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Colonialism

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Colonialism is a form of domination. Writing a short entry on colonialism, colonial studies, or even the history of European colonialism is a challenge, for it is akin to the task of writing the whole of modern human history. Over the course of the last five centuries, colonialism is arguably the primary conceptual underpinning of modern political, economic, and cultural history. Historically, colonialism refers to control over governance, land and people — most conventionally in terms of political power. Over the last five centuries, more specifically, colonialism refers to the forced imposition of European (and Euro-American) military, economic and political control globally. That is, through various phases, means and methods, colonialism — broadly — has been a foundational aspect of how the modern world is constructed and defined. The historical timeline of European (more broadly defined as “western” usually referring to British, French, German, Dutch, and Portuguese colonies) colonial power arguably begins in 1492, and thus demands an intersectional conceptual understanding of European modernity and the phases of modern forms of capitalism. Imperialism and empire overlap with contemporary understandings of colonialism. Herein, I focus more particularly on colonialism politically, militarily and economically, as well as culturally and epistemologically. Since the specificities of settler colonialism, a primary analytic in the study of Palestine, will be covered in a separate essay, it will only be briefly covered here within the larger rubric of colonialism.

In the space and place of Palestine — over time and in the present — the conceptual legacy of colonialism is fraught with both possibilities in new theorization as well as heavy with the genealogies of historical analysis. Palestine is not exceptional, but can be considered unique regarding the layers of domination produced by franchise colonization, settler colonization, and military occupation that are part of a broader field of western imperialism. While there shall be an independent entry in this collection on each of these forms of colonialism, it remains important here to consider all of these forms as emerging from and of European capitalist modernity. This brief essay covers these historical and epistemological legacies as an invitation for further analysis in/through Palestine and beyond regarding the more intricate specificities of how to interrogate the political and conceptual legacies of different colonial modalities of rule. The invitation therein is one of a relational analysis in location with and of the Global South/Third World. If, as Vijay Prashad argues, the articulation of “the Third World” is a political battle cry, then this piece also invites the reader to consider the implications of historically contextualizing colonialism in the colonial/imperial present (Prashad, 2012).

Beginnings - Territorial Domination

In the late fifteen century, two major moments serve as the bookend of our contemporary understanding of the origins of modern colonialism: the papal bull decrees in relation to the doctrine of discovery (Newcomb 1992; Todorov, 1992). Specifically, Columbus' voyages into what was later described as "the new world" was based, in part, on theological and legal doctrines formulated by the leadership in the Catholic Church during and after the Crusades. In 1452 (nearly four decades before Columbus' first voyage), Pope Nicholas issued a papal document that basically declared war against all non-Christians, specifically sanctioning and prompting conquest and exploitation, i.e., colonization. In 1492, Christopher Columbus, with support from the Spanish monarchy, represented this kind of conquest, working towards implementing the idea that possession was related to "discovery." In 1493, another papal document reinforced this ideology thereby granting to Spain the right to conquer and take possession of the lands they "discovered," with a later amendment that this right to conquest cannot interfere with lands already claimed by other Christian powers in Europe.

European expansion was based on this "doctrine of discovery" and, in various iterations over the long history of Euro-American colonialism, is the cultural and epistemic, as well as material basis, for colonial domination. That is, the idea of European patriarchal supremacy rendered all other peoples non-human and not deserving of the "right" to possession or control of their lands, their governance and their very ways of being. At the same time that this brutal and genocidal doctrine was put into practice by various European "explorers," the Spanish monarchy pursued a similar tactic locally in the bloody form of the Inquisition, marking the end of the "Islamic Empire" in Europe and the fall of Andalusia ('Akash, 2011; Shohat 1998; Anidjar, 2010). Thus began the long and violent history of modern European colonialism. The legacies of the doctrine of discovery loom large over the centuries from the doctrine of manifest destiny to justify white settler expansion in North America to forge the United States as a new nation, to the mythologies of Zionism that justify the attempt to violently work to eliminate native Palestinians from their homeland. The epistemic violence embedded in the notion of discovery formed the basis for Orientalism, the science of categorical knowledge production based on colonial domination and European hegemony, and underline the subsequent centuries of European colonial domination in various manifestations over the geographies of colonial rule (Said, 1979).

In Palestine, like in other geographies of settler colonial violence, Zionism adopted similar forms of settler logics of manifest destiny. That is, Zionist thinkers in Europe manipulated theological rhetoric to justify their colonial desires in ways similar to settler logics elsewhere, in particular in North America (Shihada, 2012).

European Capital - Economic Domination

During the sixteenth century, another sort of beginning occurred in Europe in the form of the earliest stages of what would later be named industrial capitalism. In the sixteen, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, development of technology changed the systems of economic production, which, in turn, developed into a European (later global) political system of oppression (Marx, 2019). The relation between technological development, modes of production and modes of economic power would soon dominate the social, political and culture formations of people (Lenin, 1999). By the eighteenth century, the hegemonic form these formations took was the modern European nation state. The particular construction of this nation state held the hierarchical structures of capitalist power both internally and externally. The marriage of capitalist power with the nation state would eventually be the vehicle for capitalist expansion in the form of imperialism (Hobsbawm, 2010).

Although capitalist economic systems based on profit and expansion pre-dated the sixteenth century in Europe, the development of this new form of capitalism was centered around the growth of the English cloth industry with a new distinguishing feature of accumulation (accumulated capital). Accumulation enlarged production capacity, which, in turn, changed the material and social realities that grew around this new production capacity (modes of production). As such, this new and constantly developing form of capitalist production introduced another means of control and potential domination that, by the eighteenth century, served as a foundational aspect of European modernity, of which European colonialism was a primary factor. In particular, capitalist modes of production (and the all-important factor of who controls these modes of production) became the central governing feature in capitalist societies. In turn, property rights and market control adopted to the new forms of governing power defined through capitalist accumulation, production, commodification and, subsequent consumption. In terms of colonial expansion, primitive accumulation or the initial monopolization of control of resources and raw material for industrial production fueled the proverbial (and quite real) engines of European expansion. Employing historical materialism as the basis for understanding the history of not only capitalism, but also the transformations of political power over time, has been a key component in our collective understanding of colonialism over time. Throughout the phases of capitalist expansion, what Marx initially named “primitive accumulation” has become a primary feature of understanding territorial expansion and control. Over time, scholars have understood primitive accumulation as ongoing accumulation (ongoing throughout the phases of ongoing colonial expansion) to explain the ongoing violence of imperialism (Coulhard, 2015). Through the approach varies among scholars, the force of accumulation is largely regarding the main engine of capitalist expansion and a primary factor in colonial desire (Karuka, 2019).

Historians, employing the historiography of materialism, describe the early or original stage of European capitalism as a kind of restructuring of society. Internally in Europe, these structures of capitalist power translated into the formation and basis of institutional, or bureaucratic, power of the nation state, in each state in its particular formation and transformation. The division of society into a stratification of classes whereby the ruling capitalist class wielded their power on the basis of the oppression of the newly formed working class in industrial societies, created the ebb and flow of class struggle within societies and, in time, beyond in terms of global capitalist expansion and the growth of international refusal of the imposition of hierarchical structures of political power based on the monopoly of capital and political power in the hands of a ruling class (‘Aml, 1988, 2001).

While the transformation of class stratification took on various forms throughout Europe, the emergence of modern empires was based on capitalist expansion in terms of markets, trade routes, territorial possession and accumulation (Byrd, 2014). The world was soon to be divided by societies who experienced a so-called industrial revolution, and the subsequent political restructuring, and societies who were oppressed by the economic power of industrialized states. While the construction of the modern nation state did not follow a single form in Europe, nor did the development and growth of capitalism, by the mid eighteenth century, it was the dominate means of national governance. This has become the classic historiographical account of the French and US Revolutions (1789 and 1776). The landscape of capitalism transformed people’s relations with their own landscape, capitalism required cities in terms of people, capital and production (Harvey, 2012). The growth of modern cities in Europe mirrored the oppression of colonized territories (Ho Chi Min, 1973; Biko, 1988; Guevara, 1968). That is, cities were born out of industrial needs and demands just as colonized states were structured around these same demands (Harvey, 2012, Hampton, 1969).

While colonialism is a general reference for the history of European expansion, it took on various forms with a myriad of goals. Franchise colonialism, most notably investigated in the scholarship on colonialism in reference to British colonial control in India, is one kind of European colonialism (Spivak, 1999; Guha, 1998; Chakrabarty, 2007; Chatterjee, 2001). The British wielded control in the form of a vast empire and created the political structures in India to support their imperial intentions. Elsewhere, settler colonialism was more a common form, where land was the primary aim, with the ultimate goal of possessing a land without people. In this context, European expansion took the form of settler colonialism, where expansion was translated as elimination (Wolfe, 2006) and erasure (Kauanui, 2016). In the geographies of settler colonialism, the intention of the settler society was not just to control the native population, but rather to eliminate the peoples of the land in order to build settler society that would replace them (Wolfe, 2006).

The slave trade was also a primary aspect of colonial expansion. Chattel slavery (in particular in the Americas) formed the foundation for the violent growth of capitalism. The trade of human beings and bondage is the historical foundation of modernity (Robinson 2021; Gilroy, 1993). While France and the US are commonly referenced in the literature of liberal modernity as classic examples of how nations evolved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even a cursory look at the history of Haiti (and in particular the Haitian Revolution of 1791) reveal the many layers of oppression produced by colonial modernity. As a foundational example of a slave revolution, in the late eighteenth century, the people of Haiti exposed the oppression of Spanish and French colonialism, as well as the contradictions of the promises embedded in liberal democracy and modernity (CLR James, 1989). The story of Haiti is also a primary resource in terms of understanding colonialism in social, political and economic terms, but also in terms of how colonial oppression works over time to silence the revolutionary past and the promises it holds for the present (Trouillot, 1995). The historical legacies of the slave trades resonate with great brutality in the contemporary world. Racism is a direct and ongoing result of the colonial expansion of capitalism throughout the globe as racialization, like Orientalism, remain logics of domination.

Empire - Imperial Domination

The overlap between colonialism, capitalism and imperialism are foundational aspects of Euro-American modernity. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, European colonial ambitions came to a competitive and bloody head in the form of the First World War. After centuries of colonial map making, imposing borders and their imagined geographies on the world (Said, 2021), European powers waged an imperial war on themselves and the globe (Lenin, 1999). In the wake of the war, a new world order seemed to emerge as expressed in a juridical formation (League of Nations). Empire took on a new iteration with the reinforcement and imposition of the nation state model (Hardt and Negri, 2000). For example, British and French colonialism in the Arab East took on the form of the mandate model, a newly revised form of colonial rule with a juridical foundation run through the auspices of the League of Nations (Khalidi, 2020). In Palestine, as elsewhere in the region, this meant British governance in the service of empire and Zionist settler colonialism (Seikaly, 2015; Barakat, 2019). After the Second World War and the advent of the United Nations as new form of global organization, direct colonialism in various geographies gave way to revised forms of political, economic and cultural domination through what some name neo-colonialism. Imperialism then had new engines to drive this kind of influence like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Understanding Colonialism through Refusal

It can easily be argued that colonialism was and is best understood by the colonized. In his famous *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire offers a full diagnosis for the barbaric uncivilizing and brutal nature of colonial rule in his simple commentary on the genocides in mid-twentieth century Europe as colonialism coming home (Césaire, 2001). Colonial domination worked to destroy cultures, dispossess people, and erase entire civilizations. From the fifteenth century, a new re-ordering of the world began in the form of colonial domination that wielded the violent weapons of capitalist expansion coupled with a civilizing discourse. Colonialism created a Manichean world order (Fanon, 2004). With this world order, came racism and subjugation through the patriarchal privileging of European representation of its supreme self (Said, 2012; Spivak, 1999). Colonialism is the inhumanity of absolute violence and refusal of this inhumanity was, as Amílcar Cabral explained, revolutionary democracy (Cabral, 1993). Colonialism is the violent imposition of an order of the world that exclusively serves the interests of a white, patriarchal, capital ruling class. To dismantle this imposed order, as Audre Lorde explained, is to dismantle the structures that the order built (Lorde, 2012).

Franz Fanon's words echo into the present in his simple articulation of colonial violence and anti-colonial resistance: "when we revolt it's not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe" (Fanon). The modern legacies of colonialism continue to plague the globe and Palestine stands as both a harbinger of the colonial past and the settler colonial present (Sayigh, 1965). As the geography that has withstood the violence of capitalist colonialism and settler attempts at elimination, the people and place of Palestine also represent the possibilities embedded in the refusal of the order imposed by colonial history. As Ghassan Kanafani described in a short booklet on the 1936 Revolt in Palestine, people's resistance to settler desires, imperial plans, and the local proxies of these forms of domination stand as a lesson in modern history to the power of anti-colonial resistance (Kanafani, 1974).

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