

# Chapter One

## Post? Anti? De? Why Anticolonialism Still Matters

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### Introduction

From around 1906 to 1915, a small group of Indian men (with an even smaller group of women) found themselves in the small French territorial enclave of Pondicherry on India's southeastern coastline. The men, the majority of whom were from Tamil-speaking regions of India, were the core of an emergent anticolonialism in Southern India. Already, they had been involved in a number of revolutionary nationalist activities, and all were identified as being parts of an 'extremist' faction amongst the Indian National Congress (INC), the main legal organisation by which Indians could agitate for change within British-governed India. By moving to Pondicherry, the group escaped from immediate prosecution or imprisonment, but moved into a space of exile, shut off and contained within the small confines of the city and with limited means to earn money and survive.

Despite these restrictions, Pondicherry became an important nodal point in an international network of anticolonial agitation which stretched to London, Paris, New York, San Francisco, Tashkent, Constantinople, Berlin and Tangiers to name only a few. Revolutionaries passed through Pondicherry, were not only trained there in the techniques of anticolonial revolution, but also smuggled guns and revolutionary materials into the rest of India through the city's port. However, being confined to Pondicherry, as well as the changing political situation in India and globally by the outbreak of World War One, meant that the group was never able to agitate effectively and to create a mass movement in South India, and by

1915, Pondicherry's moment as a centre for political radicalism had gone. Despite this, for such a small group operating in often distressed circumstances, the radicals who found themselves in Pondicherry played an important role in shaping the wider geographies of anticolonialism which were emerging globally in the early twentieth century.

It is this group, who came to be known variously as the Pondicherry 'Gang', 'group', 'anarchists' and a variety of other names by the British authorities who spied on them whilst they lived in Pondicherry, who form the focus of this book. What the book argues is that although a relatively minor moment in the struggle for India's independence, the activities of the Pondicherry 'Gang' are of vital importance in understanding how anticolonialism was a diverse set of activities, which crucially were productive of new geographies of the world. The Pondicherry group of anticolonialists was never really as cohesive a group as the colonial authorities made them out to be. However, the individuals who moved through Pondicherry illuminate how anticolonialism was dynamic and heterogeneous in its attempts to resist imperial and colonial domination.

This emphasis on anticolonialism is particularly important as the legacies of colonialism, and how we deal with them is increasingly visible in academic and public life in the twenty-first century. Social and political movements have emerged over the past decade to challenge orthodoxies and colonial assumptions which, alongside long-existing struggles, have shifted some of the face of public discussion. In North America, the indigenous struggle over the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock brought together indigenous communities and environmental activists in ways which reworked existing solidarities, and the fight for racial justice, with its often underplayed links (in mainstream commentaries at least) to colonial racial hierarchies, have meant that the anti-confederate statue movement, Black Lives Matter and the NFL Anthem/Colin Kaepernick protests have all worked to destabilise many hegemonic structures of power and domination. In South Africa, the Rhodes Must Fall movement at Cape Town University expanded to a nationwide and eventually transnational struggle to recognise the colonial legacies that are embedded within higher education institutions across the world (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nisanoglu 2018; Rhodes Must Fall Oxford 2018). Elsewhere in Europe, activists and intellectuals have been developing a range of responses, from policy documents to museum galleries to policy reports/books, to highlight the complicity of nations from Scandinavia to Belgium to Germany in colonial projects which are often downplayed compared to British or French colonialism.

This process has become so clearly important to academia that the need to be 'decolonial' or to 'decolonise' our education systems and wider societies is frequently used as a rallying cry for a variety of social justice movements. In terms of geography, it is notable that the 2017 Royal Geographical Society Conference theme was 'Decolonising Geographical Knowledges'. At the same time, there has been a predictable backlash against these movements. From the broadly 'right-wing' sections

of society, university students and lecturers, often when they are women, or people of colour, or most often both, have been attacked for, amongst other things, being ‘snowflakes’ who are too sensitive about historical injustices and need to toughen up to the realities of a harsh world, or for attacking and seeking to remove traditional (read: ‘white’) authors and intellectuals from disciplines. These attacks often wilfully ignore the contexts and nuance of the arguments for creating a more inclusive and diverse education system (and indeed wider world).

This book is written then at something of a ‘decolonial’ moment where the varied practices, experiences and legacies of colonialism are at the forefront of many debates in society. Why then, is this book titled ‘Geographies of Anticolonialism’? As will become clear throughout this introduction and the rest of the book, whilst the decolonial and the postcolonial are undoubtedly vital and important to the ongoing struggle against colonial forms of domination, my argument is that geography would be well served not to ‘forget’ the anti-colonial as an equally important, yet subtly different register for understanding the practices and experiences of resistance to colonialism/imperialism. As Mary Gilmartin, in the discussion surrounding her lecture for the journal *Political Geography* at the RGS–IBG conference in 2017 argued, we should be mindful of what the struggles against colonialism in the past and present actually offer us, and what anticolonialism’s rigorous commitment to dismantling the political structures of colonialism gives us alongside the equally important cultural, epistemological and ontological strategies which form a core aspect of postcolonial and decolonial approaches (see also Gilmartin 2009; Naylor et al. 2018 for more by Gilmartin on post-/de/anticolonialism and geography). For the rest of this introductory chapter, I will set out the ways in which geographers have engaged with these terms. In particular, through this chapter, and on into the next chapter which deals with anticolonial thought in more detail, I want to argue that, whilst all three terms, and their related schools of thought are ‘against’ and therefore ‘anti-colonial’, geographers and academics are, as Gilmartin suggested, missing out on something vitally important if we ignore or downplay the anticolonial in these more contemporary movements. In the suitably imperial/colonial surroundings of the Ondaatje Theatre of the RGS building in South Kensington, London, I remember having to suppress a cry of ‘Yes! Someone else gets it!’ when Mary said this.

Crucially, my point is that anticolonialism is not just an aspect of the past, or a historical relic, something which it is often relegated to – for example, in Robert J.C. Young’s recent (2015) primer on the variety of approaches to colonialism, the chapter on anticolonialism deals exclusively with movements that struggled against formal practices of colonialism in the past – and therefore, anticolonialism is something that is discussed in the past tense, rather than something which is ongoing. This book is my attempt to think through what that response could be, and to (hopefully) open up ground for other attempts to understand the myriad ways in which anticolonial geographies were and are relationally produced in practises

which fruitfully intersect with post- and decolonial approaches to geography. It is then, something of a beginning and hopefully opens up some space for similar discussions in the future about different anticolonial geographies.

Before moving on to discuss some of these terms and their evolution in geographical thought in more detail, it is worth mentioning a small detail about terminology. For a long time in postcolonial theory, and in postcolonial geography, there were a lot of debates about whether there should or should not be a hyphen inserted in the term (i.e. post-colonial). Whilst these debates have largely disappeared, it is still important to clarify my particular use of terms here. I tend to use postcolonial as I think that the hyphen tends to create an emphasis on the experience of colonialism as something that is ‘past’ or over. Removing the hyphen, to me, not only allows a sense of the continued existence and legacies of colonialism to be maintained but also to indicate that the term is continuing to work beyond and against colonialist practices. Likewise, I do not use the term ‘anti-colonialism’, rather choosing to use anticolonialism. Whilst my objection to the postcolonial lies largely, but not wholly, in its creation of a certain type of temporality, I use anticolonial to break down the sense that anticolonialism is only a negative reaction to the colonial situation. Removing the hyphen, to me, not only helps to both show that practices of anticolonialism were always situated and calculated responses to the specific colonial encounters that produced them but also gives these practices the space to exceed those circumstances. As will become clear throughout this book, the development of a number of responses to colonial and imperial rule involved not only negating and contesting the dominant narratives of colonialism but also showing how to imagine a future world beyond them that would be more than, to use the terms of John Holloway (2002), a shout ‘against’ the colonial system. With this clarification in mind, the rest of this introduction sets out the evolution of geography’s varied engagements with resistance to the colonial and the imperial.

## **‘Postcolonial’ Geographies?**

The impact of postcolonialism on geography is in danger of being overlooked, given the present desire to embrace decolonial approaches. The supposedly passé or elitist nature of postcolonial theory has meant that the term has come under a number of vituperative attacks in recent years – see, for example Hamid Dabashi’s (2015) short but damning criticism of Homi K. Bhabha’s ‘useless bourgeois post-modernism’ (p. 7). However, despite the tensions inherent in the term, it is important to state that without the development of a variety of postcolonial approaches to geography since the early 1990s, the discipline as a whole would look remarkably different. To many postcolonialists, it was the publication of Edward Said’s (2003) *Orientalism* that mark the emergence of a distinct postcolonial theory. It is, of course, problematic to assign a specific moment to

the emergence of such a diverse range of thought, and, as Marxist critics of postcolonialism have noted, Said's orientalism only signalled the emergence of an increasingly post-modern trend within postcolonial studies (Kaiwar 2015). However, for geography, postcolonialism emerged as an approach later on, around the same time as the 'cultural turn' in Geography. Postcolonial geographies are fundamentally an attempt to understand the intersections between colonialism and space. As Blunt and McEwan argue in the Introduction to *Postcolonial Geographies* (McEwan and Blunt 2002, p. 1), 'postcolonialism and geography are intimately linked. Their intersections provide many challenging opportunities to explore the spatiality of colonial discourse, the spatial politics of representation, and the material effects of colonialism in different places'. Interestingly, Blunt and McEwan argue that many of the chapters in their edited collection were working towards decolonising knowledges and the articulation of colonial discourses in the past and the present. The significant overlaps between post-/de-/anticolonial approaches have therefore always been present. McEwan and Blunt's book, as well as Sidaway's survey chapter in the same collection and the chapter on postcolonial geography in Blunt and Wills (2000), marked an important point in the official recognition of postcolonial approaches to geography. Prior to this point, whilst there were a number of geographers who were writing about postcolonial issues (Blunt and Rose 1994; Phillips 1997; Radcliffe 1997), it was in the early 2000s, that postcolonialism was placed firmly as a topic of concern to all geographers. This shift was something that happened rapidly in my own personal experience, where, as someone who graduated in 2002 from an undergraduate degree which had no explicitly postcolonial content during the entire programme, I suddenly encountered an invigorated and vibrant postcolonial approach to geography when I returned to the academy to undertake an MA in 2004/2005.

However, for many geographers around this time, postcolonial approaches utilised the various theoretical 'tools' provided by the scholars who were working through the details of postcolonial thought in cultural studies and elsewhere. It is therefore not surprising to see the well-established work of cultural and literary postcolonial approaches being used as key touchstones by geographers at this time, and the likes of Ashcroft et al. (2000) and Loomba (1998), as well as key thinkers such as Edward Said or Homi K. Bhabha or Gayatri Spivak, were often key citations in this work. It is also from criticisms of the supposedly 'post-structural' and culturally inflected nature of these authors that the initial critiques of postcolonialism and postcolonial geographies emerged, particularly from scholars such as Arif Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmad. Whilst these critiques are well known, it is worth examining them here as they set out the frameworks for much of the critique that was to follow, and which has coalesced around the drive for 'decolonial' approaches to geography today, but with some important differences. Both Ahmad and Dirlik are broadly Marxist in orientation, and are also deeply sceptical of the post-modern or post-structural nature of postcolonial

thought in the 1990s. For Ahmad (1995), this meant that term had evacuated much of the initial idea of the postcolonial, which had emerged out of the anticolonial nationalist struggles of the mid-twentieth century – where the postcolonial was closely linked to temporality and was a marker of the political project to create a nation, or even a world, after colonialism. To Ahmad (1992), the emergence of postcolonial literary theory had moved this struggle away from the political economy of imperialism/colonialism, into the realm of the cultural ‘superstructure’ of Marxism. This intellectual shift meant that, on the one hand, postcolonial theory became increasingly bourgeois and detached from political struggle, but on the other, was also prone to making and repeating assumptions about the postcolonial world which were rooted in colonialist framings. In particular, Ahmad was famously critical of the range and scope of the literatures that many postcolonial literary theorists were working with, most notably in his polemic on Frederic Jameson’s categorisation of ‘Third World literature’ and the colonialist assumptions which underpinned that conception.

Following a similar line of argument, according to Arif Dirlik (1999), the postcolonial had become by the late 1990s so diffuse a term as to be almost worthless. By moving away from its original domain of resistance to actually existing colonialism into a more nebulous area where ethnicity and representational politics seemingly took precedence over gendered and classed politics, postcolonial theory, it was argued, not only missed the terms of the game, but failed to achieve much in terms of concrete change for those who suffered the negative effects of colonial rule, and often served to reinforce existing colonial relations:

Conceived to combat ethnocentrism and racism, postcolonial discourse ironically contributes presently to the racialisation and ethnicisation of the languages of both critical intellectual work and politics – with liberal intentions, no doubt, but at the risk on the one hand of covering up proliferating problems of social inequality and oppression whose origins lie elsewhere, and, on the other hand, of contributing to the consolidation of the very ethnic, national and racial boundaries that it is intended to render porous and traversible. (Dirlik 1999, p. 153)

By its expansion beyond its immediate terms of reference as a temporal and a political issue, postcolonialism ‘retreated’ from two of its earlier key concerns – ‘nation’ and ‘class’ (Dirlik 1999, p. 150) and became too concerned with cultural and representational issues. Crucially to Dirlik, these cultural issues were not missing from the earlier period, but instead formed part of a wider political movement to achieve national liberation. The debt to Marxism in these criticisms is clear, but they do highlight the perceived limits of postcolonial critique as post-modern and focussed on the representational at the expense of the formally ‘political’.

By the mid-2000s, postcolonial approaches to geography had become established across the discipline to such an extent that Joanne Sharp’s textbook

*Geographies of Postcolonialism* (Sharp 2009) was published, marking for the first time a dedicated text for undergraduate students on the core aims and scope of postcolonial geographies. Within geography, especially after the publications noted earlier, there continued to be debates about the utility and use of postcolonial thought in various sub-disciplines. Despite geographers' awareness of the criticisms of postcolonialism's intellectual diffusion noted earlier, as Sidaway (2002, p. 12) argues, the opening up of postcolonial thought allowed the creation of an 'open constellation of meanings associated with the term'. Indeed, postcolonial geography has proved a ripe ground for challenging a number of intellectual orthodoxies. In political geography, David Slater (2004) took traditional notions of geopolitics and used postcolonial ideas to interrogate their assumptions. In an intervention into geopolitics but from a feminist subaltern perspective, Joanne Sharp (2011, 2013) has argued for alternative centres of geographical knowledge production such as Nyerere's Tanzania to be recognised. Elsewhere, Jennifer Robinson (2003, 2006, 2016) applied postcolonial ideas to urban studies, challenging the Eurocentric basis of many urban models, and this has opened up a whole set of debates about how to imagine a plural urbanism for the twenty-first century, but which have also had important consequences for how we imagine space/geographies more broadly. Likewise, development geographies have been clearly influenced by the postcolonial imperative (Radcliffe 2005; Power, Mohan and Mercer 2006).

Although not true of all of the aforementioned examples, much of the work in postcolonial geographies was avowedly interested in the representational. Given Said's inherently geographical understanding of the production of the orient and its 'imagined geographies', there was undoubtedly much to be done in exposing and challenging these geographies, not least because of institutional geography's complicity in imperial and colonial projects which reproduced these ideas. Whilst earlier work by the likes of Blaut (1993) had exposed the epistemological coloniality at the heart of geographical thought, the emergence of postcolonialism allowed a generation of geographers to show how coloniality was produced and consumed by the subjects of imperialism/colonialism, from advertising through to expos and fairs. However, by the mid-2000s, the emergence of non-representational, or more-than-representational, theories, had begun to alter postcolonial approaches. As a result, there has been a wave of work which has begun to think in post-human terms about the postcolonial, enrolling non-human subjects into our understandings of the world. This has been driven at least in part by Spivak's (2003) discussion of planetarity, which has had important consequences for how geographers have used the postcolonial to understand ontology as well as epistemology (Jackson 2014).

Postcolonial geography has remained one of the discipline's most vibrant areas in recent years, bringing together and challenging many problematic categorisations and rethinking terms which have seemingly been forgotten about or become passé in other disciplines (for example the work done on the subaltern in

geography in recent years (Featherstone 2015; Jazeel and Legg 2019)). There is then a rich and continuing debate which is alive in the discipline about understanding how links to colonialism are still present. Postcolonial geographies have therefore been crucial to broadening the scope and challenging the Eurocentricity of geographical knowledge production. This project is still demonstrably ongoing, yet the Marxist-inspired criticisms of the supposedly bourgeois, or at least overly theoretical and post-structural nature of postcolonial theory have continued to hang over the sub-discipline of postcolonial studies more broadly, and in geography, this is no different. Whilst I do not necessarily agree with many of these critiques, they have been at least partially responsible for the shift towards calls to 'decolonise' our societies rather than to think postcolonially about them, and so the next section of this introduction moves on to these approaches which are now prominent beyond academia.

## Decolonial Geographies?

Postcolonial thought's resistance to conceptual discipline has meant that it is unable to attach a specific set of political values to itself. Whilst it is in general committed to an ethics of liberation and against oppression, the wide range of different colonial/imperial situations means that many postcolonial theorists are unwilling to corral the ethics of the postcolonial into one particular frame. This has meant that postcolonialism remains resolutely committed to the theoretical. This may be a commitment to 'minor' theory/ies (and more on this in the next chapter), but unlike Marxism or feminism, postcolonialism does not have a distinct praxis *per se*. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the term was targeted so heatedly by Marxist critiques in the 1990s. Despite the openness of the term, and the ability of intersectional politics, such as Sharp's feminist postcolonial geopolitics which was mentioned earlier, to be fruitful avenues of academic endeavour, the desire for an openly practical resistance to colonialism, and particularly one that can be used in the present, has driven the emergence of an increasingly visible movement to 'decolonise' our world. This move has driven a debate that has not necessarily split postcolonial geographers, but has at least provoked a new wave of thought and engagement with the terms by which we make sense of the colonial world around us.

Decolonial approaches, whether in geography or more broadly, most often trace their lineages back to anticolonial struggles rather than the literary work of Edward Said et al. Most often, Frantz Fanon (1963, 1964) is invoked as an important figurehead in this process, but equally, the works of Ho Chi Minh, Amílcar Cabral, Sylvia Wynter, and others could be seen as originary. As it is broadly understood now, there are two overlapping but related approaches that gave rise to decolonial approaches (see also Bhabra 2014). The first strand is the emergence of a distinct Latin American engagement with the postcolonial

theory which shifted debates that had, in anglophone and literary postcolonial debates, been shaped largely by discussions between European and South Asian scholars. This is most often framed through discussions of the 'Latin American Subaltern Studies Collective' (LASS), a term used in contradistinction to the Subaltern Studies collective which coalesced around studies of South Asian politics in the late 1970s to early 1990s (and more on these in Chapter Three). This term is not unproblematic as it suggests that the debates in South Asia and Europe were precursive and potentially originary of this Latin American intellectual movement (Mignolo 2000). In fact, the LASS agenda was related to but distinct from the Subaltern Studies Collective's project, not least because it emerged in relation to the specific colonial milieu of Latin America. Without wishing to reduce a huge range of writing to a few key figures, it is often clear that writers such as Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo and Maria Lugones have provided important practical and conceptual tools for academics. For the likes of Quijano and Mignolo, debate circulates around how the present is and remains colonial. Quijano's pairing of 'coloniality/modernity' (Quijano 2007) as a single term, emphasises that we cannot understand modernity without understanding how it continues to be shaped by colonial process, and thus the condition of our times is its very 'coloniality'. Mignolo's 'colonial matrix of power' (2011) emphasises a similar point, but discusses how dominant, colonial framings and codings of knowledge and subjectivity; race, gender and sexuality; economic management, and; systems of authority; all work together to maintain coloniality in the present world system. Lugones (2010) takes an explicitly feminist approach to this work, showing how patriarchy is embedded within coloniality, with the colonial, heterosexual male becoming the 'perfect' marker of civilisation, however, this hierarchy is also complicated by the racialisation and heteronormativity of women's bodies, where those who were deemed aberrant are pushed further down the hierarchy based on their intersectional position. Lugones is clear that the task of this decolonial feminist approach is rooted in praxis – it is a 'lived transformation of the social' (Lugones 2010, p. 746). This decolonial approach makes it a core concern that although formal imperialism/colonialism may be over in much of the world, coloniality is not, and challenging the categorisations of modernity/coloniality remains a crucial challenge.

The second strand of decolonial thought has emerged from the very present, lived, experience of coloniality amongst indigenous communities, particularly, but not exclusively, those from North America. Notable here are attempts to challenge the epistemological and methodological foundations of research and academic practice more generally (Smith 1999) through to Fanonian-inspired discussions of the racial politics of being identified as 'indigenous' (Coulthard 2014). Again, the core aim and discussion here is how the colonial is still experienced and confronted on a regular basis. Within geography, this has spurred a range of developments, from work on settler colonial masculinities (Gahman 2016), post-foundational accounts of indigenous communities' engagements with the legal system (Sparke 2005) and

understanding occupation as a key strategy of indigenous communities so that it prefigures the supposed territory-claiming novelty of the Occupy! Movement (Barker 2012). This second approach is important because it makes clear that the struggle for decolonisation is not only an epistemic one, where the colonial foundations of knowledge production need to be dismantled, but is also fundamentally about struggles over land and territory in the colonial present. The very real and immediate need to consider how colonialism is made manifest in the present, and how to resist it in the specific contexts in which it arises (Tuck and Yang 2012).

This situates decolonisation/decoloniality as very much a concern for the world we inhabit today. Unlike postcolonialism's uneasy relationship with the past or the use of the hyphen, decolonial theory and practise marks an attempt to challenge and deconstruct the practises of imperialism and colonialism that still exist today. This has meant that decolonisation has become a key marker of many social and political movements in the twenty-first century. For much of the last 50 years, indigenous and anticolonial movements across the world have long used the language of colonialism, the hegemonic discourses of the time meant that such claims were often seen as hyperbole – witness the shift in the 1980s in exiled Tibetan political discourse away from the language of colonialism and independence from China towards a seemingly more 'pragmatic' tone of autonomy within China in the hope of gaining some traction in the realpolitik of the Tibet Issue. However, movements like Occupy!, the aforementioned indigenous activism, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), and Rhodes Must Fall (amongst many others) mean that decolonial campaigns have become news in recent years. To be sure, this has often, especially in the United Kingdom and the USA, been at the expense of the campaigners themselves – see, for example the various campaigns to decolonise UK universities, where students and academics, especially those who are non-white and/or female or non-cis, and have often been targeted by sections of the press for attacks for their supposedly over-sensitive behaviour. This is a mark of the various 'culture wars' that have been taking place so far in the twenty-first century. These have long histories in themselves, but the crucial point here is that decolonisation has provided a set of tools by which people are actively seeking to challenge the ontological and epistemological frameworks which many take for granted and which continue to produce conditions of colonality for many in the world.

This emergence has certainly intersected with much of the writing in postcolonial geographies, especially since the late 2000s. Discussions of planetarity, although owing a debt to Spivak, also clearly intersect with decolonial ideas, and the ontological turn within geography has also provided some fertile ground for decolonial and postcolonial intersections (Jackson 2014). This has also meant that we continue to have to interrogate the practices of geographers as professional researchers. Whilst there have been numerous studies of the troubling past of many geographers during the colonial era (Kearns 2010), there are also still concerns about much more recent practices of colonialism taking place within

geography (Wainwright 2012). It is from these concerns that a debate around the 2017 RGS–IBG conference theme of Decolonising Geographical Knowledges took place. In particular, members of the Race, Culture and Equality (RACE) Working Group wrote a number of pieces about the limits of Geography to actually decolonise itself (Esson et al. 2017). These, along with a number of sessions at the RGS–IBG, opened up the terms of discussion for geographical knowledge production in the present and future. Crucially, Esson et al. pointed out the tension of having a conference theme within the spaces of the RGS–IBG, an institution which is indelibly marked by its colonial past. The danger of having the conference theme based on decolonising geographical knowledge was, as Esson et al. rightly point out, that such a theme would not lead to a sustained and rigorous interrogation of the colonial structures at work within the RGS–IBG itself (as well as in academia more generally), but would rather allow the RGS in future to say it had worked to confront these issues, and that would somehow be enough.

The issues raised by decolonisation then are at the forefront of many academic and societal debates at present. The need to address the concerns of colonised people and to rigorously confront the colonial matrix of power within geography (and beyond) is vital to the discipline. However, the imperative of decolonisation means that it is constantly driving towards thinking about how to decolonise in the present to work towards a future where it may be possible to work outside coloniality. This present-centredness is undoubtedly vital, as the debates around the RGS in 2017 and since have shown. However, as I noted earlier, there is a danger that we turn away from past *anticolonialisms* or forget about the lessons that we may learn from them, and this is what this book seeks to address.

## Geographies of Anticolonialism?

The overviews above set out how post- and decolonial approaches have had significant impacts upon geographical knowledge production over the past three decades. Why then does this book use ‘anticolonialism’ as its key term? As Stephen Legg has recently noted, ‘colonialism’ could be defined as ‘practises within colonies’ (Legg 2017, p. 347). However, this could be read as situating colonial practises as only taking place within territories that are colonised – and not in places like the colonial centre of power in the metropole – the Colonial Office in London, for example. Likewise, one of the key aims of this book is to think about how the spaces of anticolonialism were not limited to only ‘colonies’. We will see how a series of activities in South India spurred a number of events that stretched across the world. Therefore, anticolonialism is a broad range of activity that can be seen to be acting against the similarly broad range of practices and by-products of colonial rule that include racism, militarism, resource exploitation, land dispossession, and so on. This can include resistance to internal and external colonialisms (i.e. within/outside a nation-state’s domestic borders, respectively), which also encompass a number of different practices.

Anticolonial geographies are therefore closely linked to, but different from post- and decolonial approaches. They differ from postcolonial approaches because of their explicitly political nature. It is also a somewhat broader concept than decoloniality, which is often (and necessarily) rooted/routed through the specific circumstances of colonialism in particular places/spaces – something like a broad stance rather than a toolkit for precise circumstances. The anticolonial then can act as something of a bridge between the postcolonial and the decolonial, not only suturing them together but also highlighting different practices and activities which are allied to these approaches, but may be ignored or occluded by them. As a result, I argue through the rest of this book that taking an anticolonial approach remains something that will offer a different perspective to geographers. Crucially, this is not an approach that is only historical. Thinking anticolonially about space and place remains relevant to understanding the present and should not be something that is relegated to the past simply because much of the world has now been formally granted political independence from colonial rule.

In the next chapter, I go into more detail about what exactly ‘anticolonialism’ as an approach to thinking, and importantly thinking geographically, could mean. I not only think through some of the key writings on and by anticolonialists but also develop a sense of what the geographies of anticolonialism could look like. The book does this by thinking through a series of geographies related to the activities of the so-called ‘Pondicherry Gang’. As noted earlier, the ‘Gang’ as such never really existed as a coherent group of people, apart from one short period of activity between 1910 and 1911 – instead, Pondicherry acted as a hub for a number of anticolonially minded individuals to pass through, and even then, for only a short period of time. I re-utilise the term Pondicherry ‘Gang’ to emphasise the connections between the men (and women) who passed through the spaces of anticolonialism connected to Pondicherry which also reworks the denigration inherent in the colonial use of the term to instead suggest the solidarity and friendships which were shared by the group. This arguably creates too much of a sense of connection between the often disparate groups of people connected to Pondicherry. However, it also stresses the fact that these individuals did share connections that bound them together in their opposition to colonial rule, and which had dramatic consequences for most of their lives.

The historical context of these activities is also important because, as I will show, the various anticolonialisms which took place in and surrounding the Pondicherry ‘Gang’ show how diverse anticolonialism was in the past. This has important effects in terms of understanding things like the evolution of politics and nationalism in India today, but does more than this in that it also shows how different political subjectivities such as anarchism or spiritual reformism were a part of these movements. When today decolonial and feminist approaches are rightly asking us to think intersectionally about our present, we can look to historical examples such as the ‘Gang’ to see how these anticolonialisms played out in the past. This is important especially as the activities of the ‘Gang’ were often

destined to end in failure. If we are to decolonise our world, an ability to learn from and think through the challenges and mistakes of the past attempts to decolonise is key to this process.

To establish how the book will do this, it is necessary to say a little here about the structure of the book to come. As mentioned, I set out the anticolonial approach to geography which is central to my argument in the next chapter (Chapter Two), which involves a discussion of some of the key theoretical framings of anticolonial thought. In Chapter Three, I think through some of the core approaches to understanding the historical geography of the struggle for Indian independence which are most relevant to this book. These include discussing ideas about nationalism and internationalism, non-violence and revolutionary violence, and the subaltern. These are important as they continue to develop some of the themes of anticolonialism developed in Chapter Two, but show how anticolonialism was articulated within these specific places. However, as well as continuing the engagement with more theoretical concerns, later in the chapter I begin to introduce some of the history of Southern India which is necessary to place the later chapters in their context. This is important not only in terms of 'setting the geographical scene' and providing some regional context to the later chapters. Instead, an important consideration for this book is to provide a space by which the political activities which took place in Tamil-speaking areas of South India are properly recognised. Traditionally, South India has been characterised as much less militant during the freedom struggle than areas like the Punjab or Bengal. This book shows that this narrative is misplaced, and in fact, South India has its own distinctive place within the history of the freedom struggle.

After these opening chapters, the next four chapters form the historical heart of the book, and each addresses a specific space of anticolonialism though one individual who was either loosely affiliated to the Pondicherry 'Gang' or was active in spaces associated with it. The chapters themselves proceed relatively chronologically, and Chapter Four examines the emergence of *swadeshi* forms of radicalism in South India. *Swadeshi* activism was a complex arrangement of different political strategies which sought to encourage the economic development of India and the reduction of its reliance on foreign-produced (predominantly British) goods. It marked the first nationwide wave of radical protests against British rule in the early twentieth century but also had a number of regional variations. Specifically, this chapter explores the maritime-affiliated spaces of anticolonialism which were created when V.O.C. Pillai attempted to challenge British maritime supremacy of the Indian Ocean by setting up the *Swadeshi* Steam Navigation Company in Tinnevely district in the far south of India in 1906. The chapter investigates how Indian 'nationalism' was not terra-centric, instead expanding to wider imaginaries about both the industrial development required not only for a future independent Indian nation but also about how this nation would require maritime dimensions. Crucially, the symbolic power of

maritime steamship enterprises played into shaping South India's largest-scale industrial nationalist protests, and which marked a key moment in the emergence of anticolonialism in the region.

Chapter Five continues the development of the place-based geographies of Southern India through a discussion of the Tamil poet and polemicist Subramania Bharati. Bharati's life course connects the emergent anticolonial nationalisms caused by the *Swadeshi* Steam Navigation Company to wider currents of political activism in Madras Presidency, the largest British-governed territorial jurisdiction in South India. Bharati was the first political exile to move to Pondicherry, escaping from Madras under the threat of arrest due to his 'seditious' writing and publishing. However, Bharati was a key cultural figure in Tamil-language circles. Today, he is largely credited with reinvigorating Tamil literature, creating a new style of writing that was suitable for political commentary, and establishing a number of standards which continue to shape Tamil political culture. This not only re-emphasises the intersections between space, culture and the political as they played out in South India but also tells some more complex stories about how the spatial politics of anticolonialism are actually mobilised and articulated.

Chapter Six challenges some of our ideas about what counts as 'political' by thinking about the intersections between the political and the spiritual by looking at the life of 'Sri' Aurobindo Ghose, an 'extremist' member of the INC who, when he moved to Pondicherry in 1910 supposedly 'gave up' politics for a life of spiritual retreat into his own practice of integral yoga. This brings into conversation decolonial ideas about the framings of coloniality/modernity, specifically challenging the idea that Aurobindo's move into yogic asceticism was somehow 'non-political' – which tends to be the dominant framing which has been applied to him ever since this move baffled the colonial authorities – at the time, Aurobindo was the most wanted man in India, and his turn away from 'the political' caused a degree of confusion about his motives. However, I argue that Aurobindo's move here is less a shift away from politics, but rather exposes the limits of what can count as 'political' under conditions of coloniality/modernity. As I will show, Aurobindo's turn was still marked by a revolutionary imagination about what was possible for the future of humanity and was therefore resolutely political, but this was a politics which exceeded the narrow confines of what was recognised as politics by the colonial state.

Chapter Seven focusses on the complex international revolutionary networks of the inter-war years through the life of M.P.T. Acharya, a member of the Pondicherry Gang who travelled Europe seeking to overthrow imperialism wherever he found it, and which eventually led him to turn to anarchism as the, to him, ultimate form of emancipatory politics. This chapter exposes some of the spatially extensive networks which were being produced by anticolonialism in the early twentieth century, which not only utilised existing imperial networks but also created new revolutionary spaces by which an alternative world could be imagined. Acharya's biography not only tells us about the spatial extent of

anticolonial activism that emerged from the Pondicherry Gang but also continues to challenge the idea that anticolonialism, particularly in the South Asian/Indian context, was predominantly nationalist in character. This forces us to consider the varied geographies which anticolonial activists were attempting to produce – especially given the tendency today to imagine that independence in the form of a nation-state was the only intended goal of anticolonial movements.

The varied spaces discussed in these chapters, each of which is associated with a particular individual tied in some way to the Pondicherry ‘Gang’, illustrate how anticolonialism was and is productive of radically alternative ideas about not only the future world after colonialism but also how to get there. One aspect of this which will appear in the book is the debate about whether violent or non-violent strategies were appropriate to defeat colonial rule. For the members of the Pondicherry Gang, they invariably chose the former, at least during the time period covered in this book. A variety of other tensions are also present within any political practice, and anticolonialism is no exception.

Before the next chapter, it is worth discussing my positionality and how this impacts the book. As a white British (Welsh) man, the writing of this book presented a number of challenges. As mentioned in the acknowledgements, I first started research on Pondicherry as a result of a British Association of South Asian Studies/European Consortium for Asian Field Study/British Academy (BASAS/ECAF/BA) fellowship to the Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient in 2013. However, my contact with Indian Tamil culture had begun when I spent six months between 2003 and 2004 teaching non-formal education in a Tamil-speaking informal settlement in Bangalore (now Bengaluru). However, despite my attempts since then, my Tamil language skills remain very limited – and so I have been reliant in this book upon the work done by a range of Tamil historians of India and, what is today, the state of Tamil Nadu. Foremost amongst these has been Professor A.R. Venkatachalapathy, whose work and also advice throughout this project has proved invaluable. The work done by these academics has proved important in moving sources away from the colonial archive, with all its problems of representation and misunderstanding. As a result, I have always tried to use a variety of archival and other sources, including pamphlets, short stories and cartoons written by the individuals in this book as well as their associates. This, I feel, gives a sense of the rich world which the Pondicherry Gang were creating, and it is due to those Tamil and Tamil-speaking scholars who I am indebted.

Related to this, it should be clear that this is a book primarily written for academic geographers. I hope that it attracts an audience beyond these disciplinary boundaries. This is important because the story of anticolonialism in South India deserves to be more widely known in general – the paucity of work on South India remains a lack in a number of disciplines, not only geography. However, when I refer to ‘we’ in this book, I am predominantly referring to geographers. Given the discipline’s geographical limits, I have assumed that most people who read this book will be academics based in institutions in EuroAmerica,

but also geographers in institutions overseas, not least in India. I sincerely hope that a more international audience reads the book, and think that most of the arguments I make in it would apply equally and make equal sense everywhere – one of the key aims for the idea of anticolonialism I articulate here is a scepticism to disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries. However, despite all of this, I recognise that there will be errors and slippages in the text – the responsibility for them, always, lies with me. The cautionary note aside, I now move to discuss what the geographies of anticolonialism could possibly be.

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