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IS SCOTLAND A COLONY? THE WESTERN COGNITIVE EMPIRE AND  
THE RHETORIC OF COLONIALISM

In 2019 The Right Honourable Boris Johnson had Her Majesty the Queen appoint him as the first 'The Minister for the Union', as the first champion for the United Kingdom, a role to be held concurrently with his duties as Prime Minister. In 2020 he established the Union Unit was established to destabilise the campaign for an independent Scotland free from London rule, an outcome which most Scots support. After various internal disputes and the jettison of two heads in a few weeks, this unit is now called the Union Cabinet Committee, but its name may have changed again by the time you read this. Suffice to say this is to be a substantial operation to undermine the prospect of Scottish Independence, to oppose the will of the Scottish people, paid for by public funds, including those collected from Scottish taxpayers.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021 'All Under One Banner' (AUOB), an organisation which promotes pro-independence marches across Scotland, posted the following message on Twitter:



Controversy ensued when this post was challenged by Tom Arthur, an elected Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), which has limited devolved powers in Scotland.





**Tom Arthur** @ThomasCArthur · Jan 22

An interesting 24 hours on Twitter. For stating that Scotland is not a colony I've been called a vichy jock, careerist, naïve, house jock, uneducated, unionist, dreadful man, arrogant trougher and told I have a colonial mindset. Easy to ignore but then "quiet isn't always peace."

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Both protagonists are important players in the struggle for Scottish Independence. The last AUOB march in Edinburgh, before the pandemic, was attended by 200,000 people. Tom Arthur MSP sits for the Scottish National Party (SNP) who have governed in Scotland for the last 14 years and are the main political party for Scottish Independence.

I introduce this dispute as a framing mechanism, as evidence that the rhetoric of colonialism is a contentious matter in Scotland in 2021. It provides the opportunity to consider the idea of the Western cognitive empire in the context of Scottish Independence, as a live political situation.

In a context in which most of the participants are both white and Western, what does it mean to talk about decoloniality when the very issue of coloniality is contested and in which many argue that Scots were fully paid-up participants in the Western cognitive empire's worldview. Is it legitimate to invoke the rhetoric of coloniality, decoloniality, postcoloniality? I will suggest that this Scottish case study may be valuable in a wider critique of any who frame the themes of this conference only in terms of the matrices of race or colour, developed world/developing world or ethnic purity contrasted with and a civic sovereignty based on territory.

### **Part 1 – When is a Colony not a Colony: This is a rhetorical question...**

The Western cognitive empire depends on the adoption, absorption and assimilation of its own historiographies, its own narratives, its version of events, its own 'deposits' recycled over generations, its home truths. The Western cognitive empire is, as I understand it, perpetuated not only by the believability of its narratives, the stories it tells about the data of history, but also about the visibility of such 'ways of seeing'. If there are no contrasting narratives, if there is no contestation, there is no basis for critique.

This is more than just saying that history is written by the winners, this is to say that knowing there are other stories is a prerequisite for any critique of the prevailing historiography of the Western cognitive empire. If indigenous people simply go along with the dominant versions of events their indigeneity is eroded, but more importantly the question of decoloniality is rendered invisible through some weird version of Stockholm

syndrome, an emic agreement about the virtue and the value of the dominant version of events.

Not teaching indigenous history is one effective way of achieving this end. Although I am an indigenous Scot, I went through a Scottish schooling system and have a first degree in history and politics, I was never taught Scottish history.

What I have found is that there is a problem in the way the Academy is structured between those who study and write about Empire History and those who study and write about Scottish History. The former tend to focus on Scotland too little and the latter too much, presenting a classic Goldilocks problem. Where historians write about Scotland, in the context of the rise of the British Empire, they write about a dynamic process where the institutions and language of Empire were inchoate, fluid, evolving. Through the economic exploration and exploitation of Dutch, French and English East India Companies the formation of the Western cognitive empire assumed a global 'playing field'. In such globalising narratives of empire Scotland is inconsequential. Such texts may contain mention of Scottish imperial soldiers, Scottish imperial administrators and Scottish trade in goods, like cotton and tobacco, produced by slaves but Scotland's geopolitical context as the northern border of England is scarcely dwelt on, because the 1707 Union is part of Scottish history not Empire history.

Alternatively, where historians focus on Scotland's 'incorporating Union' of 1707, the global context can slip away and the focus is placed on a Scottish point of view. This can readily fuel the narrative that Scotland was a weak, poor, backwards country which 'succeeds' in embracing modernity and empire through unification with its much larger neighbour, England. But the pact of a Union in which Sovereignty is willingly traded for economic gain also remains simplistic because it too overlooks the prevailing geopolitical context by tending to focus on the detail of events and who did what, where and when.

There is no time for a long re-telling of Scottish history but bear with me for a paragraph. The coup (which is never called a coup) in London in 1688 deposed the Catholic King James, the legitimate tribal leader of England, Ireland and Scotland, and installed the Protestant King William from Holland. As a result of this 'glorious revolution' (a prime example of a retrospective semantic overlay) England was thrown into nine years of tribal wars with France on a global basis (1688-1697) and after a four-year break, a further round of thirteen years of war with France and its tribal allies (called the war of the Spanish succession 1701-1714). The key point is that the English refused to negotiate a Union with Scotland in 1667, 1670, 1690 and 1703 to protect their markets from the Scots in a zero-sum game of the prevailing

mercantilist economic theory. What was different 1707, in the midst of war, was the need to (1) secure the Northern English Border against Catholic French invasion and (2) for England to secure ready military access to suppress the followers of the deposed Catholic King James who were active in Scotland and became the Jacobites. When the English came to negotiate the incorporating Union of 1707 it wasn't on a whim. They came with threats - sanctions against trade and Scots who lived in England (The Alien Act 1705); they came with inducements - the previously denied access to English markets; they came with promises to defend the power of the powerful - the lawyers, the church, the landowners, and they came with the promise of a £400,000 cash bribe. In this takeover, Scots gained 45 seats out of 558 seats in the boardroom of the combined entity, the Parliament in London. A wee bit a voice, but no power, a permanent minority, an 'incorporating union' in which Scotland was...incorporated. Scottish sovereignty ended because England's strategic interests required the protection of English territorial interests against the Catholic French and the Catholic supporters of the deposed tribal leader King James. In this version of the story, all the facts remain, but questions of coloniality are brought to the surface.

The matter is settled, Scotland is not a Colony because it was part of an Incorporating Union. But what is not settled is whether the rhetoric of Colonialism is relevant to the Scottish experience. The idea of a 'one-size fits all' model for a 'Colony' is naïve. Not only did the institutional power structures of imperialism evolve from the foundation of the East India Company in 1600 to the ongoing question of who will be the next leader of the Commonwealth... so did the language. The dynamic rhetoric of colonialism includes: self-governing colonies, crown colonies, dominions, territories, protectorates, dependencies. That these later terms of imperialism were pre-dated by the terminology and process of "incorporating union". A similarly geopolitically defensive, anti-Catholic, union was implemented in Ireland in 1801. These English takeovers are only excluded from the rhetoric of colonialism by a sleight of semantics. The proximity to England, the anti-Catholic strategic, the geopolitical conflict with other European tribes may have resulted in different imperial arrangements - token representation in a Union, rather than an Empire. But Fort William in Scotland and Fort William in Kolkata (Calcutta) served exactly the same purpose, to enforce rule from London.

Where the reality of powerlessness is obscured by a debate about imperial terminology, the Western cognitive empire wins. Imperial power resides in the domination of the Interpretations of the powerful and the disruption of alternative narratives. The language of imperialism is a slippery fish, the dynamics change, the semantics change, but POWER always remains in London. This is a conclusion which historians who write, respectively,

about Empire/World History and Scottish History may well agree. But for those who don't get beyond the idea of Scots 'being bought and sold for English gold', to understand why the incorporating Union of 1707 was a solution imposed on Scotland to solve English problems, the wars with France and the defence of the 1688 coup, the geopolitical/religious context fades from sight.

## **Part 2 - Colonialism demands Collusion**

Even the name 'British Empire' is fake, a disguise for a locus of power in London which in which the public imagination is taught to buy into a 'domestic' front 'here' and a 'foreign' front, 'over there'. The success of the British Empire becomes success for Britain. But in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish industrialised mills in the town of Paisley converted cotton, picked by slaves in America, into designs stolen from Kashmir and re-branded as 'Paisley pattern', undercutting Indian weavers and putting them out of business. These Scottish mills were operated by displaced agricultural labourers for poor wages and worse conditions, as part of a globalisation in the interest of Capital, one which transcends 'domestic' and 'foreign', 'here' and 'over there'. This British Empire was not run from London so much by force but by collusion, but if force was required, indigenous soldiers colluded.

The Sikhs, the Gurkhas and the Scottish Highlanders were woven into Martial race theory. Whilst the prototype may have been the Scottish Highlanders, the Sikhs and the Gurkhas were similarly groomed as the expendable stooges of the British Empire.

Whilst complicity is uncomfortable it is exacerbated when transformed into a historiographical competition. In his 2021 book, *Empireland*, Sathnam Sanghera writes about the British Empire from the point of view of a Sikh from Wolverhampton in England.

His broad thesis is that the British Empire is racist. However, Sanghera's story provides a contemporary example of how the art of storytelling can fall too readily into avoiding complexity and the challenges of reality. Sanghera is strong on the 1919 massacre of Sikhs at Amritsar whilst omitting to mention the Gurkhas who pulled the triggers of the guns. Similarly, the complicity of Sikhs in the East India Company and their role in putting down the Indian mutiny of 1857 (the first war of Indian Independence) is overlooked. Again, the Sikh complicity in their construction as a 'martial race' is noted, but analysis of the role and implications of such collusion in the British Empire is simply absent.

By contrast, in a single paragraph, Sanghera feels competent to contemptuously dismiss Scotland for its complicity in the Empire, whilst confusingly giving the Irish a 'free pass' as white colonial victims. This presents an awkward problem at the heart of any discussion about colonialism and decoloniality. How we tell our own stories of complicity.

In so far as we engage in an argument about who colluded the most, who is the most pure, the most innocent, the most indigenous, the biggest victims, the most oppressed, we succumb to the imperial strategy of divide and rule. The British Empire was run on the collusion of indigenous people who were both victims and beneficiaries. Beneficiaries because, just as the Nazim of the Nazimat in Bengal profited from the East India company, so it is well documented that the Irish and Scottish were complicit in both Empire and the slave trade and Sikhs and Gurkhas were recruited, not press ganged as slaves into the imperial army, they fought for the empire on their own volition.

The prospect of a historiography in which authors compete in the realm of comparative complicity is invidious. Scots, Sikhs, Gurkhas, the Irish, Bengalis all have stories to tell, sins to own, but competitive complicity is a postcolonial error. The beneficiary of such a mind game is, naturally, the Western cognitive empire and its propensity to divide and rule.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

I am not advocating some glorious solidarity between the oppressed peoples of the world because such an idea quickly loops back into definitional, languaging, semantic difficulties and the ambiguity of what is meant by oppression. If Intersectionality has taught us anything, it is that oppression operates not just at an ethnic or territorial or imperial level, but within the cultural and interpersonal relations between women and men, around age, disability, gender, sexuality, as well as race. The challenge is not to smooth over difference, but to recognise that difference and diversity arise from the stories people tell about themselves, their lived understanding of their own situations. And, as Sanghera shows, it is easy to tell one's own story in a way which glosses over one's own complicity and collusion. And, to judge without listening sufficiently to other people's stories to understand their historical situations. It is like the manipulation of data on a chart – the impact differs depending not only on the data points presented, but on the time periods chosen. Whilst the Scots were Incorporated into England in 1707, that was a hundred and fifty years before the Sikhs fought for the Empire to suppress Indian Independence. History is a long game and synchronic comparisons of oppression are... literally anachronistic.

So, is Scotland a colony or not? I suggest this is an irrelevant question because it hands power to academics and politicians who control the definitions and the processes of categorisation. The language and methods of colonialism are dynamic and inherently designed to categorise and conquer, to divide and rule. I suggest a more straightforward approach to the analysis of power. Even after the devolution settlement which was designed to take the oxygen out of Independence back in 1999, Scotland still lacks power over Broadcasting, Constitutional affairs, Immigration policy, Energy Strategy, Equal Opportunities, Trade & Industry, Foreign Policy, Defence & Security, Economic Policy, Borrowing Powers & Monetary Policy, Taxation, Social Security, Pensions and Telecoms, including the Broadband which brings me to you.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we live in an interconnected world where sovereignty is always limited, or shared (depending on your perspective) and control can never be 'taken back'. This was the slogan of the Brexiteers in England who dragged Scotland out of the European Union against the will of 62% who voted to Remain. The last time Scotland returned a majority of votes for a Conservative Government was in 1955, but it is the current Conservative Government, in 2021, which decides the policies which shape Scottish futures. It is this disjunct between democracy and power which legitimises the recourse to the rhetoric of colonialism by Scots. This powerlessness is what most Scots now see, this is what most Scots now feel, we sense that we are governed by people who do not have our interests in their hearts. And this result will be reflected in three weeks-time, in the Scottish elections of the 6<sup>th</sup> of May, where Independence is the primary issue.

This is a conclusion on which both All Under one Banner and Tom Arthur MSP agree on. The difference is not about the present, it is about how they each tell the story of the past. And, more particularly, where they begin that story, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the invention of Great Britain or in the 1950's when most Scots had subsumed their Scottish identity within their British identity.

I have told you a version of this story. You don't need to agree with me. But what I know is that the Union Unit benefits by dividing the Independence movement, over issues such as this, in order to perpetuate London rule.

Although the contours of this argument are Scottish, my hope is that this case study glancingly reveals the challenges in abstractions such as "Western cognitive empire". Scotland so obviously exists within that framing. Scots are predominantly Westerners, 92% of Scots report themselves to be white, some Scots have willingly contributed to the development of both modernity and the British Empire, most Scots accept a mixed

economy in which entrepreneurs want to profit from the sale of goods and services and are willing to engage with our English neighbours, with the European Union, with the giant US tech companies, whilst retaining socialised medical services and free education – which now teaches Scottish history at school.

The Nationalism of the Scottish National Party is not based on ethnicity but territory, it is not focused on our past, but on how we can live a better, more socially just life, in the world as we find it. But at this crucial time in our Independence struggle, the rhetoric of colonialism contributes to a description of who we are and the powerlessness we feel. I share this case study as a contribution to highlighting the complexity inherent in the themes of this conference and I hope that I and other Scots can learn from your experiences. Thank you.