Postcolonialism, the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Western colonialism; the term can also be used to describe the concurrent project to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subordinated under various forms of imperialism. Postcolonialism signals a possible future of overcoming colonialism, yet new forms of domination or subordination can come in the wake of such changes, including new forms of global empire. Postcolonialism should not be confused with the claim that the world we live in now is actually devoid of colonialism.

Postcolonial theorists and historians have been concerned with investigating the various trajectories of modernity as understood and experienced from a range of philosophical, cultural, and historical perspectives. They have been particularly concerned with engaging with the ambiguous legacy of the Enlightenment—as expressed in social, political, economic, scientific, legal, and cultural thought—beyond Europe itself. The legacy is ambiguous, according to postcolonial theorists, because the age of Enlightenment was also an age of empire, and the connection between those two historical epochs is more than incidental.

From decolonization to postcolonialism

Although there were (and are) many different kinds of imperialism and thus of decolonization, two of the most-important periods for those who study postcolonialism include the British disengagement from its second empire (of the 19th and 20th centuries) and the decolonization movements of the 1960s and ’70s in Africa and elsewhere. It was during the latter era in particular that many of the international principles and instruments of decolonization were formally declared (although the history of their emergence and formation goes back much farther) and that the language of national self-determination was applied to liberationist movements within former colonial territories. The processes triggered by those struggles were not only political and economic but also cultural. Previously subjugated individuals sought to assert control over not only territorial boundaries—albeit ones carved out by the imperial powers—but also their language and history.

The term postcolonialism is also sometimes used to refer to the struggles of indigenous peoples in many parts of the world in the early 21st century. However, given the interpretation of the principles of self-determination and self-government within the international system, along with the minority status and vulnerability of those peoples even within decolonized states, the term is perhaps less apt. At that time indigenous peoples were denied even the modest gains extended by the United Nations and the international system of states to the various decolonized territories in the 1970s. Moreover, the history of imperialism is complex. European imperialism between the 16th and 18th centuries in the Americas, the West Indies, Australasia, and Southeast Asia was substantially different from that of the 19th and 20th centuries. Still, one of the central themes of postcolonial scholarship is the persistence of empire—and resistance to it—in human history.

Thus, on the one hand, the legacy of the Enlightenment forms an indispensable and unavoidable feature of the present, whether European or otherwise. The universal categories and concepts at the heart of much Enlightenment thought have been put to work by both European and non-European intellectuals and activists to criticize the injustices of their societies as well as imperialism itself. There is a tradition of anti-imperialist criticism that extends as far back as the 16th century, and yet some of the very same criticism not only was compatible with but was often used to justify imperial domination. The theoretical tools provided by the Enlightenment, combined with an often unrelenting cultural Eurocentrism, informed the political and economic practices of imperialism throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Still, many of the most-powerful local and indigenous critics of empire in the 20th century were themselves deeply influenced by European social and political theory as much as they were deeply critical of it. The seminal work of C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said, as well as by the group of historians associated with the editorial collective of Subaltern Studies, all exemplify that complex inheritance. It derives in part from the fact that there is no such thing as “the” Enlightenment but rather multiple Enlightenments shaped by different historical and political contexts; so too, the bundle of concepts and ideals to which “the” Enlightenment refers are plural and capable of a wide range of elaboration.

What is the subject of postcolonialism?

As a general domain of intellectual inquiry, postcolonialism addresses those questions that emerge in relation to the aftermath of imperialism. One of the most-important features of the history of imperialism has been the emergence of states—either from the consolidation of territories and polities or from the dissolution of empires (or some combination thereof)—and, along with that, new conceptions of international order. In that sense, to be concerned with postcolonialism is to be concerned with a set of questions at the heart of modern political thought.

However, postcolonialism is also closely associated with a more-specific set of questions, and, although it should not be reduced to these questions, they have proved to be enormously influential. One of the most prominent has been the relation between imperialism and identity. Fanon, a psychoanalyst and philosopher born in Martinique, presented one of the most searing and provocative analyses of the relation between colonized and colonizer in The Wretched of the Earth (1961) as well as in his Black Skin, White Masks (1952). Fanon remains perhaps best known for his explosive justification of violence in The Wretched of the Earth (highlighted in Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to that work), where it is cast as the appropriate response to the violence perpetrated by colonialism and as the mediation through which the colonized can begin to reclaim their self-conscious agency. His is a deeply unsettling argument, shaped undoubtedly by the brutal period of French colonial rule in Algeria and the war for independence (1954–62) there, which Fanon experienced firsthand. Violence was inevitable and necessary, Fanon seemed to be arguing in The Wretched of the Earth, but it also has to be overcome. One has to move from reaction to the construction of something new, which for Fanon included overcoming the binary oppositions imposed on the colonized by the geopolitical structures of the Cold War. It is there that the foreshadowing of some important themes that became central to postcolonialism is found. For example, Fanon combined a material and psychological analysis of the consequences of colonialism, which looked to both the micro- and macroeffects and experience of colonial government. Among those consequences and their effects, as identified and investigated by Fanon and other theorists, are: both the colonized and the colonizer are implicated in the horrors of imperialism, and both will have to be decolonized; the colonized have to find a way of overcoming the imposition of alien rule not only over their territory but also over their minds and bodies; seeking recognition from an oppressor in terms that the oppressor has set hardly provides a genuine liberation from the grip of colonialism (an effect that anticipates an important debate in contemporary political theory over the “politics of recognition”); the colonizers have to make sense of how the brutality of colonialism relates to their own apparent humanism.

Fanon’s work emphasized the complex relation between imperialism and nationalism that remained a critical focus of much postcolonial writing. The aspiration for self-determination at the heart of anticolonial struggles proved difficult to institutionalize democratically in existing postcolonial states (about which Fanon was remarkably prescient). Most postcolonial theorists—whether writing about Africa, South Asia, or elsewhere—have been critical of nationalism but also equally critical of the “nativism” and romantic communitarianism often supposed to be alternatives to it. They have sought to investigate the ways in which European conceptions of politics, as well as assumptions about secularism and historical time more generally, have been used to describe and locate non-European peoples’ forms of collective action and modes of self-understanding along a continuum that terminates with the ideas and institutions of modern Europe. Postcolonial theorists have also been critical of the assumption, often made by liberals, that what is needed is simply the extension of existing liberal universals, this time in good faith, to those to whom they were previously denied (or never seriously intended). For some theorists, the problem is not simply one of a lack of consistency on the part of liberalism; it instead lies more deeply within the structure of the universal principles themselves. The conditions attached for the ascription of rights, for example, or the distribution of liberties were often grounded in narratives of social or cultural development that justified denying rights and freedoms to those deemed too backward or uncivilized to exercise them properly. John Stuart Mill’s justification of the denial of Indian self-government is a classic instance of that kind of assumption, however much he thought it was best for the well-being of Indians themselves.

One basic question many postcolonial historians, theorists, and other writers have asked is: How does the non-European world write its own history? Some Indian historians associated with Subaltern Studies, for example, although deeply influenced by Marxism, also sought to rescue the collective agency of Indian peasants from the category of the “prepolitical” to which they had been assigned by Marxism. Such an approach puts into question the very idea of theories of social and historical development in which entire peoples or cultures are located somewhere on a scale between “primitive” or “archaic” and “civilized.” That issue is, however, complex. Could peasants be genuine political actors if they did not use the language and practice of rights or sovereignty in the way that European political thought—differentiated as it is—conceived of it? Was the collective action of Indian peasants (or Australian Aborigines or any other indigenous people) prepolitical or “backward” because it was oriented around “religious” or kinship relations, for example, as opposed to class or universal human interests? And how should those alternative sociabilities be described and made sense of anyway?

Thus, postcolonialism has been associated with skepticism about the historicism of Marxist and liberal historiography—that is, about the manner in which practitioners of those types of historiography, which posit many universals, understand history itself. For some, that skepticism has meant abandoning any essentialist representation of identity, because, they believe, any identity is always ultimately heterogeneous and must be theorized as such. There, the influence of French philosopher Michel Foucault was particularly significant from the 1960s onward. For example, in Said’s groundbreaking book Orientalism (1978), Foucault’s subtle conception of the constitutive relation between power and knowledge provided a critical angle from which to investigate the way representations of non-European culture and thought were shaped by a web of institutional and political forces connected to the justification and practice of Western imperialism.

The notion of “unmasking” the Enlightenment became a powerful theme in postcolonial writing. (It also underscores the mutual embedding of postcolonialism and postmodernism.) That unmasking tends to generate two kinds of claims. First, certain modes of Enlightenment thought are considered inherently Eurocentric and thus deeply problematic when applied in non-European contexts or presented as offering genuinely neutral principles of political association or justice. But second, and perhaps more interesting, despite the legacy of empire, the humanism and universalism of much Enlightenment thought is still understood as indispensable for addressing the challenges faced by those on the sharp end of contemporary global inequality. Postcolonialism suggests that as dominant and important as the European process of modernity has been, there have been and will continue to be multiple modernities, and important questions about how best to understand the relations between them will thus persist.