

# POSTCOLONIAL WHO? POSTCOLONIAL WHAT? SOME THOUGHTS ON THE SUBJECTS OF THE POSTCOLONIAL

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*For Yara El-Ghadban the postcolonial still usefully describes much of contemporary life, even if used in different ways. Anyway, obsessing over the definition of terms risks diverting analytical energy away from more important concerns.*

Since Peter Geschiere has bravely given us permission to swear in the Lord's house by doing it himself, allow me my own blasphemy. I am always a bit weary of discussions on the pros and cons, definitions, scopes and limitations of terms and concepts. I don't mean to undermine their importance. God knows how much they get used and abused, reduced and confused with terrible consequences. However these discussions tend to shift focus from ground-level issues to energy-devouring questions of disciplinarity. In other words, it becomes more about *us*: meaning scholars, our disciplines, our ideologies, our idioms etc., and less about real people faced with everyday challenges.

Theoretical concepts exist as tools in order to help us think through complex situations. We need to name things if we are to understand them. However, when a certain theoretical concept catches fire, it takes on a life of its own until it somehow goes out of fashion. For individuals who like to critique the commodification of everything, human and social scholars are quite fashion conscious when it comes to the terms they use. 'Appropriation' and 'resistance'? Oh that's so 1980s! I heard one anthropologist say the other day. We fall prey to buzz-words just as teenage girls fall prey to the latest fashion *faux pas*. That was the case with postmodernity, globalization, neoliberalism and now the post-colonial.

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Having said this, I do share Peter Geschiere's *inquiétude* regarding the ever expanding meaning of 'the postcolonial', even though I wouldn't place my worries quite in the same place. True, the term 'postcolonial' like most concepts in fashion, tends to lose part of its soul as it travels from one discipline to another, and from one theoretical framework to another. One of the perverse effects of interdisciplinarity and the globalization of the ethnographic field is to turn us, anthropologists and other scholars of the social and human sciences, into theoretical scavengers, tearing apart concepts developed by others, keeping only those aspects that suit us and unwittingly participating in the dismemberment of a paradigm. Thus the postcolonial ends up referring

to completely different ideas in different contexts while remaining but a shadow of the rich body of literature and thought it originally represented.

In my own research on Western art music, I quickly came across some of the limitations of using postcolonial theories uncritically. First, issues of postcoloniality, when invoked, tend to refer to the 'non-Western' Other, but, rarely, if ever, are Western musicians thought of, or characterized as, postcolonial or treated as potential subjects of postcolonial analysis. A good example of this slippage is the literature that Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* has spawned. What was retained from his thesis is the various modes of representation and misrepresentation of the Oriental, overshadowing the fact that Saïd dealt first and foremost with European literature. The main object of his study was European literature (fiction and non-fiction) and through it he read European power. In her contribution to *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes a similar critique of the legacy of Saïd's *Orientalism*. However she focuses on marginality: "Saïd's book was not a study of marginality, not even of marginalization. It was a study of the construction of an object, for investigation and control. The study of colonial discourse, directly released by work such as Saïd's, has, however, blossomed into a garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoke for. It is an important (and beleaguered) part of the discipline now."

In other words, *Orientalism* was never about the Oriental. It is about the West and how it constructed its own identity by imagining an Other to position itself against. Somehow this subtle but important nuance has been drowned out by a flood of literature on the representation of the non-Western Other,

hence going back to the old habit of situating the object of research outside Western boundaries.

When the focus turns to representation, another perversion of the postcolonial takes place. Regarding music, for example, the postcolonial was reduced to its semiological dimension where an imagined non-Western Other becomes the sole object of representation and its dissenting voice within the perceived hegemony of Western musical tradition is muted. But wasn't the postcolonial supposed to be about "talking back" and hearing that dissenting voice from the beginning?

Another problem with the way the postcolonial has been used or critiqued is the fact that there is a persistent confusion about what exactly we are talking about: Are we talking about the postcolonial condition as a historical moment and continuing process, or about postcolonial discourse, that is theories looking to de-center Western production of knowledge; or are we talking about postcolonial subjectivities, that is the individual experiences of the postcolonial? I think that all three dimensions must be taken into consideration separately, then examined in the way they intersect. For example, how can postcolonial theories as an analytical toolkit help us understand the different ways in which the postcolonial (as a shared, yet tension-filled condition that falls on both sides of colonial history) translates into a localized set of experiences with their unique characteristics? In this way, I think, the postcolonial can at the same time remain as open a concept as possible while always being grounded in individual lives, contexts and places.

This is of course all easier said than done. But who said it should be easy? Furthermore, approaching the postcolonial in this manner does not solve some

of the other worries I have, one of which Geschiere puts his finger on when he asks: When does Africa stop being postcolonial? That goes back to the one thing that troubles me with the postcolonial: The risk that the long and rich histories of peoples and nations be reduced to one traumatic experience – the colonial experience, and that everything else these peoples and nations produce in terms of culture, knowledge, politics, economics be constantly analyzed as a product of, or as a reaction to, the West, and not first and foremost for themselves.

Even though these issues have not yet been resolved, I have to disagree with Geschiere's calling into question the usefulness of the term. I still find it extremely inspiring and thought-provoking. It still speaks, in my view, to what much of the contemporary world is still dealing with. So I wouldn't call it quits on the postcolonial just yet.