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neocolonialism

Origin of neocolonialism French government officials Christian Pineau (left) and Maurice Faure at the signing of th...(more)

Ask the Chatbot a Question

Sandra Halperin Britannica Editors History

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neocolonialism, the control of less-developed countries by developed countries through indirect means. The term *neocolonialism* was first used after World War II to refer to the continuing dependence of former colonies on foreign countries, but its meaning soon broadened to apply, more generally, to places where the power of developed countries was used to produce a colonial-like exploitation—for instance, in Latin America, where direct foreign rule had ended in the early 19th century. The term is now an unambiguously negative one that is widely used to refer to a form of global

combine to perpetuate colonial forms of exploitation of developing countries. Neocolonialism has been broadly understood as a further development of capitalism that enables capitalist powers (both nations and corporations) to dominate subject nations through the operations of international capitalism rather than by means of direct rule.

The term *neocolonialism* was originally applied to European policies that were seen as schemes to maintain control of African and other dependencies. The event that marked the beginning of this usage was a meeting of European heads of government in Paris in 1957, where six European leaders agreed to include their overseas territories within the European Common Market under trade arrangements that were seen by some national leaders and groups as representing a new form of economic domination over French-occupied Africa and the colonial

territories of Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands. The agreement reached at Paris was codified in the Treaty of Rome (1957), which established the European Economic Community (EEC), or Common Market.

Neocolonialism came to be seen more generally as involving a coordinated effort by former colonial powers and other developed countries to block growth in developing countries and retain them as sources of cheap raw materials and cheap labor. This effort was seen as closely associated with the Cold War and, in particular, with the U.S. policy known as the Truman Doctrine. Under that policy the U.S. government offered large amounts of money to any government prepared to accept U.S. protection from communism. That enabled the United States to extend its sphere of influence and, in some cases, to place foreign governments under its control. The United States and other developed countries also ensured the subordination of developing countries, critics argue, by interfering in conflicts and helping in other ways to install regimes that were willing to act for the benefit of foreign companies and against their own country's interests.

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More broadly, neocolonial governance is seen as operating through indirect forms of control and, in particular, by means of the economic, financial, and trade policies of transnational corporations and global and multilateral institutions. Critics argue that neocolonialism operates through the investments of multinational corporations that, while enriching a few in underdeveloped countries, keep those countries as a whole in a situation of dependency; such investments also serve to cultivate underdeveloped countries as reservoirs of cheap labor and raw materials. International financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank also are often accused of participating in neocolonialism, by making loans (as well as other forms of economic aid) that are conditional on the recipient countries taking steps favorable to those

represented by these institutions but detrimental to their own economies. Thus, although many people see these corporations and institutions as part of an essentially new global order, the notion of neocolonialism sheds light on what, in this system and constellation of power, represents continuity between the present and past. *See also* dependency theory.

Politics, Law & Government › Politics & Political Systems

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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.

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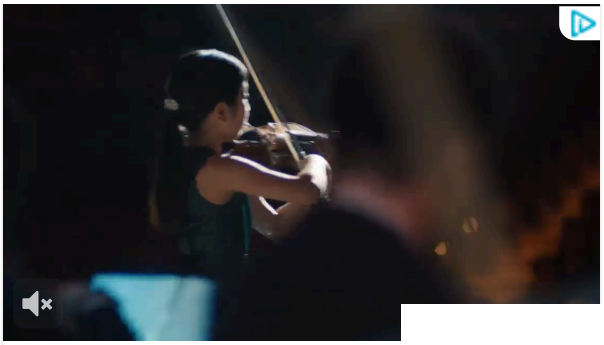
Postcolonial theorists and historians have been concerned with investigating the various trajectories of modernity as understood and experienced from a range of philosophical, cultural, and historical perspectives. They have been particularly concerned with engaging with the ambiguous legacy of the Enlightenment—as 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.

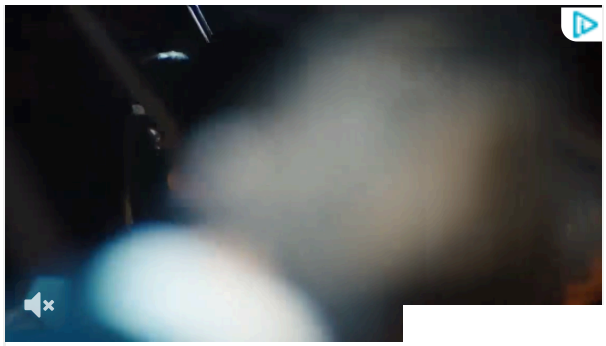


The term *postcolonialism* is also sometimes used to refer to the struggles of indigenous peoples in many parts of the world in the early 21st century. However, given the interpretation of the principles of self-determination and self-government within the international system, along with the minority 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

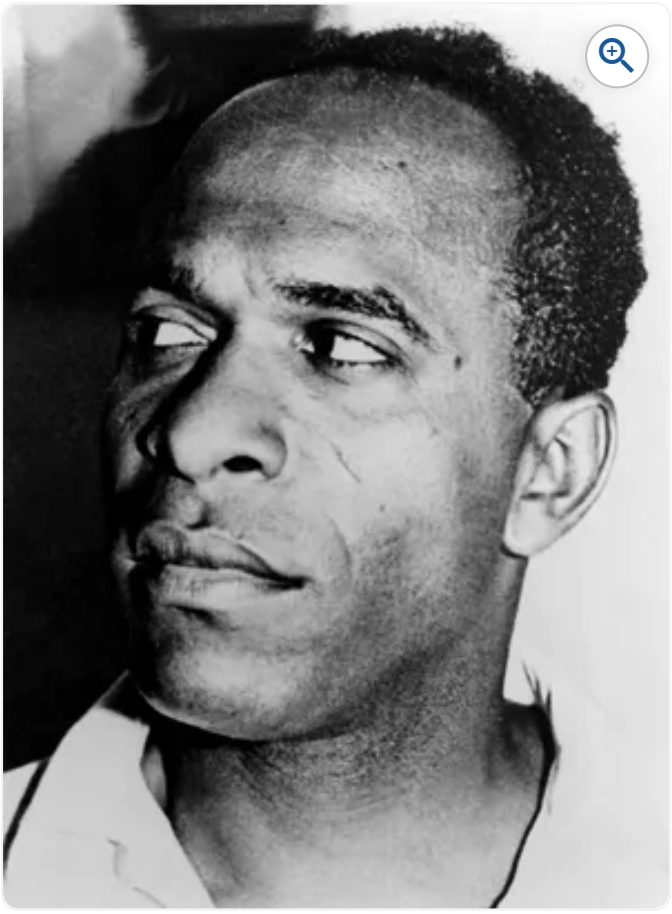
empire in the 20th century were themselves deeply influenced by European social and political theory as much as they were deeply critical of it. The seminal work of C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said, as well as by the group of historians associated with the editorial 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.

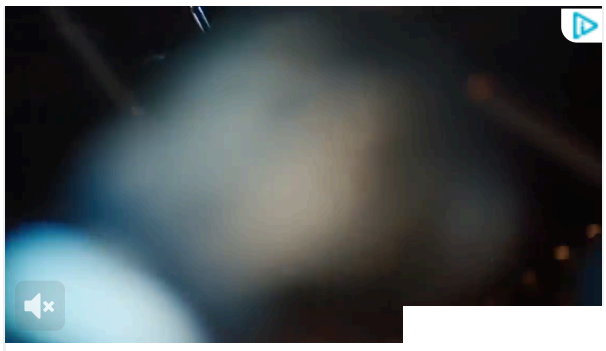


Frantz Fanon Frantz Fanon, undated photograph.

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.



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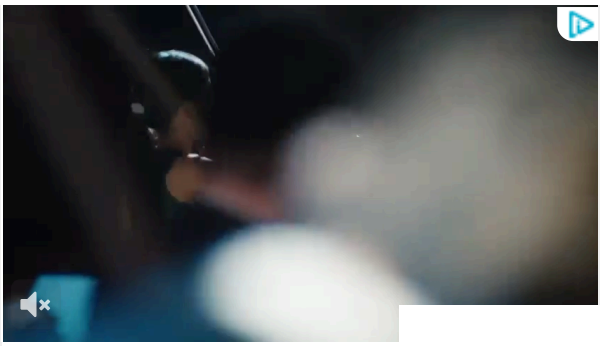
Fanon's work emphasized the complex relation between imperialism and nationalism that remained a critical focus of much postcolonial writing. The aspiration for self-determination at the heart of anticolonial struggles proved difficult to institutionalize democratically in existing postcolonial states (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.



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