The Colonization of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire

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A great deal of academic work has focused on the question of how Europe came to possess the temporal culture that now defines the ‘Western’, and Westernized, world’s view of time. Over the course of the twentieth century, numerous scholars have detailed—from the monastery to the factory—the social and economic factors that shaped the dominant perception of time in modern industrial-capitalist society. But how did the ‘rest’ of the world, especially the ‘post’-colonial world, become subject to this same view of time? Who were the first emissaries and cultural agents of the clock’s regime to clock-less societies? And by what means did they gain a following amongst the latter? Although we have attained some measure of knowledge regarding the role of time as an instrument of class struggle in Europe, we have benefited comparatively little from an understanding of its instrumentality in the colonial setting. Such a path of inquiry leads back to the period of nineteenth-century European settler-colonial expansion, during which projects to displace and reform ‘alternative’ temporalities outside Europe were first overtly deployed as a means of establishing control.

Time is powerfully correlated with culture and identity. By the beginning of the nineteenth century a wide cross-section of British society had strongly associated the notions of ‘civilization’ and ‘true religion’ with the accurate measurement and profitable use of time. Their specific experience of time, however, was not a human universal but a cultural construct, deeply embedded within the clock-governed milieu of industrial-capitalist and Christian society. Consequently, in the British colonies, the portrayal of Indigenous societies as being ‘time-less’ came to operate as a means of constructing an inferior, ‘irregular other’. By way of two case-studies—located in the nineteenth-century British settler-colonies of Victoria (Australia) and the Cape Colony (South Africa)—Nanni documents the manner in which missionary and settler-colonial discourse constructed the notion of ‘time-less’ indigenous cultures. Such apparent inferiority, he argues, reinforced the depiction of Indigenous societies as culturally inadequate—a representation that helped to rationalize and justify their dispossession in the broader context of settler-colonization.

The negative portrayals of ‘Aboriginal time’ and ‘African time’ also cast these societies as in need of temporal improvement. During everyday colonial encounters—and particularly during the course of the evangelization, education and employment of Indigenous peoples—colonial societies vigorously pursued the elimination or reform of alternative and incompatible temporalities. This project highlights some of the everyday means by which British settler-colonists and Protestant missionaries sought to remould the rituals and routines of colonized societies. The evidence provided suggests that cultural colonization in the British settler-colonies was configured—to a greater extent than previous understandings allow—by an attack on non-capitalist and non-Christian
attitudes to time, whose perceived ‘irregularity’ threatened the hegemony of European conceptions of ‘order’ with alternative and conflicting attitudes to time, work and productivity.

The process was neither homogeneous throughout the colonies, nor uncontested by Indigenous societies. On the one hand, settler-colonialism’s diverging economic objectives in the Cape and Victoria—shaped as they were by economic land/labour requirements, demographics, and localized visions of race—defined the various manners in which Europeans viewed, and sought to colonize ‘Indigenous time’. On the other hand, Indigenous people in both settings often successfully managed either to defy the imposition of clock-governed culture, to establish compromises between the new and old rhythms, or to exploit the temporal discourses of their self-styled reformers. This suggests that time in the colonial context may be seen as a two-edged sword: not only as an instrument of colonial power, but also as a medium for anti-colonial resistance.

The ‘colonization of time’, not just of territory, thus proves to have been highly instrumental in the process of asserting and enforcing European possession over colonized peoples’ lands. Furthering our understanding of this process helps to explain why, amongst societies that experienced and physically survived European imperialism—especially in urban, industrial and agricultural centres—we find that ‘alternative’ attitudes to time have been, and often continue to be, marginalised, maligned and/or assimilated within the temporal landscape of the dominant society.

By analyzing the discursive constructions of a temporal other, and by documenting the everyday struggles over the dominant tempo of society, this project highlights time’s central role in the colonial encounter and seeks to further our understandings of the process and implications of settler-colonization and Christianization.