Colonialism and Postcolonialism: Psychological Dimensions
LAURENT LICATA

European colonial powers invaded then dominated a large part of the world from the Renaissance to the middle of the twentieth century. Across this long history and numerous geographical settings, colonialism took various forms, was associated with diverse practices, and was justified by different ideologies. However, it created unprecedented situations of encounters between the original inhabitants of the colonized countries and European colonizers, locking them in “the most complex and traumatic relationship in human history” (Loomba, 2005, p. 8). This long traumatic relationship had a tremendous influence on the psychologies of both the colonized and the colonizers, deeply affecting their views of the world, of the other peoples, and of themselves. This influence did not cease once independence treaties were signed, as the colonial experience continues to impregnate the cultures and identities of both formerly colonizing and formerly colonized peoples. As a consequence, colonialism still affects their current interactions, be it in the context of international relations or in that of contacts between majority members and immigrants or indigenous peoples in Western countries. (See Peace Psychology: Contributions from Africa; Culture and Conflict.)

Accordingly, psychological analyses have occupied a central position in anticolonial and postcolonial critiques. This article will summarize some of the main features of these analyses. After defining key concepts, it will address the colonial situation as a source of representations about the other peoples for the Europeans. Then it will address the psychological characteristics of the colonial situation for both the colonized and the colonizers and their mutual relationships, before and after decolonization. Finally, it will situate colonialism as a topic in current psychological research.

COLONIALISM AND NEOCOLONIALISM

Colonization can be defined as “the takeover of territory, appropriation of material resources, exploitation of labor and interference with political and cultural structures of another territory or nation” (Loomba, 2005, p. 11). As Robert Young (2001) observes, the word colonization taps a wide range of practices that, before the nineteenth century, lacked cohesion or ideological grounding. It was the association between colonization and European imperialism that gave rise to colonialism, which could be defined as colonial practices inspired by imperialist motives and ideology. Modern – often characterized as capitalist – imperialism had economic as well as political dimensions:

The ideological justification of the mission civilisatrice notwithstanding, the real aim of the nineteenth-century imperial system was to combine the provision of domestic political and economic stability with the production of national prestige and closed markets in the international arena through conquest. (Young, 2001, p. 31)

An expression originating from Marxist critiques of post-World War II Western imperialism, neocolonialism was described as “the last stage of imperialism” by the Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah (1965, in
According to this critique, while colonized people gained formal political control over their countries after decolonization, the major world powers—usually the same as the former colonial ones—continued to exercise their economic hegemony, therefore perpetuating the dependence of the previously colonized areas.

POSTCOLONIALISM

The meaning of the term postcolonial (with or without the hyphen) is widely discussed. When referring to a situation, its scope is much wider than that of neocolonialism, as it encompasses all aspects of the situation following formal colonialism, including its cultural and psychological legacy. However, the term also refers to a trend of critical thinking addressing that situation, often inspired by poststructuralism (hence the “post”). This trend emerged in the 1980s, following the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, and “postcolonial studies” burgeoned during the next decades, mostly in English literature departments. These authors, although adopting various and often diverging perspectives, reanimated an interest in colonialism, rediscovering anticolonial authors as well as proposing new directions.

COLONIALISM AS A SOURCE OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE COLONIZED OTHERS

Gustav Jahoda (1999) recounts the history of Occidental representations of the other peoples, starting from antiquity. These images existed far before the colonial era, but colonization brought a shift in representation: from being viewed as ferocious animal-like savages, non-Europeans came to be seen as childlike primitives lacking emotional control, intelligence, and morality. The contention that the relationship between Europeans and colonized peoples was analogous to that of parents and children then provided moral justification for the civilizing and christianizing missions. Hence these lines by Kipling: “Take up the White Man’s burden . . . to serve your captives’ needs; . . . your new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child” (in Jahoda, 1999, p. 148). This representation inspired scientific theories—such as arrested development and biogenic law—as well as popular conceptions of cultural otherness, a source of stereotypes still anchoring contemporary racial prejudice.

Prolonged contact with colonized patients also fed some European psychiatrists’ theories about the effects of race and culture on their psychology and psychopathology (Mahone & Vaughan, 2007). They concluded that even the “normal” colonial subjects, suffering from intellectual debilitation, impulsivity, fatalism, or paranoia, were “essentially abnormal.” They attributed this abnormality either to the effects of “tribalism” or “detribalization” in East Africa, or to those of Islam in North Africa. According to colonial psychiatrists, these cultural influences had measurable effects on brain structure. Alongside social anthropologists, they also laid down the basis of acculturation and cross-cultural psychologies. These psychiatric theories had political consequences since, by emphasizing essential differences between Europeans and natives, they fueled arguments against independence. Hence, anticolonial resistance was often coded as madness or infantile regression.

However, psychology was also mobilized by anticolonialists to delegitimize colonialism. Octave Mannoni described the colonial situation as pathogenic and warned against the erroneous attributions of psychopathological symptoms to native cultures or their inability to face modernization, as they were, in fact, the very products of colonial domination itself.
THE COLONIAL SITUATION: DISPOSSESSION AND USURPATION

Paradoxically, Mannoni’s psychoanalytical explanation of the Malagasy revolt of 1947 was fundamentally essentialist. He argued that colonized people suffered from a “dependence complex,” which led them to transfer their need for domination from their ancestors to the colonizers, while the latter tried to cure their own “inferiority complex.” Aimé Césaire strongly opposed these views, which he saw as a mere renewal of the childlike savage image. Frantz Fanon also criticized Mannoni’s views for being reductionist. Fanon more subtly combined a sociopolitical and economic analysis inspired by Marxist dialectics with a psychoanalytical analysis of the colonial situation. As a psychiatrist in French Algeria, and himself a French Antillean, Fanon discovered the impossibility of his mission, due to the profound “depersonalization” of the Arab subjects under colonialist oppression. As such, what he described as a “white mask psychology” is to be explained by political factors – racialized power, colonial violence, and cultural subordination – rather than through a purely psychological analysis. The problem of the native subject – whom Fanon calls “the negro” – is that of being a subject in a situation where one is constantly reminded of one’s inferiority through the imposition of the hostile cultural values of the colonizers, following the eradication of one’s own cultural resources. This creates a dissonance between ego and culture, self and society, in which the colonial subject experiences him or herself as a “phobic object,” causing a deep-rooted sense of inferiority, a conflicting identity, and a lack of agency (Hook, 2005). The black subject then mimics white culture: black skin, white masks. According to Fanon, only active, violent rebellion could allow colonized people to recover their sense of agency and identity.

But Fanon and Memmi argued that colonial violence affected both its agents and its recipients. According to Albert Memmi (1957, in Young, 2001), the colonialist realized his privilege was illegitimate and therefore knew he was a usurper. He then suffered from a “Nero complex” that only amplified his racism: the more he oppressed the colonized, the more he realized the atrocity of the role he had chosen, and his hatred of the usurped grew. Similarly, Césaire denounced the moral hypocrisy of colonialism: “Henceforth the colonized know that they have an advantage over them. They know that their temporary ‘masters’ are lying. Therefore that their masters are weak” (1955, in Loomba, 2005, p. 154).

THE POSTCOLONIAL SITUATION: DECOLONIZING MINDS

This dialectical, ambivalent, and mutually destructive relationship is also the center of attention of postcolonial essayists. Hence, analyzing the British colonization of India, Ashis Nandy (1983, in Young, 2001) posits that this relationship brought equal alienation to the two groups. Although political domination formally ceased with decolonization, minds are still colonized nowadays. The “intimate enemy” is the ongoing state of mind that leads dominated people to accept the stereotypes of the dominants’ discourse, and the dominant to compromise themselves by perpetuating them. Nandy also observes that colonialism managed to impose “a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter” (in Young, 2001, p. 342). Opposing colonialism within the field of Western discourse therefore perpetuates this coloniza-
tion of minds. Nandy hence delineates one of the major issues in postcolonial thinking: the difficulty for formerly colonized peoples to articulate their own discourse and define
their own identity without relying exclusively on the ways of thinking instilled by colonization. However, most postcolonial thinkers do not advocate a return to precolonial cultural purity. Homi Bhabha envisions cultural hybridity as a way of countering colonial power: by blurring intercultural boundaries, and therefore by de-essentializing the colonized, the blending of native and European cultures produced an ambivalence that gradually altered the authority of colonial power.

The emergence of indigenous psychologies echoes this trend of thought. Distinct from other culture-oriented branches of psychology (cultural and cross-cultural), indigenous psychologies have developed in different parts of the world—often in former colonized countries—as a response to the domination of Occidental mainstream psychology, which is seen as but one illegitimately dominant indigenous psychology. Their project is to use local cultural resources to develop their own psychological sciences. However, some have observed that they run the risk of reifying these cultures, thus re-essentializing non-Western subjects.

THE COLONIAL IN PSYCHOLOGY

In contrast to the frequent use of psychological concepts in anticolonial and postcolonial critiques, colonialism, as a topic of investigation, is scarce in contemporary psychological science, even in its cultural branches. However, there exist interesting exceptions. Some researchers address the contemporary consequences of colonialism on mental health. For example, the noxious effects of the “colonial mentality” on the mental health of former Filipinos or Filipino immigrants in the United States are being studied (Okazaki, David, & Abelmann, 2008).

Another trend of research in social psychology addresses collective memories of colonial times. For example, Licata and Klein compared former Belgian colonials and Congolese colonized persons’ representations of different periods of the Congolese colonization’s history, still an important part of their social identities; Pereira de Sa and Castro studied Portuguese and Brazilian social representations of the discovery of Brazil; and Volpato and Cantone analyzed representations of colonized people as they appeared in the Italian Fascist press under Mussolini (see Volpato & Licata, 2010).

Finally, examples of colonial violence are often used in experiments on collective emotions. Reminders of colonial violence can trigger collective guilt or shame among members of formerly colonizing nations, motivating them to initiate reparative behaviors and adopt more positive attitudes towards the formerly colonized populations. Conversely, the present inhabitants of formerly colonized countries may experience anger and resentment and assign collective guilt to the descendants of the colonizers, which can fuel international conflicts. A similar phenomenon is that immigrant minorities in Western countries sometimes compete to be granted recognition of their status as victims of colonization, which might lead them to derogate other minority groups, again resulting in intergroup conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary prejudice and intergroup tensions often arise from simplistic or inaccurate representations of the colonial past, when these collective memories are not simply blocked when judged as too threatening for social identities. A thorough work of memory is necessary to “decolonize minds” on both sides of the colonial divide. This work could only be achieved through an active dialogue between formerly colonized and formerly colonizing peoples, in which
these collective memories could be debated and commonly elaborated. This would allow the former subalterns to affirm their voice, and the former oppressors to restore their moral dignity. However, this cannot be achieved as long as structural inequalities are perpetuated.

SEE ALSO: Culture and Conflict; Peace Psychology: Contributions from Africa.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Intro.html (an introduction to postcolonial studies)

http://www.postcolonialweb.org (resources on postcolonial theory and criticism)