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The Colonial and Its Discontents: Anti-Colonialism, Decolonization, and Post-Colonialism

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FRANCISCO LOBO, NOV 15 2025

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

In 2025 the President of Burkina Faso told the West: 'Before your missionaries, we knew the language of the rivers and the laws of the sacred forest' (Black Rebellion 2025, at 06:20). The irony was lost on him that he delivered this message from the gilded halls of Putin's neo-imperial Russia while donning an Order of Saint George ribbon, a symbol of contemporary military aggression. Yet, his words do carry certain weight for the praeter-colonial mind. Indeed, the writer and intellectual Joaquín Trujillo Silva, one of the finest pens the land of Chile has ever produced and another great example of the praeter-colonial mind, once wrote about imperialism: 'What is a conquest? It is the moment when an "other" arrives and everyone feels compelled to speak to them in their language' (Trujillo 2019, 268).

Another author, the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, once included a 'Statement' in his famous book *Decolonising the Mind* that is reflective of Trujillo's characterization of linguistic conquest in all its gentle brutality:

This book, *Decolonising the Mind*, is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gĩkũyũ and Kiswahili all the way. However, I hope that through the age old medium of translation I shall be able to continue dialogue with all' (Thiong'o 2005, xiv).

Why would an internationally acclaimed author ever say something like this? This statement is perplexing to someone who has chosen English as the preferred vehicle to convey all the ideas about the praeter-colonial mind

contained in this book in the hope that they may reach a larger audience, while Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o essentially writes a breakup letter to English in the preliminary pages of *Decolonising the Mind*. Why do that? Writers trade in words, so giving up an entire language as a tool to practice the wordsmith's craft is a choice no author would ever make lightly, especially if it entails giving up *the* tool to express ideas, today's *lingua franca*. Only a prior abusive relationship with English can prompt such a radical decision to break all bonds with what has hitherto been experienced as familiar – perhaps too familiar.

That is exactly what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o denounces in *Decolonising the Mind*, when he reflects on the pernicious effects of colonialism and the spiritual subjugation of his native Africa:

The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own (Ibid, 2).

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The way the cultural bomb is deployed by imperial powers is less physical and more psychological, as he further explains:

Berlin of 1884 was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visibly gentle (Ibid, 9).

These powerful words, full of passion and righteous indignation, were written by Thiong'o in 1986. However, the 'decolonization' project remains alive and well today, as evidenced by the active battlefronts of academia and the so-called 'culture wars' (on which I will have more to say in the next chapter). Many of our major struggles today have to do with war and political violence, and they are as pressing as they are palpable for way too many victims of their material destructiveness. Yet, as the UNESCO constitution states, 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed' (UNESCO 1945, para. 2).

As this study is intended to offer food for thought for the praeter-colonial mind, this chapter will focus on the intellectual challenges of colonialism and its many discontents – including anti-colonialism, decolonization, and post-colonialism – and the ways in which the praeter-colonial mind can make sense of all of them and negotiate the cognitive dissonance that arises between the past and the present, between what is imposed and what is inherited, between the natural and the naturalized.

The Last Shall Be First

The expression 'anti-colonialism' immediately conveys the idea of opposition, of tension or struggle; and there is no more clear manifestation of opposition than armed struggle. I will deal with war more in depth in the next chapter, but I cannot fail to mention here wars of national liberation as the most extreme manifestation of the anti-colonial, that is, of the opposition to colonialism.

Is anti-colonialism always violent? Does it have to be? Frantz Fanon, author of *The Wretched of the Earth*, once wrote in the context of the Algerian war of independence against France: 'National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon' (Fanon 1963, 35). Conversely, Gandhi famously gained independence for India by means of non-violent resistance. Further, I remember meeting a couple of travelers from Costa Rica who once told me that their country never really had a proper war of independence against Spain, unlike my homeland of Chile and most other Spanish colonies. Costa Rica, rather, benefitted from the expansive wave of independence that emanated from Mexico and made its way down to Central America. According to them, freedom over there kind of arrived 'by accident' as a messenger on horseback informed the locals that Mexico had declared independence. And just like that, Costa Rica started its own life as a sovereign nation. The moral of the story is simple and beautiful: you can still have national pride even if no one had to spill any blood to purchase it.

However, if we look more closely, we will find that a peaceful transition into statehood is by no means guarantee that violence can be forever banned from the life of a country. Although Costa Rica today enjoys a well-deserved fame as a committed pacifist nation since it abolished its army in 1948, it had to do so precisely after a civil war broke out, and its current constitution reserves the right for the government to raise military forces should national defense require it. More so, even though they never went to war with the United Kingdom, India and Pakistan, heirs to Gandhi's fight, are among the few nuclear powers who can hold the world hostage if they decide to use the ultimate destructive force kept in their arsenals. It would appear, then, that Fanon is right in that decolonization will always engender some form of violence, whether it comes at the outset or remains dormant as a theoretical capability.

That violence can also come in the form of fantasies or ideations of anti-colonial resistance. In this regard, some interesting examples come in the form of what could be called 'reverse colonialism' or 'revenge colonialism' – a counter-narrative of alternate history whereby the oppressed play the role of oppressors subjugating their former masters. For instance, *Civilizations* is an alternative history novel written by French author Laurent Binet in which the main premise is that it is the Incas who sail all the way from South America to Europe and end up conquering Spain

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and other European kingdoms, including the Holy Roman Empire (Binet 2019). Likewise, in the miniseries *Exterminate All the Brutes* (HBO 2021), an aesthetic-political manifesto against Western imperialism, Haitian film maker Raoul Peck inserts scenes of Black slave traders whipping a bunch of blond, blue-eyed kids in shackles as they are dragged across the jungle, to the absolute dismay of a squeamish missionary, who also happens to be a Black man.

What fuels these narratives is a deep hatred of colonialism, a veritable 'empirephobia' as María Elvira Roca calls it (Roca 2020). This drives the oppressed to fight not only to break free from their yoke and maybe retire into a quiet, independent life, but to come out on top in order to counter-subjugate their former masters. It is similar to what Said calls 'Occidentalism' as a reaction to 'Orientalism' (Said 1994, 349; Massad 2015), that is, a way of having authority over the West by redefining it. But as Gandhi once said, and eye for an eye will make the whole world blind. Whatever happened before our time, we can't afford to see things only through the tunnel vision of anti-colonial rage, especially not at a time when the praeter-colonial mind needs more, not less, insights into the many paths that have led us to this point in history.

Revenge of the Nerds

A few years ago, on New Year's Eve, I was at a friend's house in Oxford. He and his wife were living there to get their doctoral degrees. They kindly invited me to spend the evening with them. Another friend was invited too, also a student at Oxford. We all happened to be Chilean, and we all had a keen interest in legal and political philosophy. And so, we found ourselves discussing the many details and minutiae of the lives of Anglo-Saxon thinkers such as Bernard Williams, John Rawls, and Ronald Dworkin.

At some point during the conversation, I felt something was off. Of course, it was natural for us to discuss the thinkers from those lands given that we had all moved to England to study the scholars that culture has produced. It also felt like a *déjà vu* for me, considering the same group of friends had gathered before for many an afternoon in the faraway land known as Chile to discuss the exact same topics and the exact same thinkers.

One could say our minds, our Hispanic *mentes*, had been effectively re-colonized by the influence of Anglo-Saxon academia in the twenty-first century. The cultural bomb that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o once talked about had been effectively released on our intellectual space without us even knowing. This is very common in the fields of legal theory and international law. A few years prior I attended a talk by a Spanish legal philosopher in Chile, where he urged us to re-discover the value of scholarship written in Spanish by Latin American thinkers, including some Chilean legal philosophers he particularly admired (authors he deemed to be '*de fuste*', or very solid), but about whom I confess I know little, whether it is their life or their contributions to the field. A real shame.

Our New Year's Eve debate took place in a setting that was not unfamiliar with that kind of controversy. Indeed, ever since the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement started in 2015 in South Africa, it spread to other places of the English-speaking world, including the UK (Chaudhuri 2016). As it happens, at Oriel College in Oxford University sits a statue of Cecil Rhodes, one of the most vicious British colonizers of Africa who even founded his own country, 'Rhodesia' (today Zimbabwe), where he implemented an apartheid regime as brutal as the one in South Africa. A statue similar to the one that was taken down in Cape Town University a few years ago, and that continues to defy detractors at Oxford to this day.

Even if Rhodes is still 'sitting pretty' in Oxfordshire, the Rhodes Must Fall movement had a lasting impact in the way British academic institutions approach the contents they deliver and the manner in which they are taught. This reappraisal, the product of an earnest soul-searching process after centuries of imperialism, resulted in what is known today in the UK as 'decolonising the curriculum'.

According to the (imperialistically named) School of Oriental and African Studies in London (SOAS):

"Decolonising SOAS" therefore refers to thought and action within the university to redress forms of disadvantage associated with racism and colonialism. A background assumption for us is that global histories of Western

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domination have had the effect of limiting what counts as authoritative knowledge, whose knowledge is recognised, what universities teach and how they teach it (SOAS 2018, para. 7).

It is a movement that goes beyond the social sciences and humanities, extending also to the hard sciences as evinced by the *Decolonising the Curriculum Toolkit* published by the Manchester Metropolitan University, which stresses that:

Decolonising is integral to an inclusive curriculum, and seeks to both recognise and address the legacies of disadvantage, injustice and racism that have arisen from historic global domination by “The West”, and the consequent inherent “whiteness” of our STEM disciplines (MMU 2024, para. 1).

How should we go about this without it turning into ‘doublethink’, that is, without it becoming an exercise whereby two incompatible truths have to coexist in our minds? Should we just stop reading Aristotle, Newton, or Rawls altogether? Should we get rid of everything that is old, and if so, would it even make sense anymore to talk about decolonizing the curriculum – another word resulting from an imperial legacy, that of Rome – or should we start saying ‘decolonizing the stuff we teach’? The defenders of the decolonizing the curriculum movement make it clear that this is not the way. As Rowena Arshad explains:

Decolonising is not about deleting knowledge or histories that have been developed in the West or colonial nations; rather it is to situate the histories and knowledges that do not originate from the West in the context of imperialism, colonialism and power and to consider why these have been marginalised and decentred. (...) Decolonising the curriculum is about being prepared to reconnect, reorder and reclaim knowledges and teaching methodologies that have been submerged, hidden or marginalized (Arshad 2021, para. 4).

In other words, it is about embracing knowledge and sources that have been hitherto ignored in Western curricula. For example, Martti Koskenniemi (a Finnish international legal scholar who believes that there is nothing Europeans despise more than non-Europeans trying to be and act like them) included the following disclaimer in a recent study about the medieval origins of international law as a tool of Western political power:

An embarrassing aspect of the chapters that follow is that practically all the characters are white European men. (...) aside from one or two exceptions, all of the proper names below belong to white European men, men with power and privilege, and sometimes with attitudes we would today call racist and misogynist. (...) What do we know about what women or non-Christians thought about such matters? Not much – and not because they agreed, but because they lived in societies that did not allow them to be heard, societies in which such silences were produced and maintained precisely by these books and these men (Koskenniemi 2021, 12–13).

The sources he had to use, then, to tell the story of the evolution of a field of knowledge, international law, are all fairly homogenous. There have been in recent times some attempts at diversifying said sources, and I will come back to these new approaches later. For now, I can say that my own academic journey has led me to rediscover some of those voices from the periphery that have been hitherto ignored or forgotten. I think of a study I conducted alongside my colleague Daniel Brunstetter on the role the Tlaxcalteca tribe played in the Spanish conquest of Mexico, as they sided with the conquistadors in a remarkable exercise of agency to get rid of the colonial yoke of a local empire, the Aztecs (Brunstetter and Lobo 2024). I also think of a work of literary analysis where I combine Chilean and Ukrainian epic poetry from the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries to identify commonalities and themes about empire and national identity (Lobo 2024). All of this has resulted, I believe, in me becoming a more knowledgeable scholar without having to sacrifice an inch of the precious Western canon every academic is obligated to cite to be taken seriously.

And yet, it is also necessary to mention the downside of decolonizing the curriculum if it happens to be implemented in the wrong way. Walter D. Mignolo calls ‘decoloniality’ the process beginning after the Cold War, whereby the ‘Colonial Matrix of Power’ is dismantled such that formerly oppressed peoples may ‘delink in order to re-exist, which implies relinking with the legacies one wants to preserve in order to engage in modes of existence with which one wants to engage’ (Mignolo 2017, 40–41). At the same time, Fanon points out how one of the first effects of

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decolonization is 'the spectacular flight of capital' from the former colonies (Fanon 1963, 103). What if that drain also includes human capital? What if it backfires and by forcibly 'delinking' our systems of knowledge from the Western canon we stunt the development of our best minds out of an obsession with reconnecting with our roots, whatever that means?

This kind of anti-colonial driven brain-drain is already happening in Russia, where the government's openly anti-Western rhetoric and policies have pushed skilled workers out of the country (Smith 2023). This includes Russian scientists, who cannot do research anymore in the *lingua franca* of science, English, as their government has forbidden them to publish in international journals (Fazackerley 2022). Now we won't be able to access their findings, and they have increasingly less access to ours, thus undeniably hurting the accumulated knowledge of humankind. Has it been worth it to 'decolonize the Russian curriculum' if we are all dumber for it?

The Post is Passé

Timothy Snyder recently remarked: 'The central political problem of the twenty-first century is: what to do after empire?' (Ukraine World 2024, at 21:19). Accordingly, Robert D. Kaplan has pointed out that today 'the imperial mindset is experiencing a disturbing afterlife' (Kaplan 2023, xvii). But what does the 'post' mean in 'post-colonial' anyway?

Back in the early 1990s, Ella Shohat reflected on the meanings of the term 'post-colonial'. It conveys not just the idea of a period in history that has ended; it also means moving beyond or overcoming something, similar to 'post-Marxism' or 'post-structuralism'. Thus, she concludes, 'the "post- colonial" implies both going beyond anti-colonial nationalist theory as well as a movement beyond a specific point in history, that of colonialism and Third World nationalist struggles' (Shohat 1992, 101). Similarly, Kaplan calls for moving past the misdeeds of colonialism without minimizing them (Kaplan 2023, 18). The praeter-colonial also corresponds to this understanding of the 'post-colonial', as one of the many definitions of 'praeter' is precisely 'beyond', as we have seen.

At the same time, since the praeter-colonial is also semantically and conceptually anchored in the *past*, it differs significantly from what is usually understood as 'post-colonial'. In other words, the *past* is never truly gone when we think in terms of the praeter-colonial, not least because it is very difficult to decide when exactly in history we can reset the clock and start counting it as a definitive departure from the past.

Indeed, as Shohat admits, pinpointing a precise moment and place where the 'post' begins and the 'past' fades away is not always easy (Shohat 1992, 103) – isn't the US as post-colonial a place as, say, Nigeria or Pakistan, in the sense that they are all former colonies? Ultimately, she concedes that one of the main dangers of the term 'post-colonial' is that it 'carries with it the implication that colonialism is now a matter of the past, undermining colonialism's economic, political, and cultural deformative-traces in the present' (Ibid, 105). That is why the term 'praeter-colonial' is perhaps more adequate as a concept if we are trying to make sense of the many complexities of our modern world and the multiple legacies of colonialism, as the 'praeter' acknowledges that the past is still present to some extent.

Finally, it is important to differentiate here 'post-colonialism', the 'praeter-colonial', and the 'post-colonial'. As a discourse or ideology advocating for the definitive overcoming of colonialism, 'post-colonialism' is still pervasive in our campuses and in our political communities. The 'praeter-colonial' mind, on its part, tries to make sense of the conflicts arising from the clash between the tangible legacies of colonialism and the theoretical aspirations of post-colonialism. In that sense, the praeter-colonial is not a discourse or an ideology, but an epistemological approach to phenomena in our present world which we may struggle to understand at times. This intellectual struggle of the praeter-colonial mind takes place against the chronological backdrop of the 'post-colonial', in the sense that for each place in the world it is probably possible to identify an exact moment in time when, at least formally, the colonial ends and the post-colonial begins (what we call 'history'). Yet, as William Faulkner once said, 'The past is never dead, it is not even past'. What is the praeter-colonial mind to do, then?

Instead of the rage-infused fantasies of anti-colonialism, or the orthodoxy of post-colonialism, when the praeter-colonial mind finds itself trying to make sense of everything that the post-colonial day has to offer, it is perhaps helpful

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to return to one of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's reflections when he wrote his manifesto for decolonizing the mind. He espouses what he calls 'a quest for relevance', namely 'the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe' (Thiong'o 2005, 87). In that quest, as Fanon also hopes, everyone should get involved, the oppressed and the oppressors, such that we may finally rehabilitate humanity for all (Fanon 1963, 106). We owe this to those who came before us, as well as to ourselves and to those who will one day remember us after we fade into the preterit of existence.

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.