Is it possible to forge a post-colonial geography?

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Blunt and Wills (2000) define the aims of postcolonial geography as diverse, encompassing the history as well as the present status of the discipline, the ways in which geographical imaginations have underpinned colonial power and knowledge, and the need to recover the experiences and agency of colonised peoples. At its broadest, post-colonialism 'deals with the effects of colonisation on cultures and societies' (Ashcroft *et al*, 1998), yet this definition is too general when attempting to answer the question posed. Primarily, we will see that post-colonial refers to both 'after' and 'beyond' the colonial era. As Clayton (2003) states, post-colonialism is a 'trendy buzzword for a range of critical practices that grapple with what it means to work 'after', 'beyond' and 'in the knowledge of' colonialism. Thus, the question as to whether we can forge a post-colonial geography is immediately more complex than may at first appear. Furthermore, the use of the term 'forge' conjures ideas not only of building or forming a 'post-colonial geography' but also in another sense faking a 'post-colonial geography'. Clayton (2003) suggests that the postcolonial world has placed new demands upon western theory and scholarship. He notes that western academics have become more attuned to the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in their disciplinary visions, more sensitive to issues of otherness and cultural diversity and more alert to the idea that universals enshrined in European thought are at once indispensable and inadequate tools of critique. There is, however, widespread debate as to the discipline of geography and the attitudes incorporated within a study of it in addition to arguments as to whether we are in fact after *or* beyond colonialism.

The term 'postcolonial' was first used after the Second World War as a chronological marker referring to the 'post-independence' era that followed decolonisation (Blunt & Wills, 2000). From the 1970s, however, the term has become more significant and has been used to refer to 'the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies' (Ashcroft *et al,* 1998), encompassing effects of colonisation and decolonisation. As noted above, the 'post' in post-colonialism has two meanings referring firstly to a temporal aftermath – 'after' colonialism – and secondly, to a critical aftermath – 'beyond' colonialism (Blunt & Wills, 2000). It is argued that it is the problematic interaction of these terms that often makes post-colonialism a contested term. Primarily, we can assess the problems of referring to 'after' colonialism. The temporal distinction implies a clear break with a colonial past, often obscuring the continuities in international relations that persist even after formal decolonisation (*ibid.*). Davis (1994, cited in Sidaway, 2000) argues that 'post-coloniality represents a misnaming of current realities, it is too premature a formulation, it is too totalising, it erroneously contains decolonising discourses'. Jones (2000), when addressing whether it is possible to fully deconstruct the terms 'First' and 'Third' world notes the continuing gulf in inequality between the First and Third world, arguing that 'many countries of the Third World continue to suffer greatly from the vagaries of colonialism and more recently enforced Structural Adjustment and western financial domination of many debt-ridden countries', the latter processes often being referred to as forms of 'neo-colonialism'. Thus, this persistence of international inequalities in a neo-colonial world throws the very possibility of decolonisation into question (Blunt & Wills, 2000). In addition, a third problem is that the temporal underpinnings of the term 'postcolonialism' continue to

define the world purely in terms of western expansion (*ibid.*). Thus, we may refer to being *beyond* rather than only and necessarily *after* colonialism, within a 'critical' aftermath. Prakash (1994) argues, however, that eurocentric habits and categories of thought are very much part of the aftermath and we need to question 'the comfortable make believe' that there exists a critical position outside the historical configurations of colonialism from which a postcolonial future (or decolonised discipline) will emerge (Clayton, 2003). Thus, Prakash (1996) insists that we critique colonialism *in media res* – from inside a story that has not ended.

If indeed we are to argue that a post-colonial geography is possible it would mean passing through a process of decolonisation. This is a problematic term in its own right since it implies the initiatives for decolonisation were taken by the metropolitan, ruling powers, rather than by the colonised peoples themselves. Chamberlain (1985) notes that decolonisation varied over time and space. Although formal structures of colonial rule were overturned in this process, the legacies of colonial rule remain intact in many spheres of life both in the metropolitan centres and in the ex-colonies. Political, administrative, legal, educational and religious systems in many ex-colonies continue to reflect past European colonial influence (Blunt & Wills, 2000). In economic terms, colonial rule often led to regional specialisation so that regions, or even whole countries were focused on producing a specific raw material or food crop for export. This dependence on export and global exchange has meant that regions and countries are vulnerable to crop failures, price fluctuations and changes in international demand. Thus, the ex-colonies continue to be bound to the crises of global capitalism (*ibid.*). International flows of people, capital investment, aid and debt repayments also continue to reflect past colonial ties. Furthermore, different conflicts in the world often have colonial roots for example the ongoing feud between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. In addition, direct colonial rule continues in many places for instance the Chinese in Tibet. Sidaway (2000) argues that we must also take into account the variety of contemporary internal colonialisms and colonial occupations. This highlights the ways in which colonial categories and discourses are re-imported into the wider politics of the metropolitan powers, where they crop up in racist discourses and practices (this point will be discussed further at a later point). There are also breakaway settler colonies where there has been formal independence from the founding metropolitan country, thus *displacing* 'colonial' control from the metropolis to the colony itself. Examples include the USA, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. These 'multiple postcolonial conditions' as Sidaway refers to them, serve to highlight once more the sustained importance of colonialism within the discipline of geography since many of these issues form key constituents of geographer's study. Thus, a post-colonial geography appears impossible.

At this point, it is necessary to discuss the concepts surrounding Livingstone's (1992) claim that 'geography is the science of empire'. Geography as an academic discipline and geographical education at all levels played fundamental roles in shaping the ideas, meanings and imaginations that helped to represent and to justify the British Empire (Blunt & Wills, 2000). The intertwined histories of geography and empire lead to geographers being socialised into a discipline and discourse 'whose assumptions, concepts and ways of working are always and everywhere earthed in material grids of power' (Clayton, 2003). Sidaway (2000) enforces such a view by stating that 'any postcolonial geography must realise within itself its own impossibility, given that geography is inescapably marked (both philosophically and institutionally) by its

location and development as a western-colonial science'. Furthermore, Sidaway (1997) refers to Livingstone's suggestion of a self-generating (western) geographical tradition. Sidaway (1997) argues that the complex reality is that non-western geographies are enfolded into the making and evolution of a supposed western geographical tradition yet there has existed a strategy of acknowledging that other traditions exist but then ignoring them to write about the western one as if it were a big self-generating/self-contained entity. This is obviously problematic, and as Sidaway puts it, as problematic as describing the structure of a house without mentioning the foundations. It is also at odds with a wider and growing concern to 'decolonise' western historical metanarratives about origins. The roots of geography as a discipline within the colonial period cannot, however, be dismissed in this manner since, as Livingstone (1992) notes 'western geographical knowledge did not develop in some kind of vacuum, away from prior non-western geographies. It depended upon them'. Such attention to the ways in which geography was involved in projects of European colonialism and imperialism have in many cases concentrated on instrumental reason – 'exploration, topographic and social survey, cartographic representation, and regional inventory…were entirely suited to the colonial project' (Livingstone, 1993). Gregory (1998) notes, however, that the Eurocentrism of modern geography has much deeper *epistemological* roots than these arguments imply.

Gregory (1998) thus, through an incorporation of the ideas of Foucault and Said, suggests that geographical knowledge shaped the production of a colonial imaginary in a *theoretical* register through four discursive strategies:

i) absolutizing time and space
ii) exhibiting the world
iii) normalising the subject
iv) abstracting culture and nature

None of these strategies were seen to be purely intellectual constructions; they all had vitally important practical consequences for the constitution of the colonial order of things (*ibid.*). Gregory suggests that it is these strategies that have continued, in displaced form, to shape the contemporary discipline of geography and our own colonial present. In this instance then, once more, it is argued that we are not in a 'post' colonial period and thus the construction of a geography without colonial influences or without incorporation of colonial concepts is impossible. Gregory argues that as well as being a European science, geography is also a profoundly *Eurocentric* science, as alluded to previously. He suggests that we confine our histories to the empirical work of those involved in the colonial pursuit (explorers, field scientists, district officers, travellers etc) and animate our histories with the busy, practical and cosmopolitan world of late eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. In making these necessary reconstructions, and yet sliding over the conceptual orders that were implicated in these very practices we can deceptively fall into the assumption that all of these things belong to the past – as Gregory phrases it, 'hand-wringing turns surreptitiously into hand-washing'. We must be forced, however, to recognise that Eurocentrism continues to invest our geographies with their troubled meanings (*ibid.*). Thus, the idea of forging a post-colonial geography in any sense of the term is riddled with difficulties due to the very nature of the discipline.

Let us now turn to the issue of colonial discourse analysis as touched upon with reference to Gregory's work. Post-colonialism is argued to be centrally concerned

with the connections, via the concept of discourse, between culture and power (Clayton, 2003). In discursive terms, geography has been shown as central to the exercise of colonial power and the production of colonial knowledge as people and places throughout the world were brought under external control and were represented in often stereotypical and derogatory ways over space (Blunt & Wills, 2000). Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is 'commonly regarded as the catalyst and reference point for post-colonialism' (Gandhi, 1998). It examines the complex interactions of power, knowledge and representation and geography lies at the heart of the analysis, as Said focuses on 'imaginative geographies' produced by the West about the East (Gregory, 1995). Orientalism produced knowledges about colonised people and places as 'other', inferior and irrational in contrast to a powerful, rational, western 'self' (Blunt & Wills, 2000). Bell (1994) suggests that similar processes can be seen in First World stereotypes about the Third World as less advances and powerless. Thus, *Orientalism* 'opened the floodgates of postcolonial criticism' (Prakash, 1995) by challenging taken-for-granted oppositions between western knowledge and western power, scholarly detachment and worldly motives, and representation and reality (Clayton, 2003). Clayton continues to argue that geographers are embracing and developing post-colonial perspectives with a mixture of excitement and caution. Whilst the 'post-colonial' critique is said to be bolstering the 'cultural turn' in human geography, reaffirming the importance of historical perspectives within the discipline, and bringing many new objects of study into critical play, there are also complaints about the type of work that post-colonialism is encouraging within and beyond geography. Clayton suggests that post-colonialism can be described as a powerful interdisciplinary mood in the social sciences and humanities that is refocusing attention on the imperial/colonial past, and critically revising an understanding of the place of the west in the world. Yeoh (2000), however, points out that work on the historical geography of colonialism overshadows the difficult but crucial task of uncovering 'the historical geographies of the colonised world'.

Thus, the issue of what post-colonial study must include comes into question. Yeoh maintains that it is vital that geographers complement their deconstructive work on (and in) 'the centre' with research on (and at) the margins of empire and the agencies of the colonised. Furthermore, Perera (1998) argues that adding the prefix 'post-' may impose 'the continuity of foreign histories'. Critics argue that the postcolonial discourse is out of touch with postcolonial realities and may itself serve to mask and at the same time perpetuate the presence of a Eurocentric pall over current efforts at (re-) constituting the world in discursive and material terms (Yeoh, 2003). As Shamsul (1998) proposes, 'to have an academic discourse beyond 'Orientalism' and 'Occidentalism' is rather a tall order as long as we cannot break away and become totally independent of colonial knowledge'. Yeoh (2003) continues to argue that the colonial project invaded and conquered territorial space *and* has systematically colonised indigenous epistemological spaces, reconstituting these using a wide corpus of colonial knowledge, policies and frameworks. With decolonisation, ex-colonies have regained political territory, but seldom the epistemological space. Thus, even if 'other' geographies are incorporated with the aim of forging a 'post-colonial geography', it is dubious whether such a feat is possible.

The discussion so far has served to highlight both the complexities of defining what is meant by 'post-colonial', whether such a state can or does at present exist, as well as the confounding problem of geography's roots within a colonial/imperial discourse

with a Eurocentric focus. This foundation within imperialist history has had numerous repercussions on the study and the structure of geography as a discipline. As already noted, many of the international geopolitical issues of today, which are studied within the bounds of human geography, can be linked to colonialism in any. one of a number of ways as highlighted by Sidaway's (2000) multiple postcolonial conditions. Furthermore, Pulido (2002) and Anderson (2002) draw attention to racism in geography. Pulido argues that the overwhelmingly white composition of the discipline has very real implications for both individual experiences and our intellectual production and disciplinary culture. She notes the discipline's role in imperialism as a historical obstacle to the study of race within geography and that an increased number of geographers of colour would enhance our disciplinary discourse on race. Anderson suggests that the 'identity-targeting by race shows few signs of diminishing in the diverse societies shaped by the long legacy of European empire-building since the fifteenth century'. Thus, once more, the discipline is heavily influenced by past imperial imperatives including unconscious colonial practices and practitioners.

The discussion within this essay has highlighted many of the difficulties of attempting to forge a post-colonial geography. Primarily, the problem of definition of a post-colonial era arises. In many senses, we are far from living in a post-colonial society which would deem a 'post-colonial' geography impossible. There remain imperialistic tendencies throughout the modern global society manifested in the social and political structures of former colonies, internal colonies, and in breakaway settler colonies. In addition, the term 'neo-colonialism' has become something of a buzzword in human geography with reference to studies of development strategies. In addition, the structure of the discipline of geography itself, founded as it was predominantly upon ideals of imperialism and exploitation, continues to reflect such trends. As Gregory argues, it is both a European and a Eurocentric science in the form in which it exists today. Concepts of 'us and them', which characterised imperialism, persist in many instances within the discipline. Potter (2001) suggests that the 'unproductive schism of essentially dichotomous thinking in British Geography has been apparent over the last fifty years and displays little sign of abatement as we enter the new millennium'. Prakash also maintains that this is unlikely to change in the future - 'If 'the west is now everywhere, within the West and outside' (Nandy), then it is naïve and politically self-defeating to expect a critique to arise from the 'outside', from some supposed uncontaminated postcolonial experience' (Prakash, 1995). This would once more suggest that to forge a post-colonial geography is impossible. Perhaps, however, the way forward is not to accept the paralysis of such an impasse but to take advantage of the 'shape-shifting instability of the concept' (Hau, 2000) and to strategically and critically mine this variegated field for insights and impulses (Yeoh, 2003). There is little doubt, however, that 'postcolonial geographies' pose important challenges to the world and to the discipline of geography, and the multifaceted task of decolonising geography will continue to be crucially important in the twentieth century (Blunt & Wills, 2000).

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