# Questioning Decolonization

## Framing essay 4.2: What was decolonized?

If we just view decolonization as a historical event (or series of events), as we did in the first essay (why did decolonization happen?) can largely say it is over. In most of the world, political authority and sovereignty have been transferred from imperial powers to local government. There are a few places where formal or *de facto* empire lingers – the US in Puerto Rico, Britain in the Falkland Islands, and France in parts of the Caribbean, for example. But these are few and usually quite small or sparsely populated. We can also argue that incidents of formal colonial rule rise up, in some cases new ones: China in Tibet, or Israel in the occupied territories, or Russia in the Ukraine, for example. But these, too, are either quite limited in extent or don’t really look a lot like ‘empire’ as we knew it in the past.

On the other hand, if we view decolonization as a process to unravel the legacies of colonialism, many scholars, politicians, and activists argue that there is a lot of work to do. We can start this discussion, then, by moving beyond political sovereignty to ask what elements of colonialism are still widespread and powerful in the world today.

**Cultural colonialism**

One place to begin is by exploring postcolonial theory, a body of theory that (despite its name) actually argues that colonialism is still around. Many of the principal theorists in this area are people who grew up in colonies or former colonies themselves – scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Franz Fanon, and Edward Said, among others. These scholars that colonialism still exists in terms of many of the definitions of the concept we gave in the first essay (What was colonialism?).

In particular, postcolonial theorists argue that the system of hierarchy, difference, and the ‘civilizing mission’ that characterized colonialism is still very present. They argue that imperial ideas (or ideas from imperial societies, especially in Europe) still dominate the world, and are even resurgent. These include racism and eugenics, of course, perhaps the most obvious of these. But they also argue that colonial ideas can be found, for example, in ideas about science, in how people have to dress to get jobs and who gets those jobs, in where important institutions including the United Nations and World Bank are located, in what gets taught in history classes.

Among the important ideas among these scholars is the observation that colonialism “colonizes the mind”, and that merely changing governments doesn’t liberate people from the ideas and beliefs they were taught. For example, most books published in Africa are still published in English or French (or sometimes Arabic), and these are still seen by many as higher-value or more civilized languages than people’s everyday languages!

**Economic neo-colonialism**

Another important argument is the idea that the global economy continues to be dominated by a small group of powerful nations that use their clout to dominate others, in particular former colonies. As evidence, scholars and activists point to the fact that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, on which many smaller nations rely for funding and loans, are dominated by Europe and the United States. The terms for loans and support are therefore dictated by former imperial powers. Similarly, most big corporations doing business in the former colonies are managed by people in the US, Europe, and Japan and most of their shareholders are in these regions.

This picture is complicated now, of course, by the rise of China. Formerly a country that was more of an informal colony than anything else, China is today a global economic superpower whose government and corporations are deeply invested in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and elsewhere. People in many of these regions debate whether China is a fair partner or a new imperial power. India, too, has moved from being a colony to being an economic powerhouse today.

**Decolonizing the curriculum**

Finally, many anti-colonial activists and educators have pointed out that colonialism is implicit in what gets taught and how it is taught. Everywhere in the world, the school and university model is largely based on what Europeans were practicing when they were imperial powers. The very disciplines – history, anthropology, even biology and engineering – are based on a European system of organization. The rules of what constitutes ‘evidence’ were developed from these models, and are most familiar to Europeans and Americans. They are alien to societies elsewhere, in many cases. Moreover, much of the academic power is based in the US, Europe, and Japan. The biggest African Studies association in the world is not in Africa. It is in the United States. More books on the history of Southeast Asia are published in the US and Europe, by US and Europe-based scholars, than in Southeast Asia itself.

How can we move on from this hierarchy and disparity? Recently, some scholars have begun to call for a ‘decolonization of the curriculum’. There are various ideas as to what this might mean, but Professor Meera Sabaratnam argues that it entails at least three transformations[[1]](#footnote-1):

* First, helping students to interrogate assumptions about how the world is or was. Decolonization does not call for abandoning certain ideas or language, but rather problematizing them. What does it mean when we talk about primitive societies or civilizations, and to whom de we apply these terms? What do students learn from this?
* Second, who are the experts to whom we refer students? Who do they see as people of authority and knowledge? Is it just a bunch of the same type of people? Or a diverse community? And can they see themselves or people like them as experts?
* Finally, asking whether we ourselves are thinking of our students and their particular needs? Are our pedagogies culturally relevant to them? Are we helping them to understand the inequalities in the world today?

All of these arguments for a continuing decolonization deserve our attention, although there are critics of all of them. You will be reading some of the works of both proponents of economic, cultural, and curricular decolonization and some of their critics.

1. Meera Sabaratnam, “Decolonising the Curriculum: What’s All the Fuss About?”, *SOAS Blog*, 18 January 2017, <https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/decolonising-curriculum-whats-the-fuss/> . [↑](#footnote-ref-1)