

What is the Postcolonial?

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The postcolonial seems to have become ubiquitous. Today postcolonial theory has been taken up in almost every discipline in the humanities and social sciences, from anthropology to medieval studies to theology. It is not only about migration: intellectually it has taken the form of transdisciplinary migration. It knows no boundaries, whether of discipline, nation, or peoples. After the disciplinary dispersion of the postcolonial, what if anything, we might ask, remains of the postcolonial as such? Has it scattered itself so widely and so successfully that it no longer exists as a separate intellectual field with a distinct political identity? In order to answer this question, we might start by asking what we mean by *the postcolonial* or *postcoloniality*. People define and use these words in many different ways: even what might seem to be the obvious core meaning for postcolonial, that is, coming after the colonial, cannot be taken for granted. For some writers have tried to redefine the postcolonial anachronistically to mean resistance to the colonial at any time—literally in the case of decolonized societies, and ideologically for still colonized societies. Although the term postcolonial will certainly always involve the idea of resistance, I prefer to preserve the historical specificity of the term, and to think of the postcolonial as involving what we might simply refer to as the aftermath of the colonial. The situations and problems that have followed decolonization—whether in the formerly colonizing or colonized country—are then encompassed in the term postcoloniality. What, then, would the term postcolonialism mean? Whereas postcoloniality describes the condition of the postcolonial, postcolonialism describes its politics—a radical tricontinental politics of transformation. What does this involve?

At its simplest level, the postcolonial is simply the product of human experience, but human experience of the kind that has not typically been registered or represented at any institutional level. More particularly, it

is the result of different cultural and national origins, the ways in which the colour of your skin or your place and circumstance of birth define the kind of life, privileged and pleasurable, or oppressed and exploited, that you will have in this world. Postcolonialism's concerns are centred on geographic zones of intensity that have remained largely invisible, but which prompt or involve questions of history, ethnicity, complex cultural identities and questions of representation, of refugees, emigration and immigration, of poverty and wealth—but also, importantly, the energy, vibrancy and creative cultural dynamics that emerge in very positive ways from such demanding circumstances. Postcolonialism offers a language of and for those who have no place, who seem not to belong, of those whose knowledges and histories are not allowed to count. It is above all this preoccupation with the oppressed, with the subaltern classes, with minorities in any society, with the concerns of those who live or come from elsewhere, that constitutes the basis of postcolonial politics and remains the core that generates its continuing power.

Where did the postcolonial come from? My argument has been that postcolonial theory has been created from the political insights and experience that were developed in the course of colonial resistance to western rule and cultural dominance, primarily during the course of the anti-colonial struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When I was working on the history of these struggles I was particularly moved by the extraordinary power of the intellectual work that was produced at this time. Instead of theoretical rigidity and dogmatism, I found creativity, a spirit of innovation and a desire to combine universal ideas of social justice with the realities of local cultures and their particular conditions. Postcolonial studies as a discipline marks the intrusion of these radically different perspectives into the academy, hitherto dominated by the criteria and knowledge formations of the West. The university system, as we know it, with human knowledge divided up into separate disciplines, was set up in the nineteenth century on the basis that white, male, European knowledge, the kind of knowledge associated with the idea of modernity, was the only true kind of knowledge. From the late 1970s onwards, spearheaded by the arrival of academics in western

universities who were brought up in the so-called third world, the politics of postcolonialism began with the deconstruction of ethnocentric assumptions in western knowledge—as the great Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o has put it, after political decolonization of the old empires, it was now a question of “decolonizing the mind.” This process of decentering and displacing of western knowledge initially focused on examining its links to colonialism and racism, and on questioning the perspectives of western history and philosophy. Western knowledge was organized philosophically through binary oppositions which had the effect of demonizing or denigrating what western people often term the other: instead of master/slave, man/woman, civilized/uncivilized, culture/barbarism, modern/primitive, colonizer/colonized, the postcolonial seeks to develop a different paradigm in which identities are no longer starkly oppositional or exclusively singular but defined by their intricate and mutual relations with others. So colonizer and colonized come to be re-viewed as “intimate enemies,” in Ashis Nandy’s evocative phrase (Nandy 1983). At the same time, the postcolonial project seeks the introduction not just of knowledge *of* other cultures, but of different kinds of knowledge, new epistemologies, *from* other cultures.

Postcolonialism, therefore, begins from its own counter-knowledges, and from the diversity of its cultural experiences, and starts from the premise that those in the West, particularly, both within and outside the academy, should relinquish their monopoly on knowledge, and take other knowledges, other perspectives, as seriously as those of the West. Postcolonialism, or tricontinentalism as I have also called it (*Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*), that is the language and perspective of the three continents of the South—Africa, Asia, and Latin America—represents a general name for these insurgent knowledges, particularly those that originate with the subaltern, the dispossessed, that seek to change the terms and values under which we all live. Since the early 1980s, postcolonial studies has developed a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between the western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed. What does that involve? It’s about learning to challenge and think outside the norms of western assumptions. The only qualification you need to start

is to make sure that you are looking at the world not from above, but from below, not from the north, but the south, not from the inside, but from the outside, not from the centre, but from the margin's forgotten edge. It's the language of the South challenging the dominant perspectives of the North.

It is the world turned upside down, to cite Christopher Hill's resonant description of the radical English revolution of the seventeenth century. It means experiencing how differently things look when you live in Baghdād or Benin rather than Berlin or Boston, and understanding why. It means realizing, as Edward Said (1978) argued, that when western people look at the non-western world what they see is often more a mirror image of themselves and their own assumptions rather than the reality of what is really there, or of how people outside the West actually feel and perceive themselves. If you are someone who does not identify yourself as western, or as somehow not completely western even though you may live in a western country, or someone who is part of a culture and yet excluded by its dominant voices, inside yet outside, a marginalised minority, then postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last.

What's distinctive about postcolonialism is that, unlike many academic disciplines, such as history or sociology, it combines analyses of objective historical processes with the subjective experience of those who undergo them. This is why literature has always been centrally important to the postcolonial, because it is literature, above all the novel, which is the form of writing most adept at simultaneously articulating the subjective with the objective. The understanding and articulation of the subjective experience of objective processes, the ways in which they are felt on the pulses of ordinary people, are common to the work of the greatest postcolonial and anti-colonial writers. It could be said to have begun with Frantz Fanon, who recognized that Jean-Paul Sartre's account of historical determinism remains unique in the way in which he combined subjectivity, the consciousness of acting as an historical agent, with the totality of determining historical processes. Fanon identified this combination of subjective experience with objective analysis

(we could also call this form) with culture itself. At the same time, his writing shows how the effect of colonial rule is to invert this positive dialectic: as Homi Bhabha (1994) has argued, Fanon continually exposes the violent splitting between a person's, or a people's, sense of themselves and their external, objective characterization or situation. It is this articulation of the processes of interpellation, of how forms of power produce a sense of a dislocation between the psychic and the social, inside from outside, that makes Fanon such a compelling inspiration for postcolonial theorists. In Fanon it exists as a theoretical problem, *the* theoretical problem, but it also constituted the fundamental mode of his writing, which imaginatively inhabits the borders between psychic and material bodily life, exploring their wounds, touching their scars.

This philosophical and theoretical analysis is always linked to social activism. The work of the postcolonial will only end when there are no unjust and unaccountable hierarchies of power in the world, when there are no forms of exclusions, no insides to which others are outsiders. Postcolonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being. The reality, though, is that the world today is a world of inequality, and much of the difference falls across the broad division between people of the West and those of the non-West.

What does that mean for those who work on the inside, or in positions of power, including institutions such as universities, wherever and whatever they may be? It means relearning, returning to the ordinary world for re-education. One place to begin might be with the code taught to children about how to cross a road: *Stop. Look. Listen.* Most of all the last term. For postcolonialism listens. It begins from knowledges that are drawn from that zone of occult instability where the people dwell, in Fanon's English translator's powerful phrase, many of them elaborated during the long course of the anti-colonial movements, or more recently, from the experiences of migration, of racism, of exploitation in the third world or the metropolis. Postcolonialism starts from the world as people experience it. It's the knowledge of the people who live on the street level, what Italians call *il basso*, the knowledge of street insurgency, as Walter Benjamin liked to put it. Instead of rejecting the meaning that they give their experiences as simplistic or ideological, postcolonial-

ism seeks to learn from them, from their native intelligence, and from the language in which they speak. It listens to them articulating their stories—of exploitation and dispossession from the land, of the hopes and hardships of desperate journeys of migration, of cruelly ambivalent cultural experiences in the metropolitan cities of the world: “This is how it is—for us, this is how it was—for us.” Since the late 1970s, the fundamental activity of postcolonial studies has been to analyse world history and its cultures from a non-European perspective, to explore, articulate and represent subaltern views and their different marginalised knowledges. Listening to what others are saying, about themselves or ourselves, is perhaps the central necessity for any postcolonial critic. The problem is not only that the subaltern cannot speak, in Gayatri Spivak’s oft-cited phrase (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*), but also that the dominant will not listen. Those in power often develop a curious but symptomatic deafness.

The cultural perspectives that cause speech to be heard or to be silenced are nicely if unexpectedly illustrated, I think, in an episode recounted by the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his famous children’s book of 1945, *The Little Prince*. It seems to be not a coincidence that this comes in a children’s book. As Charles Dickens knew, everyone as a child has some version of the postcolonial experience—because as a child, you are looking up at the world, powerlessly, from below. The difference in later life is between people whose politics, like Dickens’, are founded on the memory of that experience, and those who choose to forget it, once they are empowered:

I have serious reason to believe that the planet from which the little prince came is the asteroid known as B-612.

This asteroid has only once been seen through the telescope. That was by a Turkish astronomer, in 1909.

On making his discovery, the astronomer had presented it to the International Astronomical Congress, in a great demonstration. But he was in Turkish costume, and so nobody would believe what he said.

Grown-ups are like that...

Fortunately, however, for the reputation of Asteroid B-612, a Turkish dictator [Kemal Atatürk] made a law that his subjects, under pain of death, should change to European costume. So in 1920 the astronomer gave his demonstration over again, dressed with impressive style and elegance. And this time everybody accepted the report. (Saint-Exupéry 15)

Universities are also like that. In order to be accepted, you have to look right, in every sense, and speak the right language, which is the language of academia. And of course, as in this story, the right language is the dominant language, which is the language of the West. The division between the rest and the West was made fairly absolute in the nineteenth century by the expansion of the European empires around the world. By the end of the First World War European or European derived powers controlled or occupied around four-fifths of the globe. European culture was regarded (and remains) the basis and the norm for ideas of legitimate government, law, economics, science, language, music, art, literature. In a word, *civilization*. The domination of western perspectives today is still based on that structure of power, originally developed through the course of European colonial expansion.

Saint-Exupéry's story hinges on the changes that came about at the end of the First World War, when the Ottoman Empire was defeated by the Allies, and its territories in the Middle East divided up between Britain—which assumed control of Palestine, Iraq and Jordan—and France, which took Syria and the Lebanon. This was to be the high moment of European imperialism, whose fractured legacies we are still very much living with today—particularly the conflicts of today in Israel/Palestine, and Iraq. The First World War brought about the end of the Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman empires, after which Germany experimented with the ultimate imperial fantasy of colonizing the world. The cost of victory and defeat alike in the war that followed was the beginning of the end for the empires of the British, Dutch, French, Italian, Japanese and Portuguese. Decolonization occurred relatively quickly after World War II, beginning with Indian independence in 1947, although it

was to be another forty years or so before the last great western empire, that of the Soviet Union, was dissolved. Both Europe and the decolonized countries are still coming to terms with the long history of colonialism, which could be said to have begun over five hundred years ago, with the voyage of Christopher Columbus and the so-called discovery of America in 1492. The postcolonial reconsiders this colonial history from a critical perspective, arguing that there was something particular about it—it was not just any old oppression, or any old series of wars and territorial occupations—while at the same time analyzing its political and cultural after-effects in which we all live. It also emphasizes that the resistance to, and eventual liberation from colonialism, was one of the most remarkable stories of human history. That revolutionary political agenda of anti-colonialism also gave rise to an alternative historical project, which challenges the western view of the history of the world as the history of the West. Its task with regard to empire and imperialism is to anatomize empire, imperial practices, and their material effects from the point of view of the colonised. To that extent it seeks to reconfigure the dominant western accounts of its own imperial history insofar as they appear partial and ideologically driven. This has meant that postcolonial studies has been less interested in imperialism and colonialism from the point of view of the history of particular empires than in the ways in which individual practices, or quite often as in the case of Cyprus, Egypt, Mauritius, Somalia, or Sri Lanka, successive practices by different occupying imperial powers, affected the historical, political, cultural, social and psychic lives of the local peoples who bore the brunt of colonial subjugation. One complaint from historians about postcolonial theory has concerned the use of common theoretical heuristic paradigms across very different colonial arenas. However, this kind of objection misses the fundamental point—because it is still coming from the perspective of the imperial centre. From the point of view of the colonized, the structure of domination in fundamental terms was the same, whether it be British, French, Dutch, Italian, Japanese or Portuguese.

There were differences of course. But it is not as if, for example, any of them immediately established democracy as the first act of colonial rule. In fact, the establishment of democracy always marked the end and

dissolution of colonial rule. From the point of view of the colonised, a soldier from a foreign power who rules your country by force rather than consent represents the same structure of domination whichever national colours he happens to be wearing—for the colonial subject, at one level it makes no difference which particular power he happens to serve. The international military response (an alliance of eight colonial powers, Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 in China highlights the fact that, at one level, colonial powers operated as all the same. Postcolonial studies traces the commonality of the colonized.

Looking at the long trajectory of anti-colonialism, it is possible to construct general patterns of resistance that formed a common structure across different colonial periods and formations. In fact, from this perspective, colonialism and imperialism themselves become less significant as structures per se than the common history of resistance to foreign rule or domination, by whatever name, ideology or structure it might go under. From that perspective, the shifts from imperialism to postcolonial, neo-colonialism to globalization, involve particular reorientations of political and economic formation but not necessarily fundamental structural transformations that require conceptual restructuring. Imperialism, the expansion of Europe around the world, was already a form of globalization. So resistance to imperialism and resistance to contemporary globalization may share certain cultural perspectives and political practices. It has become increasingly clear that, contrary Hardt and Negri's argument in *Empire* (2000), we do not need a new theory of empire. The forms of oppression and resistance may change, but their fundamental structure remains intact.

It was for this reason that in my own work I turned the history of imperialism back-to-front in order to write what amounted to the first history of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. People had related the narrative of imperial decolonization, or of individual liberation movements, but no one had looked at the liberation movements as a particular narrative of world history. My book *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001) traces a history of the anti-colonial movements

over the past 500 years, and seeks to situate the politics of the present in a long history from Las Casas to Burke and Adam Smith, from Toussaint l'Ouverture to Gandhi, from the Communist Internationals and Congresses of Peoples of the East at Baku of 1920 to Bandung in 1955 and the Havana Tricontinental of 1966, from Ho Chi Minh to Mao Zedong, to Gandhi, Nkrumah, Fanon, and Guevara, and to the institutionalisation of their writings and practices as an object of academic study in the highly politicised discipline of postcolonial studies initiated by Edward Said's *Orientalism* of 1978. Postcolonial studies is fundamentally the product of that anti-colonial, anti-Eurocentric political knowledge and experience and its construction of new tricontinental modernities.

One of the things that emerged in the epic narrative of the *Historical Introduction* was the importance of events that histories of imperialism typically pass by, such as the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which established the first ideologically anti-imperialist state, the defeat of the Kuomintang of 1949 and the establishment of the first non-western Communist government in China, or the Iranian Revolution of 1979 against the western-imposed neo-colonial regime of the Shah Pahlavi. Emphasis on individual decolonization histories also hides the fact that from the late nineteenth century onwards, anti-colonialism was always a globalized phenomenon. The struggle against imperialism involved national campaigns that took international forms and were always conditioned by international contexts. The Irish Republican Brotherhood, the forerunner of the IRA, was the first international anti-colonial organisation: by the late 1860s it was able to effect terrorist acts, including military invasions and naval skirmishes, against the British around the world (Young 144–45). Despite local particularities, anti-colonialism was an international, transnational discourse that even before 1917 was developed self-consciously through networks of articulations with comparable struggles around the globe. So a postcolonial history will emphasise the histories of the formation of transnational networks between different anti-colonial activists. Sometimes these were strategic with respect to a common colonial enemy, such as the extensive links that were developed between Boer, Irish and Indian nationalists, for

example. In other cases, they were set up in the imperial centres themselves. Affording a freedom unavailable in the colony, London, Paris, Berlin, Lisbon, Tokyo and New York were all at various times bristling with anti-colonial activists communicating with each other, establishing international networks of activist cells, and articulating with affiliated comparable struggles.

In the complex history of the liberation movements, intellectual production was equally syncretic: the work of the tricontinental political-intellectuals involved a transformation of available radical discourses, typically of local cultural ideas crossed with versions of international Marxism, always adapted to the specificities of different geographical, political, cultural and historical conditions. As a part of their wide liberationist aims, anti-colonial activists were concerned to develop new kinds of knowledge, of anthropology, history, literature, politics, generating an unauthorized, subversive, and insurgent counter-modernity. The cosmopolitan, international structure of the anti-colonial movements helped to construct a formation of intellectual and cultural resistance, a huge production of philosophical and cultural knowledge that flourished alongside anti-colonial political practice and the material forms of resistance, from strikes to insurrections. Unauthorized knowledges and cultures such as these have always been those that empower the popular politics of resistance, but since they are unauthorized there is inevitably a time lag before their work is recognised in the academy. Feminism would be an obvious example of the slow institutionalization of radical counter-knowledges, and the situation is even more pronounced if the knowledge has been produced outside the parameters of the West. This accounts for the time lag between the production of such intellectual and political work in the anti-colonial arena and its appearance as the foundation of the postcolonial.

My argument has been that as collective intellectuals committed to social and political transformation on a global scale, we must continue to work in the spirit of the anti-colonial movements by further developing its radical political edge, forging links between its engaged intellectual activism and specific, often local political practices designed to end oppression and enforce global social justice. At a political level,

postcolonialism is concerned with developing the driving ideas of a political practice morally committed to transforming the conditions of exploitation and poverty in which large sections of the world's population live out their daily lives. It has also shown itself to offer a way of articulating the struggles of the everyday over issues of social justice which may not immediately follow along the lines of received orthodox leftist thinking—relating, for example, to a wide range of women's issues, of cultural production, along with questions of development, of ecology, of land, of racism, of immigration and migration, of dispossession, of the environment, of identity in the urban metro-mix of the postcolonial city of modernity, as well as to the everyday deprivations of economic exploitation. Above all, postcolonialism seeks to intervene, to introduce its alternative knowledges into the power structures of the West as well as the non-West. It seeks to change the way people think, the way they behave, to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world.

The postcolonial cultural analysis that has been developed as a part of this project has been much concerned with the elaboration of theoretical structures that contest the previous dominant western ways of seeing things. So postcolonial theory involves a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledges, as well as needs, developed outside the West. Postcolonial theory, however, is not a theory in the scientific sense, that is a coherently elaborated set of principles that can predict the outcome of a given set of phenomena. Nor is it even a theory as understood by the social sciences, which is a methodology to be utilized for the analysis of empirical data. It comprises rather a related set of perspectives, a cluster of concepts, which overlap or are even juxtaposed against each other, on occasion contradictorily or poetically. Postcolonial theory does not involve a single set of ideas, or a single practice. Indeed, at one level there is no single entity called postcolonial theory: as a term, it describes practices and ideas as various as those within feminism or socialism. For much of postcolonial theory is not so much about static ideas or practices, as about the relations between ideas and practices: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures. Postcolonialism is about negotiat-

ing the most difficult and challenging aporias of cultural translation, translating and transforming the world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners intend to change further.

Above all, a postcolonial politics seeks to change the inequitable power structures of the world. Some of the world is rich. Very much more of the world is poor. Postcolonialism challenges the global apartheid system according to which different nations are divided up in absurd disparities of wealth—so that inhabitants of rich parts of the world spend millions of dollars into trying to lose weight, while so many millions of others in other parts of the world do not have enough to eat. In a range of different ways, a tricontinental postcolonial politics seeks to bring about global justice, working for societies based on values of communities rather than individuals, for popular participation rather than centralised control, for empowerment rather than exploitation, through sustainable social change developed from local knowledge systems and resources.

In the face of the complex forces of globalization, tricontinental postcolonialism will continue to articulate active challenges to the impoverishments of global power. Its radical agenda will always be to reject the unbearable conditions of inequality and poverty in the world today and to demand equality, dignity, and well-being for all the peoples inhabiting all the continents on this earth.

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