

Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction

Preface to the Japanese edition, 2005

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While I was very pleased to hear that *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* was being translated into Japanese, the translator's generous suggestion that I write a short Preface for the Japanese edition gave me serious pause since, as I quickly realised, Japan does not figure in this book. Which is not to say that it has no place there, but rather that you, the Japanese reader, will be much more capable of writing this Japanese Preface than I, since it is for you to construct the ways in which the issues developed in this book relate to your own cultural and political situations. Which is to say that, in a sense, the Japanese reader of this book is its ideal reader, since the aim of the book was not to impose a particular paradigm on other readers, cultures or nations, nor to offer a single theoretical framework that was designed to fit all. Rather the reverse: the point of the book is to argue against conventional (eurocentric or occidental) ways of always seeing the world, and to offer a series of examples, which could have been extended indefinitely, of seeing issues and problems differently, from the perspective of others whose point of view does not achieve widespread recognition in the international media or political institutions, and whose cultural and political values remain effectively virtually invisible. Despite this deliberate relativism, the book also asserts a range of universal political values, above all protesting the inequity of the global hierarchy of nations in which some nations enjoy prosperity and plenty while in others people suffer deprivation of the most fundamental kinds, of food, water and medicine. One day in the future people will look back on our era and wonder how we could tolerate such inhuman discrepancies, allowing millions to starve at the same time as spending millions on research to produce drugs to reduce obesity. This book, therefore, attempts to be performative, not telling you a 'truth', but trying to persuade you the reader to take a stand and commit the energy of your life towards the goal of ending this system of global apartheid and transforming the impoverished places of the earth so that the people in them enjoy the gift of plenty. Its mantra is not the philosophical 'know thyself' but rather the postcolonial 'translate yourself'! Make use of the forms of self-empowerment that are available to you, or do everything you can to make self-empowerment and a transforming agency available to others. A better world *is* possible.

This commitment, it might be argued, emerges as the positive legacy of the anticolonial era. For at one level what was characteristic of the colonial era was that, however dark its present, it was possible, throughout the twentieth century at least, both to foresee and to imagine its inevitable end. However resistant individual colonial powers—such as Portugal—or societies—such as apartheid South Africa—may have been, the writing was clearly visible on the wall of history, even if the moment when its meaning would finally

be delivered remained impossible to calculate. The achievement of liberation, however, and the move into the postcolonial era, has proved in many ways disappointing, not only because, as quickly became clear, forms of economic, military and political neo-imperialism continue to operate on the formerly colonised countries to their disadvantage, reducing their political sovereignty to a minimum, but also because, especially as these circumstances seem to have materially increased in recent years, it becomes harder to foresee an end point when this state of postcoloniality will end. The postcolonial becomes a nervous condition of permanent unbecoming, one that from the point of view of the subaltern subject seems at times to have been removed from the realm of agency and political process. However I would argue that this perspective operates—to invoke an older paradigm—within the realm of an ideology which is precisely designed to make itself appear eternal, as colonialism tried to do. Colonialism’s masquerade was exposed by the anti-colonial activists of the twentieth century who refused to accept the status quo offered them by colonial ideology. This is the great example that we must continue to invoke, admire, and to rehearse in the different but no less compelling and critical conditions of our own time.

A rather different though significant question is how far Japan itself figures in the topography of the postcolonial. Japan’s position is not at all straightforward. Having committed itself to insular, self-isolation in the 1600s after the Tokugawa Shogunate took control, Japan found itself the object of violent colonial intervention in 1854 when Commodore Perry insisted, at the point of a gun, that Japan allow itself to be assimilated into the new western dominated global system of trade so memorably described in the *Communist Manifesto* of six years before. Whereas the habitual route of the state, such as Bengal, which allowed the establishment of the factories or warehouses of European traders, was to soon find itself controlled by the foreigners in its midst, Japan chose to take an alternative and persuasively successful route to avoid becoming an imperial possession, namely to modernise itself into a world power in the space of one or two generations, an achievement for which it was widely admired by activists and intellectuals in colonised countries in particular all over the world. Japan’s success in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War was celebrated by such anti-colonial activists as the first defeat of a Western by a non-Western power, and its subsequent imperial expansion, occupying Manchuria, China and South-East Asia in the 1930s and 1940s, was also welcomed by some as far apart as India and the USA as a form of colonial liberation. These anti-colonial dynamics are only now beginning to be reassessed. What is less in dispute is that, precipitating a war with the US for hegemony over the Pacific, Japan itself was finally subjected to US control in 1945. Despite this history, something of Japan’s original self-isolation remains: its position in the world today is unique in that, unlike all other imperial powers, it has not now opened up its borders to the peoples of its former colonised territories. To some degree, this is the result of the fact that unlike the European powers, Japan industrialised its occupied areas, a process which arguably laid the basis for the so-called miracle of the Asian tiger economies. At the same time, it means that Japan remains the least culturally hybridised major industrial economy today and therefore, perhaps, one of the least ‘postcolonial’. Can we talk of Postcolonial Tokyo in the way we speak of Postcolonial London or Paris? Perhaps it is rather the Japanese diaspora, in Brazil, the US, who most visibly embody its own radical postcoloniality.

You, however, the Japanese reader, may well want to tell a very different story, and I hope that you will...

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