Multiple Colonialisms

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Colonialism is usually associated with practices of domination that involve the subjugation of one group of people by another. Part of the problem in defining colonialism is that it is sometimes confused with 'imperialism'. Critics often use the two term interchangeably, or assume that they mean, approximately, the same thing. Imperialism also involves domination but of a kind that is best understood as political or territorial. It describes the way one country exercises domination over another. Colonialism, on the other hand, implies the transfer of people from 'metropole' to 'colony'. This process is usually described as 'colonization', that is, the compact settlement of overseas territories by outsiders, usually white Europeans, who create new societies while maintaining political allegiance to their country of origin. For this reason, debates around colonialism invariably depend on a number of key

binaries, among them 'coloniser/colonised', 'civilisation/barbarism', 'universalism/inequality'.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term colonialism dates from the late nineteenth century. In fact, world history is full of examples of the practice of colonialism, at least dating back to the ancient Greeks. Underlying this historical process were two key drivers: the demand for new territory and, linked to this, the demand for natural resources. The prevailing view in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that in a world where resources were considered 'finite', colonies were necessary to further the interests of European nation-states. In mercantilist terms, the function and value of colonies were twofold: 1) to provide Europe with raw materials (sugar, rice, tobacco, cotton, minerals); and 2) to provide a ready-made market for European goods. We can trace the same underlying principles in the expansionism of the late nineteenth century, when the term colonialism came into vogue. They are also implicit in the Nazi concept of *Lebensraum*, which in the eyes of some critics, among them Sven Lindqvist, self-consciously mimicked older European notions of colonialism.

Colonialism also depended on notions of othering that assumed that indigenous peoples were inferior, backward and, in most cases,

disposable. Skin color was an important register here, but so, too, were physical characteristics, customs and traditions. Indigenous peoples were dismissed as savages, their nakedness and unwillingness to work reinforcing notions of racial superiority that set an unbridgeable distance between colonizer and colonized. Colonisation, as a result, was invariably characterized by acts of violence and brutality that resulted in indigenous peoples being either removed or destroyed, making way for settler societies organized on European principles, including the rule of law. Colonialism, therefore, in its purest form was a rapacious historical process, driven by a disregard for indigenous people, their customs and traditions. Resistance was often futile, particularly in the face of European naval and military forces equipped with the latest technology. The sacrifices and self-abnegation demanded of native rulers were other symptoms of European 'superiority'.

The association between colonialism and extreme brutality was noted by Enlightenment thinkers, among them Diderot and Kant. The second half of the eighteenth century also witnessed the emergence of calls to abolish slavery and the slave trade, predicated on the idea that Africans were 'fellow creatures', worthy of respect and fair treatment. 'Abolition' would become one of the most successful reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, it did not signal a retreat from empire. On the contrary, reformist tendencies re-energised colonial discourse, lending it a new legitimacy. The 'New Imperialism' of the late

nineteenth century, for instance, took it as axiomatic that it was the duty of European nation-state to look after those (in Africa, Asia and the Pacific) who were too weak to look after themselves. This is what Rudyard Kipling meant by the 'white man's burden', a patriotic slogan that rested explicitly on notions of European racial superiority.

It followed, as a matter of course, that the colonized had no history. Histories of empire written during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were generally written from the perspective of European nation-states, or those of (white) settler communities. In the same way, Europeans took little account of local customs or linguistic norms. (Consider here the British Government's decision in 1835 that English should replace 'Persian' as the official language in India and that it should be introduced as a medium of instruction in all institutions of learning.) Instead, indigenous communities were expected to absorb European rituals and to join settlers in the celebration of events that reinforced their outsider status. Colonialism in this sense was a linear process that made no concessions to colonial others. European contact with Africa was particularly destructive. The transatlantic slave trade looms large in this history but so, too, does the brutality of King Leopold of Belgium's 'stewardship' of the Congo Free State. The cultural amnesia that surrounds these and other atrocities, particularly around the capitals of Europe, is another legacy of colonial mentalities that more often that not

imagined (and treated) indigenous peoples as perpetual aliens and perpetual menials.

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Colonialism was a global phenomenon. It was also dynamic. In its original guise, colonialism was driven by a sense of (white) privilege that necessarily brought European nations into conflict with each other. The Caribbean island of Trinidad was a Spanish colony for 200 years before being seized by the British in 1797, after which it was administered by the British according to Spanish law. Sint Eustatius (again in the Caribbean) changed hands twenty-two times before finally becoming a Dutch colony in 1816. No one, it seems was immune to these incursions. Eastern Europe can properly be considered a zone of multiple colonialisms. Torn between great land empires in the nineteenth century, it was subjugated to the Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. Racism, slave labour, internment and warfare caused millions of deaths in these European 'bloodlands', as well as massive dislocations. The history of post-Soviet Russia has also been characterized by ruthless and pre-meditated incursions into neighbouring countries, as witness what has happened in the Ukraine and Georgia.

These interventions were divisive and unsettling, especially for those who found themselves on the wrong side of history. The cultural legacies were profound. In South Africa, for instance, racial hierarchies (black/white) disguised bitter rivalries between Afrikaners and those of British descent that were played out in cultural and linguistic terms. The result was a sometimes undignified scramble for status and authority, exemplified by the Voortrekker Monument (1949), which was symbolic of a revitalized Afrikanerdom (the monument commemorated the Voortrekkers who had colonized the interior of South Africa in the nineteenth century) that defined itself against British imperial capitalism. These entanglements, moreover, were refracted through the experiences of the victims of the apartheid era, notably those displaced under the 1959 Group Areas Act, a specific form of *removal* that had a lasting impact on South African society, as well as its landscape and environment.

The ending of apartheid shattered these old certainties. If the privatization of the Voortrekker Monument represented a form of repression (the monument still has a ghostly presence in modern South Africa), the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign witnessed the emergence of a more thoroughgoing critique of white power and authority that raised serious questions about the Eurocentric nature of knowledge, the university curriculum and the over-representation of white scholars in the academy.

In this charged political climate, the politics of removal (really an agenda) have taken on an added resonance and meaning, inextricably linked to issues relating to land, resources and economic justice. Colonialism presses heavily on these debates. Yet in other instances it has *re-emerged*, not least in the work of contemporary South African artists [Mary Sibande and Sue Williamson, for instance], who are keen to explore (and re-interpret) the often tangled relationship between colonized and colonizer.

What has happened in South Africa is in many ways symptomatic of wider efforts to reinscribe the experiences of those marginalized by the European colonizing project. Slavery is an important factor here, hence the huge emotional and financial investment in projects such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, which while being an important memory work in itself also serves as a forum for debate and discussion. So, too, is the history of indigenous peoples. Here again, museums have been quick to respond to these challenges, even if the results (the First Peoples' Hall of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, for instance) have attracted adverse criticism. Inclusion comes at a risk, however, particularly if it fails to meet indigenous peoples on equal terms. This is why some indigenous scholars have called for a new politics, which places emphasis instead on notions of repression, in this case a refusal to engage with Western liberal

norms. What is needed, they argue, is not assimilation or inclusion but a process of rebuilding from within, an idea that draws heavily for its inspiration on Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

The recovery of indigenous traditions, including the oral tradition of storytelling, obviously implies a rejection of white European priorities, just as it foregrounds attempts to imagine and perform 'new' heritage practices that challenge the hierarchical relationship between colonizer and colonized. Colonialism, as a result, has become a contested space, increasingly inseparable from claims for reparations (Africa and the Caribbean region), the restoration of ancient lands (Australia, Canada and New Zealand) and discussions around diversity and cultural distinctiveness. Almost without exception, these debates assume that colonialism is an ongoing process, reflected in a range of issues, including 'hate speech', economic injustice, black incarceration and psychological alienation. They also emphasise the serious damage caused to formerly enslaved and indigenous peoples by centuries of economic exploitation, unfair labour practices, displacement and violence and brutality.

In these different ways, our understanding of colonialism has changed dramatically in the past fifty years. Once regarded as a justifiable extension of European influence, colonialism now conjures up images of violence and exploitation, racist othering and blatant disregard for indigenous claims to land and natural resources. Attitudes have changed.

Yet the legacies of colonialism live on, evident in the vibrancy of debates around land, rights and reparations. Logic dictates that these debates will continue to evolve. Even the term colonialism itself has invited close scrutiny, not least when used to describe experiences that by their very nature were sharply differentiated. Localism has become an important interpretative register, as has migration. If migrants seek new opportunities in Europe, they also bring with them assumptions that make them resistant to assimilation, particularly if that means the loss of their cultural independence. The 'insider/outsider' status of many migrants from Europe's ex-colonies highlights the ongoing significance of colonialism, both as an idea and a process.

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