

Geography

ISSN: 0016-7487 (Print) 2043-6564 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rgpy20

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**To cite this article:** Tariq Jazeel (2012) Postcolonialism: Orientalism and the geographical imagination, Geography, 97:1, 4-11, DOI: 10.1080/00167487.2012.12094331

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/00167487.2012.12094331

Published online: 11 Aug 2020.

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# Postcolonialism: Orientalism and the geographical imagination

Tariq Jazeel

*ABSTRACT: This is the first of two articles that together outline of what use an understanding of postcolonialism can be for geography students. Here, I suggest that what has come to be known as 'postcolonial theory' offers students a valuable tool for a critical and inquisitive undoing of our received geographical knowledges, particularly in order to interrogate inequalities, power and privilege. This article briefly sketches the origins and underpinnings of postcolonialism in Edward Said's* Orientalism *(1978), before using the example of India to stress how postcolonialism reveals both the colonial origins of material geographical space, and our more subjective geographical imaginations of such formerly colonial spaces. In the second article (to be published later in 2012), I discuss the production of postcolonial spaces and identities.*

## Introduction

Since its emergence in the field of literary studies in the late 1970s, postcolonialism – or postcolonial theory – has had a lasting impact across the social sciences and humanities. Geography students at British universities will be well aware that 'postcolonial geography' forms an important part of our discipline. But what exactly is postcolonialism? It is often regarded as one of those theory-heavy words that resists easy definition, and as such the term postcolonialism also has a tendency to strike fear into students and teachers alike. Given its complexity, perhaps a more relevant question for geography teachers is: of what use is an understanding of postcolonialism for geography students? In this series of two articles on postcolonialism and geography I posit some answers to these questions by pointing to the value of postcolonialism not as a body of complex, often abstract, theory, but instead as an approach for students to think critically and geographically at the same time. Above all, I intend to emphasise how students might think of postcolonialism as an intellectual resource to draw upon through which they might interrogate privilege, power and inequality in our world.

In this first instalment, following some broad remarks on the conceptual origins and underpinnings of the term, I offer a few examples of how postcolonialism can help students to scratch beneath the surface of their taken-for-granted worlds and geographical imaginations in order to reveal some of the historical and political dimensions of our everyday geographies. In the second article, again drawing on examples, I show how postcolonialism brings into view both the spatial interconnectedness of our common world and its irreducible mixed-up-ness – what postcolonial theorists call 'hybridity'. My emphasis throughout is on the potential that postcolonialism offers for a critical and inquisitive undoing of our received geographical knowledges; what I refer to as a geographical unlearning.

## Origins and underpinnings

Postcolonialism of course refers in one way or another back to colonialism itself. It is a term that encompasses hugely diverse sets of imperial projects, designs and power-laden exchanges throughout history. If colonialism implies the physical occupation of territory and resources, and the imposition of political and economic systems and ideologies in those territories (Sharp, 2009), then in the European Age of Exploration (15th–

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19th centuries) alone, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British colonisers variously enlisted a vast tapestry of methods – some violent, others more coercive – to facilitate their occupations of equally vast swathes of the non-western world. In the process, they effectively dispossessed indigenous populations of land and other resources. Mercantile activity, trafficking of slaves, military conquest, the imposition of colonial governments, geographical and scientific exploration as well as Christian missionary work have all variously supported the colonial designs of different European empires. Much of the non-western world has at some point been subject to colonial rule by various European powers who sought to secure their own forms of economic and cultural accumulation under the pretence of developing – or as they would have it 'civilising' – the non-western world. If it is true that much of the world was once colonial, then much of it is now, temporally at least, 'post-colonial' – that is to say, independent of colonial rule. Should this independence not in itself be a cause for celebration?

Partially yes, but just because the local viceroy or governor packs up and goes home, the effects of colonial power do not cease. In this very respect, 'postcolonialism', or 'post-colonialism' (the hyphen can imply a temporal break from colonialism), is not a term that simply signals a time period after colonialism. Although there is nothing wrong with celebrating the end of colonialism (and indeed we should – despite the familiar rhetoric about colonialism gifting to the colonial world such avatars of civilisation as railways, infrastructure and democracy), such celebrations can be grossly misleading. Indeed, postcolonial scholarship across the social sciences and humanities has deployed the term 'postcolonial' as a way of recognising the continued and troubling presence and influence of colonialism within the period we designate as after-the-colonial (McClintock, 1992; Nash, 2002, p. 220). In other words, much postcolonial scholarship actually seeks to explore the ongoing effects that colonial encounter, dispossession and power have in shaping the familiar social, spatial and political structures, as well as the uneven global interdependencies of the world as we know it. By the same token, postcolonial scholarship has also sought to draw attention to the presence of new, less territorial and more ideological, forms of empire building; for example, North America's cultural, political and economic global ambitions. In many ways therefore, and as my examples below suggest, much of postcolonialism's value is in the way it draws attention to the very difficulty of confident declarations about the end of colonialism. In other words, its critical potential for students is precisely its non-linear logic, the ways it can ask: in what sense are we actually after, or beyond, the subjugating effects of colonial power? And, in what ways can we think against the grain of colonial power's lingering effects both at home and abroad? These questions form the basis for critical geographical engagements of the world at hand.

First, however, it is worth emphasising postcolonial scholarship's debt to the path-breaking work of the literary critic Edward Said, particularly in his book *Orientalism* (1978). Said's *Orientalism* clearly allowed us to see how the very geographical categories of east and west, or as he referred to them the 'Orient' and 'Occident', were neither in any sense natural, nor merely there. As Said (1978) suggested, they are in fact humanly and imaginatively made by a litany of ways of talking about, painting, and writing on, the Orient throughout western history – what he referred to



**Figure 1**: *An example of Orientalist painting:* An Arab Weaver, *1886, Point Armand (1861–1932)/ © Bradford Art Galleries and Museum/The Bridgeman Art Library.*

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as Orientalism. Consider, for example, that when we utter phrases such as 'throughout western history', we actively participate in a form of speech that helps consolidate an over-generalised idea of the west (the Occident) in our imagination, a west that we all too easily believe to be objectively different from the east. Objectively, though, what actually is the west? Where does it begin and end? Culturally, what values define it? What economic standards demarcate the west? Politically, what separates west from east? The difficulty in answering such questions suggests that 'west' and 'east' are nothing if not a vast series of geographical over-generalisations. In fact, Said's (1978) work has shown us how the vast repertoire of European and North American representations about the Orient that emerged with the Age of Exploration conjured into existence not only the imaginative category of the Orient itself, but also our senses of self as Occidental. In other words, Orient and Occident are mutually constituting geographical categories. Despite this commitment to the representational production of Orient and Occident, however, Said (1978) did not deny the material reality of eastern or western places. Rather, he stressed that what makes them seem eastern (Oriental) or western (Occidental) to us is the vast repertoire of categorisation that is made to seem like common sense through representation, through the things we say about the world. In short, through discourse.

There are two things to note from the above discussion. First, that the forms of colonial dispossession, conquest and discovery through which Europe variously annexed its territorial colonies, were in fact enabled by Orientalising ways of seeing the non-west. In other words, cultural representations of the non-west, the Orient, were never far from power. It was precisely the ability of the west to authoritatively represent the peoples and places of the east as at one and the same time passive, exotic, undeveloped, barbaric and alluring, that laid the foundation for contact, dispossession and colonial rule by imperial powers. Just as there is a vast tradition of 18th- and 19th-century European Orientalist painters (Figure 1), novelists and mapmakers, it is significant that there is no similar South Asian, African or Middle Eastern artistic or literary tradition of representing Europe. With Orientalism, power flows one way.

Second, Said's whole thesis is profoundly geographical, and for geography educators the opening pages of *Orientalism* should be of especial interest. As Said wrote:

> *We must take seriously [the] … great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as "Orient" and "Occident" are man-made.* (Said, 1978, pp. 4–5)

To use Orientalism to begin to think postcolonially, therefore, is to begin to think geographically (Blunt and McEwan, 2002). Despite its birth in literary studies, postcolonialism is an inherently geographical mode of thought. It encourages us to consider the ways we think about distant and different elsewheres, the connections familiar from globalisation, immigration or cultural hybridity, and the western and imperial origins of the spaces and places we take for granted. Thinking postcolonially is to critically probe our own geographical imaginations (Gregory, 1994).

Equally, as geography educators we should remember that the discipline of geography itself has been centrally implicated in colonialism. It is no coincidence that geography's growth as a science of considerable repute emerged through the Age of Exploration, and that in Britain geography reached maturity as a university discipline and distinct knowledge branch through the colonial period (Livingstone, 1992). The production of geographical knowledge was closely linked with the heroic tales of travel, exploration and discovery that facilitated colonialism. Indeed, the early 19th-century origins of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) – who, since its founding in London in 1830, has supported the work of explorers such as David Livingstone, Richard Francis Burton, Ernest Shackleton and Sir Edmund Hillary – shared links with various institutions closely allied to imperial government, such as the Admiralty, the Foreign Office and the Hydrographer's Office, for example (see Driver, 2001). Colonialism's ambition was essentially geographical.

Building on all of this, in the second half of this article I outline some of the ways that

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postcolonialism can be useful for geography students. This list is by no means exhaustive, but I offer them as examples in order to encourage postcoloniality in the classroom. Further to Said's (1978) implication of cultural representations in the geographical production of the non-west, I expand on the ways that colonialism has literally shaped vast areas of the world. I then focus in more depth on the representations that shape our geographical imaginations of non-western space in the present. I use the colonial formation of India and the continuation of colonial ways of seeing India through its marketing and consumption in today's global economy.

By way of disclaimer, in this and the following article my examples circulate exclusively around the British Empire, its legacies, and particularly its South Asian colonial histories, simply because these are the postcolonial formations with which I am most familiar. Inevitably, the texture of postcolonial analysis changes when we consider other parts of the British Empire; its African, Caribbean or settler colonies, or other former empires such as the Portuguese, Dutch or Spanish. The analysis also changes when we extend our conception of the postcolonial to explore the legacies of earlier empires such as the Roman (see Phillips and Jones, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2011). Despite my own bias, what I wish to emphasise through the examples I use is simply that for geography students, postcolonialism is at its most useful and politically enabling not as a body of dense and opaque theoretical debate, but rather as an analytical disposition. This disposition draws critical attention to, first, the role that colonial power and encounter have had in shaping the geography of the world as we know it, and second, the ways that we continue to consider the west and western philosophy as somehow special and/or universally applicable.

## The geographical imagination and colonial representation: India and the exotic

Many of us would assume that India is a country whose ancient history pre-dates that of its colonisation. We are, of course, right to believe that many of India's religions, languages, traditions and myths have roots that precede European colonisation. However, to assume that India's history has been merely interrupted by colonialism is to gloss over the foundational geographical formations of colonialism in South Asia. In fact, it is no exaggeration to state that British colonialism created the nation state we call India. In other words, 19th-century British imperial rule imposed a territorial political organisation that never was before. If it is axiomatic that colonialism was responsible for the formation of colonies, then the coming-into-independence of those colonies was the geographical basis for postcolonial nation state formation. India, in other words, is a product of colonialism.

The British East India Company (Figure 2), which looked after Britain's trade and territorial interests across much of South Asia, was founded in 1600, gaining a foothold in India around 1612 when the Mughal Empire granted the Company trading rights on the west coast. In 1640, these rights were extended much further south, by the Vijayanagara Empire, enabling the British to establish a presence in Madras (Chennai). In addition to this, Bombay (Mumbai) was granted to the British as a dowry upon the marriage of the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza to Charles II in 1662. Some 20 years later the Company also established a presence on the east coast – it set up a trading post in Calcutta (Kolkata) which was to become a hub for its mercantile activities. Gradually, through the 18th and 19th centuries, as the Mughal Empire waned in power, the Company annexed more and more native states directly; it also forced other states within Indian territory to sign treaties that acknowledged British power in exchange for limited forms of autonomy. The result was the formation of the territorial unit known as 'British India'. In 1858, one year after India's first war of independence (the civilian rebellions), the Company was dissolved and the British government transferred direct control of its territorial assets in India to the newly formed British Raj. India finally won independence from the Raj in 1947, due in large part to the non-violent, and violent, approaches taken by the various institutions and individuals through the late 19th and 20th centuries that comprised the Indian independence movement. With independence came the creation of India and Pakistan at midnight on 14 August 1947.

However, it was not just treaties and military conquest that secured British India's geographical incarnation. British India was also consolidated by

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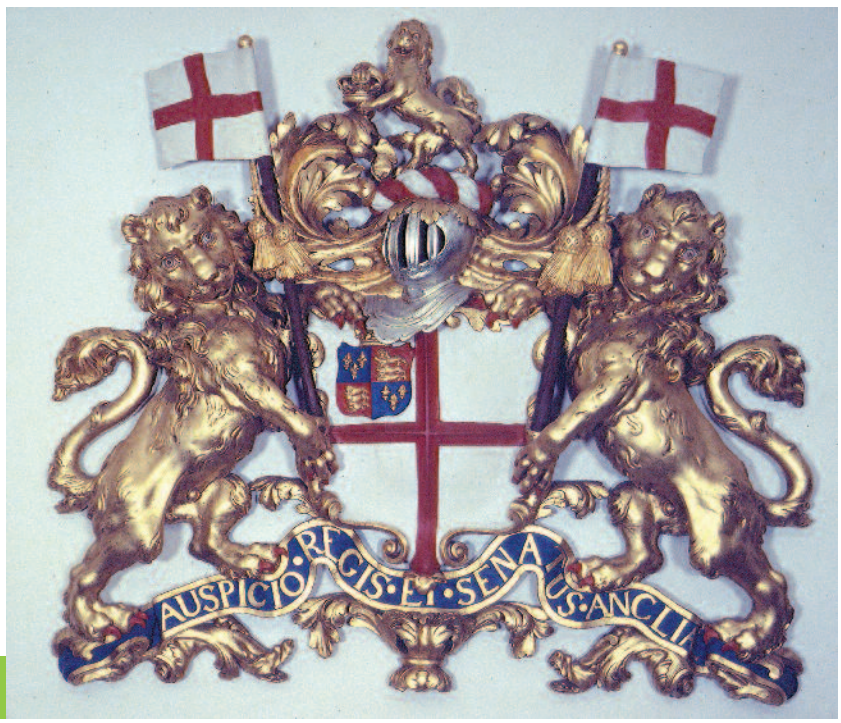


the forms of representation to which postcolonialism attaches so much importance. Take mapping, for example. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British cartographical representations of the Company's prized territorial acquisition in South Asia did not just aim to sketch on paper an already existing country that was being colonised. As Matthew Edney has shown in *Mapping an Empire* (1997), those mappings helped visualise and imaginatively produce the territorial integrity of a specific region of Earth's surface that was known to the British and other Europeans as 'Hindostan' or 'British India'. Mapping itself was, intrinsically, a powerful representational tool that helped to materially and imaginatively fashion the geographies of the colonial world. Indeed, the subtitle to Edney's (1997) book is telling, for it highlights 'the geographical *construction* of British India, 1765–1843'. Materially too, the colonial production of railway networks stretching the length and breadth of India, nested scales of regional and national government, 'national' plantation economies, plus a litany of other institutions helped to realise the construction of India as a solid, material and meaningful colonial state – a delimited place – in the geographical imagination.

This grossly schematic colonial history is intended to establish one simple fact: colonialism was no simple interruption in Indian history. Instead, it created the possibility of an Indian nation state; a country that could subsequently be thought to have its own history, geography, peoples, independence struggles, and so on. Thought in this way, Hindu myths of ancient India that seem as old as time itself – the Sanskrit epics the Maharabata and Ramayana, for example – were transposed into 'national' myths as the idea of the Indian state itself became naturalised during the 19th century. In this sense, colonial rule was so influential that even anti-colonial Indian nationalists like Gandhiji, Nehru and Dr Ambedkar could not operate outside the national geopolitical template, and through the structures (British bureaucracy, colonial education, and the imposition of English as a common language, for example), that colonial power had conjured into existence.

This is not to suggest that India is not an 'authentic' nation state. If anything, a postcolonial geographical approach like this alerts us to the constructedness of all our nationalities and nation states. Indeed, for postcolonial theorists 'authenticity' itself is an inadequate measure of the veracity of geography and identity (Griffiths, 2006). Scholars have traced similar postcolonial historical geographies of the material and representational coming-into-being, and naturalisation, of a host of other former colonies, including Sri Lanka (see Barrow, 2008; Jazeel, 2009), Australia (Carter, 1987), Pakistan (Mufti, 2000), and North America (Bowlby, 1990). As these authors argue in different ways, all are as real, as historical and as material as any other nation state, including Britain, Spain, Portugal and other such colonising powers. The point is that postcolonialism is able to make visible the true fictions that have produced the world as we know and imagine it to be.

**Figure 2:**
*The East India Company coat of arms, c. 1730 (painted and gilded wood), English school (18th century)/British Library, London, UK/© British Library Board. All rights reserved/The Bridgeman Art Library.*




## 'Exotic' India

The postcolonial geographical imagination, however, does not just bring into focus the territorial creation of post-colonies. It also enables us to explore the commonly-perceived textures, feel and aesthetics of those post-colonies as they emerge through patterns of marketing and consumption in a global economy that do little to destabilise the essence of Orientalism as the more or less 'ineradicable distinction between western superiority and Oriental inferiority' (Said, 1978, p. 42). Here also postcolonialism allows us to identify the remnants of colonial privilege and power in representations of the all-too-often exoticised non-

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west. Indeed, the idea of the east as somehow 'exotic' continues to haunt all manner of representations of places like India in the UK travel and tourism industry and the 'exotic' we must remember is no innocent label. It is part of a 'Eurocentric' vocabulary that Ella Shohat and Bob Stam so aptly refer to as, 'the discursive residue or precipitate of colonialism' (1994, p. 15). The 'exotic' is a way of thinking and speaking about the non-west that is underpinned by a series of lasting colonial binaries which at once privilege western agency, modernity and mobility over non-western passivity, tradition and rootedness. Order/chaos, activity/passivity, movement/stasis: these are among the binaries imposed on west/east respectively when the exotic gaze is mobilised. And it is not hard to find the lingering trace of the 'exotic' in contemporary representations of India. As one travel company puts it in the introduction to its India brochure (chosen at random from a local travel shop):

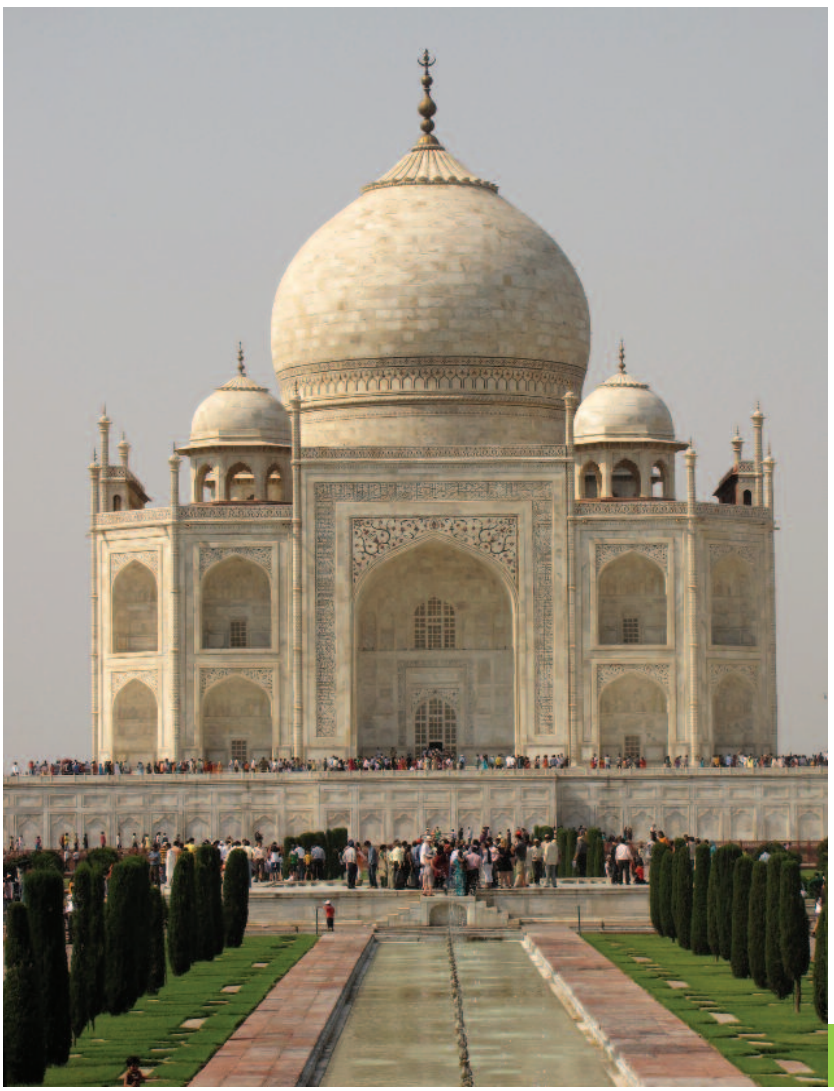
> *Experience the colour and magic of a holiday to India and beyond! … From the fertile Himalayan foothills and the regal palaces of legendary Rajasthan, to the steps of the marble Taj Mahal and the palm-fringed beaches of Goa, India offers an exotic and tempting smorgasbord of sights and sounds that cannot fail to enchant and captivate even the most seasoned traveller.* (On the Go, 2010, p. 3)

Such 'dreamy, feminine, and overly abstract' (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p. 139) representations of a deeply stylised India characterise the Eurocentric residues of colonialism. As potential visitors, we are encouraged to be active, western traveller-explorers and consume this passive India. My point here is not to disavow the appeal that









*'Exotic' India: the 'fertile Himalayan foothills'; the 'regal palaces of Rajasthan'; the 'steps of the marble Taj Mahal'; the 'palm-fringed beaches of Goa'. Photos: © Dainis Matisons/ciamabue/Karl Fernandes/Friar's Balsam. All from Flickr and reproduced under Creative Commons licence.*

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such holidays evoke. Indeed, I would be the first to admit that such holidays continually tempt me! Rather, my point is to realise where these 'exoticising' ways of seeing – this 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 2002) – comes from and the power relations it holds in place. For what the On the Go brochure does not do is encourage us as consumers to engage with the high-tech modern society that India is. It gives potential holidaymakers no inkling that India's economy is one of the fastest growing in the world, nor does it enjoin us to witness the plethora of informal economies, creative and media industries, or the huge inequalities of contemporary Indian society (see Lee, 2011). In short, we are not encouraged to be critical, enquiring and postcolonial tourists. India's contemporary socio-cultural and political realities are not allowed to speak to us. Instead, we are inscribed into this text as latter day colonial travellers, enticed to enjoy the precipitates of colonialism through tours with such catchy and nostalgic titles as 'Taj and Raj', described thus:

> *Packing in Delhi, the Pink City of Jaipur, and the Taj Mahal, this tour also strikes north visiting Shimla, India's largest and most famous hill station and the former summer capital of British India.* (On the Go, 2010, p. 17)

Exoticism works like this as a system of containment, one that safely assimilates the west's 'others' in ways that effectively reinscribe the superiority of the west over those others (Huggan, 2001, p. 32). Nevertheless, we should also remember that exoticism can also be performed by non-western others as a strategic way of seizing the means of development and resisting the legacies of colonial underdevelopment. Just as there is an array of travel companies which continue to exoticise tourist destinations in the non-west, those destinations have also established tourist infrastructures and hospitality industries that work hard to ensure tourists' expectations are met. While on the one hand it is easy to identify the lingering colonial power relations embedded in the hospitality moments that unfold in exotic holidays (e.g. in the cultures of servitude and deference that many hotels offer western tourists), on the other, recent research on ecotourism in Java, for example, has shown just how tourist hosts and workers use such exchanges for their own forms of empowerment, education and postcolonial development (see Wright, 2010). Just as postcolonialism works against the grain of colonialism's precipitates in our present, it is also well positioned to attend to unlikely modes of resistance to such enduring forms of geographical colonialism.

## Conclusion

This first instalment on postcolonialism and its relevance for geography has shown that our close-at-hand geographical imaginations, as well as many of the material geopolitical realities of the modern world have their formative roots in colonial encounters, mappings and representations. In my second article, I will indicate how developments in postcolonial theory have also brought into view the interconnectedness of the modern world and the resulting 'hybridity' of culture and identity. The sheer diversity of postcolonial scholarship and its theoretical innovation across the social sciences and humanities makes it difficult to adequately summarise, but I wish to suggest that perhaps the major challenge postcolonialism sets us as geographers is to think again about some of the geographies we take most for granted. Because in those taken-for-granted geographical imaginations – the exotic gaze we might project onto modern India, for example – are embedded stubborn power geometries, developmental inequalities and privileges that colonialism put into place so many years ago. Postcolonialism should encourage us and our students to unlearn some of the geographical power, inequality and privilege retained by 'the west'. Postcolonialism's radical potential is, at its core, its refusal to recognise the superiority of western cultures and a propensity to productively disturb the order of the world (Young, 2003).

The second of the two articles on post-colonialism ('Postcolonial spaces and identity') will follow in the Summer 2012 issue of *Geography*.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Pat Noxolo, Eric Olund, Margo Huxley, Peter Jackson, Dorcas Brown and the two anonymous referees.

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## Key terms

**Discourse**: literally refers to a formal, lengthy discussion about a subject. However, postcolonial theorists usually adopt the French poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault's usage of the term which instead denotes systems of thoughts which are composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices, and as such systematically construct both the subjects and the worlds of which they speak.

**Exoticism**: used in postcolonial theory to refer to the qualities of people, places and things associated with the Orient as opposed to the Occident. It is a term that implies dreamy, aestheticised, desirable and often eroticised qualities, and like Orientalism, it is connected with a power relationship that objectifies and caricatures the non-west.

**Orientalism**: used by Edward Said in the late 1970s to refer to a tradition of 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century European and North American artistic, literary and academic representations of the East. The word 'Orientalist' was used from the 19th century to refer to artistic and scholarly traditions of depicting the East. However, Said used 'Orientalism' to refer to the unequal colonial power relationships that inhered in 'Orientalist' representational cultures.

**Orient**: this may refer to the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and other geographical regions subjugated by Europe and North America ('the Occident').

**Occident**: used to refer to western lands, regions or nation states; in other words, that which is not 'the Orient'.

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