

NICK C. SAGOS

Epistemic Inequality and its Colonial Descendants

Göran Collste, *Global Rectificatory Justice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

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Global Rectificatory Justice is part of a series on global ethics seeking to address normative issues through an empirically informed lens. The series as a whole casts a skeptical eye on mainstream liberal cosmopolitan approaches to political justice. It views these mainstream approaches as undeservedly depoliticized. The series attempts to disrupt this *de facto* liberal cosmopolitan standard by examining the emerging challenges posed by multiculturalism and globalization. Offering what it sees as a more nuanced examination of the social contexts and cultural structures that underlie multiculturalism and globalization, the series tries to correct perceived omissions in mainstream accounts of global ethics.

Göran Collste's volume is an exercise in applied ethics and it concerns itself with the legacy of colonialism, focusing primarily on the epistemic aftereffects of colonial rule. Collste argues that we should think of colonialism as an ongoing historical process and not as a vestige of the past. Colonialism involves more than just prior economic exploitation, on his view. Because of its ongoing structural and institutional influence, colonialism for Collste also constitutes an ongoing *epistemic injustice*. Collste's grounds his contention on historical sources, official state documents, and in-person interviews. He also draws on a wide-ranging academic literature, with sources ranging from normative ethics to developmental economics and international relations. His goal is to illustrate how each disciplinary matrix influences and colors our understanding of past and present colonial injustices. Part of this influence is inchoate and part involves actively forgetting the advantages colonialism provided the West.

As the book progresses, Collste accumulates telling omissions that underscore his main point. The various omissions he unearths show the lasting and underappreciated cultural damage done by Western powers. Many of the official documents that Collste examines either minimize or reject factual cases of Western colonial misconduct. Collste is concerned with the way that liberal cosmopolitan accounts of justice underemphasize (or ignore) these purposeful omissions. He notes,

‘Just before the British were forced to leave Kenya, they moved boxes with documents containing information on what had happened

during the colonial war and in detention camps, to Britain. The same thing happened when the British left other colonies [...] Now the documents are accessible and they show that the British government was well aware of what methods were used against the opposition in Kenya and in other colonies' (Collste (2015), pp. 108 and 185-6).

Omissions of this kind hide a darker truth for Collste. For example, hundreds of thousands were placed in detention camps during Kenya's war of independence. Many Kikuyu were tortured or killed. No formal apology has been forthcoming despite requests by Kenya (Collste (2015), p. 108). In many similar cases, wrongdoing goes unacknowledged at all, even today.

In interviews with participants of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Collste closely details the choices made by the South African government when representing and remembering its colonial past. In Mozambique, he interviews former freedom fighters about their experiences under the Portuguese. He also examines the legacy of colonialism in Uganda, Malaysia, and China. In so doing, Collste uncovers a disturbing pattern of active forgetting in many of the countries he surveys. By contrasting official documents with first person reports that directly contradict them, Collste conveys both the suffering and the ongoing humiliation faced by many indigenous populations due to colonialism. In illustrating the lengths to which some former colonial powers went to hide their own atrocities, Collste identifies a persistent tendency toward exculpation at the expense of the truth. Forgotten communiqués in old archives and weathered plaques on decaying colonial buildings betray a suppressed history, one that distorts our present thinking about global justice.

Any discussion of reparations or of rectification, presupposes an agreed upon background of actions for which rectification is sought. And it is these actions and presuppositions that Collste wants us to interrogate more critically. The actions for which rectification is being sought remain deeply contested in many former colonies, as Collste notes. While an official policy of decolonization was adopted by most of the former colonial powers, Collste marshals empirical sources that highlight a concurrent policy of bureaucratic subterfuge taking place at the same period. That official subterfuge, he argues complicates the tidy picture of global justice often offered. It adds an epistemic element to the discussion on rectificatory justice.

Some former colonial powers have taken responsibility for their actions and others have provided compensation. Yet many states still refuse to view their role in colonization in these terms. For Collste, this reluctance signals an unwillingness to engage in epistemic fair play. Not only do former colonial

governments not want to accept the full moral burden of colonialism, they also fail to appreciate the extent to which their presence deformed the epistemic landscape of their former colonies. Many former colonies now understand themselves and their respective histories predominantly in colonialist terms. They have internalized the viewpoint of the colonizer. And this fact is a salient aspect of Collste's argument in favor of an epistemic understanding of colonial injustice.

The process of decolonization did not just absolve former colonials from additional responsibility for the welfare of their former charges. Collste proposes that the self-interested policy of decolonization also came to mold the public discourse on colonialism in the global South and in the East for generations to come. This discursive influence was generally negative, as he tries to show through testimonials. It is clear that colonialism serves to undermine the self-determination and self-interests of indigenous people around the world. What is less clear is whether we are better off conceptualizing the damage caused by colonization as an epistemic matter rather than viewing it through some other prism. Collste makes the case that a morally suspect form of self-interest, in fact guided the selective decolonization practiced by Western governments. However, his epistemic case is less clear-cut. It is not evident that colonial injustice is best addressed as a primarily epistemic problem.

Collste does not exclude ethical considerations from his account, but he does wish to concentrate on the epistemic toll of colonialism. Along the way, he grapples with Jon Elster's argument for ethical individualism, showing how his own view is compatible with a version of his. Collste also examines the work of Kok-Chor Tan on these issues, among several others. Yet it is his epistemic account of injustice that sets his view apart from the standard distributive justice accounts which he finds wanting. The notion of epistemic injustice gives his account its distinctiveness. The evil of colonialism is the original harm from which all other harms that Collste describes stem. However, Collste believes that the psychological scars of colonization are equally salient. Without attention to these, our appreciation of colonial harm remains only partial. For him, it is the concept of rectification, which conjoins the moral elements and the epistemic elements at the heart of the post-colonial experience.

Drawing on literature from post-colonial studies, Collste adopts Rajeev Bhargava's explanatory framework, which views the history of colonial rule as an epistemic problem. Collste adopts this interpretative stance for two reasons. First, Bhargava's framework includes a phenomenological element that Collste argues we too often leave out of examinations of colonial injustice. Second, the framework accords well with the experiences and recollections of Collste's

interviewees, many of whom felt the cultural/epistemic displacement described by Bhargava. The interviewees themselves explain their experiences in terms that are consonant with the idea of colonialism being a form of epistemic injustice.

Collste explicitly endorses Bhargava's definition of an epistemic framework as 'a historically generated, collectively sustained system of meanings and significance, by reference to which a group understands and evaluates its individual and collective identity' (Collste (2015), p. 87). Culture and injustice intersect for Collste and Bhargava because colonialism substitutes the vital indigenous culture with a new viral colonial culture. Collste also endorses Bhargava's definition of epistemic injustice. For Bhargava 'epistemic injustice is a form of cultural injustice. It occurs when the concepts and categories by which people understand themselves and their world are replaced or adversely affected by the concepts and categories of the colonizers' (Collste (2015), p. 87). Because the harm wrought by colonization involves the displacement of indigenous identity and cultural meaning, Bhargava rejects the idea of providing an analysis of reparations moored solely on political factors. Moral factors are relevant but only to the extent that they impact identity and culture. Collste does not seemingly go this far.

He resolutely tries to show that reparations for colonialism are required, if one wants to endorse a coherent moral position on global justice. At times, Collste implies that colonization is a past epistemic harm that is irreducible to traditional ethics. In other places, he takes a more conventional globalist liberal view. In the end, Collste's view is a forward-looking amendment to the mounting literature on global distributive justice. And despite his focus on epistemic injustice early in the book, it is the value of *political justice* itself that takes center stage later on. Reconciliation as he writes

'entails elements of both forgiveness and justice - or perhaps more correct - is a result of forgiveness and/or rectification, but the emphasis is on the relations between the parties; how to achieve dialogue and mutual understanding between victim and perpetrator in order to establish peaceful future relations' (Collste (2015), p. 156).

Perhaps the reason for his equivocation involves the fact that the harms of the colonists continue to advantage some, while severely dispossessing others. Material and economic inequality is not only a hallmark of the global political order. Inequity has also come to define and condition the internal disparities that characterize most societies. Great scarcity and great prosperity now stand shoulder to shoulder in most parts of the world, seemingly without contradiction.

Inequity extends to political influence as well and inequality today is not solely a matter of material want.

For Collste, the inequality of political influence first established by the colonials, today extends all the way to our most august global institutions. Putatively melioristic organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, exist in part due to our collective colonial past, as does the global order they manage. Collste is troubled by this because former colonies remain lowly exporters of raw materials to the global North even though in many cases these countries are now sovereign nations. Where there is industrialization, it is of a limited sort, catering mostly to global multinationals. The present political order is therefore more than a distributive injustice buried in the past. Much of our politics, he notes takes place inside the socioeconomic matrix originally established by colonialism. Collste recognizes that the rectificatory project will remain unfinished so long as the experiences of the formerly colonized are not part of the conversation. The continued injustice involves a cultural imperialism which is epistemically grounded in his view and which continues to undervalue contributions from colonial scholars.

Nick C. Sagos
Rutgers University
Email: nsagos@gmail.com

