From Colonial History to Postcolonial History: A Turn Too Far?

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A 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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[1] Following Jack P. Greene, I use "American" here in the residually nationalist sense of "United-States-ian," not as a synecdoche for North American or western hemispheric. In addition to the works on the postcolonial turn in American history cited by Greene, see for example Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, N.C., 1993); C. Richard King, ed., *Postcolonial America* (Urbana, Ill., 2000); Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, eds., *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* (Jackson, Miss., 2000); Kariann Akemi Yokota, "Post-Colonial America: Transatlantic Networks of Exchange in the Early National Period" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2002); Joyce E. Chaplin, "Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (March 2003): 143–63.

[2] Sudipta Kaviraj, "A State of Contradictions: The Post-Colonial State in India," in *States and Citizens: History, Theory, Prospects*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Bo Stråth (Cambridge, 2003), 146.

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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 colonial 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 sweeping the board in scholarship and teaching. We may not all be Atlanticists now (or yet), but the salutary expansion of historical horizons 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 periodic 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 reconceiving colonial American history as the history of early modern British America: a chronologically postcolonial history before the term postcolonialism 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 prenational," 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 encourage 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 developments 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

[4] Jack P. Greene, "Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 64, no. 2 (April 2007): XXXX. For excellent examples of the study of settler colonialism, see Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen, eds., *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies* (New York, 2005). Comparative studies of Anglophone settlement include Peter Karsten, *Between Law and Custom: "High" and "Low" Legal Cultures in the Lands of the British Diaspora—The United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, 1600–1900* (Cambridge, 2002); John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650–1900* (Montreal, Canada, 2003); P. G. McHugh, *Aboriginal Societies and the Common Law: A History of Sovereignty, Status, and Self-Determination* (Oxford, Eng., 2004).

[5] On empires and states, see Frederick Cooper, "States, Empires, and Political Imagination," in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005), 153–203; Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007). For studies of Latin American and South Asian history in this vein, see for example Kaviraj, "State of Contradictions"; Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, 2d ed. (New York, 2004); Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Independence of Spanish America* (Cambridge, 1998); Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton, N.J., 2006).

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.