

Reflections on Colonialism and Coloniality

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1. Colonialism is a historical phenomenon that roughly lasted from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, during which time primarily, but not exclusively, European countries dominated countries in Asia, Africa, and South America. Colonialism is thus a form of domination closely related to imperialism, racism, and other such evils throughout human history. The rise of colonialism was based on sheer power and domination, the principle that “might is right,” and therefore inherently predicated on the myth of the racial superiority of the colonizers over the colonized, and the belief of superiority in political, economic, military, cultural, and all other aspects of life. Colonies were established as the colonial powers expanded their

territories by invading and occupying weaker countries and territories. Under colonialism, the colonialists were a minority that ruled over the colonized majority, creating a hierarchy of social classes that was often also based on a racial hierarchy. The colonizers ruled directly via a colonial government, or indirectly through a local government created and controlled by the colonial establishment.

2. In terms of China and Hong Kong, colonialism has a particularly complicated history. China was never formally colonized, in part because of the sheer size of China and strong Chinese resistance, and in part because of competing interests that made it impossible for the colonial powers to come to a consensus on how to divide up China in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. After the Opium Wars in the 1840s, Hong Kong was colonized by Britain, and after the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Taiwan was occupied by Japan and turned into a Japanese colony. Japan invaded China in 1937, and occupied Manchuria and large areas of China during the Second World War until Japan's unconditional surrender in 1945, after two atomic bombs were dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hong Kong was ruled by Britain for 150 years and did not return to China until 1997. As a Special Administrative Region (SAR), Hong Kong retains its capitalist system and rule of law, which are British legacies that are appreciated by a majority of the local population, even though the return of Hong Kong to

China is politically inevitable. As a country ruled by one party—the Communist Party—China has numerous problems and is riddled with corruption, human rights abuses, etc.; though compared with Mao's China of thirty years ago, the development of its economy and the overall improvement of living standards have been nothing short of miraculous. Taken together, the Hong Kong-China relationship and the local Hong Kong people's sense of identity remain a subtle and delicate issue. In the Hong Kong situation, it is difficult to view colonialism as a stereotypically evil domination of the colonized by the colonizers, and it is also an interesting test case for the broader question of coloniality.

3. As a historical phenomenon, colonialism became obsolete by the late twentieth century, disappearing largely as the result of the national liberation and independence movement of the 1960s. In one sense, colonialism has become a thing of the past, no longer relevant to international economies and politics of the twenty-first century. And yet, we should be careful of any simplistic understanding of colonialism as a form of polity and thus a simplistic belief in its demise. The colonial mentality as a form of ideology and habit of thought is far more tenacious and resilient than colonialism as a form of political institution. The governor of a colonial government may leave office, but the colonial mentality will remain intact or largely unchanged. This is what coloniality means; i.e., people in the former colonies still think and behave in the way or ways as under colonialism, even

in a politically and culturally postcolonial situation. Hong Kong provides a clear example of this in many ways, but coloniality is not simply an issue in the former colonies; it is widely distributed in a world that has been dominated by the West for at least the last two hundred years or more.

4. Coloniality as a form of ideology and habit of thought is considerably more complicated than colonialism, and it is not limited to the relationship between former colonies and their former colonial sovereign countries. As a widely influential mode of thought that originated in the West in modern times, that is, since the fifteenth and particularly the seventeenth century, coloniality in the sense of colonial thinking primarily signifies, in my understanding, an intellectual hierarchy; i.e., the superiority of Western philosophical and theoretical thinking about history and society in all aspects over any non-Western conceptualizations. One example of such a colonial mentality is what I would refer to as a form of “social sciences arrogance” in area studies, where many Western scholars believe that non-Westerner scholars can only provide the raw materials for other scholars equipped with Western theories and methodologies to analyze and to theorize. Theories are by definition Western, and all other possibilities are neglected and discarded.

This form of colonial mentality is not limited to Western scholars. Many scholars in the non-Western world mechanically and blindly follow Western theories and methodologies without

ever thinking through the circumstances with which such theories and methodologies may or may not be suitable. As Harish Trivedi, an eminent Indian scholar has observed, postcolonial intellectuals continue to follow an agenda set up in academic institutions in the former colonial metropolises. “Only yesterday,” says Trivedi in an ironically self-mocking tone with regard to English studies in India, “have we begun asking questions about canon, relevance, reception, the other, the alternative (alter-native?), historicism old and new, orientalism, feminism, and the all-Derriding Theory, and this for the good reason that such questions began to be asked about English literature in England and America the day before yesterday.”¹ Ironically, the postcolonial dominance of Western theoretical concepts and models in non-Western discourses is a form of neo-colonialism in thinking and theorizing, and this is common not just in India, but in much of the remaining world.

5. Coloniality is thus the unreflective adaptation of Western theories and methodologies in the humanities and social sciences and the mechanical application of these to non-Western realities—social, historical, and political realities as well as textual and philological realities. The word “reality”—a much contended term in contemporary Western Theory—requires

1) Harish Trivedi, “*Panchadhatu*: Teaching English Literature in the Indian Literary Context,” 1993. *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India*, Calcutta: Papyrus, p. 229.

further reflection, as do many other words, terms, and concepts, such as “lived experience” and moral and political “responsibilities.” Ultimately, theory and theorizing or philosophizing are rooted in reality and people’s lived experience, and in a way they reflect the reality and purport to explain, rationalize, or justify a certain way of doing things or a certain way of life. The diversity of human experience in the world makes it impossible to have theories and methodologies emanate from a single direction, albeit the powerful West, that pretends to hold a universal validity that mirrors the universal dominance of the West. It is thus important to recognize the local circumstances and meanings of the universal claims of Western theories, and to seriously think through the global and the local, the universal and the parochial.

6. It is also vital to recognize the internal diversity of the West itself. The West is no more monolithic an entity than the East is a unified homogeneous space. Dichotomy and incommensurability are sterile and unproductive ideas, and coloniality cannot be a concept that establishes a sharp opposition between the West and the Rest, denying the values and validity of all Western theories, concepts, and methodologies. As Edward Said remarked in reissuing the famed *Orientalism*, the point of his book is not to endorse anti-Westernism. Enough damage has been done by ultra-nationalism and fundamentalism in today’s world that ideas based on narrow-minded nationalism

have no place in responsible intellectual discourses. It is on equal footing that we should look at the East and the West, taking whatever is valuable and constructive to our understanding of the world and its diverse cultural traditions, and refusing to be dominated by any single tradition or orientation. The problem is not with universal claims as such, but universal claims made on the basis of parochial experiences; therefore, the diversity of experience and knowledge may be the best way to prevent false claims and pretentions.