



On the Sins of Colonialism and Insurgent Decolonisation

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In 2017, a professor at Oxford University in the United Kingdom proposed a research project. The key thesis: that the empire as a historical phenomenon – distinct from an ideological construct – has made ethical contributions and that its legacy cannot be reduced to that of genocides, exploitations, domination and repression.

Predictably, such a project raised a lot of controversies to the extent that other scholars at Oxford penned an open letter dissociating themselves from such intended revisionism and whitewashing of the crimes of the empire. One leading member of the project resigned from it, citing personal reasons.

Historically, theoretically and empirically, it should be clear that the empire was a “death project” rather than an ethical force outside Europe; that war, violence and extractivism rather than any ethics defined the legacy of the empire in Africa.

But it is the continuation of revisionist thinking that beckons a revisiting of the question of colonialism and its impact on the continent from a decolonial perspective, challenging the colonial and liberal desire to rearticulate the empire as an ethical phenomenon.

The ‘ethics’ of empire?

In the Oxford research project, entitled *Ethics and Empire* (2017-22), Nigel Biggar, the university’s

regius professor of moral and pastoral theology and director of the MacDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Life, sought to do two important interventions: to measure apologies and critiques of the empire against historical data from antiquity to modernity across the world; and to challenge the idea that empire is imperialist, imperialism is wicked, and empire is therefore unethical.

In support of its thesis, the description of the research project lists “examples” of the ethics of the empire: the British empire’s suppression of the “Atlantic and African slave trades” after 1807; granting Black Africans the vote at the Cape Colony 17 years before the United States granted it to African Americans; and offering “the only armed centre of armed resistance to European fascism between May 1940 and June 1941”.

But the selective use of such examples does not paint an accurate picture. Any attempt to credit the British empire for the abolition of slavery, for instance, ignores the ongoing resistance of enslaved Africans from the moment of capture right up to the plantations in the Americas. The Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 still stands as a symbol of this resistance: enslaved African people rose against racism, slavery and colonialism – demonstrating beyond doubt that the European institution of slavery was not sustainable.

The very fact that, in the Oxford research project, the chosen description is “the Atlantic and African slave trades” reveals an attempt to distance itself from the crime of slavery, to attribute it to the “ocean” (the Atlantic), and to the “Africans” as though they enslaved themselves. Where is the British empire in this description of the heinous kidnapping and commodification of the lives of Africans?

The second example, which highlights the very skewed granting of the franchise to a small number of so-called “civilised” Africans at the Cape Colony in South Africa as a gift of the empire, further demonstrates a misunderstanding of how colonialism dismembered and dehumanised African people. The fact is that African struggles were fought for decolonisation and rehumanisation.

The third example, that the British empire became the nerve centre of armed resistance to fascism during the second world war (1939-45), may be accurate. But it also ignores the fact that fascism became so repugnant to the British mainly because Adolf Hitler practised and applied the racism that was meant for “those people” in the colonies and brought it to the centre of Europe.

Projects like Briggar’s, and others with similar thought trajectories, risk endangering the truth about the crimes of the empire in Africa.

Afro-pessimism: Seeing disorder as the norm

What, fundamentally, is colonialism? Aimé Césaire, the Martiniquean intellectual and poet, posed this deep and necessary question in his classical treatise [*Discourse on Colonialism*](#), published in 1955. In it, he argues that the colonial project was never benevolent and always motivated by self-interest and economic exploitation of the colonised.

But without a real comprehension of the true meaning of colonialism, there are all sorts of dangers of developing a complacent if not ahistorical and apologetic view of it, including the one that argues it was a moral evil with economic benefits to its victims. This view of colonialism is re-emerging within a context where some conservative metropolitan-based scholars of the empire are calling for a [*“balance sheet of the empire”*](#), which weighs up the costs and benefits of colonialism. Meanwhile, some beneficiaries of the empire based in Africa are also adopting a revisionist approach, such as Helen Zille, the white former leader of South Africa’s opposition Democratic Alliance party, who caused a storm when she said that apartheid colonialism was beneficial – by building the

infrastructure and governance systems that Black Africans now use.

Both conservative and liberal revisionism in the studies of the empire and the impact of colonialism reflect shared pessimistic views about African development. The economic failures, and indeed elusive development, in Africa get blamed on the victims. The disorder is said to be [the norm](#) in Africa. Eating, that is, [filling](#) the “belly” is said to be the characteristic of African politics. African leadership is roundly blamed for the mismanagement of economies in Africa.

While it is true that African leaders contribute to economic and development challenges through things like corruption, the key problems on the continent are structural, systemic and institutional. That is why even leaders like Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, who were not corrupt, did not succeed in changing the character of inherited colonial economies so as to benefit the majority of African peoples.

Today, what exacerbates these ahistorical, apologetic and patronising views of the impact of colonialism on Africa is the return of crude right-wing politics – the kind embodied by former US President Donald Trump. It is the strong belief in inherent white supremacy and in the inherent inferiority of the rest.

But right-wing politics is also locking horns with resurgent and insurgent decolonisation of the 21st century, symbolised by global movements such as [Black Lives Matter](#) and [Rhodes Must Fall](#). However, to mount a credible critique to apologies for the empire, the starting point is to clearly define colonialism.

On colonisation, colonialism, coloniality

Three terms – colonisation, colonialism and coloniality – if correctly clarified, help in gaining a deeper understanding of the empire and the damage colonialism has had on African economies and indeed on African lives.

Colonisation names the event of conquest and administration of the conquered. It can be dated in the case of South Africa from 1652 to 1994; in the case of Zimbabwe from 1890 to 1980; and in the case of Western and Eastern Africa from 1884 to 1960. Those who confused colonisation and colonialism conceptually, ended up pushing forward a very complacent view of colonialism which define it as a mere [“episode in African history”](#) (a short interlude: 1884-1960). While this intervention from the Ibadan African Nationalist School of History was informed by the noble desire to dethrone imperialist/colonialist historiography which denied the existence of African history prior to the continent’s encounter with Europeans, it ended up minimising the epochal impact of colonialism on Africa.

It was Peter Ekeh of the University of Ibadan, in his Professorial Inaugural Lecture: [Colonialism and Social Structure](#) of 1980, who directly challenged the notion that colonialism was an episode in African history. He posited that colonialism was epochal in its impact as it was and is a system of power that is multifaceted in character. It is a power structure that subverts, destroys, reinvents, appropriates, and replaces anything it deems an obstacle to the agenda of colonial domination and exploitation.

Eke’s definition of colonialism resonated with that of Frantz Fanon who explained, in [The Wretched of the Earth](#), that colonialism was never satisfied with the conquest of the colonised, it also worked to steal the colonised people’s history and to epistemically intervene in their psyche.

Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe is also correct in positing that the fundamental question in colonialism was a planetary one: to whom does the earth belong? Thus, as a planetary

phenomenon, its storm troopers, the European colonialists, were driven by the imperial idea of the earth as belonging to them. This is why at the centre of colonialism is the “coloniality of being”, that is, the colonisation of the very idea and meaning of being human.

This was achieved through two processes: first, the social classification of the human population; and second, the racial hierarchisation of the classified human population. This was a necessary colonial process to distinguish those who had to be subjected to enslavement, genocide and colonisation.

The third important concept is that of coloniality. It was developed by Latin American decolonial theorists, particularly [Anibal Quijano](#). Coloniality names the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and its replication in contemporary times. It links very well with the African epic school of colonialism articulated by Ekeh and dovetails well with [Kwame Nkrumah’s concept of neo-colonialism](#). All this speaks to the epochal impact of colonialism. One therefore wonders how Africa could develop economically under this structure of power and how could colonialism be of benefit to Africa. To understand the negative economic impact of colonialism on Africa, there is a need to appreciate the four journeys of capital and its implications for Africa.

Four journeys of colonial capital and entrapment

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, in his [Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe](#), distilled the four journeys of capital from its mercantile period to its current financial form and in each of the journeys, he plotted the fate of Africa.

The first is the epoch of enslavement of Africans and their shipment as cargo out of the continent. This drained Africa of its most robust labour needed for its economic development. The second was the exploitation of African labour in the plantations and mines in the Americas without any payment so as to enable the very project of Euro-modernity and its coloniality. The third is the colonial moment where Africa was scrambled for and partitioned among seven European colonial powers (Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal) and its resources (both natural and human) were exploited for the benefit of Europe. The fourth moment is the current one characterised by “debt slavery” whereby a poor continent finances the developed countries of the world. Overseeing this debt slavery is the global financial republic constituted by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other financial institutions. All these exploitative journeys of capital were enabled by colonialism and coloniality.

Empirically and concretely, colonialism radically ordered Africa into economic zones of exploitation. This reality is well expressed by [Samir Amin](#) who identified three main colonial zones. The first is the “cash crops zone” covering Western and Eastern Africa, where colonialism inaugurated “peasant trade colonies” whereby Africans were forced to abandon cultivation of food crops and instead produce cash crops for an industrialising Europe.

The second zone was that of extractive colonial plantations symbolised by the Congo Free State which was owned by King Leopold II of Belgium; Africans were forced to produce rubber, and extreme violence including the removal of limbs was used to enforce this colonial system.

The third zone was that of “labour reserves” inaugurated by settler colonialism. The Southern Africa region was the central space of settler colonies, where Africans were physically removed from their lands and the lands taken over by the white settlers. Those African who survived the wars of conquest were pushed into crowded reserves where they existed as a source of cheap labour for mines, farms, plantations, factories, and even domestic work.

This colonial ordering of economies in Africa has remained intact even after more than 60 years of decolonisation. This is because achieving political independence did not include attaining economic decolonisation. At the moment of political decolonisation, Europe actively worked to develop strategies such as Eurafrica, Françafrique, Lomé Conventions, the Commonwealth and others to maintain its economic domination over Africa.

Roadblocks to development

Like all human beings, Africans were born into valid and legitimate knowledge systems which enabled them to survive as a people, to benefit from their environment, to invent tools, and to organise themselves socially on their own terms.

The success story of the people of Egypt to utilise the resources of the Nile River to build the Egyptian civilisation, which is older than the birth of modern Europe, is a testimony of how the people and the continent were self-developing and self-improving on their own terms.

The invention of stone tools and the revolutionary shift to the iron tools prior to colonialism is another indication of African people making their own history. The domestication of plants and animals is another evidence of African revolutions. This is what colonialism destroyed as it created a colonial order and economy that had no African interests at its centre.

Flourishing pre-colonial African economies and societies of the Kingdom of Kongo, Songhai, Mali, Ancient Ghana, Dahomey were first of all exposed to the devastating impact of the slave trade and later subjected to violent colonialism. What this birthed were economies in Africa rather than African economies - economies that were outside-looking-in in orientation - to sustain the development of Europe.

Fundamentally, the economies in Africa became extractive in nature. By the time direct colonialism was rolled back after 1945, African leaders inherited colonial economies where Africans participated as providers of cheap labour rather than owners of the economies. These externally oriented economies could not survive as anything else but providers of cheap raw materials. They were and are entrapped in well-crafted colonial matrices of power with a well-planned division of labour.

Today, the economies in Africa remain artificial and fragile to the extent that any attempt to reorient them to serve the majority of African people, sees them flounder and collapse. This is because their scaffold and pivot are colonial relations of exploitation, not decolonial relations of empowerment and equitable distribution of resources.

For real future development and a successful move from economies in Africa towards true African economies, there is a need to revolutionise the asymmetrical colonial power structures that still govern the fate of the continent.

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