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Violence and Emancipation

Colonial extremists arrived at their chosen spot — cold, cynical, and ready to prime their mayhem. They were not concerned by Western ideas of innocence, moral responsibility, or fair play. Flirting with such deflections was for reformers, or conflicted intellectuals. Revolutionaries saw themselves differently. Not negotiating over an impasse, their mission was to destroy those whose disagreement with them caused it. The world did not change the moment a hotel crumbled into dust or when a crater was put under a checkpoint. But it noticed. When the dust settled, the mirepoix of bricks and metal, along with ownerless sandals, was regarded as a message.

Decolonisation was a date in a diary to come sooner or later.

Anti-colonial agitants used violence on purpose to create distance between themselves and the presumptions of a colonial state. Such a disjunctive space could not be recognised as legitimate, or unbridgeable, by such a state, its contemporary form, or their media proxies. Hence, the space has been filled with familiar inanities: all political violence revels in bloodlust, is senseless, or is a malign

advertisement for a vicious creed designed to invoke public fear and act as a rebuke to a peace-loving way of living. Such doubt centres not on national security but nihilism, a careless passage beyond event horizon, dragging everyone inexorably into fear. Its insinuations are placed on an out-of-control autocue. Politicians worry that their delivery does not keep up with the high significance of the required claims and allusions. But if the words sewing doubt were common sense, why would they need to be repeated so much?

This book refers to the remarkable similarity between standard descriptions of historical colonial-era revolutionary violence and its exogenous jihadist form occasionally disrupting the daily life of European nations these days. We are told often that the terrorists win if the good people of the West change the way they go about their daily life as the result of violence. Yet something has changed. Purveyors of such mannerisms will not acknowledge that terrorist anger and praxis have reasons rooted in one colonial past or another, or that atoning for their actions might be prudent. Terrorist violence these days does not shift the needle of public policy as it could in the late British Empire, despite the old insistence of giving the bandits no truck. No admission can be made that a hateful global hierarchy of wealthy states chafes at the saddle of a colonial past. The West refuses to see how it provokes terrorist outrages on its home soil. Instead, we have the rational and prosperous West and the irrational, struggling East as if we were still generalising the world (as we did in 1925).

The elements of violence and emancipation recur too often in the formation of colonial ideology to be ignored. There is sense in considering a history destroyed of its absolutes and submerged in its patterns — not in a claim of there being no ultimate truth to be had or a desire to collapse into a post-modern concern with the ambiguities of power. There is no “awake” or “asleep”, “Communist” or “Tory”,

“colonialist” or “native”, “British” or “American” imperialism etc. For as long as we cling to such extremities as if perfectly exemplified by history, a triumphalist current is permitted into a strait of unchallenged futurity. Recognising the impact of losers in the game of colonialism, for instance, becomes unthinkable. It should be possible to think about history as a series of contestable moments. This implies a need to recover history as an awoken dreamer might try to piece together the instruction of a dream. If history can only be thought about as examples of victorious wakefulness, any hope of somnambulant tracing must be given up. It is hard enough to recover fast-dissolving resonances from a dream without being shaken as you wake and told that there was no such dream, or that it not worth chasing when awake. Not even the skirmishing or bruising can be recalled. That is not exclusively the problem of the history of British Malaya, but it is a good place to start.

Modern conditions of post-colonial life are half-states forged by violence and emancipation as twin engines of history. The mass media has played a fateful role in obscuring this. There were many losers in the fisticuffs bloodying the British Empire. Yet anti-colonial resisters such as Pádraig Pearse, Wiremu Kīngi, and Chin Peng need not be noiselessly archived as examples of an outdated evil, or captains of hopeless causes. While there exists a past in which their motives have utility in explaining the present, the memory of their like should not be allowed to perish. Newsroom pundits do not care much for history, for their urge is to make today appear as if it were ever thus. This is not to suggest that history will always be excluded. It makes appearances in the American classroom and the airport bookshop as something that completes you. The mass media’s homogenising mission to please advertisers, however, requires it to whisper denatured, materialistic distractions into the ears of awoken sleepers, to a world populated by the time-poor and careworn.

The media specialises in providing such souls with caricatures to model themselves on. Journalists care not for in-between historical states or their production of a contested present. Losers in history's political struggles are never credited with creating ripe inter-subjectivities by pushing colonial winners further than they wanted to go to achieve their ostensible victory. Winning gives the successors heartburn and in the media they find a tonic through the enterprise of selective recollection and its confirmation.

This chapter makes two preliminary points that help interpret the historical case studies that follow:

- that emancipation and violence as factors of ideological formation exist in colonial and post-colonial states and
- a significant compensatory shift has not occurred under the imperial watch of the United States, a fact that has significant implications for the rise of China.

Having contemporised violence and emancipation in ideology, I proceed to make a point: the genitors of anti-colonial violence could jointly author colonial compensatory reactions of a colonial administration. Due to the fact that revolutionary violence ran against the grain of what Walter Benjamin termed the colonial state's monopoly on "lawmaking, law-preserving violence",¹ its prospects of historiographical recognition have been necessarily dim.

This chapter closes with a justification of why the experience of British Malaya has been chosen as an example of the workings of colonial ideology.

How Emancipation and Violence Continue to Work

In 1971, there was a televised debate between the two most incisive theorists of their generation, Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault.

Chomsky expressed his view that “the state may define what is legal but the state does not define what is justice or even correctness”.² Chomsky did not finish there. He added: “blowing up an ammunition train to Vietnam is not civil disobedience, it is a duty. We need to be very careful about what the state calls ‘illegal’”.³ His comments called to mind the legitimacy of violence in so-called settled colonies as well. When the people of a belligerent nation go to the shores of another’s to confiscate its land and subjugate its people, a moral imperative to violently oppose such rule would be stronger than that of liberal anti-colonialists in their own country when their government declared their acts of civil disobedience in support of an anti-imperialist position as illegal actions. The state’s ideological power in a colony comes not, in a final analysis, from what it declares legal or illegal. The main strategy is having people agree to the state’s decisions without quite knowing why. Anti-colonial nationalist violence in the name of housing or healthcare or the arguments of a new, deserving polity might not result in a colonial nation’s political independence, but its objectives can become colonial policy if partial emancipation can fill a troublesome gap.

What makes a violent act in the name of a political aim impractical or adventurist in Leninist eyes conceivably makes it illegal or terroristic in neo-liberal capitalist ones. Unless an act of violence has the support of a broad class base and the masses are convinced that revolutionary violence is imperative, it is deemed invalid.⁴ This has been a constraint on the use of violence in colonial and non-colonial contexts alike but conceivably makes a compensatory solution to an impasse more likely in a colonial context. Reformed communist spy Whittaker Chambers, in describing the crowd of 80,000 Russians that swept into the Duma in 1917 to demand it end 1,000 years of their nation’s autocracy, remarked “such a crowd in the first instance is not a menace. It is a notice: it says that official power is impotent

in a profound way and is seeking a new centre in the mass”⁵ I reject such assumptions throughout this book, and not because I especially disparage Chambers for being a renunciate Leninist.

When threatened by revolution, liberal democratic, colonial, and neo-colonial states project disingenuously towards a constituent mass as if it was their only legitimate heir. In a moment of constitutional crisis, a feudal autocracy fights for its survival but does not, perhaps with the exception of Magna Carta England, pluralise itself through broader compensatory measures because its exponents know there is no point in loosening the feudal vice. Leninism was a form of opportunistic shock politics not in the habit of negotiation. The crowd described by Chambers did not position itself as mainstream. It did not invite the confidence of its rulers: it made an objective declaration that the political situation was beyond reform and hopeless. Its ultimatum to the Duma was to end the Tsar’s days or be ended immediately themselves, because the Communists fatefully wanted more than partial emancipation. The uprising of the Communists in Malaya in 1948 came from their disappointment that democratic promises had been reneged on by the colonial administration. The Malayan Communists aimed at full emancipation but provoked partial emancipation through giving urgency to post-war colonial compensatory arrangements.

The idea pursued here, of ideology as populist franchise recognition prompted by the violence of also-rans, cannot be limited to the colonial experience alone. By limited consent-seeking and enfolding seemingly antithetical elements into its own programmes, the only goal of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism has been to make the past continue to be present. This modus leaves one with a choice between writing a history of contested moments of coming-to-be, careless of who actually won, or unpicking neo-colonialism’s aggregation of non-contiguous “past” and ever-existing “present” as

if this has therapeutic prospects. Pursuing the coming-to-be option involves a plenary concept of ideology, including governance actions and inactions widely disclaimed to be ideology, especially in colonies where the standard question has long remained: why persuade or bribe someone to calm down if you can legally shoot them?

On occasions when martial law was imposed for the unexceptionable benefit of law and order, a colonial state displayed itself as if above ideology. Louis Althusser's thinking on ideology pointed to something similar: the idea of ideology "negating itself".⁶ In a Western nation, ideology needed to be perceived as innocuous or inevitable so it could be immersive and so it could limit or misdirect subjects without them knowing. Althusser saw that the way the institution of the school situated itself as "indispensable", "purged of ideology", and valuing the "conscience and freedom" of students had made it a largely unsuspected site of ideology, much as the Church was a few hundred years ago.⁷ It will come as no surprise that Althusser had to be especially bored with conventional narratives in order to get to the bottom of an institution that claimed to be non-ideological so that it could ideologise freely. The supposition I make is that if it works for Althusser's critique of the Church, why not identify similar techniques in the armoury of colonial and post-colonial states?

Colonial governments that pursued developmental outcomes, scientific management of a resource, or public housing initiatives, postulated an ideology that disclaimed itself as an ideology to preempt or quell what Karl Marx and Frederick Engels named "a veiled civil war raging within existing society".⁸ Ideological techniques used to petrify those tensions in colonial contexts to sustain foreign rule were different from those prevailing in Western Europe. In the colonies, petty commercial permissions and a protection racket over meagre mercies were usually enough to maintain control. It could be suspected that it was not always this simple.

If a colonialist could control the villagers by bringing or not bringing a bag of lollies to their camp, then how could any amount of ideological sophistry perfect their power? One does not necessarily have to mention a scale of civilisation to conceive that the degree of ideologising required by Europeans to hold power varied from state to state. Yet, as an empire matures, a compensatory mode in favour of the colonised becomes necessary. The British did this quite well; not so the Americans, at least not to date.

Few in the privileged middle-class beltways of the United States wish to acknowledge that, in the several outposts of their implied empire, having more consumptive wants than any other power in history can be fairly construed as a provocation to terrorism. They want to believe in their nation as a force for good even when its emissaries are implicated in atrocities. As Jean Morefield observed, this conundrum has “deep roots in the tradition of liberal imperial apologetics”.⁹ In the context of colonial India, Purnima Bose called out the “endurance of the ideology of rogue-colonial individualism” which “occludes the collective workings of the system by rendering them as merely the experiences of the individual agents of the system”.¹⁰

Negative tropes of personal agency of thousands of colonial agents never touched the collective identity in the Raj, or for that matter, that of the Americans at present. This is a founding value of colonialism. If one was an Indian or Chinese colonial subject, then a bedraggled handful of you was quite sufficient to construct and assign a malign collective identity, but Lyndie England was an aberration and so was Clive of India. Highlighting the rogue on either side is problematic from another angle: it underestimates the power of anti-colonial violence in developing the compensative concessions that contribute to the totality of colonial ideology.

Ideology is a slippery beast in the colonial and neo-colonial context, not because its constituents of violence and emancipation are incapable of definition, but because ideology itself has an imperceptible character assigned to it very young. It situated itself in the granules of a sandpit, if you will, beneath a shade sail, and waited. Possessing a trinity of half a treasure map, the power of word-of-mouth, and a sense of inevitability, ideology became its discoverer's idea because it was imparted as a playground rumour that fitted with pre-existing assumptions. Although bespoke in its moment, it blended with the narrative of its individual consumer, and was never accused of wielding a heavy hand. Every ideology has had uncanny timing and has revelled in a welcome reserved for a saviour. No ideologist wants the world to know they run the show. That would reveal the true level of indeterminacy by which individuals live their lives.

One should not expect from any colonial government an explicit explanation of how its horrors were justified by reference to a framework of purportedly available liberal norms. Late British colonialism claimed to be for an ever-widening grouping but was framed by sharp lines inscribed in acid, and crisp bevels were used to identify with exactitude who was part of its polity and who was not. Althusser remarked that ideology was not like a science, for it is “both theoretically closed and politically supple and adaptable”.¹¹ It is not a science, but it is no less a call for a conformity around reputedly objective or universal lines. A lesson not learned by the American empire has been that colonial government was only an effective gatekeeper to modernity's hierarchies for as long as it could claim credit for an epistemological shift towards compensation.

An empire that gives nothing back by way of compensation fails bit by bit and usually collapses without warning. The surprisingly

elastic decline of the United States will only marginally delay an impending change in the pecking order of human suffering. No-one has experienced monumental suffering like the Chinese or endured it with so little international sympathy. The ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) directs the Chinese people to believe that colonialism is almost solely responsible for every new inflammation of their nation's near-bottomless historical sensitivities and that humanist internationalism is a Western bourgeois idea to be guarded against. These conclusions have expressed themselves in the dualism of Chinese foreign policy since the early 1950s, much in the same way as Marxism-Leninism was used as a ruling ideology to identify friendly and imperial nations.¹²

Due to Maoism being quite self-inflicted, the deflective routines of China's national memory have fed off the latest Western insult as part of a continuous stream of rebukes since 1842. Negotiation is not possible with a nation whose rulers hold such a mindset. When it comes to history, Chinese Communists are more self-referencing and ideologically censorious than the Americans, if that seems possible. However, the extraordinary growth of the Chinese middle class since 1979 has demonstrated that the CCP has learned the compensatory adjustment lessons of the late British Empire in a manner not accomplished by the Americans.

The necessary characteristic of ideology in Althusser's lexicon is its ability to effortlessly adapt its sales pitch to the point of complete reinvention but serve essentially the same constituency.¹³ In a world of mass communication, the speed and ease of messaging enables the political ideas of the United States to endlessly scale up and down neo-colonial frequencies according to its immediate needs. The empire's ideas also pass unchallenged through trusted proxies and doxies to find a subject audience to pass off its information as if it were knowledge. Syed Hussein Alatas claimed that a key element