

Publications

Drums in the Postcolonial Night

by George Steinmetz

Responding to Professor Tarrow, I will first address issues of rhetoric as a “marker of attitudes, hidden assumptions, and crypto-polemics that resist refutation unless textually analyzed.”[1] After lingering briefly on language, I will turn to issues of disciplinarity and to the suggestion that current versions of global domination “only faintly resemble the imperialism and colonialism of “the last two Euro-centered centuries.”

Tarrow carries with the negative and coquettes with colonial colloquialisms. The title of his essay evokes the familiar anxieties of colonial settlers and officials—the fear of *Trommeln in der Nacht*. Drums do not evoke “classical” music here, although they might evoke European military music. But of course, European princes deployed Africans as military drummers after the late 17th century. The reference to an “imagined” European studies in the title calls up the concept of the Imaginary realm of fantasy and illegal identifications unfettered by reality testing—the world, that is, of the childlike mirror stage. The colonized, we recall, were often viewed as children. The shadowy image of the “native” already begins to emerge.

Professor Tarrow’s maxim guns, however, are aimed at those engaged in the “ritualistic chant of the postcolonial mantra.” What are we to make of the claim that there is something specifically ritualistic about calling for greater attention to Europe’s colonial origins and extensions? Ritual is linked to totemism, mana, spirits, magic, and also, in movements like the Maji Maji or Boxer uprisings, to anticolonial resistance—in short, to practices considered mindless and stupid by humanist and colonial rationalism. Tarrow also links ritual to an image of “choruses of outraged postcolonial scholars,” who are juxtaposed to ranks of “serious” scholars. The chorus suggests an antique collective that is deeply at odds with the individual hero of modern social theory. Haven’t we learned to distrust those *grands récits* according to which modern fragmentation marks an unambiguous advance over tradition?

Professor Tarrow’s choice of metaphors might be seen as intellectual redlining aimed at keeping the postcolonials out of the neighborhood. The idea of outraged masses, after all, is reminiscent of other fraught boundaries. Yet even a cursory reading of this text seems to lend initial support to postcolonial theorists’ claim that our discourse is still haunted by a colonialism understood as dead and buried. Whether these tropes are deployed intentionally and paradoxically here, I hesitate to judge.

My central argument, however, had little to do with a caricature of a moralizing postcolonialism that insists we all pay more attention to the Chinese invention of gunpowder or to *homo sacer* in the Third World. Instead I began with a problem in the sociology of knowledge, asking why European studies, or at least its central tendency, has been (1) centered on the social sciences, while other area studies fields in the U.S. have tended to mix the humanities and social sciences; (2) overwhelming presentist, while many other area fields, from Asian to African studies, are much more open to history; and (3) relatively uninterested in exploring the effects of the (post) colonial world on Europe. Professor Tarrow is correct that many European studies programs have moved beyond their earlier focus on Western Europe to

encompass Eastern Europe, but that is really peripheral to my argument. He does not dispute my other descriptive diagnoses, and agrees that European studies ought to be anchored in the humanities as well as the social sciences.

How can we account, then, for the “exceptionalism” of European studies? Partly in terms of the material base-funding. But these funding priorities are not an unmoved mover. They both reflect and reinforce our preexisting understandings of “Europe” and its relationship to its (post) colonies. Postwar American social science tended to assume that only non-western places had cultures in need of active deciphering. Academic ontological doxa posited a fundamental difference between European humanity - rational, adult, and familiar - and non-European subjectivities, viewed as irrational, infantile, and odd. Arguing that Europe has been constituted by its colonial or imperial margins undercuts this distinction, as do historicizing and culturally relativizing analyses of Europe itself.

As Professor Tarrow suggests, there are many, many examples of postcolonial, historicizing, or estranging analyses of Europe. Indeed, some of his examples are ones that I referred to in my original essay. If we define postcolonialism as any discourse that imagines a future beyond colonialism and its categories, it can be argued that postcolonialism and colonialism begin simultaneously. For precocious “postcolonial” analyses of Europe we can go back as far as Leibniz’ writings on China and Peter Kolb’s description of the Khoikhoi at the Cape of Good Hope in the early 18th century; Peter Altenberg’s 1897 novella and “performance” piece *Ashantee*; or the Surrealists’ 1931 Paris anticolonial exposition, with its display of “European fetishes.” For more recent writing that renders European cultures strange and exotic we can turn to Carlo Ginzburg, Michel Foucault, or Klaus Theweleit. Yet none of this work seems to have created a sense within European studies that Europe needs to be historicized, anthropologized, or considered in relation to its extra-European wellsprings.

One might counter that the study of Europe from America already represents one sort of oblique perspective, perhaps even a “postcolonial” one. Yet even the current “troubles” in the transatlantic relationship have failed to bring about a serious consideration of European cultural difference. Although we have heard incessantly during the past year that Americans are from Mars and Europeans from Venus, this analysis does not actually entail any claims about radically differing psychologies or cultures. People in both continents act as if they inhabited a brutal Hobbesian world of rational actors; the difference is that the Europeans have an interest in reigning in this system legally, while the Americans revel in it. According to Robert Kagan’s “Mars/Venus” thesis, Europeans are not driven by incommensurable emotions or national characteristics, but have the same “perfectly normal human psychology” as their U.S. counterparts. Their differing “norms” can be explained by objective conditions, especially relative military strength. Indeed, the United States is often seen as being more endangered than Europe by a turn away from individualism due to the pressures of “multiculturalism.”

To acknowledge that “Europe is a creation of the colonies” is to recognize the presence at the heart of European culture of alternative rationalities (or “irrationalities”) that are typically attributed to non-Europeans. This is not to argue that the periphery is objectively more spiritual, or irrational, but that it has been perceived as such. The greater attention to literary and anthropological analysis within the

non-European area studies fields reinforces this sense of a gulf between the cultural and rational parts of the world.

Professor Tarrow suggests that the “profoundly new challenges in the world today” require that we move beyond colonial and postcolonial theory and history. On the contrary, many of these challenges remind us how crucial it is to continue to rethink European (and American) history through the lenses of colonialism and imperialism. The champions and critics of current U.S. geopolitical strategy both tend to agree in describing the latter as a version of imperialism. What we are currently witnessing is indeed, pace Tarrow, a version of “gunboat diplomacy and cultural hegemony,” even if these projects involve bigger guns and more insinuating cultural technologies than in “your father’s empire.”

Current U.S. imperialism should not, I think, be equated with colonialism, despite some ideological continuities with Europe’s earlier colonial “civilizing” mission. Even the most aggressive U.S. planning for postwar Iraq, at the time of writing, envisions a period of direct U.S. occupation that is almost ephemeral by the standards of earlier European overseas colonies. In its broad outlines, the Bush administration’s geopolitical strategy rather resembles the classical British “imperialism of free trade,” or the model of imperialist hegemony described by world-system theory, even if its domestic policies differ. Only a careful comparative study of earlier European colonial and imperial history will allow us to understand what, if anything, is qualitatively new about the United States empire and its new counterpart: “Venusian,” post-Hobbesian Europe.

Notes and References:

Kristol, Irving. 1997. "The Emerging American Imperium." *Wall Street Journal* 18 August, A14.

Steinmetz, George. 2003. "The State of Emergency and the Revival of American Imperialism: Toward an Authoritarian Post-Fordism." *Public Culture* 15(2): 323-345.

1. This quote is from a personal communication from Herman Lebovics, whom I would like to thank for his critical comments on an earlier version of this essay. Most of the citations in this piece have been cut for reasons of space. For a fully annotated version, please contact geostein@umich.edu.