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Review Essay

Colonialism: Taking the Good with the Bad

Legacy of Violence: History of the British Empire, Caroline Elkins, Alfred A. Knopf, 2022, pp. 875, $26.49 hardbound.

Against Decolonization: Taking African Agency Seriously, Olufemi Taiwo, Hurst & Company, 2022, pp. 270, $28 softbound.

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Decolonization used to mean turning a colony into a self-governing entity. But this term has subsequently been captured by a leftist "restorative justice" project that has twisted the meaning of decolonization into something else. Restorative justice decolonizers seek to "emancipate" those whom the left defines as "victims" of European imperialism and colonialism. Olufemi Taiwo has labelled the original meaning "decolonization1" while he calls the second (mutated) meaning "decoloniztion2." Taiwo's book unpacks and explains this mutation of the decolonization concept, and also offers an important critique of how this mutation has turned decolonization into a very fashionable industry for activist-academics.

Taiwo's *Against Decolonization* is one of two books recently published which flow from the contemporary zeitgeist making "decolonization" into fashionable topics for the chattering classes of the Anglo world. But because these two books take very different positions on decolonization they serve as neat foils to each other. Taiwo's book develops an argument against Decolonization2, whereas Elkins's narrative, *Legacy of Violence: History of the British Empire*, is simply another example of an anticolonial "attack book" that embeds itself within the rhetoric of Decolonization2. So where Taiwo is a critical

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academic who grapples with what he calls the "sloppy" thinking of Decolonization2, Elkins eschews critical thinking in favor of wallowing in today's academically (and journalistically) fashionable ideology of Decolonization2.

Elkins's book is a perfect illustration of a genre of writing that has come to characterize the Decolonization2 mindset. As with other publications in this genre, Elkins's book conforms to what the Decolonization2 model demands—it is all about cataloguing the wrongs of colonialism and European imperialism. And Elkins has put a lot of work into compiling a long list of "wrongs" in her construction of this emotively-laden villain-victim morality tale. The resultant "attack book" will of course appeal to activist-academics because her catalogue of "British Empire wrongs" provides Decolonization2 restorative justice warriors with much material to be used for chattering class moralizing. The recipe is predictable.

Elkins deploys two core arguments. The first is simply a rehash of a core theme in the Decolonization2 narrative about the British Empire. Elkins reproduces this poststructuralist anticolonialism to criticize how Britons during the Empire period apparently saw themselves "incorrectly." Elkins contends Britons misunderstood their Empire because she claims their self-representation of Empire has been grounded in ideological untruths which have portrayed the Empire as doing "good things" (e.g. civilizing the globe by spreading democracy, rights, rule of law, and economic development). Elkins is obsessed with demonstrating this "civilizing mission" idea is untrue and, in line with the Decolonization2 narrative, racist because it deploys the logic of civilizational hierarchy, a notion that Decolonization2 finds abhorrent.

Elkins's second argument is that instead of seeing Britain's empire as a good thing, it should be deemed an inherently villainous phenomenon because this Empire was all about violence perpetrated by colonial agents (villains) against the colonized (victims). Elkins ties this villain-victim binary to her notion of "legalized lawlessness," drawing a picture of an Empire awash in violence, mostly by focusing on selected events while ignoring mitigating or unhelpful

facts. But Elkins's "legalized lawlessness" concept fails to convince because even her selected facts cannot hide the surfeit of evidence that Britons ran a liberal empire governed by people obsessed with the rule of law and documenting their actions.

The "empire-as-violence" paradigm grew out of Elkins's earlier research on the Mau Mau guerilla war in British-Kenya, which was used successfully by former Mau Mau detainees who sued the British government. *Legacy of Violence* resulted from Elkins expanding her Mau Mau research to other counterinsurgency wars fought by Britain after World War II. Britain fought six of these (in Greece, Palestine, Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus, and Aden), but rather disingenuously, Elkins uses only four of these counterinsurgency wars to construct her argument that Britain's empire was actually grounded in the sort of nasty violence associated with counterinsurgency warfare. Focusing on this one particular type of war provides precisely the sort of "evidence" Elkins needs to attack Britain's empire for being violent and brutal: counterinsurgencies are always especially nasty affairs, given that both sides deploy "terrorism" and that legal niceties become strained when civilian populations are indistinguishable from fighters. The point is, counterinsurgency warfare was not characteristic of conflicts across the entire British Empire, hence this genre of warfare cannot be generalized the way Elkins seeks to do. Claiming the sort of violence associated with this type of warfare lay at the heart of British imperial governance is either a conceptualizing error on Elkins part, or a deliberately false construction.

There are a number of problems with how Elkins uses these counterinsurgency wars to construct her "empire-as-violence" and "legalized lawlessness" claims. And these problems tell us much about the methods of narrative-construction deployed by activist-academics when they write "attack books."

For one thing Elkins avoids discussing Britain's counterinsurgency wars in Greece and Aden—perhaps because they do not comfortably fit the narrative she is trying to construct. Much more problematic is the fact that Elkins fails to acknowledge that counterinsurgency warfare was a core feature of the Cold War period. Nineteen countries fought against significant insurgencies during the Cold War

period. Not mentioning that all nineteen deployed the same counterinsurgency methods to defend themselves undermines the entire argument in Elkins's book. The "nasty methods" Elkins describes were not limited to Britain's empire.

There is a whole body of work on revolutionary guerrilla warfare written by those who launched these wars and those that fought against them who Elkins seems woefully unaware of. There is also much political science literature analyzing these wars that Elkins doesn't consult. This lack of familiarity with the relevant literature becomes evident in her naïve moralizing about Kenya, Palestine, Malaya, and Cyprus. It is just plain wrong to suggest this genre of warfare is a peculiarly British phenomenon or has anything to do with a specifically British style of governing or maintaining order in its empire.

What Elkins has read are the Empire's archival records, and given that her book focuses on Britain's counterinsurgency wars, her research is necessarily skewed in favor of records written by those administrators, court officials, and security force members who were documenting these wars. This gives the impression that the British Empire was primarily a violence machine. Had Elkins's archival research focused on the careers (and memos) of officials involved in other aspects of empire (trade, education, health, and infrastructure) the picture presented by Elkins's book would have been quite different.

There are other sleights of hand. Elkins mentions conflicts in other British colonies as if these also led to counterinsurgency warfare. We are told that, post-1945, Britain faced rebellions in Jamaica, Grenada, Guiana, and Uganda, but these never led to nasty counterinsurgency wars or to anything like the sort of strategies and tactics the British had to use when faced with guerrilla or terrorist attacks in Greece, Palestine, Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, or Aden. The reality of the Empire was complex and so Britain necessarily used different methods (policing, military, and negotiation) when facing different situations. You would never think this was the case from reading Elkins's book, which tries to create the image of an Empire filled with people fighting brutal repression from one end of the Empire to the other.

This was never the case, and if Elkins does not know this, she ought to know it. After all there were fifty-seven colonies, dominions, and protectorates in Britain's empire. Yet Elkins's "empire-as violence" model is built upon her mentioning only eleven cases of conflict that occurred over sixty years.

Another problem with the Elkins narrative is revealed by the organization of the book. In order to demonstrate that the Empire's defenders routinely used the legalized lawlessness of counterinsurgencies, Elkins throws together wars from two different periods, cunningly creating the impression that this is how the British always ran their Empire over an extended period. But periodization is important for making sense of history. Discussing wars from two different periods without any context, Elkins is able to strengthen her attack-narrative.

Essentially Part One is concerned with an era when the Empire faced (recurring) opposition from three groups, namely, Indians, Irish, and Afrikaners (or, more specifically, from some segments of these three groups). This opposition never produced an Indian counterinsurgency war, but did produce a South African insurgency in the second half of the Boer War. This in turn helped catalyze an Irish insurgency, because the IRA emerged from Irish volunteers in the Boer War, and the Boers taught these Irish how to fight guerrilla wars. (Elkins shows some discomfort integrating Boers into her narrative given that Afrikaners are a pariah group in American popular culture and so do not fit comfortably with victimhood as defined by Decolonization2). Elkins also included the (Indian) Amritsar massacre, but downplayed how this led to General Dyer being forced out of the army and, more significantly, led to modifications of (Britain's) Indian Army rules of engagement with civilian populations.

Part Three focuses on four counterinsurgencies Britain fought post-1945. Highlighting these particular wars in a way that decontextualizes them from other Cold War counterinsurgencies, while linking them back to the Part One wars, becomes a key mechanism for supporting Elkins's claim that Britain's empire was fundamentally grounded in legalized lawlessness.

Elkins ties together Parts One and Three by using Part Two as her bridge (where she discusses World War II and Britain's postwar reconstruction). This bridge becomes a vehicle for her to introduce the (commonly heard) anticolonial claim that one of the reasons for the British Empire's collapse was that Asian and African soldiers who fought for Britain in two world wars returned from these wars with critical perspectives of empire. To illustrate how overblown this claim is I refer to Elkins's (359) statement that Britain recruited 400,000 Africans in World War II who "returned home understanding the vulnerabilities of their white colonizers at the hands of Asians . . . [which] helped spread an anticolonial ethos to grassroots African society." Elkins's propensity for hyperbole is revealed by the fact that 282,000 of these Africans fighting for Britain were white Africans and 118,000 were black. Further, Elkins is silent about many of these black recruits remaining in the Kenyan and Rhodesian armies after World War II and fighting against the Mau Mau and against Mugabe/Nkomo guerrillas in the Rhodesia Bush War. Perhaps Elkins does not know this; or perhaps it just does not fit her anticolonial narrative.

One consistent bias is that Elkins favors criticisms of the Empire that could broadly be classified as socialist—those writers who criticize Britain for running an "extractive" empire that exploits labor. The point is, this empire was criticized from a range of different perspectives including liberal, socialist, Marxist, and nationalist. Yet Elkins consistently highlights and talks positively about those authors who broadly write from a socialist or Marxist perspective. Elkins makes it clear she opposes the Empire for grounding itself in capitalism and nationalism as well as for building colonial capitalism. Elkins is entitled to her biases, but her readers should be conscious that her thesis comes from a particular point of view.

Elkins's key sweeping generalization is that across all units of the Empire Britain relied on nasty violence and legalized lawlessness to maintain its empire. This claim just does not stack up, nor does her suggestion that the colonized never gave their consent. The history of each individual colony reveals that some of the colonized gave wholehearted consent; some gave conditional consent; some gave no consent (but went silent); and others rebelled against the Empire.

In British Kenya, about which Elkins is most knowledgeable, we see precisely this pattern. Elkins implies the Mau Mau constituted some sort of "national liberation" uprising. But Elkins's own figures show that 80 percent of Kikuyu supported the Mau Mau, while other tribes did not. In fact, 82 percent of black Kenyans overall, and virtually all Indian Kenyans, were what the British called "loyalists." That does not sound like a failure of British hegemony. Even in colonies where a rebellion was occurring, there remained a great deal of consent from the colonized.

The colonized were not homogeneous. There was always a range of reactions to the Empire; and not all colonized were anti-Empire. Elkins would have us believe that "national liberation struggles" mobilized larger percentages of the population, but this obfuscates reality: in Kenya and Malaya, both the Mau Mau and MNLA (Malayan National Liberation Army) had only the support of minority groups—namely, members of the Kikuyu tribe and Chinese members of the Malayan Communist Party.

But Elkins is wedded to the anticolonial idea that the British Empire was uniformly a "burden" for the colonized, and "lived reality" for the colonized was uniformly bad. Some of the colonized benefited from the Empire, while others were harmed by it. The point is all political systems produce winners and losers and Britain's empire was no different. Hence there were people of color in the Empire who did well in life, just as there were Britons (both within the UK and as colonial settlers) who lived lives of struggle. Too many anticolonial academics prefer to accept mythology and sweeping statements, along with the propaganda of anticolonial politicians and activists, instead of searching for the granular messiness of actual realities on the ground.

There are important realities Elkins chooses to ignore. One such reality is the global balance of power into which Britain's empire was embedded. Elkins fails to discuss the wider post-World War II context which was all about the Pax Americana replacing the Pax Britannica. Transitions from one empire to another always create turmoil and violence. And the post-World War II transition was made even more messy and violent due to the USA-Soviet conflict. As the

Pax Americana became dominant, Britain's empire came under simultaneous pressure from both the Soviets and the USA. A proper discussion of Britain's post-World War II counterinsurgency wars required at least some analysis of how both Britain and anticolonial rebels reacted to this transition from one empire to another. This failure undermines any pretense that Britain's empire was especially violent.

Those seeking an antidote to Elkins's relentless confected moral outrage can find it in Olufemi Taiwo's *Against Decolonization.* Indeed, Taiwo's critique of Decolonization2 provides an excellent framework for both positioning and criticizing Elkins's book.

Taiwo is an American academic (originally from Nigeria) deeply concerned at the damage being wrought on Africa by the fashionable Decolonization2 discourse. Taiwo favors accepting Westernization as an ingredient in developing Africa and building new African societies by hybridizing African and Western cultures. Taiwo sees the universality of Enlightenment thinking and liberal democracy, and understands that Western civilization does not belong to white people, but rather belongs to all humanity.

Taiwo bemoans the fact that most contemporary African intellectuals reject Enlightenment thinking and modernization because they see it as "Westernization" and tie it to colonialism. But according to Taiwo, the hold Decolonization2 currently has over Africa's opinion leaders means that Africans trying to argue against Deolonization2 will be marginalized.

Taiwo argues that sloppy and faddish thinking mutated into victimhood has resulted in Africa's rejection of Western modernization. In Africa this mutation has produced Decolonization2 thinking, while in the West it has resulted in the Elkins-type of academic-activism which catalogues the wrongs of European imperialism. These catalogues are then used by "restorative justice" activists (in both Africa and the West) to promote new varieties of socialist wealth transfer—in the form of calls for reparations, restitution through affirmative action, diversity quotas, etc.

That victimhood, anticolonialism, and decolonization have become so fashionable has resulted in a surfeit of "apparatchik"-type

jobs for activists, "rescuing" the "victims" they invent. But while victimhood can be profitable for some, it has huge downsides for many. Those who allow themselves to become the playthings of activist-academics and the new apparatchik class become disempowered. Thus, Taiwo notes, Decolonization2 thinking has effectively locked Africans into a permanent state of victimhood.

According to Taiwo the core error of Decolonization2 is widening the definition of "decolonization" into a kind of catch-all idea for attacking imperialism and colonialism and anything even remotely connected with the West. This has allowed victimhood to continue beyond the point at which European empires ended. Following independence, Africans should have used their sovereignty and human agency to improve their societies. But this has not happened. Secondly, Decolonization2 made Africans believe everything to do with Europe's empires was bad, making Africans hostile to all things Western. This, says Taiwo, made many Africans hostile even to the many good things that Europe brought to Africa.

But Taiwo takes his critique further, noting how decolonization thinkers are intellectually sloppy. He gives a number of examples such as the way contextual specificity is ignored in favor of homogenized thinking. Thus, the huge diversity of African colonies is ignored in favor of sweeping statements and generalizations about colonialism.

Taiwo identifies a very real problem in today's university system where this decolonization discourse is being diffused by activist-academics engaged in vitriolic name calling, finger pointing, and myth-making (which they call "reframing narratives"). I'm less inclined to recommend Elkin's book for all the reasons above. But there is one category of reader who might be attracted to reading *Legacy of Violence*: namely those interested in how anticolonial writers construct their revisionist mythologies. For those keen to do some deconstruction on Elkins's revisionist history, read her book with a view to identifying her "narrative reframing" and myth-making tools, and the errors that result from a scholar lacking expertise in important details of her subject, in this case the British Empire.