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# Decolonialism

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**Abstract:** this piece opens with some reflections on the geographies of postcolonial scholarship and encourages us to trace out colonial durations in our lives and in the provocations we face. Two examples are given, from the International Conference of Critical Geographers and the Nottingham Citizens' Hate Crime Commission, before reflecting on 'decolonialism' might mean for Geography.

**Keywords:** decolonization, colonialism, hate crime, Palestine, biography

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# Decolonialism

“... colonial entailments do not have a life of their own. They wrap around contemporary problems; adhere in the logics of governance; are plaited through racialized distinctions; and hold tight to the less tangible emotional economies of humiliations, indignities and resentments...” (Stoler 2016, 3-4)

## Durations

A very small minority of geographers have historically attempted to, if not decolonise their discipline, then to provide an internal and outward facing critique of imperial endeavours: highlighting the violent crimes of colonial expansion into its *Heart of Darkness*; or exposing the role of purposive environmental and urban degradation in neo-imperial warfare. But the geographical discipline has also been exposed as a ‘handmaiden’ of Empire, providing its experts, maps and institutions. Geographers and historians have also shown how the empire was networked in to the imperial ‘core’. We are now familiar with a whole landscape of places, institutions and estates that profited from colonialism, imperialism and slavery, and from abolition.

These institutions are, however, conservative, in two senses. First, they rightly direct us to the elite, coordinating hubs of empire; to banks, insurance agencies, political elites and societies, many of which were right of centre or, in British political vocabulary, Conservative. But, second, these institutions are also conservative in the sense of being (too) narrow. A geographically non-conservative, in the second sense, view of imperialism in the colonising ‘core’ takes us beyond elite (and in the British case, often London) spaces to consider empire before and after decolonisation in a host of spaces and scales.

But what would a politically non-Conservative, in the first sense, geography of imperialism in this same core look like? The political left was involved in building global networks of solidarity between workers, anti-colonialists, and in portraying the effects and extent of Empire to a wider public. But there were also complicated and, for some, uncomfortable hybridisations of leftist and imperialist thinking: from Fabian advocates of imperial federalism; to British Communist designs on colonial populations; to the municipal and council housing projects which benefitted from decades of experimentation in colonial development. Broadly defined leftist (from socialist to welfarist) projects criticised, collaborated with and benefitted from colonialism. They, as much as the elite, Conservative institutions of empire have to be situated within the recursive networks of empire. They must be placed in what Ann Stoler (2016) terms imperial “durations”; the hardened, still-present constraints and confinements of colonialism. In a sense we are all under colonial ‘duress’, but our relations to this condition vary wildly by location, race, status, period, and the stubborn refusal to accept the conditions of duress; to endure.

My experiences and perspectives are clearly shaped by having been brought up in the United Kingdom, and by being an historical geographer. My most apparent, and difficult to grasp, imperial duration is trans-generational social mobility. My granddad's grandfather was a coachman, my great-grandfather was a ploughman, my granddad was a steel worker, my father was an advertiser, and I am an academic. Much has been lost in this journey, but I have a degree of financial security and stability that marks me in many registers as part of the social and economic 'elite' (also see Griffiths 2017). If we 'followed the things' my family had made, some would have been sold to countries within the empire, and the money flowing in from colonial and imperial ventures doubtless found its way into their personal journeys.

Tougher questions concern the sites of the welfare state upon which some of them, and I in particular, have relied. The seven years I spent at Kimberley Comprehensive and Sixth Form College, a bog-standard suburban school, felt neither imperial nor elite. Neither do the National Health Service (NHS) diabetes clinics I have attended annually for the last ten years. My nine years at the University of Cambridge never felt anything less than elite, and imperial legacies were not hard to find, although my undergraduate college had been established in 1869 precisely to encourage less-privileged applicants. Following pedagogic and biotechnological 'things' through these institutions and their histories would doubtlessly bring us circuitously back to Empire, but the bigger question is how the establishment of the NHS and the comprehensive school system (and even the expectation that Cambridge should widen participation) took place using the money and expertise of Empire.

Even without traceable routes from Empire to British welfare, the black box into which capital from the former flowed and from which the latter emerged marks a space of certain colonial duration, the legacies of which can be acknowledged but never erased. Our challenge is to find spaces that provoke us to think about still-colonizing forms of knowledge and to try to craft ways and means of thinking harder about and against them. Below I would like to give two examples of experience that have recently challenged me to think harder about colonial durations.

### **Provocations**

#### *Ramallah*

In July 2015 I attended the International Conference of Critical Geographers in Ramallah, Palestine. This was the seventh such conference and former meetings had taken place in locations (Békéscsaba in Hungary, Mexico City, Mumbai in India, Taegu in South Korea) that gave participants the opportunity to break out of Euro-American conference circuits. The event was organised such that the conference itself became an educator in critical geographies, in at least three ways.

First, the majority of participants flew in to Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport where they were asked by Israeli immigration official where they planned to go and the purpose of their trip. Participants were advised in advance not to lie, and to stay the first night in Jerusalem where the opening event was taking place, but not to mention unless prompted that they were travelling to the West Bank.<sup>1</sup> Like most western academics, my prior experience of airport security was of that of the protected subject. Though interrogated and profiled, as a white British male I usually remain above noticeable suspicion. At Ben Gurion Airport, however, two conference registrants were detained and then deported (one of whom was a white, European male), while two further registrants were turned back at the Allenby Bridge crossing connecting the West Bank and Jordan. The airport questioning on departure was more thorough, and we were advised by the conference organisers not to carry the conference programme in our luggage. As sites of intense and invasive racial profiling and securitisation, the start and end points for the conference marked, for many, a buffeted and temporary exposure to the insecurities of travel experienced by politically, racially or religiously 'marked' subjects worldwide.

Second, the conference organisers had made sure that the hosting institution was not affiliated or tied to the Israeli state, that the event was organised without the aid of Israeli research institutions, and that it was free of commercial sponsorship. The host was the Friends School, founded in 1869 and extended in 1901 by the Quakers, pre-dating the period of Britain's formal presence as Mandate overseer. Caterers, drivers, and assistants were chosen to craft out, as much as possible, an autonomous space of convergence within occupied Palestine. This autonomy was maintained as much as possible during fieldtrips to sites of occupation and resilience.

Third, the conference featured various panels on "Imperial, Colonial, Postcolonial and Anti-colonial Geographies" which attempted to forge conversations across different forms of colonial and post-colonial experience. Audra Simpson, Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, presented a keynote lecture which highlighted the spiritual ontologies of First Nations communities in the face of reservationist politics and geographies. The lecture made it clear that for many communities decolonising geographies is not an epistemic project, but one about land, territory and rights (Sium et al. 2012). This had also been made clear through a pre-conference statement, which attendees were asked to endorse, and a concluding resolution supporting the Palestinian Academic and Cultural Boycott and the broader Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign against Israel.<sup>2</sup> These campaigns

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank one of the co-organisers, Omar Salamanca, for confirming these details with me.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://iccg2015.org/conference-statement/> and [https://iccg2015dotorg.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/iccg2015\\_pressrelease-resolution\\_en1.pdf](https://iccg2015dotorg.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/iccg2015_pressrelease-resolution_en1.pdf), accessed 15<sup>th</sup> December 2016.

resonate beyond the immediate Palestinian context in (ex-)colonies worldwide for whom, as Tuck and Yang (2012, 1) have put it, “decolonization is not a metaphor”.

### *Nottingham*

The second provocation came about through my collaboration with Nottingham Citizens, the local chapter of Citizens UK, which mobilises businesses, charities, faith organisations and official institutions in local campaigns. I had suggested I would be keen to be involved in one of their campaigns and the senior advisor invited me to join preliminary conversations about hate crime in the city, and the local council and police force’s failure to secure reports and convictions based on the provisions of the 2003 Criminal Justice Act. As a gay man and member of the University’s LGBTQ staff network I was asked to help draft parts of our questionnaire relating to sexual discrimination, but my experience of south Asian research was also called upon in working with Nottingham’s Pakistani heritage communities. Our investigation concerned hate crime on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, sexuality and gender.

The research, which lasted a year and consisted of questionnaire work and interviews, confirmed that physical and verbal abuse was commonplace and widely unreported.<sup>3</sup> Working closely with local Muslim organisations highlighted how successive forms of post-colonial racial insults and violence intersected with each other; for instance, the insult “Paki”, which emerged in Britain during the 1960-70s against South Asian (not just Pakistani) migrants merged with accusations of un-Britishness and fundamentalism following the attacks of September 11th, 2001 in the US and July 7th, 2005 in Britain. The reaction to these attacks marked a new ‘colonial present’ in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq but it also triggered a new “colonial presence” (Stoler 2016, 33) of racial, ethnic and religious bigotry and violence for many Muslims in Nottingham, and in endless sites worldwide. Powerful testimonies were given to the hate crime commission: of a male Pakistani-British taxi driver stabbed with a screwdriver; of a British South Asian woman rammed with a shopping trolley by a skinhead in a supermarket; of countless taunts and insults in the street.

Recession and austerity were one context: the police and council had reduced their hate crime teams following severe financial cuts, while hate crime is known to spike in periods of economic decline. But the racial and religious tone of many of the attacks proved that colonialism has durabilities that are territorial and economic but also, here, violently racialized, and resisted (through witnessing and testifying, but also through protests such as the Black Lives Matter activists who disrupted the

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<sup>3</sup> For the commission report see: [http://www.citizensuk.org/notts\\_commission](http://www.citizensuk.org/notts_commission)

Nottingham tram network in August 2016).<sup>4</sup> These durabilities are both site specific and imminent in our everyday lives. The provocations above mark fleeting irruptions of ever present realities which challenge us to rethink our privilege, victimhood and commitments, and the ways we might think about what we might call 'decolonialism'.

### *Decolonialism*

Many activists and First Nations scholars have worked hard to establish the 'decolonising' of minds, methodologies and landscapes, to great effect. Yet I find myself tripping over the term. In my historical research I focus mostly on 'colonialism' (practices within colonies), not the 'colonial' (a project or product), 'coloniality' (a period, or experience of being a colony), 'colonisation' (conquering) nor 'colonising' (the act of acquiring a colony). Colonising and colonialism are etymologically very close; both are active, both make colonial things. But colonising makes colonies, while colonialism makes practices within colonies. As such, when I think of what I try to do today, I think not of 'decolonising' (un-acquiring colonies), despite how clearly useful it has been to many scholars and activists, but of 'decolonialism' (challenging the practices that made colonies and which sustain colonial durabilities). Whilst decolonising holds out the prospect of an achievable final state (the decolonised, or decolonisation), decolonialism emphasises an endless process, although one which need not be nihilistic or futile, but combatively open and encompassing (Legg 2016). For geography, decolonialism must similarly lack a singular endpoint; namely the wholly decolonised academic subject. But in continuing to practice decolonialism geography will necessarily transform itself. It will, hopefully, become more aware of the colonial durabilities in its institutions, its locations, and the lifepaths of those who become geographers, and, most vitally, push itself to find and learn from ever more varied places where subjects endure, resist and refuse colonial durations.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/03/black-lives-matter-activists-convicted-over-nottingham-protest> accessed on 20th December 2016