

From Obelisks to Candy Bars: Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* and the Presence of  
Colonial Forces Today

John Rogers

Humanities 104

Professor Denham

April 24, 2019

As I walked through the Tuileries Gardens in the heart of Paris, I noticed a towering structure that dominates a roundabout. What I saw was the Egyptian Luxor Obelisk, which resides in the Place de Concorde. Upon further thinking, I discerned that the obelisk is an overt display of French power through the possession of an artifact that was created on another continent. The obelisk struck me as a symbolic artifact: while France no longer extracts riches from other countries by force, it still exploits the African continent in a process called neocolonialism. I will investigate the foundational ideas behind anticolonial thought, in order to explore whether or not the desires of anticolonialists have truly come to fruition. Thus, I will take several pages to analyze Aimé Césaire's work, *Discourse on Colonialism*, which is an important basis for investigating colonialism and its surrounding perspective. The problems in Césaire's essay and today's neocolonial climate are not identical, but they are similar. Overall, the problems of the 1950s are not very different from the problems of the 2010s. Former colonies in Francophone Africa still face economic, political, and cultural control from France. There has not yet been a revolution to end colonial practices.

Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* is an essay written in 1955, describing how colonialism is an injustice against human rights that must be put to a stop. In particular, this essay will focus on the first 15 pages of his essay, because that is the portion which speaks against theoretical problems with colonialism, while the rest of the essay concerns problems of racist ideology in Europe. A man from Martinique, he references Africa throughout his work, but this refers to the broad group of people who are within both the African continent and the African diaspora.<sup>1</sup> Césaire's work is a Marxist condemnation of the colonial practices of

---

<sup>1</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, New York: 2000), 32.

capitalist Europe, and it could inspire revolution with its strong wording and important ideas.<sup>2</sup> He explains how colonialism is detrimental both to the lives of the colonizer and the colonized as he sets up his argument in the first few pages: he adopts a staunchly anticolonial stance, criticizing Europe as “morally, spiritually indefensible.”<sup>3</sup> This statement explains the problems caused by colonialism for all participants: the colonized are killed and enslaved, while the colonizers live dishonest and morally depraved lives. In fact, Césaire claims that the colonizers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were worse than the ones from the 1500s, such as Cortés and Pizarro. His reasoning for this is that while colonization used to be honest about murdering and pillaging, recent colonialism has attempted to justify its actions as a moral crusade to civilize the colonized peoples.<sup>4</sup> Césaire thus argues against the claims that colonialism is a positive influence on the colonized. He argues instead that it is clearly hurtful and that it is untrue to claim that the people outside of Western civilization are savage or uncivilized.

Césaire claims that the practice of colonialism is a force that is opposite to civilization. He states that “between *colonization* and *civilization* there is an infinite distance; that out of all the colonial expeditions ... there could not come a single human value.”<sup>5</sup> According to Césaire, colonialism is, by nature, a decivilizing force. It strips the human dignity from all parties involved, as people are either subjected to servitude and thus made into objects or they are subjecting others into servitude and thus made into devils. However, he makes clear that he is not against the interaction between the cultures of Europe and Africa. He makes sure to emphasize that “it is a good thing to place civilizations in contact with one another.”<sup>6</sup> He recognizes that

---

<sup>2</sup> In the final paragraph of his essay, Césaire demands “the Revolution – the one which, until such time as there is a classless society, will substitute for the narrow tyranny of a dehumanized bourgeoisie the preponderance of ... the proletariat (78).

<sup>3</sup> Césaire, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Césaire, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Césaire, 34; italics are the author’s.

<sup>6</sup> Césaire, 33.

societies in isolation die out; yet, he resents colonialism as the best way to place civilizations in contact with one another.<sup>7</sup> Since colonialism decivilizes societies, the best way for different cultures to learn from each other is through free choice, not through the subjugation of one place under another. This is because the act of ruling and controlling people against their will takes away the ability to express culture and exchange ideas. Rather than inform one another, one group simply is forced to copy the other's ideas and customs of behavior. He criticizes colonialism as an objectifying force, stating that colonization produces "no human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production."<sup>8</sup> Césaire reiterates his idea that colonialism actually serves to reduce civilization, rather than create it. The process of ruling and subjugating another people forces a power dynamic that is inherently problematic. When one group controls another rather than working with that group as equals, there is constant animosity from the subjugated people and a corresponding reinforcement of power by the controlling group.

After outlining the dehumanizing effect of colonialism, Césaire questions if the numbers of progress were worth the loss of life and culture. He questions the cost of the benefits that colonialism has brought: "Security? Culture? The rule of law? In the meantime, I look around and wherever there are colonizers and colonized face to face, I see force, brutality, cruelty, sadism, conflict."<sup>9</sup> The products of anything are questionable when human life is at risk, but Césaire makes the claim that colonialism is abhorrent because it produces so much suffering for such insignificant benefits as a European-like society. Later in the paper, I will point to some of

---

<sup>7</sup> Césaire, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Césaire, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Césaire, 42.

the current problems of France's political control of postcolonial countries, which continues to produce such pain. It doesn't make sense to sacrifice the well-being and culture of a people if the only benefit that they receive is a modern political institution. He references his objections, and how the positive aspects spouted by those who favor colonialism pale in comparison to the loss of life. The loss of African culture and personal autonomy is juxtaposed alongside "mileages of roads" and "the tonnage of cotton or cocoa."<sup>10</sup> These economic exploitations are like the obelisk— they involve the extraction of resources and power from other societies, and later in this paper, I will show how France continues to take advantage of its formal colonies through trade. The subtlety of this argument is salient. In his argument against the use of colonial practices, Césaire points out how colonizers use numbers to their advantage, pricing African lives in terms of how many raw materials were extracted from their lands. While Césaire fights to preserve ways of life and well-being, his opponents spout the importance of getting materials to manufacture new clothes or make candy bars.

Not only does Césaire argue that the advantages of colonialism are outweighed by the carnage and destruction it creates, but he also claims that precolonial problems have only been worsened by colonial solutions. For example, he says that, "they talk to me about local tyrants brought to reason; but I note that in general the old tyrants get on very well with the new ones, and that there has been established between them, to the detriment of the people, a circuit of mutual services and complicity."<sup>11</sup> The justice and saving that the colonizers claim to do is thus essentially symbolic – they replace unfair rulers with leaders who are only different from the old ones in name. Césaire's condemnation about the progress made by colonialism prompts him to reminisce about all the positives that were held by the precolonial, preindustrial societies.

---

<sup>10</sup> Césaire, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Césaire, 43.

According to him, “they were communal societies of the many for the few... They were democratic societies, always. They were cooperative societies, fraternal societies.”<sup>12</sup> His repetition emphasizes not only the advantages that are held by customs of the old communities, but it also implies that the current communities, born from colonialism, are full of selfishness, and suffer from a dearth of love and care for one another.

However, Césaire makes clear that his opinions, while expressing a yearning for precolonial life, do not call for a revolution to remove European influence from Africa. In fact, he states that a command to go back to what once was is both not a statement that he has made and an impossible task.<sup>13</sup> He says that Europe has cause enough destruction and suffering to make it impossible for Africans to return to their former way of life. He indicts the imperial processes that “had fallen into the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industry... and that Europe is responsible before the human community for the highest heap of corpses in history.”<sup>14</sup> Césaire’s strategy is to wash his hands of revolutionary incitement, before making a statement that is nothing short of radical: that colonialism has been the most murderous force in the history of society.<sup>15</sup> Even if he is not asking for armed conflict in order to uproot colonial influence, his list of abuses are certainly as just, if not more so, of a reason for revolution against capitalism than the similar lists compiled for the American and French Revolutions. His grievances, if factual, should be a convincing argument in favor of a disappearance of colonial practices.

---

<sup>12</sup> Césaire, 44.

<sup>13</sup> Césaire, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Césaire, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Césaire published his work in 1955, which means he was writing after the Holocaust, and thus implies that colonial practices have been a force more terrible than Nazi Germany. In fact, Césaire notes the presence of Hitler in all colonial actors at another point of his essay (35-39).

Césaire wraps up the heart of his essay by reiterating his previous statements. He argues that Europe has destroyed African progress because it “has grafted modern abuse onto ancient injustice, hateful racism onto old inequality.”<sup>16</sup> A recent historical example that provides evidence for the truth of this idea is the Rwandan genocide, as Belgian rule in that region inspired animosity between the Hutus and Tutsis, leading the two groups to erupt into a civil war in which they massacred each other.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he indicates how it is nonsense to claim that colonial control is necessary for progress, since Japan has progressed into a nation just as advanced as Europe, despite never being colonized and simply experiencing a free trade of ideas.<sup>18</sup> The portion of Césaire’s essay that I am concerned with concludes with a powerful statement: “at present it is the indigenous peoples of Africa and Asia who are demanding schools, and colonialist Europe which refuses them... it is the colonized man who wants to move forward, and the colonizer who holds things back.”<sup>19</sup> With this indictment of colonialism as an impediment to progress, Césaire sums up his argument against the hypocrisy and cruelty of colonization. Imperialism kills innocent people, it propagates inequality and racism, and it destroys culture, humanity, and civilization. These ideas are the main arguments of Césaire’s essay.

The relevance of Césaire’s work in today’s world is made clear by historian Robin D.G. Kelley in his work, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism.” Kelley, a historian who was teaching at NYU when he wrote his review of Césaire,<sup>20</sup> explores the importance and style of *Discourse on Colonialism*, drawing some conclusions that are important in the context of this paper. Firstly,

---

<sup>16</sup> Césaire, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Picador USA, 1998), 47-63.

<sup>18</sup> Césaire, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Césaire, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “A Poetics of Anticolonialism,” *Monthly Review* 51, no 6 (November 1999): 1.

Kelley opens his essay by describing how “Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* might be best described as a declaration of war... [it] speaks in revolutionary cadences.”<sup>21</sup> If Césaire demands a revolution against colonialism in his essay, and such a revolution has not yet occurred, then his points are still relevant and applicable to today’s world. Secondly, Kelley makes clear at the close of his work that *Discourse on Colonialism* is not “a roadmap or a blueprint for revolution. It is poetry and thus revolt.”<sup>22</sup> Although Césaire’s text criticizes processes that are still an unfortunate reality, an overt political revolution is not necessary to end the injustices he describes. Rather, all that must happen is a discontinuation of the injustices that are outlined in *Discourse on Colonialism*. Lastly, Kelley’s review is important because it references how “few assessments of postcolonial criticism pay much attention to *Discourse*, besides mentioning it in a litany of ‘pioneering’ works without bothering to elaborate on its contents.”<sup>23</sup> That is precisely where this essay fits into the scholarly conversation: it explores the extent to which the specific ideas in Césaire’s essay are still relevant today in reference to neocolonialism.

Now, I will see how Césaire’s lamentations are still applicable to contemporary contexts. Upon examination of French neocolonialism in Africa today, it is clear that the problems outlined in *Discourse of Colonialism* are still present to some extent through neocolonialism. For instance, while France no longer holds overt political control over vast territories and populations in Africa, it still influences African politics, which in some instances leads to the rule of “tyrants” as described by Césaire. For example, France was recently accused of neocolonialism for its involvement in shutting down a rebellion against Chadian president Idriss Déby, who is

---

<sup>21</sup> Kelley, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Kelley, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Kelley, 3.

considered a dictator by rebel groups and Chadians who demonstrated in France.<sup>24</sup> Of course, this type of situation is difficult, because ending a violent rebellion is a good thing if the leader in question is not truly a despot. However, regardless of whether or not Déby is a just ruler, French military involvement in Chad is a somewhat unfair influence. It is the kind of political control that Césaire laments in *Discourse on Colonialism*. According to Tomáš Profant, France “is capable of a military intervention to protect African leaders with close ties to the Elysée. France needs to intervene to support these autocrats in order to maintain her power status.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, European countries are capable of and willing to prop up dictators if their own well-being would benefit from it. This prevents African countries from having true political autonomy.

Furthermore, neocolonialism is present in the amount of economic control that France still exerts over its formal colonies. According to the *Journal of Third World Studies*, the average former French colony depended on France for 30.2% of its exports in 1985, meaning that “there is still a definite colonial legacy with regards to trade: decades after the fall of formal colonialism, the now independent countries still rely heavily on their former rulers for trade.”<sup>26</sup> African countries, since they were granted independence, have been forced to turn to their former colonizers for trade, participating in the same lopsided arrangements. This trade puts raw materials in Europe and finished goods in Africa, continuing to make money for Europe and hinder African economic freedom. Recently, French President Emmanuel Macron traveled to Nigeria in order to promote the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, which has the potential to open up African markets more directly to European trade, hindering the growth of

---

<sup>24</sup> Christina Okello, “Chad-France – France Accused of Propping up Chad’s Deby with Air Strikes on Rebels,” *Radio France Internationale*, March 20, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Tomáš Profant, “French Geopolitics in Africa: From Neocolonialism to Identity,” *Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2010): 54.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Athow and Robert G. Blanton, “Colonial Style and Colonial Legacies: Trade Patterns in British and French Africa,” *Journal of Third World Studies* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 230.

African businesses.<sup>27</sup> Without economic independence, former colonies are still facing the capitalist exploitation that Césaire described.

The last place that could provide evidence for neocolonialism is the presence of an identity crisis in Africa, causing people on that continent to feel inferior to Europeans due to a racist colonial legacy. Okey Onyejekwe explains how France has control over the social structures and education within its formal colonies, which means that these countries do not have sovereignty over their own culture.<sup>28</sup> This contributes to a loss of humanity due to objectification, which was also a point made in *Discourse on Colonialism*. After a speech in Dakar by former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, Mwatha Musanji Ngalasso was disheartened by Sarkozy's condescending words when he told the people of Dakar what their problems were and how to fix them.<sup>29</sup> In the eyes of Europeans, Africans are still uncivilized people who need education from a higher culture, and this is detrimental to African identity and self-imagery. To be sure, if neocolonialism is present, there is still much that needs to change in order to rid society of the horrors described in Césaire's essay.

In 1955, Aimé Césaire wrote about the problems he saw in the European colonies within the African diaspora. His condemnation of the horrors of political, economic, and cultural control and destruction became a foundational text for anticolonial and postcolonial thought. As a revolutionary text, Césaire's work is a call for action that is still relevant today due to the existence of neocolonialism. Césaire's grievances must be resolved, in order to restore the humanity of both Africans and Europeans. The Luxor Obelisk still resides in Paris, not in Egypt. African countries are still victims of European control. This leaves the following to be asked:

---

<sup>27</sup> Omele Ibukun, "Why is Macron in Nigeria?," *PM News (Nigeria)*, July 4, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Okey Onyejekwe, "Decolonization and Recolonization in Africa: The Trend for the 1980s?," *Journal of African Studies* 11, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 115.

<sup>29</sup> Profant, 55.

How much longer will people in postcolonial societies be dependent on European countries?  
How could European countries go about giving former colonies true sovereignty, if they even attempted to do so in the first place? Or, if they don't end neocolonialism, will there be an armed revolution by African countries, fighting for the recovery of their dignity and quality of life? Is there an alternative to ending postcolonial horrors that does not involve bloodshed? And is it possible for us to avoid supporting the obelisks and chocolate bars that reinforce neocolonial practices?

## Bibliography

- Athow, Brian, and Robert G. Branton. "Colonial Styles and Colonial Legacies: Trade Patterns in British and French Africa." *Journal of Third World Studies* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 219-241.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press: New York, 2000.
- Ibukun, Omele. "Why is Macron in Nigeria?" *PM News (Nigeria)*, July 4, 2018.
- Gourevitch, Philip. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*. New York: Picador USA, 1998.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. "A Poetics of Anticolonialism." *Monthly Review* 51, no. 6 (November 1999): 1-21.
- Okello, Christina. "Chad-France – France Accused of Propping Up Chad's Deby with Air Strikes on Rebels." *Radio France Internationale*, March 20, 2019.
- Onyejekwe, Okey. "Decolonization and Recolonization in Africa: The Trend for the 1980s?" *Journal of African Studies* 11, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 110-116.
- Profant, Tomáš. "French Geopolitics in Africa: From Neocolonialism to Identity." *Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2010): 41-61.