

Sovereignty and Instances of Violence: Colonial and Neo-Colonial Moments

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Abstract

This essay attempts to link the questions of sovereignty and violence in the specific context of colonialism and neo-colonialism. It will show that many of the leading western “democratic” countries in the world today were colonial powers that terrorized and tyrannized over others and the latter are still struggling with various forms of non-democratic governments, the seeds of which were sown in the violence of that very colonial period. To this end Oppenheim’s idea that the term sovereignty is indeed a murky one can be supported. For the majority of the leaders and citizens of these western democracies appear to have no qualms about proclaiming their sovereignty, their aversion to the use of violence, and their commitment to democracy all in the same breath. Finally, I employ the empirical example of Cuba, all the way from the violence of its early colonization in 1492, through its neo-colonial phase and right up to its liberation in the socialist period, to make the case that Cuba is the one country in the region to have made valiant steps in the direction of securing genuine sovereignty with all the murkiness of that term.

Introduction

I am monarch of all I survey,
My right there is none to dispute,
From the centre all round to the sea,
I’m lord of the fowl and the brute.

WILLIAM COWPER, 1731–1800

To link the ideas of “sovereignty” and “violence” is not difficult, for especially in the colonial context, sovereign countries have long been known to use violence to maintain their sovereignty and simultaneously to keep non-sovereign countries non-sovereign. In other words, blinded by their Eurocentric, chauvinist and racist gazes, the sovereign countries of Europe never gave a second thought to the possibility that the colonized were also deserving of sovereign

rights, for they often saw the latter as having a “lesser intelligence or capacity for ‘civilization’”.¹ The colonizers’ world view was such that it prevented them from grasping the complex ways in which, historically, sovereignty was secured for some while at the same time it was denied to others. And there is perhaps no more compelling proof of this fact than the process of European exploration and expansion into countries that lay at the margins of the then-known world.²

Stated differently, the securing of European sovereignties was part and parcel of the process of feudal decline and the simultaneous emergence of capitalism on the continent. In the consolidation of those sovereignties the first capitalist classes appeared (merchants and traders) and it was not long before the logic of capital accumulation would dictate even further expansion, this time outside of Europe. It was all part of the primitive accumulation of capital that witnessed the scramble to own parts of Africa, Asia, the Far East, the Middle East, South America, and the Caribbean. As is known, and in the name of *democracy*, the entire enterprise saw the institutionalization of violence via various regimes of forced labour such as slavery and indentureship, and in the process it was necessary to elaborate ideologies such as Christianity, meritocracy, liberalism, individualism and even racism, as key weapons in the European arsenal of conquest, domination and control.³ So how are we to understand the concept of “sovereignty?”

Democracy and Sovereignty

To answer this question it is instructive to interrogate the notion of “democracy”, especially in the western experience, where “democracy” and “sovereignty” are seen as complimentary and not contradictory processes. Further, in terms of western understanding, these terms are so commonly assumed to describe a normal and accepted way of being that they appear not to require any definition or specification. For example, the term *democracy* is almost always invoked ideologically to describe a system in which such things as

1 Miles, Robert. 1989:37. *Racism*. London: Routledge.

2 Searle, Chris. 1992. “Unlearning Columbus: A Review Article”. *Race & Class* (33)3: 67–78.

Stevenson, Michael. 1992. “Columbus and the War on Indigenous Peoples”. *Race & Class* (33)3: 27–48.

3 Allahar, Anton L. 1993. “When Black First Became Worth Less”. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*. (XXXIV)1–2. (pp. 39–55).