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Geschiere, P.

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IS THERE 'A' POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION?

Peter Geschiere
(University of Amsterdam, Netherlands)

Peter Geschiere is concerned that the concept of 'the postcolonial' is too all-embracing to be analytically useful. How could so many variants of colonialism produce one postcolonial condition? And how long does the postcolonial really last? In many places being in or post something else (like the cold war or neoliberalism) is arguably more defining.

The Johannesburg Salon offers a welcome forum to follow up on my blunt and ill-prepared intervention on 'the' postcolonial during the most inspiring Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism, in early July 2009. As I said in my JWTC presentation, emitting some doubts in the setting of this particular workshop concerning the usefulness of a notion like 'the' postcolonial felt like 'swearing in the Lord's house'. Such *vloeken in de kerk*, as we say in Dutch, often goes together with some vulgarity. After all we are a deeply Protestant nation, so for us it takes some boisterous courage to try and de-sacralize the Lord's house. So let me try to elaborate and nuance a bit.

Luckily, after my rash comments, several friends went to some length to try and rescue me from further grossness. My dear colleague Shalini Randeria, good-hearted as she is, gave me a crash course in postcolonial thinking the very same afternoon – in the shopping mall of Rosebank of all places, as postcolonial a setting as one could wish for. She mentioned a series of key-moments that for her had been eye-openers in the unfolding of postcolonial thinking. First of all Edward Said's *Orientalism*; and subsequently the ideas of the Indian historians known as 'the subaltern studies group', on the colonial state as resting on power without hegemony – so that a whole history of the subalterns had to be rescued from being hidden underneath the official history around the state; this approach was coupled with a most effective undermining of Eurocentric history in which capitalism, modernity and such were seen as achievements produced by the West to which non-Western societies only 'reacted'. Shalini pointed out that it might depend on one's disciplinary background how exactly postcolonial perspectives had changed one's understanding of the world in which we live as being a postcolonial one (irrespective of whether it is in formerly colonized countries, Europe, north or south America) – or the way in which this affected one's view on the politics of knowledge production – by drawing attention to the continuing impact of colonialism and imperialism today. For her, trained as a sociologist/social anthropologist it had been important as a corrective to the Eurocentrism of almost all social theory. Social anthropology had discovered colonialism rather late (with Talal Asad's 1970s collection). And sociology had yet to realize the importance of the historical and contemporary entanglements that link the West and the Rest. For her it remained astonishing that classical sociologists (Durkheim, Weber and Simmel, for instance) had failed to theorize colonialism, or to recognize it as constitutive of modernity; and even more that all major contemporary theorists (Habermas, Luhmann, Eisenstadt, Giddens, Foucault, Beck) had also failed to theorize its role in the making of the modern world. No doubt this is a very simplistic summary of what Shalini tried to put across – Rosebank's mall has its diversions (sorry Shalini!). My first reaction was that these were certainly very important moments, but that all this was also a lot to subsume under one notion, the postcolonial.

As an historian, the discipline in which I had my training, I had certainly been confronted with the power of these different moments, but not necessarily under one heading. Said's momentous attack on Orientalism (1978) -- and the subsequent debates about 'Othering' it inspired – was truly innovative, but its importance seemed to surpass the colonial context, at least if 'colonial' refers to situations of direct colonial rule. The subaltern studies' attack on Eurocentrism fell for us, as students of history, under the broader heading of the debate about the limitations of imperial history; and their emphasis on subaltern history fitted in with the broader search for a 'history from below'. Of course it can be clarifying to broaden notions like 'colonial' and in its slip-stream also 'postcolonial' so that they can accommodate all these momentous and urgent reconsiderations. Yet, for an historian this leads immediately to the question as to how such a broad version of 'the' post-colonial can accommodate all the different trajectories involved. Or, to put it differently, when notions are too much stretched they loose their impact and risk becoming panaceas.

Julia Hornberger launched a similar rescue operation. She gently asked me whether postcolonial theory had not meant for me a true moment of reconsidering things (a conversion?). I certainly could remember such a moment of insight. But for me it came a lot earlier when we, as a group of serious but innocent Dutch students, were invited for an official visit to Nasr's Egypt in 1964. To our surprise we were constantly rushed off to put flowers at all sorts of monuments – I vividly remember a picture in a newspaper (which worried us a bit) of such a solemn moment of flower deposing at the Port Said monument for the victims of the war over the Suez canal. But the real shock came when we were taken to Gaza, then still under Egyptian control. At the time the Netherlands were still staunchly behind the Israelis, invariably depicted as heroes fighting against Arab villains. The shock was for me all the harder: how was it possible that the crying injustice of Gaza did not penetrate in the media and current opinions at home? Was this my postcolonial moment? It seems that there was a lot more at stake – also a generational conflict and my wish to break out of post-world-war-two correctness.

I certainly recognize that 'the postcolonial' notion has had great power in breaking through established conventions and ways of thinking and Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* remains a never-ending source of inspiration and enigmas. Yet, I am worried that the constant stretching of the notion and its increasing popularity, which leads to glib usages of the term (cf. the current debate in France that seems to come all too late), serves to conceal important variations. One effect of 'the' postcolonial might be to turn its root, 'the' colonial, into some sort of monolith. To clarify an example I briefly mentioned in my JWTC presentation: I have always been surprised that Fred Cooper's and Ann Laura Stoler's collection on *Tensions of Empire* (1997) came across to many as containing a new message: the idea, already subsumed in the title, that colonial rule was marked by internal tensions. It is certainly a rich book, but how could the emphasis on the fragmented character of colonial rule come across as a surprise? The more detailed literature on various parts of colonial empires is full of such tensions. In the forest area of Cameroon where I worked, the traces of the old rivalry between missionaries and administrators were still very fresh. This rivalry was about ideology (Christian missionaries against administrators who were supposed to be Free Masons), but also concerned very concrete issues, like the question of who would control the scarce labor available in that part of the colony – the missionaries or the chiefs in service of the administration? The historical literature about Indonesia, another region where I worked, is full of similar struggles. How could the idea of the colonial as a monolith ever take root? There might be a relation with the notion of 'the' postcolonial as basically the same condition all over.

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Differentiating the colonial remains of great importance to understand present-day issues. In his splendid reaction to my JWTC talk, David Goldberg raised a wide array of very relevant points. He ended with the fatherly advice that I would certainly not wish to deny that the whole of Europe is still in a 'postcolonial condition'. Of course, I do recognize that Western Europe's present-day problems with immigrants are directly affected by colonial history. But I am worried that a notion like 'the postcolonial condition' serves to hide that these effects are quite different. In the Netherlands, for instance, the Surinamese (who often see themselves now as more or less 'integrated') and the Antilleans (clearly less integrated) consider other immigrant groups, notably the Moroccans who increasingly outnumber the other groups, with great unease. For Surinamese and Antilleans it is of great importance that their colonial past gives them a claim to citizenship: after all they were subjects of the Dutch empire, which sets them clearly apart from the Moroccans and the Turks who have no past of Dutch rule and therefore cannot participate in all sorts of commemorations like, for instance, around the slavery monument. Clearly it does matter that some relations are marked by colonial rule in the strict sense of the word and others are not. For the Surinamese and the Antilleans (like for earlier generations of Moluccans) the idea of 'postcolonial' expresses a sense of entitlement from which the others are excluded. An incident three years ago showed how easily such differences can explode. A Surinamese woman accidentally killed a young Moroccan – he stole her bag from the backseat of her car and she backed up to get him, with fatal consequences – and immediately tensions flared up. The woman's court case is still pending and she is still in hiding. For many Surinamese, the continuing rebelliousness of the second (and soon the third) generation of Moroccans is a clear sign that they do not even want to belong in their new country – they are the real 'allochthons' in contrast to immigrants from former colonies.

Of course one can multiply such examples. The (North) African youngsters who burn cars in the French *banlieues* insist on their right to belong in their new country. From a Dutch point of view this could give rise to a certain jealousy: recent comparative research reports that Moroccans of the second generation in the Netherlands show very little interest (especially in comparison with France and Spain) to belong in 'their' new country. Germany's dealings with the Turks seem to be directly affected by the relative novelty of Turkish immigration, not resting on a previous colonial relationship. There are striking contrasts here – both concerning official policies and the immigrants' perceptions – with the situation in France and the UK.

To sum up: the concept of the postcolonial served to raise most urgent and incisive issues. Yet, it remains important that it leaves scope for studying the highly different trajectories of 'the' colonial. 'The' postcolonial has different implications when there is, for instance, a heritage of direct colonial rule, or rather of a colonial relationship in a broader sense of the word. A related problem is the linking of truly innovative theoretical breakthroughs to a basically chronological referent, which, for instance, makes it increasingly difficult to dodge the question as to how long 'the' postcolonial will last? Notions like 'Orientalism' or 'Imperial History' indicate certain reflexive distortions through the use of terms that are less bound to a certain time-span. This is not just a terminological quibble. For African studies, for instance, it becomes a valid question how long it will remain useful to speak of 'the' postcolonial state. In a forthcoming study on Togo, offering seminal interpretations of present-day uncertainties, Charles Piot suggests that the recent metamorphosis of the state is rather related to a 'Post-Cold War moment'. Elsewhere in the continent also the state seems to undergo striking transitions under the impact of the neo-liberal tide in the 1990's. While in the first decades after Independence (for most countries around 1960) the state could be called postcolonial in a most concrete sense (in many respects the new authorities continued indeed the frameworks of colonial rule), it is more difficult to see the recent and often quite surprising avatars the various African states are producing now as continuations of colonial arrangements. Again, the question is whether a certain limitation of the postcolonial might not increase this notion's relevance and impact.

Are these just some ruminations from the interface between anthropology and history, two disciplines that in the eyes of philosophers and others have always been hampered by a theoretical aporia? Or is a view 'from below' also useful for theoretical re-considerations?