

Two Cheers for Colonialism

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Colonialism has gotten a bad name in recent decades. Anticolonialism was one of the dominant political currents of the 20th century, as dozens of European colonies in Asia and Africa became free. Today we are still living with the aftermath of colonialism. Apologists for terrorism, including Osama bin Laden, argue that terrorist acts are an understandable attempt on the part of subjugated non-Western peoples to lash out against their longtime Western oppressors. Activists at last year's World Conference on Racism, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, have called on the West to pay reparations for slavery and colonialism to minorities and natives of the third world.

These justifications of violence, and calls for monetary compensation, rely on a large body of scholarship that has been produced in the Western academy. That scholarship, which goes by the name of anticolonial studies, postcolonial studies, or subaltern studies, is now an intellectual school in itself, and it exercises a powerful influence on the humanities and social sciences. Its leading Western scholars include Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Walter Rodney, and Samir Amin. Their arguments are supported by the ideas of third-world intellectuals like Wole Soyinka, Chinweizu, Ashis Nandy, and, perhaps most influential of all, Frantz Fanon.

The assault against colonialism and its legacy has many dimensions, but at its core it is a theory of oppression that relies on three premises: First, colonialism and imperialism are distinctively Western evils that were inflicted on the non-Western world. Second, as a consequence of colonialism, the West became rich and the colonies became impoverished; in short, the West succeeded at the expense of the colonies. Third, the descendants of colonialism are worse off than they would be had colonialism never occurred.

In a widely used text, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, the Marxist scholar Walter Rodney accuses European colonialism of "draining African wealth and making it impossible to develop more rapidly the resources of the continent." The African writer Chinweizu strikes a similar note in his influential book *The West and the Rest of Us*. He offers the following explanation for African poverty: "White hordes have sallied forth from their Western homelands to assault, loot, occupy, rule, and exploit the world. Even now the fury of their expansionist assault on the rest of us has not abated." In his classic work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes, "European opulence has been founded on slavery. The well-being and progress of Europe have been built up with the sweat and the dead bodies of Negroes, Arabs, Indians, and the yellow races."

Those notions are pervasive and emotionally appealing. By suggesting that the West became dominant because it is oppressive, they provide an explanation for Western global dominance without encouraging white racial arrogance. They relieve the third world of blame for its wretchedness. Moreover, they imply politically egalitarian policy solutions: The West is in possession of the "stolen goods" of other cultures, and it has a moral and legal obligation to make some form of repayment. I was raised to believe in such things, and among most third-world intellectuals they are articles of faith. The only problem is that they are not true.

There is nothing uniquely Western about colonialism. My native country of India, for example, was ruled by the British for more than two centuries, and many of my fellow Indians are still smarting about that. What they often forget, however, is that before the British came, the Indians had been invaded and conquered by the Persians, the Afghans, Alexander the Great, the Mongols, the Arabs, and the Turks. Depending on how you count, the British were preceded by at least six colonial powers that invaded and occupied India since ancient times. Indeed, ancient India was itself settled by the Aryan people, who came from the north and subjugated the dark-skinned indigenous people.

Those who identify colonialism and empire only with the West either have no sense of history or have forgotten about the Egyptian empire, the Persian empire, the Macedonian empire, the Islamic empire, the Mongol empire, the Chinese empire, and the Aztec and Inca empires in the Americas. Shouldn't the Arabs be paying reparations for their destruction of the Byzantine and Persian empires? Come to think of it, shouldn't the Byzantine and Persian people be paying reparations to the descendants of the people they subjugated? And while we're at it, shouldn't the Muslims reimburse the Spaniards for their 700-year rule?

As the example of Islamic Spain suggests, the people of the West have participated in the game of conquest not only as the perpetrators, but also as the victims. Ancient Greece, for example, was conquered by Rome, and the Roman Empire itself was destroyed by invasions of Huns, Vandals, Lombards, and Visigoths from northern Europe. America, as we all know, was itself a colony of England before its war of independence; England, before that, had been subdued and ruled by Normans from France. Those of us living today are taking on a large project if we are going to settle on a rule of social justice based on figuring out whose ancestors did what to whom.

The West did not become rich and powerful through colonial oppression. It makes no sense to claim that the West grew rich and strong by conquering other countries and taking their stuff. How did the West manage to do that? In the late Middle Ages, say 1500, the West was by no means the world's most affluent or most powerful civilization. Indeed, those of China and of the Arab-Islamic world exceeded the West in wealth, in knowledge, in exploration, in learning, and in military power. So how did the West gain so rapidly in economic, political, and military power that, by the 19th century, it was able to conquer virtually all of the other civilizations? That question demands to be answered, and the oppression theorists have never provided an adequate explanation.

Moreover, the West could not have reached its current stage of wealth and influence by stealing from other cultures, for the simple reason that there wasn't very much to take. "Oh yes there was," the retort often comes. "The Europeans stole the raw material to build their civilization. They took rubber from Malaya, cocoa from West Africa, and tea from India." But as the economic historian P.T. Bauer points out, before British rule, there *were* no rubber trees in Malaya, no cocoa trees in West Africa, no tea in India. The British brought the rubber tree to Malaya from South America. They brought tea to India from China. And they taught the Africans to grow cocoa, a crop the native people had never heard of. None of this is to deny that when the colonialists could exploit native resources, they did. But that larceny cannot possibly account for the enormous gap in economic, political, and military power that opened up between the West and the rest of the world.

What, then, is the source of that power? The reason the West became so affluent and dominant in the modern era is that it invented three institutions: science, democracy, and capitalism. All those institutions are based on universal impulses and aspirations, but those aspirations were given a unique expression in Western civilization.

Consider science. It is based on a shared human trait: the desire to know. People in every culture have tried to learn about the world. Thus the Chinese recorded the eclipses, the Mayans developed a calendar, the Hindus discovered the number zero, and so on. But science -- which requires experiments, laboratories, induction, verification, and what one scholar has called "the invention of invention," the scientific method -- that is a Western institution. Similarly, tribal participation is universal, but democracy -- which involves free elections, peaceful transitions of power, and separation of powers -- is a Western idea. Finally, the impulse to trade is universal, and there is nothing Western about the use of money, but capitalism -- which requires property rights, contracts, courts to enforce them, limited-liability corporations, stock exchanges, patents, insurance, double-entry bookkeeping -- this ensemble of practices was developed in the West.

It is the dynamic interaction among these three Western institutions -- science, democracy, and capitalism -- that has produced the great wealth, strength, and success of Western civilization. An example of this interaction is technology, which arises out of the marriage between science and capitalism. Science provides the knowledge that leads to invention, and capitalism supplies the mechanism by which the invention is transmitted to the larger society, as well as the economic incentive for inventors to continue to make new things.

Now we can understand better why the West was able, between the 16th and 19th centuries, to subdue the rest of the world and bend it to its will. Indian elephants and Zulu spears were no match for British rifles and cannonballs. Colonialism and imperialism are not the cause of the West's success; they are the result of that success. The wealth and power of European nations made them arrogant and stimulated their appetite for global conquest. Colonial possessions added to the prestige, and to a much lesser degree the wealth, of Europe. But the primary cause of Western affluence and power is internal --

the institutions of science, democracy, and capitalism acting together. Consequently, it is simply wrong to maintain that the rest of the world is poor because the West is rich, or that the West grew rich off stolen goods from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The West created its own wealth, and still does.

The descendants of colonialism are better off than they would be if colonialism had never happened. I would like to illustrate this point through a personal example. While I was a young boy, growing up in India, I noticed that my grandfather, who had lived under British colonialism, was instinctively and habitually antiwhite. He wasn't just against the English; he was generally against white people. I realized that I did not share his antiwhite animus. That puzzled me: Why did he and I feel so differently?

Only years later, after a great deal of reflection and a fair amount of study, did the answer finally hit me. The reason for our difference of perception was that colonialism had been pretty bad for him, but pretty good for me. Another way to put it was that colonialism had injured those who lived under it, but paradoxically it proved beneficial to their descendants. Much as it chagrins me to admit it -- and much as it will outrage many third-world intellectuals for me to say it -- my life would have been much worse had the British never ruled India.

How is that possible? Virtually everything that I am, what I do, and my deepest beliefs, all are the product of a worldview that was brought to India by colonialism. I am a writer, and I write in English. My ability to do this, and to reach a broad market, is entirely thanks to the British. My understanding of technology, which allows me, like so many Indians, to function successfully in the modern world, was largely the product of a Western education that came to India as a result of the British. So also my beliefs in freedom of expression, in self-government, in equality of rights under the law, and in the universal principle of human dignity -- they are all the products of Western civilization.

I am not suggesting that it was the intention of the colonialists to give all those wonderful gifts to the Indians. Colonialism was not based on philanthropy; it was a form of conquest and rule. The British came to India to govern, and they were not primarily interested in the development of the natives, whom they viewed as picturesque savages. It is impossible to measure, or overlook, the pain and humiliation that the British inflicted during their long period of occupation. Understandably, the Indians chafed under that yoke. Toward the end of the British reign in India, Mahatma Gandhi was asked, "What do you think of Western civilization?" He replied, "I think it would be a good idea."

Despite their suspect motives and bad behavior, however, the British needed a certain amount of infrastructure to effectively govern India. So they built roads, shipping docks, railway tracks, irrigation systems, and government buildings. Then they realized that they needed courts of law to adjudicate disputes that went beyond local systems of dispensing justice. And so the British legal system was introduced, with all its procedural novelties, like "innocent until proven guilty." The British also had to educate the Indians, in order to communicate with them and to train them to be civil servants in the empire. Thus Indian

children were exposed to Shakespeare, Dickens, Hobbes, and Locke. In that way the Indians began to encounter words and ideas that were unmentioned in their ancestral culture: "liberty," "sovereignty," "rights," and so on.

That brings me to the greatest benefit that the British provided to the Indians: They taught them the language of freedom. Once again, it was not the objective of the colonial rulers to encourage rebellion. But by exposing Indians to the ideas of the West, they did. The Indian leaders were the product of Western civilization. Gandhi studied in England and South Africa; Nehru was a product of Harrow and Cambridge. That exposure was not entirely to the good; Nehru, for example, who became India's first prime minister after independence, was highly influenced by an socialism through the teachings of Harold Laski. The result was that India had a mismanaged socialist economy for a generation. But my broader point is that the champions of Indian independence acquired the principles, the language, and even the strategies of liberation from the civilization of their oppressors. This was true not just of India but also of other Asian and African countries that broke free of the European yoke.

My conclusion is that *against their intentions*, the colonialists brought things to India that have immeasurably enriched the lives of the descendants of colonialism. It is doubtful that non-Western countries would have acquired those good things by themselves. It was the British who, applying a universal notion of human rights, in the early 19th century abolished the ancient Indian institution of suttee -- the custom of tossing widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. There is no reason to believe that the Indians, who had practiced suttee for centuries, would have reached such a conclusion on their own. Imagine an African or Indian king encountering the works of Locke or Madison and saying, "You know, I think those fellows have a good point. I should relinquish my power and let my people decide whether they want me or someone else to rule." Somehow, I don't see that as likely.

Colonialism was the transmission belt that brought to Asia, Africa, and South America the blessings of Western civilization. Many of those cultures continue to have serious problems of tyranny, tribal and religious conflict, poverty, and underdevelopment, but that is not due to an excess of Western influence; rather, it is due to the fact that those countries are insufficiently Westernized. Sub-Saharan Africa, which is probably in the worst position, has been described by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan as "a cocktail of disasters." That is not because colonialism in Africa lasted so long, but because it lasted a mere half-century. It was too short a time to permit Western institutions to take firm root. Consequently, after their independence, most African nations have retreated into a kind of tribal barbarism that can be remedied only with more Western influence, not less. Africa needs more Western capital, more technology, more rule of law, and more individual freedom.

The academy needs to shed its irrational prejudice against colonialism. By providing a more balanced perspective, scholars can help to show the foolishness of policies like reparations as well as justifications of terrorism that are based on anticolonial myths.

None of this is to say that colonialism by itself was a good thing, only that bad institutions sometimes produce good results. Colonialism, I freely acknowledge, was a harsh regime for those who lived under it. My grandfather would have a hard time giving even one cheer for colonialism. As for me, I cannot manage three, but I am quite willing to grant two. So here they are: two cheers for colonialism! Maybe you will now see why I am not going to be sending an invoice for reparations to Tony Blair.

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