

How have historians of the modern British Empire responded to the insights offered by post-colonial theory?

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Abstract

This article examines how the historiography of the modern British Empire has responded to the ideas and interventions of post-colonial theory. It defines the modern British Empire as the period from the emergence of 'New Imperialism' in the late nineteenth century to the era of decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century. The article argues that post-colonial theory has fundamentally reshaped how this period has been studied by challenging earlier Eurocentric and elite-focused narratives that marginalised the experiences and agency of colonised peoples. Focusing on the influential work of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Frantz Fanon, the study analyses how their ideas transformed historical approaches to imperial power, culture, and knowledge production. By tracing how these theoretical insights influenced historical writing on the modern British Empire, particularly within Western academia, this article demonstrates how post-colonial perspectives encouraged historians to reassess the structures, legacies, and lived experiences of empires. It also highlights the growing contribution of scholars from formerly colonised regions who have challenged Eurocentric imperial histories. Ultimately, the article argues that post-colonial theory has not produced a uniform transformation of imperial historiography, but has nonetheless profoundly reshaped the questions historians ask and the perspectives they prioritise.

Key words: post-colonial theory, imperialism, orientalism, subalternity, colonialism, legacy, agency, decolonisation.

Introduction

As the literary scholar Patrick Williams notes, the notion of the post-colonial has consistently been regarded as a "difficult and contested term" (Williams, 1993, p. 91). This is owing to the fact that there is not a clear-cut definition, and this idea can mean something distinct depending on the region that is being studied, with the Kenyan Professor D. A. Masolo at the University of Louisville elucidating that "the colonial experience is by no means monolithic" (Masolo, in Ahluwalia, 2001: 14). Despite the ambiguity of this concept and term, there are some shared characteristics within post-colonial studies. A principal framework for understanding this as a broad concept is the discipline's engagement with the "vast and horrific social and psychological suffering, exploitation, violence and enslavement" of colonised peoples, alongside its challenge to "the superiority of the dominant Western perspective" (Parsons and Harding, 2011, p. 2).

The Ghanaian-Canadian literary critic Ato Quayson argued that this concept must be understood as a multifaceted and open process. He argues that this discipline should not be seen as something that is static, but as a "process of postcolonizing" an intellectual engagement with the evolving links between the colonial period and current or modern day inequalities" (Quayson in, Hiddleston, 2009: 4). Post-colonial methodological approaches have attempted to "shift the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed" (Young, 2003: 2).

Literature Review

Post-colonial approaches to the study of the modern British Empire are not reducible to critiques of British imperialism, thereby distinguishing them from anti-colonialist literature. Early critical analyses of empire frequently reduced European imperial wars and conquests to purely economic motivations, overlooking other political, ideological, and cultural factors, with J.A. Hobson's 1902 publication *Imperialism* providing a prime example (Louis, 1999: 16) (Hobson, 2011). Moreover, as Jane Hiddleston points out, whilst "anti-colonialism" names specific movements of resistance to colonialism, postcolonialism refers to the wider, multifaceted effects and implications of colonial rule" (Hiddleston, 2009: 1). Post-colonial theory as an area of academic study has been beneficial as it provides a foundation for scholars and literary critics to capture the voices and experiences of the "silenced parts of the world" (Mishra and Hodge, 2005: 375). Nevertheless, the field has attracted criticism, even from among postcolonial theory's foundational and preeminent scholars. The Indian literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose insights will be analysed in this article, wrote "I find the word post-colonialism just totally bogus", because he objected "to the implication of an achieved state beyond colonialism" (Childs and Williams, 1997: 16). The English-American philosopher and writer Anthony Appiah attacked the discipline's authenticity as a school of thought when it claims to recover the voice of the colonised. Appiah wrote that post-colonialism was created by a "small, Western-style, Western trained group of writers and thinkers" who created "an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa" (Appiah in, Childs and Williams, 1997: 18).

From Anti-Colonialism to Post-Colonial Critique

Post-colonial historiography has evolved from an initial challenge to imperial and nationalist historical narratives into a multidisciplinary field concerned with the relationship between power, knowledge and historical representation. The work of early anti-colonial thinkers, most notably the Trinidadian historian and scholar C. L. R. James and the Martiniquais scholar and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, foregrounded the centrality of colonial violence and indigenous agency. Fanon, in particular, conceptualised colonialism as a system of "violence in its natural state", thereby emphasising its structural dimensions rather than viewing it as merely a political phenomenon (Fanon, 1963: 61). A decisive historiographical shift occurred with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which demonstrated that colonial domination was sustained through systems of knowledge that "helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image" to the rest of the world, prompting historians to interrogate and analyse the power and legitimacy of colonial archives (Said, 1979: 2).

This cultural turn was followed by the Subaltern Studies collective, which criticised both colonial and nationalist historiography for privileging elite politics and excluding popular agency, arguing that subaltern politics possessed an 'autonomous domain' irreducible to elite leadership. This was outlined in Ranajit Guha's seminal work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) which argued strongly that peasants were not simply passive followers of elite-led national independence movements but had obtained their own political consciousness and agendas. (Guha, 1983: 9). However, post-structuralist critiques exposed the limits of such recovery projects, most notably in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" within elite academic and scholarly frameworks (Spivak, 1988: 308).

From the early 2000s onwards, postcolonial historiography has increasingly converged with global and decolonial approaches, notably in Dipesh Chakrabarty's work that calls for the "provincializing" or 'decentring' of Europe as the universal foundation of historical inquiry (Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. 3–4), while others have questioned the field's earlier emphasis on discourse at the expense of material and political analysis (Cooper, 2005: 33).

'Selective Engagement': British Imperial Historiography after the Cultural Turn

Since the late 1980s, the historiography of the modern British Empire has been greatly reshaped by engagement with post-colonial theory; however, the adoption has been more selective than wholesale. Earlier histories of the British Empire, particularly those produced before the 1970s, tended to focus on high politics, administrative structures, and imperial governance, often narrating empire from the perspective of metropolitan elites and treating imperial expansion as a largely functional or progressive process. Such approaches frequently marginalised colonial subjects and paid limited attention to questions of culture, power, and representation. For example, earlier imperial histories such as Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's *Africa and the Victorians* (1961) framed the British Empire primarily through the actions of metropolitan policymakers and strategic interests, largely marginalising the experiences of those communities who were colonised. (Gallagher and Robinson, 1961).

Post-colonial critiques have been greatly influenced by Edward Said's insistence that empire operated through systems of cultural representation and "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1979: 3), and this has challenged older imperial histories that privileged elite scholarship, institutions and narratives. In response, historians of the modern British Empire, have reconceptualised empire as constitutive of British society itself, emphasising the connection between the metropole and the colony. As Catherine Hall has argued, empire was "not something that happened elsewhere," but was instead "deeply embedded in the making of modern Britain" (Hall, 2002:15), while Antoinette Burton has shown how progressive metropolitan politics, including feminism, were "produced through imperial power rather than in opposition to it" (Burton, 1994: 2). At the same time, many historians have pushed back against post-colonial theory's focus on texts and abstract ideas, warning that this could lead the discipline to ignore important issues like politics, violence, and historical records. John Darwin, for example, cautions against treating empire primarily as "a cultural construct detached from the material structures that sustained it" (Darwin, 2013: 255). The resulting historiography has been shaped more by tension than agreement. Post-colonial theory has changed how scholars think about power, knowledge, and marginalised groups, demonstrating the ways in which these scholars have responded to the insights offered by post-colonial theory, even if these responses have not always universal.

Research Plan

This research article analyses the ways in which studies of the modern British Empire have been shaped, challenged, and reoriented by the insights of postcolonial theory. This article will argue that whilst the reshaping of the historiography has not been universally altered, historians of the modern British Empire have responded to insights of post-colonial theory in several ways. Using post-modernist methods, these scholars strive to recover the voice and agency of those left out of the archive and examine the true legacy of empire. In this article, the 'modern British Empire' delineates the period from 'New Imperialism' of the late 19th century up to the era of decolonisation which originated in the aftermath of the Second World

War, a period which saw both the British Empire reach its gargantuan height as well as seeing the crumbling of Europe's hegemonic empires. It is important to mention that due to the breadth of the historiography it is impossible to include all of the different schools of modern British Empire historiography in this article. The British imperial historian C. A. Bayly contended that, from the 1980s onwards, the influence of postcolonial theory, especially the increasing politicisation of imperial history and regional historians' engagement with subaltern studies, has profoundly shaped scholarly approaches to the study of the modern British Empire (Bayly in Winks (ed.), 1999, p. 68). The over-politisation of imperial history over the past decade is untangled in an article by Dr. Robert Saunders, a lecturer in Modern British History at Queen Mary University of London. Saunders's article "offers a new reading of the relationship between Brexit and imperial memory", outlining how Britain's legacy of empire has massively impacted political decisions (Saunders, 2020: 1143). One of the article's central arguments is that "imperial modes of thought could shape the views of supporters, as well as opponents, of European integration" (Saunders, 2020, p. 1144).

This article analyses how the ideas of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Frantz Fanon have influenced what historians have written about the modern British Empire, as their ideas and concepts are commonly viewed as foundational in post-colonial thinking. However, it is also very important to note that these scholars do not have a monopoly over post-colonial concepts and ideas, and a larger study would include a wider array of scholars and academic critics. It is also important to note that it is often hard to explicitly highlight key points when a historian is trying to reject post-colonial theory. One of the examples in the historiography is from the British historian John Darwin, who in his book *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain*, criticised Orientalism, as it assumed that during the era of empire there were no debates that "upset the smooth ideological mould" (Darwin, 2013: 267).

Analyses

'Orientalism': The Legacy of the Perception of Western 'Superiority'

Edward Said's 1978 publication, *Orientalism*, is widely regarded as the foundational text of post-colonial theory as an academic field. Edward Said (1935-2003) was a Palestinian-American academic and political activist whose concern and interest in colonial relationships and power structures originated with "the Israel[i] occupation in his birthplace of Palestine" (Rudolph and Sriprakash, 2025: 1156). Said argued that despite the end of 'formal' empire, the idea rooted in colonial ideology of 'western' superiority was still prevalent in both political and academic discourse. Said was "flabbergasted" to discover on a trip to the Middle East in 1985 that literature courses were "rigorously orthodox, and that young Arabs in Arab universities were dutifully reading Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Austen, and Dickens", instead of writers from the Middle East or Africa (Xie, 1997: 19). For Said, *Orientalism* was "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient[s] special place in the European Western experience" (Said, 1979: 1).

One notable example of a study that attempts to respond to these insights is Wendy Webster's *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* which illustrates a cultural history. She analyses how ideas of western superiority persisted in Britain, even during the historical moment of decolonisation. Webster constructs a rich narrative situated in an archive of press, radio, feature films, and television that would have influenced the lives of Britons of all races and classes. The author engages with the ideas presented by Said in *Orientalism* noting that British newsreels emphasised "British stability, order, continuity, and history" in the context of the

British withdrawal from India (Webster, 2005: 59). Although the decolonisation of India involved extensive sectarian violence, these events were rarely understood in Britain as consequences of imperial governance. Webster points out that “Violence following independence was seen not as the product of a particular historical event – partition – but as an essential characteristic of the East” (Webster, 2005: 61). Through this example, she demonstrates that, even during the period of imperial decline, colonial tropes depicting social order as being contingent upon British imperial authority, and threatened by its withdrawal, continued to be pervasive. To further solidify this point, Webster asserts that the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi “was used in the Daily Express as further evidence of what happens when the ‘impartial rule of Britain’ was abolished” (Webster, 2005: 61). This illustrates that the violence at the moment of independence was not perceived solely because of Britain’s divide-and-rule tactics or its disastrous partition of India, which created enduring tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities. Rather, it was framed as the end of a supposedly superior ‘Western’ rule, to be replaced by what was perceived as an ‘inferior’ form of independent Indian governance.

Alongside this example of historiography that focuses on British India, Gardner Thompson’s *Legacy of Empire: Britain, Zionism and the Creation of Israel*, illustrates how British actions in the Middle East have left a legacy which has contributed greatly to creating an image of the region being inherently violent and unstable. Although not solely the outcome of Britain’s actions in the region, Thompson argues how “The new Israel was – and remains – scarred by an inter-communal conflict provoked by Zionist colonisation fostered by the British during an ill-judged administration of Palestine tied to the Balfour Declaration” (Thompson, 2019: xiii). A central focus of Thompson’s book is to emphasise that historical events should not be understood as predetermined, as they assert that the present configuration of the Israel–Palestine conflict should not be understood as an inevitable outcome. (Thompson, 2019, p. x). His argument highlights the contingency of historical processes and the role of human agency in shaping outcomes and challenging deterministic interpretations of the past. Thompson is responding to Said’s idea that the representation of the ‘East’ in the western imagination as being an inferior and war-torn area of the globe is not an inevitability, but a result of external intervention by European colonial powers and the United States of America. In doing so, Thompson reinforces the argument that perceptions of the Middle East as inherently violent or unstable are not the product of historical inevitability, but rather the consequence of contingent imperial interventions that continue to shape both material realities and representational frameworks.

Said’s family experienced first-hand the consequences of these events as they were forced to flee Jerusalem at the outbreak of this internal communal conflict with the creation of the state of Israel in 1947. Said, whilst arguing in favour of the political legitimacy for a Jewish Homeland, saw the subjugation of the Palestinian people as akin to Western-style imperialism. In *Blaming the Victims* which he co-authored with Christopher Hitchens in 1988, Said argued that the suppression of the Palestinians was being made possible by US imperialist support for Israel (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 2009: 128). Both of these studies engage with Edward Said’s concept of ‘Orientalism’, seeking to explain and challenge Western academic and political discourses that construct notions of inherent and inevitable “Eastern” instability and inferiority. Beyond this, they further develop the argument that Western colonial powers have historically sought, and continue to seek, to dominate other regions of the world not only through military and economic means but also through cultural, written, and verbal forms of authority, often underpinned by coercion and violence.

The 'Subaltern': Looking Beyond the Archive

Alongside *Orientalism*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is widely regarded as one of the most influential and controversial interventions within post-colonial theory, described by some scholars as "the most influential work in the field of post-colonial theory" (Maggio, 2007: 419). In this essay, Spivak interrogates whether those positioned at the lowest levels of colonial and patriarchal power structures, particularly women in the Global South, can meaningfully represent their own interests within dominant intellectual and institutional frameworks. Spivak's intervention fundamentally challenged historians' assumptions about recovery, voice, and agency, particularly when working with colonial archives produced overwhelmingly by elite, male, and European historical actors.

Spivak's intellectual formation and lived experience shaped these concerns. Born in Calcutta, British India, in 1942, five years before independence, Spivak later emerged as "among the foremost feminist critics who have achieved internal eminence" (Landry and Maclean (eds), 1996: 2). Drawing on Marxism, feminism, and post-structuralist theory, Spivak questioned whether academic attempts to recover subaltern voices risked reproducing the very power relations they sought to dismantle. Central to Spivak's argument was the concept of the 'subaltern', a term originally coined by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci to describe groups of an "inferior rank" excluded from hegemonic power (May and Asharagovind, 2024: 88–89). From the 1980s onwards, the term became closely associated with South Asian historiography and came to refer to "third world women and men and the working-class people and those disenfranchised by the western culture" (May and Aksharagovind, 2024: 91).

Spivak's most provocative claim, that 'the subaltern cannot speak', did not deny the existence of subaltern resistance or consciousness, but instead highlighted the structural impossibility of unmediated representation within elite academic discourse. Spivak's work was particularly influential in post-colonial feminist scholarship, where she argued that Western feminist movements frequently universalised women's experiences while marginalising or misrepresenting those of women in the Global South. Spivak further criticised Western economic and philosophical frameworks for ignoring crucial social distinctions within colonised societies. For instance, Spivak argued that Karl Marx's theory of labour disregarded gender roles and caste structures in colonial and post-colonial India (Maggio, 2007). As a result, even radical theoretical traditions could obscure the lived realities of subaltern women. These interventions raised profound methodological challenges for historians, calling into question whether subaltern women's experiences could ever be fully recovered from archives that had systematically excluded them.

Despite Spivak's scepticism, historians of the modern British Empire have increasingly sought to engage with their insights by experimenting with alternative sources, methodologies, and narrative strategies. Clare Midgley's chapter in *Bringing the Empire Home* offers a significant example of this response. Midgley demonstrates how women from colonised societies, though often marginalised within imperial and metropolitan contexts, have nonetheless been able to find a voice and "challenge hegemonic discourses" (Midgley, 2011: 230). By examining the presence of colonised women within Britain itself, Midgley shows how their participation unsettled "essentialised notions of ethnic and racial difference" (Midgley, 2011: 236), thereby complicating dominant narratives of empire and gender.

One of the most prominent figures analysed by Midgley is Pandita Ramabai, a widowed woman from a Hindu Brahmin family in British India. Ramabai travelled to Britain and emerged

as a vocal advocate for women's education following the 1882 Hunter Commission's assessment of Indian schooling. Her campaign was sufficiently influential to gain the support of Queen Victoria, resulting in Indian women in Britain being granted access to medical colleges. However, Midgley's analysis remains attentive to the constraints Ramabai faced. She was pressured by white supporters to avoid public speaking in order to "safeguard her respectability" and subjected to "attempts to remould her into a Christian missionary to Indian women" (Midgley, 2011: 238). Nevertheless, Ramabai resisted these expectations, as Midgley shows that "she sought her own path, questioning Anglican orthodoxy and asserting her own agenda of social reform" (Midgley, 2011: 238). This example illustrates how historians have attempted to navigate Spivak's concerns by acknowledging both agency and constraint, rather than presenting subaltern women as either silent victims or fully autonomous actors.

Midgley further extends this analysis through her examination of women involved in the Pan-Africanist movement during the first half of the twentieth century. Amy Ashwood Garvey, wife of Marcus Garvey, played a central role in the radical wing of the movement, contributing to the formation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and supporting Ethiopia during the invasion of Ethiopia by Benito Mussolini's Italian forces in 1935. Garvey even went so far as to accompany the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie to the League of Nations in his ill-fated attempt to seek international assistance (Midgley, 2011: 248–249). In contrast, Midgley also explores the career of the Jamaican playwright and journalist Delia Jarrett-Macauley, a reformist figure who opposed communism and worked within British women's organisations such as "the British Commonwealth League, formed in 1925 to encourage the development of women's groups within the Commonwealth" (Midgley, 2011: 248). Despite their ideological differences, both women sought to introduce "feminist ideas into black-led organisations" while also pressing "the white-dominated British and international women's movement to treat black women on terms of equality and take their concerns seriously" (Midgley, 2011: 248).

Through these case studies, Midgley's work illustrates how historians of the modern British Empire have responded to Spivak's theoretical intervention not by claiming to fully 'recover' subaltern voices, but by critically examining the conditions under which those voices emerged, were constrained, or were mediated. This approach reflects a cautious engagement with Spivak's insights, acknowledging the limits of representation while still foregrounding subaltern women as active historical agents. In doing so, such scholarship challenges earlier imperial and feminist historiographies that marginalised colonised women, while remaining attentive to the methodological and ethical problems that Spivak herself so forcefully identified.

'Double Consciousness' and Agency: The Reclaiming of Identity

Lastly, the work of the Martiniquais psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon has greatly influenced both post-colonial studies and the historiography of the modern British Empire. Historians influenced by Fanon now write about empire as something resisted and destabilised from below, not dismantled by metropolitan goodwill, and they emphasise both the psychological damage of colonialism and the agency of colonised peoples in reclaiming identity and independence. Fanon's writings challenges the idea that independence was something 'bestowed' upon formerly colonised peoples by the European and American colonial powers. Born in Martinique in 1925 during French colonial rule and fighting for France in the Second World War before training as a psychiatrist in Lyon (London School of Economic and Political Science (LSE), n.d.). Fanon's work has profoundly shaped a historiography that rejects narratives of imperial benevolence by foregrounding colonised peoples as conscious

political agents whose resistance to psychological, cultural, and military intervention, was central to the collapse of empire.

As a psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon produced a collection of writings and essays, posthumously published in *Alienation and Freedom* (2018), in which he argued that the effects of colonialism were closely intertwined with the causes of mental illness, contending that the only way to alleviate these harmful effects was to dismantle the colonial system itself (Fanon, 2018, pp. 73–74). He saw how colonialism had destroyed local cultures and how colonised populations could only ‘rise to the status of the coloniser’ if they assimilated into the cultural norms and practices of the dominant power. In *Black Skin and White Masks* (1952), which is a founding text of post-colonial theory, Fanon wrote that a colonised person has been created “by the death and burial of its local cultural originality” (Fanon, 1986: 18). This text further “explores how racism and colonialism force marginalised people to suppress their true identities, producing internal conflict and feelings of inferiority, while also pointing toward ways of reclaiming identity and dismantling oppressive systems” (Khatun, 2025: 54). This suppression of identity should be understood not only as a psychological effect of colonial domination, but as a deliberate strategy through which colonial power is sustained. By encouraging the internalisation of inferiority, colonialism operates at both structural and subjective levels, shaping how colonised subjects understand themselves and their position within the imperial order.

Fanon further develops this argument by showing how colonial rule encouraged the adoption of the coloniser’s cultural practices. Fanon wrote that “the colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (Fanon, 1986: 9). This process of cultural mimicry reinforces colonial hierarchies by associating European norms with civilisation and value, while devaluing indigenous cultures. Consequently, attempts at social mobility within colonial society require a form of self-alienation, in which colonised subjects are pressured to reject aspects of their own identity in order to gain recognition. Building on this, Fanon’s engagement with W.E. B. Du Bois’s concept of ‘double consciousness’ further clarifies the psychological fragmentation produced by colonial domination. Through this framework, Fanon shows how colonial subjects develop a divided sense of self, “attempting to see themselves through both native and colonial perspectives” (Khatun, 2025: 54–55). This dual awareness creates an ongoing tension between self-understanding and external judgement, demonstrating how colonial power persists not only through political and economic control, but also through its capacity to shape consciousness itself.

A study where the influence of Fanon’s writing is clearly demonstrated is Priyamvada Gopal’s, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*, which is an impressive study that charts anti-colonial resistance from the Indian Mutiny in 1857 to the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya from 1952 to 1960. Gopal, the Professor of post-colonial studies at the University of Cambridge, explores the role of the colonised in anti-colonial resistance. His study of anti-colonial resistance movements is extensive, but does not directly focus on the crises generated by Irish resistance, which are frequently used to critique anti-colonial resistance in post-colonial studies (Gopal, 2020: 36). With the aim of empowering those who have been colonised, Gopal takes issue with the claim that the abolitionist movement and decolonisation derived “chiefly from the campaigning consciences of white British reformers or as the logical outcome of the liberal and liberalizing projects that empire ostensibly always was” (Gopal, 2020: 3). The author and activist Akala also augmented his argument when he wrote that “It’s

rather odd, then, that if what the British Empire was offering was so evidently a good deal for all, the restless natives so often picked up their guns to fight against it" (Akala, 2018: 146). Gopal is responding to Fanon's ideas through his desire to grant agency back to those communities and civilisations that were colonised during era of European empires. His idea contrasts with Bernard Porter whose 2007 publication, *Critics of Empire: British Radicals and the Imperial Challenge*, focuses primarily on domestic white British activists who were critical of empire. (Porter, 2008). However, many of the historical figures Porter writes about, whilst being critical of certain elements of empire, were very rarely strong anti-imperialist supporters. Gopal links domestic resistance to those on the periphery of empire. He argues that it was the dissidents of India, Africa, and the wider diaspora that inspired the radicals that Bernard Porter talks about. For Gopal, the ideas and notions that inspired legislation around universal human rights and economic and social injustice owe just as much to these dissidents and activists as to those in the metropole.

To support his argument, Gopal uses the case study of Kenya, and the Indian born British MP for Leyton East, Fenner Brockway. Brockway had a close relationship with the Indian National Congress (INC) in India, and Brockway's support for radical liberationist politics in Kenya was driven by his visits to Kenya "where he witnessed the material underpinnings of the racial oppression" (Gopal, 2020: 408). He saw that it was the conditions of British rule that had created the Mau Mau uprisings in the 1950s, but although a supporter of Kenyan independence, he did not give his backing to the actions and ideas of the Mau Mau rebels. Brockway was not the only pioneer that could see that it was the nature of British rule that had created the conditions for the anti-colonial movements to independently form without any influence from the coloniser. Others figures in Britain like Barbara Castle, Eileen Fletcher and the reformist advisor to the Colonial Office Margery Perham saw that the "persistence of the insurgency drove home the fact that imperial resistance to anticolonial resistance might well have been futile" (Gopal, 2020: 398). Gopal and Akala take the view that colonised people were active agents in the process of decolonisation. They challenge the idea and the notion that the independence for the colonised parts of the globe was something gifted to them by the colonising powers.

Antoinette Burton's *The Trouble with Empire*, exemplifies how historians have sought to reclaim the agency of indigenous peoples, emphasising their active role in achieving liberation from colonial rule through the analysis of colonial warfare. Burton pushes back on the assertion that the late 19th century was a period of unbridled domination for Britain militarily, highlighting that "The Somme was not the first time British colonial subjects witnessed imperial military failure" (Burton, 2015: 25-26). Burton exemplifies how military campaigns that were "won but badly bungled", as well as successive but difficult and costly campaigns against the Zulu Kingdom and the Emirate of Afghanistan "are evidence of the fitful, halting character of imperial supremacy in its heyday" (Burton, 2015: 18). Burton is foregrounding how indigenous people were active agents in fighting back against colonialism to defend their land and societies and further stresses how Britain was not always militarily commanding during the peak of empire. Barabara Bush's publication *Imperialism and Post-Colonialism*, contains a chapter towards the end which focuses on and examines how indigenous people still are campaigning against systematic discrimination in the 21st century (Bush, 2006), highlighting issues like discrimination through disproportionate police violence, as well as western 'modernity' continue to negatively affect indigenous communities' way of life: for example, the 2004 Sydney riots and the 1995 riots in Ontario caused by the killing of young boys from indigenous communities by the law enforcement (Bush, 2006: 208-209). Moreover, Bush

points out that many indigenous communities in regions that were former British colonies still continue to struggle with aspects of modernity. For example, in Canada the Innu peoples' forced "dislocation from homelands and their traditional way of life resulted in alcoholism and substance abuse", and treaties protecting the lands of indigenous communities are often breached in favour of stipulations from oil and gas companies (Bush, 2006: 208). Both authors emphasise that imperial rule has always been, and continues to be, contested by those marginalised under such governance. It is the actions of these communities and societies that bring about 'independence', even if this independence is, in practice, only nominal.

Conclusions:

Historians of the modern British Empire have responded to the insights offered by post-colonial theory by attempting to dispel the myth of 'eastern inferiority', regaining the agency of those who lived under colonial rule, and coming to terms with Empire's legacy. Both Webster and Thompson have responded to Said by looking at the legacy of Empire and how ideas of western superiority persisted. Midgley responds to Spivak's insights around 'subaltern women' by analysing how subaltern women's voices can be recovered in a western dominated world, and what can be achieved by researching and studying history beyond and outside the archive. Finally, historians have responded to the insights offered by Fanon by outlining the role of colonised people in anti-colonial resistance and how this helps these marginalised groups to reclaim their identity stolen by colonialism.

Areas of British imperial history still remain that underscore the limitations and impediments of post-colonial theory. For example, many studies only focus on non-white resistance, which is something Gopal acknowledges; so a future study, for example, on resistance in Ireland would help to plug this gap. Additionally, studies that are more focused on gender histories, especially regarding the experiences of indigenous women in Britain's imperial territories, is a further promising and imperative future topic of study.

Ultimately, the engagement between post-colonial theory and the historiography of the modern British Empire should be understood less as a completed transformation and more as an uneven, ongoing process. While historians have not universally adopted post-colonial theory, its core insights have nonetheless reshaped the questions that imperial historians ask, the sources they privilege, and the power relations they seek to expose. In this sense, post-colonialism's greatest contribution to the study of the modern British Empire lies not in offering a single interpretative model, but in unsettling older certainties and insisting that empire be understood as a lived, contested, and enduring historical experience whose consequences extend well beyond the moment of formal decolonisation.

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