

## **Modernity, Colonialism and Genocide: (Not only) Southern African Dimensions**

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There is a long history of the West and the rest. Too long to offer a nuanced panorama within the few minutes I have. Let me therefore try to focus mainly on a topic, which seeks to combine seemingly neutral notions of modernity, often associated with development and progress, with the devastating effects and impacts this had for all those on the receiving end of these paradigms applied. We all have come together for this INOGS General Conference in the shadows of a long history of mass violence in different forms at different places and times to come to terms with some aspects of these dark sides of history. We should not overlook the elephant in the room, often dressed up in the bright glitter costume of civilization. We should not allow to be blinded by it. Hence the focus of my following remarks.

The philosopher Ginés de Sepúlveda and the Dominican padre and bishop Bartholomé de Las Casas exchanged lengthy arguments at the Spanish court in Valladolid in 1550. Subject were the annihilating effects of the *Conquista* on the South American indigenous population and their excessive decimation through forced labour in the mines. The deliberations were a kind of marker for the final entry into what might be termed European modernity in the wake of its first stages of colonial-imperialist expansion some 500 years ago. The legal-philosophical exchange combined the emerging era of enlightenment (considered to be of emancipatory substance and nature) as represented in its infant stage by Las Casas, with a racial hierarchy. The world's people were perceived as a pyramid - on top ranked the most civilized European nations and their members. The South American Indians - according to Las Casas - were to be spared for having the potential to become civilised. Las Casas suggested as a suitable replacement the negro-slaves from Africa, since they were in his view inferior to the Indians and not yet human beings.

The French aristocrat and *citoyen* Condorcet (in 1794 himself a victim of the guillotine) embodied a more liberal mystification of progress already advocated by Las Casas, which was appealing to a bourgeois humanism with all its inherent discriminations. His linear evolutionism represented the absolute belief in progress and development within a hierarchical worldview, which kept the central

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European nations and people at the top of the pyramid. All other people, while recognised as human beings, had to be uplifted to this level in the course of the civilising mission – or had to disappear. An advocate of the abolishment of slavery, he nevertheless was caught in a mind-set, which considered emancipation of the fellow human beings as the domestication of the “savage” to copy the French and Anglo-Americans as the most civilised human beings. The German philosophers and *Spätaufklärer* Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) were prominent protagonists of such Eurocentric civilising mission. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) personified in the tradition of the “Philosophical Radicals” the ambiguities of such an enlightenment in the English industrial-capitalist society emerging.

The colonising imperial Europe was based on such ideological premises of the so-called civilising mission, which targeted both: the subjects at home and in the colonies. Those, who not yet had internalised the virtues and norms and behavioural prerequisites for the industrial-capitalist mode of production in the making. In parallel processes, “savages” both at home and abroad were trained to become either citizens or subjects, and domesticated into commodities within a new system of social reproduction. The founder of the Salvation Army, who published in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a programmatic manifesto, gave it – in clear reference to Stanley’s travelogues from Africa – the title “Through Darkest England”. These processes of forming workers with responding ethics were qualified as modes of modelling the affect (originating from establishing permanent armies and introducing the *etiquette* at the feudal courts, as shown among others by Norbert Elias), or as disciplinary society (most prominently analysed by Michel Foucault). It was the domestication of the inner nature, which went hand in hand with the taming of the outer nature. The expansion into other territories took place with regard to both, the interior, mental landscape (socialisation of the “savage” psyche) as well as the exterior and geographical map (subjugation of “savages” in the colonies).

The dispositions created corresponded with the power structures and had long-term effects. They were an integral part of modernisation philosophy, no matter of which political-ideological orientation (including orthodox Marxism). Not surprisingly, the decolonisation processes since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century never emancipated the people – neither colonisers nor colonised – from the dominant paradigms of “developmentalism” and the mental affinities to such modernity. The virus survived, even in the ambivalences of a Eurocentric critique of the origins of totalitarian rule as presented in the pioneering work of Hannah Arendt, who herself was not immune against racist perceptions. A clear indication of the ‘success story’ of bringing Europe to most other parts of the world is that the institutions of the state and its agencies survived the colonial system and remained largely unquestioned and intact. While those controlling and executing social and political power might have changed, the concept of power and its applications had not. Genocidal practices, unfortunately and sadly so, were not limited to European perpetrators. They are nowadays a global brand. “The Intimate Enemy” (as Ashis Nandy titled his critical assessment of mental

continuities within India's post-colonial society) resurfaced in new forms based on old practices, thereby resembling core features of earlier mind-sets and systems surviving in the seemingly new. A gendered perspective on India, for that matter, can only reinforce such a view in the light of the sad realities when it comes to the atrocities committed against women and girls.

Similarly, the colonial legacy has in most former colonising nations hardly been fundamentally questioned and critically examined in terms of the dominant ideology applied also within these countries to "civilise the natives" – both at home and abroad. The hegemonic discourse has in principle changed little since then. This could be witnessed with regard to the approach by the West German society to the unification of Germany since 1990, which displayed similarities to imposing the self-declared superiority of the guardian upon the foster child or *Mündel* (ward). The patronising, paternalistic hierarchy enforced upon the East Germans resembled basic features of colonisation. A deeply frustrated prominent political activist and later political office bearer from the former German Democratic Republic in support of unification voiced his disgust with reference to the redistribution of property in an article in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* around 2004 – at a moment in time, when the centenary of the Herero genocide was at the core of efforts to be brought into public memory. He claimed that the East Germans were treated like the Herero. - They were of course not, since the Herero and Nama were annihilated to an extent, which qualified the colonial war by the German *Schutztruppe* (note the euphemism of being called a "protection force"!) in South West Africa a century earlier as genocide. Hence such an analogy is a deeply offending statement adding insult to injury. It is in itself an expression of subtly racist dispositions.

The point I would like to make is, that with reference to the colonial era and its treatment in former colonial powers "*Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*" ("The inability to mourn"), as diagnosed by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in the mid-1960s with reference to the reluctant remorse of the post-World War 2 Germany to come to terms with the Holocaust, is a phenomenon also applicable to the processes refusing to accept the fundamental challenges in terms of re-thinking power and dominance (as well as their appliance in forms culminating at times in extermination) in the context of conceptual notions such as "development", "progress" and "modernity" – all defined in an hegemonic, linear mode of thought as normative and absolute paradigms. None of the former colonial powers has to my knowledge accepted the fundamental challenge in collective memories and commemoration practices to deconstruct the fundamentals, upon which the colonial mind abused the "civilising mission" as form of predatory capitalism. – A mode of production, upon which the relative prosperity and wealth of most Western societies are based, as Walter Rodney documented in his study "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa".

There might exist different forms of dealing with a colonial past in these former so-called motherlands (- again: what an euphemism!). But none of them would accept that colonialism was a prelude of European modernity to two world wars,

the Shoah and the Gulag, as much as the atomic bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki (whose nuclear power came from the Katanga province in the Congo) and other forms of mass extermination of those defined or perceived as enemies. The Era of Enlightenment was the ultimate point of departure for a 'modern' rationality, which in its uncritical belief in man-made progress was the curtain raiser - in the words of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno - for the dark horizon of the myth of a sun of calculating reasonability, under whose icy rays the seed of new barbarism is ripening. It gave birth to a kind of progress that implies the advancement of power in forms, which turn it into regression: the spell of unstoppable progress is the unstoppable regression.

The forms of indiscriminate violence merit the classification as 'brutes' more for the perpetrators than for the victims of such extermination strategies. The "garden state" (a term introduced by Zygmunt Bauman to characterise the systems, which are prepared to include mass destruction and extinction strategies in their system of dominance and subordination to root out the 'weed') consolidated its (self-)image and outer appearance in the era of colonial expansion and has never been rigorously deconstructed since then.

The Herero, Nama and Damara in South West Africa, as well as the victims of the scorched earth warfare in response to the so-called Maji-Maji uprising in East Africa, were not only a singular phenomenon of a particular German trajectory, although the German *Sonderweg* (special trajectory) might be still a worthwhile, albeit inconclusive debate - if only to suggest, that such *Sonderweg* could have happened elsewhere too, and therefore is no *Sonderweg*. Thanks to a recent Master thesis by Daniel Grimshaw at Uppsala University we have convincing empirical evidence from the colonial archives in London that the British Foreign Office and the Cape colonial administration were not only aware of the German warfare in the neighbouring territory North of the Orange river in all its brutal forms, but also a willing supporter of the logistics that allowed to execute the intent to destroy. They knowingly made business through the supply chain fuelling the military machinery implementing the infamous extermination order issued by the commanding general Lothar von Trotha. While the infamous "Blue Book" published 1918 to discredit the German colonial practices pretended to disclose hitherto hardly known atrocities, eye witness reports from members of the Cape colonial police as well as British army officers accompanying the German troops reported in minute detail at times shocking revelations, met with a leniency in London tantamount to being an accomplice in the atrocities. The German genocide in South West Africa was business for the Cape Colony and British companies who supplied essential war material, while many Boers were employed as freight drivers of the ox wagons providing the transport and logistics.

Scholars more recently also offered a more systematic perspective of the annihilation of the San communities (also known as Bushmen) by individual settlers in the Southern African region. Dubbed by Mohamed Adhikari as "genocide in slow motion", this extermination culminated in privately organised hunting safaris as a perverse form of settler entertainment, documented by Rob

Gordon for the Kalahari region of today's Namibia. The descendants of the survivors live in destitution as impoverished farm workers, as 'noble savages' on display in nature reserves or as other objects of exotic attraction for tourists without ever having received any compensation or recognition for the historic injustice. Adhikari quotes an elder of a San community with his meaning of restitution, summarised in three words: Land, water, truth.

Belgian massacres since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Congo, described by Joseph Conrad as "The Heart of Darkness", were of a similar nature to German colonial atrocities. Settler colonial extermination strategies of autochthonous people in North America, Canada and Australia hardly differed. US-American warfare in the Philippines and British military slaughters in the Sudan were of no other category, neither the Spanish or Italian bombings of civilian populations in North Africa and the Horn of Africa respectively, or the Portuguese massacres in Angola and Mozambique. The resistance of the so-called Mau-Mau movement among the Kikuyu in Kenya was met with similar indiscriminate force by the British colonial army as late as the 1950s, paralleled by the French massacres among the Algerian population. All these and many more organised and systematic atrocities committed in the name of a superior Western civilisation reflected the uncompromising will of extermination, which is reproduced since then in other places and times of this world.

Colonial strategies of oppression, subjugation, annihilation, imposition of foreign or minority rule and warfare against those who resist have unfortunately so by no means been confined to colonialism and survived unabated into our presence. Frontiers were battlegrounds when "Waiting for the Barbarians" (J.M. Coetzee) at the periphery of empires, while in the centres of empire organised industrial mass production translated into the willingness to resort to corresponding organised mass killing. This reminds us of Raphael Lemkin's original but largely ignored insight that genocides are intrinsically colonial. The necessary question which ought to be explored, namely to what extent these current practices and mind-sets represent a continuity of (hardly modified) colonial thinking and its application is rarely asked – and even less explored further. The school of thought as most prominently represented in a mainly inner-German debate by the INOGS President Jürgen Zimmerer with regard to the possible links between Windhoek and Auschwitz remains contested if not a matter of outright dismissal often resulting in insulting distortions of his arguments. The potential continuities departing from colonial mass violence and being perpetuated in other forms of aggression have never so far been a so-called mainstream issue in any of the former colonial powers. This, however, remains a necessary and long overdue debate, which would accept that (as William Faulkner put it) "the past is never dead, it's not even past". Instead, it is reproduced in manifold (though not always as obvious) ways. People such as those from the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean remain forced to live in a foreign country against all law, since they were expropriated from their homes to make place for the strategic military base of Diego Garcia.

The genocidal mind-sets have in the meantime however resumed a global character and are not confined to European modernity in the sense of being barbaric acts of Europeans only. Genocide, unfortunately, is not the sole property of the West. The killing fields of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, the *Gukurahundi* in Matabeleland in the 1980s, the Rwandese genocide in the 1990s, inner-Sudanese warzones since the beginning of this century are among the indicators that mass killings have become (if not always were) practices everywhere. As Achille Mbembe stresses, the “frontier” is not a dividing line between “them” and “us”, since the claimed “historicity” of African societies is “rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualised outside a world that is, so to speak, globalised”. He therefore rejects the notion of any “distinctive historicity” of African societies since the time of the slave trade, which are “not embedded in times and rhythms heavily conditioned by European domination”. This understanding consequently “presupposes a critical delving into Western history and the theories that claim to interpret it”.

Re-visiting the belly of the beast might be a particular challenge to those, who by means of origin and tradition were socialised within a culture of European domination and imperialism on the side of the perpetrators. They are confronted with the at times painful challenge to decolonise their mindsets also by means of self-critical reflections on the fundamentals of their rationality. Having said this, a similar challenge exists also to those coming from ‘the other side’ of the same historical processes, as Achille Mbembe reminded us. To continue – now under opposite premises – the ‘we-they’ divide, separating the ‘goodies’ and the ‘baddies’ according to the pigmentation or cultural roots, means to simply create the opposite dichotomy instead of changing the nature of perception. It remains a basic polarisation along mutually exclusive domains and entitlements. But coming from a group of erstwhile victims does not protect one from turning into a perpetrator. Having been discriminated does not exclude discriminating practices exercised by those who have experienced them. Nor does the origin from a group of perpetrators (in a historical and collective sense) determine individuals as being unable to emancipate themselves from this legacy in their own perceptions, concepts, convictions, commitments and deeds – with all the ambiguities such socio-political and -cultural (and indeed -psychological) processes of mental decolonization might involve.

From barbarians to savages, vermin, gooks, dogs, baboons, cockroaches, rats and so on... - The list of invectives denying fellow human beings the respect they deserve by degrading them to species below the human race is almost endless. In South Africa today, statements by ANC officials make reference to members of the opposition in parliament as “political vultures and hyenas”. Dehumanization lowers the threshold and allows the elimination of others because they are perceived as sub-human. This elevates their elimination to an act of civilisation, so to say, a service to humanity, to protect its commanding heights from the onslaught of the beasts. Shocking images released worldwide underline that this is not a mechanism of the past. US-American marines urinating on the corpses of killed Taliban are a reminder that the Western civilization remains also the cradle

of modern barbarism. A kind of barbarism replicated by those who claim to represent an alternative. But by butchering people like animals in front of video cameras they only show that they are more of the same, their atrocities coming from the belly of the beast in total disrespect of fundamental values for humanity.

The link between modernity, colonialism, and genocide, as the admittedly rather cryptic and necessarily fragmentary presentation dares to suggest, remains - at least through the colonial mind created and since then not abandoned - an integral part of European modernity. Worse: it hasn't even been acknowledged so far in the dominant cultures of the former colonial powers as such, not to mention the missing efforts of a true decolonisation. Such efforts would need to allow questioning the fundamental values and norms, which guide our legitimacy of power executed and the inherent practices of dealing with deviations from what is considered to be the acceptable norm. It would, I dare to hope, invite for a fundamental re-definition of concepts currently applied in terms of social engineering and "good governance". It would require replacing the hegemonic discourse by new concepts of power and equality, of the same and the other. If acknowledging 'otherness' as possibly (but not necessarily) different, however always as equal, the implicit justification of discriminatory practices would lose its legitimacy. It would allow us to move maybe a bit closer towards a true emancipation of human beings. It is a long way ahead, but I believe it's worth trying to overcome all the obstacles in the efforts to reach the goal.