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New Book – The Praeter-Colonial Mind: An Intellectual Journey Through the Back Alleys of Empire

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FRANCISCO LOBO, OCT 28 2025

This is an excerpt from *The Praeter-Colonial Mind: An Intellectual Journey Through the Back Alleys of Empire* by Francisco Lobo. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

The Praeter-Colonial Mind attempts to understand the many ways in which, for good or ill, the lingering legacies of imperialism play a key role in our post-colonial societies of today. Drawing on anecdotal evidence and philosophical analysis, its contents span across the war in Ukraine, British and American imperialism, the so-called Global South, anti-colonialism and decolonization, culture wars and political violence, Trumpism, the rules-based international order, the rise of China, and the advent of AI, all against the backdrop of the author's personal experiences in America, Europe, and post-Soviet spaces. The mind that tries to make sense of all of this is the praeter-colonial mind, a mind that, in accordance with the varied meanings of the prefix 'praeter' (namely 'past, by, beyond, above, more than, in addition to, besides') sees colonialism simultaneously as past and present as it is confronted with the evidence of its many legacies. A mind that, in the end, attempts to step aside to gain perspective and go above and beyond colonialism for the sake of the present and the future.

Tough Times

What is happening to the world? The late José 'Pepe' Zalaquett, a renowned human rights lawyer who stood up for justice and truth against the atrocities committed by Pinochet in Chile and beyond, used to say that what we are experiencing after the Cold War may very well not be a 'time of change' ('época de cambios'), but a true 'epochal change' ('cambio de época'). It is for future historians to decide whether or not he was right. Yet, his words carry significant weight for the reader of the present, as there is no denying that with the advent of Donald Trump's second presidency we are observing a 'direction of travel' that for many points to the end of the rules-based order established after World War II (Cordall 2025).

Whether times of change or the days of an epochal change, ours can surely be called '*tiempos recios*', or 'tough times'. These are the words that Santa Teresa de Ávila, a Spanish nun, chose to characterize her own times, the sixteenth century in Europe, rife with religious wars, invasions, disease and controversies surrounding imperial expansion and matters of conscience. They seem also quite suitable to describe our tumultuous twenty-first century so far.

How is it possible to gain any understanding of our times? Hannah Arendt once described the epistemological attitude of the ancients as 'wonder', until the Age of Reason, and Descartes in particular, turned that sense of wonder into the methodic 'doubt', or doubt as a way of seeing the world in front of us (Arendt 1998, 275). In our age of post-truth and pervasive online vitriol, it is hard to say what our epistemological attitude is. It is certainly not an attitude of doubt – otherwise, most misinformation and conspiracy theories would be met with an impenetrable wall of logic and we would all be better for it. But it is also not an attitude of simple wonder, as the world does not seem to surprise us anymore – so much so that, not content with believing we know everything about the past and the present, some even call themselves 'futurists', namely professionals who predict trends and developments in all things technological and political.

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The epistemological attitude of our day, rather, seems to be a unique blend of a sort of 'caustic doubt' that challenges all canons, understandings, and institutions for the sole sake of dismantling them; and a 'supine wonder' that renders us completely defenseless in the face of overwhelming amounts of data and the information technologies delivering it to our doorstep, or to our fingertips. The epistemic attitude that is the praeter-colonial mind presented in this work is one step in the right direction to move us away from these perils. But we should all be mindful that no one book will hold all the answers to the questions that afflict us today.

I am, naturally, not exempt from these flawed outlooks. However, I like to think that going outside of my comfort zone has helped me to overcome them at least in part. As fate would have it, my wife's work led us to a place where some of the most important issues of the day, including war, misinformation, decolonization and the fight for self-determination, are in full display and unfolding at a vertiginous speed: Ukraine. After many years of studying war and political violence through the pristine lens of law and ethics, I was finally afforded the opportunity to see a society at war from up close. Ironically, around the same time I was working on a chapter about a sixteenth century Spanish priest, Alonso de la Vera Cruz, a contemporary of Santa Teresa de Ávila and protagonist of her fabled tough times who defended the rights of indigenous peoples in colonial Mexico, not contenting himself with staying behind and pontificating about the New World from the Old one. 'I speak from experience' he would famously remark (Lobo 2025, 59). It could be said that I had my own 'Vera Cruz moment' when I was lucky enough to go see Ukraine. This reflection and all of the ones that follow and that make up this book are the result of such an experience.

But unlike Vera Cruz, I am not confronted with the main issues of imperialism in its early stages. What I saw in Ukraine belongs in the opposite end of the long arc of colonial history: a process of decolonization and the search for self-determination that has resulted in a valiant and bloody war of self-defense against foreign aggression. This is, after all, the main political question of our time, according to historian Timothy Snyder: what to do after empire? (Ukraine World 2024). The following reflections attempt to answer that question. More specifically, in a world where the 'post-colonial' is the predominant narrative and, at the same time, everything and everyone have been touched by colonialism to a greater or lesser extent, the praeter-colonial mind inquires 'if everything is pre- colonial, colonial, and post-colonial all at once, how can I make sense of it all?' As such, the praeter-colonial mind looks not for an apology or justification of all the evils of colonialism, but merely for an earnest explanation of colonialism's meaning and lasting impact on the present.

Roadmap

This book consists of the present Introduction, which makes up the remainder of this section; two main parts, Huddles and Struggles; and an Epilogue. The first part, Huddles, refers to the groups or collectives we are often thrown into without further reflection and that we are expected to identify with. It will be divided into the following chapters, each of them corresponding to a separate online post: 1. The Grand Inquest of the World: British Imperialism and Europe; 2. The Reluctant Empire: The United States and America; 3. The Haves and the Have-nots: The West, the Global South, and the Rest; and 4. The Silicon Conquistadors: Humanity and Digital Colonialism in the Age of AI. The second part, Struggles, addresses some of the main challenges of our tough times, regardless of the huddles we find ourselves being a part of. It is divided into the following chapters, also amounting to separate online posts: 5. The Colonial and its Discontents: Anti-Colonialism, Decolonization, and Post-Colonialism; 6. Existential Battles: Culture Wars and Real Wars; 7. Why We Fight: The Rules-Based International Order; 8. All Under Heaven: China's Awakening; and 9. America First, Humanity Second: Trump, MAGA, and American Imperialism Revisited.

The book that binds all of these chapters together is not meant to be read, necessarily, as a linear argument. Therefore, the reader can jump ahead and choose any of the above-mentioned chapters to start exercising the muscle of their praeter-colonial minds, with the exception of the Epilogue which I advise to leave for last. All the chapters, including this Introduction and the Epilogue, will be published as a stand-alone post online for easy access. It is likely that many readers will be drawn immediately to the chapters/posts that cover some of the most pressing issues of our time, such as, for instance, Chapter Nine on the MAGA movement and its neo-colonial implications, or Chapter Four on the perils AI poses for humanity and for self-determination. They are welcome to read those first or any that captures their attention. Each chapter will include references to the main theme of the book, namely the concept of the praeter-colonial that acts as the common thread cutting across all of them, to help the reader navigate

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all these intricate and complicated topics. Armed with this new concept of the praeter-colonial (which is defined and illustrated in the following sections), the reader might be able to better make sense of a post-colonial world where also the colonial and the pre-colonial coexist and compete as rationales in our everyday lives.

As this book is presented in various accessible formats, the reader can engage with it in different ways, and read it in whole or in part. But before you decide, allow me to continue with this Introduction which will provide an explanation of the purpose of this work, as well as a definition of the concept of the praeter-colonial and a rationale for this intellectual undertaking.

Vade Mecum (or a User Guide of sorts)

This is not a book about colonialism. At least not in the traditional sense, the way it is treated by scholars and politicians as a concept with one or two sharp edges, a word to cut through resistance of bodies and minds. Thus, this will not be a study about 'decolonization', 'anti-colonialism', 'post-colonialism', or any such trendy academic buzzwords, although some reckoning with these concepts will become necessary at some point.

Despite what the title may suggest, this book is not intended as a critique of colonialism or imperialism as such. It is an invitation for you to suspend your judgment about what all those things mean – insofar as such a proposition is even practicable when the very words you are reading right now are a legacy of colonialism, a testimony to the incredible soft power of one of the most successful colonial experiments in history, the British Empire. In all honesty, English is not even my first language. But even if I tried to use my native tongue, Spanish, that would place us not very far removed from the epicenter whence English, and, at some point, Spanish, French, Dutch, and certainly the language lending a crucial prefix to this book's title, Latin, all come from. Thus, this will be in significant degree a book about Europe, and about Europeans.

Europeans are endlessly fascinating. Most of them offer a generous, unsolicited apology for their colonial past no sooner the topics of history or world politics come up. It is a nerve that does not even need to be struck, as the weight of the past keeps their hearts open in all their vibrance and vascularity. And for the most part, I believe their heart is in the right place when they do so. However, I have yet to meet the European individual who, truly moved by historical guilt, vows to never leave their continent again. No, just as their forebearers, modern Europeans remain actively engaged with the world and in their travails of dissemination of the gospel they deem is the truth of the day, be it articulated in the language of 'trade', 'human rights', 'development', 'capacity building', and so on. Of course, such a penitence would not solve any of the major problems of the world. It would probably make them worse, so interconnected our societies have become that they simply cannot afford to squander such a trove of human and financial resources as Europe. Still, it would be a remarkable thing if they entertained the thought if only for a moment. It would be nice of them to offer, and smart for the rest of us to gracefully decline.

But perhaps this is precisely what we need the idea of the praeter-colonial for – not to judge, nor to belittle or dismiss out of hand the efforts of thousands of honest, committed individuals whose only sin was to be born in the place where the so-called 'West' saw its first dawn. Thus, the concept of the praeter-colonial that is proposed in this study is one that remains neutral when facing the complicated legacy of colonialism. It does not judge, but it is an analytical tool to build judgment once we have come to terms with what our minds know and perhaps do not always articulate. It is not a guide to help people 'decolonize' their minds, partly because such an endeavor promises to prove futile, as the structures and legacies of imperialism are too entrenched, their roots running too deep in our forms of life to simply weed them out without losing something of our own selves in the process. As Yuval Noah Harari has eloquently put it: 'All human cultures are at least in part the legacy of empires and imperial civilisations, and no academic or political surgery can cut out the imperial legacies without killing the patient' (Harari 2014, 232). Thus, this is a book to help the mind take a step aside and have a long, hard look at its cultural make-up after half a millennium of colonial history.

This does not make this a psychological study. Nor is it an academic effort in the sense of being concerned primarily with engaging with the social sciences or humanities. There is no hypothesis to be proven or methodology to be applied. It is just a framework that the mind may use to converse with itself (Arendt 1976, 476), in order to find out

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what to it seems plausible or relatable even if no theorem, equation or scientific protocol can tell us why. It is a work of non-fiction to think about the fictions we carry within ourselves as scripts of sorts that we act out in our daily lives, whether we realize it or not.

Put more simply, this will be a collection of reflections for an age of contestation such as ours. It is an intellectual journey through the back alleys of empire that survive in the post-colonial era across some of those background concepts and ideas that are hidden behind the grandiose exteriors of civilization, democracy, freedom, human rights, self-determination, and the like. Not always suited for the foreground, these back alleys take the irregular form of irony, contradiction, discomfort, pain, and even injustice, all phenomena we must learn how to live with as we are in constant need of renegotiating the conditions making up the world around us. Even if we don't want to look at them, these back alleys remain an integral part of the entire structure that is our world.

A Brave New Word

Almost a decade ago a philosopher of science, Dr. Ruth E. Kastner, was inspired by a classic horror film to redefine the rather archaic term 'preternatural' as 'something at first disturbing and incomprehensible that nevertheless may become familiar and comprehensible once we better understand it through an expanded conceptual awareness' (Kastner 2016, para. 2). For example, magnets. The film titled 'The Haunting' (1963) features a researcher of the paranormal who tries to use science to understand phantasmagoric phenomena, thus turning it from 'supernatural' to 'preternatural' with the aid of logic and the scientific method. In a similar sense, I believe the concept of the 'praeter-colonial' can help us to approach colonialism and its legacies as something that, however disturbing and incomprehensible at first, may become familiar and comprehensible through the exercise of critical thinking that expands our conceptual and experiential awareness. The praeter-colonial mind, thus, seeks to acknowledge that the colonial is still with us even if we sometimes forget it or don't want to talk about it. As such, the praeter-colonial mind does not celebrate colonialism, but is ever mindful of its power.

'Praeter' is a Latin word that can mean 'past', 'by', 'beyond', 'above', 'more than', 'in addition to', or 'besides' (Oxford English Dictionary 2024). Hence, it will be the chief proposition of this study that the 'praeter-colonial' can mean all these things at once, namely 'the colonial as past', 'by or parallel to the colonial', 'beyond the colonial', 'above the colonial', 'more than the colonial', 'in addition to the colonial', or 'besides the colonial'. All these numerous possibilities enclose the risk that we may stretch the concept so thin that the expression 'praeter' becomes devoid of any meaning. In order to avoid this, the prefix must remain firmly anchored in the main concept it is attached to, or the 'colonial', much as the present cannot be really understood unless the colonial foundations it is built on are laid bare. Thus, as indicated above, the praeter-colonial mind is ever engaged in the intellectual task of trying to make sense of (i.e. making more comprehensible and familiar) a world that at some point has been either pre-colonial, colonial, or post-colonial, and the many ways in which this trajectory impacts the vantage point from which such task is undertaken, that is, the present. In other words, the mind that tries to make sense of all of this is the praeter-colonial mind, a mind that, in accordance with the varied meanings of the prefix 'praeter' (namely 'past, by, beyond, above, more than, in addition to, besides') sees colonialism simultaneously as past and present as it is confronted with the evidence of its many legacies. A mind that, in the end, attempts to step aside to gain perspective and go above and beyond colonialism for the sake of the present and the future.

Only our minds, as we think about all these possibilities, illuminated by our own experiences as individuals living in a world carved out by imperialism, can tell us whether these alternative meanings can make sense all of them at once, or only some of them, or none. Only our minds can demystify the 'supernatural', that is, the uncomfortably foreign within the colonial and turn it into the familiar and comprehensible 'praeter-colonial'. But perhaps a few examples may help in bringing down to earth all these abstract notions.

Jesus of Nazareth is perhaps one of the most salient examples of the praeter-colonial mind. He lived and died under the rule of one of the most powerful polities in history, the Roman Empire. He was versed not only in Hebrew and Aramaic from his homeland; he also spoke Greek and Latin, the two main languages of the empire. He learned a trade at the same time as he learned and mastered scripture. And he was not afraid to show his knowledge, and even to school those supposedly more erudite than him. But he was also someone who understood that the Roman

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Empire was not going to go anywhere anytime soon. He urged his followers to render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar's, for his kingdom was not of this world. He understood that some form of compromise was needed, 'the accommodation necessary to human as opposed to angelic life' (Carroll 2002, 115). Thus, his revolution of souls in a transcendent plane of existence (a post-colonial world of sorts) while the body remained beholden to the Romans was the very definition of the praeter-colonial.

Other exemplars of the praeter-colonial mind may be found besides the Son of man. One of the greatest pens of North America, John Steinbeck, writes in *East of Eden* that when the Spaniards arrived in the New World, they had to give everything they saw a new name – which was both a duty and a privilege (Steinbeck 1952). Yet, Steinbeck remains critical of their motives, as of those of American settlers after them. In the consecutive layers of conquest and empire that have covered North America, Steinbeck sees no clear claim for redemption, yet he understands perfectly well the succession of events and peoples that have given that part of the world its character, the same character that he portrays so uniquely.

Similarly, one of the greatest pens of South America, Gabriel García Márquez, writes in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* about a man facing the firing squad thinking back to the time when his father took him to see ice for the first time as a child (García Márquez 2017, 13), a rare material in the torrid tropical climate of the Amazon basin. The world was so new at the time, García Márquez continues, that many things were unnamed and they had to be pointed at to refer to them. Perhaps some of Steinbeck's explorers may have helped naming things that needed an identity. Or perhaps newcomers should have paid more attention to the way those who were there first referred to things. The point being, the waves of colonialism advancing north and south of the landmass known as America were relentless in their efforts to renew what they knew (or should have known) was old, ice standing as the ultimate metaphor of all things foreign (and northern) that were imported into those latitudes. Thus, both Steinbeck and García Márquez need the colonial to frame their narratives. That is, their praeter-colonial minds (and pens) need the colonial as the platform from where their stories may take flight and ultimately transcend, thus helping to shape national identities ('Americans', 'mestizos') that need to see themselves as both new to the soil they discovered/conquered and at the same time native to it in order to define their own character.

More examples can be found in other parts of the world. When asked what he thought about 'Western civilization', Gandhi reportedly said: 'It would be a good idea' (Tripathi 2004). He, too, can be thought of as an embodiment of the praeter-colonial mind as a harbinger of the post-colonial turning the tools of colonialism (such as law and philosophical argument) against it.

Another case may be found in one Turkish intellectual complaining about the fact that if he happens to do research in the West (say, Paris), everyone expects him to work on topics only related to religion or immigrants, not, for example, French urban planning (his actual calling) (Dikeç 2010). For him, being called 'Eurocentric' because he doesn't do 'identity research' is as ridiculous as trying to call his work in Paris 'field work' according to the academic metric that so divides the world.

Another example from Turkey is the writer Orhan Pamuk, who narrates in *The Black Book* how in a mannequin store the models no longer reflect the way real humans look and act because of the influence of Hollywood movies in society, as Turks no longer want to be Turks, they want to be something else (Pamuk 2011, 91–99). Thus, by aping gestures seen on screen, such as nods, winks, coughs, fits and the like, the citizens of Turkey – and of the world – have become uniform in their demeanor. Only a true praeter-colonial mind can denounce this imperial paradox afflicting a supposedly post-colonial world such as ours.

But popular culture also shows signs of true praeter-colonial spirit when, for example, a classic song like John Denver's *Country Roads* is adapted and reclaimed by a reggae band like Toots and the Maytals, who instead asked those roads to take them back home to West Jamaica, not West Virginia. There is a plasticity at work here that is a signature trait of the praeter-colonial mind as it can take the colonial and shape it or repurpose it, even reclaim it, as a display of agency and ownership.

The praeter-colonial can further be found in Georgia, a country that, like Ukraine, has seen much of human history

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unfold within its borders. Today, a popular American franchise, Wendy's, can be found all over the land. The franchise is owned by a business conglomerate that supports Russian influence in Georgia (the Wissol Group). At the same time, Chinese building companies have proliferated all over the Georgian landscape as they engage in the tireless construction of highways and tunnels as part of their 'One Belt One Road' initiative. Is Georgia, then, a truly post-colonial state?

In the field of defense, which owes a great debt to the developments of imperialism as we shall see in this book, another example of the praeter-colonial mind comes in the form of the code of ethics adopted by the New Zealand military, titled *The Way of the New Zealand Warrior* (New Zealand Army 2020). Therein, it is proudly claimed that the New Zealand professional of arms is a unique blend between the Māori warrior and the British soldier, both coexisting in harmony and enhancing each other's virtues and potential in one and the same 'kiwi at arms'.

Finally, some outstanding female figures can also be included among those displaying the praeter-colonial mind. Hannah Arendt, a German-Jewish philosopher who escaped Nazism, refused to be labeled as a victim or treated as a pawn in the chess game of great power competition during World War II. Displaying remarkable agency and analytical skill, she decided to stare evil in the eye to try and figure out how it could have grown such profound roots, in all its maleficence and banality, during the times of totalitarian rule in precisely the epicenter of civilization, Europe (Arendt 2006). It turns out that there is no guarantee against empire turning against itself and rearing its ugly head in the Homefront.

Another famous woman, Aung San Suu Kyi, a political activist who fought to gain democracy in Myanmar and won a Nobel Peace Prize for it, more recently has stood before the International Court of Justice to defend her country's use of genocidal violence against the Rohingya people, an unexpected move by a Nobel laureate coming from the 'Global South' and expected to be sympathetic to the cause of those oppressed by tyranny (Choudhury and Heiduk 2019). The complex and the paradoxical are also an integral part of the praeter-colonial mind, it would seem.

Many more examples from around the world can be included in this brief overview, but that is not necessary here, as there is no 'quota' to fill so that everyone is satisfied, or everyone is equally dissatisfied. These pages only tend to the intellectual need to stimulate the mind with a few illustrations that shall be paired with more anecdotal evidence and discussion throughout this study.

What all of the people mentioned above have in common is that they all understand that we live in a world that is shaped by empire and colonialism, a world where many things existed before empire and were so new they did not even have a name, and at the same time a world where pretty much everything (including these symbols your mind is currently decoding from English) is something that is a by-product of empire. But that is no reason not to try and go above and beyond the colonial, to reclaim it and give it new meaning to explain our shared experiences, to try and be more than and at the same time something in addition to the colonial tidings by which many, including ourselves, wish to define us. So much for the purpose of this work and the meaning of the praeter-colonial. In the rest of this Introduction, I will delve into the rationale for undertaking this intellectual journey.

On the Road, An Intellectual Journey Begins

For me, it starts in Chile, where I was born and where I lived my entire life before moving to Europe. '*Chile?!*' The perplexity that descends upon the face of every single customs agent that is confronted with my passport is amusing at this point of my life. It happens every time, sometimes coupled with a smile, of the kind little kids draw on their faces when they learn that the colors they knew to exist can come together to form new tones and thus make their world richer without even having to pay for it. Or perhaps it is a nervous smile to mask their own ignorance. Some other times they double check with a colleague to see if they are reading the document correctly and to confirm whether we are friend or foe – the answer is invariably 'friend' because no one can think of a reason to call us the opposite. We are simply not that important. It always reminds me of a similar episode experienced by a Chilean traveler in Paris (in 1830, according to his memoirs), when a customs agent told him that his country did not exist, and that he must have come from Mexico, as there was no room in the European's mind for anything else in that side of the world. 'V. Perez Rosales, natural of Santiago of Mexico' the lie was proclaimed, printed and stamped to make it

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official (Pérez Rosales 1886, 100).

Even though Chile has existed as an independent nation at least since 1818 after almost a decade of military struggle against Spain, in the twenty-first century, same as in the nineteenth century, the sole proposition of such a place is still met with skepticism by the proper authorities. But we do exist. We have a flag and everything (as the British comedian Eddie Izzard has eloquently put it 'No flag, no country!'). Almost shaped like the Texas flag – even though we came up with ours twenty years before! – it also has the same colors, red, white and blue, which we adopted at a time when the French revolution was still perceived as one of the greatest achievements in history, much as folks must have felt about the fledgling Soviet Union in the 1920s. We even adopted a quintessentially masonic, enlightened motto to go with the rest of our new republican regalia: *Post Tenebras Lux* or 'After the Darkness Comes the Light'.

It has become a great irony of history that my country's existence is doubted in the very place where nationhood and a right to exist as a nation are being defended every day as I write these lines, by a country whose existence an invader precisely denies out of imperialist aspirations. We must begin this study in such a place, where the pre-colonial, the colonial, and the post-colonial all converge and compete for purchase and validation. In a word, we must begin where there is fertile ground for the praeter-colonial mind to flourish. This story begins in Ukraine.

Ego Sum

'We exist! We exist!'. The words have never really been uttered by me when being controlled by border agents each time I go into Ukraine, although I have been tempted to shout them out in order to reassure them of the existence of my country – just as that Chilean traveler in Paris all those decades ago. This existential cry was written by Mykola Mikhnovsky, a Ukrainian lawyer and political activist living at the turn of the twentieth century, as he was making the case for an independent Ukraine finally free from the yoke of Russian imperialism (Mikhnovsky 1996, 213). One hundred twenty-five years later, these words remain as topical as the day when they were first written. It is indeed the battle cry of every Ukrainian man, woman and child, a nation up in arms fighting for its own survival. Indeed, Russia has been characterized as something the praeter-colonial mind may find not too difficult to understand, namely 'a postmodern empire, in which many of the physical features of empire have disappeared, but where the imperial spirit is still present and even resurgent' (Stent 2023, 180). Ukraine finds itself today at the receiving end of this resurgent imperialism.

But certainly, a country with its own flag, its own history and institutions, a full-fledged member of the United Nations, exists. Right? Or so we all thought, until Russian imperialists decided against it, calling Ukraine a made-up country. Of course, all states are artificial, as Jade McGlynn has pointed out (Lavrova 2024). It is not just Ukraine that had to be created. It is also the case with Russia, the United Kingdom, and every other country in the world, as countries are not found in a state of nature. In fact, they represent the next stage *after* human beings decide to congregate in order to transcend such a state of nature. The praeter-colonial mind understands that states are super-natural.

Further, this artificial quality is the very essence of a country that stands as one of the most successful experiments in self-government resulting from the ideals of the Enlightenment, the United States of America, a country that is not quite accurately defined as a nation, but as an idea – the proposition that all men are created equal, as we shall see in a later chapter. As Harari remarks in his latest book *Nexus*: 'There are no objective definitions for who is British, American, Norwegian, or Iraqi; all these identities are shaped by national and religious myths that are constantly challenged and revised' (Harari 2024, 29).

We must understand that this Enlightenment-inspired idea of equality stands as a challenge to everything humans had known so far, at least since the foundation of civil society, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by 'The first man who, after enclosing a piece of ground, took it into his head to say, *this is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him' (Rousseau 2022, 113).

Thus, the Enlightenment promoted the idea that, if inequality was brought about artificially by human beings when creating the first forms of political organization – empire being one of the oldest, most dominant ones throughout

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history (Kaplan 2023, 16) – then the remedy would also need to come artificially with the foundation of a new kind of body politic that would find a way to accommodate the often-times conflicting ideas of '*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*'. Enter the modern Nation-State, the product of a science of government so rational and universal it could be implemented anywhere in the world.

At least that is what you are told when you grow up in one of those 'made-up' countries Steinbeck and García Márquez write about, like the United States or Chile, those spawns of the Enlightenment found in places like the Western Hemisphere where we were promised that after the medieval *tenebras* the modern *lux* would come to light up our lives with the luminescence of the separation of powers, the rule of law and individual rights, with liberty and justice for all.

Certainly Europeans, of all people, will understand this. After all, Europe is where the Enlightenment first emerged, where these egalitarian ideals first took root. However, if Tocqueville was right and Americans have a passion for equality, then Europeans certainly have a soft spot, if not for inequality, at least for *difference*. Indeed, Europe gave us the problem (lack of natural equality) and the solution (more artificial equality through government) but somehow found a way to solve the former without deploying the latter. It seemingly got rid of inequality but kept differentiation (within itself and, even more strongly, against the rest of the world), while its current mélange of flags and institutions is something halfway between the colorful kaleidoscope of the feudal and the finite sepia shades of the imperial.

And all of this is precisely what Ukrainians want for themselves. They have so much need for the light after the darkness, for nationhood after servitude, that they are willing to pay the admission price every day with the blood of their sons and daughters. This is their (second) war of independence, and a lesson to the rest of us that no matter how certain you are of your own existence, you may at any point in history be required to reassert it with the words "I exist! I exist!".

Blood Will Tell

The blood being spilled right now in the battlefields and cities of Ukraine has sadly been poured generously over that part of the world in recent memory. Ukraine is located in what has been called the 'Bloodlands' by Timothy Snyder (Snyder 2015), by which he means the hapless space between two of the most blood-thirsty and tyrannical regimes in history, the Nazi and the Soviet empires. This area includes Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states. Whether by planned mass starvation, deportation, war, forced labor, or extermination, in the span of a few years the Bloodlands were irrigated with the lives of millions of human beings whose only crime was being born in the wrong side of the world, within the liminal space contained between two of the most conspicuous wrong sides of history.

When visiting the Bloodlands and reading about their dark history I must confess I succumbed to a form of stereotyping, whereby I was expecting to find dreary landscapes and crushed spirits everywhere. Like the 'green colonialists' of our time who want to preserve the landscapes of the so-called 'Global South' evergreen and virginal even at the expense of loss of revenue for local populations (Sanghera 2024, 103), I wanted to preserve the inhabitants of the Bloodlands perfectly still in a chrysalid made of their own dried tears. My mind was set to 'post-colonial' mode, we could say. I suppose it is similar to what happens to some visitors from across the pond when they go to Europe and expect everything to look and feel like a World War II movie. The fact that it was winter when I first visited the Bloodlands did not help things, the naked trees and grey skies making for an exquisitely foreboding aesthetic that would be the dream of any filmmaker in Hollywood.

But then, my prejudiced, post-colonial mind was challenged by the evidence it was confronted with. Yes, there were plenty of museums and monuments memorializing the sad events that took place in the Bloodlands, from the Holodomor Museum and Babyn Yar memorial in Kyiv to Auschwitz and the Warsaw Rising Museum in Poland, as well as the KGB prison cells in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. They all speak eloquently to the brutality those lands have seen.

At the same time, I was lucky enough to spend a Hallmark-worthy, snow- white Christmas in wartime Kyiv, enjoying comfortable beverages and plenty of good food at places that were open seven days a week and where electronic

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payment was a matter of course. In Warsaw, a city razed to the ground by World War II, I got to eat a cheeseburger in my swimsuit before entering one of the biggest spa centers I have seen in my life, complete with all kinds of saunas and facilities dedicated to wellbeing. And in Tallinn, where the USSR ruled with an iron fist even after Estonians gained their independence in 1920, I took a Bolt car across a city buzzing with activity to meet a friend to talk about his 'fintech' start-up business.

In a word, all these places strike one as vibrant, forward-looking societies where the memory of the dark events in the Bloodlands has not arrested their development in the slightest; on the contrary, it has strengthened their resolve to be the masters of their own destiny. In that sense, they have become the very definition of the praeter-colonial mind as they keep an eye on the past without it preventing them from looking ahead, into the future.

Great Expectations

If we zoom out from the Bloodlands and have a look at the wider universe of post-Soviet spaces a similar picture emerges. We are told by Hollywood (the same Hollywood that effectively re-engineered the way Turkish people carry themselves according to Pamuk's account) that post-Soviet spaces are bleak and depressing wastelands with no hope and no future. A travel log published by Michael Totten under the title *Where the West Ends* is a case in point (Totten 2012). The book describes this American writer's adventures in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea. Although Totten's wanderlust is nothing if not admirable, and mindful of the fact that the misadventures he recounts take place in a time when smart phones, simultaneous translation apps and GPS were a luxury as opposed to the household devices we take for granted in our daily lives today, one cannot but conclude that his views of those places are colored by the same type of post-colonial prejudice or stereotyping that afflicted me when I first ventured into the ominous Bloodlands.

It is not just Totten's constant complaining about how things are so different from back home (isn't that the point of traveling, anyway?), or the fatuous display of frustration at the impossibility to understand a language (and an alphabet) he did not study beforehand (I am just as ignorant as the next Westerner but I try not to complain too much and I manage to get by with whatever scintillations of Latin I can find hiding in foreign tongues). It is also his predisposition to continue to see that part of the world as a place where there is an objective deficit (a place that is lacking something we all need to sustain a life worth living), when in fact it is merely a place that stands in relative difference to what he knows – a place that simply does things differently to the West and where people manage just fine.

Totten concludes his account with a reflection inspired by what he deems a very depressing landscape on the shores of the Sea of Azov in eastern Ukraine:

This place was so utterly godforsaken and misery-stricken I had a momentary feeling that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had never fallen apart, that, Mordor-like, its malice truly is sleepless, that it's still crushing parts of the world in its totalitarian fist (Ibid, Ch. 12).

And Totten is probably right about the lasting negative influence of Russian imperialism in that part of the world, where currently a war of independence is being fought precisely to resist that totalitarian fist. However, having been more recently to many of those former Soviet spaces myself thanks to my wife's research and career – including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Montenegro in addition to Ukraine, Poland, and Estonia – I believe that the same exhortation Snyder includes at the end of his book on the Bloodlands can be applicable to all those places in the world where people have been turned into numbers by tyrannical regimes. It is up to us to turn the numbers, and the stereotypes, back into real people (Snyder 2015, 408).

Thus, I have come to the informed conclusion, in exercising the faculties of a praeter-colonial mind illuminated by experience, that no place is forever cursed just because it was once ruled by an evil empire, and that we have no right to describe someone else's home as a corner of hell. What people want most of all in those places, and everywhere else, is to exercise agency, to receive respect, and ultimately to live with dignity.

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Euro-Vision

If we zoom out even more and leave the post-Soviet spaces, we find the horizon to which Ukraine has aspired for at least a decade since the momentous Maidan protests of 2013-2014: Europe (hence the name 'Euro- Maidan'). Is Ukraine a part of Europe? When asking such a question, we need to be mindful of the fact that 'continents' and 'continental thinking' (like 'Europe' and 'Europeanness') had to be invented by someone (e.g. Greeks and Persians) (Quinn 2024, 225). Is Ukraine European? Can it be? Can it make its 'European decision' the same way Georgia has (Japaridze 2022, 50)? These are the questions that are killing thousands every day in Ukraine's war of independence, so we had better ponder their answers very carefully as we proceed.

A prominent contemporary Ukrainian historian, Serhii Plokhy, certainly seems to think so, calling Ukraine *The Gates of Europe* (Plokhy 2015), a quintessential borderland whose history is indissolubly linked to the history of Europe, as Ukraine has always been a gateway to the Old Continent as well as a bridge between Europe and Eurasia. Tracing Ukraine's early history back to Herodotus himself, Plokhy argues that it was the first frontier of the political and cultural sphere that began in ancient Greece and that we now call the West. Thus, Ukraine is 'where the West began to define itself and its other' (Ibid, 27). Furthermore, others argue, Ukraine's past, present and future are inextricably tied to the West (Kuleba 2021).

In all its rich history, ever interwoven with world events, it would be easy to see Ukraine as a mere clearing-house or a simple node in the circuitry of historical forces. Yet, it is so much more than that, as an impressive cast of characters left an indelible mark on the face of the country like so many layers of a cake into which all of them – Scythians, Sarmatians, Slavs, Jews, Khazars, Vikings, Mongols, Tatars, Cossacks, Poles, Lithuanians, Habsburgs, Russians, Soviets – are baked, making up a unique national identity.

This is precisely what makes finding the 'European' within Ukraine sometimes difficult, as it may be hidden under some of these many layers. But every once in a while it erupts like a force of nature that cannot be contained, like when a monk climbs up the bell tower of the church of Saint Michael to send a distress call at the sight of the invading Golden Horde in the thirteenth century; or when an entire nation congregates for months in the cold, open space of the Maidan (a word of Indo-European stock) to reclaim their rightful place in Herodotus's world in the twenty-first century. It can also be observed in the reappropriation of Virgil's *Aeneid* by a Ukrainian poet from the eighteenth century, Ivan Kotlyarevsky, at a critical time when the Cossack identity was struggling to survive consecutive imperial onslaughts coming from East and West (Kotlyarevsky 2004).

If, as one philosopher puts it, Europe's first word was 'rage' – as found in the opening act of Homer's *Illiad* (Sloterdijk 2010, 1) – then 'perseverance' is a concept that we may definitely draw from Virgil's epic tale of Trojan refugees founding the city of Rome, as well as from Kotlyarevsky's *Eneida* where Cossacks endure after the destruction of their polity by the Russian Empire. Rage may be Europe's first word, but perseverance is its creed, and Ukraine its paladin.

But perhaps the question we should be asking, by availing ourselves of the faculties of the praeter-colonial mind, is not 'Is Ukraine a part of Europe?', but the more fundamental inquiry 'What is Europe, anyway?'. If we consider that it is a place named after a Phoenician princess kidnapped by Zeus and taken away from her home in today's Lebanon, as the myth goes, then it would be fair to say that not even Europe is truly 'European'. What makes us say, then, that something or someone definitely count as a part of Europe? Will we know it when we see it? Or have we been conditioned to approach the question with a tunnel-vision that prevents us from seeing what may be right in front of us, only perhaps a little to the East, a little to the South?

One of such suspiciously meridional (or southern) places that have been at times stripped off their 'Europeanness' is the Iberian Peninsula. Even though in geographical terms it is a contiguous part of the landmass of the European continent, it is not always seen as a proper European country, or at least not a 'Western European' one. All Spain and Portugal can claim for themselves is the dubious title of 'Southern European', alongside other problem children such as Italy and Greece whose economies have needed in the past to be shored up or bailed out by their more solvent septentrional brethren.

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In addition to the struggles of the present, Iberian countries are guilty of the mortal sin of not having stopped the Muslim advance in Europe in the eighth century – unlike their fabled Frank counterparts in Poitiers in 732. As a result, more than half of the Iberian Peninsula was occupied by Muslim invaders and turned into the land known as Al-Andalus – although an event spanning eight centuries and leaving indelible marks on the face and soul of all the peoples involved is somewhat mischaracterized by the use of the word ‘occupation’ and would probably be better described as a full-on colonization. It was not enough that the Catholic kings eventually rallied and managed to single-handedly expel the Muslims (and the Jews, for good measure) from their corner of Europe in 1492. It was already too late for Iberia to remain a ‘pure’ part of Europe as it had been ‘contaminated’ by centuries of Eastern influence in the eyes of the rest of Europeans, whom we know love a good opportunity to nurse their differences, that they may grow strong and hard to eradicate.

And so, a feeling of Hispanophobia started to take hold over the centuries (Roca 2020), which was only exacerbated by imperial rivalries whereby the Dutch, the French, and the British were only too happy to contribute to the effort to taint the reputation of the Spanish Empire, around which a ‘Black Legend’ was built that spoke of the genocidal brutality of the *conquistadores* lusting after blood and gold wherever they went. I shall revisit this imperial whataboutism and its discontents in the following chapters. For now, the case of the Iberian Peninsula may serve as a litmus test to ascertain what counts as truly European, and thus it may provide a useful case study to address some of the struggles and challenges of the Ukrainian plight in the present.

Not unlike Ukraine, Iberia has been called home by many consecutive peoples throughout the ages, including Celts, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, Visigoths, and Muslims. The foundation of the Caliphate of Cordoba in Al-Andalus after the Muslim takeover did not amount to a dark age when all knowledge and culture were lost or fell through the cracks of history.

On the contrary, the city of Cordoba was called once a true ‘Ornament of the World’ (Menocal 2003), a beacon of progress in the otherwise dark Middle Ages, a place where religious tolerance was a way of life and where the troves of European and Middle Eastern culture were preserved and treasured as much as gold. It is in part thanks to such conservation efforts amidst this unique intellectual vibrancy resulting from centuries of Iberian *Convivencia* or ‘coexistence’ (Carroll 2002, 322–332) that we today can access the foundational texts of the European canon, including the contributions of Herodotus and Thucydides to history; of Hippocrates to medicine; of Archimedes and Ptolemy to science; and of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca to philosophy. Far from disappearing from the face of the earth, the European identity remained alive and well, among others, under the stewardship of the overlords of Al-Andalus and elsewhere in the Muslim world (Quinn 2024, 369–382).

Was medieval Iberia a part of Europe, then? Probably yes, if we measure it not only by its geography, but by its contributions to the preservation of European culture. Was medieval Ukraine a part of Europe? Also probably yes, for it at least represents what Plokhy calls the gate located at its easternmost part, just as Iberia may be called the gate of Europe’s westernmost flank. Is Ukraine today entitled to full-fledge membership in the European family, like Spain and Portugal, despite of – or perhaps due to – its non-European influences? Equipped with the sobering lessons of history, the praeter-colonial mind must ponder these questions critically and in earnest as it tries to assess the value of the past for the understanding of the present and the construction of the future.

Rockin’ in the Free World

We may lastly try to zoom out even more in order to situate Europe within a wider geopolitical construct that is quite prevalent in the way we see and talk about the world today: the ‘West’. I shall have more to say about the West and the rest in Chapter Three. For now, it is worth pointing out here that, as a construct or an idea, the West it is not quite geographically bound as, say, ‘the Caribbean’ or ‘the Horn of Africa’.

The West encompasses not only most of Europe, but also significant parts of North America (including the US and Canada), as well as a myriad of distant, yet undoubtedly ‘Western-like’ polities, such as Australia, New Zealand, and arguably Japan. If we are being very generous – the way my teachers and elders were when I was growing up in Chile, telling me we also belonged in the West as we speak a European language, have European institutions and a

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European culture and life-style complete with a pervasive American influence – we may also include Latin America, although we would probably be met with skepticism and even amusement by Europeans, those masters of difference.

But what is it about the West that everyone wants a piece of it? What is the allure? The West looms large as a positive force in some of the most popular fictions of our time, including J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* – where everything good and pure comes from the West, even beyond the sea, while evil dwells in the East – and George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* – where all the relevant plot developments happen in the land of 'Westeros'.

Beyond the realm of fiction, the strong appeal that the brand 'West' enjoys becomes also painfully visible when we see Europeans competing for the label, as they desperately try to shake off more ignominious tags that have a bad rap, such as 'Eastern' European (Müller 2018), over which they will take anything – even 'Central'! – that will move them closer to the West and the North.

In the meantime, no one really wants to claim the 'South' as a source of pride, at least not for the right reasons – the wrong ones including such unfortunate propositions as the racist 'The South will rise again!' in the US, or the incredibly inaccurate 'Global South' at the international level. But if competition for the label 'West' is something that may cause the praeter-colonial mind to crack up in amusement, we must also bear in mind that right now there are people for whom accession to the coveted title is not only a matter of prestige or status: it may literally mean the difference between life and death, between the patronage and the protection of other members of the

West (in the form of military alliances such as NATO, or in the shape of political and economic communities that can have a measurable positive impact in the wellbeing of their members, like the European Union), and the continued oppression of their former colonial masters to the East. For Ukrainians, being called 'Eastern' instead of 'Western' is no joke if that places them closer to their aggressive Russian neighbor with all its neo-imperialistic tendencies. Ukraine may feel it belongs in the European family, but Russia's characteristically 'Eurasian' ambiguity towards Europe (Stent 2023, 65) is threatening to drag all of its neighbors down with it *ad nocturnum*, into the night of tyranny and underdevelopment.

When Ukrainians are deprived of the title of 'European' after so much of Europe's history has actually transpired in that frontier-land 'where utopias and dystopias collide' (Lasheras 2022, 62), irrigated with the blood of its own sons and daughters, it must feel like an insult or an inexcusable oversight, almost coterminous with the denial of their own existence as a nation, the 'European' being an integral component of such an existence.

As they try to fight their way out of the shadow of empire towards the light of self-determination in 'the hope that light can overcome darkness' (Kuleba 2024, 12), we would do well to remember that we all come from places that were once covered in darkness.

About the author:

Francisco Lobo holds a PhD in War Studies from King's College London. He also holds an LLM in International Legal Studies (New York University), an LLM in International Law and an LLB (University of Chile). He has worked as a legal practitioner in the private and public sectors. He has more recently worked as an advisor for an international development project to train the Armed Forces of Ukraine in IHL and military ethics standards. His research focuses on international law, human rights, the laws and ethics of war, legal theory, moral philosophy, and history.