

Reparations & Justice: Re-Appraising Imperialism

In this post for LSE International History, John Hemmings provides a thought-provoking analysis on the history of imperialism in India and its use in modern-day politics. He argues that concepts such as reparations and justice – a theme at a recent Oxford Union debate – must be addressed in a way that is itself just. Concepts such as reparations and justice must be addressed in a way that is not prejudiced against Western imperialism (“far imperialism”), in favour of “local imperialism”, which is often ignored in discourse and popular perception.

Shashi Tharoor’s recent **speech** in the Oxford Union debate that Great Britain should pay India reparations for 200 years of colonial rule was eloquently-argued and well-received by the audience. The fact that Prime Minister Modi later endorsed the Indian opposition member’s remarks – stating that Britain should pay a symbolic amount of one pound a year for the next 200 years indicates the attraction of such an argument in India more generally. The speech raises a number of broad points on how history is received, how it is understood, and how it is used for political purpose in the modern age.

Despite the superb eloquence of the speaker, it is clear that Tharoor’s speech relied on a number of assumptions about Indian history and connotations about the concept of reparations in general. His speech also raises a number of questions about how empire is understood in the modern world and how justice as a foreign policy tool or social mechanism is applied. One need only think of the number of wars and empires that have existed in history and wonder what the statute of limitations is on this type of thing to illustrate the point.

It is, of course, quite clear that no one should defend imperialism now or in the past, nor is there any wish in this article to say that what took place between India and the United Kingdom was anything but morally wrong. However, Tharoor is logically inconsistent at times, implicitly forgiving some earlier forms of imperialism on the Indian subcontinent, while criticizing later ones. In many ways, his views are consistent with an ever-simplistic reading of the history of imperialism.

How far back?

A few pertinent questions should reveal some of the problems with his speech and the assumptions implicit. First, who was doing the colonizing? Tharoor is criticizing the British, but why stop there? Why not go further back? One could argue a number of different directions, but none seem to favor Tharoor’s stance: first, one might say that the British colonized India as it was under the Mughal Empire (1526-1857), however, this immediately presents Tharoor with a problem in the sense that the Mughal Empire was itself a foreign polity, imposed by the remnants of the Timurid-Mongolian Empire, central Asian converts to Islam into India in the 16th century.

Tharoor could argue that by the 1700s, the Mughals belonged to India as much as the Normans belonged to Anglo-Saxon England but this merely raises a second point. Do the more successful and long-lasting empires escape this reparation model? Or should we only criticize those that are not absorbed? Is “sticking around” sufficient for establishing innocence of imperialism? Are the Normans innocent of imperialism merely because they were eventually absorbed? What if a state has suffered a wave of foreign imperialists? After all, when the Mughals conquered India, they absorbed the territory of the Delhi Sultanate, a Turkic-Afghan Muslim Kingdom, which had itself invaded and ruled over Northern India between 1206 and 1526.

Perhaps he would argue that in fact the legitimate government of India was the Maratha Confederacy (1674-1818), a Hindu warrior group from the Deccan Plateau who ruled much of the subcontinent as the Mughals were declining. However, the Marathas conquered many **nominally** Muslim principalities in their expansion across the sub-continent. Were they liberating or **colonizing**

as they did so? Furthermore, the Marathas Confederacy did not include the Sikh territories in the north, which later became the Sikh Empire.

Whether Tharoor likes it or not, there had not been an India free of foreign invaders and imperial powers – including the French and Portuguese on top of the others already mentioned – for nearly nine hundred years. It is not clear if there was a single state, much less a single people, religion, or culture of whom one could say the British had conquered. Even Greek city-states shared more in common than the large number of Indian kingdoms and Khanates. The question, therefore, once again arises as to whom do the British owe reparations. And if the British should pay them so, should Mongolia, Iran, and Afghanistan also pay India reparations? What makes their invasions and empires in India less worthy of criticism?

Reparations

The concept of reparations are also deeply problematic. Tharoor relates the fact that the idea is already in existence, noting that Germany gave Israel and Poland reparations following the Second World War. First of all, this is slightly disingenuous, since he conflates imperialism with wars of aggression and genocide. They may share similar traits, one might lead to the other; but the reasons that underpinned Germany's decision to give reparations to Poland are due to very different circumstances and a different sense of ethics in politics. There are other problems, besides these, such as trying to put an economic figure on particularly seminal and indeed contentious events in history.

Tharoor states that when Britain colonized India, it held 23% of the global economy, a figure which had shrunk to 4% by the time it gained independence in 1947. This is a somewhat simplistic argument as it does not take into account the fact that the rest of the world – especially Europe and North and South America – may have grown economically, relative to India. In other words, India's economy relative to the world may have shrunk, but it's unclear that it shrunk in absolute terms. Further, the argument attempts to blame Britain for global economic forces – like industrialization across Europe – that were well beyond the scope of London mandarins and civil servants.

Justice

The idea of justice in international relations is a powerful one, and difficult to argue against. However, justice must be applied evenly for it to be itself just. One cannot argue that the huge cultural damage and human suffering that took place under Mongolian conquests across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East in the 13th and 14th centuries were any less destructive than British imperialism. Consider for example, the terrible destruction wrought on Bagdad and the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258. Tharoor might attempt to argue a statute of limitations on this but it would be – one assumes – completely arbitrary. However, such arbitrariness is open to abuse and political rather than judicial considerations. An example of this is how modern-day China uses Japan's imperial history against it as part of a regional geopolitical strategy.

This point of fairness raises an even more fundamental point of how historians and academics consider empire. In many circles, imperialism and colonialism are synonymous with Western imperialism, carried out between the 15th and 20th centuries. To some extent this critique of imperialism grew from within the West, so it makes sense that this great project begins here. However, in order to truly be representative of new global standards, should we not view non-Western imperialism with similar scrutiny?

There are good reasons to criticize British or French imperialism. There are equally good reasons to criticize Ottoman imperialism in south-eastern Europe. Consider Chinese imperialism in Vietnam, Korea or Dzungaria and how the Great Wall is deep inside China's modern borders. It has merely kept its imperialism local. Consider the Zulu colonization of the Khoisan, Sotho-Tswana, and other non-Bantu peoples, prior to their war with the British. Consider the Russian

colonization of central Asia throughout its long history. If one is to maintain an intellectually rigorous critique of imperialism, one must consider the porridge of historical invasions and occupations. Whether that can be done practically is open to question, but the principle is important.

Tharoor's points are of interest to the academic community: anything relating to justice in international relations must be considered and debated. It is part of the human search for a better global community. But to choose the British as deserving of reparations, while ignoring others, is in itself unjust. He is either quietly sidelining massive events in India's rich history or merely ignorant of them. Furthermore, his criticism of imperialism is implicitly Western-centric. We have long studied Western imperialism with a critical eye. We stand at a crossroads: we must either apply such criticism equally or move on. Separating "local imperialism" from "Western imperialism", is logically inconsistent, unjust, and slightly dishonest. It is itself Western-centric.

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