Post-colonial Theory

Defining Postcolonial Theory

What is meant by postcolonial theory, on a basic level, seems easy to see: it is theory after (or post) colonialism. Yet despite the initially obvious temporal answer, postcolonial theory has been quite difficult, in fact impossible, to concretely define. Postcolonial theory is a theoretical approach that attempts to disrupt the dominant discourse of colonial power. Put simply, postcolonial theory is about colonialism, emphasizing the effects of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizer. This means postcolonial theory provides a point of view that responds to colonialism and the complicated power dynamic that occurs both during the colonial experience and in the aftermath. Such a vague definition of postcolonial leads to contention in the highly self-critical environment of postcolonial theory.

In an early definition of what is postcolonial, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin posited, "We use the term 'post-colonial'…to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (1989, p. 2). The response to this definition was largely critical, and many argued that this defined almost everything as postcolonial, since imperialism had such a widespread presence. Since then, many new definitions of postcolonialism, postcoloniality, post-colonialism, and other variations of the term have expanded, reduced, and refined the concept of postcolonial (JanMohamed, 1985; McClintock, 1992; Shohat, 1992; Child & Williams, 1995). For the purposes of understanding postcolonial theory in an introductory sense, however, Ashcroft et al.'s basic definition is a good point of departure and provides a good platform from which to explore the body of work that comprises the theoretical canon.

In particular, postcolonial theory has argued that academic systems of knowledge are rooted in a colonial mindset and that the voices of the colonized have been made invisible. Postcolonial theory is not only interested in providing the point of view of the colonized, but also in how the experience of colonialism has led to certain ways of thinking. In the social sciences, postcolonial theory has dealt with Eurocentric points of view in methodological processes and in the ways power is understood. In literature, postcolonial usually refers to work produced by subjects of the European nineteenth-century colonialism writing from their own perspective. Postcolonial theory, then, is not simply a temporal description, but rather a point of view (or many points of view).
**Historical Development**

While postcolonial theory has brought new light to aspects of colonialism, it has done so by building on previous sociological and philosophical traditions that have been critical of imperialism, such as classical Marxism, and by incorporating analyses of power by social theorists such as Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. Marxism offered a critique of imperialism rooted in the economic exploitation of capitalism, pointing to the unfair extraction of wealth and resources from the colonies by the European powers as a result of capitalism's insatiable desire to expand. This was certainly a perspective that was sympathetic to the colonized, but classical Marxist analysis of imperialism never quite managed empathy; that is, it was always still looking into the colonies from outside, and always assuming a unidirectional power flow: the imperialist West abusing the powerless East. Marxist theoretical approaches to colonialism were also heavily rooted in the economic sector, which left many aspects of colonialism unexamined.

**Knowledge Production**

The limitations of a strictly Marxist approach led many academics of the late 1960s to postmodernist and poststructuralist analysis. The work of Michel Foucault influenced the way academics viewed power. No longer unidirectional in a case of domination/exploitation, postmodernist interpretations of power examine an all-inclusive and multidirectional presence that is actively coercive upon the individual through processes of knowledge production. This postmodern perspective opened up a new arena in which to see power and to see the effect of that power on both the colonized and colonizer. Foucault's emphasis on knowledge production and power opened the academy itself up to critical examination for its role in exerting power through the establishment of "truth" (much of which was developed via colonial encounters). Despite this appearance, postmodernism and Marxism do not necessarily contradict each other; indeed, postcolonial theory employs them both. As pointed out by Leela Gandhi, "Arguably, then, it is through poststructuralism and postmodernism — and their deeply fraught and ambivalent relationship with Marxism — that postcolonialism starts to distil its particular provenance" (1998, p. 25). The roots of postcolonial theory as a hybrid of postmodernism and classical Marxism has led in many ways to a tension within the postcolonial perspective that is highly critical of theory and simultaneously self-theorizing. This tension has also contributed to a
degree of self-distrust that has made postcolonial theory ever-changing and particularly malleable.

The role of knowledge production in the academic realm is particularly important to postcolonial theory. It is a fundamental aspect of the postcolonial theoretic project to destabilize the "truths" born out of colonialism and to open a space in the academic world for alternative voices and perspectives to be heard. It is important to note that with regard to the historical development of postcolonial theory, the lens of critical analysis has frequently been turned upon the academic disciplines, and postcolonial theory has resulted in the shaking of many academic foundational theories. This is both the result of, and a contributing factor to, the highly interdisciplinary nature of postcolonial theory; it is particularly not confined to history, philosophy, sociology, literary studies, or any specific field.

**Postcolonial Theory & Sociology**

Postcolonial theory can thus be seen as a way to explore the effects of imperialism on society, the individual, and the academic disciplines that study them. Many classic sociological theorists and foundational concepts have been critiqued by postcolonial theorists and continue to present points of debate. In particular, despite an increasingly globalized perspective, sociology as a discipline has been accused of being Eurocentric, which means that it privileges Western, European society as the normal point of comparison. Sociologists have responded to such critiques with varying degrees of agreement, but the criticism has led to a new self-examination of the sociological perspective (McLennan, 2003). Thus, while the function of some classical sociological theory is present in postcolonial theory, other functions are challenged. The value of the application of postcolonial theory in sociological research is clear, and postcolonial theory is commonly present in contemporary examinations of sociological subjects as far ranging as education systems, microfinance, and modern slavery. Furthermore, the push for sociology to become more self-reflective promises to lead the field in endless directions.

**Applications**

While postcolonial theory has taken many forms, there are basic ideas that have guided the theory since its major development in the 1970s. This section will explore some of the key concepts of postcolonial theory and some of the major works that comprise the common canon, or at least major theoretical reference points.

**Orientalism & the Other**
In what is widely accepted as the seminal work of postcolonial thought, *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argues that beyond the physical and economic aspects of colonialism, there was another aspect present: the defining of the "Other." The Other, Said contends, is the result of a binary worldview, in which the world was divided into an us-and-them structure. Said uses the term Orientalism to describe the process of "Othering" of the Eastern colonies by the Western metropole, the European colonizers' home nation. Orientalism is the European definition of all things related to the colonies as wild, emotional, backward, powerless, and fundamentally different from the (purported) Occidental qualities of civilized behavior, rational thought, modernism, and (justifiably) powerful. Through a conscious production of knowledge, the West defined the East as inferior and, in doing so, also defined itself as superior. However, and perhaps more importantly, Said argues, the West cannot exist without the East, as it is a mutually dependent definition (there can be no West without an East) and it illustrates the interconnected relationship of the colonized and colonizer.

According to Said, the long-lasting effects of Orientalism remain and represent an aspect of colonialism that never ended. The viewing of modernity, progress, civilization, and power in Eurocentric terms is a legacy of colonialism with which we continue to live and which postcolonial theory seeks to illustrate and destabilize.

**The Subaltern Subject**

In the 1980s, another major defining move was made in postcolonial theory. The work of the Subaltern Studies Collective and the set of edited volumes it produced, alongside the responses to them, firmly established the notion of the subaltern in postcolonial theory. The subaltern, according to a founder of the idea, Ranajit Guha, was the colonized subject who was not only completely absent from colonial-produced accounts of the colonized period, but in fact operated on a completely different and often utterly separate level from the colonizer and the elite indigenous class. The concept of the subaltern is further laid out in the introduction to the first volume of collected essays in Subaltern Studies I and then elaborated on in Guha's monograph, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983). He claims that, parallel to the domain of elite politics, there existed… another domain…in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities, but the subaltern classes and groups constituting
the mass of the labouring population…
— that is, the people (1983, p. vii).

Guha builds on the methodology of prior social historians and theorists, such as E. P. Thompson and Antonio Gramsci, to try and point out an arena of non-elite activity in the history of colonialism in South Asia. In terms of theory, Guha argues that this is different from prior approaches of social history because the idea of the subaltern was not just filling in the perspective of overlooked people (such as the working class). Instead, Guha took it a step further by demonstrating that the domain of the Indian peasant constituted a discrete arena from the elite domain. In other words, the peasants were not just reacting to the colonial government or elite rulers; the subalterns were actively involved in making their own history (MacDonald, 2009). Since its early manifestations, the subaltern studies are seen as a subset of postcolonial theory, despite never claiming to be part of the postcolonial project.

The notion of the subaltern, while fundamental to postcolonial theory, has been contentious. Gayatri Spivak famously pointed out that the subaltern subjectivity, or individual perspective, may indeed not be recoverable as it is too far removed, too nebulous, and too different for the non-subaltern to grasp. Indeed, she asks, is it any better for modern theorists to attempt to speak for them by flattening them into an essentialist category? Essentialism refers to the flattening of a diverse group of people (Indian peasants) into a group based on a few shared qualities (in this case, poverty and relative geography). Spivak acknowledges, however, that "strategic essentialism" can help to clarify certain aspects of colonialism but that it must be deployed consciously, carefully, and critically (Spivak, 1990).

**Agency & Resistance**

Within the same vein of locating the subaltern, many postcolonial theorists have endeavored to locate their own perspectives on colonialism. Postcolonial theorists have been careful to point to instances in which the colonized subject was able to exert power over his or her own life. This ability to exercise power is referred to as “agency” and is a critically important aspect of postcolonial theory. Agency is often conflated with resistance, but it is important to note a clear distinction between the two. Agency can manifest in acts of resistance to colonialism, in big actions such as a massive worker strike or in small actions such as the conscious refusal to adapt to the colonizers’ mode of fashion. However, agency can also manifest in acts that are explicitly nonresistance oriented, such as collaborating with the colonizer to root out agitators among the
workers or consciously deciding to master and embrace the colonizers' philosophy and education. It is further important to note, that in all four examples of agency, the resistance (or nonresistance) could even be misleading, and each scenario could be reversed into resistance or acquiescence. Thus, when we think of agency as it relates to postcolonial theory, it is referring only to the ability to exercise power over one's individual, or subjective, situation. Collective agency, which refers to a group of people having agency, is arguably more difficult to distinguish from resistance. Still, resistance must not be overemphasized as the only way power functions.

Resistance is one important way agency functions, and frequently it is a point of focus for postcolonial theory. Guha's early work defining the subaltern was also concerned with locating his or her resistance to colonialism. Postcolonial theory has retrospectively incorporated many of the texts written by colonial subjects (and former colonial subjects) as works of resistance. Among the most cited writers of postcolonial theory is Franz Fanon, particularly his work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Omar, 2009; Fanon, 1968). Although all of Fanon's work deals distinctly with the experience of colonialism and the effects of the colonial encounter, *The Wretched of the Earth* most clearly engages with the issue of resistance. Fanon was himself actively involved in the struggle for Algerian independence, and his theories on the violence of colonialism justifying (indeed mandating) a violent resistance in response have been explored and theorized heavily in later postcolonial work. It is also important to note that for Fanon, and for postcolonial theory generally, resistance occurs not only in a mass uprising, but in the individual mind because, argues Fanon, colonialism projected power in the form of physical and emotional oppression. The individual submission to be considered a colonized/inferior subject occurs in the mind, and thus, resistance to it also begins in the mind. For postcolonial theorists this has meant that understanding this aspect of the colonial experience requires more individually-focused sources and different forms of expression such as art and literature as modes of resistance.

**Literature as Resistance**

Literature as resistance is a particularly large field within postcolonial theory, and it comprises both reading resistance *in* texts and reading texts *as* resistance. Fanon's work is about resistance, and therefore it is easy to see; but other work is more subtle in the way resistance works. While the examples are many, one particularly good example of resistance in literature can be seen in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Within this text, Achebe fiercely counters the
colonially-informed stereotypes of "primitive" Africa by depicting the complex life of an African village. He also writes the dialogue in a high register of the native language Igbo, which not only illustrates the beauty of the language, but also positions the Western English-speaking reader as the outsider to a complexity of African life. Indeed, this approach of recreating dialects spoken by the colonized is a form of resistance that occurs throughout much postcolonial literature. Achebe's work is an excellent example of a postcolonial text challenging colonial knowledge production and has provided rich material for postcolonial theory in its production, content, and reception (Ashcroft et al., 1998).

**Assimilation & Hybridity**

Another major component of postcolonial theory deals with the issues of cultural subjectivity and the intersections of colonized and colonizer. Arguing against the binary categories that colonized/colonizer accepts, postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Ann Laura Stoler have argued that the spaces of "mixing" offer the greatest challenge to colonialism by destroying the very definitions on which it was based (Bhabha, 1994). The colonial preoccupation with keeping the relationships distinctly clear between the two categories through vast amounts of colonial policy regarding the intermixing of the racialized categories of colonized/colonizer points to a clear concern on the part of the imperial authority to keep it straight which is the Other (Stoler, 2001).

The physical creation of hybrid persons, biologically the product of a colonizer and a colonized, is one type of hybridity, but another hybridity occurs on a cultural level. Postcolonial theorists (including Bhabha) have also explored the cultural blurring of the two binaries. The notion of assimilation, or ways in which aspects of the colonizers' culture were adapted into a local manifestation (accepting some aspects while likely rejecting others), has provided interesting insight into forms of agency, resistance, and the effect of the colonial encounter on larger social structures such as religion, gender, race, and class. Hybridity refers to the new culture that colonialism produces — a culture distinct from both the colonizer and colonized prior to encounter. While some postcolonial theorists valorize this space, others see it as problematic. Fanon refers to the hybrid man as having a schizophrenic mindset and equates the assimilation of Western habits to mimicry and a loss of identity that is another example of colonial destruction (Fanon, 1968).

**Viewpoints**
Critiques of Postcolonial Theory

The first and foremost critique levied at postcolonial theory is with the concept of "postcolonial" itself. Critics have challenged that postcolonial is either so vague in its definition that it encapsulates virtually all times and places, therefore rendering it meaningless, or that the term is just too simplistic. Aijaz Ahmad has argued that the overly broad definition of colonialism (and subsequently postcolonialism) leads to meaninglessness, pointing out, "colonialism" then becomes a trans-historical thing, always present and always in a process of dissolution in one part of the world or another, so that everyone gets the privilege, sooner or later, at one time or another of being the colonizer, colonized, and post-colonial — sometimes all at once, as in the case of Australia (Ahmad, 1995, p. 9).

Ann McClintock has problematized the notion of a postcolonial by noting that the term is still rooted in a binary: the colonial/postcolonial. She argues that "the singularity of the term effects a re-centering of global history around the single rubric of European time. Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance" (McClintock, 1992, p. 86). McClintock continues to point out that in its simplicity, the term also privileges the nineteenth-century European colonial experience as the standard—an essentialism of colonialism that ignores, or at least diminishes, the imperial projects both preceding the European era (such as Japanese imperialism) and in the era after its demise (such as Soviet imperialism). In addition, the term “postcolonial,” say critics such as McClintock, implies that colonialism has ended and that we can look back on it with new postcolonial perspective. While official colonialism as defined by nineteenth-century European standards may have passed, many have pointed out that fingers of colonialism remain deeply enmeshed in the world, and many geopolitical relationships could be (and frequently are) defined as colonial, or neocolonial. Does this mean that at some point there could be a postneocolonial theory? The question is only partially in jest and points to an issue with defining the theoretical perspective as postcolonial and what it implies. Postcolonial theory with all of its focus on knowledge production has certainly not been blind to the power of language, and as a result, some of the most heated debates regarding the postcolonial terminology have come from those who have worked to define the idea themselves.

Further critiques of postcolonial theory have also emphasized an uncomfortably dominant position of European colonialism in postcolonial theory. Indeed, while still an example European colonialism, the Spanish colonial project in the Americas has been given scant (albeit
increasingly more) attention as it ended decades prior to the end of colonialism in Africa and Asia. Similarly, in the 2000s and 2010s, Australia is beginning to be represented, and the experience of groups that have been subject to internal colonization, such as indigenous populations, have had far too little voice in the project of rewriting colonial history (Shohat, 1992; McClintock, 1992). Postcolonial theory has also been accused of ignoring structural conditions in favor of subjectivity, to the point of missing the real power altogether (Dirlik, 1994). Finally, the highly self-critical nature of postcolonial theory has elicited charges that postcolonial theory has reached into an esoteric realm, perpetually arguing with itself about what it is and what it should be called.

**Postcolonial Theory in the Future**

The fact that postcolonial theory is no longer new has enabled it to settle a bit more comfortably into the academy, even if that comfort is subject to destabilization. The application of postcolonial theory to a wide-ranging spectrum of academic endeavors is proof that the theory has something to offer various projects. In early twenty-first-century work, postcolonial theory has been used to inform the understanding of such widely variant topics as nursing protocol in the post–9/11 world (Racine, 2008) to the sanitation system of Mumbai (Bombay), India (McFarlane, 2008). Within the vast range of applications of postcolonial theory, the sociological applications offer a particularly rich ground for new research and postcolonial theory will undoubtedly continue to inform academic inquiry in a variety ways.

**Terms & Concepts**

**Agency**: The ability to exert power.

**Assimilation**: The absorption or adaptation of various foreign aspects of culture and behavior.

**Eurocentric**: A viewpoint which over-privileged the perspective of Europe and European culture as superior or normative.

**Hybridity**: The combination of two elements into a new, separate element; in culture, it refers to a combined culture that creates new meaning from combining foreign and indigenous aspects of culture.

**Metropole**: The "home" base of the colonial power (for example, Great Britain for the British Empire or France for the French Empire).

**Orientalism**: The depiction of culture and society in the colonized world as exotic, backward, and in opposition to Western (Occidental) tradition.
**Subaltern**: The colonized subject who is not only missing from historical account, but who also lived in a realm that was at times distinct from the colonial encounter.

**Subjectivity**: The individual perspective based on personal experience rather than external force.