

Colonialism Made the Modern World. Let's Remake It.

This is what real “decolonization” should look like.

July 27, 2020

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“Decolonize this place!” “Decolonize the university!” “Decolonize the museum!”

In the past few years, decolonization has gained new political currency — inside the borders of the old colonial powers. Indigenous movements have reclaimed the mantle of “decolonization” in protests like those at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access pipeline. Students from South Africa to Britain have marched under its banner to challenge Eurocentric curriculums. Museums such as the Natural History Museum in New York and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels have been compelled to confront their representation of colonized African and Indigenous peoples.

But what is “decolonization?” What the word means and what it requires have been contested for a century.

After World War I, European colonial administrators viewed decolonization as the process in which they would allow their imperial charges to graduate to independence by modeling themselves on European states. But in the mid-20th century, anticolonial activists and intellectuals demanded immediate independence and refused to model their societies on the terms set by imperialists. Between 1945 and 1975, as struggles for independence were won in Africa and Asia, United Nations membership grew from 51 to 144 countries. In that period, decolonization was primarily political and economic.

As more colonies gained independence, however, cultural decolonization became more significant. European political and economic domination coincided with a Eurocentrism that valorized European civilization as the apex of human achievement. Indigenous cultural traditions and systems of knowledge were denigrated as backward and uncivilized. The colonized were treated as people without history. The struggle against this has been especially central in settler colonies in which the displacement of Indigenous institutions was most violent.

South Africa, where a reckoning with the persistence of the settler regime has gripped national politics, reignited the latest calls for decolonization in 2015 with the #RhodesMustFall movement. Students at the University of Cape Town targeted the statue of the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes, but saw its removal as only the opening act in a wider struggle to bring white supremacy to an end. Under the banners of “more than a statue” and “decolonize the university,” students called for social and economic transformation to undo the racial hierarchies that persist in post-apartheid South Africa, free university tuition and an Africa-centered curriculum.

Now, partly riding the global surge of Black Lives Matter mobilizations, calls for decolonization have swept Europe's former imperial metropolises. In Bristol, England, last month, protesters tore down the statue of Edward Colston, the director of the Royal African Company, which dominated the African slave trade in the 17th and 18th centuries. Across Belgium, protesters have focused on statues of King Leopold II, who ruled the Congo Free State (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) as his personal property from 1885 to 1908. King Phillippe II of Belgium recently expressed “regret” for his ancestor's brutal regime, which caused the death of 10 million people.

Colonialism, the protesters insist, did not just shape the global south. It made Europe and the modern world. Profits from the slave trade fueled the rise of port cities like Bristol, Liverpool and London while the Atlantic economy that slavery created helped to fuel the Industrial Revolution. King Leopold amassed a fortune of well over \$1.1 billion in today's dollars from Congo. His vision of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, which opened in 1910 soon after his death, reproduced a narrative of African backwardness while obscuring the violent exploitation of the Congolese.

By tearing down or defacing these statues, protesters burst open the national narrative and force a confrontation with the history of empire. This is a decolonization of the sensory world, the illusion that empire was somewhere else.

Laying a flag of the Democratic Republic of Congo on the statue of King Leopold or hauling the Colston statue into the sea, where thousands of enslaved women and men lost their lives, tears apart the blinders and boundaries between past and present, metropole and colony. Insisting on the presence of the past, the protests reveal Europe's romance with itself, unmasking its political and economic achievements as the product of enslavement and colonial exploitation.

This historical reckoning is only the first step. Acknowledging that colonial history shapes the current inequalities and hierarchies that structure the world sets the stage for the next one: reparations and restitution.

Reparations is not a single act. The Caribbean Community has already demanded reparations for slavery and Indigenous genocide from Britain, France, Spain and the Netherlands. Although there is little movement at the level of states, the University of Glasgow agreed last year to pay 20 million pounds (about \$25 million) for development research with the University of the West Indies in recognition of how the university benefited from the profits of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The Herero of Namibia, who suffered the 20th century's first genocide at the hands of Germany, have also called for redress. Their efforts follow the successful bid for reparations by the Mau Mau of Kenya, many of whom were tortured during Britain's brutal suppression of their independence movement in the mid-20th century. In other contexts, activists have focused on the return of the looted artifacts that fill Europe's great museums. France, for instance, has committed to returning 26 stolen artworks to Benin.

But reparations should not focus only on the former colonies and their relations with European states. Colonialism lives on inside Europe's borders, and Europe itself must be decolonized. Black Europeans experience discrimination in employment and education, are racially profiled and are subject to racist violence at the hands of the police and fellow citizens.

The European Union recently avowed that "Black lives matter," but its policies deprive Black people of equal rights, imprison them in camps and drown them in the Mediterranean. Overseas imperialism was once believed to be a political necessity for European states; today, anti-immigrant politics plays the same role. In either case, European policymakers disavow responsibility for the misery they bring about.

Repair and redress is owed as much to Black Europeans as it is to former colonial states. It would mean treating Black Europeans, and all migrants from the colonized world, as equal participants in European society. And this form of reparation cannot be perceived as one-off transactions. Instead, it must be the basis of building an inclusive and egalitarian Europe.

This is no easy task and will not happen overnight. But we should remember that just 80 years ago, colonial rule appeared to be a stable and almost permanent feature of international politics. In just three decades, anticolonial nationalists had transformed the world's map.

The struggle for racial equality in Europe is a fight for a truly postcolonial condition, and its creation is implied by each dethroned statue. If colonialism made the modern world, decolonization cannot be complete until the world — including Europe — is remade.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 7 of the New York edition with the headline: The Slow Road to Real 'Decolonization'