

## AIMÉ CÉSAIRE DISCOURSE ON COLONIALISM (1950)

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Aime Césaire, known for his skill as a poet and playwright, brings the experience of a politician to the authorship of this excerpt. Born in 1913 on the island of Martinique, Césaire's work deems him one of the most influential authors from the French-speaking Caribbean. He has also been associated with the idea of "negritude" a term signifying the black youth's attempt to maintain a positive racial identity.

In "Discourse on Colonialism", Césaire critiques European colonization, hence civilization. Influenced by Marx's historical materialism, he portrays how colonization gives way to capitalism, thus creating the relations of domination and subordination. To the extent that this is so, Césaire addresses the persistent nature of the economic system called capitalism and ways in which the power of the bourgeois has and continues "to extend on a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies." He is aware that within the economic system of the bourgeois, lies the class structure which determines the institutional and ideological framework of capitalist society. Indeed, Marxist analysis points to the idea that classes are antagonistic when the places they occupy in the system of social production are such that one class obtains wealth at the expense of the other. For this reason Césaire notes that ideological inducements are used to falsify relationships of domination and subordination. In other words, he subscribes to Marx's ideology of the ruling class. It is precisely what Marx refers to as the political, educational, and legal systems existing within capitalist society wherein lies, what Marx terms, the dominant ideology of the society in question. It is in this way that the ruling class is able to maintain and impose whatever ideas they see fit in order for them to retain their control of power.

Césaire therefore provides the readers with the reality of colonization by examining the ideology at its foundation and its consequences for the colonizer and colonized. He states that it is important for one to "see clearly, to think clearly" about colonization to avoid deception by lies. For "the commonest curse is to be the dupe in good faith of a collective hypocrisy that cleverly misrepresents problems, the better to legitimize the hateful solutions provided for them" (172).

Césaire argues that colonization is nothing more than an agent of proletarianization and mystification seeking to impose its ideas upon the proletariat who unthinkingly assimilates them. However, as Marx states, this also leads to both ruled and ruling classing existing in a state of false consciousness. Let us briefly recall Marx's concept of false consciousness and Lukacs' class consciousness. An individual's perception of the world is related to his/her social class and his/her understanding of it. Most people are under a false consciousness. The bourgeoisie is usually unable to rise above this because of their aims. The colonizers sought domination and to achieve this they needed to establish and maintain the view that they were the superior race. Colonization spread the concept of racial inequality and the superiority of the European race. As Césaire states the colonizers acted on their belief that "*Christianity = civilisation, paganism = savagery*". They saw the colonized as an uncivilised and inferior people to be conquered. Therefore, they justified their brutal activities due to the inequality between the races and their supposed domination.

He points out that one must recognize that colonization was not what it was disguised to be. Colonization for the Europeans was development, the civilization of 'uncivilized' people and the "evangelization" of pagans. For many people this purpose justified the actions of the Europeans as they sought to dominate the rest of the world. However Césaire points out that we must not be deceived. Colonization affected civilization more negatively than it did positively. Césaire explains that we need to carefully examine colonialism and remove its disguise. Only then can we see it for the disease it is and which has infected European

civilization.

Cesaire upholds that, relating to the consequences of colonization, “‘Europe’ is morally, spiritually indefensible” (172). He boldly establishes a link between colonialism and Nazism. Cesaire’s argument is that people should view colonization and Nazism as equally cruel and inhumane because both have the same ideology at their foundation, that one race is superior to another and therefore should dominate. He argues that colonization was tolerated because it was directed at non-European races and at first Nazism was also tolerated. He states that people

hid the truth from themselves, that it is barbarism, but the supreme barbarism, the crowning barbarism that sums up all the daily barbarisms, that it is Nazism, yes, but that before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it. . . . (174)

Cesaire points out that Hitler embodied the notion of domination of one race over all others. He refers to the philosopher Renan and others who justified colonization because of Europe’s superiority and so-called God given task of civilizing the world. Renan summarized the existing belief when he stated that:

the regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races by the superior races is part of the providential order of things for humanity...Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race...a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; ...a race of masters and soldiers, the European race....*Let each one do what he is made for, and all will be well.* . . . (175)

No one protested to such notions and as a result they developed further and Nazism was founded on them. The reason why Nazism is viewed differently, says Cesaire, is not because of the act itself and that it was committed against mankind, but that “it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonist procedures which until then had been reversed exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa” (174). For Cesaire, Hitler “makes it possible to see things on a large scale and to grasp the fact that capitalist society, at its present stage, is incapable of establishing a concept of the rights of all men, just as it has proved capable of establishing a system of individual ethics” (174).

Cesaire argues that colonization has negatively affected not only the colonized but the colonizer as well. The colonized were ‘othered’, that is, they were considered inferior to the Europeans. Cesaire uses an equation to demonstrate this – “colonization = ‘thingification’” (177). The colonized individual was dehumanized and reduced to “an instrument of production” (177) to serve the purpose of the colonizer. As a result of colonialism the indigenous people also lost their culture. Cesaire expresses concern for the destruction of the societies and the “millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life – from life, from the dance, from wisdom” (178). He points out that there was no room for positive interaction between colonizer and colonized. Contact only resulted in “relations of domination and submission” (177).

Cesaire argues that colonization “works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred and moral relativism” (173). Cesaire provides specific example of the violence directed at the ‘uncivilized’ to further develop his point. Six accounts are referred to which clearly show the cruel; nature of the colonizer. He stresses that such acts show that colonization

dehumanizes even the most civilised 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; that the colonizer, who in

order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal. (177)

Cesaire refers to this as a "boomerang effect of colonization" and it is not unexpected. Cesaire explains that:

no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization – and therefore force – is already a sick civilization, a civilization that is morally diseased, that irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one repudiation to another, call for its Hitler, I mean its punishment. (176)

Throughout his work Cesaire reinforces the decline which faces European civilization because of colonization. He refers to it as a "decadent", "stricken" and "dying civilization" (172). He states that "a poison has been instilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savagery" (174). He notes that many others refer to the development and "achievements" due to colonialism and overlook the negative effects. However, Cesaire more so recognizes the alienation, exploitation and destruction of those who have been colonised and their societies. He suggests that the "old societies" were better before European intervention in that they were "ante-capitalist" as well as "anti-capitalist", "democratic", "cooperative" and "fraternal societies" (178). According to Cesaire we are still living within industrialized capitalist societies where the antagonistic economies of the capitalist regime are still maintained through the unequal distribution of economic resources, where the colonialist procedures remain in place, where colonialist Europe remains dishonest in trying to justify its colonizing activity and where despite the "colonized man's desire to move forward, the colonizer holds him back." Historical materialism may therefore have a contemporary significance in that it is still applicable here and now. It shows us what has taken place in the past, what is taking place now and therefore what our political policies should encompass.