

Colonizing Culture

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The geo-strategic expansion of the American empire is an accepted fact of contemporary history.

That scholars and political thinkers have talked at length of "soft" colonization processes only establishes the uncomfortable reality that history is bound to repeat itself in all its ugliness, unless the human civilization makes a concerted effort to eliminate the use of brute force from human affairs.

Gandhi, the apostle of non-violent resistance said:

"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave."

This is an idea rendered irrelevant in the current scenario, where the mightier among the world's nations have secured the mandate to invade, with impunity, any society and any state that can be exploited for resources. Unlike earlier times, modern-day invasions are invariably camouflaged by a façade of elaborate deceit that claims altruistic intent as the motive of assault. In this new scheme of things, resistance is deemed as insurgency and dissent is unpatriotic. Those that are invaded do not have the luxury to decide between being beggar and slave. Culture would be the last thing on their minds as they struggle to stay alive. Yet it is the loss of their culture that ultimately causes the disintegration of these societies to the absolute advantage of their victors.

It is said that history is written by the victor. What is not said is that destroying the enemy is only half the purpose of a victor. The other half is the subjugation and drastic alteration of the self-perception of the enemy, so as to gain unquestioned control over every aspect of the subjugated state, its populace and its resources, so that having won victory it can get on with the "much bigger business of plunder," according to Franz Fanon, philosopher, psychiatrist, author and a pre-eminent thinker of the twentieth century.

At one level there lies the Human Terrain System (HTS) wherein social scientists are embedded with combat units, ostensibly to help the occupiers better understand the cultures they are occupying. The veiled intent is to exploit existing schisms and fault-lines in these societies to the occupier's own advantage through the policy of divide and conquer.

As Edward Said stated in "Orientalism":

"... there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge - if that is what it is - that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion."

It is extremely obvious that the HTS belongs to this second category.

At another unquestioned level, the "democratization" and "modernization" of a "barbaric" society goes on. The embedded scholars of HTS evidently find no evidence of these cultures having withstood decades of international

isolation and assault, yet sustained their sovereignty by the sheer dint of their education, culture and a well-integrated diverse social fabric. So the US sets up a range of state-funded programs, ostensibly to empower the women and youth of the target society, in the ways of democracy and modern civilization. Whether or not that suspect goal is accomplished, the badgered collective consciousness of the invaded people, traumatized by loss and conflict, does begin to submit to the "norms" of behavior prescribed by the victor, even when they are in violation of actual norms of society that may have prevailed prior to invasion.

Fanon said : "A national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systematic fashion."

Describing the psychopathology of colonization he said, "Every effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, to recognize the unreality of his 'nation', and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure."

Fanon's speech to the Congress of Black African Writers in 1959 is an uncanny description of Iraq's tragedy today:

"Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to over-simplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of a conquered people. This cultural obliteration is made possible by the negation of national reality, by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power, by the banishment of the natives and their customs to outlying districts by colonial society, by expropriation, and by the systematic enslaving of men and women

...

"For culture is first the expression of a nation, the expression of its preferences, of its taboos and of its patterns. It is at every stage of the whole of society that other taboos, values and patterns are formed. A national culture is the sum total of all these appraisals; it is the result of internal and external extensions exerted over society as a whole and also at every level of that society. In the colonial situation, culture, which is doubly deprived of the support of the nation and of the state, falls away and dies."

At times one may witness blatant violations as in the distribution of backpacks with US flags to Iraqi children.

A more repulsive example is the Skin White Serum. One of many companies engaged in selling skin-bleaching cream is Skin White Research Labs. They proudly sell Skin White Serum in "over 30 countries." There are countless other companies involved in this market, selling similar products, like Skin White Bleaching Cream and Xtreme White.

The hidden message here is that, politically, those in the culture being colonized should seek to cover their brown skin, which is in fact part of their ethnic identity, and aspire to the culture, power and influence of the dominant culture at the expense of their own.

Somewhat less subtle is the corporate colonization of Iraq's culture. An example of this is Iraqi girls carrying Barbie backpacks in the Sadr City area of Baghdad.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the dominant culture for a while now has been the US military. Since it has all the firepower and the brute force, it sets the norms and the standard. This is done by repeated suggestions through propaganda, and advertisements suggesting that the local population is of lesser worth than

the occupiers of their country in their appearance, their beliefs, their customs and their way of life.

The material practices of society sustain its culture, which is the lifeline of identity, and affirmation that the progress of a nation depends on. Social custom, production systems, education, art and architecture are a few of the visible pillars of culture.

Community and custom become the first casualties when an entire people, unequal in the face of military might, struggle to survive under perpetual fear of loss and death. In a state of vacuum, the threatened society will grasp whatever is offered by the occupier as a "better" way of living. In the process it is bound to lose its own tried and tested self-sustaining modes of living.

With the destruction of infrastructure, education, health and livelihood sources are destroyed. When rehabilitation and restoration come packaged in alien systems of knowledge (read-USAID), that, too, is accepted in the absence of what existed earlier.

Literature, art and architecture meet with more systemic demolition.

"The occupation forces [in Iraq] encouraged the rebels to loot museum and libraries. Five thousand years of history and art were irretrievably lost in hours. It is a loss for the world, not Iraq alone. Buildings can be fixed, so can electricity, but where can I find another Khalid al-Rahal to make me a new statue for Abu Fafar al-Mansoor? How will I replace the artifacts dating back to thousands of years? Iraq is altered forever."

But men and women in Iraq, "We need our art, because it connects us with what has brought us here, and reminds us of where we are headed." Dr Saad Eskander has been director general of whatever remains of Iraq's National Archive and Library and he says, "This building was burned twice, and looted. We have lost sixty percent of our archival collections like maps, historical records and photographs. Twenty-five percent of our books were lost ... It has crippled our culture, and culture reaches to the bottom of peoples' hearts, whereas politics do not."

It is not difficult to see that the extent of devastation caused by the invasion and occupation of Iraq goes beyond loss of life, livelihood and property. The historical and cultural roots of the nation have been destroyed. □□□

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