On European 'Civilisation': Colonialism, Land, Lebensraum

Part of Living with Ghosts: Legacies of Colonialism and Fascism

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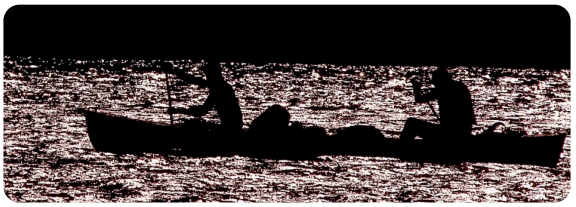

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'A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization' – so begins Aimé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism (1955/2000, p. 31). It is a searing critique of European 'civilisation'. Writing in the aftermath of the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi regime on European soil and drawing upon the longer histories of European colonialism across the world, Césaire argues forcefully that as the civilisation of Europe established itself on the brutalisation of others, it negated its own claim to be recognised as such. 'Truly,' he states, 'there are sins for which no one has the power to make amends and which can never be fully expiated' (p. 42). Sixty years on, Europe, in the main, stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that it has created any problems and, thus, that there is anything for which to make amends. What then do we call a civilisation that turns away from the histories that have produced it and seeks instead to institutionalise mythologies of value for which it has 'fought'?

But, European civilisation – as Mahatma Gandhi famously said of the idea of British civilisation – would indeed be 'a good idea'. Achieving it would require both reflection on the past and postcolonial reparative action in the present. The injustices which disfigure the world we share in common can only be addressed through acknowledging the histories that have produced them, as well as the historiographies that have obscured them. Europe's past is an imperial and colonial past. Often presenting itself as a continent of nations, it is, in fact, one of national projects buttressed by colonial endeavours. Moreover, colonial settlement involving the movement of populations has been one of the most important ways in which

Europeans have established their hegemony across the globe. This has included both the voluntary movement of Europeans themselves and the involuntary movement of others by Europeans, whether through the enslavement of people from Africa or the bonded labour of those from Asia.

The European nation state was central to the development of the colonial settlement project (most notably Spain and Portugal, followed by Britain and France), as were the movements of European populations, including people from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. While the idea of Lebensraum (territory desired for national development) was explicitly articulated in Germany in the late nineteenth century (Smith 1980), expansionist policies for land and territory for one's 'own' citizens had been central to the European colonial project for much longer. The long-standing association between the idea of the citizen/subject and their entitlement to land, even if occupied by others, brings twentieth-century fascism and current anti-migrant sentiment into the nexus of activities that must still be understood as colonial – this is particularly so as Europe today claims that it is unable to sustain the presence of others.

Scholars across the political spectrum at this time saw colonialism as an unproblematic and necessary process to the establishment and development of their nation. Max Weber (1895/1980), for example, argued that if the process of German unification was going to end simply with the establishment of the nation state, then it would have been better not to have begun this process on the grounds of excessive cost. The point of unification was to establish Germany as a world power through colonial expansion, and this had become especially urgent as the places of 'free soil' around the world were rapidly vanishing. Socialist John A. Hobson, writing around the same time as Weber, also saw colonialism as a natural overflow of the nation, consisting 'in the migration of part of a nation to vacant or sparsely peopled foreign lands' (1902/1954, p. 6). Such expansion was necessary, according to Hobson, 'to absorb and utilise the surplus of our ever-growing population' and was deemed to occur either in 'vacant places of the earth … or in places where they have set up a definitely British supremacy over lower races of existing inhabitants' (p. 41). The mythology of free soil or vacant land was precisely that: mythology. As Hobson indicated, however, the presence of others would be no obstacle. Domination would be legitimated by a claim to racial supremacy.

There was no land to which Europeans ventured that was not already populated. This is most evident in the history of the United States. By the nineteenth century, European colonisation and settlement had led to the establishment of thirteen states along the Eastern seaboard, resulting in the dispossession and displacement westwards of the Indigenous people who lived there. The defeat of France by the Haitian revolutionaries in 1804 led France to 'sell' what it called Louisiana to the fledgling US. This extension of territory by 828,000 square miles, doubling the landmass over which the US claimed sovereignty, was without consultation of any Indigenous peoples affected by the transaction (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). In the immediate aftermath, an expedition was authorised to survey and chart this new territory and then to travel onwards to the western coast.

The official reports of the expedition west led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark describe an empty and 'virginal' land (terra nullius) waiting to be discovered

and appropriated. Yet Bruce Greenfield (1991) shows how the journals kept by the pair narrate many accounts of Indigenous peoples and observations of their relationship to the land; there are also accounts of their everyday interactions and dealings with many Indigenous groups along the way (Josephy 2006). As Greenfield writes, 'it required a special rhetoric to respond to the land as essentially empty and waiting to be discovered, while daily documenting their exchanges with its inhabitants' (p. 27). The myth of an 'empty continent' was known not to be true even at the time, and today we have sufficient evidence to insist on the mythical nature of such a statement.

In a recent issue of the journal Nature, for example, Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin argue that the arrival of Europeans in the lands that would come to be known as the Americas – lands previously known by their inhabitants as 'Turtle Island' and 'Abya Yala' – 'led to the largest human population replacement in the past 13,000 years' (2015, p. 174; also see 2018). According to their research, recent population modelling suggests that the continent had a population of around 61 million prior to 1492, which 'rapidly declined to a minimum of about 6 million people by 1650 via exposure to diseases carried by Europeans, plus war, enslavement and famine' (2015, p. 175). This rapid and catastrophic decline in population meant that their societies also largely collapsed, yet they did not entirely disappear. At the same time, the husbandry they practised on the land, which supposedly Indigenous peoples neither tilled nor kept grazing animals on, was also appropriated: for tomatoes, potatoes, squashes, tobacco, maize, peppers, cacao.

If subsequent waves of Europeans found these lands 'available', this is not to be regarded as a natural fact, but as a social and political fact that requires further analysis. Indeed, it should be central to all discussion of the movement of peoples to lands that were depopulated and continued to be depopulated by colonial settler actions. And yet, there are only a few voices calling for any proper accounts today which fully recognise the histories of Europe (and beyond) in the configuration of contemporary societies (Byrd 2011).

These histories of European settlement would acknowledge the fact that throughout the nineteenth century around sixty million Europeans left their countries of origin to make new lives and livelihoods for themselves on lands inhabited by others (Miège 1993). Each new cohort of Europeans was allocated land at the edges of the territory which had already been settled; this was done in order to extend political control over contested border territories. In this way, Europeans from across the continent participated in the elimination and dispossession of the populations who preceded them and, thus, they too were complicit in the settler colonial project.

At least seven million Germans moved to these lands: to the US in the north and to Brazil and Argentina in the south. By the late nineteenth century they had become one of the largest immigrant groups in the north (Bade 1995). Large-scale Polish emigration began in the period after the Franco-Prussian War, and by the turn to the twentieth century more than two million Polish people had moved to the Americas, with about 300,000 Polish colonists settling in Brazil by 1939 (Zubrzycki 1953). Two million subjects of the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary travelled to the Americas (Zahra 2016). As did over eight million Irish people over the nineteenth century (Delaney 2000); a million of whom emigrated as a consequence of the mid-century

famine induced by British colonial rule. By 1890, nearly a million Swedes (one fifth of the total Swedish population) were living in the lands colonised by (and as) the US. In addition, 13.5 million British people moved to settler colonies across the globe during the nineteenth century (Fedorowich and Thompson 2013).

European colonial settlement was central to the displacement, dispossession and elimination of populations in the Americas and the Caribbean, across Southern Africa including Zimbabwe and South West Africa (now Namibia), and in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, among many, many other places. Imperial rule in India, across the Middle East and in Africa was also established through violence and plunder. These histories similarly require further address as part of the processes that have constituted Europe and what has come to be understood as the 'West' more generally. They have been central to global inequalities and injustices that mark the worlds shared in common and form the basis of contemporary movements of peoples; movements that have sparked authoritarian impulses throughout Europe and the West, which in recent years have only amplified and exacerbated the situation of inequality.

Migration is a movement of people across political boundaries. Migrants are people who live in societies other than their own, but according to the rules and norms of the societies of which they come to be a part. Within this understanding of migration, those who do not en masse live according to the rules and norms of the societies of the lands they come to are not migrants. They are better understood as colonial settlers and colonial settlers are not migrants even if much of the scholarship describes them as such. This distinction is significant to the extent that the usual use of term normalises and legitimates the violence of the past as the condition for continued violence against others in the present. That is, the violence of imperial rule and colonial settlement disappears from histories of the nation – happening as it so often does outside of the borders of the state – enabling arguments for national sovereignty to be used to securitise borders against others who are said to 'invade'.

The perceived necessity of land for one's own population was the driver of colonial expansion which dispossessed and eliminated populations, both across the world and within Europe. Current hostility towards those who seek to come to Europe arises from the same ideological framework: Within the metropole, this land is considered to be our land and not for sharing with others; within settler colonies, this land is our land because we took it from others and made it our own. This is generally called progress, as 'lower' forms of society are replaced by the 'higher' form of modern society; just as people are organised into lower and higher races to justify both domination and replacement.

If we were truly to account for the histories that have produced the very possibilities of our lives within European metropolitan areas and those of colonial settlement, we could come to understand the enormity of the injustices that have constituted the ground for these societies. By confronting our connected histories squarely, we can begin to think through how we might alter our actions and behaviours in the present. Perhaps unconditionally accepting refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants to Europe would mitigate the actions of earlier generations, those actions which have precisely made the places 'they' come from unliveable? Could rethinking

and reformulating trade and other policies – which are entirely to Europe's advantage – be an act of reparative justice? Might relabelling 'aid' as 'reparations' create the space for conversations about how little Europe actually gives (and how much of what we give returns to us anyway) to facilitate the possibility of doing more?

Europe is the wealthiest continent on the planet. Its wealth is an 'inheritance' that derives from the very same historical processes that have left other places poor. The movement of peoples to Europe today is also a consequence of these histories, although these movements are considerably less than those taken by Europeans in the past. Further, those coming to Europe today live according to the norms and values of the societies to which they move. The all too common response, however, is to express concern about others unfairly accessing the inheritance which belongs to Europe's 'national' citizens. This line of thinking involves constructing the other as a 'replacement' of the European on their own soil; such fear of replacement is an irrational and dangerously incorrect echo of European practices in the past. If we are to be better than we were, we need to move beyond colonial arguments for Lebensraum and all manifestations of race 'science', past and newly expressed. I began with Césaire and I'll end with Sven Lindqvist: 'You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions' (1992/2018, p. 2).

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