

Postcoloniality and History

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Article abstract

This essay explores the implications of postcolonial writing for our understanding of the practice of history. It outlines the central principles of contemporary postcolonial inquiry, and provides a critique of recent trends in the field. With its pre-occupation with the local and the particular, contemporary postcolonial writing has become detached from the critical frameworks of analysis embodied in the initial phase of postcolonial writing.

Postcoloniality and History

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Abstract

This essay explores the implications of postcolonial writing for our understanding of the practice of history. It outlines the central principles of contemporary postcolonial inquiry, and provides a critique of recent trends in the field. With its pre-occupation with the local and the particular, contemporary postcolonial writing has become detached from the critical frameworks of analysis embodied in the initial phase of postcolonial writing.

Résumé

Quels impacts les écrits postcoloniaux ont-ils eu sur notre compréhension de la pratique de l'histoire ? Arif Dirlik avance ici une réponse en montrant sur quels principes fondamentaux repose la recherche contemporaine postcoloniale et en présentant une étude critique des dernières tendances dans le domaine. Parce qu'ils ont centré leur intérêt sur le régional et le particulier, les écrits contemporains postcoloniaux se sont écartés des cadres d'analyse critique qui avaient marqué les débuts de l'écriture postcoloniale.

If I may begin this discussion with an often overlooked banality, how we assess the implications of the idea of the postcolonial for historical thinking and practice depends very much on what we understand by that term in the first place. The postcolonial is not transparent in meaning either as a periodizing term, or as a reconceptualization of the phenomena associated with colonialism. As a periodizing term, it ranges in coverage from the intuitively most obvious sense of “after-colonialism,” to the more counter-intuitive (and expansive) sense of beginning with the moment of the colonial and persisting through its aftermath. As a reconceptualization, it calls for the centring of the colonial in historical analysis, while also debunking it by questioning its very coherence as phenomenon and concept, opening the way to the negation of its significance in historical explanation.

These problems are compounded, I might add, by complications presented by a conceptual field of which the postcolonial is a constituent, but only one among others. The postcolonial has played some part in shaping this field,

which in turn has endowed it with different associations — and, therefore, meanings — at different times. This is a field that includes competing, as well as complementary, concepts — from the colonial and the neo-colonial to the postmodern and post-structural to, more recently, the transnational, global and diasporic — which makes it difficult to trace the conceptual origins of new analytical departures. It is a reminder, however, that any effort to assess the impact of the postcolonial on historical thinking and practice, if it is to go beyond narrow academic or political interests, needs to be accompanied by a historicization of the postcolonial itself.

What I would like to undertake in this brief discussion is to sort out the implications for historical analysis of different understandings of the postcolonial. The point of departure for my discussion is the understanding of the postcolonial that has been prevalent in academia over the last decade or so. This is indeed the point of departure for most discussions of the postcolonial with reference to history, or to other disciplines. As we tackle the questions that confront us presently, which we must, it is important nevertheless to remember that there is a good measure of historical amnesia in the identification of the postcolonial with its recent incarnation, displacing an earlier, more radical, understanding of the postcolonial that prevailed during the decades surrounding de-colonization in the immediate aftermath of World War II. There is some evidence to suggest that this more recent version of the postcolonial, too, has been receding for some time now from the centrality assigned to it in the 1990s — partly because of intellectual and political shortcomings, which have become more evident as the concept has achieved popularity, and suffered a dissipation of its original insights, partly because the more significant of its contributions have been routinized in academia, depriving it of its claims to novelty as a resource for rethinking the past. Most important, however, may be the supersession of the postcolonial by concepts such as the global and the transnational which, in their re-narrativization of the past, promise to erase not just the postcolonial but also the colonial of which it is the progeny. The postcolonial re-writing of the past may well be overtaken by demands for a global history, and absorbed into a new metanarrative to which it has, or should have, a problematic relationship.

Most analyses of the postcolonial in history with which I am familiar stop with this recently popular sense of the postcolonial. I would like to suggest, to the contrary, that any convincing assessment of the impact of the postcolonial on historical thinking and practice needs a more expanded understanding of the concept, one that includes the burdens of historical reinterpretation it assumed at the moment of decolonization. The originary moment of the postcolonial provides the historical and intellectual context for its later unfolding. It also reveals that the postcolonial has played a much more important part in shaping historical thinking and practice than is evident from the much more limited impact assigned to it in discussions that equate it with its most recent manifestations.

It is foolhardy to squeeze into a few categorical identifications a conceptual apparatus that is complicated enough in its relationship to the colonial, but has become even more complicated over the years in its detachment from the original historical situation that produced it, to be rendered into a generalized set of precepts that may be applicable to a wide range of historical situations — from diverse situations of transnationality to more particular forms of social relationships marked by gender or ethnic relationships. It is possible, if only for purposes of discussion, to point to a few general guiding principles that have been associated widely with postcolonial criticism as it has acquired popularity in the 1990s.¹ These might be summarized as:

- (a) The centrality of the colonial in the experience and the writing of history. The necessity, for the same reason, of deconstructing the colonial to reveal its historicity, and the need, therefore, to begin analysis with the deconstruction of categories that have their origins in the colonial encounter, including the category of History, which has served since its origins to “naturalize” colonialism in time. The critique of Eurocentrism is a necessary point of departure in deconstructing the relationship between colonialism and history.
- (b) The repudiation of metanarratives temporally and structures spatially that have served to homogenize time and space, respectively, suppressing in the process the heterogeneity of historical experience. Orientalism has been a primary example of such spatial and temporal homogenization that also has served as the discursive foundation for colonial power, but it is not the only one. Even radical critiques informed by the history of capitalism, from world-system analysis to Three Worlds discourse, are suspect not

1 I offer what follows as fundamental features of the thematics of postcolonial criticism as I read it. They should not be taken in any way as defining features of a postcolonial understanding of history, because no such definitions are possible that would cover the variety of postcolonial situations, however we may understand that term historically. In my opinion, one of the most unfortunate turns taken by postcolonial criticism is its conversion by some of its proponents into a “theory,” in the process burdening what is open-ended critical inquiry with the constraints of universalizing claims. Theory may be more appropriate for describing the more structured interpretations of colonialism that characterized the first phase in the unfolding of postcolonial criticism, but it hardly fits in with the deconstructive, historicizing thrust of its more recent incarnation. These themes, not necessarily all in one place, may be found in works that address the question of postcolonial ways of doing history. For examples, see Gyan Prakash, “Introduction: After Colonialism,” in Gyan Prakash, ed., *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3-17; Gyan Prakash, “Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography,” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 8-19; Jeffrey J. Cohen, “Introduction: Midcolonial,” in Jeffrey J. Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 1-18; foreword by Shahid Amin, and introductory essays by Andres Guerrero and Mark Thurner in Mark Thurner and Andres Guerrero, eds., *After Spanish Rule: Postcolonial Predicaments of the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), xi-xv, 3-57. Cohen offers a more comprehensive listing than of what he takes to be the main historiographical features of postcolonial criticism, 6-7.

only because they privilege Euro-American constructions of modernity, but also because they erase the importance of local encounters in the production of histories. One of the most important departures of contemporary postcolonial criticism has been to include national narratives in the critique of metanarratives, as nationalist narratives themselves are largely “derivative” of culturalist discourses of one kind or another, and engage in their own erasures of the local.

- (c) A consequent shift of attention in the de-colonization of history from the certainties of the centre to the ambiguities of the borderlands, from the national or global to the local, and from the normative to the marginal. The stress on spatial metaphors is revealing of the turn in postcolonial criticism to the critique of established temporalities themselves for their complicity in cultural homogenization and teleology. The turn is also crucial to the critique of claims to durable and stable cultural and social identities in favour of flexibility, hybridity and in-betweenness.

The postcolonial questioning of narrative strategies and categories of analysis for their complicity in hegemony has played an important part in underlining the analytical priority in critical historical thinking of historical writing to what is being written about. The unveiling of the relationship between colonialism and colonial historical discourses has sharpened our understanding of colonial modes of domination and hegemony. The critique of nationalism for its replication of the forms, practices, and even the inner substance of colonialism, has called into question the status of nationalist historiography as an antidote to the colonialist erasure of the colonized. The insistence on borderlands as the locations for the resolution (or, at least, the by-passing) of this aporia has led to much useful thinking on issues of cultural self-definition and identity. It is also the case that these critiques have found a receptive audience at least partly because they speak to contemporary issues and self-identifications — including the self-identifications of postcolonial intellectuals who are themselves cultural products of colonial or unequal encounters, and who express in the ambivalences of postcolonial criticism their own self-conscious sense of hybridity and in-betweenness. There is a tacit recognition here, I might add, that colonialism is here to stay, because the categories it has created have already become part of the construction of the world. Unfortunately, the suspicion in postcolonial criticism of structures and meta-narratives has led to a serious failure to examine the broader structural and narrative consequences of “normalizing” the hybridization of the colonizer and the colonized, which naturalizes into history the legacies of colonialism, rendering modernity into a prison-house of colonial modernity from which there may be no escape. Postcolonial criticism in this sense is infused with a deep sense of pessimism about the possibility of liberation from colonialism, from which the only escape (or illusion of escape) would seem to be ludic mimics

that undermine representations but leave structures of power intact.

Here, too, there is resonance between postcolonial criticism and the cultural/linguistic turns of the 1980s. The assimilation of postcolonial criticism to North American academia in the 1990s coincided with a retreat from revolutionary politics globally, including in revolutionary societies, so that unlike in its earlier phase of the 1960s, postcolonial criticism took a postmodern/post-structuralist turn from the 1980s that is not merely postcolonial, but even more importantly, post-revolutionary. It may not be very surprising that in this version, postcolonial criticism has come to voice concerns that may be more pertinent to First World than to Third World social and cultural re-orientations, or at the very least orientations that are the products of increased Third World presence in the First World, most importantly of Third World intellectuals.

This may explain the historicism of postcolonial criticism which, in its insistence on the epistemological and political priority of the local freed of structural readings, places the weight of historical significance on difference and dispersion. Without well-articulated historical frameworks for judging questions of significance, however, the historicist preoccupation with the local and the concrete easily turns into a contemporary form of social antiquarianism, if not arbitrarily interpretive claims on the past—which takes us back to the problem of structures.² What Terry Eagleton has written of contemporary cultural theory applies equally well, I think, to the historiographical implications of postcolonial criticism:

It dislikes the idea of depth, and is embarrassed by fundamentals. It shudders at the notion of the universal, and disapproves of ambitious overviews. By and large, it can see such overviews only as oppressive. It believes in the local, the pragmatic, the particular. And in this devotion, ironically, it scarcely differs from the conservative scholarship it detests, which likewise believes only in what it can see and handle.³

The questions presented to the practice of history by postcolonial criticism are quite real. On the other hand, despite extravagant claims made for postcolonial criticism by some of its champions, we need to ask whether these questions arose out of the experience of the colonizer/colonized encounter, or

2 For examples, see the essays in Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, eds., *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, and Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). I have argued elsewhere that the postcolonial as it unfolds from the 1980s should be understood also as fundamentally post-revolutionary. See Arif Dirlik, "Postcolonial or Postrevolutionary: The Problem of History in Postcolonial Criticism," in A. Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 163-85.

3 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 72.

represent the re-reading of that encounter by insights from and ideologies of the present. Many of the intellectual insights offered by postcolonial criticism, including the constructedness of history, have been concerns of historians. On the other hand, postcolonial intellectuals are for the most products themselves of a global intellectual milieu in which these questions have been of intense interest for the last half century; and if the postcolonial did play an important part in their emergence, it was a version of the postcolonial rather broader in scope, and motivated by goals of revolutionary social transformation, which inevitably raises questions of structure and metanarratives. Postcolonial criticism in our days is heir to this earlier discourse of the postcolonial. It is also very different in its political references, which stress assimilation and dialogue rather than opposition and conflict. Hence the battle against structures of power has been shifted to deconstructing its representations (of self and the other), while the structures live on, changed in their personnel, but not in the oppressive practices of which they are embodiments.

The rapid decline of the postcolonial has been attributed by some of its proponents to the generalization of its conceptual procedures beyond the field of colonial studies.⁴ While this is quite plausible, what I have in mind is something slightly different: the so-called “cultural turn” of the 1980s which, intended initially as a corrective to strictly political economic understandings of the postcolonial, was to end up substituting the cultural for the material, narrowing considerably both the intellectual and the political scope of the postcolonial. Contrary to what might be suggested by ideologues of the cultural (and linguistic) turn in postcolonial criticism, most of the deep-seated impact of the postcolonial on historical thinking and practice, I might suggest, is a product of the first phase of the postcolonial in the 1960s and 1970s, which brought together the critique of Eurocentrism in the academy with a broader critique of political economy. The first phase of the postcolonial, I suggest, was that which called into question the prevalent modernization discourse, rooted in the evolutionist assumptions inherited from the nineteenth century, and colonialist interpretations of the world. Challenges to modernization discourse by varieties of Marxist-inspired world-systems analysis rephrased the critique of colonialism by placing it within the history of capitalism, and called for a re-writing of history to avoid the hegemonic assumptions not only of colonialism but also of models of development that naturalized capitalism in history. The critique of Eurocentrism (and history), in this perspective, could not be divorced from the critique of capitalism, or from a critical historiography that sought to give voice

4 I might note in passing that despite some disagreements here and there, my understanding of postcoloniality as a historical condition — and postcolonialism as the cultural/intellectual/ ideological articulation of that condition — closely parallels those of Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992); Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* and Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001).

to those marginalized globally in paradigms of modernizationist historiography — from indigenous peoples in the remotest corners of the world to women, working classes and oppressed minorities in Europe and North America. The one departure in historical analysis that has been claimed for postcolonial criticism, that of the Indian Subaltern historians, was in its origins very much grounded in a Marxist critique of both colonialist and nationalist historiography that brought together these various dimensions of hegemony and oppression.⁵

The retreat from the latter has rendered postcoloniality in historical practice to little more than a version of liberal historicism, contributing to existing trends in historical practice to the “de-structuring” of the past. The result has been to reduce the postcolonial to boundary problems of power and identity, in conscious opposition to totalizing structural narratives of the postcolonial. Indeed, in this version of the postcolonial, any affirmation of the structural in historical explanation itself is viewed as integral to the construction of power, and its justification. The one phase of the postcolonial, in other words, has turned its back upon the orientations of an earlier phase, of which it is in so many ways a product. The shift is consonant with fundamental shifts in the configuration of global political economy, and its echoes in academic institutions of learning. On the other hand, a radical postcolonialism has been replaced by postcolonialism that speaks most audibly from established seats of power, in particular the United States, that has lost most of its critical political edge as it has shifted attention from the transformation of the structures of political economy and power to the negotiation and representation of identities within a structure of political economy, that has in fundamental ways normalized the legacies of colonialism so long as the earlier structures of power open their gates for the admission of newly emergent groups and classes from the former Third World.

Mistakenly, in my view, proponents of this latter version of the postcolonial have approached their project as a substitute for an earlier version of the postcolonial, which had been very much shaped by thinking through structures and

5 I have always been very much impressed by Ranajit Guha's reference to “New Democracy” in the opening essay of *Subaltern Studies*, which recalls immediately Mao Zedong's 1940 essay of that title, which also laid out the strategy that would bring the Communist Party of China to power in 1949. “New Democracy” challenged socialist metanarratives by opening the way to the assimilation of socialism to different local circumstances, which I have described elsewhere as the vernacularization of socialism. Chinese Marxist theoreticians from Mao to Liu Shaoqi viewed the direction Mao gave to Marxism to be of general relevance to Third World societies. See Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” *Subaltern Studies* vol. I (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1-8. Mao's essay, “On New Democracy,” is found in Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works*, vol. II (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 339-84. For further discussion of “vernacularization,” see Arif Dirlik, “Mao Zedong and Chinese Marxism,” in Arif Dirlik, *Marxism in the Chinese Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 75-104.

totalities, heavily inflected by the legacies of Marxism. It is a mistake because it has opened up the idea of the postcolonial to appropriation for purposes that have little to do with the questions that had generated the concept to begin with — most importantly, the question of colonialism. To the extent that it retains conceptual vitality these days, postcolonial criticism is as likely to serve as a method for dealing with sexual identities in society as it does the analysis of coloniality. In its stress on the different, the particular, and the place-based, postcolonial of this latter version has favoured a methodological individualism that is preoccupied with the local and the particular — and a historicism of the most conventional kind. The concept in the generalization of its explanatory strategies across widely different social situations and problems, ironically, has served for the same reason to flatten out differences between different social problems.

I think it is possible, and potentially quite productive, to conceive of contemporary postcolonial criticism as not a substitute for an earlier understanding of the postcolonial, but as an effort to compensate for major oversights in earlier structural explanations of postcoloniality (or coloniality). Insufficiencies of such structural explanations, however, do not render them irrelevant. Reaffirmation of the significance of totalizing narratives in time and space may, on the contrary, provide the necessary context for the individual, the local, and the place-based to prevent the dissipation of historical phenomena into atomized events without any apparent impact on similar events; in other words, the dissipation of history itself as an intelligible (not to say, intelligent) undertaking. This is all the more the case, I think, since the emergence of the postcolonial on the intellectual scene after World War II (especially from the mid-1950s), already called into question disciplinary boundaries in academia for their complicity in hegemony, including in the writing of the past. The continued de-structuring of History, if it is to do more than keep on breaking the past into proliferating histories, needs restructurings, possibly under the aegis of a new intellectual division of labour — “the unthinking of social science,” as Immanuel Wallerstein has phrased it, which does not mean however that the alternative is simply intellectual chaos.⁶ What these restructurings may look like is a question we are not likely even to speculate about until we have raised once again the necessity of bringing together the global and the local, the transnational and the national, and the over-determined structures of trans-localities in a renewed effort to capture wholes without sacrificing parts, or vice versa.

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6 Immanuel Wallerstein, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth Century Paradigms* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991). What Wallerstein has in mind, needless to say, is overcoming the legacies of the nineteenth century (nationalism and colonialism among them) that have shaped the social sciences as we have them today.

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