

# Digital Barbarism: The New Colonization of the Mind\*

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## Abstract

The goal of this article is to compare and contrast the traditional Western versus the postmodern colonization of the mind. How is the current technological age barbaric? I investigate Aimé Césaire's writings, refer to Lea Ypi's definition of colonialism, and discuss society's use of psychopolitics to find the answer.

## Keywords

Aimé Césaire; barbarism; colonialism; dignity; psychopolitics

## Introduction

Until recently, the statement “colonization of the mind” was used in an abstract sense to refer to prolonged psychological damage to self-image and manifestations of guilt – plagues brought, sowed, and left by colonizers to obtain capital and dominance over the colonized. Under the brutal colonialism by Western powers, the minds of colonial subjects and their generations to come have, indeed, been subjected to colonization in the form of civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and legal systems that suppress local autonomy and damaged the foundation of locals' imagination of self. Imposed with a new inhumane culture of self-hate, the colonized were subjugated in mind. Perhaps forever altered, colonized people and societies, and their descendants feel the sting of

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colonization. Today there is a new kind of colonization taking place. Like before, it is the “colonization of the mind”, only now with the aid of neurotechnology.

Current international human rights law is an ever-changing legal body that attempts to safeguard humanity from indignity and inhumane treatment. This means that human rights are often reactionary to the world in which we live. Without question, the newest human development is the relationship between human beings and their increasingly sophisticated technologies. Modern technologies have grown without many watchdogs able to raise legal opposition to what could be called the colonization of the mind via modern technologists.

Some of today’s modern platforms and neurotechnological devices are used to colonize minds. Without equal and reciprocal terms of cooperation, modern technologists have harnessed human minds to do their bidding.

International human rights law does not protect against damage from the sophisticated use of modern neoliberal psychopolitics. Some argue that a brave new world of human rights law is required to protect not only the psychological life of human beings but the human spirit itself, as both remain largely unaddressed.

The goal of this article is to compare and contrast traditional Western colonization of the mind and the more recent colonization of the mind. I conclude that there is much in common and much to learn from the former to understand the latter. Indeed, neurotechnology is merely a new tool for subjugation in the newest iteration of colonization.

## **Colonialism**

Origins are almost impossible to find. It is easier to find a beginning. The beginnings of colonialism are best articulated in the impactful postcolonial manifesto writings of Eduardo Galeano, Aimé

Césaire, and Frantz Fanon. Galeano was unceasingly thorough and passionate in his denunciation of New World imperialism. To this day, his *Open Veins of Latin America* is under the arm of Latin American anti-globalization revolutionaries who want to know what they are fighting against. Galeano is a preeminent authority on the history of colonization in the New World. Césaire was poetic in his denunciation of colonialism, *Discourse on Colonialism*. One of Césaire's students, Fanon was a psychiatrist in addition to a manifesto writer. His articulations were Afrocentric and reflected his uniquely black experience. His manifestos *The Wretched of the Earth* and the insightful *Black Skin, White Masks* focused on the psychology of colonialism, race, and recognition. All three authors were interested in the dialectic of colonial relation. That is, what makes one person human and another not in the colonial outcome, and can a person be progressive while being inhumane and dehumanizing? All three of these iconic writers address these two glaring questions. I use Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* as my main manifesto reference.

Césaire's 1972 book *Discourse on Colonialism* describes colonialism as “morally, [and] spiritually indefensible” (Césaire 2000, p. 32). But of course, the writer looks at how such an act was defended. How could colonialism be defended? Modern colonial barbarism has a three-pronged attack: technology, spirituality, and politics of custom. In an effort to conquer, Western powers used free-market ideology as civilizing leverage. Often touting their “Christian virtues” – the values that won them colonial conquest, victory in the Second World War, and economic supremacy – the West preferred submissive genuflection to a mere bended knee from the Third World (Césaire 2000, p. 47). This meant allegiance to the European god and lords. Western powers had to justify what it wanted to do, and it did so with a charming crucifix. As Césaire writes, “capitalist society, at its present stage, is incapable of establishing concept of the rights of all men, just as it has proved incapable of establishing a system of individual ethics”, yet the Church of

Capitalism has its worshipers and its priests (Césaire 2000, p. 37). When technology (capitalism), spirituality (Christianity), and the politics of custom (Western government) come together with nonreciprocal terms of cooperation, you find colonial barbarism. Barbarism is the creation of a subjugated class that is promised salvation but ultimately becomes enslaved. Césaire jests that one is more likely to find the colonialist's Creator in a "business directory and on some comfortable executive board" than saving the colonized (Césaire 2000, p. 67).

### **The colonial eye and progressive dehumanization**

How can colonists commit such evil? Césaire answers this, too. Colonization is a bad route to established contact between peoples because the colonial eye is able to look the other way from or approve of cruel barbarism because it is in a process of "progressive dehumanization" (Césaire 2000, p. 68). Colonizers commit barbaric acts because the colonizer has legitimized its suppression based on folklore whispered in its ear. The root is mythology, namely the mythology of superior religion, technology, and custom. Creating such dualisms never allows for a world of humanity. Once the contacted society is othered, colonization can begin. As Césaire writes, "no one colonizes innocently", that "no one colonizes with impunity either", and that the White man ought to recognize and

respect the dignity of the colonized in "their full human value" (Césaire 2000, p. 39; 58).

Césaire's poetics are clear: "colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer" (Césaire 2000, p. 35). Colonizers proceed towards savagery in their endeavours (Césaire 2000, p. 36). He identifies that treating another with indignity is to treat the self with utter ignorance. Colonizers cover their ears, they look the other way when barbarism commences (Césaire 2000, p. 36). So, in effect, the colonizer is transformed by the act of colonizing, and it is the colonizer that becomes a

barbarian, not the lowly colonized, or as Césaire writes, “colonization...dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it”; he calls this the “boomerang effect of colonization” (Césaire 2000, p. 41). Under their presumed pretexts of superiority, the colonial mission is justified, and tortures begin.

Césaire argues that “bourgeois swinishness is the rule” (Césaire 2000, p. 49). Only with a deaf conscience can a nation justify colonialism and the mythology of the barbaric other to fester. He writes that “it is not the head of a civilization that begins to rot first. It is the heart” (Césaire 2000, p. 48). The sadism, the greed, corruption, and violence are possible because of economic flows that pacify any change in trajectory. The ties that bind colonialism and its colonizers are not loosened easily either. The power of easy myths – such as the dominant anthropology of early conquest – is for history to vomit, but the effort required for and of criticism is far greater. Undoing the knots, emancipation, etc. takes effort, as Césaire writes:

But there is one unfortunate thing for these gentlemen. It is that their bourgeois masters are less and less responsive to a tricky argument and are condemned increasingly to turn away from them and applaud others who are less subtle and more brutal (Césaire 2000, p. 62).

It is better that humanity advocates against colonization, as it is a monstrous creation that engulfed all of modernity into flames. But even with this recognition, can it happen again? Césaire screams back “Yes!” I argue he prophetically writes that colonialism may possibly “reappear in the future in one form or another” (Césaire 2000, p. 50).

## **Reflections of barbarism**

The barbarism of today reflects the accounts of barbarism in the above-mentioned postcolonial manifestos. Society is not postcolonial but instead has found new avenues of influence for more discrete subjugation.

A religion that is not destroyed is eternal. As long as society has dissimilarity and ignorance, there will be those who build a theology of superiority. Today, that is the neoliberal ideology. Ironically, no one identifies as a neoliberal, yet today nearly everyone has succumbed to neoliberal tendencies in one way or another. This is why Césaire invokes the concept spirit of colonialism. Neoliberalism has its own spirit, which many critics of neoliberalism have addressed (Kotsko 2018; Míguez, Rieger, and Sung 2009). Variants include subtle and not so subtle forms of racism and white supremacy. A religion only needs mythology and practitioners. Furthermore, destructive ideologies merely require “a reaction caught unawares, a reflex permitted, a piece of cynicism tolerated” as society has already witnessed from the rise of white supremacy and neo-fascism under banal if not encouraging leadership often connected within a military-industrial-spiritual complex (Césaire 2000, p. 48).

René Girard would tell us that myths are made of the colonized to cope with the problem of tumult, and order is created through scapegoating. Consider for example the depiction of European Jews after the First World War and the subsequent Jewish Holocaust. The figuratively dispensable people – those who have become transparent in society – become subject to mythology. The attainment of the proverbial colonial crown jewel (i.e. India by Great Britain) caused a run toward colonialism by other countries. In a competitive setting, the rate of colonialism rises, and nations easily lose their humanity in the myth. A history of colonization must be told in order to rebuild order.

Césaire's words on the capitalist colonial master ring true today: "the iron man forged by capitalist society squarely in the eye to perceive the *monster*, the everyday monster, his hero" (Césaire 2000, p. 66). Man is hardened by neoliberalism; he becomes a hypocrite, indignant to his own faith's teachings. He becomes his own idol. "The setting is changed, but it is the same world, the same man, hard, inflexible, unscrupulous, fond, if ever a man was, of 'the flesh of other men'" (Césaire 2000, p. 66). Like the capitalist colonialist, today's neoliberal American per se carries masochistic and sadistic traits expressed in how power is maintained throughout its bureaucracies. A toxic neoliberal workplace can provide exhibition: When a neoliberal worker transitions from being a suppressed, masochistic (indignant) worker to a sadistic (indignant) ruling manager, the ethos and conditioning transfer. Here one learns that there is no redemption in becoming the master.

### **"What's Wrong with colonialism"**

Lea Ypi's reflective, postcolonial 2013 article "What's Wrong with Colonialism" offers a concise understanding of why colonialism is morally reprehensible. In the context of this paper, it will serve as a bridge to the more modern forms of colonial barbarism.

In her paper, Ypi argues that "equal and reciprocal terms of cooperation" are essential for avoiding colonialism (Ypi 2013, p. 158). She elucidates, writing that "equality and reciprocity in decision making" are required for just interactions (Ypi 2013, p. 163). Furthermore, "equal and reciprocal terms of political association" are essential trademarks of fair relations (Ypi 2013, p. 167). Ypi argues that the formula of equal reciprocity is eternal. Even in the postcolonial setting, the "ideal of equal consideration of each other's claims and of reciprocity in communication ought

to be taken into account every time two previously unconnected political groups try to establish a basis for future political cooperation” (Ypi 2013, p. 175).

Ultimately, the wrong of colonialism is then the “departure from an associative ideal that fails to respect equality and reciprocity in the creation of its norms and often also in the substantive principles governing that association” (Ypi 2013, p. 186). An important point Ypi makes is that “The wrong of colonialism consists in its embodiment of a morally objectionable form of political relation, not in the allegedly wrongful occupation of others’ land” (Ypi 2013, p. 190). Colonialism is therefore not a spatial phenomenon; it is not something that simply happens over scarcity but is instead a fundamental breakdown in political relations.

### **Modern colonialism**

Modern colonialism of the mind is barbaric. How does the figurative colonization of the mind described in the manifestos compare to the colonization of the mind today? Today, there are fundamental breakdowns in political relations between technologists and their targets. This problem is due to a lack of informed consent. One can only become subjugated when one ceases to be seen – and therefore often treated – as a human being. Being thingified is a problem brought on by Christopher Columbus or Hernán Cortés and his Conquistadors, rather than by any true discoverer.

One must make the distinction between discovery and conquest. One *discovers* a land, a brain function, or some other truth, but to *conquer* it is something else. As Ypi touches on in her paper, settler colonialism is something very different from discovery, because colonialism involves *conquest*: the subjugation of one or more parties in political relations. Instead of discovering land,



a brain function or some other truth, conquest is the procurement of these through illegitimate means, that is, without informed consent. Let us look at each of these examples closer.

Conquest of land and its resources is part of the pre-Ypian definition of colonialism. The Oxford Advanced American Dictionary defines colonialism rather loosely as “the practice by which a powerful country controls another country or other countries” (Hornby 1995). Such colonialism continues to happen today through less visible means such as lawfare, or even less legitimately as, for example in the modern Hong Kong saga. In Hong Kong, the vast majority of locals reject Chinese posturing and force, yet the conquest occurs without the consent of Hongkongers. *Ceteris paribus*, a Chinese takeover of Hong Kong would aptly be called an annexation.

One example of *discovery* is the collection of data on brain function by functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). But today, technologists push further in the direction of conquest by making intrusive neurotechnology that allows for the colonization of the mind in the form of modern *psychopolitics*. With no adequate policing, no consent and no legitimacy, humanity has reached a new bastardization of colonial barbarism in certain applications of neurotechnology.

Psychopolitics is the politicization of the mind, that is, under the influence of psychopolitics, the mind becomes a field where contingent power dynamics are played out. This has gone on in many ways over much of colonial history. The reprogramming of people in the name of a god or the Crown, has gone on for centuries in schools where languages and religions are taught in a manner that encourages hatred for the re-educated’s known culture. The mind is something that commands the utmost dignity, yet it cannot be completely monitored since it occupies a formless space. By using big data and neurotechnologies, technologists can now make highly informed guesses and changes regarding the once sacred domain of the mind. Mindreading

and mind tampering via neurotechnology is real and threatens the dignity of its subjects. It is the responsibility of advocates to bring such control, exploitation, and lack of informed consent to the attention of civil society and policymakers.

Notably, the right to cognitive liberty, the right to mental privacy, the right to mental integrity and the right to psychological continuity have been advocated for by members of the ethics community (Ienca and Andorno 2017). These aspirational rights aim to protect humanity from nefarious modern neurotechnologies. They foresee neurotechnologies depriving subjects of the sacred privacy of the mind, that can manipulate, damage, and even utilize the cognition of its subjects, and even compromise the continuity of experience.

Prodded by the pursuit of profit, technologists have made highly advanced systems that now engage with the minds of unwilling users or unwitting participants of the Market – this time in a controlling manner. For example, social media platforms like Facebook utilize psychopolitics in order to keep people on their platform (Sieber 2019b). This is one of Facebook Inc.’s objectives because by increasing the “flow” or intensity of Facebook and therefore its use, Facebook’s advertisement income rises (Brailovskaia, et al. 2020). Even more scandalously, political parties appear able to partner with Facebook – utilizing its information silos – as the Cambridge Analytica scandal showed.

Furthermore, Facebook’s leadership held private meetings with the sitting United States President Donald Trump during campaign season and then exhibited a clear bias towards fake news outlets that fuel political misinformation (Stanley-Becker and Dwoskin 2020). Instead of owning their role as an alleged fact-checking social networking site, Facebook has outsourced the job of filtering news to the highest bidder. With the controversial, alt-right Breitbart News Network doing much of Facebook’s fact-checking, there is little confidence that the status quo is interested

in facts over profit, which ultimately brings us to a modern dystopian reality of sophisticated mind colonization (Duncan 2019). Facebook ceases to be a social media platform simply because it fails to bring its users closer together. Rather, Facebook crouches its users behind computers and cellphones (Sieber 2019a).

Facebook is not alone. Google is not a search engine per se; it is an advertisement organizer and makes its revenue as such, while also using human–computer interaction eye-tracking technology to finetune its marketing.

As Césaire wrote on the indignity of colonialization, it is the noble Western tycoon that represents true barbarism and savagery. American Apple, Inc. and South Korean Samsung scour the globe for precious metals whilst contributing to the Anthropocene, slavery, human and ecological displacement, suppression of human rights and democracy, etc. in order to make their products.

### **Political theater and optics**

Who is today's barbarian? There are many manifestations of barbaric behaviour, and they be in the eye of the beholder. Brutal police officers using computer algorithms that target minority populations in the United States, routine public beheadings in Saudi Arabia, and draconian modern public surveillance in China, for example, are sophisticated and widespread. Terrorism persists as a political method worldwide. But in a shrinking world, the global barbarian is both in plain sight yet stealthier than ever.

I argue that the big technology industry is the world's most damaging barbaric entity. And as Césaire said, the heart rots first. The heart of society has been seduced by the peddled ethos of neoliberalism. The belief in Silicon Valley's superiority and civilizing power has turned into a

theology of too big, too important, and even too progressive to be thought of anything but righteous. Neoliberal ideology thrives in the “progressive” crevasses of the West as the new manifestations of colonial barbarism. Aided by bailouts, mimetic desire, etc. the allegedly progressive brands wear a deceptive mask, protecting themselves from overt public oversight.

The modern world is dominated by industrial might and marketing. The normalization of telling a story in order to sell has effects as well. Political theatre and optics are how you make your brand stand apart and above others. No corporation in its self-interested cognizance would allow its shareholders or customers to know how it wrongly acquires rare metals in Central Africa or the Amazon Basin. One would assume that the optics would be detrimental. If the story of the suppression or even enslavement of local Indigenous peoples by their government to force them to work in the mining industry were on the cover of every Western newspaper, it would reflect poorly on Apple, Inc. (Kelly 2019). Instead, the political theatre of marketing plays out where both Mark Zuckerberg and the late Steve Jobs have sleek and seductive, multi-million-dollar films that are made about them which resonate more with the public than any newspaper article on what their companies do and did on the fringes of the Third World. If anything, they only serve to reinforce the fetishized following of Silicon Valley leaders. Needless to say, when one thinks of Apple iPhones, one thinks of the ingenuity of putting three devices into one instead of the externalized barbarism that plagues gold, silver, platinum and rare earths pits around the world, the meticulously ordered Chinese production factories, and the cultural destruction of Tibet. Corporate-government alliances based on calculated risk and profit have that covered. Branding takes care of the rest.

How often does one associate Samsung and Apple, Inc. with barbarism? Hopefully, this synthesis of colonial barbarism will help the reader peer past the shiny objects and see the

phenomenon of colonialism in its clear present form: more sophisticated but ultimately the same as that by conquerors Cortés or Columbus.

## **Conclusions**

In the melee of being number one in the Market, marketers have used neurotechnology that colonizes minds in new ways. Not unlike Galeano, Césaire and Fanon, today's critics can highlight the same key elements. In the face of neoliberal capitalism and its message of superiority, advancement and even virtuosity, one now sees the same barbaric formula: the ingenious white Westerner, with its awe-inducing technology and values that glare of wholesomeness are endorsed and then applied to conquer minds by altering emotions and conduct, and therefore their users' consumption at the expense of unwitting users' dignity (Han 2017, p. 46-8).

Some are so bold as to personify their neoliberal creation, selling to the world the mythical image and necessity of capitalist conquest, success, and virtue. These are the new conquistadores. Maybe Zuckerberg and other technology tycoons will fall onto their own swords as their inventions reach an unwilling public; that is, however, unlikely. Recently, Worldcoin's founder Sam Altman unabashedly announced that he intends to exchange cryptocurrency in exchange for people's iris scans (Huet and Tan 2021). His company intends to profit off of the natural identity of its clients. Perhaps another scenario will play out where the hardening of the postmodern heart is reversed, and proper accountability is taken.

The postcolonial task is not over and may well never be over. The very term "postcolonial" is a misnomer that implies a rupture in what has been happening for centuries. No longer is there a religious symbol in modern barbarism; instead, today's barbarism is secular yet entirely spiritual – cultish even. The fetishization of brands and their leaders speaks to the stealthy nature of

neoliberalism but also the character of modernity's many members. Neoliberalism has made heroes of eroded ironmen à la Césaire. These leaders run bureaucratic monsters that turn the many barbaric. Today, that nudge is all it takes for a citizen to look the other way and condone or rationalize barbarism. We live in a world where every shareholder and user of Apple, Samsung, Google, or Facebook, who stays complicit contributes to modern barbarism, - something that I bifurcate into two perpetrating parties: corporations and passive consumers. Those consumers become both promoters and victims of invasive, non-consensual psychopolitics which whiffs of the old barbarism poetically renounced by the postcolonial manifesto writers of old. Neoliberal psychopolitics are just another manifestation of colonization of the mind. Digital barbarism is old barbarism by a different name.

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