

REITH LECTURES 1961: The Colonial Reckoning

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Lecture 1: Anti-Colonialism and Anti-Imperialism

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‘Colonialism’, here is a new word, or at least a word that has been used in a new way during the last few years. What exactly does it mean? It is certainly a word of abuse. We are never left in any doubt about that. It is nearly always coupled with ‘imperialism’ as if to make sure that the abuse is all inclusive, and also, perhaps, to increase the guilt of colonialism by associating it with a word of much older and wider significance. We find these words are nearly always used in the context of an attack upon the West by most of the colonial and ex-colonial peoples.

The West, of course, is a variable term. Sometimes it means the western colonial powers; sometimes it includes the United States, or even all white non-communist nations, with South America ranking in some contexts as an ex-colonial region. It will be seen that the division tends to put the coloured world on one side and the white world, or at least the western part, on the other. There is no escaping from the issues aroused by this attack. The other day I reckoned, as I put down my daily newspaper, that out of some thirty-eight overseas news items no less than twenty-two dealt with different kinds of reaction against the dealings of white peoples with coloured peoples. The bitterest expressions, perhaps, are those addressed to coloured peoples, and especially to Africans, over the ether.

Anyone who wants to plumb the depths of this bitterness should study the monitoring records of the B.B.C. Russia, China, Ghana, and Egypt are among the centres which diffuse condemnation. Egypt, which does not share our affection for the canine species, has much to say about imperialist dogs. Damascus radio proclaimed that the death of Mr. Hammarskjöld, like that of Mr. Lumumba, was one of the ‘filthy crimes of imperialism’, while China added other murders to the western account, including that of Mr. Bandaneraika! Each advance in political emancipation by western powers is condemned as a subtle trick to gain new kinds of control. Moscow told Africa the other day that the Americans are now ‘the most clever and dangerous colonialists ever known to history’, their 5,000 missionaries in Africa are ‘imperialists working in black garments to serve United States monopolies rather than God’. ‘Colonialism’, said Russia, ‘regards poverty, disease, ignorance, brutality, treachery, the bondsman’s chains and the hangman’s rope as its allies in Africa’.

These, of course, are the extremes of propaganda. But they are intended to prolong, to enlarge and exacerbate something which already exists, that great movement of assertion amongst the non-European peoples which has so suddenly changed the balance of forces in our world. For anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism represent the latest phase in the reaction of the rest of the world against the long domination of the West.

Professor Toynbee, in his 1952 Reith Lectures on 'The World and the West' and in his *Study of History*, has put this movement into its universal setting as only he could do. He has analysed the overwhelming predominance which its technological superiority gave to the West during the last few centuries, and with ever-increasing weight. The subjected groups have struggled to take over from the West their instruments of power in order to turn them against the West, to regain their independence and to rebuild their own shaken societies. Japan showed the way with her intelligent and amazingly rapid appropriation of Western techniques. Russia, though herself part European, felt her difference, indeed her inferiority, in relation to the West. Her leaders drew and, as Mr. Khrushchev's speeches show, still draw, their main impetus from a competitive antagonism towards the West, military, economic, and ideological - the idea of communism. The coloured colonial and subjected peoples first in Asia, now in Africa, have followed suit with rejection, liberation, appropriation, condemnation. Communist China was never wholly subjected, but because of her pride in her great and ancient but isolated civilization she reacted all the more bitterly against the string of 'foreign devils' who monopolized her trade. This resentment has hardly yet found expression in action; it hangs over the West like a gathering storm.

These two attacks, the communist and the anti-colonial, are simultaneous, and the communist states are working hard to make them a fully combined operation. This would set some three-quarters of the world against the West. This fusion has not yet happened. In the last year or so there have been developments which suggest that it may not happen. But the very possibility shows how inseparable this problem of colonialism is from the greatest of all the dangers of our world, the rift between the Communist and the Western Powers.

It is upon the colonial aspect of this world situation that I want to direct our attention during these talks. This is the part which most intimately concerns us in Britain. For by far the greater number of the newly emancipated peoples were in our Empire. Consider for a moment the scale of the operation. Sixteen years ago we ruled some 600,000,000 people. Today we rule some 40,000,000, and East Africa's 20,000,000 are on the very edge of independence. We shall soon be left with some small and scattered ports and islands. We may have a sense of association, even affection, towards them. But, in realistic terms, some of them represent obligations rather than assets. Even the utility of some of the once cherished military bases is beginning to look questionable in this age of jets and atoms. The Britain of 1961 is very different as regards her external power from the Britain of 1939 or even of 1945. But perhaps even more startling than the loss of governing power has been this outburst of anti-colonialism which has accompanied it. It condemns our past record, it weakens our present influence. It also threatens to harm our future relations with many of our former subjects and other coloured peoples.

A Matter for Pride

I realize that this negative anti-colonialism is to some extent the reverse side of a positive force, the desire for freedom: and also that our relations with most of our ex-dependencies still remain basically friendly, though this base is often obscured by clouds of misunderstanding. The real significance of the end of the Empire has indeed been masked partly by our own increasing readiness to liberate, and partly by the

voluntary decision of nearly all the former dependencies, including the great states of India and Pakistan, to remain within the Commonwealth. This is certainly a matter for pride and satisfaction. But the nature of the Commonwealth is being deeply changed by this influx of new members, some of them small, none of them sharing the ties of blood and culture of our earlier members, and most of them striking out their own independent lines in foreign policy. At this moment our proposed entry into the European Common Market is obliging us all to reassess the nature of this changed Commonwealth. We still believe that it can serve their interests and ours, but we cannot now clearly foresee its future shape.

In this situation of change and uncertainty what might almost be called the cult of anti-colonialism cannot be shrugged off. It represents a fertile source of mistrust especially in international affairs. Suspicion and disagreement can grow from it overnight as it did over the death of Mr. Hammarskjöld. It is generally expressed in something like a ritual condemnation of imperialism which seldom shows discrimination as between past and present, between one imperialism and another, or between the different aspects of their rule.

What has been our reaction to these events and attitudes? People of my generation were taught from their schooldays that our Empire was a splendid achievement, conducted as much for the good of its many peoples as for our own, peoples who, indeed, now owe to us their very existence as national states. The words 'trusteeship' and 'partnership' held serious meaning. And to the generation before us the 'white man's burden' was not a rather bitter joke. Then how, we ask, has 'colonialism' suddenly, as it seems, become a term of abuse? Have we been utterly blind? Was the idealism we so often professed merely a cloak in which we tried to hide our complete self-interest from the world—and, indeed, from ourselves. Has our rule really harmed these peoples, distorted or delayed their development?

Close Ties with Africa

In these talks I mean to discuss these questions and others which arise out of them. In doing so I shall concentrate upon Africa, indeed upon British tropical Africa. One reason for this is that it would be difficult to turn to the whole colonial empire for our examples. But much more because some of our largest and latest dependencies have been in Africa, and because it is there that the voice of anti-colonialism is loudest. And because these dependencies lie in the world's most precarious region; its vast middle block most empty of power; its northern and southern extremities in the grip of forces seemingly irreconcilable to the rest of the continent. Because, furthermore, Africa makes an almost unlimited demand for help upon the rest of the world and yet at the same time makes any response to that demand supremely difficult. And, finally, because Britain has many close ties with this continent and has still some important decisions to make there in the very near future.

Am I, you may ask, and certainly the anti-colonialists will ask, going to put up a defence of colonialism? Yes, so far as I believe our record -to have been misjudged, and misleading tests applied to it. But I hope we can also ask where we have failed as well as where we have done well. You might go on to ask—certainly Africans might ask—whether someone of my nationality is sufficiently unbiased to offer an answer to these questions. To profess complete impartiality, as a Chinese sage once said, is itself

a kind of partiality: I do not claim so much. What, then, are my credentials? Though I have sometimes worked with my government I have never been employed by it, and I have often been publicly critical both of its acts and policies. From the base of my university I have been travelling in the Empire, but especially in Africa, for about thirty years as a student of colonial government and race relations. Members of my family and many friends have been both settlers and administrators in Africa. Indirectly my contact reaches further back. One of my most intimate friends and fellow-workers in this field, Lord Lugard, was in Africa from the eighteen-eighties. He was in turn a fellow-worker with the friends of Livingstone. He went himself to explore, to annex, and to govern in tropical Africa and later, as elder statesman, to defend the interests of Africans as he saw them. Many of my pupils in recent years have been colonial officials coming to Oxford for refresher courses after some years of work overseas. We joined together in comparative discussions of their ideas and their work which taught me more than they learned themselves. Many African graduate students now come to Oxford, and a number have been my pupils and friends. So, indeed, have some of the political leaders. These remarks do not, I think, spring from egotism. I have always believed that those who venture to pronounce upon a controversial subject—especially with the brevity of these talks—should explain their qualifications and what they at least *think* is their standpoint.

Letting in the Light of History

It would be well to begin by letting in a little of the background light of history upon this phenomenon of anti-colonialism. We need not trace the inconstant use of this word colony since the time when it was used by the Romans to describe their settlements of veterans, such as founded Colchester. For of course we need no help from etymology to understand what our critics mean today by British colonialism—the rule of African and other coloured peoples by the British government or by that of our white emigrant minorities. What confuses the issue is that they constantly extend the idea from the British colonial empire to that of all European powers and slide on to a denunciation of western domination in general. They shift from the past to the present, and even to future fears, to what colonialism *may* do to them as it transforms itself subtly through economic intervention into neo-colonialism.

It seems that not only are the western empires to be regarded as an evil, but almost as though the very possession of economic and military power was, and is, itself discreditable: unless, of course, it can be put entirely at the service of the weak and poor, according to their own directions. Here the coloured peoples seem to be sharing in their own way in the escape from authority which is common throughout almost the whole world, as the bonds of family, neighbourhood, religion, status, class and empire relax. It seems as though the only authority men will accept today to reconstitute the fluid masses of individuals is that which arises directly from their own wills or which can be made to appear to do so. And perhaps of all the old authorities which are being condemned and discarded none has fared worse than imperialism.

Here indeed is a reversal of esteem! All through the sixty centuries of more or less recorded history, imperialism, the extension of political power by one state over another, has been taken for granted as part of the established order. To appreciate the meaning of this recent change of view we should pause for a moment and measure it against this long record. Empire is no very exact word. It can, however, be taken to

cover those dominations by which a state profited from the land and labour of other peoples.

Empires were larger in space and longer in time than the little masteries which the ever-shifting weight of power allowed one group of men to impose upon another—following, of course, an earlier stage in which men simply killed and perhaps ate each other. Historians may judge some empires to have been mainly destructive, but many, perhaps most, in spite of their toll of suffering, in spite, perhaps, of being built upon slavery, seem to have been the chief means for extending peace and spreading civilization. Certainly, if the exercise of power by one tribe or nation over another were to be regarded retrospectively as a crime, it would be difficult to find any people, except perhaps the pygmies and the Eskimos, who must not plead guilty to having committed it at some time or another. As soon as tropical Africa could be observed by the rest of the world it was seen to be a vast area of tribal conflicts, of subjugations and enslavements, some, indeed, upon a sufficiently large and organized scale to qualify as the African version of imperialism.

All through the ages, it seems, men have congratulated themselves upon these extensions of their power and have gloried in its exercise. Our own Victorian grandfathers joined the chorus. Lord Mimer, for instance, declared that the 'Pax Britannica is essential to the maintenance of civilized conditions of existence among one-fifth of the human race'. Other Victorians claimed divine sanction for the Empire. I remembered this when I was visiting the antiquities of Egypt and being wearied by the long succession of deified Pharaohs driving chariots over the bodies of their victims, or receiving long files of captives. There is one clear portrayal of the Beja people of the Red Sea coast, Kipling's Fuzzie-Wuzzies, being trampled into submission. So these attractive and handsome nomads felt the yoke of empire some 4,000 years before they passed under that of Britain! And what a sequence of conquests is recorded in the Old Testament! Certainly we can see here the conquered protesting against their conquest. The exiled Israelites wanted to see the children of the Babylonians dashed against the stones. But they themselves had gloried in their own bloody conquest of Canaan and had claimed divine warrant for it.

Unfortunately this was taken by later Christian conquerors as divine sanction for their own subjugation of the heathen. This was true of the Elizabethan British in North America, and is even more emphatically true today of the Afrikaners in South Africa. In Rome we crick our necks gazing up at the slaughter and conquest of the Dacians spiralling round Trajan's pillar. Not far away, on the arch of Titus, we can more comfortably observe the legionaries carrying away the sacred seven-branched candlesticks of the Jews, whose captured men were worked to death building the Colosseum. The Colosseum! where thousands more captives from the colonial wars—the surplus not needed for the mines or the galleys or as household slaves—died in various spectacular ways for the amusement of the Romans. Yet Rome also gave peace, trade, wider contacts, a higher standard of living, a large measure of civic freedom and provincial self-government. The very barbarians who helped to destroy it, and the Church it had persecuted, actually attempted to reconstruct it. Some historians, looking back have even regretted that the legions halted on the Rhine because this meant that the raw tribalism of the Germans was not hammered into the same order which Rome brought to the barbarians of Gaul, Britain, and other lands.

So the Roman Empire, which has so often been compared with the British, went down, certainly in destruction, and yet in a sunset of regret and remembered glory.

As we look at our own record, and listen to the denunciations of our colonialism, we naturally speculate as to where Britain's policy and circumstances differed from those of this great predecessor. Was it due to our briefer span of mastery? Was it because, with China beyond Europe's horizon, Rome had no competitor, whereas Britain's empire was always one among others? Was it that Rome worked gradually, solidly, outwards from her base on the Tiber while Britain collected, for miscellaneous reasons, an oceanic empire in continents and islands dispersed all over the world? Were most of Rome's subjects closer to her in race? All these contrasts have some weight. But the deepest contrast of all is surely that Britain's subjects and ex-subjects have confronted her with political and, more, moral demands, which are new at least in their intensity and wide acceptance. From where, we must ask, were these new standards derived? I think we shall find that, like other weapons turned against the West, they have been purloined from the West. And the ideal of democratic freedom and an almost indefinable sense of moral obligation towards the weak have been learned very largely from Britain herself.

We ought not to quarrel with this. If we believe in our own principles we can hardly expect to keep them for domestic use only. But I think we can protest on two points. The first is that our critics often use their weapons unrealistically, and unhistorically. Instead of regarding the element of altruism in our dealings with them as a quite new and difficult ideal which we have lately achieved in some small part, they are inclined to judge *all* our doings and *all* our history by a 100 per cent standard of altruism and loudly condemn every fall from this high grace. The reason for this perfectionism may lie partly in our having ourselves so often and so unwisely claimed the highest motives for all our imperial activities. Another reason, especially for more isolated Africans, may be that not many of them have yet had the opportunity to develop that sense of history, of the relation between time, event and idea, which is rather a sophisticated and largely western development. Tribal memories must depend more upon legend, myth and genealogy than history. Or is it perhaps that colonial leaders, many of them still very young, have been born into a world full of new ideas of the welfare state, of international aid, and of the need of nations today to collaborate or perish? Today we are at least trying to escape, through international co-operation and especially through the United Nations, from the old law of the jungle. But this was the law which ruled international relations through all the years of our empire until the very latest, and which bound men in the dilemma between moral man and immoral society.

Another misconception arises from the use of the words 'the policy of a nation'. We all tend to personify nations and colonial peoples may think of Britain, in the image of John Bull or Britannia, following a dominant purpose across the decades or even centuries. Some autocracies in history have pursued a fairly consistent policy over two or three generations. The great land empires, Rome, China, Russia, the United States, could follow a clear-cut and for long a largely uninterrupted policy of expanding steadily outwards. But this is not true of the modern oceanic empires, certainly not of the British. No one dominant aim inspired its expansion; no government ever wholly controlled it. As soon as the vigorous, boisterous English of the Tudor period suddenly found that the surrounding sea was not a wall, or even a

moat, but a highway for their new ocean-going ships which led all over the world, they started to tumble out of their island like boys out of school. And because the highway led them and their successors at different times to many different kinds of lands and peoples, the motives of annexation and the methods of rule showed the same diversity.

Yet, for all the diversity, there were *some* dominant motives for empire. And for all the unreadiness, governments did have *some* major purposes though these, too, shifted in character and effectiveness. It may be that, trying to look at our colonial record through the eyes of our critics, we shall be able to draw up for their benefit and our own some very rough and ready political and moral colonial balance sheet. And though the critics of colonialism are mainly interested in today and tomorrow we must remind them that our vanishing empire has a large heritage of history, which is loaded with bequests, good, bad and indifferent, which neither they nor we can easily discard.

But before we do that we must try to get a closer understanding of this new phenomenon of anti-colonialism. Because on its positive side it is pro-freedom, it has led in Africa alone to the astonishingly rapid emancipation of some twenty states of the British and French empires within the last six years, and Africans are still not yet satisfied with the new map of their continent. So next week I want to discuss the nature of this new force and ask how it developed with such unexpected speed and power. In my third talk I shall try to show the British response to this pressure in terms of politics, the difficult and delicate politics of bringing new states to birth. Fourthly, we must turn to consider the great and still outstanding problem of the European colonists, for this raises the issue of racial relations in their most intimate, most obdurate—and, indeed, most tragic—form. In the fifth talk I shall offer the colonial reckoning. This can only be my judgment, given in brief and general terms, of the balance of achievements and of mistakes in our colonial record. In my final talk I would ask you to strain your sight by looking into the future to discern what part the ex-colonial states which form the great majority of the so-called ‘uncommitted nations’ are likely to play in our dangerous world, and what may be our own relations with our former empire.