specter is haunting American history: the specter of postcolonialism. Jack P. Greene is only the latest in a diverse series of Americanists to call for a postcolonial turn in the study of what has long been termed colonial America.¹ There are weak and strong versions of that turn. The weaker version is postcolonial in the chronological sense that it is the successor of colonial history: less beholden to teleology, unencumbered by anachronism and nationalism, and not hierarchically disposed between center and periphery, metropole and colony, dependency and independence. It demands a change in the scale of American history by placing that history in broader contexts of comparison and conjunction, encompassing the entire North American continent, the hemispheric Americas, the greater Atlantic world, or the British Empire, for example.

The strong version, by contrast, is postcolonial in the metaphysical sense that it assumes "that some of its characteristic features could not have arisen without the particular colonial history that went before."² Such a history assumes the continuity of colonialism beyond independence or decolonization but attempts to avoid the disabling narratives of inclusion and exclusion, inferiority and superiority, achievement and potential, which informed the ideology of colonialism itself. To make a

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postcolonial turn in this sense would set American history within the
same analytic framework as the histories of South and Southeast Asia,
Africa, and the Middle East—those parts of the globe that mostly
European colonialism forcibly shaped, leaving behind ineradicable colo-
nial legacies even for the formally decolonized. It would also demand
nothing less than a wholesale revision of the histories of the peoples and
territory now occupied by the United States.

The weak version of a postcolonial American history is now sweep-
ing the board in scholarship and teaching. We may not all be
Atlanticists now (or yet), but the salutary expansion of historical hori-
zons to encompass the prehistory of the continental United States and
the larger oceanic and imperial connections of the British American
colonies has proceeded apace in the last three decades. Much of the
credit for this achievement can go to Greene himself, thanks to his peri-
odic reports on the state of the field and his frequent exhortations to
consider alternative and more expansive approaches to it. In the mid-
1980s, for example, Greene, J. R. Pole, and others collaborated in recon-
ceiving colonial American history as the history of early modern British
America: a chronologically postcolonial history before the term post-
colonialism had even entered the vocabulary of the human sciences.
Now that the metaphysically postcolonial is reshaping studies even of
the Middle Ages, Greene recommends that students of antebellum
America should follow suit.3 But has he now moved from weak to
strong, from chronological to metaphysical, postcolonialism? And if so
how likely is he to find others to follow him in this sharper turn?

For the moment at least, Greene’s postcolonialism is somewhat
stronger than the version he and his collaborators offered more than two
decades ago. It decisively questions the teleological subordination of
colonial American history to the history of American nationhood: “No
longer can scholars think of colonial as something exclusively prena-
tional,” Greene writes. It also aligns itself with a broader movement
among students of colonialism to include settler colonialism within
their ambit. It will be greatly reinforced by, and will in turn further
courage studies that place the American experience of settlement, the
process of dispossession, the extension of law, and the elaboration of

3 Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, eds., Colonial British America: Essays in the New
History of the Early Modern Era (Baltimore, 1984). For an up-to-date report on devel-
opments in Atlantic history, see Alison Games, “Atlantic History: Definitions,
Challenges, and Opportunities,” American Historical Review 111, no. 3 (June 2006):
741–57. On the postcolonial turn in medieval studies, see for example Jeffrey Jerome
Cohen, ed., The Postcolonial Middle Ages (New York, 2000); Ananya Jahanara Kabir
and Deanne Williams, eds., Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages:
Translating Cultures (Cambridge, 2005).
sovereignty in the comparative context of Anglophone settlement across the globe.4

The great advantage of Greene’s postcolonial perspective is that it reveals the common imperial features that spanned what have conventionally been seen as the colonial and national eras. The United States was—or rather were—born into a world of empires; little wonder, then, that the land-hungry, westward-expanding, federal Republic should have taken on many of the features of the imperial state that had given birth to it and also of its imperial neighbors and contemporaries. The world of states today emerged decisively only in the last fifty years in the aftermath of decolonization, though its roots lie in American and Latin American revolutions. Scholars should not project its peculiar features onto eras when states were only one among many competing forms of corporate human association. Taking that knowledge into account allows historians to uncouple nationhood from statehood and to reverse the nationalist teleology that informed much American historical writing. It will also have the salutary effect of bringing American history into closer parallel with developments in Latin American and South Asian history, both of which have tended to stress continuity rather than rupture in the passage from the colonial to the postcolonial state.5

Such a rapprochement between American history and the histories of other comparable regions should ameliorate one possible implication of Greene’s proposed research program: what looks like a turn inward, to the level of the individual states, as against the turn outward, “attentive to the larger contexts in which developments in America took place,” as


he puts it. The challenge for those who pick up the gauntlet Greene has thrown down will be to keep the larger contexts in play simultaneously with what he calls “the localist perspective.”6 Only by testing theory against the American experience in this way will it be possible for Americanists to determine whether the postcolonial specter has substance or whether it should be exorcised once and for all.

6 Greene, WMQ 64: XXXX.