

***Geographies of Postcolonialism: Spaces of Power and Representation*, by Joanne P. Sharp, Los Angeles: Sage, 2009, 158 pp.**

Joanne P. Sharp's *Geographies of Postcolonialism* is a short, useful, and accessible introduction to the postcolonial approach within geography. Sharp states in the book's acknowledgements that her argument is based on an Honors undergraduate course she taught over the preceding ten years. It is precisely in that type of context — introducing postcolonialism to students/geographers with relatively little background in the approach — that the book holds the most value. It will have little use, except as a teaching tool, for geographers with a basic understanding of postcolonialism, as it neither systematically surveys the state of postcolonialism within geography nor does it introduce a novel perspective/argument.

The Introduction to *Geographies of Postcolonialism* begins with personal accounts from three writers, each of whose identities can be described as bi-national or multinational. In today's globalized world, elements of rapid and ever-present change interact with elements that appear much more solidly rooted in singular cultural traditions. A postcolonial perspective, Sharp explains, helps us make sense of the ambiguity created by the interaction of the two elements. The Introduction also lays the groundwork for the book's argument by distinguishing between *post-colonialism* (the period/condition following independence from colonizing powers) and *postcolonialism* (a particular critical approach to analyzing

the worlds of colonialism and post-colonialism). Sharp notes that postcolonialism is not a neutral approach to knowledge, but instead has a very specific agenda: to shift the major ways in which relations between Western and non-Western peoples are viewed by disrupting the hierarchy within those relations. In other words, postcolonialism seeks to profoundly question the assumption that Western forms of knowledge and culture are superior to non-Western forms.

Part I is called “Colonialisms.” It begins in Chapter 1 by pointing to the power of imagining others and imagining geographies. Europeans built their worlds in part by imagining various differences that they believed characterized other peoples and places. By contrasting themselves to such characteristics, these imagined differences helped Europeans create a sense of who they themselves were — a sense of identity. Building on earlier imaginations, a specific form of imagining others — Orientalism — emerged as part of the Western colonial project. Orientalism was marked by an assumption that difference, strangeness, and inferiority characterized non-European cultures. Chapter 2 explores how particular forms of knowing — particular approaches to knowledge—became part of the power relationships that made colonialism possible. These forms include the European Enlightenment, with its emphasis on science and technology; academic societies; scientific racism and social Darwinism; travel accounts characterized by nationalism, masculinity, and a romantic approach to far-off places; and World’s Fairs. Chapter 3 examines how power and Orientalism operated in the specifically geographical context of colonial landscapes. Through careful examination of landscapes, Sharp argues, geographers can make particular contributions to the postcolonial project. Such analyses show, in ways that textual analysis alone cannot, that European colonial projects were often incomplete and fragmented. Colonization was thus a give-and-take relationship (if still marked by greatly differing levels of power), and not simply total domination, between colonizing and colonized peoples/places.

Sharp calls Part II “Post-colonialisms.” Here she develops the argument that the Orientalist forms of knowledge and ways of imagining that marked Western colonialisms have left a strong mark on today’s (mostly) decolonized world. Chapter 4 explores both the promise and the actuality of post-colonialism, again by focusing on cultural imaginations. Decolonization has apparently allowed colonized places to create strong national identities and develop the education and skills necessary to compete in the modern world. However, while true to some extent, Sharp emphasizes that this particular narrative of decolonization still centers the West as the “hero of the story” (p. 74). It is through Western values and forms of knowledge that non-Western parts of the world seem to have the opportunity to develop themselves. They succeed by abandoning their own cultures. Thus in reality, she argues, the specific post-World War II geopolitical structure (First, Second, and Third Worlds) possessed hierarchies, cultural logic, and forms of knowing similar to the colonialism it replaced. Chapter 5 focuses on particular cases of cultural imperialism persisting within today’s world of globalization. In globalization, patterns of capitalistic consumption of goods and services create and reinforce cultural relationships between peoples/places across the world. Sharp illustrates how cultural imperialism from the West toward the non-West is established through film, fashion, magazines, and tourism. Nevertheless, she argues, the issue of cultural imperialism is complex. Much of the concern with cultural imperialism arises because of Western concerns about the loss non-Western cultures. Without carefully listening to non-Western peoples’ desires, the West often worries that (what it imagines to be) authentic and stable non-Western cultures will be lost.

Part III centers on “Postcolonialisms.” As illustrated in the previous two sections of the book, much of postcolonial writing *critiques* dominant Western cultural assumptions and forms of knowledge. In this section Sharp shows how postcolonial writing can aid a *positive* political project. Chapter 6 deals with key theoretical issues and debates. A central question is whether/how one can speak

for others of different cultures (or even as a representative of a non-dominant culture) without reproducing imperial or stereotypical ways of knowing. Even apparently liberatory ways of knowing, such as feminism, face fundamental challenges in this regard. A second key debate is whether formerly colonized peoples are better off embracing or rejecting the mixtures of cultures and apparent impurity that exists in post-colonial situations. Chapter 7 explores specific cultural expressions of this latter debate, particularly through concepts of hybridity and fundamentalism. Turning away from popular culture, Chapter 8 asks how regional economic development projects might usefully incorporate postcolonial perspectives. Sharp hereby extends postcolonialism to a more traditional concern within geography. Noting the frequently uneasy relationships between development and postcolonial experts, she concludes the book by suggesting how these two types of knowing might work together better.

As the book is oriented primarily toward introducing postcolonialism to geography students, Sharp does not attempt to break much new ground. Her major examples are well known within postcolonial literatures. She gives special attention to such traditional “big name” theorists as Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Mary-Louise Pratt, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Salman Rushdie, bell hooks, Partha Chatterjee, and Frantz Fanon (including a thoughtful discussion of his advocacy of anti-colonial violence) outside of geography; and James Duncan, Matthew Sparke, Doreen Massey, Derek Gregory, Katherine Mitchell, and Allison Blunt within geography. The key concepts she discusses are likewise unsurprising; for example, in addition to those already mentioned: discourse, power-knowledge, racism, binary logic, the body, and strategic essentialism.

Nevertheless, while not presenting a novel analysis, *Geographies of Postcolonialism* does several things well which make it appropriate for its intended audience. Most notably, the book provides an accessible entry into postcolonial thought. Much of postcolonial literature is difficult. Its roots in poststructural and other forms of literary analysis give it a highly specialized vocabulary and way of

thinking. It poses great challenges to non-expert speakers of English and those with little background in cultural theory/analysis. Sharp skillfully makes postcolonialism's fundamental claims, issues, and debates easily understood. Second, Sharp shows clearly why postcolonialism should interest geographers, even those without a background in cultural theory. Her discussions of landscape and development, though perhaps briefer than might be desired, demonstrate that postcolonialism in geography has applications beyond textual criticism. Additionally, *Geographies of Postcolonialism* will work well as a teaching tool. It explains and highlights key concepts well, effectively poses important questions for readers to ponder, and provides not only strong arguments supporting key postcolonial ideas but also important lines of critique that students will benefit from exploring.

I regard the book as a very good, but not superb, introduction to postcolonialism for geographers. In spite of its accessibility, it could better acknowledge postcolonialism's debt in its approach to knowledge to other theoretical perspectives, especially poststructuralism. Adding explanations of a few key concepts derived from poststructuralism — self/other, subject, and hegemony, for example — would strengthen the presentation. A glossary would add to its value for students. The book appears to have been put together a bit too quickly; a few typographical errors are apparent. Perhaps most important, the book reproduces, without adequate discussion, one of postcolonialism's key weaknesses. This relates to the paradox that while postcolonialism frequently critiques Western academic types of knowledge, it consists mostly of highly complex academic writing within the Western languages of English and French. Postcolonialism may be highly useful and cathartic for scholars who work directly within societies affected by British, French, and American colonialisms, but its relevance to other parts of the world has always been much more questionable. *Geographies of Postcolonialism* briefly acknowledges some of postcolonialism's paradoxes and uses a more accessible writing style. But it does

little to address this issue of Western-centeredness. Thus I suspect that in East Asia this book will offer a strong introduction to a perspective currently important in English-language human geography, but will not dispel concerns that postcolonialism, despite its objectives, remains a highly Western-centric approach.

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