

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Decolonizing Infrastructures of Empire

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Our collection of essays appears as we approach the two-year mark of an election that delivered a white supremacist populist as president and unsettled the United States of America's self-conception as the planetary role model of liberal democracy. As political theorist Mahmoud Mamdani reminds us, "America is not just the first new nation; it is also the first modern settler state. What is exceptional about America, the USA, is that it has yet to pose the question of decolonization in the public sphere (2015, p. 608)." Given the deep imprint of the US as the normative center that shapes the overwhelming majority of social theories of media and technology across the globe, we feel it is an opportune time to foreground the question of the decolonization of the social studies of computing and digital media.

In a 2016 special issue of the journal *Media, Culture and Society*, Miriam Aouragh and I raised the question of why the Arab Spring of 2011 spurred such a flurry of interest in the "gift of the Internet" as a force to fuel social change through cultivation of liberal democratic values, with

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little reflection upon the US's and other Western colonial powers' legacy of occupation, ongoing violence and strategic interests across the Middle East, North Africa and South and Central Asia. We found that histories of colonial inequality and violence have always been at the margins of communication and media studies as a discipline.¹ The battle lines were drawn in the period between the late 1960s until the early 1980s, between Cold War expansionists touting the inherent value of what political scientist Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) called the “technologies of freedom,” versus a critical group of scholars, many calling for a democratic communications world order. The latter group included now largely forgotten Argentinian, Bolivian, Chilean and Venezuelan communications scholars such as Antonio Pasquali, Luis Ramiro Beltrán, Fernando Reyes Matta and Mario Kaplún, who at the time were responding to the US-led expansion of transnational corporations into the region alongside overt and covert military operations that culminated in the 1973 coup and assassination of the democratically elected Salvador Allende of Chile (Roach, 1997). The European and North American scholars most recognized today as advocates of the “media imperialism” or “media propaganda” theses, such as Armand Mattelart, Herbert Schiller, Dallas Smythe, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky were surely inspired by anti-colonial and socialist writers and activists in the Third World. It was through these movements for decolonization and racial and economic justice where we first see calls for self-reliance and ultimately “liberated media infrastructures to combat colonial propaganda and build transnational circuits of transport and communication (radio and newspapers) in the service of the commons (Arough & Chakravartty, 2016, p. 563)”.

At stake in these early discussions over US cultural and media imperialism were questions of the growing domination of the US culture industries, the near monopoly in global newsgathering, and growing unease in the Third World about technological reliance if not dependence (Schiller, 1992). The turn away from media imperialism to critical theories of cultural globalization, hybridity and difference — popular in the 1990s

and early 2000s — drew inspiration from a range of postcolonial theoretical influences including the work of Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, among many others, who rightly critiqued Eurocentric theories of knowledge production.

Here, we might ask what the unintended extension of this theoretical trajectory has been in the last two decades of studies of global media and society? What was lost in the afterglow of the proliferation of a more optimistic media and globalization studies emanating from the Clinton-Blair era and beyond? The post-Cold War era of a seemingly peaceful global order alongside the worldwide proliferation of neo-liberal media and computer infrastructure has further shifted interest in the fields of communication and media studies away from engagement with colonial violence and what political scientist Cedric Robinson termed "racial capitalism" (1983). The more limited scholarly interest in questions of US imperialism in studies of computing and digital media is surely puzzling given the very fact of the longest digitally mediatized war in global history and the growing significance of racialized inequalities unleashing ethno-nationalist populisms across much of the globe.

There is thus much to be gained from engaging the black radical theoretical tradition alongside indigenous and decolonial critiques, which have focused on the long history of European enslavement and colonization of indigenous settler societies, and more systematic attention paid to the centrality of global racial/ethnic hierarchies and gendered modalities of domination and resistance. The works of Cedric Robinson, Sylvia Wynter (McKittrick, 2014), Maria Lugones (2007), Aníbal Quijano (2005), Jodi Byrd (2011) to name but a few key scholars, help us move beyond the question of knowledge production alone as the focal point of our scholarship. What is perhaps the most productive drawing from these theoretical traditions at this particular political conjuncture, is the ways in which this body of scholarship connects back to anti-colonial thinkers and writers who were as concerned with re-writing histories from the perspective of the subaltern to as in creating the terms for collective emancipation.

Notes

¹ There are of course exceptions to this general recurring lacuna in the field which include (among others) Said (2008) Mattelart (1994) Boyd-Barrett (1977, 2016) and Herman and Chomsky who have been active in these debates since the 1970s. There are also a number of more recent works on media that focus on 21st century U.S. imperialism by Abu Lughod (2015), Butler (2016), Kumar (2012), Mirzoeff (2006) and Parks and Caplan (2017), among others.

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Bio

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