Identity: the perpetually evolving relic of an imperial past

The study of imperial history is often approached from a distant and sanitised perspective. The concept of imperialism is largely viewed by apologists and critics alike as a relic of the past and a closed chapter in national and global history. Yet the study of empires is one of a great emotional and subjective nature, as the effects of their very existence permeate the modern world and evoke an incredibly visceral response. This dichotomy is a stark reflection on the highly complex and intricate nature of empire, yet it stems from a much simpler and far more human aspect of the imperial experience. This essay aims to explore the fundamental cause and effect of such an experience through the lens of culture and identity.

Global systems

Personally, I find the most intriguing approach to post-colonial discourse to be Edward Said's musical paradigm[1]. Extrapolating his analysis, a pre-colonial global system may be viewed as an atonal polyphony, a tapestry of independent, contrasting soundscapes coexisting in a system unbound by strict harmonic convention. Here, the lack of a dominant concept of order makes superficial any dissonance or difference between voices – their differences are simply a fact. Translating this to the real-world context, cultures can thrive simultaneously out of respect for the established relativistic relationship between them. The lack of centralised regulation allows them to define themselves in their own terms. The mid- and post-colonial global systems shift towards a symphony, in which several voices still contribute separate melodic and rhythmic motifs but must ultimately give way to a dominant line, relative to which each voice is defined. Every voice is tethered to a strict universalist framework of harmonic order; dissonance now becomes a tangible, characterizable quality that draws attention to itself, and must, if the laws of the symphony are to be obeyed, eventually subordinate itself to the dominant voice, converging towards mimicking – **not** replicating[2] – it.

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[1] Outlined in further depth in <u>Music and Imperialism</u> (Harrison, 1995)
[2] This distinction is necessary, and we shall expand on it later.

The colonised

Since the inception of formal imperialism in the ancient period, its most radical principle has undeniably been its definition of identity. The imperial *modus operandi* is to approach small, sometimes informal, polities and amalgamate them into a larger unit solely because it is easier to govern a single centralised colony than multiple decentralised ones. This process disrupted local cultures by arbitrarily – some may argue, recklessly – grouping communities purely by their geographical proximity[3], forcing them to bear a new label *in terms familiar to the colonising force* at the expense of existing local identity. The combined political transition from autonomy to colonial government makes these local identities as they existed on the eve of colonisation totally irretrievable. In hierarchically-focused empires like Britain, the forged identity is not a complete and distilled transplant of perceived "Britishness" but rather a reorganisation of an unfamiliar race into familiar structures; Bhabha (1984) suggests the concept of colonial mimicry, a reconstruction of "[the] Other … as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (emphasis original). In assimilation-focused empires like France and Portugal, the intrinsic cultural, technological and linguistic devices of peripheral societies are not sufficiently compatible with those of the metropole to articulate a carbon copy of its culture, much like the unique timbres and tonal qualities of different instruments in our symphonic analogy. Instead, the cultures undergo a partial syncretic fusion, often leading to the genesis of creoles and regional dialects of both cultures' languages that are still in use today.

This process also propagates stereotypes that create a discrepancy between expressed and perceived identity. An anecdote by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie illustrates this well; never having needed to think about race growing up in Nigeria, she describes how she "became black in America," with misguided stereotypes of the labels "black" and "African" corrupting her peers' interactions with her[4]. The idea that skin colour is more than a benign aspect of identity – or even an aspect of identity

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[3] One need not look any further than the African continent for a prime example of this: the 19th-century 'Scramble for Africa', notorious for its careless re-drawing of borders which still apply to many African nations today. It left countless communities separated and arbitrarily redressed the balance of power between ethno-linguistic groups, which remains a root cause of many conflicts and atrocities since decolonisation.
[4] (Reese, 2018)

at all – stems from the imperialist craving to anthropologise and categorise their subjects into discrete labels[5].

We shall briefly expand our musical paradigm in this context. The composer (the coloniser) takes unfamiliar material and incorporates it into a work governed by his native framework of music theory. He utilises melodic, harmonic and rhythmic motifs that, when performed to a narrowly selected audience with the same cultural references, may evoke a visceral, emotional response, perhaps alluding to some shared memory or experience. If the same piece is played in the community from which the thematic inspiration was taken, it may be recognised but as a heavily accessorised, perhaps even mutilated, motif. The same cultural references bringing tears to the eyes of home crowds will mean nothing elsewhere. It is this universalism that forms the basis of cultural re-modelling under imperial rule.

The colonisers

Empire is not a one-way street, however; it bears equal influence on the identity of the colonisers. A common thread of present-day diplomacy and communication is a hostility and aggression directed at an ex-imperial power by an ex-colony out of association with that nation and its past actions. Eagleton (1990) describes how the oppression of certain identities (social, sexual, racial) in both the metropole and the peripheries "force[s] us to lavish an extraordinary amount of attention on these things", which he considers generally irrelevant, preferring to "take our being British for granted and think about something else for a change." Modern Britons are not responsible for colonialism, yet their ancestors' insistence on drawing attention to identity condemns them to judgement on this front. Yet even "our being British" is itself a product, to some extent, of empire. Britain, like other metropoles, arose from a union of localities with individual identities that have been sublimated into a single, dominant state out of necessity. Who still pledges themselves to the

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[5] It is curious to consider that, had modern science preceded imperialism, conversations around skin colour would be distant from vernacular speech, mainly restricted to scientific and medical discourse, even then falling under a relatively narrow specialisation. With objective scientific fact irrationalising colour's connotations of racial hierarchy, the consequences of colonialism would have looked unrecognisable.

kingdoms of the English Heptarchy, for instance? Individual, local identities must become secondary – a nationalisation of culture, perhaps – if empire is to succeed, for a projection of power and hierarchical order on other societies requires some standard to impose.

Returning to Eagleton's arguments on collective responsibility for Britain's imperial past, justified though his grievances are, it cannot be forgotten that metropolitan identity and culture is so closely shaped by the fruits of colonial exploits. Early modern European empires were operated by chartered companies attempting to dominate foreign markets. Often connected to the corporatist governance of cities in the metropole, the profits from the colonies were often channelled into the development and complete urbanisation of these cities. In the case of Britain, port cities such as Bristol and Liverpool notoriously owe their growth to the slave trade, a fact that did not escape the notice of Black Lives Matter protestors in 2020. Tharoor (2016) delves further into the development of two key British institutions as a direct result of colonialism: the Union and the monarchy. Scottish participation in the British colonial project is claimed to have lifted it out of poverty and strengthened the Act of Union (1707), whilst the Crown Jewels, famously a symbol of royal power and wealth, boast the Koh-i-Noor diamond, seized by the East India Company after their defeat of the Sikh Empire. The details of its acquisition remain a point of contention, but the fact that the most prized state artefact is such an explicit reminder of the woes of colonialism prompts many to indict the current royal establishment as proud of its plunder. Surely, then, Eagleton's proposal to "take our being British for granted" collapses; the examples presented above barely even scratch the surface of what modern British society owes to its forebears, again, not purely out of their actions but their insistence to define themselves by them.

The changing nature of regional, national and global cultures and identities discussed here is arguably the most permanent and radical marker of the imperial experience. Whereas the economies and demographics of post-colonial societies – tangible, quantifiable affairs – may return to higher pre-colonial levels with some effort, it is far more difficult to predict success in efforts of cultural revisionism at any level. The very nature of colonisation, an almost taxonomical desire to re-structure

and displace, divide and conquer, has forced the abandonment of isolated communal society in favour of a highly complex, delicately strung network of nations and unions. The direct product of empire is complete cultural shift, a societal selection pressure mandating nations and peoples to conform to the contours of an ever-changing modern world under pre-defined strictures. The wheels of empire may have stopped turning but they shall forever power the engines of identity.

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