

Publications

Banging the Post-Colonial Drum: George Steinmetz's Imagined European Studies

by Sidney Tarrow

I read George Steinmetz's "The Implications of Colonial and Postcolonial Studies for the Study of Europe" with the familiar feeling of finding an old friend in a slightly spruced-up bar. On the one hand, Steinmetz reminds us of things that Europeanists should never forget: that Europe was constructed of non-European materials; that it took its modern shape on the backs of the lands it conquered; and that even its own state formation in the medieval and early modern periods was a colonial process. He also calls stalwartly for a European Studies that is anchored in the humanities as well as in the social sciences. Nothing to argue with about this.

But do Europeanists still need to rehearse these lessons as Europe enters the 21st century? Like familiar conversational gambits that recur when old friends meet, there is something ritualistic about Steinmetz's plea. Did my colleague Martin Bernal not teach us twenty years ago that Europe was [partly] constructed of non-European materials? Haven't Hobsbawm and many other Europeanists demonstrated how Europe's democratic development was [partly] built on colonial exploitation that was anything but democratic? Didn't Tilly, in his 1990 account of European state development, depict the formation of the European state system [in part] as a colonial process? And twenty years after Benedict Anderson described the "causal circuits running from the colonies to the metropolises" to [partly] produce modern European nationalism, do we need to have Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said trotted out to be convinced that "the intertwining of core and periphery has shaped ... aspects of European culture?" These are insights that were absorbed into the Europeanist canon years ago.

Of course, repeating what is largely true is never useless – even if it remains to assess its importance. If nothing else, Professor Steinmetz's injunction to Europeanists to look beyond Europe to understand Europe will encourage younger scholars to continue along paths traced by their predecessors. But isn't it time we sought new sources of inspiration and fresher insights? Are programs of European Studies really as unreconstructed as Steinmetz's bill of particulars suggests? And finally, is the postcolonial drum the most resonant instrument for Europeanists to play as we enter the 21st century? Here are a few brief observations intended to start a discussion:

1. **New Inspirations:** One new source of inspiration for Europeanists is found in the recent blossoming of European and Europeanist anthropology, as once-ghettoized Eastern Europeanist specialists interact with their once-postcolonial and increasingly-Europe focused colleagues in Western Europe. Another is the spectacular expansion of European-Union-derived scholarship, which has stimulated economists and sociologists alongside traditional political scientists to analyze the emerging European polity. The fertilization has gone in two directions: as students of European integration, like Alberta Sbragia, are taking their insights on regionalism to other parts of the globe, European historians have been inspired by the problematization of the European national state to re-examine the pre-Westphalian and Westphalian European state systems.

2. European Studies Programs: I cannot speak for the sites of European Studies that Professor Steinmetz knows, but the European Studies programs that I know something about moved outside the narrow precincts of Western Europe years ago. Soon after 1989, many of our best European Studies programs (including the Council for European Studies) made great efforts to transcend the cold war-induced academic division of East and West European Studies and to revive the trans-European study of Europe. (For an example, see www.einaudi.cornell.edu/europe/mellon). At the same time, much of the best work on democratization outside of Western Europe has come from scholars extending, testing, and falsifying models that developed out of the experiences of Western and Southern Europe. And European and Europeanist scholars have been actively broadening the “social movement” field beyond their territorial home to examine revolutions, communal conflicts, nationalism and democratization. (For examples of this effort, see Aminzade, et al, *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* and McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (both Cambridge University Press, 2001).
3. 3. Playing New Music: The polemics of research are fine, provided they open new seams of scholarship or open rents in the rusty armor of inherited wisdom. But by rehearsing the by-now ritualistic chant of the postcolonial mantra, we may be distracted from examining the profoundly new challenges in the world today. For example, current forms of global domination only faintly resemble the gunboat diplomacy and the cultural hegemony of the last two Euro-centered centuries. Moreover, as the industrial core of Northern societies is displaced to the South, the new exploited working class in the South and the marginalized one in the North are reaching out to each other to coalesce against the ravages of global capitalism.

Moreover, the construct of a “global North” — the reflexive trope of much postcolonial scholarship — ignores the always-deep and growing cleavages within the North. Were Poland and Scandinavia as guilty of colonial exploitation as Britain or France? And can today’s imperial dominion be understood in the same holistic terms as “the North” of the nineteenth century? Even in recent months, the Bush administration has dug a profound cleavage among the capitalist democracies of the North. Europe itself is not unifying or homogenizing, but is creating a new and more institutionalized matrix for conflict — something that non-European states and postcolonial intellectuals could learn from.

I hope that Steinmetz’s article will stimulate a debate among Europeanists. But having heard the choruses of outraged postcolonial scholars for almost two decades now, may we not hope for a more contemporary debate, a more serious debate, and one that will engage Europeanists and non-Europeanists around the profound crisis in the world today?