

Discuss differences and similarities between decolonial and postcolonial approaches to knowledge production.

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Introduction

Postcolonial and decolonial approaches are theoretical tools for understanding and dismantling colonial power. This essay will briefly sketch out the origins and main features of the postcolonial episteme, followed by its evolution into decolonial thinking. Finally, the essay will discuss the implications for academic practice, finishing with the argument that postcolonial theory is useful (and necessary) to knowledge production in the social sciences.

The postcolonial approach

In terms of its historical origins, postcolonial theory can be drawn back to the adoption of a cultural front by national liberation movements in the Third World in order to 'develop anti-colonial consciousness.'(Young 2001, p. 7) This first cultural turn emerges in

the 1960s and takes many forms, such as Black Power in the USA, the direct action campaigns of the Welsh Language Society, or the Cultural Revolution in China. This is the political context, and we will return to the importance of the cultural turn later on.

In the philosophical sense, the postcolonial approach is conceived as a challenge to the (European) 'methodological nationalism' of the social sciences.(Bhabra 2016, p. 1) Postcolonialism takes as a basic principle the position that knowledge produced within the imperialist countries is framed by – or linked to – colonial objectives.(Siamardi and Deedari 2016, p. 123) Therefore western knowledge has a colonial quality to it. The exact form of this colonial quality is not defined, it is dependent on the extent to which knowledge production is generally influenced by social conditions. However, we can also see a very direct relationship between the development of social sciences and the demands of colonial rule.(Bhabra 2014, p. 452) For example, the early development of western anthropology was conducted by kidnapping indigenous people on colonial expeditions and bringing them back to Europe to be exhibited as trophies.(Bertino 2014, pp. 3-8) Stepping into this practice, the purpose of anthropology was to gain knowledge about indigenous peoples. That knowledge was then useful to European merchants, soldiers, and diplomats in order to improve the process of colonial exploitation.

The power dynamics of this historical anthropology are clear: the colonial subject is studied, they are spoken of, but they do not speak for themselves. Postcolonial theory intervenes here in a struggle over representation and self-representation. In his criticism of René Maran, Frantz Fanon (2008, p. 145) refers to him as a black man able to express French racism only once 'standing outside himself.' In this way, coloniality disassociates the colonial subject from their own identity, makes them strangers in their own skin. This has consequences beyond the psychological impact, as the representation of black and brown bodies is used by the state to control these bodies.(Williams and Clarke 2018, p. 2) This in turn suggests that a strategy to achieve physical liberation includes re-

claiming the ability to auto-constitute the self, to develop a 'liberated consciousness.'(Fanon 1965, pp. 156-157; cited in Orlando 2016, p. 2)

Cultural turn

Thomas Sankara discussed the issue of consciousness as a crucial element of the revolutionary project in Burkina Faso. He fully embraced the principles of *négritude* in trying to imbue the Burkinabe people with pride in their identity as Africans.(Sankara 2007, pp. 143-146) This was important in order for the revolutionary process to develop on its own terms, with a population able to withstand the pressure to define themselves in relation to the cultural and economic standards of the French metropole.(Rapp and Chanel 1984)¹ It's likely Sankara was influenced by Che Guevara's ideas on socialism and the birth of the 'new man.' Che, like Sankara, placed importance on building a new consciousness, he declared that "society as a whole must be converted into a gigantic school."(Guevara 1965) For Che, knowledge production is unquestionably a social process, it must be creative, and it must serve emancipatory (anti-colonial) objectives.

Having traced postcolonial ideas back to Che, we can now trace their projection forwards from Cuba into the Third World. At the point where the Soviet Union was settling into peaceful coexistence with the west, the Cuban revolution was being internationalised.(Hatzky 2005, p. 160) The global revolutionary imperative slipped out of the hands of its custodians in Moscow and was taken up by national liberation movements across the Global South.

¹The entire passage is too long to quote here, but there is a part of the interview in which he defends the measures to shut down nightclubs in Ouagadougou. He explains this as an attempt to break down the isolation of a bourgeois and western-oriented strata from wider Burkinabe society. This section does not seem to be included in the Pathfinder Press collection.

In France, this shift was most visible in the division of the French left over the Algerian national question. The PCF (French Communist Party) had taken an ambivalent line on Algerian independence, (Young 2001, p. 419-420; Césaire 1956) and this forced French scholars of the New Left to re-assess creative applications of Marxism-Leninism outside the European context.² There is something important here about the unique character of the French Republic, which is assembled around an emancipatory project. When that project grew into an imperial enterprise, the underlying *proletarian* lessons of the French revolution were passed on to the colonised peoples. Yet, the radical thinkers in the French colonies were good students, they took the ideals of the revolution beyond what could be achieved by France alone, and even deployed those ideals against the Republic itself. (Ciccariello-Maher 2014, p. 29) This is how writers such as Fanon or Césaire could be politically French, and francophone, while maintaining a discrete Afro-Caribbean subjectivity. This process, where the periphery appropriates and reclaims (modern) European universal values, results in the creation of alternative modernities.

Alternative modernity

This essay has so far spoken of the postcolonial tendency in relation to real political expressions of anti-colonial sentiment. It is worth making the link between postcolonial theory and the national liberation movements more explicit. Postcolonial thinkers are close to these movements, and sometimes intervene directly in them. For Régis Debray it was the ELN in Bolivia, for Edward Said (2003) it was Palestine,³ for EMS Namboodiripad (2010, p. 8) it was the Indian National Congress, and for Fanon it was the Algerian FLN.

²See Chris Marker's 1977 film essay *le fond de l'air est rouge* for an account of the the New Left and the 'Third World war.'

³Said participated in the Palestinian National Council in a symbolic capacity, but he never actually joined the PLO, see *The Politics Of Dispossession* (1995).

These are all tied to the process of national construction and more broadly the formation of an anti-imperialist global order.

This link between postcolonial theory and anti-imperialist practice underlies the construction of alternative modernities. Again we can return to Fanon (2008, p. 179), who insists that he is “not a prisoner of history” and develops this in his assessment of the French & American war against Vietnam.

The Vietnamese who die before the firing squads are not hoping that their sacrifice will bring about the reappearance of a past. It is for the sake of the present and of the future that they are willing to die.(ibid., p. 177)

Fanon’s vision remains fixed on the future, he does not hesitate to sweep away the foundations of a traditional, pre-modern past. In a similar vein, Sankara famously sought to “invent the future.”(Sankara 2007, p. 232; cited in Parry 1998, p. 47) The post-colonial thinker should not walk away from the future horizon, as J Moufawad-Paul explains,

the solution to the impasse presented by the Eurocentric cantonment of modernity is not to seek bastion in culturalist mystification but, rather, to push the envelope of modernity.(Moufawad-Paul 2018)

Postcolonial knowledge production seeks to fill in the gaps of an incomplete and unfinished modernity, which may have originated in Europe, but no longer fully belongs to Europe.⁴ Where Euro-modernity had failed to develop African economies,(Magaziner 2015, p. 284) a new form of Afro-modernity would take up the

⁴This was referred to in Leicester University’s 2018 Annual Geography Lecture, in which Patricia Daley commented favourably on the phenomenon of Chinese investment in European universities, accompanied by the opening of Confucius Institutes.

task.(Iroanya 2017, p. 201) This positive outlook on modernity is not shared by decolonial thinkers, and it is one of the main points of divergence between the two approaches.

Hegemony

Another feature of the cultural emphasis is that postcolonial theory pays special attention to power relations, and in particular the continuity between *dominance* and *hegemony*.(Ali 2015, pp. 242-245; Chibber 2013, p. 35) Through this continuity, we see that colonial power extends beyond the coercive institutions of colonial domination, and establishes hegemony by seeping into everyday social interactions. This is why postcolonial theory maintains a focus on literary and cultural critique – culture is the realm of civil society, where social interactions are reproduced. Gramsci refers to sets of binaries:

- dominance/hegemony
- state/civil society
- coercion/consent

These are not necessarily fixed oppositions, they overlap in a process of composition. A state can be hegemonic, consent can be coercively established. A critical engagement with Gramscian strategy suggests that a successful anti-colonial project ought not only to expel the (foreign) colonial force, but also prevent the re-emergence of neo-colonial patterns within the liberated society.(Bragança and Wallerstein 1982, pp. 4-5) It's here that we can raise the concepts of *war of position* and *war of manoeuvre*, which Gramsci explains through the allegory of First World War military strategy.(Gramsci 1971, pp. 1614-1616; cited in Anderson 2017, pp. 34-35) A war of position suggests that competing tendencies can wage an attritional conflict within society, each side advancing and retreating

over small parcels of ground. Meanwhile a war of manoeuvre is more suited to explosive campaigns, where a brittle state can be torn down and easily replaced with a new order. A war of manoeuvre is only appropriate if the metaphorical state fortress is not buttressed by civil society.

These strategic approaches are applicable to different models of colonial rule, and the different balance of forces they contain. For example, Amilcar Cabral (1974) paid special attention to each internal faction within Guinean society, and their individual relations with colonial power. In particular there is a question over the role of the national bourgeoisie, whose relationship to colonial power is changeable. (Fanon 1965; Hiddleston 2009, pp. 38-39) This changeable relationship with coloniality means an academic should warn against reductionism, and be wary of reflecting their research goals onto a native informant. (Kapoor 2004, p. 630)

Returning to hegemony, it is important not to lose sight of political struggle; cultural hegemony cannot be built among enemies of the revolutionary movement, only among its allies. Furthermore, an attunement to cultural acceptance or tolerance does not suppose the non-existence of struggle. For example, Rhodesia, while a white supremacist state, was content to organise and sponsor museums and exhibitions on African culture, so long as these were divorced of any political content.⁵ Again, this is a challenge post-colonial knowledge production must confront.

The decolonial approach

The decolonial approach is critical of 'Third World fundamentalisms' (Grosfoguel 2007, p. 212) and addresses the universal, totalising narratives present in the postcolonial. Part of the decolonial approach involves divorcing postcolonialism from its pretence to modernity, and

⁵The same is also true of apartheid South Africa.

from its association with alternative nationalisms. For example, the decolonial approach takes up the concept of the multitude from Hardt and Negri (2005) and rejects the unity of the colonised public.(Ciccariello-Maher 2017, pp. 123-125) The singular concepts of people, nation, race, class, gender, are broken down and their heterogeneous dynamics exposed to criticism.

Part of the decolonial approach rests on a relationship between colonialism and modernity.(Mignolo 2013, p. 306) If modernity or historicism is a feature of colonialism, this explains the decolonial insistence on a post-modern departure from modernist or historically-linear postcolonial attitudes.

Another decolonial position exposes the “Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism”(Stojnić 2017, p. 109; Grosfoguel 2007, p. 211) This is not only because European or Western thinkers are privileged points of reference for postcolonial theory, it also touches on the way in which we talk and think about coloniality. For example, Césaire (2001, p. 35-36) described colonial violence as savagery, characterising the coloniser as uncivilised. The image of the ‘European savage’ is deliberately provocative. It plays on the language of coloniality, and requires the reader to confront the way in which discourse reproduces power relations. The decolonial approach is careful not to fall into the trap of critiquing Eurocentrism within a normatively Eurocentric discursive framework.

Consequences for knowledge production

The definition of Eurocentrism given by Samir Amin (1989, pp. 107-108) is to dismiss non-European knowledges as imperfect, and suggest that there is not much to be learned from them. Therefore a decolonial approach requires an ‘epistemic shift,’(Mignolo 2013, p. 307) to seek other knowledges. This involves going beyond the familiar points of reference in Engels, Lenin, or Luxemburg, and instead looking to the theory produced in the Third World. In keeping

with decolonial suspicion of universalism, the popular movements outside the metropole produce their own theory, adapted to unique social and political conditions. We should reject the attitude that serious theory is written in Europe, while the rest of the world produces 'guerrilla manuals.'(Butler 2018) A decolonial academy needs wider points of reference, and these should be upheld as valid, and valuable contributions.

Stemming from this, research *about* subaltern populations should come *from* the subaltern. Decolonial work aims to give the subaltern a voice, and involves the use of participatory methods; all the while remaining vigilant and reflexive of power relations between research and its subjects.(Schurr and Segebart 2012, pp. 149-150) Otherwise put, the task of the critical intellectual is to work alongside the people, and resist the coloniality or 'embourgeoisement' of the academy.(Prashad 2018, p. 61)

Lastly, and by way of conclusion, this essay asserts that post-colonial research is not exclusively driven by moral directives. It cannot only rely on the argument that coloniality is ethically problematic. There is real academic value in breaking the Eurocentric straitjacket of the social sciences. By broadening our terms of reference, we can expose the university to alternative, perhaps underappreciated, reservoirs of thought and experience.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ELN Ejército de Liberación Nacional

FLN Front de Libération Nationale

PCF Parti Communiste Français

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