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The last 20 years have seen the publication of numerous readers, general introductions, and volumes of essays dedicated to defining the concept-term “postcolonialism.” Yet, as a key critical term in the social sciences and humanities today, postcolonialism resists easy definitions. At one level, postcolonialism suggests a temporal relationship with a colonialism that came before. It is after/post colonialism. While the use of the term in this particular configuration has gained significant circulation, it nevertheless fails to recognize that we are yet to be after colonialism. New empires of multinational corporations and their global financial markets still hold the world under their sway. At another level, the term signifies an amorphous array of heterogeneous practices that attempt to uncover the fissures in Empire’s idealization of its own universalism while excavating diverse ways of being-in-the-world. Postcolonialism can, then, be read as a commitment to a possibility of politics that attempts to readdress history from the perspectives of the marginalized.

Take, for instance, a recent performance by the artist Inder Salim. On June 19, 2008, the artist recited a poem titled “The Other 1857,” facing the sculpture of Major General Henry Havelock in Trafalgar Square in London. Celebrated in British annals as the valiant officer who seized Kanpur from the “rebels” during the Indian uprising of 1857, Havelock’s sculpture had been installed in 1861 to commemorate the British Empire’s claim of stability and permanence. Facing the bronze statue of Havelock, Salim,

however, recounted an account of 1857 that differed significantly from both British imperial and Indian nationalist histories of the event. Foregrounding subaltern participation in the legendary uprising, the performance meditated on the silences in history writing to unsettle the totalizing claims of Enlightenment rationality as a product and effect of Empire.

While the diversity of articulations in the name of such a postcolonialism would be difficult to enumerate, it is in the writings of the anti-colonial revolutionary Frantz Fanon that we find an early elaboration of postcolonialism’s imperatives (Fanon 1952). Although Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is usually regarded as the contrapuntal force that marked the arrival of postcolonial theory in the Anglo-American academy, it was in 1952, in an era of massive global decolonization, that Fanon made a powerful assertion for the dislocation of subjectivities under colonialism (Said 1978). Yet, even as Fanon eloquently critiqued the violence of colonialism’s apparatuses, he continued to invoke the (Western) Enlightenment through Hegel’s master–slave dialectic.

In certain ways, Fanon’s concurrent denunciation of both Western colonialism and Europe’s civilizational conceit through a rereading of Hegel became a leitmotif in the new postcolonialism that emerged in the decades following the 1980s. Homi Bhabha, for instance, returned to Fanon to suggest that ambivalence and hybridity were products of the colonial condition (Bhabha 1994). Building on Fanon’s thesis that colonized subjectivity was constitutively shaped by Europe, Bhabha recognized in this shaping a possibility of resistance on the part of the colonized. Even as the colonizer compelled

the colonized into replicating a European self, the incompleteness of this mimicry made visible the failure and instability of colonial discourse. For Bhabha, this space of failure, the space of flux and ambivalence, was the site of resistance, produced both within and beyond dominant discourse.

However, along with early and mid-20th-century anti-colonial political thinkers such as Fanon, Mohandas Gandhi, and Aimé Césaire, it was the Subaltern Studies collective under the guidance of Ranajit Guha that played an equally crucial role in framing the intellectual contours of post-1980s post-colonialism (Guha 1982). A new method of history from below, enunciated in the collective's early volumes, aimed to address the elitist prejudices – both colonial and bourgeois-nationalist – in accounts of 19th- and 20th-century Indian history. Although, by the late 1980s, the Subaltern Studies volumes included more heterogeneous approaches that paid equal attention to the textuality of colonialism and resistance, the collective effectively inserted the term “subaltern” into a global intellectual field (see Bhadra, Prakash, and Tharu 1999).

By the 1990s, postcolonialism had surfaced as a recognizable form of writing and thinking. Its genealogies, however, could be traced back to the anti-colonialism of Fanon and the revisionism of Guha, among others. One sees traces of this genealogy modulating Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (Chakrabarty 2000). Considering how a hyperreal Europe fabricated by imperialism and nationalism had assumed the privileged habitus of both modernity and history, Chakrabarty delineated the epistemic violence inherent in perpetually banishing non-Europe to a site of derivativeness and belatedness. Rather than an atavistic denial of European thought, Chakrabarty, however, presented the project of provincializing Europe as a mode of rethinking the Enlightenment from and for the margins.

One also sees traces of postcolonialism's long genealogy in Bhabha's ambivalence (discussed above) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative iteration of Enlightenment from below (Spivak 2004). Rather than abandoning the Enlightenment, Spivak urges the postcolonial to use (in her words, “ab-use”) the Enlightenment as a way of both accessing Europe and transgressing its limits. Elsewhere, Spivak responded to Guha by suggesting that the gendered subaltern never speaks about herself (Spivak 1985). The subject can only be spoken for and spoken of. Spivak's 1985 interlocution led to a new turn in postcolonialism that made difficult projects that attempted to recuperate subaltern subjectivities at the margins of the nation, empire, and history.

Even a fleeting glance at these multiple formulations thus makes evident the impossibility of conclusively defining postcolonialism's intellectual field. At best, one reads postcolonialism as palimpsests of open-ended fragmentary practices that continue to coalesce around questions of inclusion, difference, equity, and social justice. It is precisely this imperative that led Inder Salim to stand at the heart of the erstwhile British Empire and speak *of/for* the Indian sepoy (soldier) whose fingers would be severed if he did not trim his nails, and the non-caste/“untouchable” woman who was “born non-existent” (Salim 2008). It was also this imperative that had led the author Chinua Achebe to deterritorialize both English and the form of the novel in the 1950s to destabilize Europe's production of Africa as a space of nostalgic lack (Achebe 1958). This, then, is the theory and practice of postcolonialism/s.

SEE ALSO: Anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism; Decolonization; Enlightenment and empire; Nationalism and imperialism

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