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Dialogue

What Three Wrongs can make “Right” about Scholarship on Colonialism

Introduction

In the essay which follows, I will embark on a joint venture to both evaluate two articles selected in the context of my wider goal of elaborating my personal commentary on the article “What’s Wrong with Colonialism” by Li Ypi and then subsequently to synthesize these additions to the relevant field of scholarship in order to highlight the flow of intellectual activity related toward it, as well as point toward future additions necessary in the conversation. The general theme of this initial work, as well as the two articles, “The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism” by Ritwik Agrawal and Allen Buchanan and “Saving Cosmopolitanism from Colonialism” by Daniel Weltman, revolves around criticizing practices of colonialism past, present, and future, utilizing moral frameworks. The initial effort by Ypi roots itself in a Kantian notion of cosmopolitanism, which Weltman will directly engage with in a valiant effort to resuscitate such justifications from attempts to prove the opposite thesis. The position taken by Agrawal and Buchanan differs in its structure in this regard, as the authors seek to centralize more material notions of harm in colonial activities than those that correspond solely to political structures. In this essay, I will summarize the arguments of both sets of authors and then pay crucial attention to the interactions which are explicate between their work and that of Ypi. This formal literary review will then conclude with a refreshed understanding of what unites the dialogue taking

place across the works and make specific notes of the direction scholarship can take in their wake.

Part I: Literature Review

1.1 “The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism:” Central Argument

The article entitled “The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism” by Ritwik Agrawal and Allen Buchanan adopts a position within the field of moral philosophy centered around colonization, which seeks to move past previous frameworks including that which I have selected in Ypi’s work. The joint authors of this piece consider the views of previous authors in the field to not accurately isolate what is wrong with colonialism, come short of connecting neo-colonialism and internal colonies to the process, and present an inaccurate view of the true negative impacts of these actions on its victims. According to the authors, it is not just suffering from an unjust political structure that defines the experience of colonization, but perhaps more significantly, there exist the qualities of suffering economically and facing humiliation respective to those engaging in colonial processes. Moving onto Agrawal and Buchanan’s claim regarding the immorality of colonialism, they state that it “is treating normal adult human beings as inferior in the sense of assuming them to be unfit to manage their own affairs, treating them as if they were minors or mentally incompetent.” (Agrawal 185) The implication of this runs deeper than simply considering victims of colonialism as politically defunct or incompetent, as the actors behind colonialism, are, for the authors, creating systems of life which deny all independence and autonomy to those impacted. The authors state that this fundamental wrong can be known as “the Non-autonomy Assumption,” and they define this term as “relational in nature: it is a denial of the autonomy of the colonized combined with an affirmation of the autonomy of others.”

(Agrawal 186) Taken in this format, one can witness the specifics of how colonialism grants rights and privileges to one group of people, the colonizer, while simultaneously restricting those endowed upon the colonized subjects. This more specific claim centers the argument made throughout the essay, which is augmented by further evidence pointing towards more material impacts of colonial processes than previously addressed in scholarly works on the topic.

1.2 “The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism:” Frameworks

A significant effort throughout the article is devoted to expounding on the more impactful crimes which the authors hold colonialism to be responsible for. The first of these, is established as “severe economic injustice” which “is one of the most serious wrongs of colonialism.”

(Agrawal 186) Here, a prominent point of literature historically critical of colonial activities is elucidated by Agrawal and Buchanan; this is significant on account of its absence as a talking point in current scholarship including Ypi’s article. In “The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism,” the authors make specific space to air out this grievance and theoretical structure by illustrating several examples from history. The relationship between Great Britain and India is introduced, due to the inherently unequal economic tendencies which characterized the interactions between the two states during the colonial period. The counterargument made even to this day, that colonial endeavors cost more for the actors than were taken out of the victims, ignores at its base principles the concept that the colonized regions themselves were always at a loss, in terms of resources, land, and income, regardless of the specific practices of colonial powers. The general absence of this perspective from ongoing scholarship, is termed as a critical oversight on the fault of the academics in the field of scholarship criticizing colonialism, with the authors of the paper going as far to conclude “we believe that severe economic injustice is a more serious wrong of colonialism than the deprivation of collective self-determination or any of

the political deficits that Stilz, Renzo, and Ypi identify for the simple reason that it causes far greater damage to human well-being.” (Agrawal 189) This striking criticism hammers in the notion that, instead of pondering about the impacts of political systems, perhaps a critic of colonialism should instead root itself in the basic structure of a societies economic relationship to its exploiter. This must include all the impacts on health, living standards, and well-being which relate to abject economic status quos.

1.3 “The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism:” and my CRA

As previously illustrated by means of quotation, the article under examination here relates, not only to its content, but also to its critique of the explicit conclusions of my CRA paper authored by Ypi. Agrawal and Buchanan elucidate a fundamental disagreement with the framing of Ypi’s article, primarily based on it not defining how the wrong in question there, lack of equality and reciprocity, relates centrally to the idea of colonization. This criticism plays out in their own words as “the failure to satisfy ‘criteria of equality and reciprocity’ (Ypi) can result simply from a political order not being fully democratic.” (Agrawal 191) This foundational disagreement over framing is further explicated by an example within the text. The authors posit that a prosperous nation with equal standing between its citizens that happens to exist within a colonial context is compared to a despotic regime lacking such features. Would it be fair, they ask to critic the former over the latter, simply on the basis of self determination of an indigenous nature? The intent of the authors of this article is illustrated firmly by this quandary. There must exist something innate about colonialism, not simply a byproduct of it, such as unequal political structure, which can exist independently as well, that can be accurately criticized. In the opinion of the authors of this essay, this wrong comes into being as the economic inequality which

prevails every instance of colonization, as well as the issue of humiliation faced by all its victims.

1.4 “Saving Cosmopolitanism from Colonialism:” Central Argument

Daneil Weltman’s article by the name of “Saving Cosmopolitanism from Colonialism” sets out on a bold task related to the field of colonialism in academia, particularly focusing on reclaiming cosmopolitanism as method by which to critic such relations. This focus is centered around these critiques of the practice, including that of Ypi, the author of my CRA. What Weltman is attempting to accomplish is to argue for an opposition to colonialism simply based on the facts of what it entails of in its practice historically and to the present. In his view, attempts like Ypi’s to find some aftereffect in colonialism, such as an unjust political structure, “lose[s] sight of the causes of the atrocities in each specific case of colonialism: the racism, nationalistic chauvinism, rapacious greed, arrogance, brutality, and insensitivity displayed by colonizers, and the multifarious damages these things created.” Weltman makes a point to clarify, “these are the wrongs of colonialism.” (Weltman 41) The article centers prominently terms such as instrumentalization and wrong *per say*, and these terms are utilized as to separate the distinction being made by previous authors in the field, of colonialism itself as a practice, and some subsequent harm it inflicts upon its victims. Weltman issues a quite stark critique of colonial practices and what they have inflicted by commenting, “colonizers failed to achieve minimal justice just like Hitler and Pol Pot failed to achieve minimal justice, and it is on this basis that the cosmopolitan can critique colonialism.” (Weltman 29) This statement contains the essence of his attempt to save cosmopolitanism from colonialism, which he explains in the beginning of his paper can be said necessary, as many interpretations of it may, in actuality, condone various instances of it. This position is deemed necessary in review of the facts that in

contexts such as civilizing missions and settler colonialism, previous emphasis on self-determination can prove less than definitive as modes of criticism.

1.5 “Saving Cosmopolitanism from Colonialism” and my CRA

Weltman explicitly attempts to engage in an honest criticism of the critique of colonialism laid out by Ypi in the essay I have selected for my CRA. He comments in reference to her that “some recent cosmopolitans follow Kant’s legacy and endorse a right to self-determination or a principle of rightful political association which serves to block colonialism.” (Weltman 26) In this respect he is noting that, staying true to the Kantian framework, Ypi attempts to morally condemn colonialism on account of its inaptly structured form of political association. Within his article, Weltman refers to the fact stated earlier that there may exist a type of variance to the extent to which colonialism is critiqued by Ypi. This is not done immediately but instead after the fact. He comments how this dynamic “would make Ypi into a kind of instrumentalist: it’s quite alright to colonize so much as one wishes (via unilateral imposition, the first kind of wrong) so long as one does not carry out the second kind of wrong (upholding unequal and nonreciprocal political associations).” (Weltman 31) Here, Weltman’s substantial addition to cosmopolitan frameworks almost presents itself as immediately necessary. One must be able to condemn colonialism on its own, and not merely as a tool by which some further illness is brought about. The perspective taken up by Ypi is further questioned, to the extent that perhaps some practices of colonization could escape her critique. This argument from Weltman takes place in two forms: “First, many states do not provide all citizens with an equal capacity to change the laws over time... Second, colonialism can be undertaken such that the colonized group is granted a capacity to alter the content of the state’s laws equal to that enjoyed by any other group.” (Weltman 32) The example of the United States and Hawaii is brought up

in context of the second contention, for if the former had granted the latter statehood immediately, seemingly Ypi could not make a sound against it. It is in his attempt to condemn colonialism in its very existence that Weltman comes into a hostile position relative to Ypi's attempt to merely argue against its possible effects.

Part II: Synthesis

2.1 Colonialism as a Unique Wrong

A prevalent theme in the articles selected for this specific paper, related to my CRA, is the notion that colonialism and its wrongs must remain imbedded deeper into the concept than merely positioned atop the political structures it creates, which may arise for a variety of reasons. The first article by Agrawal and Buchanan argues that, enshrined in any colonial reality there must exist an innately unequal economic relationship stretched between colonial power and colonized region. They emphasize firmly that this material reality digs itself further into the root of any subsequent developments, including potential decolonization, than any merely surface level structure related to politics and rights. I am familiar with arguments of this nature, as they correspond to typical Marxist analyses of colonialism, or imperialism, which take issue primarily with unjust economic relations as a base, which predate and extend past any given political form as a superstructure. One can find parallel in a manner of speaking between this contention, and what Weltman concludes in his article is significantly wrong about colonialism. In this critique of scholarship of colonization, he takes issue with the tactic of looking past colonization as a practice and instead employing it merely as an instrument to achieve some other harm. According to this corresponding analysis, there exists something crucial to every instance of colonialism which, removed from any potential outcome, may be spoken of as wrong in and of

itself. This choice, on behalf of both sets of authors, places them in a critical relationship to Ypi, whose article they both directly respond and engage with. Essentially, looking past the implementation of a colonial situation for something to critique, is itself redundant. This is because, as the authors of both articles selected here will conclude, the proof of colonialisms wrong can be found in the very eating of its pudding.

2.2 Gaps and Future Scholarship

To my findings, Ypi's original framework laid out in 2013, contained many innate oversights and points which required revision, while simultaneously harking on points that still require further follow through today. As demonstrated by Weltman, it remained theoretically possible for a colonial relationship to exist absent from her critique of it due to circumstances. She attempted to construct an impervious argument against all forms of colonization, including civilizing missions. However, in such cases as that of the United States, where incorporation as a state comes with all the subsequent benefits beholden to all citizens, it seems, according to Weltman's analysis, that a crucial gap in theory forms. Identified by the authors Agrawal and Buchanan, the field of colonial scholarship could strongly benefit from deeper introspection into how this process relates to neo-colonialism as well as internal colonies. It seems particularly relevant to note the economic basis for the unequal nature of both institutions, beyond simply a framework of rights being left unattended to, or agency removed from any chosen group. The notion of these topics as relevant to colonialism is introduced back in Ypi's work yet given its address more recently in the joint authorship of "The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism," it seems academia has its tasks ahead of itself regarding how to craft a criticism which truly hits at the core of these more nuances and topical conversations. Furthermore, Weltman in his piece comments on topics including immigration and border policies, again reflecting a direction

hinted at by Ypi. Given the less prominent position these conversations hold within his piece, and how relevant to ongoing political activity these issues are, I find that scholarship should narrow down its focus in relation to cosmopolitanism toward these areas. In addition to this, the contention raised at the intersection of both authors remains this; what is uniquely wrong about colonialism that no other process includes in its totality?

Conclusion:

Interwoven between these three articles given attention here today, there exists a dialogue of both agreement and criticism with how colonialism should be addressed in critical scholarship of the topic. As far as my CRA is concerned, Weltman's essay shares the basic premise of cosmopolitanism which exists as the core of the nature of Ypi's argumentation. He, on the other hand, finds its precepts to be employed in a way which loses their critical fangs, leaving colonialism open to defense from those who would justify their actions from that very same ideological direction. In reference to the first article examined today by Agrawal and Buchanan, there stands a firm critique of the innate processes of colonialism as a direct harm to societies past, present, and future, which cannot be boiled down to a political apparatus issue. In these ways, both articles in their essence seek to further attack colonialism as it may be viewed positively, even in the wake of attacks such as Ypi's. I strongly believe that more critical historical and philosophical work may be done in the field, taking the precedent set by both articles in hand and expanding the field of study in regard to heated topics internationally and domestically, including neo-colonialism and immigration. I find the most sufficiently debatable part of the entire topic to be what Agrawal and Buchanan hint at, and what Weltman provides examples for, how is colonialism itself as a process a unique moral wrong in a manner which no other unjust political structure or reality truly bears with it?

Bibliography

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