

On Collective Trauma: (Post)colonialism and Its Myths in Modern Society

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Abstract: This article details the concept of collective trauma through the lens of (post)colonialism and contends the general idea of it [collective trauma] being a set of memories that are (re)constructed by officials. It upholds that individuals in power reformulate an imagined collective trauma from instances of insecurities, humiliation, and relevant traumatic emotions that the public may not experience through which they harness the propaganda of traumatic past in motivating nationalism and strengthening governance. To further, this article will also suggest deploying the framework of *Chosenness-Myths-Trauma* proposed by Johan Galtung in drawing up the framing steps of the discourse of collective trauma.

1. Introduction

In the literature on (post)colonialism, building a national identity and promoting nationalism are typically considered to be important parts of the decolonization process, but there is considerable variety with respect to reasons and strategies. Although (post)colonial history is slipping further and further into the past, the formation and logic of postcolonial nationalism continue to profoundly impact today's society. Reviewing relevant parts of this literature will contribute toward a better understanding of the rationale behind the construction of a national identity and strengthening nationalism based on colonial trauma.

For example, In China, the semi-colonial period in the country's history, during which it was (partially) conquered by the West and Japan and lost its sovereignty, is constantly emphasized and reframed. In the view of many Chinese, this was a period in which China was attacked and torn apart by other nations that were seeking an extension of their sphere of influence and/or economic gain. The colonial past, the shame it caused, its role in narratives of Chinese identity, and its political influence have been discussed by many scholars of modern Chinese history [1][2].

However, after years of decolonization, what is the (continuing) significance of (post)colonialism in contemporary society? The pioneering work of Ann Laura Stoler provides thoughtful insights into these matters. She contends that the logic of imperial governance is still playing a significant role in contemporary society. Even though some nations no longer look back to this historical period, the imperial logic is still present and constantly influences government. Stoler proposes the concept of "duress" to refer to a kind of persistent condition caused by a nation's colonial past that can take many visible and invisible forms. "Duress" includes experienced and expected violence and anxieties, as well as the proliferation of insecurities (resulting therefrom) that influence people in ways that help to legitimate the actions involved in colonialism and imperialism [3].

Based on this analysis, I aim to argue that (post)colonialism is not merely a concept or a historical process of decolonization resulting in a break of the connection with former colonizers, it is a strategy that resolves colonial history and associated trauma into a source for nation formation, which strengthens nationalism and national identity and which invigorates the leadership. Memories that formed collective trauma are not necessarily present within the bounds of the post(colonialism). Cutting pieces from the traumatic history, collective trauma is constructed and circulated by the official, serving as a strategy to unite the nation. The succeeding part of this article will expound on how such collective trauma came into emergence and for what reasons it was developed.

2. (Post)colonialism and Nationalism

Some scholars have argued that postcolonial nationalism reveals the historical advancement of a nation. The nation has come to be what it is as it developed and grew from its history, and therefore, collective (national) identity and the legitimacy of the nation must be based on a shared, continuing history. To achieve this, the nation must emphasize the significance of the continuity of its history and culture. Some African nations do this by adopting a strategy that uses traditional culture to exemplify the role of culture in the (post)colonial context, for example [4].

Anderson Benedict, however, puts (post)colonial nationalism under a more critical lens. He argues that nationalism is constructed on the base of a discourse that generates homogeneity and that excludes and marginalized the possibility of divergent debates. In this way, it ultimately eliminates differences and strengthens hegemony [5]. Like Benedict, Fanon explains how postcolonial nationalism can develop into a form or tool of domination. The new (postcolonial) government uses the colonial memory to legitimize its rule, but then turns itself into an agent of the former colonizers and replicates injustice for its citizens again [6]. Benedict, however, sees further ways in which (post)colonial nationalism is related to hegemony. He argues, for example, that poetry and songs are used to serve specific political and economic purposes related to the building of a national community; and that when a decolonized nation fails to sufficiently support its legitimacy, nationalism becomes its fundamental ideology in an attempt to show that the government can promote social cohesion and progress [4][5].

While these authors provide profound insights into the background and rationale of (post)colonial nationalism from the perspective of third world countries and/or (formerly) colonized nations, why does this period of history (still) matter? How does it continue to shape worldviews and the world order? Ann Laura Stoler provides thoughtful insights into these matters. She contends that the logic of imperial governance is still playing a significant role in contemporary society. Even though some nations no longer look back to this historical period, the imperial logic is still present and constantly influences government.

In her book *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*, Stoler uses the concept of “duress” to simultaneously refer to three main features of (post)colonial history: its hardened impact, its long and drawn out temporality, and its impalpable restrictions. In addition to “duress”, she emphasizes three related terms: “durability”, “duration”, and “endurance” [3]. While the first two have relatively straightforward relations to “duress”, the third more or less revokes it, however – it refers to the endurance of duress and its damaging characteristics. Stoler uses a case study of classical liberalism and US imperialism to show that modern nations are still using strategies to promote certain ideologies that are essentially colonial in their form, which reveals the duress, durability, and duration of colonialism in the present day.

Another key term in Stoler’s book is “occlusion”, which refers to acts of mislabelling, dissociation, and concealment of ideas and knowledge that are part of the “occluded histories of empire” and that obscure the real nature of imperialism or colonialism. Occlusion is not some kind of by-product of imperialism – rather, occluded histories are inherent components of the foundation of the geopolitical establishment [3].

After introducing and explaining these guiding concepts, Stoler discusses the inconsistencies of (post)colonial reasoning with regards to topics such as terrorism, security, the defence of society, and race. She questions the ways in which this shapes the probability or even possibility of various futures, and the ways in which (post)colonial reasoning identifies targets and enemies [3].

Hence, imperialism and its institutions produce(d) enduring vocabularies that may seem harmless, but that tenaciously stick to people, places, things, and ideas. These legal, social, political, and cultural lexicons shape and frame the narratives about peoples, places, and history, and determine common sense and the limits of thought.

For Stoler, identifying the forces of imperialism and colonialism is a heterogeneous and complex exercise. It involves appropriating the representations of visions and practices of imperial architects and agents, locating their temporal and spatial coordinates. Only then becomes mending possible in the shadowed zones of colonial governance, smudged and illegibly blurred on the imperial maps. The

alternative is the political choice to represent these zones in a way that pre-emptively justifies future violence and abandonment.

In this analysis, both the logic and strategies of imperial governments are closely related to fear, insecurity, and injury. The governors use these emotional responses to stimulate national insecurity and collective identity. Why are they crucial in the process of building collective identity, in stimulating nationalism, and in supporting the nation? Terror management theory, which links existential fear or “terror” to self-esteem, further explains why and how collective trauma matters.

3. Terror Management Theory and Collective Trauma

Humans deal with the ever-present threat of death and the fear or terror resulting from the realization of one’s inevitable death by means of “terror management”. To manage the fear of death (which remains unconscious most of the time) people rely on the “immortality systems” provided by their cultures. These include “symbolic immortality”, the belief that one is part of something greater than oneself, as well as beliefs in more “literal immortality”, that is, some kind of life after (physical) death. It has been shown that culture and cultural icons, such as signs and symbols, play significant parts in keeping this terror at bay. Once children outgrow the initial security provided by caretakers and realize that death is inevitable and irreversible, a psychological commitment to their culture(s) takes its place. In the cultural worldview, faith and self-esteem go hand in hand in managing existential fear – the former being the provider of “order, meaning and permanence”; the latter a “feeling of personal significance” [7].

Our fear of death can be managed by our belief in cultural eternity, because this belief provides stability, reducing the need to worry about death and disappearance from this world. Terror Management Theory provides a theoretical basis explaining why people depend on a stable (imagined or real) culture or nation. Like the call for insecurity in Stoler’s postcolonial theory, a sense of security is found in the order of the nation, so the stability of the nation becomes the (existential) security of the self. However, faith cannot completely resolve our fear of death. We humans feel fully secure only if we consider ourselves valuable contributors to the world according to our world-view.

Self-esteem gives people the sense of being of value to a meaningful universe, thereby keeping their deepest fears at bay. The link between self-esteem and psychological security develops in early childhood with the experience that kind acts result in parental love and protection, while wrong acts cause the loss of that love and protection leading, in turn, to anxiety and insecurity [7]. These ideas are then cemented throughout people’s lives by the cultures they are part of, promising rewards to those who do good and punishment to those who act badly, either here on earth, or in the afterlife, or both. People try to live up to the expectations set by cultural roles and values that are embedded in a symbolic reality in which cultural identification is the key factor in transcending the threat of death [7]. Self-esteem, then, is one’s fortitude, but it is hard to gain (or hold on to) self-esteem when others in the cultural mainstream see a person or their social roles in a negative light.

We face many threats to our survival and there always are many terrors and dangers outside, but we have evolved to deal with those. Terror Management Theory tells us that when people feel external crises all the time, they will become more dependent on their culture and systems that can stabilize those, and as long as they work together in service of this cultural system, they can derive their own value and self-esteem therefrom and thereby suppress fear and insecurity.

As suggested by Stoler and terror management theory, national insecurity and occluded histories provide the foundations in the colonial period, which has been adopted in contemporary society as a method to spread the formation of ideology. However, it is yet unknown how collective trauma is framed. To fill that gap, I propose to adopt Johan Galtung’s theoretical framework of *Chosenness-Myths-Trauma* to explain how traumatic history can become the fundamental source of national identity and nationalism.

4. The Making of Collective Trauma: Chosenness-Myths-Trauma (CMT)

According to Galtung, political leaders always select useful elements from history to construct a

meaningful identity, but the legitimacy of this selection and construction depends on a higher authority, such as history or God. He identifies six building blocks that are needed to achieve this end, namely a collective self (self-love), a collective other (trauma), a history (myths), a geography (promised land), a transcendental principle of good (chosen people), and a transcendental principle of evil (danger); or in his words:

“We’ love ourselves, hate Other, view Time in terms of glory, see land as ours, God as ours but Satan as theirs; whereas They inflict trauma on us, but Time gives us myths, Space gives us land, God chooses us, whereas Satan may be dangerous, lurking in the dark.” [8]

How do “we” prove that we are worthy of being chosen? By fighting that “satanic” element in ourselves, by cleansing ourselves of any inclination in that direction. By fighting “them” we fight Satan in ourselves and prove ourselves worthy of being chosen. These six building blocks together are an archetype entering the collective subconscious from somewhere, either by diffusion from other identity constructions of the same kind, or intentionally through a process of production and marketing that meets a collective need for identity [8].

With reference to the CMT model, Zhang explains that even though a group may have experienced several traumatic episodes, the group’s identity is largely shaped by only one specific trauma, a chosen trauma that epitomizes the group’s unfathomable feelings of despair and victimization, its (perceived) threats and (experienced) fears (i.e. a transcendental principle of evil) [1]. Such a chosen trauma reflects the past generation’s inability to accept losses, to recover, to heal the wounds to the group’s self-esteem, and to overcome humiliation (a transcendental principle of good). Although a group does not purposely choose to be victimized or to lose self-esteem, it does choose to appropriate and exaggerate the past event.

In case of China, duress, occlusion, and emotional responses to (post)colonialism can be observed in the interplay between collective trauma and the discourse supporting the legitimacy and authority of the party. For decades, nationalistic myths have been grafted into China’s collective memory. The myth of the Chinese people as “victim”, which has become an official narrative, has been assembled from memories and reconstructions of painful events in the past, especially in the colonial period. During the nineteenth century, Western nations subjected China to their aggressive imperial ambitions and economic exploitation. Atrocities committed by the Japanese caused unfathomable suffering during the Second Sino-Japanese War, and Japanese chauvinism and historical revisionism continued in the post-war period. Additionally, Western countries have long been blatantly condescending in their attitude towards China’s rising economic and political power. The collective enemy of the West and Japan from the colonial period, together with the sense of humiliations it entails, effectively arouse the essential need to protect the nation.

As claimed by the CMT theory, the establishment of a national identity requires a collective self and transcendental principle of good. At the start of the early 1990s the Party used the new phrase “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴) as a slogan to unite the nation. It uses the word “rejuvenation” (复兴) to emphasize the Party’s objective to restore China to its former glory and position. The party’s mission changed into a more nationalistic direction, away from the realization of communism. Now president Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream” continues the CCP’s practice of providing the people an optimistic view of the future [1]. Under this context, citizens are said to be the selected one who can restore the traumatic past under the guidance of the government.

5. Conclusion

(Post)colonial nationalism is key to decolonization and reformation of the solidarity of a nation. However, in contemporary society, colonial history provides a steady stream of traumas and crises that feed the construction of national identity. Collective trauma, which thrives in our existential terror and the need to obtain self-esteem, is socially constructed and is positively employed as a political strategy for modern society to boost nationalism and enhance national identity. Through the CMT framework, the building blocks of collective trauma and its myths to the society are exhibited and made comprehensible. Instances such as the invasive other during the colonial period are the external

enemy that tremendously threatens the security of the nation and ultimately our existence. We are selected to overcome this threat – this trauma. Gravitating unity among us utterly recaptures our glorious past, which we'll then harness to anchor our value of existence to the world. Respectively, future research can be made to showcase this framing strategy and probe deeper into its application to different mediums, such as social media, cinema, and significantly more.

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