

Postcolonial Cities

A. D. King, State University of New York Binghamton, Binghamton, NY, USA

© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Definitions

In everyday usage, postcolonial cities refer to those cities (frequently capitals) in what were previously colonial societies. In addition to this temporal or historical use of the term, however, postcolonial may also imply a particular critique, one which not only emphasizes the distinctive impact which colonialism has had on the economy, society, culture, spatial form, and architecture of the city but also on the way the city itself is understood and represented. Thus, some postcolonial critics would reject or deny representations of cities as postcolonial, arguing that this privileges a particular (usually 'Western') interpretation of the city at the expense of a more indigenous one. As the terms imperialism and colonialism are often used interchangeably, in what follows, imperialism refers to the imposition of the power of one state over the territories of another, frequently by military force. Where imperialism originates in the metropole, what happens in the colonies resulting from economic, political, and cultural control and domination is colonialism, even though this can take various forms. While the term postcolonial can be used to apply to all historical and geographical instances of colonialism, whether of the Romans in Britain, the Japanese in Korea, or the English in Ireland, this article focuses on European industrial colonialism and its aftermath in the non-European world.

In a less-frequent usage, the term postcolonial cities refers to those capitals or major cities of the one-time imperial metropolises, such as Paris, London, Birmingham, or Amsterdam, not only because of the large postcolonial populations they have attracted following the formal end of empire and independence of what were previously colonies, but also because for migrants from these ex-colonies, for example, Paris or London is a postcolonial city. The term can also be used more metaphorically to refer, for example, to cities in Eastern Europe, previously under the hegemonic control of the Soviet Union. Irrespective of the different uses of the term, understanding the meaning of the postcolonial city presupposes familiarity with the inextricably connected concept of the colonial city.

Origins of Interest in Postcolonial Cities in Human Geography and the Social Sciences

In the 30 years following World War II, over 70 states, previously European colonies, gained their political if not economic independence. From the mid-1950s, a number of mainly North American and European social scientists (geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists), studying aspects of urbanization in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, began to identify distinctive social, spatial, and cultural characteristics of towns and cities in recently decolonized countries where European traders, settlers, and colonial officials had lived (or were still living) and whose urban development they had largely controlled. With the departure of the former colonial power, these colonial towns and cities had now been inherited by the newly liberated subjects of the independent nation. What these studies described were dual cities, ethnically, socially, and spatially segregated between the 'European' town and 'native' settlement; the first, modern, spacious, low density, well maintained through the use of town planning, and culturally different from the surrounding environment; the second, usually separated from the first by parks, railway lines, or open space, invariably more densely settled, with traditional housing, social and cultural buildings overcrowded, and lacking in services and infrastructural provision. A powerful condemnation of this phenomenon from French Algeria that simultaneously conveys the sense of oppression and injustice experienced by members of the colonized society is that of the Martiniquan nationalist writer, Frantz Fanon, in his oft-cited critique of colonialism, *Les Damnés de la Terre*:

The colonial world is a world divided into compartments ... of native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans; in the same way we need not recall apartheid in South Africa ... The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers, are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesman of the settler and his rule of oppression ... The settler's town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel ... The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the

reservation, is a place of ill fame ... It is a world without spaciousness, men live on top of each other ... The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. (Frantz Fanon, 1961: 37–39)

While this dual-cities phenomenon, though varying greatly between different places, was widely recognized, it is evident from the mid-1960s' comments of American sociologist, Janet Abu-Lughod, that, despite the occasional observations mentioned above, the subject had not yet attracted serious theoretical or policy-related attention, either from local or foreign observers:

The major metropolis in almost every newly-industrialising country is not a single unified city, but, in fact, two quite different cities, physically juxtaposed but architecturally and socially distinct ... These dual cities have usually been a legacy from the colonial past. It is remarkable that such a phenomenon has remained almost unstudied. (Janet Abu-Lughod, 1965: 420)

The years which followed witnessed a number of serious attempts to remedy this situation. The interest in human geography and other disciplines came from two sources. One was the growing dissatisfaction among geographers, sociologists, and others, increasingly familiar with cities outside the West, of the inadequate state of comparative urban theory at this time. This was seen as largely based on Western industrial experience with theories of urban and city growth dominated by the work of the Chicago School. For these scholars, serious thinking about the concept of the colonial city and theories of colonial urban development were to take place between the late 1960s and mid-1970s.

The second impetus came from urban professionals concerned with policy-related issues of urban development planning following the end of colonial rule. It was in these two, often interrelated, contexts that a more theoretically informed understanding of the notion of both the colonial and postcolonial city developed. It was an understanding which recognized that, despite political independence, the persistence of colonial structures – represented among others by the grossly unequal social and spatial divisions of major cities – was an affront to the democratic aspirations of newly independent nations. This 'colonial space' of the European part of the city and its distance from the native settlement was not just based on the standards and specifications of the so-called modern city in the West; in many cases, in order to satisfy the political and cultural demands of the colonial elite, it also represented a gross inflation of these standards. In many postcolonial cities, decades after independence, while the native area of the city crumbled under pressure from rapid migration, indigenous elites occupied the spaces vacated by their foreign predecessors.

In addition to these real spatial inequalities, however, the newly independent nation was faced with additional symbolic contradictions in the city. In different colonial towns and capital cities, the architecture and urban design of the imperial power, whether modest or grandiose, had been consciously conceived to convey cultural as well as political authority. For the political elite of the new postcolonial nation, removing monuments and replacing street names with those of their own folk heroes was relatively simple; however, endowing the city with a totally new national identity, one that draws on its own vernacular cultures, representational spaces, and modes of signification, was not only a much longer-term project but also, because of competing regional, ethnic, linguistic, and other tensions in newly established nation-states, a deeply contentious one. Moreover, more immediate priorities had to be addressed, such as political stability, land redistribution, economic development, or providing shelter for the burgeoning population in squatter settlements. In this context, transforming the image of the city, projecting a new identity, had usually taken second place on a new nation's agenda. In India, for example, it took almost 40 years after independence for the names of India's one-time colonial port cities, such as Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, to be vernacularized as Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkatta, respectively.

Representing the City

As with the term postcolonial itself, it can be argued that the category of the postcolonial city is more of an outsider's than insider's label. It privileges a representation of the city which foregrounds its colonial past, rather than the city's present or future. In this sense, postcolonial can carry the meaning of the failure of decolonization. Is the once-colonial city destined to be forever postcolonial or can it, like Hong Kong or Singapore, gradually metamorphose into a world or global city? The mutability of categories applies equally to other terms used over the last 50 years with reference to other cities in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. Where world space is couched within a developmentalist framework, rather than one of colonialism and postcolonialism, the same cities are referred to as 'Third World Cities', a phrase coming into use following the invention of the 'Three Worlds' paradigm in the early 1950s. In this conceptual framework, they are represented not with regard to issues of cultural identity, heritage, and questions of representation, but rather in relation to inadequate water and shelter provision, unemployment, and overburdened infrastructure. As all such representational categories emanate from a globally dominant anglophone positionality and a discourse originating in the West, it follows that they are either contested or

rarely used by the inhabitants of the city itself, whether urban professionals or local residents. However, since the late twentieth century, new research and scholarship on the colonial and postcolonial city by scholars native to the city has resulted in original and interesting perspectives on both.

Revisiting the Colonial and Postcolonial City

While the earlier studies of colonial and postcolonial cities (principally in English, though also in French and Spanish) produced during the first three or four decades following the end of colonial rule might be described as the first critical accounts of such cities, they have generally located the topic within a European or Euro-American frame of reference. Moreover, as they were generally based on European archives and language sources, the agency for the cities' development has frequently been primarily accorded to their European inhabitants, with less attention paid to that of the indigenous population. Since the late twentieth century, however, studies by scholars native to the city or country, drawing on previously unused sources, often in local languages, have begun to transform this perspective. Accounts of the development of Singapore, for instance, based on a detailed study of local archives, have challenged the notion of the colonial city as simply the outcome of dominant (Western) forces. They represent the city as a product of indigenous, local agency where the colonized have maintained substantial control over their lives.

Other recent studies of the colonial city have challenged one of the dominant themes of these earlier Euro-American studies, namely, the ethnic, racial, social, and spatial divide between the indigenous city and the European colonial settlement. Detailed historical studies of Delhi, for example, drawing on a variety of different local archives, have questioned the use of dualistic categories of colonizer/colonized, traditional/modern, European/native, old/new, and shown that social and spatial divisions in the city were not nearly so clear cut as has been represented. Instead, there were charged interconnections between the two spaces. The new colonial settlement offered opportunities for some Indian residents to move between cultures and spaces, constructing new identities, identifying with the new by rejecting the old, and creating indigenous modernities. A similar study of Calcutta, making use of local languages, challenges an oft-repeated colonial representation of the city as a space marked by a Manichean division between the 'European city' and the 'black town'. While such labels certainly exist on European maps and in the anglophone colonial records, helping to confirm

European perceptions of the city, they (and similar terms) are absent in local Bengali accounts of the city, and hence, do not inhibit the movement or activities of local inhabitants. For them, the meaning of the city is not constructed through a perception of colonial spatial divisions but rather as a cradle of Bengal nationalism.

These recent accounts, postcolonial in both senses of the term, show that the space of 'the colonial city' is both ambiguous and contested. Most importantly, attitudes have changed over time. The same is true of the postcolonial city, a concept not easy to define. What has happened in the decades since it first came into use is that its meaning has fluctuated, not least because the conditions in which the postcolonial city exists have also changed. This is most clearly seen in relation to the postcolonial Indonesian capital of Jakarta. Here, following the end of Dutch colonial rule in the mid-twentieth century, social and political oppression not only returned during the three decades (1966–98) of President Suharto's dictatorial 'New Order' regime, but also their severity and scope increased. In this context, the urban, housing, and architectural developments undertaken by the Dutch have, by comparison, been seen by an Indonesian scholar as relatively enlightened, a 'colonial gift' inherited by the postcolonial society and state. Clearly, however, not all postcolonial accounts of colonial cities are so benign.

In this context, how is the postcolonial city recognized? This is not easily answered as cities are not necessarily postcolonial in the same way. The most drastic solution to transforming the colonial city and, in the process, changing the public's sense of commitment to the nation and promoting a sense of national pride, is to shift the geographical location of the capital, not only building a new city on a new site, but also using spectacular vernacular architecture and an indigenous name to do so, a strategy adopted by Sri Lanka in shifting its capital from Colombo to Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte. Less dramatic is the construction of a new capitol or parliament building, a strategy adopted by Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, and Kuwait, among others. Elsewhere, as in India's capital city, the lavish spatial layout of the central areas of New Delhi has, over the half-century since independence, been re-densified by the addition of numerous government buildings. Toponymic reinscription is a common way of reclaiming the cultural space of city streets. The urban and architectural attributes of the one-time colonial city can also be treated as part of the city's inheritance and used for the promotion of tourism. Yet such policies are invariably contested. For some, but not for others, half a century after independence, the symbolic significance of colonial buildings has lost its oppressive meaning and become an apolitical part of the nation's heritage. While such a policy may be enthusiastically endorsed by UNESCO's International

Committee on Monuments and Sites, it can be bitterly resisted by local groups.

In other cities, such as Brazilia, Chandigarh, or Islamabad, modernist architecture has been combined with nationalist rhetoric to create new images for the nation. From the late twentieth century, constructing the world's highest building, as in Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur or Taiwan's capital, Taipei, has become an essentially competitive strategy for postcolonial nations to 'put themselves on the map' and make claims on others' definitions of modernity. In all these strategies, the aim is to convey to the city's inhabitants a new sense of national citizenship, a new collective consciousness.

Yet, irrespective of these changes to the physical environment, inherent structures of power, inherited from the colonial regime and institutionalized in the centralizing and authoritarian practices of city and state bureaucracies leave an indelible scar on the urban landscape, not least in the post-apartheid cities of South Africa.

Cities: Postcolonial or Postimperial?

So far, it has been assumed that postcolonial cities refer primarily to those cities existing in formerly colonized societies. Yet the distinction between postcolonial and postimperial cities can be ambivalent, depending on the position and location of the speaker. Labeling Paris or London as (technically) postimperial cities foregrounds their earlier imperial role without necessarily invoking imperial contexts. Yet postcolonial is increasingly used to describe them, not only because of the ethnic and racial composition of their populations but also because of their public culture and civil society, including matters of education, politics, religion, and culture, among others. As world space is simultaneously global, postcolonial, and colonial (among other categories), postcolonial histories of migration not only distinguish the population, politics, and culture of one postcolonial (or postimperial) city from another but also from other 'world' or 'global cities', such as Frankfurt, Chicago, or Zurich. For example, of the roughly one-third of population of New York that is foreign born, over half are from the Caribbean and Central America, with significant proportions from Europe, South America, and South and Southeast Asia. Any explanation for the presence of a substantial portion of that population, particularly the English-speaking migrants from the Caribbean, South and Southeast Asia, has to take account of colonial and postcolonial histories. This is equally the case with the Spanish-speaking migrants from the Caribbean and Central and South America. In London, of the roughly one-fifth of the population that is foreign born, the large majority is principally from postcolonial countries, particularly South and Southeast Asia, Ireland, East, West and South Africa, the Caribbean, North America, and Australia, as

well as from continental Europe. The same is true of Paris, where about one-fifth of the population is foreign born; of these, a substantial proportion are primarily from postcolonial North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia), or Mauritius. Of the legal immigrants in Lisbon, many are from Portuguese ex-colonies such as Brazil, Angola, Cape Verde islands, and Macau.

These distinctively postcolonial migrations have major influences on the economy, society, culture, religion, politics, spatial and built environments, and also security, of the city. They bring to the global city a variety of vibrant postcolonial cosmopolitanisms specific to the city (and the state) where they exist. Numerically or economically powerful postcolonial minorities can bring their influence to bear on government policies, both domestic (in regard to immigration, education, or welfare) or foreign (in relation to foreign policy, international disputes, and disaster relief) or in regard to public culture, the arts, dress codes, and media. They shape the definition and nature of multiculturalism and create new forms of hybridity in different cultural realms, whether in regard to language, religion, literature, or the arts. Understood in this sense, the postcolonial city can be said to generate not only multiple temporalities but also multiple spatialities. These extend the real and the virtual space of the city and its inhabitants to other urban and rural locations worldwide.

The significance of these real and virtual spaces can be seen in the growing outsourcing of employment (especially in call centers) from cities in North America, Europe, and the UK to the large anglophone labor markets in South and Southeast Asian cities, an aspect of globalization that cannot be understood without reference to a postcolonial urban frame. Employment outsourcing has generated both extensive employment opportunities and also office building in major metropolitan Indian cities such as Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Delhi. In Paris, most postcolonial minorities (mainly North African) are in the *banlieues* which, from the late twentieth century, have concentrated the socially and economically marginalized in the peripheral areas of French cities. Structurally equivalent to British and American inner-city areas, and often referred to as ghettos, the *banlieues* provide a space to develop a separate cultural agenda where the inhabitants reterritorialize housing projects that were previously socially anonymous. In Britain, the urban landscapes of (especially) eastern, western, and southern inner suburbs of the postcolonial global city of London have been regenerated and transformed by South Asians, a large proportion of whom, while being united by and sharing the same religion, are nonetheless divided along national and ethnic lines. In the urban enclaves and terraced housing of Britain's second major postcolonial city of Birmingham, the largest group of South Asian Muslims

are from Pakistan, comprising 7% of the city's population. The east Midlands, manufacturing city of Leicester, with almost 30% of its 280 000 population from South Asia, occasionally described as 'Europe's largest Indian city' must also be the most postcolonial of this continent. In the words of Singapore geographer, Brenda Yeoh, not only are the colonial city and imperial city "umbilically connected in terms of economic linkages as well as cultural hybridization but their 'post-equivalents' ... need to be analyzed within a single 'postcolonial' framework of intertwining histories and relations." In this context, policies of colonial urbanism in the one-time colonies can also be seen as being related to the development of racial and class divisions in major Western cities. However, it has to be underlined that individual urban authorities in different countries have their own distinctive policies, whether in regard to questions of housing, planning, education, or other spheres. In multicultural societies, it can be expected that members of particular communities, particularly if they are of recent settlement origin, stay together, with access to their own shops, social centers, and places of worship (as, for example, was also the case with British and other European and American communities abroad).

Long after the formal end of empire, postcolonial memories and associations continue to affect the use of spaces in the one-time imperial city. Debates over historic sites in the City of London, for example, remembered as the economic and financial center of the Empire, have been used to influence subsequent decisions about urban design. Memories of empire have been kept alive through maintaining the historical importance of particular places. Yet, postcolonial as well as postimperial memories can also be celebratory for the multicultural population of the city. This consciousness points to a changing, vibrant future, a new kind of intellectual milieu created by new ethnicities, hybridized identities, and diasporas that create new and distinctive cultures in each unique, geographically and culturally specific postcolonial city. Whether in the cities of the one-time metropole or the one-time colony, postcolonialism creates both the split, as well as the suture, between traditional and modern identities. It is inextricably linked to the creation of plural societies and transnational cultures.

The more metaphorical (rather than literal) use of the terms, colonial/postcolonial, have also been deployed to refer to urban processes in contemporary Europe. With migrant labor, legal as well as illegal, arriving from all over the world, including postcommunist Eastern Europe, filling the lowest-paid slots in an ever-increasingly globalized economy, there are new colonized populations in Western cities. In this context, features that to a greater or lesser extent distinguish postcolonial populations, such as a language shared with the host society, some familiarity with the laws, culture, and social practices of the

metropolitan society, a shared, if contested, history, the presence of long-established communities, are features which, among others, differentiate postcolonial communities and migrants from those of nonpostcolonial origin. In the context of these criteria, multicultural Berlin or Zurich differs from multicultural London or Paris.

Various scholars have shown how the postcolonial paradigm has been expanded to cover many historical and geographical instances. Though not sufficient in themselves, postcolonial histories, sociologies, and geographies are nonetheless key to the understanding of a plethora of issues, not just in the multicultural, postcolonial, and postimperial global cities, such as Hong Kong, Toronto, or Amsterdam, but in many other cities worldwide. The growth of a postcolonial urban perspective in the last two decades is a result of globalization and migration as well as the extension of virtual worlds through the spread of information and communications technology. It is an essentially comparative, cross-cultural, and cross-temporal perspective. It results not only from observations of postcolonially mobile authors and their postcolonial mobile readers, but also from more sophisticated interpretations of globalization, from the viewpoint of countries and religious cultures outside the West.

The nature of what is postcolonial about the postcolonial city can be radically different in different places and at different times. What is meant by the phrase must always be elicited on the basis of the specific historical, cultural, and political circumstances in which each postcolonial city exists.

See also: Categorisation; Colonialism I; Globalization I; Imperial Cities; Multicultural City; National Identity; Positionality; Post-colonial identities; Race; Urban architecture; Urban design; World/Global cities.

Further Reading

- Abu-Lughod, J. (1965). Tale of two cities; the origins of modern Cairo. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 7, 429–457.
- Bishop, R., Phillips, J. and Yeo, W. W. (eds.) (2003). *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes*. London: Routledge.
- Chattopadhyay, S. (2005). *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism and the Colonial Uncanny*. London: Routledge.
- Drakakis-Smith, D. W. (1987). *The Third World City*. London: Methuen.
- Fanon, F. (1961). Les Damnés de la Terre, pp 37–39. Paris: François Maspero (*The Wretched of the Earth* (1968). New York: Grove. Transl. Farrington, C.).
- Horvath, R. V. (1969). In search of a theory of urbanization: Notes on the colonial city. *East Lakes Geographer* 5, 69–82.
- Hosagrahar, J. (2005). *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Urban Form*. London: Routledge.
- Jacobs, J. (1996). *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*. London: Routledge.

- Kincaid, A. (2006). *Postcolonial Dublin: Imperial Legacies and the Built Environment*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- King, A. D. (1976). The post-colonial city. In *Colonial Urban Development: Culture, Social Power and Environment*, ch. 11, pp 282–288. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan & Paul.
- King, A. D. (1990). *Urbanism, Colonialism and the World-Economy: Cultural and Spatial Foundations of the World Urban System*. London: Routledge.
- King, A. D. (2004). *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Kusno, A. (2000). *Behind the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia*. London: Routledge.
- Legg, S. (2007). *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mabogunje, A. (1968). *Urbanization in Nigeria*. London: University of London.
- McGee, T. G. (1967). *The Southeast Asian City*. London: Bell.
- Perera, N. (1998). *Decolonising Ceylon: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Space in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rayfield, J. R. (1974). Theories of urbanization and the colonial city in West Africa. *Africa* 44, 163–185.
- Ross, R. and Telkamp, G. J. (eds.) (1985). *Colonial Cities: Essays on Urbanism in a Colonial Context*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Sidaway, J. D. (2000). Postcolonial geographies: An exploratory essay. *Progress in Human Geography* 24, 591–612.
- Yeoh, B. S. A. (2001). Postcolonial cities. *Progress in Human Geography* 25(3), 456–468.

Relevant Websites

<http://www.iniva.org>
Paul Gilroy: London: Postcolonial City, CelloidCities at Iniva.