US ethnic studies and Third Worldism, 40 years later

Colleen LYE

The year 2009 marked the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of the 1968–1969 San Francisco State Third World strike that resulted in what was to become the first college or department of ethnic studies in the United States. It is therefore altogether appropriate to ask: what has become of the ethnic studies project since its late-1960s’ inception, and what are the grounds for its practice today? In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the subject-effect of the demand for ethnic studies was coalitional; its political orientation was anti-imperialist and nationalist. Since the 1990s, the impetus toward the transnationalization of our critical frameworks has exercised a splintering effect on the coalitional subject of ethnic studies, resulting in trends toward ethnic-specific diasporic study. Transnationalism is also the symptom of contradictory political tendencies within ethnic studies – sometimes reflecting an anti-imperialist sensibility faithful to the field’s founding moment, sometimes a postnationalism that directly repudiates it. Without a concrete mode for the expression and linking of anti-imperialist struggle, however, academic transnationalism often transpires as a kind of internationalism without political ground. Which brings us back to the motivating question for this essay: what has become of the ethnic studies project since its late 1960s inception, and what are the grounds for its practice today?

A debate between the late president of the American Studies Association (ASA) Emory Elliot and the Berlin-based American Studies scholar Winfried Fluck in the recent pages of American Quarterly suggests the significance of ethnic studies to the question of the ambiguous thesis of transnationalism in American Studies in general. Here is how I would recapitulate the debate. In his 2007 annual address, Elliott saluted the rise of transnationalism in American Studies, turning to US intellectuals, writers, and artists of color who were in his words ‘internationalists as early as the 1880s’ and ideally suited to demonstrate ‘the ways that the United States is interconnected culturally, not only to Europe, but also to Africa and Latin America’ (Elliott 2007: 10, 8). In his response, Fluck granted that ‘stories of dislocation by and about people of color in transnational borderlands’ may well serve to remind us of continuing injustices and to project new visions of equality; but he also wondered to what extent they end up serving to reconsolidate an ‘exceptionalist America,’ albeit one more inclusively defined (Fluck 2007: 27). Fluck noted that US-based American Studies scholars are more likely to be beckoned by the romance of the intercultural space – some ‘magic “arena for transitional, multinational and international linkages”’ – scholars elsewhere tend to be more concerned with analyzing the workings of American power to which they are subjected. ‘Far from going outside the United States,’ Fluck argues, ‘we have to go back inside. For those outside, the need for such an analysis appears greater than ever…. No talk about the crisis of the nation-state can distract us from the fact that there is enough nation-state left to affect all of us decisively. American power is … still a major issue for the rest of the world’ (Fluck 2007: 28–29). I find myself sympathetic to Fluck, no doubt due in good part to my experience working on the editorial collective of this journal – where,
as one of the two US-based scholars among an Asia-based group, I am constantly made conscious of the differential impact of institutional and geographical location on how we approach apparently shared scholarly topics, and in particular the enormous material privilege and power of position with which US scholars, including US minority scholars, are viewed by others. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate in this debate to witness the study of ethnic formation and the critique of US power being counterposed. The instruction I therefore take from the exchange between Elliot and Fluck is this: how can US ethnic studies be better articulated to the critical study of US power? This means guarding against reifications of the ethnic subject as the embodiment of an abstract internationalism. The American temptation to represent the ethnic subject as an alternative form of US transnationalism suggests that there is much ongoing political work for ethnic studies critics to do.

What were the goals of the Third World Strike at San Francisco? Lasting from the fall of 1968 through the winter of 1969, the Third World Strike represented the longest student strike in US history. It was led by a coalitional group called the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) which had been formed in the spring of 1968 and consisted of various ethnic-specific student groups: the Black Student Union (BSU), the Mexican American Students Confederation (MASC), the Philippine-American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE), Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA), and the Asian American Pacific Alliance (AAPA). Notably, all of them, except for BSU, had come into existence in roughly the same time period as the TWLF itself. The demands put forth by the TWLF to the university administration were these:

1. First, the TWLF demanded the right of all Third World students to an education. The TWLF pointed to culturally biased ‘standardized’ tests used as admissions criteria as an instance of ‘institutionalized racism.’ It demanded open admissions and an expanded special admission program. TWLF members recruited high school students to apply for admission. They called for the college to use all special admissions slots for disadvantaged students, in response to the fact that in 1966 and 1967 state colleges had admitted only 0.27 and 0.85 percent ‘disadvantaged’ respectively, even though 2 percent were allowed through an ‘exception rule.’

2. Second, the TWLF demanded that education be relevant to students’ lives and communities. A position paper of the TWLF conceived of a School of Ethnic Area Studies that would be ‘involved in confronting racism, poverty and misrepresentation imposed on minority peoples by the formally recognized institutions and organizations operating in the State of California.’ As against the 1960 California Master Plan for Education, which had established a three-tiered system of higher education that in their view reproduced class hierarchy and corporate interests, the TWLF advocated a redefinition of education that would serve their communities, retrieve their historical legacy, and advance social change.

3. Third, the TWLF demanded the right to have ethnic studies classes taught and run by Third World peoples themselves. ‘Self-determination’ in this instance meant that each nationality had the right to set its own curriculum and hire its own faculty. The argument was that those who had lived a particular ethnic experience were best able to teach it to others. Because it considered the criteria used to evaluate ethnic studies and Third World faculty to be biased by Eurocentrism, the TWLF also demanded programmatic autonomy. (Umemoto 1989: 20–22)

Widened minority access to education; a political reorientation of education’s purpose toward ‘serving the people’; and national or racial self-determination in matters of faculty staffing and departmental
governance. These three main objectives of the TWLF, all to various degrees institutionally and intellectually influential, place into stark relief the distance between the ethnic studies project then and the ethnic studies situation now.

(1) First, rollbacks in affirmative action starting in the 1980s have made student diversity a value that has ironically found more protection today at private elite universities than at public universities, which have been vulnerable to the neoconservative capture of state power. This has resulted in a widening gap between the struggle for racial equality and the economic redistribution of educational resources, which had once been more closely articulated.

(2) Second, further corporatization of the university between then and now has weakened the liberal arts model of higher education, and this has narrowed the foothold for ethnic studies’ critique of knowledge.

(3) Third, the critique of nationalism and essentialism in identity politics means that we no longer think that the diversification of faculty personnel and the institutionalization of ethnic studies curricula and research programs are (or should be) interchangeable goals. While this development is itself the inevitable result of the dissemination of ethnic studies across a number of traditional disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, and in some sense a sign of ethnic studies’ institutional success, the disparity between ethnic studies’ intellectual legitimation and the continuing fact of lagging faculty diversity at most institutions presents in some ways an even more challenging set of problems for hiring and promotion in these fields, sometimes resolved by the concept of ‘strategic essentialism.’

Of the three developments that mark the distance between ethnic studies then and ethnic studies now – rollbacks in affirmative action, corporatization and professionalization, and the critique of nationalism and essentialism – I would like to focus on the last, as it is this development that might be understood as more purely internal to the logic of the ethnic studies project rather than evidence of its political defeat by external forces. This is because, ultimately, my purpose in revisiting the 1960s is not to lament our historical regression since that time; my interest in revisiting the 1960s is in excavating its potential openings to the future. Here, I take my cue from Chris Connery’s recent essay ‘The World Sixties’ (2007) which returns us to the 1960s in order to retrieve for present day uses political content that had been foreclosed by standard New Left representations of the late 1960s as a declension of an earlier more heroic 1960s – a foreclosure therefore that had everything to do with ideological repression of the radical meaning of its Third Worldist conjuncture. For Connery, among the most significant aspects of the World 1960s was its Asian component, instanced in the exemplary force of the Vietnamese war of resistance against US imperialism and in Global Maoism’s emphasis on praxis and the ‘logic of the situation.’ Among Global Maoism’s theoretical contributions, most relevant to our purposes today are the concept of thirdness and the idea of the liberated zone. For Connery, Third-Worldism is a concept subsumable under thirdness because of the appeal of Maoism in revolutionary or potentially revolutionary situations in much of Western Europe, India, and even the United States, where it presented an alternative to Soviet-oriented communist parties. The idea of the liberated zone, which in some of its more abstract 1960s forms could refer to the mind itself, was associated with the Maoism of the Jingangshan and Yanan base areas: ‘The base area introduced a spatial dimension into revolutionary theory and praxis that was a persistent figure, and of great strategic importance, in India, Cuba, the Philippines, Malaysia, Burma, Vietnam, and elsewhere’ (Connery 2007: 100).

We can detect traces of this ontology of thirdness, the idea of the liberated zone, thirdness as liberated zone, in today’s
academic discourse of transnational ethnic persons and spaces celebrated by Emory Elliott. We might also detect it in the origins of an Indian subalternist studies whose project of recapturing peasant consciousness was a response to the failure of political decolonization and the representational elisions of bourgeois nationalist and traditional Marxist historiography. Global Maoism’s theoretical legacy can be seen, I think, in the concept of strategic essentialism, the term coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to refer to the subalternist historians’ uses of an essentialism in the service of a scrupulous political interest. Strategic essentialism can be seen from one perspective as a practical deferral of theory or, alternatively, as a theory that consists of practice. One might further venture that it comports with Connery’s account of contradiction as the most important component of Mao’s original contribution to Marxist thought. As Connery describes it,

Contradiction and the levels of contradiction formed an analytical means for a strategic understanding of a particular historical conjuncture, often at the level of the nation-state, but including those characteristics that are perhaps generalizable to the level of the ‘undeveloped world’, as developed in the essay ‘On New Democracy’…. The correct identification of primary contradictions, at the local level, would prevent party cadres from forcing circumstances into conformity with some abstract model. (Connery 2007: 98-99)

If strategic essentialism might similarly be framed as the ‘strategic understanding of a particular historical conjuncture,’ then also like the Maoist concept of contradiction it is a kind of theory whose ‘practical’ character allows it to be globalized without being universalized. It is all the more ironic then that strategic essentialism has so often functioned in academic discourse as a ritual fix, serving to suture our lived gap between theory and practice instead of revealing the specificity of the historical contradictions entailed by that gap. To the extent that it is a theory, strategic essentialism is not theory as an abstractable and indifferently portable concept, but a demand for the consideration of the political contexts of theorizing.

Returning to the TWLF’s demand for self-determination, the demand that seems most impractical if not problematic today, it might be possible for us to see in this a nationalism without essentialism. If the TWLF had demanded the right to have ethnic studies classes taught and run by ‘Third World peoples’ because it was believed that those who had lived a particular ethnic experience were best able to teach it to others, this need not be understood as an identity posited upon cultural or biological essence but on historical experience. It was with a tactical, and therefore historical, sense of what constituted ‘Third World identity,’ after all, that student leaders in the later stages of the strike found themselves having to combat reifications of identity practiced by the university administration as a tactic of counter-insurgency.

BSU central committee member Terry Collins described the problem this way in an article in *Black Fire*:

Factionalism was rampant, potential revolutionary brothers were disillusioned, sisters were used and abused in the name of ‘blackness’. It was the era of the bourgeois cultural nationalism…. Bourgeois cultural nationalism is destructive to the individual and the organization because one uses ‘blackness’ as a criterion and uses this rationale as an excuse not to fight the real enemy when the struggle becomes more intense. (Umemoto 1989: 25)

From the year of the Bandung Conference of African and Asian nations that initiated the Non-Aligned Movement, to Mao’s late-Cultural Revolutionary version of Three Worlds Theory, which some argue laid the groundwork for China’s future alliance with the US and neoliberal reforms, the period 1955 to 1975 marked the era when Third Worldism took the form of the political defense of national sovereignty and economic self-reliance, or the determined pursuit of independent
routes of development. As an international solidarity formed around liberation struggles conducted on the national scale, Third Worldism contained elements of delinking and alliance, a form of thinking globally and acting locally.

At the start of this essay, I asked: what has become of the ethnic studies project since its late 1960s inception, and what are the grounds for its practice today? A historically-situated approach to the Third World subject, the coalitional subject that founded ethnic studies and that ethnic studies would found, may allow us to entertain briefly the second part of this question. It is interesting to note that since 2000 or so, there has been a revived interest in the Bandung spirit among academics both inside and outside the US, and an emerging interest in comparative racial formations, among these Afro-Asianism being the most prominent. The reasons for this revival are in part obvious: the heightened visibility of US unilateralism after 2001, the formalization of the doctrine of pre-emptive war as the justification for the Iraq Occupation, accompanied by ballooning and unsustainable US debt – these have generated global political resistance and economic skepticism even among the US’s postwar dependants and allies. Present day circumstances appear to afford some semblance of the conditions for an anti-imperialist alliance that had been a key element of Third Worldism in the period 1955–1975.

Since the period 1955–1975, internal inequality within the so-called Group of 77 has structurally divided the countries that became competitive industrial exporters from those that remained restricted to the export of primary products and marginalized by capitalist globalization (Herrera 2005: 550). At the same time, the serious interest in transnational and comparative ethnic studies we’re witnessing today can, more than ever, be seen as a fulfillment of the ethnic studies project of the 60s. Wittingly and unwittingly, this work makes clear that political solidarity does not automatically follow from scholarly comparison. Asian American Studies scholar Diane Fujino is right to observe that the political conclusions of present day Afro-Asianist scholarship pull in contradictory directions, sometimes emphasizing inter-racial tension, sometimes structural hierarchy, sometimes occasions of collaboration (Fujino 2008). An important leader in teaching us that there could have been no Asian American Studies without the Asian American movement nor an Asian American movement without Third Worldism, Fujino is as yet uncertain as to how to account for the broader forces that might explain today’s renewed academic interest in the Asian American movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Outside the US, Asian scholars interested in the recovery of the Bandung moment tend to be more critical than their Asian American counterparts of its potential romanticization. Since there is no countervailing collective power against today’s economic predominance of transnational financial capital, Cho Hee-Yeon has cautioned:

> It is not enough for us to pay a verbal tribute of praise to the Bandung Conference and argue for the revival of it ... It might be a simple retrospective revival. In order to say that the Bandung spirit is still meaningful to us and that the Third World is not dead, we have to look at how it is related to the current globalization context. (Cho 2005: 503)

Today, though there may still be a ‘third world in reality’ whose incomplete liberation poses a seemingly permanent predicament – today, when ‘predominance’ is expressed in the form of the economic power of transnational capital – national self-determination struggles are still necessary and insufficient. But they are so in a way different from the long 1960s, and it is this difference that we have to work through. Rather than beginning from the perspective of a theoretically correct post-nationalism or wishful, ungrounded internationalism, beginning rather from the strategic demands of the ‘logic of the situation’ of today’s form of predominance, the critical task of the US
ethnic studies critic is to grapple with what it would mean to bring this war home.

Notes

1. Earlier versions of this essay were originally delivered at the 23rd annual conference of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS), 5 April, 2009, and at a conference of the American Studies Program at UC Berkeley, 15 May, 2009. I thank the participants in both those venues for their questions, which helped to sharpen this essay.

2. Fluck is quoting the wording of the Call for Proposals for the 2006 annual ASA meeting (Fluck 2007: 28).

3. Connery is also the editor of the important special issue of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies on ‘The Asian Sixties’. See Inter-Asia Cultural Studies (2006).

References


Author’s biography

Colleen Lye is associate professor of English, University of California, Berkeley.

Contact address: Department of English, 322 Wheeler Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.