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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150479/aa49i1.3>

ISSN: 0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica • 2017 49(1):
39-52

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Explorations into modernity, colonialism and genocide: Revisiting the past in the present

Submission: 21 February 2016

Date accepted: 23 June 2017

This essay contextualises forms of mass violence and genocide in a historical perspective since the era of enlightenment. Western modernity and its notion of civilisation domesticated and colonised at home and abroad. The concept of development imposed during the colonial era elsewhere too included organised violence as an integral part of the expansion into the rest of the world. Since then violence remains an element of the project of globalisation. It has also infected those in the former so-called periphery executing control over people. Forms of domination anchored in a colonial mindset are not any longer only of Eurocentric or European brand but alive in certain forms of power executed elsewhere too. Hence there remains a global responsibility to decolonise the mind.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Colonialism, Genocide, Europe, Africa.

1. Introduction

*“The past is never dead.
It’s not even past.”*
(William Faulkner)

There is a long history of the West and the rest. This essay critically engages with parts of its underlying, seemingly neutral, notions of modernity, often associated with development and progress. The way these paradigms were imposed on the rest of the world had devastating effects and permanent, irreversible impact. The export of so-called civilisation was a very uncivilised mission. But it created and anchored lasting new realities, often reproducing the old in the new. The mimicry brought to attention not least by postcolonial and subaltern studies should be a reminder that the universal claim inherent in many Western models and lifestyles was indeed infectious. Among others, genocidal practices are not any longer the exclusive domain of Western imperialism but lead their own life.

The unholy configuration, which contributes to a perpetuation of organised forms of mass violence with the intent to destroy groups of people for specific features attributed to them, is interrogated in this essay. It recapitulates the historical roots of European modernity and violence since the era of enlightenment and traces its consequences for colonialism. It then introduces the notion of genocide and its implications in international law and summarises the globalisation of the genocidal mind. It ends with an appeal arguing for the necessity that mindsets are decolonised everywhere.

2. The dark side of Enlightenment

In 1550 the philosopher Ginés de Sepúlveda and the Dominican padre and bishop Bartholomé de Las Casas exchanged lengthy arguments at the Spanish court in Valladolid. Their subject was the annihilating effects of the *Conquista* on the South American indigenous population and its excessive decimation through forced labour in the mines. The deliberations were a kind of marker for the final entry into what might be termed European modernity in the wake of its first stages of colonial-imperialist expansion since the *Conquest of Paradise* in 1492.¹ The legal-philosophical exchange signalled the emerging era of enlightenment. Widely considered as a turning point, it paved the way to subsequent secularised concepts of humanity, guided by philosophical reason and rationality. Men (indeed in the male exclusivist form) claimed to step out of nature and religious

1 So the title of a movie by Ridley Scott released 500 years later.

faith to tame the natural (including the female), challenge tradition and authority and thereby to create new concepts and forms of culture.

Ironically, if not tragically, this step out of a preconceived natural determinism also introduced and reinforced naturalist conceptions rooted in biological views of classification systems. This was combined with the introduction of a pseudo-scientific racial (and racist) hierarchy, represented in its infant stage by Las Casas. The world's people were perceived as a pyramid – on top, ranked the most civilised, European nations and their members. The South American Indians – according to Las Casas – were to be spared for having the potential to become civilised. Las Casas suggested as a suitable replacement the negro slaves from Africa, since they were in his view inferior to the Indians and not yet human beings (see Hanke 1959; Hernandez und.). The Swedish medical and biological scientist Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) turned this world view during the first half of the 18th Century into a codified classification system for flora and fauna that is still in use today. Linné also included the human species into his system as part of the primates. While he stopped short of a strict ranking of human 'sub-species', he articulated clear generalised preferences. Europeans were characterised as "acute" and "inventive", and were "governed by laws", while black people were in his view "crafty, indolent, negligent" and "governed by caprice" (Fredrickson 2002: 56).

Such scaling of human sub-groups guided even those who subsequently advocated human rights for all. The French mathematician, aristocrat and *citoyen* the Marquis de Condorcet (who in 1794 himself became a victim of the revolution in which he had actively participated) embodied a more liberal mystification of progress already advocated by Las Casas, which was appealing to a bourgeois humanism with all its inherent discriminations. His linear evolutionism represented the absolute belief in progress and development rooted within a conviction that human beings are entitled to rights (Williams 2004). But his perspective was also limited by a hierarchical world view, which kept the central European nations and its educated people at the top of the pyramid. Education was for him the key to humanity. All other people, while recognised as human beings, had to be uplifted to the level of European modernity in the course of the civilising mission – or had to disappear. An advocate of the abolishment of slavery, he nevertheless was caught in a mindset that considered emancipation of fellow human beings as the domestication of the 'savage' to copy the French and Anglo-Americans as the most civilised species.

The German philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), representatives of the era of so-called late enlightenment (*Spätaufklärung*), were prominent protagonists of such a

Eurocentric civilising mission.² John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) personified in the tradition of the Philosophical Radicals these ambiguities in the English industrial-capitalist society emerging. Modernisation was about 'development' and what this supposedly entailed for people affected by the expansionist project. The 'developmental' goals defined by European colonialism were moulded in such mindsets of Eurocentric progress over generations (see Duffield and Hewitt 2009; Hodge et al. 2014). Progress, in such perspective, was tantamount to civilising the 'savages', and if necessary, to "exterminate all the brutes"³, if they objected to their destiny.

European colonialism was based on the ideological premises of such self-declared civilising mission. A mission that originally targeted first and foremost the subjects at home: those who had not yet internalised the virtues and norms and behavioural prerequisites for the industrial-capitalist mode of production in the making. In parallel processes, 'savages' both at home and abroad were trained to become either citizens or subjects, and domesticated into commodities within a new system of social reproduction. The analogy between 'savages' abroad and at home was commonly used. William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, published in 1890 a programmatic manifesto, the title of which, in clear reference to Stanley's travelogues *Through Darkest Africa*, was *In Darkest England and The Way Out*. Processes of forming workers with responding ethics were since the earliest stages of infant capitalist production qualified as modes of modelling the affect. Such concepts of discipline, including the physical body, originated during late feudalism from establishing permanent armies and introducing the *etiquette* at the feudal courts (see Elias 1983, 2000), or as disciplinary society and its accompanying bio-politics.⁴

It was the domestication of the inner nature, which went hand-in-hand with the taming of the outer nature. The expansion into other territories took place with regard to both the interior, mental landscape (socialisation of the 'savage' psyche) as well as the exterior and geographical map (subjugation of 'savages' in the colonies). Colonisation was a parallel process, both at home and abroad.

At a closer look, these parallel forms of indiscriminate violence merit the classification as 'brutes' more for the perpetrators than for the victims of such

2 For a critical engagement with Kant see i.a. Harvey (2009) and Elden and Mendieta (2011).

3 A parole coined by Joseph Conrad in his 1902 published novel *Heart of Darkness*. It remains controversial whether this was written with a colonial-critical or apologetic intention. Lindqvist (1996) was inspired by Conrad's novel for his fundamental critique of colonial mass violence.

4 Most prominently introduced by the work of Michel Foucault (see Mills 2003).

extermination strategies. The 'gardening state'⁵ consolidated its (self-)image and outer appearance in the era of colonial expansion and has never been rigorously deconstructed since then in mainstream perceptions, as testifies the rise of new racist forms of exclusivist nationalist narratives in the former central European colonial metropolitan states in the current era of right-wing populism. Such forms of 'patriotism' bring back the Eurocentric world view, in which 'otherness' is classified and judged based on narrow-minded own value systems, which denies humanity the recognition as being one.

3. Colonial mass violence and the notion of genocide

Colonial strategies of oppression, subjugation, annihilation, imposition of foreign or minority rule and warfare against those who resist have introduced new forms of mass violence and extinction, which at times and according to circumstances culminated in the elimination of indigenous people in the settler colonies (Adhikari 2014). Frontiers were battlegrounds when *Waiting for the Barbarians* at the periphery of empires (Coetzee 1982), while in the centres of empire organised industrial mass production translated into the willingness to resort to corresponding organised mass killing.

This underlines Raphael Lemkin's original but largely ignored insight that genocides have their roots in colonial minds.⁶ By "uncovering the colonial roots of the genocide concept itself", these

"operationalize Raphael Lemkin's original but ignored insight that genocides are intrinsically colonial and that they long precede the twentieth century. The history of genocide is the history of human society since antiquity." (Moses 2008: ix)

But the school of thought representing such an understanding as most prominently represented in a hitherto mainly inner-German debate with regard to the possible links between Windhoek and Auschwitz remains contested if not a matter of outright dismissal, often resulting in insulting distortions of the proponents' arguments (see Zimmerer 2015).

On 9 December 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. This

5 A term introduced by Zygmunt Bauman to characterise the systems that are prepared to include mass destruction and extinction strategies in their system of dominance and subordination to root out the 'weed' (see Bauman 1989).

6 See the special issue on Raphael Lemkin of the *Journal of Genocide Research* 7(4), 2005; Schaller (2008), Moses (2008, 2010), and Schaller and Zimmerer (2009).

was a response to the hitherto unprecedented scale of targeted mass extinction of defined groups of people by the German Nazi regime, which Winston Churchill had termed in a broadcast speech of 1941 “a crime without a name”. Only in 1944 did the lawyer Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish Polish refugee, coin the term genocide (Lemkin 1944).⁷ He had worked relentlessly to find an international, legally defined and anchored response to the Holocaust. Significantly, however, his concept reached far beyond the singularity of the *Shoah*. It also explicitly referred to earlier colonial wars of extermination. Not least it acknowledged the colonial war of extermination by the German imperial state in its colony of “German South West Africa”.

Due to Lemkin’s initiative, the concept of genocide as a violation of international law entered the United Nations system as a normative framework.⁸ On 11 December 1946 the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted Resolution 96(1). It states categorically that,

“genocide is a crime under international law which the civilised world condemns – and for the commission of which principals and accomplices, whether private individuals, public officials or statesmen, and whether the crime is committed on religious, racial, political or any other grounds – are punishable”.⁹

It took more lobbying and several compromises – in fact watering down the original definition, reducing it to a much narrower concept – before essentials of this resolution were finally adopted two years later as the Genocide Convention. It went into force another three years later. The convention defined genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”, and it made genocide a punishable crime under international law.

4. Genocide and international jurisdiction

The studies on the origins, historical and social contexts, as well as the concrete forms of genocide and related acts of mass violence, require further analyses also in a comparative perspective. This includes a focus on the South and a variety of actors at different times and places, from mass violence perpetrated during the process of colonisation, to oppression under colonial rule, during anti-colonial struggles as well as under post-colonial regimes. The broadening of the approach towards concepts and victims of violence will, however, also have to re-assess

7 See for popularised summary versions explaining and advocating the use of this term Lemkin (1945, 1946).

8 On Lemkin’s efforts to this effect see Segesser and Gessler (2005) and Elder (2005).

9 See for a detailed report on the interactions leading to this pioneering resolution Lemkin (1947).

current notions and to move beyond the ordinary confinement to the war or conflict scenarios. There is a need to include forms of gender-based violence, consequences of ecologically changing environments as a result of human interventions and the effects of climate change for the survival of people (and the threat to it), as well as other effects of structurally induced violence.

The political and legal shifts towards a more systematic intention to accept the challenges posed by the ongoing scale of mass violence occurring in diversified forms and by many causes have also generated a growing interest in more nuanced studies of genocide. This has produced a new quality of scholarly discourse, which to some extent is motivated and supported by the new power of definition. It emerged towards the end of the 20th Century under legal paradigms re-shaping international law norms and resulting in newly created institutions with the power to prosecute. The shift in emphasis modified and had an impact upon both the international political context, as well as the scholarly debate on genocide and other related forms of crimes against humanity as represented by acts of mass violence against a civilian population in a variety of contexts and forms.

These approaches offer necessary complements to the schools of thoughts under genocide studies guided by a wider perspective, including related forms of mass violence. They add to the existing body of knowledge by positioning mass violence during different times and in different social and historical formations in various regions in relation to the current debates within genocide studies. The results should not be confined to academically-oriented discourses but should address the political dimension of the subject as an integral part of the effort to come to terms with the massive challenge of responsible global governance.

Indeed, the sobering if not sad lesson since the Holocaust is that the programmatic 'never again' was wishful thinking instead of a sustainable reality resulting from the trauma. Neither have forms of organised mass violence ceased, nor the intention to annihilate groups of people on the basis of common characteristics ascribed to them. The Convention of 1948 had declared the intention to establish a genuine and universal international criminal court to act in the spirit of the convention. It took another 50 years until this was created in June/July 1998 at the Rome Diplomatic Conference – and only with further compromises and deviating views refusing full recognition of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its jurisdiction established. The refusal by the big powers to ratify the treaty and thereby oblige with the jurisdiction of the ICC shows the reluctance to refrain from the power of definition and the continued double standards. Especially the West is prone to claim a moral high ground by pointing fingers at others, while not being willing to be held accountable for its own acts of

crimes against humanity too. But also the recent position held by most member states of the African Union, who originally supported the ICC, ratified the Rome Treaty and even submitted claims to the ICC to prosecute war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in their own countries, does not any longer entitle them to claim any moral high ground.¹⁰

5. Globalisation of genocidal minds and deeds

Genocidal mindsets have in the meantime resumed a global character. They are not confined to European modernity in the sense of being barbaric acts committed by Europeans (or on their behalf) only. Genocide is not the sole property of the West. The killing fields of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, the *Gukurahundi* in Matabeleland in the 1980s, the Rwandese genocide in the 1990s, as well as the inner-Sudanese warzones since the beginning of this century or the plight of the Rohingya in Burma/Myanmar, are among the far too many examples that others commit mass killings too. After all, the frontier is not a dividing line between 'them' and 'us'.

In the same vein, the claimed historicity of African societies is "rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualised outside a world that is, so to speak, globalised" (Mbembe 2001: 9). Mugabe's Zimbabwe is a particular case, which at a closer look reveals the bogus anti-imperialism deployed by the autocrat, who accuses the West for its moral double standards to simply create a discourse that allows him and his regime to get away with murder. It is equally revealing that the massacres in Matabeleland bordering on genocide during the early to mid-1980s (Phimister 2008) were hardly a matter of concern for the Western world and in particular the United Kingdom despite (or because of?) Zimbabwe being a member state of the Commonwealth. This deliberate blindness (Cameron 2017) displayed once again double standards: "Implicitly, human rights, at least with regard to the black population, would come into play in only the most extreme of circumstances" (Doran 2017). The West only became seriously active when white commercial farmers were targeted by the so-called fast track land reform since the turn of the century. It is of similar discomfort that solidarity with Mugabe among most of the African governments had a greater weight than the plight of the people, and that the track record of atrocities did not stand in his way to becoming the highest representative of both the Southern African Development

10 For a summary on the African positions withdrawing from the legal obligations once entered into by ratifying the Rome Treaty and thereby recognising the ICC see Allison (2015).

Community and the African Union.¹¹ From barbarians to savages, vermin, gooks, dogs, baboons, cockroaches, rats and so on... The list of invectives denying fellow human beings the respect they deserve by degrading them to species below the human race is almost endless (see Smith 2011). Such hate speech borders on dehumanisation, which lowers the threshold and allows the elimination of others because they are perceived as sub-human, as also the degree of brutal xenophobic violence documents. It elevates the elimination of perceived 'otherness' (as also represented by groups such as gays and lesbians)¹² to an act of civilisation, so to say, a service to humanity, to protect its commanding heights from the onslaught of the 'beasts' even in 'ordinary' societies – almost as a kind of civic duty.

Such a world view also continues to motivate forms of current warfare. Shocking images released worldwide underline that this is not a mechanism of the past. US-American marines urinating on the corpses of killed Taliban are a reminder that Western civilisation remains also the cradle of modern barbarism, a kind of barbarism replicated by some among those who claim to represent an alternative. By butchering people like animals in front of video cameras, however, they only show that they are more of the same, with their atrocities being evidence of continued total disrespect of fundamental values for and of humanity. Using this again in return as a justification for applying the most horrendous and atrocious forms of torture under the euphemism of Enhanced Interrogation Techniques (EITs) is another evidence that so-called Western civilisation "would be a good idea", as Mahatma Gandhi is said to have once quipped when asked in an interview.

The link between modernity, colonialism, and genocide remains an integral part not only of European modernity and its legacy. Worse: it has not even been acknowledged so far in the dominant cultures of the former colonial powers. Such efforts would need to allow questioning of the fundamental values and norms, which guide a legitimacy of power executed and the inherent practices of dealing with deviations from what is considered to be the acceptable norm. It would invite a fundamental re-definition of concepts currently applied in terms of social engineering and so-called good governance. It would require replacing the hegemonic discourse by reflections on new concepts of power and equality, of the same and the other. If acknowledging otherness as possibly (but not necessarily) different, however always as equal, the implicit justification of discriminatory

11 The ideological relevance and impact of 'Mugabeism' is documented in a variety of aspects in Sabelo-Ndlovu (2015).

12 See Hudson and Melber (2014) on different forms of 'othering' in a variety of African societies and the devastating consequences for those affected.

practices would lose its legitimacy. It would allow us to move maybe a bit closer towards a true emancipation of human beings.

6. Towards true decolonisation

The dispositions created during Western European processes of industrialisation and physical expansion into the wider world corresponded with the power structures and had long-term effects. They were an integral part of modernisation philosophy, no matter of which political-ideological orientation (including orthodox Marxism). Not surprisingly, the decolonisation processes since the mid-20th Century never emancipated the people – neither colonisers nor colonised – from the dominant paradigms of developmentalism and the mental affinities to such modernity. The virus survived, even in the ambivalences of a Eurocentric critique of the origins of totalitarian rule (Arendt 1951; see also Court 2008). A clear indication of the success story of bringing Europe to most other parts of the world is that the institutions of the state and its agencies survived the colonial system and remained largely unquestioned and intact in the reproduction of a given system of power and control. While those controlling and executing social and political power might have changed, the concept of power and its applications had not.

Similarly, the colonial legacy has in most former colonising nations hardly been fundamentally questioned and critically examined in terms of the dominant ideology applied also within these countries to ‘civilise the natives’ – both at home and abroad. The hegemonic discourse has in principle changed little since then. With reference to the colonial era and its treatment in former colonial powers, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (“The Inability to Mourn”), as diagnosed with reference to the post-World War 2 Germany being unable to come to terms with both the victims but even more so the perpetrators during the Nazi-regime (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1967), is a phenomenon also applicable to the refusal to accept the fundamental challenges in terms of re-thinking power and dominance (as well as their appliance in forms culminating at times in extermination and the role executed in this process by earlier generations) in the context of conceptual notions such as development, progress and modernity – all defined in an hegemonic, linear mode of thought as normative and absolute paradigms. None of the former colonial powers has hitherto truly accepted the fundamental challenge to deconstruct in collective memories and commemoration practices the fundamentals upon which the colonial mind abused the civilising mission as a form of predatory capitalism.

Re-visiting European modernity and its notions of progress and development might be a particular challenge to those who, by means of origin and tradition,

were socialised within a culture of domination and imperialism on the side of the former generations of perpetrators. They are confronted with the at times painful challenge to decolonise their mindsets also by means of self-critical reflections on the fundamentals of their socialisation and its inherent rationality. Having said this, a similar challenge exists also to those coming from the other side of the same historical processes. To continue – now under opposite premises – the we-they divide, separating the goodies and the baddies according to their pigmentation or cultural roots, means to simply create the opposite dichotomy instead of changing the nature of perception. It remains a basic polarisation along mutually exclusive domains and entitlements. After all, being descendants of erstwhile victims does not protect one from turning into a perpetrator. Having been discriminated against does not exclude discriminating practices exercised by those who have experienced them. Nor does the origin from a group of perpetrators (in a historical and collective sense) determine individuals as being unable to emancipate themselves from this legacy in their own perceptions, concepts, convictions, commitments and deeds – with all the ambiguities that such socio-political and socio-cultural (and indeed socio-psychological) processes of mental decolonisation might involve.

The basic question to be explored is to what extent current practices and mindsets, as reproduced in still dominant concepts of progress and development, represent a continuity of (hardly modified) colonial thinking and its application. It is rarely asked – and even less pursued further – despite the obvious limits not only to growth based on the industrial model of capitalist development but also with regard to the devastating effects of the consequences we are confronted with in terms of climate change and environmental damage. Their effects, again mainly among the most vulnerable in the global South, are taking form in large-scale human-caused mass violence too (see Crook and Short 2014; Zimmerer 2014). At the same time, it is not only our future, but even more so the future of generations to come, which depends on our degree of ability to address these issues and change the fundamentals of thinking. If we fail to decolonise our colonial minds, humankind might fail to survive.

The era of enlightenment was the point of departure for a 20th Century rationality, which in its uncritical belief in man-made progress (indeed in its male reductionist version) was the curtain raiser for the dark horizon of the myth of a sun of calculating reasonability, under whose icy rays the seed of new barbarism was ripening (Horkheimer and Adorno 1986: 32). Ever since this rationality emerged as the European project of hegemonic expansion by occupying the commanding heights of a power of definition pretending to represent an omnipotent universalism to solve the problems of our world (at the ultimate cost of the extermination of millions of species – ultimately also including us), its

mindset and resulting lifestyle have been the subject of (self-)critical reflections. Such critical interrogations were and remain an integral component of the legacy of the era of enlightenment. It also produced those who question the dominant paradigm, which it gave birth to.

Within a transformative period, when world views and philosophies changed according to the change of the modes of production (and reproduction), representatives of a 'Radical Enlightenment' (Israel 2001, 2006 and 2011) already then challenged some of the dominant ideological justifications for inequality and injustice. They resisted complying with the declared notion of progress. Rather, they embarked upon the critique of a kind of progress that implied the advancement of power in forms which turned such progress into regression. As Horkheimer and Adorno (1986: 35) warned: the spell of unstoppable progress is the unstoppable regression. This essay has sought to utilise such critical tradition in engaging with a history that is far from past but alive in the present.

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