

Francophone Postcolonial Studies

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Q. What exactly does the field of Francophone postcolonial studies encompass?

A. Francophone postcolonial studies is a relatively new field of research, which forges an alliance between scholars interested in cultural, historical, and political aspects of the French Empire and its legacy (it also seeks to develop similar research in relation to the smaller Belgian Empire). It is important to note that the prefix ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ is thus not meant purely in a chronological sense to indicate that scholars are dealing solely with the period ‘after colonialism’. Rather, it is meant to indicate the position of scholars in relation to empire: we are working after the era of colonialism (although as recent events in the Middle East have shown, the age of ‘empire’ has not yet past) and attempting to understand the full complexity of France’s imperial project as well as its aftermath, both in the former colonies and in France itself.

These concerns are not new and plenty of academics have been researching these issues in recent decades. However, there was no one forum that brought together this work, and scholars working in these areas have often occupied quite isolated or marginal positions within existing academic structures, particularly those working in French departments, which is my own experience. (I’m sure the experience of those in History or Sociology departments is slightly different to mine.) So, one might say that Francophone postcolonial studies was born from a double frustration with the limitations of both French Studies and postcolonial studies. Let me explain what I mean by this.

For much of the twentieth century, French Studies in Britain (and elsewhere around the globe) focused almost exclusively on the culture and history of metropolitan France, with a particular emphasis on studying the ‘classic’ texts of French literature. From the 1970s, efforts to widen this interest to the culture and history — again, often through the study of literature — of the wider Francophone world (namely, France’s former colonies) led to the development of what generally came to be known as Francophone Studies. In some French departments with a strong research interest in historical or political matters relating to France’s former colonies, there was a parallel move to develop what was known as ‘Area Studies’, grouping together academics interested in Francophone Africa/Asia/North America, etc. However, rather than leading to a reassessment of the work carried out in French departments, Francophone Studies and Area Studies have, with some honourable exceptions (such as the Centres in Portsmouth and Leeds), been seen as marginal strands existing alongside ‘mainstream’ French Studies. In this context, there was little scope to bring together different analyses of the complex relationships between France and its former colonies. This led many scholars working on ‘Francophone’ material — particularly literature specialists — to turn to postcolonial studies as a more helpful framework.

Postcolonial Studies emerged as a distinct discipline in the 1980s when English Literature departments began to analyse work by writers from Britain's former colonies and also to reassess the colonial dimensions of 'classic' works of fiction such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. A vast body of critical theory grew up around this literary analysis, focusing on the complex cultural and historical ties between the former imperial centre and the colonized periphery; key themes of this theory have been: the construction of national identities, the 'hybridity' of postcolonial identities, the history and culture of diasporas. However, the field of postcolonial studies has almost exclusively focused on the British Empire. This is quite ironic as many of the anti-colonial authors who are central to postcolonial theory are actually Francophone: Aimé Césaire (Martinique), Frantz Fanon (Martinique/Algeria), Albert Memmi (Algeria).

The aim of Francophone postcolonial studies is thus to draw on existing postcolonial theories and to test their assumptions in relation to the French Empire; this new field will also be able to introduce theories from French-language theorists such as Edouard Glissant, Abdelkébir Khatibi, and Victor Segalen, whose work is not well known to those in English Studies. Hopefully, this will also lead to a dialogue between scholars working on both the British and French Empires so that a genuinely comparative approach to empire might emerge. There is now a Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies (SFPS), which has brought together scholars from Britain, Ireland, North America, Australia, France, Belgium, Holland, and Austria. The first three issues of the SFPS journal, *Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, contain a series of position pieces by leading scholars in the field, charting the topics, themes, ideas and approaches that might be encompassed by this new field of research.

To provide some concrete examples of the scope of Francophone Postcolonial Studies, let me give some examples from a collection of articles I have just co-edited (with Charles Forsdick) entitled *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* (2003). The first section provides some historical perspectives from slavery to exoticism to decolonization, charting the ways in which notions of racial hierarchies and global politics developed from the eighteenth century to the end of empire. The second section focuses on language issues, analysing the so-called universality of the French language, and the language politics of the French Republic, both within the homeland and in its former colonies. The third section traces the complex global ties that have been created by empire: from the debates on multiculturalism and assimilation in France to the creation of links between former colonies that bypass the former metropolitan centre. The final section provides an overview of contemporary Francophone postcolonial thought and culture in Africa, Asia, France, the Caribbean and Canada, and also charts the influence that Francophone writers have had on the development of postcolonial theory.

This is, of course, not an exhaustive list but it suggests the potential of Francophone postcolonial studies to draw together exciting research on a wide array of topics dealing with the French Empire and its aftermath. I believe there is a lot to be learned from putting these researchers in dialogue with one another. Within universities, historians, literary scholars, anthropologists, politics experts, etc. often work in related areas but because of differences in approach or disciplinary boundaries, they do not always bring their findings together. Hopefully, the development of Francophone postcolonial studies will make this process easier to achieve.

One final thought. There have been many critiques of postcolonial studies: some are made by scholars hostile to the concept, which they see as too broad and

badly defined. Other scholars who would see themselves as working within postcolonial studies have made similar critiques but have used their criticisms to help refine the definitions and ideas used within the field. The bottom line for many of these latter scholars is that empire was a global system, which means we need an equally broad field of research in order to understand its true complexity. Postcolonial studies may have its flaws, but it is a very useful means of bringing ideas from different fields together in order to gain a better understanding of empire.

Q. How does the concept of Francophone postcolonial studies help us to understand contemporary France and the former French Empire?

A. On a purely semantic level, the use of ‘Francophone’ alongside ‘postcolonial studies’ is designed to indicate that this field of research is interested in how empire has affected all Francophone countries, that is, both France and its former colonies (and don’t forget the Belgian empire and its problematic ties with the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi). As I mentioned earlier, in Britain (and in other parts of the globe), to study something called ‘French’ is primarily to study the culture and history of metropolitan France. However, this is not generally the case when one studies Spanish, English, Portuguese. We must not forget that France has no real counterbalance as a French-speaking country; apart from Algeria, and earlier waves of colonization in North America, France did not create settler colonies. France is still the dominant French-speaking nation in the world; there is no equivalent for France of the United States for Britain, Brazil for Portugal, South America for Spain. The concept of Francophone postcolonial studies thus opens up the complex set of relationships between France and its former empire, by challenging the very nature of what it is we study in French departments; the ‘Francophone world’ is not simply a matter of ‘France and the rest’.

Francophone postcolonial studies can help us think about the legacy of empire in contemporary France. For instance, Pascal Blanchard and Nicolas Bancel, two of the French historians who make up the influential Parisian research group ACHAC, have shown how the discourse of empire has survived into the present day in various ways. As is indicated by the title of their book *De l’indigène à l’immigré* (1998), received ideas about the ‘natives’ of the empire have often been transferred on to France’s immigrant populations.

Equally, the connections between the colonial ‘centre’ and the colonized ‘periphery’ are often very complex. Recently, the historian Alice Conklin has argued, in her fascinating book *A Mission to Civilize* (1997), that the Third Republic used its West African colonies as a testing ground for the educational policies that it would then go on to use within the ‘peripheral’ regions of France itself, such as Brittany, where there was a strong regional identity and many people did not speak French: Bretons were thus made ‘French’ by teaching them the language and values of the Republic, just as ‘natives’ in the colonies were able to aspire to French civilization by their experience in French schools. Effectively, Conklin shows that empire is not something that happened elsewhere; it had profound effects on French society itself; this process may have been forgotten over time but that does not make it any less real. The links between France’s ‘peripheral’ regions and its colonies resurfaced in the 1960s when regionalist movements in Brittany and *Occitanie* (roughly speaking, the south of France), looking for more autonomy from central authority in Paris, turned to anti-colonial authors such as Fanon and Memmi for inspiration (for more on this

topic, see the article by Heather Williams in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*).

However, we should not just look for links between the centre and the periphery; France's empire also created links between the margins, that is, between different parts of the empire. Perhaps the best example of this came in the 1930s when students from different areas of France's vast empire — the likes of Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal), Aimé Césaire (Martinique) and Léon Gontron Damas (Guyana) — came together in Paris to create a literary movement, known as Negritude, which sought to restore pride and dignity to the colonized. In more recent times, there has been a lot of movement between the French Caribbean and Quebec; many Haitian authors in particular have now settled in Francophone Canada. Empire created strong and complex bonds between colonizer and colonized but it also brought together far-flung parts of the globe — Vietnam, the Ivory Coast, Quebec, Réunion — through their use of a common language.

Q. What is the relationship with colonial studies?

A. As I said already, the 'post' in 'postcolonial' is not an indication that Francophone postcolonial studies is interested only in the period after empire had ended. Therefore, we should not see colonial studies and postcolonial studies in opposition to one another. At the moment, colonial studies is primarily the domain of historians, anthropologists, or sociologists, whereas postcolonial studies is largely made up of literature and culture specialists, many of whom are in fact interested in the culture of empire (literature, songs, film, theatre). A lot of the difficulty in getting the two fields together is to do with disciplinary approaches. Let me make two generalizations, which I hope will make this easier to understand. Generally speaking, historians of empire work on empirical questions; that is, they pore over historical records in order to try and work out 'what happened' as meticulously as possible; on the other hand, literary and cultural studies scholars are often engaged in what is called speculative thought: that is, they are attempting to work out why certain texts/films/songs were written in certain contexts, and how this is informed by, or contributes to, or counters, colonial discourse. However, the distinctions between these fields are never clear-cut; most historians engage in some level of speculative thought when they attempt to suggest what historical facts mean or how they were perceived/interpreted at different times; equally, literary/cultural scholars need to discover certain 'facts' of empire if their analyses are to avoid being pure, theoretical speculation (which is a criticism often levelled at postcolonial critics). So, much is to be gained from a dialogue between the two areas, combining a knowledge of how empire came about and was resisted with the knowledge of how empire was understood and represented in different contexts. The literary and cultural experts who currently dominate postcolonial studies could add another cultural dimension to our understanding of the process of empire, while colonial studies scholars could provide some much-needed historical depth to postcolonial theory, which is sometimes worryingly vague about the exact historical details of empire (knowledge is often limited to the period after the Second World War).

Q. What has been the legacy of empire within France since decolonization?

A. Many historians (such as those in ACHAC) have spoken about a form of historical amnesia in France concerning their former empire. This does not mean that no

research has been carried out on empire and its legacy — it has, and there has been a lot of fine work in this area — but rather that empire is largely absent from public debate. To support their case, ACHAC cite the furore that surrounded recent ‘revelations’ by former French commanders who served in Algeria during the war of independence that the French had used systematic torture on suspected ‘terrorists’. However, such revelations about the use of torture in Algeria are not new; in fact, they had been widespread during the war itself. This is obviously an issue that is still painful for France; just as it has taken 50 years for France to come to terms with the traumatic history of the German Occupation in the Second World War, perhaps it will be another generation before the legacy of empire is fully acknowledged.

This is not to say that empire is entirely absent from public debate. There have been some important works of history and fiction. In particular, a number of fascinating books by the French novelist Didier Daeninckx have sought to address dark periods in this colonial history. In *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1984) he uses the detective story genre to uncover the buried history of the ‘Bataille de Paris’ on 17 October 1961, when hundreds of peaceful Algerian demonstrators were massacred on the streets of the French capital by riot police; while in *Cannibale* (1998) he tells the story of a group of men and women taken from French Polynesia to play the role of savages at the French Colonial Exhibition of 1931.

Without doubt, the most distinctive aspect of the French colonial legacy is the fact that various far-flung corners of the former empire are still governed today as part of the French Republic, as either *Départements d’outre-mer* (DOMs) or *Territoires d’outre-mer* (TOMs), with some others that enjoy an ‘in-between’ status. The DOMs of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, and Guyane all elect deputies to the French parliament and, by and large, are governed in the same way as other mainland (or metropolitan) departments, while the TOMs enjoy a more ‘mixed’ form of government. So we can see that the shape of the French Republic today is more than simply the ‘Hexagone’ of metropolitan France; however, French Republican ideology is often criticized for failing to take account of this ethnic and geographical diversity.

The most visible legacy of empire in metropolitan France today is the presence of vast numbers of immigrants from France’s former colonies, predominantly Muslims from North Africa (4–5 million people in total). Many of these people were invited to work in France during the boom years following the Second World War (the ‘*trente glorieuses*’ from 1945 to 1975); however, since the economic recession of the 1970s, there has been a growing tide of xenophobia towards immigrants — North Africans in particular — which is clearly seen from the popular support for the policies of the Front National (its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, received 20 per cent of the vote in the 2002 presidential election). From the late nineteenth century, France had received waves of migration from eastern and southern Europe (Russians, Poles, Italians, Portuguese, Spanish), and these immigrants were deemed to have assimilated into the dominant secular Republican culture of France. However, it has become common to speak of the difficulty of ‘assimilating’ France’s postcolonial Muslim population: the recent debates about banning Muslim students from wearing the headscarf (or *hijab*) in secular French schools is a classic example of the tensions that exist. A number of historians — such as Blanchard and Bancel (1998) mentioned earlier — and other commentators have noticed how this debate about immigration and assimilation strongly echoes debates from the colonial era about how to ‘assimilate the natives’ who were seen as irreconcilably different. In this context, it is interesting to note that the victory of France’s multi-ethnic football team in the World Cup of 1998 provoked a debate between those who saw this event as proof of the

success of France's assimilation policy and those who saw in it a resurgence of colonial discourse about the 'lesser peoples' of the empire contributing to the grandeur of France.

France's Republican ideology emphasizes the equality of all citizens within the nation, irrespective of colour, gender or religion. However, certain critics of Republicanism argue that its 'universal values' are not shared equally among all French citizens, and that France actively discriminates against its ethnic minorities. These critics cite the high rates of unemployment among ethnic minorities or the fact that there are very few 'black' people on French television or in parliament. In the cultural sphere, French writers from minority ethnic groups, are often categorized as part of 'Francophone literature' rather than 'French literature'. A collection of essays edited by Alec Hargreaves and Mark McKinney, *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* (1997) gives an excellent overview of these issues.

Perhaps the other key legacy of empire has been the creation of an international body of Francophone states and regions known as *la Francophonie*. In the 1960s, the discourse of this body was based on the rather imperial idea that all of these Francophone locations shared a single language and culture. However, as US military, economic and cultural dominance around the globe has grown, *La Francophonie* has become the defender of 'cultural diversity': i.e. all cultures have the right to survive and defend themselves from external dominance. However, in light of what has been said already about immigration in France, we can see that there is an obvious ambiguity here; the rhetoric of *la Francophonie* now promotes cultural diversity but within France itself the emphasis is on assimilation of cultural difference. Another ambiguity about France's global role was evident during debates before the Iraq War in 2003, when France presented itself as the defender of the rights of small nations. While it is true that France has invested heavily in educational, cultural and development projects in its former colonies in the four decades since decolonization, France has also been heavily criticized for what is often termed its 'neo-colonial' policies in Africa, propping up corrupt dictatorships — in Gabon, Chad, Rwanda — in order to protect its economic or military 'interests'. An awareness of France's colonial past helps us to understand better the complexity of its position on the world stage today.

Key publications by David Murphy

My own research over the past few years can be categorized under two very broad headings: (1) 'empirical' research on different aspects of Senegalese culture — literature, popular music, cinema, sporting culture — by 'empirical', I simply mean analysis of specific 'texts'/cultural products; and (2) 'theoretical' research on the links between Francophone Studies and postcolonial studies; that is, thinking about the development of academic fields of research and the assumptions/ideas that underpin them.

'Empirical' pieces

Sembene: Imagining Alternatives in Film and Fiction (Oxford: James Currey; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000).

'An African Brecht: the cinema of Ousmane Sembene', *New Left Review*, 16(July–August) 2002: 115-29.

'Postcolonial thought and culture in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa', in C. Forsdick and D. Murphy (eds), *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 221–30.

'Theoretical' pieces

'De-Centring French Studies: towards a postcolonial theory of Francophone cultures', *French Cultural Studies*, 13(2), 2002: 165–85.

Co-editor with Aedín Ní Loingsigh, *Thresholds of Otherness/Autrement mêmes: Identity and Alterity in French-Language Literatures* (London: Grant & Cutler, 2002).

'Choosing a framework: the limits of French Studies/Francophone Studies/Postcolonial Studies', *Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, 1(1), 2003: 72–80.

Co-editor with Charles Forsdick, *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2003).

SFPS Journal

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Further reading

The connections between French/Francophone Studies and postcolonial theory:

Celia Britton and Michael Syrotinski (eds), 'Francophone texts and postcolonial theory', *Paragraph*, 24(3), 2001 (special issue of a journal).

Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (eds), *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2003).

Alec Hargreaves and Mark McKinney (eds), *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

Recent French attempts to engage with postcolonial theory:

Jacqueline Bardolph, *Etudes postcoloniales et littérature* (Paris: Champion, 2001).

Jean-Marc Moura, *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale* (Paris: PUF, 1999).

Overviews of key issues in postcolonial studies:

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Elleke Boehmer *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Graham Huggan, *The Post-colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).
Neil Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001).

The legacy of empire in France:

Pascal Blanchard and Nicolas Bancel, *De l'indigène à l'immigré* (Paris: Gallimard, Découvertes, 1998).
Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize; The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).
Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).