a postcolonial humanism and a humanist postcolonial studies that is rooted in both the institutional and methodological space of the disciplinary humanities. I advance an argument for humanism and the method of humanistic critique particularly in response to the recent rise of 'world-literature' (hyphenated), which often self-identifies as a social scientific rather than humanistic field, and which reads literary texts as – some might say, reduces them to – inflections or registrations of the capitalist world-system.[1] To explain my case, I will cover ambitious stretches of historical and theoretical ground, and I will therefore be writing in broad brushstrokes. Where I give single or direct quotations, my intention is to capture general intellectual tendencies, rather than to isolate and critique individuals. My aim is never to condemn a particular critical practice outright but to explore instead where different methods might lead, and to consider their limitations, contexts, and affordances.

With this in mind, I would like to begin by accepting the editors' invitation to take the conclusion of Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (1997), 'Things Fall Apart', as an instructive snapshot of postcolonial studies in the late 1990s. For in the final pages of his book, Moore-Gilbert is searching for a 'master-narrative' that will prevent the 'things' of postcolonial theory from falling apart, and the disciplinary picture he draws is revealing for our times.[2]

First, Moore-Gilbert considers Edward Said's 'reconstituted humanism' as a unifying meta-narrative, gesturing in a single paragraph to a roster of anti-colonial humanists including Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Wilson Harris, and Chinua Achebe himself.[3] However, the humanism of these writers is characterized as incidental rather than structural to their thought, and the reading of Said is restricted to *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). The focus

on these particular books obscures the universalizing force of an anti-colonial, decolonial, or Marxist humanism, as several scholars have recently shown.[4] In fairness to Moore-Gilbert, Said perhaps put this most succinctly in his later, posthumously published book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, where he emphasized humanism as an understanding of historical change as 'human history, and human history as made by human action and understood accordingly [as] the very ground of the humanities.'[5] With its emphasis on collective human struggle as a force of historical change, Said's definition is here couched in both the terms of Fanonian decolonization *and* the writings of the young Marx ('*All* emancipation is a *reduction* of the human world and of relationships to *man himself*').[6] Though by no means a humanist, even Fredric Jameson has noted the dangers of technological determinism and the dialectical need 'to dissolve the seemingly massive and impenetrable materiality of [capitalist] machinery back into its reality as human action'.[7]

However, bereft of this underlying grasp of collective human agency, Moore-Gilbert moves in the space of a few sentences to dismiss humanism as simply 'complicit in colonial history', and then to quickly replace it with a postmodern 'emphasis on hybridity and plural identity' that is nothing like the humanism of Fanon or Said.[8] Finally, having inadvertently conflated humanism with its poststructuralist opposite, Moore-Gilbert cites the 'considerable criticism' that Said has received from scholars as varied in their methods as 'Robert Young and Benita Parry, who complain of [his] "tendency to lapse into a sentimental humanism"'.[9] The effect is to leave humanism triply condemned: *first* accused of an implicitly imperialistic liberalism; *second* equated with poststructural or postmodernist anti-humanism; and *third* chastised for what are taken to be its non-committal, sentimental politics.

It is little wonder, then, that Moore-Gilbert quickly abandons the humanist standpoint, turning instead to look for his master-narrative in Aijaz Ahmad's '"One World" theory', which accounts for 'very different social, economic and cultural formations and varied modes of insertion in the international division of labour'.[10] Though Ahmad does not invoke Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory directly, we can see here the conceptual precursor to the emphasis the Warwick

Research Collective (WReC) place on a singular modernity, and their theory of world-literature as the literature of the combined and uneven world-system.[11] However, Moore-Gilbert is not satisfied with Ahmad's One Worldism either, worrying that it 'represses other kinds of difference – ethnic, religious, gender, and cultural'.[12] Thus bereft of meta-narrative, and perhaps reflecting the field's priorities rather than his own, Moore-Gilbert finds himself backed into a corner by identity politics ('it is certainly not for me as a white, male, middle-class, erstwhile colonial child') and reduced to liberal indeterminism ('no one definition of the "postcolonial" can claim to be correct').[13] It is this fragmentation of systemic cohesion and collective agency that Neil Lazarus would later see fit to attack, not on the grounds of sentimentality or humanism, but for its 'anti-anti-liberationism' – an awkward phrase coined to describe postcolonial theory's contradictory disavowal of its liberationist origins *and* the institutional status quo.[14]

In this account, we can see how two opposing intellectual positions are consolidated through the elision of a third, creating a critical topography that still shapes the field a quarter-century on. This tired dichotomy is well-known: on the one hand, there are the materialists who read the world through an international division of labour, and on the other, the theoretically anti-humanist and poststructuralist postcolonial scholars (a position almost always epitomized in Homi Bhabha).[15] Meanwhile, the humanists remain 'sentimentally' committed to an underlying universalism, dismissed by postcolonial critics for their essentialism and materialist critics for their liberalism, all in spite of the fact that 'humanism' had been a keyword used by leading anti-colonial writers and activists throughout the twentieth-century to summon the sense of collective agency that underpinned mass movements for decolonisation.

**Things as they are**

This situation is the product of intellectual histories, disciplinary tectonics, and institutional contexts that far exceed postcolonial studies, but which continue to determine the field's divisions today. Indeed, I pursue these contexts here because I believe they continue to obstruct new humanist

directions that should be central to the future of postcolonial studies, especially after the rise of world-literature and in response to the overwhelmingly anti-humanist culture of our own neoliberal period. Consider these two statements, from different groupings of world-literature scholars, made seven years apart in 2012 and 2019:

> In the last two decades, the fields of comparative and postcolonial literary studies have belatedly acknowledged an epistemological crisis in their failure to address the historical changes in the world-system characteristic of late capitalism. However, their engagement with these changes has taken place predominantly under the banner of 'globalisation' discourses largely detached from critique of the world economy or through humanist modes of 'worlding' literary criticism.[16]

> In the terrain of this discipline, we can see a war of position being conducted between those desirous of a more totalising, politicised understanding of capitalism's systemic crises and interested in the capacity of world-cultural forms to critique or inflect capitalism's development, while critical of the increasing commodification and alienation of all forms of knowledge and cultural production, and those for whom world literature is more purely a matter for formalist analysis, humanist appreciation or taste, or datafied analysis, and whose criticism presents no threat to neoliberal consensus as such.[17]

The point that we need to recognize capital's systemic and structural force as the horizon of our criticism is importantly made in these statements. But for my purposes here, I want also to note how, in the final running clauses of each, what Edward Said called 'humanistic critique' is disappeared into an aestheticized and depoliticized liberalism, a package that is then further reduced to a boundary against which the territory of world-literature is established. Whether the word 'humanist' is used unthinkingly, or anti-humanism is consciously pursued, the theoretical erasure is the same: by conflating humanism with formalism while claiming an exclusivity on Marxism, world-literary materialism is utterly decoupled from humanism, with the effect of rendering world-literary studies an anti-humanist project.

I want to suggest that this sleight of hand is at least partly an inheritance of the split between humanist and 'scientific' Marxism that took place in the middle of the twentieth century, wherein the victory of the latter paved the way for 'Theory' (including some postcolonial theory) in subsequent decades. 'Theory', writes Lazarus, with 'its anti-dialectical and anti-humanist emphases and its

mistrust of the idea of revolution': this assessment, I argue, has more in common with 'System' – capitalized to signify not the capitalist world-system, but rather a *genre of knowledge* and way of knowing the world – than we are usually lead to assume.[18] Only when we reject the intellectual divisions that world-literary studies has inherited from postcolonial theory and its antagonists, and reconnect Marxism with humanism (as so many mid-twentieth-century anti-colonial and liberation writers once did), do the traces of post-structural anti-humanism that are grafted into the theory of world-literature become visible. With this in view, we will be able to disentangle the mistaken conflation of poststructuralism with humanism and, more importantly still, refuse humanism's misconceived incongruity with materialism.

Once opened up in this way, there will be room for postcolonial scholars to advance humanism as 'a resistance to *idées reçues*', to paraphrase Said, practising a properly dialectical dialectics between material conditions and a collective understanding of human agency that is not reducible to 'conformity or identity'.[19] This will leave no room for an anti-humanist, identity-based postcolonial theory that, to take just one tangible example, views subalternity not as 'an inequality to be expunged' but as 'a form of ontological resistance that must be preserved'.[20] But it will allow us to see how, by reproducing key agendas from the earlier materialist opposition to postcolonial theory, though now thoroughly shorn of Marxist humanism and based on a Moretti-inflected social scientism instead, world-literature might be characterized as an 'anti-anti-humanist' project. As part of a dialectical response to systems analysis, the recovery of humanism as the ground of postcolonial studies then becomes crucial not only for the field, but for its wider institutional base: the humanities. To insist on our ability – and the ability of postcolonial writers – to think beyond and act within and against the forces of the world-system is a humanist endeavour; to let go of this dialectic is to risk letting go of our discipline, relinquishing ourselves to scientism, and conceding the market-authoritarianism of our neoliberal age.

**A Brief History of System**

What Moore-Gilbert was looking for in his conclusion to *Postcolonial Theory* was not so much a 'master-narrative', as a *system*. Its very title, 'Things Fall Apart', suggests as much. For as Clifford Siskin has shown, System has become *the* genre of modern knowledge because it proposes to show us *things as they are*. By historicizing System (capitalized) as a genre rather than a 'thing' in itself, we can helpfully consider System not as the particular *content* of knowledge, but rather the form or vessel in which that knowledge is delivered. Let me emphasize that we can do this *without* losing sight of the fact that the capitalist world-system is the totality of our world, and that this is the system in which System *as a genre* has evolved. Indeed, the rise of profit and exchangeability necessitated System as a way of knowing the world, its strength as a genre lying in its historic ability to link knowledge with the 'outside' world and to perform the 'double duty' of both 'naming what was seen in the physical world *and* turning it into a message.'[21] For Isaac Newton in the late 1600s, Systems were conceptual, useful because they 'demonstrated what could be gained by setting boundaries and exploring the relationship between parts and whole'; by the time of Adam Smith one hundred years later, Systems had evolved into Master Systems and the ordering had flipped, with 'true knowledge' defined retroactively as 'knowledge that worked in the world to change that world.'[22] Through the long eighteenth century, System therefore revolutionized knowledge by redefining its value according to its practical use.

The apparent resonances between Smith's Master System and today's Research Excellence Framework (REF), along with other neoliberal tools designed to measure the 'impact' of knowledge in higher education, are generically real. They are each marked by the slow assimilation of multiple smaller Systems into a larger Master System: in Smith's time, national economies; under neoliberalism, so-called 'free' markets; for the REF, the ranking of diverse research according to a comparable system of 'stars'; for the WReC, the measurement of world-literary texts against the convolutions of Wallerstein's capitalist world-system. The evolution from System to Master System was the 'generic marker' of Enlightenment (c.1740-80), with countless studies in the mid-eighteenth century combining System with a nomenclature of aspiration, such as the word 'towards' – as in the

WReC's subtitle, *Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*.[23] Then around 1780, the Master Systems arrived, indexed in system-*affirming* rather than system-*outlining* books such as *The Wealth of Nations* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. With this shift, knowledge production began working the other way around, scaling System *down* 'into vehicles for the specialisation and professionalisation of knowledge'.[24] This process created the modern scientific disciplines and eventually, in response, the humanities. Where the former were (and sometimes remain) content to 'pursue certainty within defined parameters' and to 'see reality as matter' assimilable into the Master System, the latter insisted the Master System was not 'the social whole', reinserting the human and emphazising instead that reality is a *relationship*, or 'matter reflected upon'.[25] One discipline strengthened System by thickening its practical relevance as a category of explanation; the other identified System as *the* object to object to, insisting that human actions (and imagination, creativity, and so on) could not be 'explained' by its 'scientific' approach.

Within the modest intellectual terrain loosely defined as postcolonial and world literary studies, a similar process has taken place in recent years. Since 2015, the WReC's movement 'towards' a theory of world-literature has shifted from System to Master System. Many authors (myself included) have pegged their postcolonial critique of literary writing to the theory of world-literature, thus patching multiple Systems into its Master System. The extent of this take-up evidences the explanatory power of a Master System in general, and of the core/periphery/semi-periphery model in particular. It also explains why so many postcolonial scholars are discomfited by the approach. The rise of world-literature as a Master System re-enacts the historic rise of systematised scientific knowledge production that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, created its disciplinary opposite in the humanities. However, this time around the rise of System takes place not in opposition to the humanities, but *within* it instead. The result is a sense that this rising new Master System poses an existential threat to the humanities itself.

With Richard E. Lee and others, Wallerstein himself has shown how 'the so-called divorce between science and the humanities', which amounts to 'the divorce of "facts" and "values"', is a

consequence not only of the rise of System as a genre of knowledge, but of the shift from feudalism to capitalism that took place within the world-system.[26] Wallerstein here uses his theory of the world-system to explain the creation of the disciplines – sciences versus humanities, with the social sciences emerging as uneasy mediator in the twentieth cetury – that the increasing use of systems analysis unsettles today. The world-system is truly a Master System: it provides the expansive 'meta-narrative' that Moore-Gilbert was searching for, even explaining its own generic origins. While for liberal humanities scholars it is perhaps the singularity of this explanatory category that is unnerving, for Marxist humanists it is the way in which the totality of the world-system is sometimes positioned in world-literary studies not as the initial horizon of literary analyses, but as the predetermined answer with which those analyses must end. This is also a political issue and, I want to emphasize, a materialist one, if by definition we understand *socialist* humanism – and indeed, the notion of the dialectic itself – as an insistence 'that the future remains open and that no theory can predict it with certainty.'[27]

This deterministic tendency is present in the opening pages of Volume I of *The Modern World-System* (1974), where Wallerstein notes that he 'was inspired by the analogy with astronomy which purports to explain the laws governing the universe' – he was writing a System in the genre of Newton's original.[28] However, the analogy, which appears to fix the world-system with the same invulnerability to human intervention as the law of gravity itself, is 'politically inconvenient, to say the least'.[29] As a different group of humanities scholars have suggested, it seems to require that critics committed to liberation politics at least reconsider 'the proposition that social injustice can and must be described as systemic at the world scale'.[30] The consequences of not even entertaining this reconsideration can be seen at the applied level of world-literary criticism, where the generative practices of the humanities scholar-reader are sometimes erased. Consider one recent application of world-literary theory, which tries to attribute a degree of agency to literature by arguing that '[c]ultural forms, including literary works, can be grasped as productive forces' in the sense that they are 'a species of social knowledge fundamentally interwoven with the reproduction of material life'.[31]

However, this assertion probably *overstates* literature's world-making force, while at the same time obscuring the very process by which that force might be achieved. For by defining literature's worldliness according to the extent of its reproduction of the System (as a genre of knowledge), the possibility that the text might reveal something that *doesn't* corroborate the System – and thus become a humanistic and political force in the present of its reading – has been riskily theorized *out*.

To reiterate, this does not mean that postcolonial humanists should challenge world-literary studies on the use of world-systems theory itself. As Bruce Robbins has argued, without a view of capitalism's – or indeed, racism's or imperialism's – systemic reach, the practice of 'blaming is not really possible' (and I would here substitute Robbins's word 'blaming' for 'class politics'). [32] But it does mean that there's space to rekindle a dialectical analysis of literary texts, which 'cannot in any sense be completed by philosophy but only by praxis': as Jameson observes, 'in Marxism significance is finally only achieved by way of our concrete class situation and the act – individual or collective – within class history itself.'[33] Postcolonial humanists should therefore not be *against* System as an explanatory genre of knowledge, nor against the world-systems model that reveals the violence wrought by capitalism worldwide (though of course we should resist capitalist violence *itself*, both actively and in principle). Rather, a properly humanist postcolonial studies should define itself against the refusal to acknowledge the agency that *we* as collective, human actors have both in our use of System and within the world-system – a position held, not incidentally, by any number of mid-twentieth-century socialist and anti-colonial humanists. To let go of this relationship between ourselves and the system is to reduce the study of world (and postcolonial) literature to a social science; to hold onto it is to be a scholar of the humanities.[34]


**The Rise of Anti-humanism**

So where did the Marxist and decolonial humanism of the mid-twentieth century, once so vocally against the system, go? This is obviously a history that has filled the pages of many books (and will fill many more), so I can only offer one of many versions of events. I'll begin in 1957, when the

historian E.P. Thompson, later author of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), published his article, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', in the leftwing journal *The New Reasoner*. In that essay, Thompson railed against the Stalinist orthodoxy that had gripped the International Communist Movement. Rather than understanding Marxist ideas 'as the medium by which men [*sic*] apprehend the world, reason, argue, debate, and choose', Thompson argued that they had instead been constructed as tautological truth, justifying the crimes that had taken place in Stalinist Russia as a 'necessary' step on the path to communism: 'How much easier if *the* people had no minds,' he wrote, 'if the "superstructure" was cut out and society was all "base" […] This economic automatism certainly is not Marxism.'[35] Thompson's humanism is simultaneously Marxist and against System's objective pose: '"Stalinism" is, in a true sense, an ideology; that is, a form of false consciousness, deriving from a partial, partisan, view of reality; and, at a certain stage, establishing a *system* of false or partially false concepts with a mode of thought which – in the Marxist sense – is idealist.'[36] The emphasis on 'system' is Thompson's own.

In 1959, *The New Reasoner* merged with another journal of the British New Left, the *Universities and Left Review*, to create the *New Left Review* (*NLR*). As Barbara Epstein has documented, where the editors of *The New Reasoner* – Thompson included – grounded their analysis in the history of class struggle, 'their counterparts at *University and Left Review* were more interested in the cultural changes then underway, and more attentive to issues of racial and ethnic difference'.[37] When Thompson and his fellow *New Reasoner* editors were dropped from the *NLR*'s editorial committee following the break-up of the New Left in 1962, the *NLR* turned away from Marxist humanism, as well as struggles taking place in the Third World, and looked towards 'a sustained programme of translation and exposition of continental Marxist theory'.[38]

In the wake of this split, Britain's leading socialist humanists founded the *Socialist Register* in 1964, the first contents page of which included A. Abdel-Malek's 'Nasserism and Socialism', Isaac Deutscher's 'Maoism–Its Origins, Background and Outlook', Hamza Alavi's 'Imperialism Old and New', and  V.G. Kiernan's 'Farewells to Empire', together illustrating the journal's anti-imperial

politics.[39] The *NLR*, meanwhile, fostered a relationship with Louis Althusser, then a rising Marxist critic across the Channel in France who would go on to publish a number of articles in the *NLR* between 1969 and 1978, in the direct aftermath of the failure of the 1968 revolutions in France. Published in the same year as the *Socialist Register*'s first issue, Althusser's hugely influential article, 'Marxism and Humanism', manufactured a clean break in Marx's thought, one in which the explicit humanism of his earlier work was supposedly overwritten by his later turn to systemic modes of analysis. As Althusser argued, for many unconvincingly, Marx had undergone a 'total theoretical revolution' that 'established a new problematic, a new systematic way of asking questions of the world'.[40] Althusser reduced Marxist humanism to an ideological fog utterly beholden to the material of his Master System, ungrounding from history the agency not simply of individuals, but whole classes and nation-states. In so doing, he helped to institutionalize an anti-humanism that would provide a cornerstone for the 'anti-anti-liberationism' of Theory, including that of postcolonial theory, for decades to come.

Althusser didn't manage this on his own, of course. As the 1970s progressed, Michel Foucault drew on Althusser's ideas – including his anti-humanism and his uncompromising demonization of the state – to alter, perhaps irrevocably, the trajectory of both the humanities and social sciences.[41] As Timothy Brennan has shown, Foucault's purposefully generalized conclusions about liberal reform in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) were translated 'into an overarching epistemology of modern penality – a new universalism against humanist universalism' that embedded into criticism a shift 'from a culture of political belief to one of ontological virtue'.[42] There emerged under Foucault's influence a mode of critique that abandoned the emphasis placed on the importance of the nation-state by liberation writers such as Fanon, while also failing 'to address the urgent need for government-provided social services and […] government regulation and intervention' in the West.[43] The contemporaneity of this wholly negative view of the state with the rise of a Reaganite-Thatcherite neoliberalism, in which the state was enlisted in its own self-cannibalization, has not gone unnoticed by Foucault's critics. Indeed, some have argued that neoliberalism was an attractive enterprise to

Foucault, who had long characterized resistance not in terms of class or liberation politics, but in the lower key 'art of understanding how not to govern'.[44]

In 1978, as Thompson attempted a final repudiation of Theory's anti-humanism in his book, *The Poverty of Theory*, Edward Said published *Orientalism*, 'the most consequential redeployment of the work of Michel Foucault at the time in the United States'.[45] Keen to emphasize Orientalism 'as a *system* of knowledge about the Orient', Said used Foucault's concept of 'discourse', with the effect of 'propelling the critique of imperialism into the very heart of the mainstream, on the one hand, but also giving strength to intellectual fashions that have undermined the possibility of that very critique on the other'.[46] In his attempt to describe Orientalism as not merely a consequence but a driving force of empire, Said risked a 'culturalist' approach to colonialism that would undergird the anti-humanism of much postcolonial theory.[47] For Lazarus, Said's use of Foucault in *Orientalism* was an anomaly that should be explained by his desire to reach a 'radical' Left audience in the late 1970s, rather than by any sustained methodological commitment on Said's part – a convincing argument precisely because the implicit anti-humanism of *Orientalism* is not borne out in Said's many other writings, which taken together render him, in Lazarus's words, 'quite unambiguously as a leftwing critical humanist'.[48]

Much has been written on the implications of *Orientalism*'s use of Foucault, and none of these points are my own. Rather, I am trying to draw a genealogical line running from Althusserian anti-humanism, through Foucault, into the present of our field, where it bifurcates into two still-related strands: the first fuels the anti-humanism of postcolonial theory, wherein postcolonialism mostly shares its 'post-' with poststructural critique; the second can be traced to the scientism of world-literature, wherein the analysis of literary texts does not only begin with the totality of the world-system (which we should maintain as the horizon of our analysis), but where they are also sometimes retroactively explained through their assimilation into the genre of System. The effect, in a weird re-enactment of the late-eighteenth-century's Master Systems, is to redefine literary value tautologically according to the practical application of knowledge. With this anti-humanism, world-literature risks

looking a bit like the 'postcolonial theory' that it was partly established against, where in the worst cases texts were reduced prescriptively to an idealized 'hybridity', or 'subalternity', or whatever other postcolonial concept. As Lazarus laments, the 'sheer appropriativeness of some of the readings regularly put forward in postcolonial studies can still make one gasp', a criticism the field should take on board.[49] But as an analytical method, postcolonial and even world-literary studies must surely *also* account for the opposing dialectical pole, captured most succinctly again by Said in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, of a counterposing humanistic critique. Here he is again:

> what Foucault […] carried forward from the work of thinkers such as Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and the linguist Ferdinand Saussure [was the idea] that the existence of systems of thinking and perceiving transcended the powers of individual subjects, individual humans who were inside those systems (systems such as Freud's 'unconscious' or Marx's 'capital') and therefore had no power over them, only the choice either to use or be used by them. This of course flatly contradicts the core of humanistic thought […] Change is human history, and human history as made by human action and understood accordingly is the very ground of the humanities.[50]

In what is perhaps an unexpected pairing, Lazarus and Said work together here to bring a simultaneously materialist *and* humanist position back into view. Even as we take the material conditions of the world-system as the horizon of our analysis, it is imperative that postcolonial scholars regroup on the 'ground' of the humanities that Said identifies here, renewing it by emphasizing 'human history' and 'human action' as collective rather than merely individual forces. Only this way might we build an outward-facing disciplinary *and* institutional space where we can action the political *value* (rather than the market price) of our methods of humanistic critique.

**Postcolonial Humanism and the Neoliberal University**

Franco Moretti's 'firecracker' of an article, 'Conjectures on World Literature' (2000), published – not coincidentally – in the *New Left Review*, is an important node in the line of inheritance that runs from Althusser to the systems-based methods of literary analysis that we have today. Moretti's use of System – which he self-identifies as 'scientific work', and which claims to foreclose humanistic critique – is pivotal to the theory of world-literature, even if the WReC take Moretti's notion of

'distant reading' as 'an *emphasis*' rather than 'categorical argument'.[51] As postcolonial humanists, we might respond to Moretti's claim that 'no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts' by pointing to any number of postcolonial monographs – not least Lazarus's *The Postcolonial Unconscious* – that develop a set of astute methodological parameters out of the interpretive reading of literary works.[52] More pressing, though, is the fact that no humanist would claim simply to have 'discovered' or 'found' the methodology in the text, but would rather show their working – that is, their own historical and historicized relationship – with the primary material under discussion. Moretti postures scientism by claiming to forego this kind of work, but as critics have shown, he has merely outsourced it to an earlier generation of scholars, in effect de-historicizing himself.[53] This is why the model that Moretti renders 'objective' by invoking the authority of System is so worrying. As Brennan observes, distant reading harmonizes seamlessly 'with a market sublime', implicitly lending humanist 'alienation a philosophical and scientific respectability' that dovetails neatly with the currently hegemonic neoliberal agenda.[54]

Let me therefore bring this essay to an end by extending the genealogical line of Althusserian alienation to the systemic alienation that takes place in 'the neoliberal university' itself.[55] After all, if we are to argue for the future of the postcolonial humanities, we must also argue for the future institutions in which it is based. For those working in higher education at any stage in their career, but especially early career, today's university is a place that repeatedly prioritizes systems at the expense of humans. From the REF to the TEF to the conversion of students into an income source, today's universities are dominated by faceless systems introduced to manufacture prescriptive 'outcomes' on the cheap. As Mark Fisher wrote in his worryingly prescient book, *Capitalist Realism* (2008), this top-down prescription of results through the implementation of systems produces a form of 'market Stalinism': 'What late capitalism repeats from Stalinism', Fisher writes, is the 'valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement' – one effect of which is to encourage academics to write easily citable Systems, rather than detailed humanistic critiques.[56] In the neoliberal university, the genre of System lends market fundamentalism a 'scientific' gloss that, though claiming only to

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*describe* 'reality', in fact works overtime to produce it. The 'ground' of the humanities and the agency of the university – as an actor in society – are liquidated by the prioritization of System, a genre that only recognizes answers to the questions that the dominant system, neoliberalism, cares to ask.

In the subtitle of his book, Fisher flipped Thatcher's well-known statement around into a question: 'is there no alternative?' To this, we should answer confidently that, if there *is* an alternative, it resides in the *genre* of humanistic method. Neoliberalism, which manufactures the singular future of the free market by pretending it already exists, is fundamentally irreconcilable with the humanities' interrogation of the genre of System itself. Where neoliberalism implements a violent re-engineering of public institutions into internal 'free' markets by forcing them into the strait jacket of market-oriented systems, the humanism of the humanities refuses their predetermined outcome by insisting on the capacity of human action to find something different. There is another, less 'sentimental' word for this process: *politics*. With its global frame of reference, a postcolonial humanities should set about reconfiguring our relationship to System and within the world-system, ultimately with the aim of prioritizing human need over capital accumulation. This is a humanist concern and a political problem, one that only a systemic grasp of capitalism can bring into view, but which the genre of System alone cannot solve.

To finally return, then, to a provocation cited near the beginning of this essay: does a criticism based on 'humanist appreciation or taste' really present 'no threat to neoliberal consensus as such'?[57] Quite the contrary, I have argued, though only if postcolonial scholars commit to short-circuiting the 'liberal humanism' of one or two prominent world literature scholars with, say, the *socialist* humanism of Thompson and Lazarus, or the *anti-colonial* humanism of Fanon and Said. We need the world-system to understand our place in the totality, in all its combined and uneven violence. But we also need to emphasize our collective position *against* that whole, and to resist the Althusserian splitting of theoretical scientism from practical humanism, which dovetails too neatly with neoliberalism's market sublime. As Said writes with a characteristic simplicity that we would do well

to emulate in our own practice: 'Does one accept the prevailing horizon and confinements, or does one try as a humanist to challenge them?'[58]

## Author Correspondence & Bio

Dominic Davies (dominic.davies@city.ac.uk) is Senior Lecturer in English at City, University of London. He is the author of two monographs, *Imperial Infrastructure* (2017) and *Urban Comics* (2019), along with several articles broadly in the field of postcolonial and world literature. He is currently writing a book entitled *The Weight of World Literature*.

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[1] As Barbara Harlow observes of the WReC's method, redeploying the words of Immanuel Wallerstein himself: 'It is not very comforting to anyone in countries of the South to say that the present world-system is in structural crisis and that we are in a transition from it to some other world-system over the next 25-30 years. They will want to know what will happen in the meantime.' See Harlow, 'First Responses', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 53:3 (2016), 505-509.

[2] Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London & New York: Verso, 1997), p.197.

[3] Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, p.192.

[4] See, for example, Robert Spencer, 'Postcolonialism is a Humanism', *For Humanism: Explorations in Theory and Politics*, eds, David Alderson and Robert Spencer (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp.120-162; Vivek Chibber, 'The Dual Legacy of *Orientalism*', *After Said: Postcolonial Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed, Bashir Abu-Manneh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.37-52; Seamus Deane, '*Culture and Imperialism*: Errors of a Syllabus', *After Said*, pp.53-68.

[5] Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, pp.9-10.

[6] Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', *Early Writings*, trans, Rodney Livingston & Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.234.

[7] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London & New York: Verso, 2009), p.46.

[8] Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, p.192.

[9] Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, p.192. Parry's criticism of Said's humanism as 'sentimental' sits alongside her later argument for a postcolonial studies 'grounded in a Marxist humanism, seeking to install an ethical universality and a universal ethic'. See Parry, 'Liberation theory: variations on themes of Marxism and modernity', *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies*, eds, Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.134.

[10] Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, p.199. See also Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* ([1992]; London & New York: Verso, 2007).

[11] Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

[12] Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, p.199.

[13] Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, pp.201-202

[14] Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.10.

[15] This equation of poststructuralism with anti-humanism is of course itself a simplification that fails to account for the work of scholars as varied in their analysis as bell hooks, Sylvia Wynter, and Edouard Glissant, among others.

[16] James Graham, Michael Niblett, and Sharae Deckard, 'Postcolonial Studies and World Literature', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48:5 (December 2012), 465.

[17] Stephen Shapiro and Sharae Deckard, *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), p.21.

[18] Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, p.178.

[19] Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p.43.

[20] Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p.17.

[21] Clifford Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge* (London: MIT Press, 2016), p.20.

[22] Siskin, *System*, p.123.

[23] Siskin, *System*, p.131.

[24] Siskin, *System*, p.129.

[25] Timothy Brennan, 'Introduction: Humanism's Other Story', *For Humanism: Explorations in Theory and Politics*, eds, David Alderson and Robert Spencer (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p.9.

[26] See Richard E. Lee & Immanuel Wallerstein ed, *Overcoming the Two Cultures: Science versus the Humanities in the Modern World-System* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[27] Barbara Epstein, 'The Rise, Decline and Possible Revival of Socialist Humanism', *For Humanism: Explorations in Theory and Politics*, eds, David Alderson and Robert Spencer (London: Pluto Press, 2017), pp.20-21.

[28] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (London: Academic Press, 1974), p.7.

[29] David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, and Nirvana Tanoukhi, 'Introduction: The Most Important Thing Happening', *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), p.2.

[30] Palumbo-Liu et al., *Immanuel Wallerstein*, p.2.

[31] Michael Niblett, *World Literature and Ecology: The Aesthetics of Commodity Frontiers, 1890-1950* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), p.4. Let me note that Niblett has elsewhere emphasized the importance of the present of the reading and the role of the reader. See Niblett, *The Caribbean Novel Since 1946: Cultural Practice, Form, and the Nation-State* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), p.65.

[32] Bruce Robbins, 'Blaming the System', *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp.57-58.

[33] Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, p.11.

[34] See Ben Etherington, 'What is materialism's material? Thoughts toward (actually against) a materialism for "world literature"', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48:5 (2012), 549.

[35] Edward Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', *The New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 108.

[36] Thompson, 'Social Humanism', 106.

[37] Barbara Epstein, 'The Rise, Decline and Possible Revival of Socialist Humanism', pp.23-24.

[38] Madeleine Davis, 'Rethinking Class: The Lineage of the *Socialist Register*', *Socialist Register*, 50 (2014), 296, and 'A Brief History of New Left Review, 1960-2010', *New Left Review*, 2021. https://newleftreview.org/pages/history.

[39] The first issue of *The Socialist Register* is available to read online at https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/issue/view/448/.

[40] Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Allen Lane, 1969), p.229.

[41] For a detailed overview of this influence, see Andrew Ryder, 'Foucault and Althusser: Epistemological Differences with Political Effects', *Foucault Studies*, 16 (2013), pp.134-153.

[42] Brennan, *Wars of Position*, p.13-14.

[43] Epstein, p.61.

[44] David Alderson and Robert Spencer, 'Conclusion', *For Humanism: Explorations in Theory and Politics*, eds, David Alderson and Robert Spencer (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p.215.

[45] Joe Cleary, 'Said, Postcolonial Studies, and World Literature', *After Said: Postcolonial Literary Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed, Bashir Abu-Manneh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.129.

[46] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p.6 – this emphasis on 'system' is mine; and Chibber, 'The Dual Legacy of *Orientalism*', p.37.

[47] See Spencer, 'Postcolonialism is a Humanism', p.140.

[48] Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, pp.185, 197.

[49] Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, p.25.

[50] Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, pp.9-10.

[51] WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 7-8; Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (Jan/Feb 2000), 54.

[52] Moretti, 'Conjectures', 55.

[53] See Maurizio Ascari, 'The Dangers of Distant Reading: Reassessing Moretti's Approach to Literary Genres', *Genre*, 47:1 (Spring 2014), pp.2-3.

[54] Brennan, 'Humanism's Other Story', pp.12-13.

[55] Though primarily an Anglo-American phenomenon, it is increasingly a global one too. For a particularly lucid account of its effects, especially for the humanities, see Lawrence Busch, *Knowledge for Sale: The Neoliberal Takeover of Higher Education* (Cambridge, Massachusettes: MIT Press, 2017).

[56] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zer0 Books, 2008), pp.41-43.

[57] Shapiro and Deckard, *World Literature*, p.21.

[58] Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, p.76.