

# IS THERE 'A' POST-COLONIAL CONDITION? A RESPONSE TO PETER GESCHIERE

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*A 'catch-all' term like postcolonial is a necessary evil, suggests Megan Jones: it provides a political rallying point.*

Peter Geschiere's discussion raises the often asked and vexed question regarding the parameters of the 'post-colonial' and its application to the wide variety of historical moments and geographical contexts falling under its aegis. Here I comment briefly on some of Geschiere's points and contribute a few observations of my own, drawing on work that will be familiar to those in the field of – wait for it – 'post-colonial' studies.

It is interesting that Geschiere problematises what he perceives as a lack of attentiveness to difference in the field, when many of its most prominent theorists (the privileged position of diasporic post-colonial critics is a matter I shall simply note here) postulate difference as the preferred site from which to articulate counter-discourses to imperial hegemony. Such arguments are anchored in post-structuralist scepticism (expressed by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, for example) about

the validity of universal notions of rational/coherent subjectivities, and the elision of a marginalised 'Other' from rationalist enlightenment discourse. There have been a number of Marxist humanist critiques posited against the emphasis on a thematics of difference (see, for instance Frederic Jameson and Noam Chomsky) as disallowing the formation of political solidarities based on a shared, universal human nature. A call for a re-engagement with the post-colonial in terms of the political has been made by Laura Chrisman, who argues for a re-thinking of the field in terms of the material rather than simply the textual. Another, quite different, critique works from the supposition that too narrow a focus on difference conceals the points of interconnection and interdependence that mark both the colonial and post-colonial. Hence, Sarah Nuttall's recent deployment of the term 'entanglement' in relation to post-apartheid South Africa stresses the 'mutual constitution' of oppressor and oppressed. As far as I can tell, Geschiere's contention that stretching the term postcolonial, "serves to conceal important variations", is a call to heed historical specificity, rather than a post-structuralist deconstruction of subjectivity.

Re-calling his conversation with Shalini Randeria, Geschiere notes that Edward Said's *Orientalism* was a pivotal text in unveiling and historicising naturalised discourses of power that constructed the 'Orient' in terms of the Western 'Self' (and I use the term 'Western' advisedly). It might be useful to note here that Geschiere's concern about the monolithic assumption inherent in the term postcolonial has also been a criticism levelled at Said's work that, some have argued, makes universalised statements about highly variegated colonial and post-colonial

experiences. Geschiere goes on to mention the subaltern studies group, the influence of whose work (and indeed of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" critique of their project), gestures towards the dominance of critical engagements with the South Asian postcolonial. The hegemonic position of South Asian Studies in the field is, I think, entrenched in the academy. In literary studies at least, this dominance is supported by a market that commodifies and consumes fictions produced by South Asian authors as examples of the 'exotic' or 'magical', thereby perpetuating rather than dismantling the trope of 'Other'. Thus even within the field, there exist troubling discrepancies in the allocation of resources for the study of certain geographical/historical zones over others.

If I may narrow my focus to a South African perspective: debate over the use of the term postcolonial to describe a country that became a union in 1910, but that only emerged from white minority rule in 1994, has long been fractious. Much of this has to do with the temporal limitations flagged by Geschiere in his analysis: when exactly did South Africa become 'postcolonial'? Debate has also centred on the country's 'exceptionalism' from the kinds of imperialisms imposed elsewhere in Africa. Anne McKlintock and Mahmood Mamdani, for instance, have argued for and against South Africa as a special case in the European colonisation of Africa. McKlintock's unease with the 'flattening out' effects of postcolonial theorising shares some concerns with Geschiere's critique, whereas Mamdani's argument that apartheid was anticipated by indirect rule in British and French Africa is an assertion of the homogeneity of colonial practice. Thus, in turning briefly to South Africa, we see the fractures and dis-

satisfactions that attend the utilisation of colonial and postcolonial nomenclature.

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To answer Geschiere’s question then: there is no such thing as ‘a’ postcolonial condition and indeed, there are many reasons to dispute the term’s widespread (and sometimes indiscriminate) deployment. And yet, from my admittedly unlearned point of view, it seems that in order to compare and interrogate the varying political, economic and social structures that are the legacy of imperialism, and the grossly unequal distribution of resources that continue to define the lives of millions, a ‘catch-all’ term is a necessary evil. We can admit the inadequacies of ‘post-colonial’ and still retain an appreciation for the value of some of its theory. This, I think, lies in the interrogation of ‘naturalised’ forms of knowledge and the insertion of marginalised voices into the normative narratives of hegemonic power. Recognising the diverse and continuing effects of Empire (whether it be British, American or Chinese, state- or corporate-based) in the life-worlds of the marginalised should not blind us from the fact that there *are* commonalities within and between these worlds, points around which we could and should mobilise as critics and activists. All terms can be accused of reductionism, and yet they can still be useful. It is not without irony that I choose to end with that most bombastic of imperialists, Winston Churchill. To adapt Churchill’s famous remark: ‘Postcolonial’ is the worst form of term, except for all those other forms which have been tried from time to time.