

The House of the Post-Colonial Spirits

Written by Francisco Lobo

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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.

This intellectual journey across the back alleys of empire has been kept deliberately short, as it is the 'simple, practical, and catchy' philosophy that lasts (McDarragh 2024). In such a short space no definitive conclusive argument has been attempted of the kind that puts an end to all dialogue and reflection because it is so compelling. Rather, the aim of this study has been to function as a prompt to get a conversation started, not only with our friends, family, colleagues or even strangers, but just as important, to begin a conversation with ourselves (Arendt 1976, 476), to help our minds better navigate those backstreets we know lie behind the clear-cut constructs inviting us in.

In this sense, this is also not an apology or justification of all the evils of colonialism, as it would be very easy to simply declare with a shrug that 'everything is praeter-colonial and there's nothing we can do'. Rather, 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?' It is further not an attempt at 'weaponizing the intellect' (Galeotti 2023, 11) to set a political agenda or an ideological manifesto calling people to action. On the contrary, this is a call to reflect and to live an examined life, to probe our prejudices and assumptions and take with us only what rings true, much as the prudent traveler who strictly packs only what they cannot part with. The rest of our luggage we should leave behind, or pray someone loses it for us.

One of the champions of 'decolonizing the mind' whose work I have used in this study, Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, believes that language has a dual character, as 'it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture' (Thiong'o 2005, 12). For example, English is spoken the world over, but when it is used by non-native English speakers like Swedish and Danish (or Chilean) people, it can only serve the first function, namely it can only work as a means of communication when said peoples engage with others who do not speak their native tongue. For English speakers, conversely, this language serves a dual function, both as a means for communicating with non-native English speakers, while at the same time carrying the particular culture of the native speakers, most distinctively the British (Ibid, 13).

Thiong'o further contends that language as culture has three important aspects. First, culture (and its articulation, language) is a product of history. Second, language as culture is an 'image-forming' agent in the mind of a child – a device for identity-building. Third, although speech is a universal human ability, 'a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history' (Ibid, 15).

In other words, all humans are endowed with the ability to speak, but once destiny assigns them their first language, they are forever stuck in this accidental pigeonhole in which alone they can truly experience their culture, and as result, their own identity. Thus, the argument goes that only native speakers can carry their own culture and history in that first language – assuming that there are no bilingual or multilingual cultures, which is of course counter-factual as we know of many such cultures. Consequently, anyone attempting to express culture in a language other than those assigned to them as a child must be confused, alienated, pretending, or flat out lying. I beg to differ. Many phenomena in today's world are being experienced, designated and rationalized by people in English even if this is

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not their native tongue.

For example, there is not one specific word in Spanish for 'accountability' (the closest would be *tendencia de cuentas*) but the English word has nonetheless entered the vernacular of Spanish speakers around the world, not only as a phoneme but also as a way of life in the fight against corruption. Another example is *Gairaigo*, or the set of Japanese words borrowed from foreign languages, especially from English, that have become part of that nation's identity, such as '*anime*' (from 'animation') and '*tekunoroji*' (from 'technology'). And it would be nothing short of insulting to tell a Ukrainian 'drone operator' ('оператор дрона') that he or she is culturally confused or is faking an Anglo-Saxon identity by identifying themselves as a user of an Anglo-Saxon concept ('drone') as they shoulder the burden of defending an entire nation.

Language is, therefore, much richer as a vehicle for culture(s) than Thiong'o would give it credit for. The triumph of one language, English, that originally belonged to one culture, the Anglo-Saxons, as a carrier of thoughts and experiences accessible today to every person on Earth is proof that language needs not be this rigid, or culture that parochial. After all, if Thiong'o was right and there would be no way of experiencing culture outside of our own native language, then humanity would have, out of necessity, found a way to make work those scientific languages that do not belong to one single culture or civilization but that are devised as a summary of them all, such as Esperanto. But you are not reading this in Esperanto now, are you?

More personally, I have experienced first-hand what it feels like to carry and express culture in a language other than my native tongue. Indeed, although not rightfully mine by birth, English has come to be the vehicle through which I have been afforded the privilege of becoming a family man, as it is the language of my wife and of our son. The praeter-colonial mind cannot but rejoice in the fact that the condition of possibility for love and family for us children of post-colonial spaces from North and South America is the legacy of an empire that never reached the shores where I was born. My wife and my son are now my kin, blood of my blood, and I cannot fake our bond any more than I can pretend a feeling is truly real if I only use the words spoken by my forebearers to express it. However, I had to express this exclusively in Spanish, I would borrow a line from a Spaniard traveling across modern Ukraine whose people forever stole his heart, and declare that, in all truthfulness, '*ellos se convirtieron en mi gente*' (Lasheras 2022, 337) ('they became my people').

The power of these cultural spirits can further be felt beyond the confines of our home; they have also allowed our praeter-colonial minds to get a glimpse of entire new-old worlds, not least in all those post-Soviet/post-colonial spaces, like Ukraine, where Russian is not always spoken or even welcome anymore. In such places, English serves not only as means of communication, but also as a way to keep alive an old cultural legacy that began precisely in the pastoral life of ancient Ukraine, as Timothy Snyder reminds us, since it was there that all Indo-European languages, including English and Spanish, were born (Snyder 2024).

We began this journey by talking about Ukraine's war of national liberation against the yoke of Russian imperialism. Indeed, Russia today 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). The problem is, this spirit has actually materialized in a most violent way with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. For Ukrainians, this is a fight for their own existence as a nation and will continue to be so for generations to come, until they reach the blessed state of affairs where they can again break bread with their former colonizers in peace, just as our Pan-American family can today with the sons and daughters of our former European masters. Woefully, it might just take a while for them to get there.

We also began this journey by looking at some of the meanings of the word 'praeter', including the 'past' and at the same time what lies 'beyond'. In that sense, Ukraine's transcendent clamor for freedom today is an echo from the past of any independent nation that once fought and bled for its own existence, a reminder of what we all once were and how far we have come since. And so, as we find ourselves back home again, while my wife takes a call from Kyiv, our son hums *Carol of the Bells* (A Ukrainian Christmas carol), and I read a book on Ukraine's history, I treasure our little Ukrainian moment as these post-colonial echoes perfectly encapsulate all the wondrous things

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history has to offer to those whose minds are wise enough not to lose sight of the past and whose hearts remain open to all the many possibilities of the future.

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.