



Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction

Robert J.C. Young

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Postcolonialism explores the political, social, and cultural effects of decolonization, continuing the anti-colonial challenge to western dominance. This lively and innovative account of both the history and key debates of postcolonialism discusses its importance as an historical condition, and as a means of changing the way we think about the world. Key concepts and issues are considered, with reference to particular cultural and historical examples, such as the status of aboriginal people, cultural nomadism, Western feminism, the innovative fiction of Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie, and the postcolonial cities of London, Bombay and Cairo. The work of theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Spivak are woven into the discussion, making this fascinating subject relevant and accessible to a wider audience.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Aubrey says

I cannot in good faith give this work a higher rating than I have. Interpretation of reading will always be a subjective beast, and so I subjectively imbue my reception with moral constraints and continue on as usual. It's impossible to present a credible method if the methodology is hopelessly corrupt; I do not know what the most holistic presentation of this subject matter would be, but it is not the standard sole white/white-passing boy picking and choosing his sources, shredding and simplifying his narratives, speaking over millions of far more experienced others in order to get that next paper and paycheck. The only difference between this work and a Wikipedia article (appropriation level's the same when considering the origin of 'Wiki') is the latter's constant background chant of "Do not trust. Do not trust. Do not trust," a logo both education and society at large would do well to plaster all over their entities. A privileged voice speaking without the barest hint of self-reflexivity is worse than useless.

Why, then, the second star? For the sake of the same Wiki-page descriptor: the derivations may be far too falsely cohesive and casually formed, but the sources are a wealth of possibilities. Guevara derived privilege from whiteness over indigenous revolutionaries, Gandhi's misogyny and anti-blackness are passed over far too often here and elsewhere, Fanon gets trotted out as the author's own personal Magical Black Intellectual/Writer/Doctor/Saint/etc etc etc (qualified black people are like Highlander, y'know: there can only be one), but *chase them down*. Young includes the glorious Spivak and Said as afterthoughts and forgoes the comp0lex grants and atrocities of Mao for the more sniffing attitudes at India (not white and previously under the author's homeland's control) and France (rivalry with England ring a bell?): do not repeat his mistakes (in some places conscientious excision cause what the actual fuck is this glancing over Churchill's responsibility for the Bengali famine) or his trivializing. Veils, music, Iraq, Dalits, environmentalism, sure, sure, sure. The fact remains: if an intro to postcolonialism doesn't send one who benefits from colonialist white supremacy like me running for the hills, you're doing it wrong.

I suppose my major complaint is that I paid the author money to read something I could've written better hung-over on very little sleep. True, it was assigned for class, but the title's a casually utilized indication of quality that will distract all from the far more valuable texts, both fiction and nonfiction, that reground foundations like *The Wretched of the Earth* and blow down walls like *Almanac of the Dead*. Reading this wasn't painful because of how much I knew already, but because someone with so little awareness of their place in postcolonialism is assigned in school. If they knew better, they would have provided the funding and sat down and shut up forever after that. If they really wanted to shake the colonized mind of the reader with postcolonial thought, they would have referred to the Taino, whose response to centuries of oppression is to demand ultimate respect for their cultural connectivity, creations, and holistic integrity, the likes of which the world has only afforded to the Vatican and its colonizing holiness for a very long time.

See, in postcolonialism, you do not get to watch. You do not get to touch. You do not have a language that accesses all or a guarantee that every bit will be the same and thus all experience is open to any who pass by with a four year to eight to however many year academic degree. The text has a lot of tidbits of theory and nonfictional tracts, but it does not speak of the need for boundaries, and it does not insist on the paramount act of respect, or invitation, or negotiations that forgo any naïve speeches about "sharing." There is nothing abstract or theorizing about this postcolonial civility, so the author's insistence on excluding such is no excuse. All in all, there's a lot of talk that talks, but the walk that walks will need to be in one of the many directions away.

Ike says

3.5-3.75 stars (I clearly need a more specific grading system). Really, it's exactly what it claims to be, a very short introduction, but that did at times make me wish for more depth. Absolutely loved the last chapter on translation though, that's where it became difficult to choose between 3 or 4 stars.

Jon says

A solid intro to postcolonialism that approaches its subject from a less theoretical perspective and from a more activist, humanitarian viewpoint. Robert Young is insistent that the best approach to tackling postcolonial issues is not from the top down, but from the ground up. Using examples and ideas from Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Vandana Shiva, Ghandi, and others, Young rather nicely shows just how important and valid some of the actions and philosophies of these radical activists and revolutionaries are. These people that are often so negatively described by the developed western world actually have some legitimate grounds for resisting the controlling force of western politics and capitalism.

Especially good sections in this book include chapter four on hybridity. The section on Raï music in Islamic culture is a fascinating look at how fusing musical styles and genres creates its own unique form of protest, as well as an assertion of a people's unique cultural identity. The concluding section of chapter four on the veil in Islam was perhaps the best part of the whole book. Young writes with a clear and illuminating precision about the evolution of meaning surrounding the veil, both within Islamic culture, as well as how it is seen by the western world. This was the best section for showing how each culture views things through their own cultural lens, and can so often misinterpret another culture's traditions. Really terrific stuff.

Overall, this was an enjoyable and illuminating read. At times I think Young's writing lost me a bit. In some sections it felt somewhat disjointed, like it needed to be just a touch more cohesive. But then other sections were really compelling and clearly written. Ultimately, the book is a successful introduction that I'm happy to have read.

Justin Evans says

Not really well-named, but then, this isn't a short introduction to anything in particular. It's more like a selection of only the most outrageous stories from thirty years worth of the *Guardian Weekly*. So if you're young and want to get all hep up about bombing and racism, and are more or less unaware that, e.g., the 'problems' of Iraq are more or less the result of imperial/colonial/Western stupidity, this book will blow your mind. If you thought that 'postcolonial theory' was anything in particular, and wanted to learn about it, you'll be disappointed. Young says he won't be writing about a theory, and there is no one theory, and everything else that you're meant to say. He also has sections that read like manifestos: Postcolonialism is x. It is y. It is not z, for z is insufficiently good. And once you get to the end of all the things that postcolonialism is, and the two or three that it is not, you will be enlightened, believe me. What is postcolonialism, at the end of the day? It "seeks to turn difference from the basis of oppression into one of positive, intercultural social diversity." It is, in other words, slightly pumped up, color-blind liberalism. Postcolonialism is the good side of The Force.

Quoting Mao will not win it any new fans, I assume and hope; nor will borderline moronic statements like "fatty beef is not necessarily the healthiest thing to be eating in an era of BSE and animals pumped with growth hormones. Why do people always grow taller in the United States? Think about it." Uh... better nutrition? Oh, no, I get it, it's because they've all been eating beef pumped with growth hormones. Never mind that the chapter on feminism is mainly about Gandhi, or that the problems with nationalism are traced, perversely, to "the German Romantic account of the nation, developed at state level in Europe by Nazi Germany" - yes, the Hitler-bomb! - and not to, say, the inevitably exclusionary and elitist results of the idea of a nation.

So his good intentions don't really help you. Nice as it is that he is writing this 'from below,' (below what? below the *third* floor of Wadham College?), and nice as it is that he doesn't use theory as a battering ram to cave in your skull, some rigor and selectivity would have been nice.

PS: A few weeks later, I think I've decided that this is a Very Short Introduction to the Historical Reasons that People Like the Theories of Postcolonialism. Nothing wrong with that I guess.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Postcolonialism : a very short introduction (Very Short Introductions #98), Robert J.C. Young
Postcolonialism explores the political, social, and cultural effects of decolonization, continuing the anti-colonial challenge to western dominance. This account discusses its importance as an historical condition, and as a means of changing the way we think about the world.

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Arianna says

I think the reading of this book should be mandatory in order to understand the world we live in. Reading this book helped me reaffirm and understand ideas that were already present in my head, expanding them with new concepts and facts or defining them in better terms.

Aaron says

Not enough praise could be expressed for Oxford University Press' 'Very Short Introductions'. They provide excellent surveys of a field of study with just enough depth to sensitise the reader to the potential of a set of disciplinary tools. Unfortunately, praise for the series as a whole cannot be applied to every book. Robert J.

C. Young's addition to the series is one those texts that does what it promised but in a fashion which seems alien to its topic.

Young admits that Postcolonial theory has been attacked for using obscurantist prose and jargon-laden approaches to topics that are potentially of great political relevance. Consequently he proposes to provide a Postcolonialism-lite which engages the political, economic and social issues that contextualise postcolonial theory and which could serve as an illustration of the theory. In this case, the theory never really had a place in the text and, as such, there was a sense of the unspoken throughout the book. This was a frustrating read even though I am someone who is only mildly familiar with the topic in general and some of the primary texts.

A series of tantalising quotations floated across the page but without being substantively engaged in the Young's narrative. Bhabha, Spivak and Said are all mentioned but without sustained discussion of their ideas in light of the historical examples Young claimed to be using to situate postcolonialism. This book rather seemed to suggest that a theory of postcolonialism is needed but that what has been done so far has proved effective in only a limited sense. This may well be true but Young never made this claim explicit and I doubt that is his thinking.

However, despite these failures, there are some redeeming qualities. The insights into Fanon's life, especially, the last section of the conclusion were useful and well-paced. Young's use of Rai music as an example of Hybridity was productive, but only because I had already read 'The Location of Culture'. Moreover, the discussion of translation and land did productively elaborate important ideas in this area.

The series is excellent but this book left much to be desired. Instead, purchase Loomba's Colonialism/Postcolonialism in the 'New Critical Idiom' series.

missy jean says

I was sometimes confused by Young's organization, but I appreciated his fundamental premise of emphasizing that postcolonialism can only be understood with a "bottom-up" perspective; as he writes in the introduction, "Postcolonialism is about turning the world upside down and looking at it from a different perspective, that is, from the perspective of the disenfranchised people, a majority of whom come from the developing world." To this end, I appreciated the fact that his narrative emphasized that postcolonialism is not the sole property of sparring theorists, but that it also belongs to practitioners: organizers, collective social movements, protesters, revolutionaries. I think this perspective is critical because maintaining a grassroots perspective can help academics avoid engaging in "discursive colonization" (in Chandra Mohanty's words), because the knowledge-making and reality-constructed capacities of colonized people are always healthily respected.

Adam says

Atrocious. Young is a terrible writer, absolutely uninterested in providing real arguments, instead using the rhetoric of an angry teenager in a Che t-shirt.

I don't think I have a problem with postcolonialism, broadly. Edward Said is one of my intellectual heroes.

But I do have a problem with the sort of unconsidered, moronic, stupid, and, get this, fundamentally *imperialistic* and *colonial* PC white guilt 'you poor third world- sorry- *tricontinental* people' crap this book is full of. As just one example, while liberally using Che and Mao as figures of empowerment and enlightened revolution, Young seems unaware of any problems people might have with a white man telling other white people (who, let's face it, are mostly the people who are going to be reading this thing) about the excellent politics of a man (Mao) who killed 70 million people in the course of his 'liberating' revolution. Also, he displays a severe lack of understanding (excepting a few lines where he'll insist that he disagrees with the hierarchical politics of Hindus, for example) of the possible enlightening value of some Western ideas for the 'tricontinental' world, at least when in the hands of people from those countries. Young's writing on the hijab and burka as potentially 'empowering' for Muslim women is especially idiotic.

In other words, it's all bullshit, folks. Ignore this thing.

Shirin says

Easy-read. Finished it in an afternoon and liked it.

Erika says

This is a difficult subject and the author does wonders in this brief work.

Bertrand says

You see those "very short introductions" pretty much everywhere, but I think that's the first one I actually read: in France, we have the older and parallel institutions of the "Que sais-je?" which endeavours, I think similarly, to publish short surveys of particular (or less particular) fields by leading academics.

I suppose Young's approach, even compared to the rest of the collection, is rather unorthodox: He does not provide a survey of the issues engaged by postcolonialism, which would likely have been impossible given the vagueness and/or controversial nature of its boundaries. Neither does he attempt to position and list the theories and their authors which constitute it, which once again, as anyone who has tried Spivak or Bhabha knows, wouldn't be easily fitted in an "introduction"; Instead he opts for "montage", hopping from continent to continent (Africa, Asia and South America), from the colonial experience to the liberation struggles, to our present days, from one facet (say, land-reform) to another (feminism), and so on.

The result read somewhat like a travelogue or like journalism; Do we get the general picture we most likely came for? To an extent: I think the book was written as a kind of sentimental appeal directed to the westerns, and as such it works quite well. Save for a necessarily short comparative excursus on Fanon and Che, however, we do not get much in the way of theory beyond the occasional quote used as chapter heading. What we do get, however, is the desire to learn more; If not as an introduction to the field, then as an introduction to an introduction, the book works rather well.

Donald Quist says

Useful. A helpful gateway to more substantial texts.

Arjun says

Robert Young draws from leading postcolonialism thinkers (primarily Chakravorty Spivak, Fanon, Bhabha, and Said) and presents postcolonialism in a collage of case-studies. Some highlights include the anti-establishment music genre Rai as an exemplar of postcolonial creation, Islamic veils and the western response to them, feminism in the postcolonial era, Gandhi's misogyny and Mirabehn's environmentalism, and towards the end, a stimulating chapter on translation and linguistics as a vessel for postcolonial activism.

Reading other GR reviews of this, there seems to be a consensus that the presentation wasn't loyal to the spirit of postcolonialism. I don't know about that, but this book introduced me to a PoMo-style politics that leaves me both hopeful and shaken. Hopeful because it allows me to imagine a future where this train of thought forces leaders from imperial countries, like Emmanuel Macron of France, to come forward and acknowledge their country's colonial crimes. At the same time it unsettles me because it forces me to see privileges that I've might've been abusing without being conscious of them.

And for me, that's enough to warrant this book four stars.

Pete says

The books in Harvard's "A Very Short Introduction" series never feel as short as they look, and maybe that's partly why they're so effective. Postcolonialism has been a looming theme in my studies for the almost 8 years I've been studying in university (I want a refund). Young's "introduction" to the subject is easily the best summary for anyone that needs to have more than a passable awareness of the basic tenets of Postcolonialism but doesn't want to marry it.
