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Summary Article: **Postcolonialism**

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Postcolonialism refers both to a specific historical period or state of affairs—the aftermath of imperialism—and to an intellectual and political project to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subordinated under various forms of European imperialism. It signals a possible future of overcoming colonialism, yet also new forms of domination or subordination that can come in the wake of such changes, including new forms of global empire. It should not be confused with the claim that the world we live in now is actually devoid of colonialism.

Modernity comes to the world outside of the orbit of Western capitalist democracies in different ways and generates different responses. Thus, postcolonial theorists and historians have been concerned to investigate the various trajectories of modernity as understood and experienced from a range of philosophical, cultural, and historical perspectives. They have been particularly concerned to engage with the ambiguous legacy of the Age of Enlightenment—social, political, economic, scientific, legal, and cultural thought beyond Europe itself. The legacy is ambiguous according to postcolonial theorists because the Age of Enlightenment was also an age of empire, and the connection between these two historical epochs is more than incidental.

From Decolonization to Postcolonialism

Although there were and are many different kinds of imperialism and thus of decolonization, two of the most important periods for postcolonial writers include the British disengagement from its second empire (of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and the decolonization movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Africa and elsewhere. It was during the latter era, in particular, that many of the international principles and instruments of decolonization were formally declared (although the history of their emergence and formation goes back much further), and the language of national self-determination applied to liberationist movements within former colonial territories (see especially the United Nations' *Declaration on Friendly Relations*). The processes triggered by these struggles were not only political and economic but also cultural. Previously subjugated people sought to assert control over not only territorial boundaries—albeit ones carved out by the imperial powers—but also over their language and history.

The language of postcolonialism is also sometimes used to refer to the struggles of indigenous people in many parts of the world today. However, given the interpretation of the principles of self-determination and self-government within the current international system, along with their minority status and vulnerability even within decolonized states, the term is perhaps less apt. Indigenous people have been denied even the modest gains extended by the United Nations and the international system of states to the various decolonized territories in the 1970s. Moreover, the history of imperialism is complex. European imperialism between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in the Americas, West Indies, Australasia, and South East Asia was substantially different from that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Still, one of the central themes of postcolonial scholarship has been both the persistence of empire in human history but also resistance to it.

Thus, on the one hand, the legacy of the Enlightenment forms an indispensable and unavoidable feature of the present, whether European or otherwise. The universal categories and concepts at the heart of

much Enlightenment thought have been put to work by both European and non-European intellectuals and activists to criticize the injustices of their societies, as well as imperialism itself. There is a tradition of anti-imperialist criticism that extends as far back as the sixteenth century, and yet on the other hand, some of these very same commitments were not only compatible with, but were often used to justify, imperial domination. The theoretical tools provided by the Enlightenment, combined with an often-unrelenting cultural Eurocentrism, informed the political and economic practices of imperialism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Still, many of the most powerful local and indigenous critics of empire in the twentieth century were themselves deeply influenced by European social and political theory, as much as they were deeply critical of it. The seminal work of C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, as well as by the group of historians associated with the editorial collective of *Subaltern Studies*, all exemplify this complex inheritance. It derives in part from the fact that there is no such thing as “the” Enlightenment, but rather, multiple Enlightenments shaped by different historical and political contexts. And also because the bundle of concepts and ideals to which “the” Enlightenment refers are plural and capable of a wide range of elaboration.

What Is the Subject of Postcolonialism?

As a general domain of intellectual inquiry, postcolonialism refers to those questions that emerge in relation to the aftermath of imperialism. And one of the most important features of the history of imperialism in the last 500 years has been the emergence of states, either from the consolidation of territories and polities or from the dissolution of empires (or some combination thereof), and along with it, new conceptions of international order. In this sense, to be concerned with postcolonialism is to be concerned with a set of questions at the heart of modern political thought.

However, in recent years postcolonialism has also become closely associated with a more specific set of questions, and although it shouldn't be reduced to them, they have proved to be enormously influential. One of the most prominent has been the relation between imperialism and identity. Frantz Fanon presents one of the most searing and provocative analyses of the relation between colonized and colonizer in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), as well as in his earlier *Black Skin, White Masks* (1953). Fanon is perhaps best known for his explosive justification of violence in *The Wretched of the Earth* (highlighted in Jean-Paul Sartre's famous preface to that work), where it is cast as the appropriate response to the violence perpetrated by colonialism, and also as the mediation through which the colonized can begin to reclaim their self-conscious agency. This is a deeply unsettling argument, shaped undoubtedly by the brutal period of colonial rule and war in Algeria between 1954–1961, which Fanon experienced first hand. Violence was inevitable and necessary, Fanon seems to be saying, but also has to be overcome. One has to move from reaction to the construction of something new, which for Fanon included overcoming the binary oppositions imposed on the colonized by the geopolitical structures of the Cold War. It is here that we find the foreshadowing of some important themes that have become central to postcolonialism today. For example, Fanon combines a material and psychological analysis of the consequences of colonialism, which looks to both the micro- and macroeffects and experience of colonial governance. Both the colonized and the colonizer are implicated in the horrors of imperialism and both will have to be decolonized. The colonized have to find a way of overcoming the imposition of alien rule not only over their territory but also over their minds and bodies. Seeking recognition from an oppressor in terms that the oppressor has set hardly provides a genuine liberation from the grip of colonialism (this anticipates an important debate in contemporary

political theory over the “politics of recognition”). But the colonizers also have to make sense of how the brutality of colonialism relates to their own apparent humanism. At times, Fanon combines, often worryingly, the idioms of Marxist revolutionary, psychoanalyst, and ethnonationalist, deeply committed and involved as he was in the struggle for Algerian independence. But at other times in *The Wretched of the Earth*, as careful readers have pointed out, he is well aware of the pitfalls of a purely reactive nationalism. Here he tries to link the struggle for national liberation to the emergence of a new humanism, one that departs from what he saw as the bad faith of liberal humanism, as well as the forced choice between socialism and capitalism, but still reaches toward the universal.

In Fanon’s work we encounter the complex relation between imperialism and nationalism that has remained a critical focus of much postcolonial writing. The aspiration for self-determination at the heart of anticolonial struggles has proved difficult to institutionalize democratically in existing postcolonial states (about which Fanon was remarkably prescient). Most postcolonial theorists, whether writing about Africa, South Asia, or elsewhere, have been critical of nationalism, but also equally critical of the “nativism” and romantic communitarianism often supposed to be alternatives to it. They have been concerned to investigate the ways in which European conceptions of the political, as well as assumptions about secularism and historical time more generally, have been used to describe and locate non-European peoples’ forms of collective action and modes of self-understanding along a continuum that terminates with the ideas and institutions of modern Europe. They have also been critical of the assumption, often made by liberals, that what is needed is simply the extension of existing liberal universals, this time in good faith, to those to whom they were previously denied (or never seriously intended). For some postcolonial theorists, the problem is not simply one of a lack of consistency on the part of liberalism, but lies more deeply within the structure of the universal principles themselves. The conditions attached for the ascription of rights, for example, or the distribution of liberties, were often grounded in narratives of social or cultural development that justified denying rights and freedoms to those deemed too backward or uncivilized to exercise them properly. John Stuart Mill’s justification of the denial of Indian self-government is a classic instance of this kind of assumption, however much he thought it was best for the well-being of Indians themselves.

The Critique of Historicism

A central *topos* of postcolonialism is the problem of historicism. One basic question many postcolonial writers have asked is: How does the non-European world write its own history? Some Indian historians associated with *Subaltern Studies*, for example, although deeply influenced by Marxism, have also sought to rescue the collective agency of Indian peasants from the category of the “pre-political” to which they had been assigned by Marxist historicism. This puts into question the very idea of theories of social and historical development in which entire peoples or cultures are located somewhere on a scale between “primitive” or “archaic” and “civilized.” The critique of historicism and its relation to the elaboration of various concepts central to Marxism and liberal democratic theory is, however, complex. Could peasants be genuine political actors if they didn’t use the language and practice of rights or sovereignty in the way that European political thought—differentiated as it is—conceived of it? Was the collective action of Indian peasants, or Aboriginal Australians, prepolitical or “backward” because oriented around “religious” or kinship relations, for example, as opposed to class or universal human interests? And how should we describe and make sense of those alternative sociabilities anyway?

Thus, postcolonialism has been associated with skepticism about the historicism of Marxist and liberal historiography. For some, this means abandoning any form of essentialism whatsoever in thinking about

the representation of subaltern collective action in time or, at least, that any identity is always ultimately heterogeneous and must be theorized as such. Here, the influence of the work of Michel Foucault has been significant. For example, in Edward Said's groundbreaking book *Orientalism*, Foucault's subtle conception of the constitutive relation between power and knowledge provided a critical angle from which to investigate the way representations of non-European culture and thought were shaped by a web of institutional and political forces connected to the justification and practice of Western imperialism.

Foucault's work has also proved influential in trying to make sense of the ambiguous legacy of the Enlightenment, as previously mentioned. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argued that the legal and administrative reforms put in place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England and France as instances of self-consciously enlightened progressivism were also used to regulate and "discipline" the population in more sweeping and yet also more efficient ways than ever before. Although he was less interested in colonial contexts himself, Foucault's arguments and methodology have provided a remarkably productive set of critical tools for postcolonial theorists looking at the different forms of power at work in eighteenth and nineteenth century imperialism, as well as today. The postcolonial critique of contemporary state-sponsored multiculturalism as a form of ongoing colonial domination—albeit more subtle and indirect than previous forms—is deeply indebted to his work.

The notion of "unmasking" the Enlightenment has been a powerful theme in this strand of postcolonial writing. The critique has tended to generate two kinds of claims. First, certain modes of Enlightenment thought are inherently Eurocentric and thus deeply problematic when applied in non-European contexts, or presented as offering genuinely neutral principles of political association or justice. But second, and perhaps more interestingly, despite the legacy of empire, the humanism and universalism of much Enlightenment thought is still indispensable for addressing the challenges faced by those on the sharp end of contemporary global inequality. Indeed, this kind of ambiguity can be found in Foucault's own work, insofar as he understood the Enlightenment to represent not just a set of doctrinal commitments or principles, but also a particular philosophical ethos and attitude committed to permanent critique and self-reflection. Postcolonialism suggests that as dominant and important as the European process of modernity has been, there have been and will continue to be multiple modernities, and thus important questions about how best to understand the relations between them.

Postcolonialism and Governance

If postcolonialism raises basic questions about the representation of non-European people in history, as well as about the entanglement of Enlightenment thought with the justification of empire, is there an alternative vision of the postcolonial? One influential account of the nature of postcolonial identity has emphasized the hybridity and "in-betweenness" of the postcolonial, poised between various categories and forms of self-understanding associated with "native," "minority," "citizen," and "subject." This work, associated most closely with Homi Bhabha, has pointed to the centrality and unavoidability of a particular conception of difference—nonhierarchical, fluid, overlapping, multiform, and complex—at the heart of any possible postcolonial conception of justice. However, the general approach is oriented primarily to literary and cultural studies, the political and institutional consequences of which remain unclear.

What are the consequences of postcolonialism for thinking about the nature of governance? One

strand of postcolonialism, drawing on the critiques of historicism and Enlightenment humanism previously examined, suggests a radical critique of liberalism, and thus of various forms of liberal democracy, as inherently unjust. But another strand of postcolonial thought takes a different tack, in line with the complexity of Enlightenment thought itself, and seeks to combine a critique of Eurocentrism with the attempt to rethink and yet also put to work new conceptions of equality, global justice, and human rights. And here, postcolonialism points to the difficulty—and yet the necessity—of trying to think simultaneously with and also against dominant conceptions of sovereignty, justice, and the state. This strand of postcolonial theory takes aim, in particular, at the state-centric assumptions of much cultural, legal, and political discourse, and especially the way non-European political agents are forcibly assimilated into or excluded from an international order organized around a particular idea of statehood and radically unequal forms of economic development. The fundamental orientation of this strand of postcolonialism is to point to the essentially contested nature of political modernity, and thus of some of its basic structures of thought—including the idea of humanity—without necessarily abandoning them. With new forms of transnational and global relations of power at work in the world, as these theorists suggest, we need to think differently about not only the nature of cultural and political identity, but also the political and institutional forms in which to realize freedom and equality given these complex circumstances. In this sense, postcolonialism remains a vital aspect of the ongoing debate over the nature of sovereignty and global justice.

See also

Indigenous Governance; Nation; Nationalism; Postmodernism; State; Tribal Governance

Further Readings and References

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Duncan Ivison


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