

Post-colonialism

Concept: Post-colonialism

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Description Post-colonialism is a contested term in contemporary political and cultural theory which has come to mean many things at once. The term was first used in English studies as a way of referring to cultural practices — mainly reading and writing — grounded in the experience of European colonial expansion. This was the outcome of an attempt to politicize the concerns of fields of study such Commonwealth Literature and World Literature in English which — alongside women's studies, ethnic studies, and other counterdiscourses — had formed in the 1960s as part of a widespread revisionist project in British and North American universities. While anti-colonial thought has had a long and complex history outside the Western academy, the arrival of post-colonialism in university literature departments significantly challenged dominant modes of analysis. Indeed, one of the more important things that post-colonialism names is the critique of the cultural, political, and linguistic power of the West over non-Western cultures and societies; or more generally, the effects of colonization on the latter. Post-colonialism also designates the field of scholarly criticism and theory which, in providing this critique, has reshaped traditional disciplinary boundaries by studying literature together with politics, history, sociology, and other cultural forms. The prefix "post" marks a specific moment in time, so that post-colonialism refers to the post-independence period as well as to a movement beyond the historical experiences of colonialism and decolonization. This said, post-colonialism has also been interpreted as following the onset of colonialism rather than its aftermath. These various definitions of post-colonialism have blurred together over time, although they have all been (and continue to be) vigorously debated, both by those outside the field and by post-colonial critics themselves.

Post-colonialism has had a major impact on current modes of cultural analysis, especially considering its short history as a critical practice in the Western academy and literature departments. Over the past four decades it has brought issues of race, nation, empire, migration, and ethnicity to the forefront of academic knowledge, as well as examined their interconnection with cultural, political, and economic forces. Post-colonialism has also radically altered the forms of critical analysis which prevailed in English studies during the period prior to its arrival. By studying the relationship of culture to politics and history, post-colonialism has challenged the idea that art and artistic practices are not shaped by economic and political processes. As a result of the interdisciplinary nature of post-colonialism, it has moved well beyond literary criticism and cultural studies to become important throughout the humanities and social sciences and beyond.

But although post-colonialism has significantly reshaped and expanded the field of English studies, there is an increasing awareness of the limits of post-colonial criticism and the problems associated with its incorporation into the academy. In particular, critics (both in the field and outside of it) have questioned the generalizing and universalizing aspects of the term and its application, with some suggesting that it contributes to Eurocentrism by ignoring the specific local differences between and within former European colonies. Many critics point as well to the social and economic privilege of post-colonial critics in relation to the subjects whom they study, and in doing so question the potential for post-colonialism to transform relations of oppression. Post-colonialism has also been widely criticized for its tendency to represent globalization as simply a form of neo-imperialism, rather than as a new and different phase in the process of global capitalism. This perspective is seen as contributing to the failure of post-colonialism to give adequate attention to contemporary issues of global power and uneven development.

Nevertheless post-colonialism has always been implicitly concerned with globalization. Indeed, much of the language of theories of globalization comes directly from post-colonial theory. This does not mean that there is a clear relationship between globalization and post-colonialism; although there is certainly a relationship, it is a complex and ambiguous one at best. Yet the critical discourse of post-colonialism does deal with the relationship between literature and globalization. Furthermore, by considering the ways that culture exists outside of the nation-state, and by examining discourses such as modernity and nationalism, post-colonialism has addressed questions that are directly relevant to those of globalization. For this reason, a convincing argument has been made for the importance of social scientists considering post-colonial perspectives on globalization.

Suggested
Reading:

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2002. *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gikandi, Simon. 2001. Globalization and the claims of postcoloniality. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (3): 627-58.

O'Brien, Susie and Imre Szeman. 2001. Introduction: The globalization of fiction/ the fiction of globalization. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (3): 603-26.

Slemon, Stephen. 1994. The scramble for postcolonialism. In *De-scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and textuality*. ed. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, 15-32. London: Routledge.