

# Ideologies of the Postcolonial

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*This article was written for the opening issue of **Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies** in 1998. It was sent to a number of those working in the field of Postcolonial Studies, who were invited to send their responses. These responses were then printed in the first two issues of **Interventions**.*

‘Postcolonialism’ has come to name a certain kind of interdisciplinary political, theoretical and historical academic work that sets out to serve as a transnational forum for studies grounded in the historical context of colonialism, as well as in the political context of contemporary problems of globalisation. The major criticism of postcolonial work, despite this, is that it has transmuted the long history of anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic activism via a range of theories sometimes extraneous to that history, into a form of academic critical analysis. However, in naming this journal *Interventions* we do not intend to challenge contemporary postcolonial work in terms of an opposition between textualism and political activism. A more complex process has been at work: gender issues in postcolonial theory, for example, are not just theoretical, but are also directed towards inequalities and strategic material needs; at the same time demonstrating the ways in which postcolonial strategies can be most effective when inflecting other practices and knowledges. Indeed rather than berating postcolonialism for its textualism, we recognise that in many ways it has created possibilities for new dynamics of political and cultural practice. The journal will seek, therefore, to forge the identity of contemporary postcolonial work so as to foreground its interventionist possibilities. One implication of this is that the category of resistance so favoured in postcolonial studies will require reconsideration: ‘resistance’ emphasises a form of political agency that is at best reactive against forms of dominant oppressive power, and fails to emphasise the need for and possibilities of active, interventionist movements forcing political change and social, economic, and cultural transformation within and across postcolonial nation-spaces.

Whatever one might say about the troubled term, postcolonial—and we take the discussions of that on board, but as read—one characteristic aspect of postcolonial writing, be it creative or critical, involves its historical and political agenda, which in broad terms give it common objectives. This is the reason why, just as with feminism, postcolonialism offers a politics rather than a coherent theoretical methodology. Indeed you could go so far as to argue that strictly speaking there is no such thing as postcolonial theory as such—rather there are shared political perceptions and agenda which employ an eclectic range of theories in their service. Moreover, as with some feminisms, a substantial constituency of postcolonial writing is radically anti-theoretical, giving a primacy to the value of individual consciousness and experience. Postcolonialism’s curious combination of heterogeneous theories with a sometimes problematic or even condescending counter-affirmation of the truth of experiential knowledge, is an articulation too easily characterised either as the postcolonial

predicament or as a disjunction between the Western academy and ‘third world’ conditions of existence.

We have called the first issue of *Interventions* ‘ideologies of the post-colonial’ in order to enable an opportunity for reflection upon the project, ideological forms, normative requirements, orthodoxies and conventionalisms of postcolonialism. Those who are commonly considered postcolonial writers (as with any label, most would themselves resist such a characterisation) while concerned to unmask oppressive ideologies of past and present, are also typically very self-conscious about the locational disjunctions and ethical problems involved in their own positions. One result of this, however, has been that self-consciousness has itself become a dominant mode of postcolonial writing, with debates focusing narcissistically on *ad hominem* or *ad feminam* critiques of postcolonial critics rather than on more urgent substantive political issues. Much writing in this vein claims itself to stand outside ‘the postcolonial’—but it could be argued that writing about the postcolonial while claiming to stand outside it in fact typically characterises postcolonial writing itself. Despite the self-consciousness of its mode, therefore, postcolonialism incorporates its own hidden ideologies. Is postcolonialism a critique or is it itself an ideology, and if the latter, what are the ideologies of post-colonial writing, whether literary, cultural or critical/theoretical?

Seven initial questions that follow from such an interrogation:

Q1 Who and where is the postcolonial? Does contemporary postcolonial and related writing overemphasise the cultural impact of migrancy and dislocation? Certainly migrancy has constituted a major feature of the global order since World War II, but to privilege the migrant condition as representative of the postcolonial downplays the historical experience of the far greater numbers who have not migrated, who have migrated to non-metropolitan places, as well as of the vast numbers who migrated in the past. The emphasis on cultural hybridity in the reading of contemporary diasporas, implies a contrasting homogeneity in the past that the long histories of slavery, indentured labour and political exile refute. How are these interests to be reconciled?

Q2 The question of representation: why has ‘recognition’ of minorities become a key political issue, often apparently put above access to employment and other (un)equal opportunities? Does it still implicitly assume a Hegelian master-slave recognition structure? Who is being given the agency of doing the recognising? Are they still located at the metropolitan centre? In a related way, the topics of identity, subjectivity and ‘voice’ have become of primary significance for contemporary cultural theorists: but to whom is the voice addressed, which listeners are being spoken to, who is supposed to hear and how are they supposed to respond?

Q3 How far does the high profile of class, race, ethnicity and gender issues in postcolonialism sustain the view that postcolonial studies are really the product of contemporary multiculturalism in the US? Has theory really travelled or have the theorists rather travelled to theory in the metropolis? Does the related argument that postcolonial studies are a predominantly Western phenomenon confined to Western institutions mark a productive political intervention in an era of transnational communities?

Q4 Does 'postcolonialism' mark the end of the 'Third World'? A recent article in a British financial weekly (written prior to the election of a BJP government) suggested that India might be a good place to invest in now that it is 'shedding its post-colonial ideological shackles'. So from capitalism's point of view, postcolonialism describes the third world's adoption of the Marxist anti-capitalist ideologies in the past. Most nations in Africa and Asia had a choice of economic and political system upon becoming independent--either a Western free-market demand economy, or a Sino-Soviet Marxist centralised one, or an indigenous mixed economy, such as in India. With the collapse of the Soviet block, and the conversion of China to a form of controlled capitalist economy, today there is effectively no longer any choice: *de facto* there is now only a single world economic system. One implication of this is that with the demise of the second world, a third world no longer exists. Indeed the emergence of postcolonial theory could be viewed as marking the moment in which the third world moved from an affiliation with the second world to the first. The rise of postcolonial studies coincided with the end of Marxism as the defining political, cultural and economic objective of much of the third world. But if it still seeks an oppositional role, what form of critical participatory economics should postcolonial analysis look to? Without a substantive economic basis for its critique, postcolonialism runs the danger of merely reflecting the globalisation of capital flows that has been such a feature of post-Soviet Union history (starting with its celebration of the human version of free-flowing global capital: the economic migrant). At a more general level, this raises the whole question of postcolonialism's own historical situatedness.

Q5 In the West, it was also the theories of poststructuralism which from the 1960s onwards challenged certain Marxist presuppositions, a challenge which took on greater momentum with the historical coincidence of the collapse of Marxism in the Soviet Union and the end of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe. Unexpectedly given its initial reception as a form of apolitical idealism, many of the precepts of poststructuralism were utilised in Europe and the US by minorities, particularly people of colour, who recognised the radical political potential of certain of its ideas and transformed its priorities in the process. If poststructuralism lost its idealism, this transformation also involved the renunciation of its radical anti-Enlightenment critique of humanism and a re-endorsement of the liberal values of individualism, together with the abandonment of economic arguments in general. Has the tendency to individualise experience meant that fundamental economic disparities, both within nations and between them, are considered in general terms but without the issue of poverty, access to health care, and the benefits of political stability being addressed in any substantive way?

Q6 Postcolonial writing, together with minority writing in the West and feminist writing generally, has achieved a revolution in aesthetics and the aesthetic criteria of the literary, just at the moment when 'the literary' was most under attack as an outdated category of elitist institutions. In institutional terms, the impact of feminism and postcolonialism has radically changed the criteria of what makes authentic art by challenging the cultural capital from which notions of the literary were derived. Writing is now valued as much for its depiction of representative minority experience as for its aesthetic qualities. Postcolonial writing has decisively articulated itself through history and historical rewriting, reforming and retrieving an historical

sensibility through the creative processes of contemporary writing. This suggests that in its own way, despite an appropriation of forms of thinking associated with post-structuralist and postmodernist anti-foundationalism, in practice postcolonial studies can be strongly foundationalist, grounded in an epistemology which gives primacy to an authentic historical reality (a position decisively mapped out in the founding text of modern postcolonial studies, Edward Said's *Orientalism* of 1978). If it is this combination that orients postcolonialism in political terms and constitutes its distinctive cultural and theoretical identity, how does postcolonialism manage to lay claim to this foundationalism while at the same time reversing the premises of an earlier foundationalism grounded on universals, aesthetics, totality, homogeneity, purity, race and attachment to the land?

Q7 The notion of race and attachment to land opens up the questions of nationalism and the nation-state in relation to postcolonial studies, and the debates around their progressiveness, their viability, and their operativity in decolonized countries, or in former settler colonies operating forms of internal colonialism with relation to indigenous 'fourth-world' nations. Can a politics of cultural nationalism only be sustained in postcolonial studies in relation to continuing colonial or quasi-colonial situations?

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