

In this moment of reckoning, are we discussing the apologies for colonialism and neocolonialism offered prolifically by mainstream economist...

Sanjay G Reddy, June 13, 2020

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In this moment of reckoning, are we discussing the apologies for colonialism and neocolonialism offered prolifically by mainstream economists - not least Acemoglu and Robinson (good colonialists), Romer (charter cities and countries) & others?

[@JustinWolfers](#) [@BrankoMilan](#) etc.

In mainstream economics seminar rooms of elite US & UK universities, the idea that colonialism and slavery had a role to play in *Western* industrialization has been laughed out of court. Worth considering on this 40th anniversary of assassination of [#WalterRodney](#) [@CriticalDev](#)

The likes of David Landes influentially made the facile argument that the economic rise of the West was primarily due to cultural superiority. In contrast, carefully documented work of Southern scholars such as Bagchi, Rodney, Williams & others ignored because inconvenient.

[#economichistory](#) as studied in US and European [#economics](#) depts. has much to answer for. Silences and occlusions, implicit presumptions. Rarely if ever a real debate, taking the various arguments and voices seriously, on the rise of the West and the (relative) decline of the Rest

In decades of witnessing such seminar rooms, almost never have I heard the inconvenient arguments taken seriously. I would not have demanded for them to be embraced, just to be discussed, and in a non-dismissive way! [@delong](#) etc.

Mainstream economics response to charter cities/countries work of Romer was telling: a discussion centered on whether it would in fact work to contract governance to a benevolent & capable outsider ('good imperialist') not whether people can/should give away an inalienable right

Reminded me also of the mainstream response to the prison privatization work of Oliver Hart (like Romer, a winner of the "Nobel Prize" in [#economics](#)), which too was focused only on consequentialist assessments (Niall Ferguson and me!) and utterly blind to the procedural ones.

Soft racism behind the pervasive idea of the good colonialist in mainstream economic history, and metropolitan arrogance behind the failure to read/recognize/cite a deep vein of scholarship from the "Global South" on the reasons for the divergence of West & Rest.

How often has one seen a citation on the part of elite US and European economic historians to the great Amiya Kumar Bagchi? And how many times to David Landes?
@ramakumarr @Jayati1609 @MadhuraFAS

Only an example. Underlines that there are reasons for the silences and dismissals. It is not an accident. Cannot have a real debate on these issues without taking the role of power seriously, not just "culture", avoided systematically by "metropolitan" mainstream economics.

What do I mean by "metropolitan"? Let me borrow a phrase from Acemoglu & Robinson, who invariably underwhelm, (not because the phrase is original to them, but because economists will recognize it): "Europe and its colonial offshoots".

If "culture" is to play any role in explaining economic outcomes, let us start with taking seriously the specificity of the Japanese economic system (Morishima, Aoki, Dore etc.). But culture would not be the place to start, contra Landes, in understanding the rise of the West...

A bizarre preoccupation. Thirty three years ago, I stepped into David Landes's undergraduate course on the rise of the West. I felt (others may not agree) that the contempt with which he described what he viewed as inferior non-Western "culture" was palpable. Has much changed?

The economics journals are full of papers which refer implicitly to non-Western cultural inferiority, if dressed up through quantitative measures of various kinds (e.g. they are impatient, can't concentrate, and might just be less intelligent -- actual papers in 'top' journals)..

I will leave others to dig up the examples -- they are *plentiful*. The language which often surrounds these exercises drips with implicit presumptions. What is not 'tested' or not included as an explanatory variable as telling as what is included and how it is treated.

The broken peer review system creates a hall of mirrors through which these phrenological exercises are deified, and then propounded through world academia and policy through the transmission belt that is the institutional and journal hierarchy.

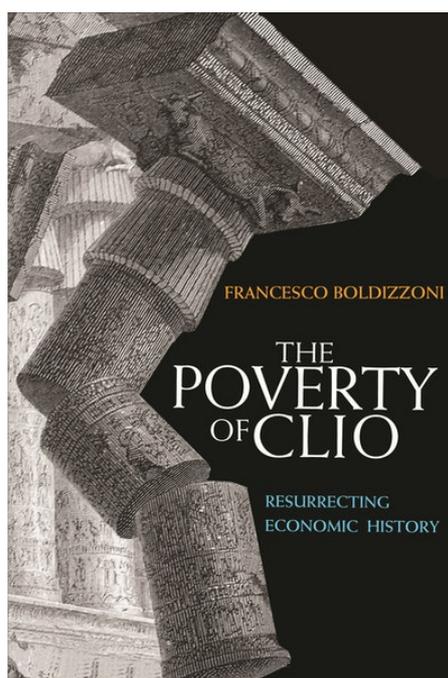
Stupefying disciplinary blinders are causally essential to these outcomes too. Preexisting or learned ignorance of economists ensures that inconvenient arguments receive no attention...

...A few selective facts (or worse, 'stylized facts') about history, politics or culture can be incorporated by the right people into their colonialism-friendly arguments & lead to their celebration as remarkable sophisticates....

...But if you are on the wrong side, erudition is dismissed as sociology! After all, as #LarrySummers informed us (was he *really* joking?) if you are a good economist you will be reborn as a physicist but if you are a bad economist you will be reborn as a sociologist!

In recent decades cliometrics has tended to be employed alongside a certain idea of what is the relevant economic theory (e.g. that the sources of economic growth are endogenous - e.g. that domestic savings matter, not plunder & profits from slavery & theft or captive markets)..

This style of economic history could best be undertaken in the leading metropolitan institutions. But there is no inherent reason that cliometrics must only be used in that way. The problem was moreover that everything else was dismissed! On which see:



The Poverty of Clio <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691144009/the-poverty-of-clio>

As a result, the insights, whatever their depth, intelligence and erudition, that emerged from Dar es Salaam or New Delhi were represented as "unscientific". No question even of reading them charitably to take what one could get of value from them...

But some of those insights were also available much nearer at hand. A decolonized economic history would wean itself away from the scientific model, while embracing

true scientificity (not just cliometrics) building on diverse insights & literatures from around the world...

...so as to incorporate a broader range of insights & perspectives, becoming self-critical about its reflex to uphold certain explanatory variables & dismiss others, uphold the voices & writing of some & not others...

..This requires work, but is needed for a different kind of a debate as to how we got here. If that kind of an economic history existed, maybe I wouldn't have walked out of David Landes's class, shell shocked, after the first lecture...

...not by Landes's brilliance (apologies) but by his outlandishness. (I took Amartya Sen's instead, which set me on another path). Indeed, maybe I would have studied economic history seriously in economics graduate school...

...I didn't, viewing it as a place where the issues I wanted to discuss could not easily be talked about, studying development, trade and other topics instead. Maybe I was wrong, but that *was* what I felt at the time...[@rodrikdani](#)

Let us hope that a new generation of economic historians and, equally, historians of economics, can right the ship. There are some signs that it is beginning to happen. [@mvsbach](#) [@cacrisalves](#) [@Undercoverhist](#) [@PMehrling](#) [@INETeconomics](#) [#YSI](#)

As far as most mainstream metropolitan economic historians are concerned, colonialism was just an expensive indulgence, like owning a summer home or a yacht, not revealing a sizable national economic interest to be had!

Acemoglu and Robinson estimate costs of colonialism but don't say it played role in rise of West due to inclusive institutions. Still those are attributed to rise of merchants from Atlantic trade. Pomeranz and Parthasarathi put colonialism at center

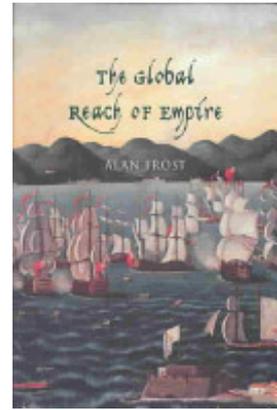
— Rakesh Bhandari ([@postdiscipline](#)) [June 13, 2020](#)

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Revealed preference for thee, not for me. Positively ahistorical since archival record and more suggests opposite: unrelenting focus on national economic gains from colonies, e.g. highest level discussions w global scope in British cabinet & Board of Trade from 18th c & earlier.

The work of the Australian historian Alan Frost is excellent on this issue, here and in more focused work on the history of Australian settlement, which places it in perspective of 18th century British global grand strategy's economic aims:

The global reach of empire "This study of British maritime and imperial expansion in the Indian and Pacific Oceans in the second half of the 18th century offers new perspectives on Pacific colonization, imperial planning, and ...

https://books.google.com/books/about/The_global_reach_of_empire.html?id=6IQpAAAAYAAJ



[@adam_tooze](#)

I now teach development in a lens that is deeply centered on economic history & on the history of economic debates, so I have made my way back to it, & try to bring in all of the relevant literature and debates, metropolitan and non-. But this is of course not about my path...

...but about the broader issues in the unexamined sociology and politics of the discipline: development & economic history are perhaps the subfields where 'decolonization' may have its greatest immediate import but there is a much broader field of ideas to consider...

The aim of the exercise in my own view is *not* to change the orthodoxy from one to another, enforced by a different power center. That would be no progress at all. Rather, it is to enable a real and meaningful contestation of perspectives, which has not been present. Indeed,...

I am not, personally, one of those who believes that every dispute can be given a final adjudication. On some questions, e.g. regarding economic history, the data available to us are sometimes compatible with more than one view (not *any* view, but more than one)..

...as in the gestalt diagram of the rabbit and the duck. This allows me to hold that there are facts but that there can sometimes also be more than one plausible narrative about the facts...

upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/comm...

...In this case, it is of the utmost importance that we listen to one another and engage in reasoned debate, at least to narrow the range of narratives that we believe can be plausibly sustained, and to see better where our different interpretations of the world...

...may derive from our different experiences & perspectival positionings (on which Amartya Sen: [jstor.org/stable/pdf/226...](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/226...)) rather than from some of us being 'smart' (a word beloved of economists) and others 'stupid'.

Part of decolonization, in my view, is therefore 'bringing erudition back in', and dampening down the 'whiz kid' culture in economics (I don't need to be so vulgar as to talk about race and gender here, although one might) recognizing that the knowledge of a Cippola,...

...a Gerschenkron or yes, a Bagchi, might, just might, in economic history at least, be worth a lot more than having a handle on the latest identification strategy (or whatever). ...

This thread has brought in a number of concerns, of the moment, and of a more enduring kind. A crucial point: it is not enough to have demographic representation of the under-represented. It is necessary to open the domain of ideas...

In this respect, I agree with those who say that diversity of perspectives & ideas is important and is not *mechanically* related to identities of other kinds. Neither is enough. One by itself is likely to have insufficient value in terms of ultimately desirable goals.

End of rant, at least for the moment. I have things to do, and so do you. All best to all.

[#decolonize](#) Come to think of it, also [#decolonise](#) [#economics](#)

[@ingridharvold](#) [@gchelwa](#) [@MkBlyth](#) [@plbds](#) [@srajagopalan](#) [@arjun_jayadev](#)

[@MalteDold](#) [@tylercowen](#)

[@PeterBoettke](#) [@EmergingRoy](#)

etc.

But decolonize it reasonably...(Like Senghor: Did he not write - if I recall, and I may be wrong - "Destroy France! But Save Paris!").