

Postcolonial Reflections on the Occasion of the Present *Corona* Pandemic

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The following is neither new nor original. Others have proposed these thoughts long before the *Corona* pandemic hit the world: historians, virologists, colonial and postcolonial activists, descendants of victimised societies. These reflections do not aim at belittling the present crisis, whose effects on the lives and livelihoods of millions of people around the world – especially on the poor and wretched, and especially in the *Global South* – we are only beginning to grasp.

In times like these, historians have always tended to look at historical precedents, examples and parallels. These days, they are studying and analysing e.g. outbreaks of the *Black Death* from the European Middle Ages in the 14th century to Marseille in 1720, cholera epidemics in the 19th century, the 1918/19 (Spanish) flu pandemic, and the Western African Ebola virus epidemic of 2014ff. And in times like these, those of us who have the fortune not to be overworked in hospitals, essential industries or services but are confined to privileged self-isolation in middle class flats, houses or living-rooms might even have more time for this type of reflection.

In the context of studying the Swiss involvement in slavery and colonialism, especially in the Caribbean, I have come to realise how important it is for the bearers of historical conscience and identity in that region that we in the West understand that the unaddressed and unrepaired crimes of Transatlantic slavery and colonial exploitation were not the first great catastrophe in their part of the world but the second. Prior to colonial slavery and closely linked with it, there was what a few historians have called the *American Holocaust* and many the *Native or Indigenous Genocide*. It may have claimed around 50 million lives according to some historical studies, which would make it the largest human mortality event ever, relative to the global population.

How are we to explain the demographic collapse of up to 90%, which the Euro-American contact caused among many of the continent's indigenous peoples? Of course, to a large extent by the effects of what has been so soberly and innocently called the *Columbian Exchange*. It was not only animals and plants that moved west across the Atlantic (horses, pigs, wheat, barley) and east (turkeys, guinea pigs, potatoes and tomatoes), but also diseases, which – apart from one form of syphilis – travelled westward with viruses (flu, tuberculosis, cholera, bubonic plague) and bacteria (typhus, yellow fever, measles, smallpox).

But it was not only the onset of those diseases that decimated indigenous communities across the Americas because their immune systems could not cope with them. The spreading of the diseases mentioned was not intentional and cannot be laid at anyone's feet, but colonial strategies, tactics, and policies can. From the first atrocities against the Arawak by Columbus on *Hispaniola* in 1492 to the massacre at *Wounded Knee* in South Dakota in 1890 (and beyond), the European conquest and settlement brought war, violence, exploitation, enslavement, forced labour, mass killings, displacement and disruption upon the indigenous people of North, Central and South America and of the Caribbean.

For the Caribbean some historians have argued that between 1492 and 1550, slavery was just as decisive a killer as were diseases imported by the Europeans. Be that as it may – the indigenous Caribs, Arawak, and Taino nearly ceased to exist, and – in times of *Corona* – it would be fitting that we, members of the middle-classes in affluent and highly-developed countries of the West, ponder on the *Great Dying*, as the period of demographic collapse in the Americas has been aptly termed. What was it like in those years to watch more and more members of your community or village or tribe succumbing to a disease you did not understand? How did you perceive the demise of your civilisation, without appropriate health systems, ICUs, medical testing, bail-outs, expert advice and the like? What must it have felt like to learn that your oppressors told you it was all "God's punishment" for your "bestial behaviour"?

I firmly believe that to ask these questions (and many more in that same context) can be considered a manner of remembrance – and mourning, for which it is never too late, not even after five centuries.

And finally, we should not forget that both *Native Genocide* and *Great Dying* opened up new spaces: geographic spaces by allowing unhindered expansion and settlement by Europeans into the Americas; ideological spaces by subscribing to the idea of an alleged superiority of some races and religions over others; economic spaces by replacing indigenous by African slaves, thus creating an extraordinarily successful 18th century business model: that of the Transatlantic slave trade plus plantation slavery. Its gigantic European profits have benefited us to this day.

St.Gallen (Switzerland, 1st April 2020, day 17 of the Swiss lockdown)