

Publications

The Implications of Colonial and Postcolonial Studies for the Study of Europe

by George Steinmetz

Although “postcolonial studies” has been taken to mean many things, it is identified above all with the claim that colonialism has been as much about Europe and Europeans as about the colonized.[1] This argument seems paradoxical at first glance, at least from a historical perspective. Prior to the massive influx of people from the former colonies into Europe during the past few decades, most Europeans were generally oblivious to their countries’ overseas colonies. The exceptions to this rule of the invisibility of the colonial were moments of violent crisis, such as the mutiny against British rule in India (1857-58), the Herero and Nama war against the Germans in Southwest Africa (1904-1907), or the uprising against the French in Algeria during the 1950s. The influence of the colonial relationship on Europe, if it is extensive as postcolonial theory suggests, has to be sought in less obvious places, beyond the reach of public opinion and the mass circulation news media.

Postcolonial analysts are not the first to examine the impact of colonies on Europe. Lenin’s concept of the aristocracy of labor and Wehler’s “social imperialism” both point, in different ways, to the political effects of empire on mass politics. Economic historians and historical sociologists discussed the contribution of gold and silver from the American colonies to the emergence of capitalism in Europe. Other historians analyzed the impact of colonial products such as sugar, tobacco, pepper and spices, coffee and tea, and rubber on European culture. Art historians have been aware of the formative impact of non-western art on twentieth century modernism since the early 20th century. Causal circuits running from the colonies to the metropolises also informed Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, which situated the origins of nationalism in the American settler colonies, specifically in the truncated career trajectories of “creole” officials, a structural feature of some colonial states.

Looking beyond these more evident strands of causality, postcolonial theorists have argued that the colonial or postcolonial margin is constitutive of Western culture more generally. By distinguishing between manifest and latent orientalism, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* allowed the process of constituting European culture from the margin to be a partially unconscious one. Evidence for the colonial reflex need not involve awareness on the part of Europeans, in other words.

Indeed, one of the most vibrant areas of postcolonial thinking has involved the reinterpretation of canonical works of European literature that are not ostensibly concerned with colonialism at all. Writers like Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said have analyzed texts by “noncolonial writers” (Jane Austen, Mary Shelly, Charlotte Brontë, Baudelaire, Kafka, Shakespeare) as constituted by the colonial margin. Others have explored the ways in which the intertwining of core and periphery has shaped other aspects of European culture. Rabinow suggests that the colonies were crucial for experiments in modernism that were difficult to carry out in the (French) metropole. Several writers (such as McClintock) have reconstructed the impact of colonialism on the evolution of the modern ideas of race and social evolutionary theory, starting in the 18th century, and on European understandings of sexuality, gender,

and social class. Others, including Comaroff and Comaroff and Steinmetz, have examined the ways in which intra-European class dynamics were displaced onto the colonial field.

The new colonial studies have also started to disrupt entrenched ways of thinking about processes that are not colonial in any conventional sense. Historians have begun rewriting the history of intra-European state formation in the medieval and early modern periods as a colonial process, even though it was not construed as such by the actors at the time. The influx and growing awareness of postcolonials within the core societies is forcing Europeans to think about the long-term ramifications of colonialism for their own societies. Most dramatically, this shift can be understood as a “historical decentering” and a “reversal of colonial history” in which the center-periphery axis is destabilized and the “master’s language” is transformed into a form of creole. Neotraditionalist resentment (and terrorism) are the other side of this phenomenon, which Sartre called “the moment of the boomerang.”

It is worth noting that this movement from theorizing about one of the poles of a relationship to a more general analysis of the entire relationship or set of relations is a common development in the history of social thought. The best historiography and sociology of the working class was explicitly relational, allowing other writers to thematize complex class relations with multiple poles. Feminist theory gave rise during the 1980s and 1990s to gender theory, which was not restricted to the analysis of women, and later to queer theory and theories of “homosexuality.” Critical race theory first allowed the emergence of “whiteness studies,” and Paul Gilroy has more recently suggested an imagination of political culture beyond race. One can trace a similar arc in colonial studies, from the study of the colonies as extensions of the colonies, to a constitution of the colonies as objects in their own right, to a construal of the metropolises as constituted by the colonial margin, to an encompassing focus on colonialism as an interactive system in which the core and periphery are mutually constituting but without either term being reducible to the other.

For centuries Europeans viewed their intellectual and pedagogical relationship to the colonized and postcolonial periphery as a one-way street. Missionaries, colonizers, social scientists, and development agencies understood the flow of knowledge in similar ways. Postcolonial studies have finally started to reverse this entrenched mode of relating to the periphery. The first generation of postcolonial critics came disproportionately from colonial and postcolonial countries themselves. Some have criticized these critics for working within universities in Europe and the United States while attacking the core, but this seems less important than the fact that these writers were able to come up with startlingly new insights. But now these insights are available to all. Why then does European studies remain largely aloof to colonial and postcolonial studies?

Like Europe itself, the field of European studies has constituted itself through a series of exclusions and negative boundaries: against the east (Eastern Europe, Asia, the non-Christian world), against the south (the colonies and the former suppliers of slaves to Europe and the New World), and even against the “west” of the west, that is, the Americas. European studies has also defined itself against the deeper European past, that is, against the medieval and ancient historical past that might also be able to disrupt the seeming obviousness of the object “Europe.”

European studies in the U.S. has also tended to define itself rather rigidly as anchored in the social sciences and as excluding the humanities as well as the burgeoning “interdisciplines” such as the field of colonial studies itself, which transcends the outdated “two cultures” model. This pattern stands in stark contrast to other area studies fields in which the humanities and social sciences are equally represented and able to interpenetrate. When we consider this academic difference from the standpoint of (post) colonial studies, it becomes glaringly obvious that by restricting European studies to the social sciences a boundary is again being drawn against the rest of the world.

As I have noted elsewhere, the willingness to analyze non-western states as fully constituted by cultural stands in sharp contrast to the acultural approaches typically preferred for analysis of core states. Max Weber’s distinction between a western core that has moved beyond culture into the fullness of rationality and a nonwestern periphery of religions and *Naturvölker* who are embedded in culture is implicitly reproduced in the difference between the European and non-European area studies fields and their respective associations. Colonial and postcolonial studies would allow Europeanists to begin unthinking some of the pernicious assumptions that were inherited from 19th century and that were reinforced during the Cold War, including the idea that the (post) colonized have culture and we don’t.

Notes:

1. Most of the citations supporting this essay were cut for reasons of space. For a fully annotated version, please contact the author at geostein@umich.edu.

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