

## Introduction

**Lars Jensen**

*Kult 12 - Beyond the Empires* is one of two publications to come out of the *After the Empires* conference held at Roskilde University, May 2013. The conference attracted scholars from all over Europe to discuss the European imperial legacy in Europe and beyond. It deliberately did not set out to establish a series of trajectories of postcolonial reflections on each European nation's repressed colonial history and how this related to contemporary anti-immigration discourses. Instead it invited speakers firstly to reflect on what commonalities and differences might be established to read the colonial experience as a transnational phenomenon. Secondly, the conference asked what are the contemporary repercussions of the historical phenomenon of a transnational European colonialism, not least how does it affect ways of dealing with the continuous arrival of 'postcolonial others', in the form of more or less patrolled immigration or refugees fleeing from crises that have colonial or, perhaps increasingly, neocolonial roots. Thirdly, the conference sought to address an often neglected issue in postcolonial studies, the question of domestic forms of colonialism within Europe itself. It is possible to argue that large groups of Europeans were forced to participate in colonial exploits, rather than merely as eager volunteers, even if the promise of exotic adventures, a quick way out of economic misery and so forth also played major roles. Two examples from within the lower orders of European societies might illustrate the complexities embedded in this point. Irish political activists protesting against British colonial rule in Ireland were sent to Australia as convicts, and became some of post-indigenous Australia's first settlers and as such participated in the brutal displacement and genocide of Aboriginal populations. Danish ships participated in the trafficking of slaves. It is inconceivable that the sailors would not have obtained information about their own dismal survival prospects, as they succumbed mainly to a range of tropical diseases during the African leg of the journey. To understand the situation of Danish sailors in the tropics, and Irish convicts in Australia is to recognise the layeredness of colonialism, *without* disregarding the discrepancy between their situation and that of the slaves and Aborigines. The argument is not about mortality rates, but about agency, racism and its nexus with colonialism and capitalism.

Domestic colonialism within Europe also refers to other practices, in particular, ways of ostracising specifically targeted groups, at times in ways that seemed reminiscent of 'overseas' colonialism. Italy's northern rule over southern Italy, Sweden's rule over Finland, Britain's rule over Ireland are three prominent examples. But there were other less clearly territorially framed forms of

colonialism. The ruthless conversion, and deportation of Jews and Moors from Renaissance Spain, Italy and Portugal (Nolan 2006: 277-82), is an early instance of the bind between modernity and domestic coloniality. This violent history of religious dogmatism and persecution lives on in displaced forms, through contemporary assimilationist approaches to immigration. Here much of the physical brutality has shifted to the point of entry into Europe. By the same token, psychological forms of oppression have become the privileged domain of state bureaucracies, accompanied by mainstream media's obsession with the unassimilable other, a notion which again feeds into populist political agendas adding more fuel to state bureaucracies' searching for even more discriminatory practices. One 'minority' group in Europe is particularly interesting in the light of the observations above concerning the relationship between the long history of colonialism within Europe and contemporary neo-colonial forms of 'othering' – the Roma people. Because they have a long continuous presence in Europe, they are in fact coterminous with European colonialism abroad. Their presence is pan-European and they have readily been associated with the European majoritarian societies' 'need' to take on exclusionary measures, orchestrated through the media-political-bureaucratic complex.<sup>1</sup>

### **A universe of theories, or the universality of theories**

*After the Empires* immediately signals a preoccupation with the postcolonial, a notoriously sprawling, contested, illuminating, thought provoking, game changer field of studies. Postcolonialism has been declared sick, dead and buried, occasionally by some its own practitioners - yet the epistemological, methodological and analytical questions it raises continue to nag. Postcolonialism may have been inadequate in its attempts to deliver resolutions to power imbalances caused by colonialism, and perpetuated by neo-colonialism, but its questioning of power is even more relevant today. The world inside and outside the academy of the 1970s to the mid-1990s, where postcolonialism became established as an epistemology, was a very different one from the contemporary. Postcolonialism came into being as colonialism in the form of mainly European territorial possession of the Global South had been dismantled, and as migrants entered western economies, and a range of academics from the Global South entered the western academy. There is no way the changes in thinking about the relationship first between the West and its

---

<sup>1</sup> I am deliberately appropriating the term 'complex' from its customary reference to the military-industrial complex, because it is of the same nature.

colonial periphery, and later on Global North and Global South, would have happened without these demographic changes in western societies – and in western academy, captured in the title of Aboriginal activist, Kevin Gilbert’s book, *Because a White Man Will Never Do It* (1973).

Today, postcolonialism sits alongside (and at times at loggerheads) with a range of other intersectional, or interdisciplinary approaches, from cultural studies (in its critical analytical form), over radicalised forms of anthropological inquiry, to critical race studies, whiteness studies and certain varieties of gender studies. All of these fields pose questions overlapping with those of postcolonialism, which is perhaps less surprising when the genealogy of experiences and writings to which they refer also overlap considerably. Marxism as never entirely satisfactory, but also as a completely indispensable analytical toolbox, is perhaps the most singular of these reference points. Another pivotal reference point is writers representing a whole range of experiences from the Global South whose work predate the emergence of the critical fields of inquiry, as an increasing number of theoretical overviews from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia will testify (Achilles Mbembe, *On The Postcolony* (2000); Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America’ (2000) and Chen Kuan-Hsing, *Asia as Method* (2010) to mention one major work from each of the three continents of the Global South). The range, and at times deeply contested ideas, unfortunately also at times deeply territorially exclusively defined and patrolled, is impossible to do any justice in a brief introduction like this. However, all the articles in this collection, and as well the other volume emerging from the conference, draw upon the assumption not to seek to establish its argument on the basis of the exclusive knowledge of a particular disciplinary tradition. Instead, it is precisely the point to seek to establish the argument with an acute awareness of the range of interdisciplinary approaches, which offer overlapping but also crucial different analytical insights.

### **Devils in greater detail**

To speak of Europe collectively often results in speaking about the idea of Europe. Europe does not have a meaningful geographical, political, historical or cultural collectivity that sets it apart. Clearly, Europe is not Asia, Africa, Latin America or North America, but nor are they each other. Achilles Mbembe’s, *On the Postcolony*, represents an interesting example of an attempt to write a Sub-Saharan intellectual political history, yet also he admits of the impossibility of carrying out such a task. How to do justice to experiences from Ghana to Uganda, from Botswana to Zimbabwe?

Yet, Africa's indisputable heterogeneity cannot work as a displaced argument for European homogeneity. The political structural adjustments in Europe, interestingly after its collective loss of overseas colonies, through the establishment of the Common Market, and later on the EU, is one obvious place to look for a more homogenised Europe, since it has no equivalent in any of the other continents. Yet, the EU is also primarily a political bureaucracy still searching for an identity, which it may be building, but against tremendous nationalist forces in the various parts of Europe. However, as an economic political reality, the EU wields considerable – EU sceptics would say enormous – influence on each member state's (and ironically for the EU sceptics on non-member states as well) way of prioritising political issues. But then again so do the financial markets, the IMF, rating agencies and other neoliberal institutions beyond any democratic control. What the current crisis in Europe – in terms of the erosion of welfare society and the accompanying rise, or intensification, of an anti-migration and anti-multicultural discourse – is followed by can only be a subject of mere speculation while the crisis is still raging. It is however, important to remember that the erosion of the welfare society and the anti-migrant, anti-multicultural discourse, may have been exacerbated by the crisis, but it actually also predates the GFC. In Britain, Enoch Powell gave his racism motivated 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968, Italian Prime Minister Benito Craxi gave his anti-immigration speech in 1985 (Guild and Minderhoud 2006: 173). Hence, different moments have marked different nation's difficulties in accepting the multicultural reality that is contemporary Europe. A multicultural reality that is actually the consequence of Europe's own global intervention in the colonial world, including a massive exodus of Europeans to its colonies. But everywhere it predates the GFC of 2008+, even if it is clearly related to the broader economic challenges forced upon Europe by the neoliberal agenda that has driven the global economy since its baptism in Thatcher's Britain and Reagan's US in the early 1980s. The current crisis can be read as harvesting the seeds of predatory neoliberalism unleashed in the 1980s in the West and beyond (for example the disastrous Structural Adjustment Programs forced upon developing economies in the Global South in the 1980s that despite their evident, disastrous consequences nonetheless are the model followed when European nations have been forced into bail-outs).

The particularity of the individual European nation/state within the pan-European generality is then both difficult to establish yet clearly a factor. Powell's speech while drawing on the same colonial archive as Craxi remains different, because the late 1960s are a different moment than the mid-1980s, and because Britain is not Italy. What the volume seeks to disentangle is how we may begin to address the relationship between the particular and the general. While this is a momentous task to

complete, it is worth addressing some of the benefits deriving from such approach, which informs the rationale behind this volume. Firstly, it denaturalises the locus of the narrative as always given by the individual state-nation formation, even when that is opened up to a critique by drawing upon that nation's broader imperial-colonial history, through the implicit comparative frame of the present volume. Secondly, through the space created for different languages in the volume, it draws attention to the dilemma that much work in individual state-nation discourse takes place in the vernacular language. To make available those vernacular discourses is not simply a question of having them translated into English, something which is unlikely to happen anyway, both because of the constant labour this would involve, but also because of the academic discourse privileged by US-British publishing houses. It is in relation to the last point this volume participates in an inaugural moment shifting boundaries in contemporary academic thought. Anglophone postcolonial studies have had a tremendous influence, has represented an enabling moment in a new phase of critical thought that is unique because it has contributed centrally to de-universalise Western thought, from postcolonial studies' engagement with Eurocentric philosophy to producing analytical insights into localised situations in the Global South, but also in the Global North. Even if Eurocentric philosophy continues to be produced and read, it now clearly represents a choice, rather than the unquestioning rationale behind *real* philosophy. No longer can philosophy from the Global South be reduced to cultural, or quasi-anthropological statements located beyond the west. Yet, postcolonial studies has also, at times inescapably, become a privileged site for reading global processes that has failed to work through its own situatedness, primarily in American and British academia, and the accompanying narrative that the postcolonial is about the Anglophone postcolonial, and what lies linguistically and culturally outside this, is merely an empirical space which is yet to be dug out. Not a separate domain where different and very diverse experiences need to be understood through other prisms. The present volume is a contribution to this new academic landscape that can also accommodate Anglophone postcolonial studies in its self-recognised provincialized form.

### **Works cited:**

Gilbert, Kevin (1973 [1994]) *Because a White Man Will Never Do It*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson Classics

Guild, Elspeth and Paul Minderhoud (eds) (2006) *Immigration and Criminal Law in the European Union: The Legal Measures and Social Consequences of Criminal Law in Member States on Trafficking and Smuggling in Human Beings*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers

Kuan-Hsing, Chen (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialisation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Nolan, Cathal J. (2006) *The Age of Wars of Religion, 1000-1650: An Encyclopedia of Global Warfare and Civilization*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press

Mbembe, Achilles (2001) *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Quijano, Anibal (2000) 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America'. *Nepantla* 1 (3), 533-580