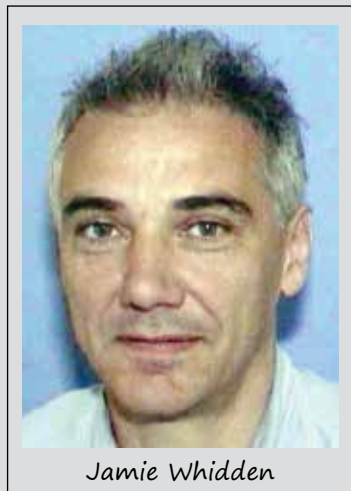


Former imperial powers should take responsibility for the painful history of colonialism



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■ ■ One takeaway from your study is that “categorical statements”, like Edward Said’s “thesis that culture was an arm of imperial power,” are “based on theoretical principles that are not always in conformity with the facts.” Could such discrepancies between theory and fact be revealed in similar studies on other colonial settings or is Egypt a unique example?



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This photo from John Cassell's 'Illustrated History of England' (Volume 8) shows British soldier in Egypt in 1906.

It depends on the situation, for instance while Egypt had a very large foreign community, the majority did not represent the occupying power. Most foreigners were Greeks, Italians, French, and Maltese, who were not necessarily as ideologically driven as were the British. Algeria's colony was a settler population that identified with France – Algeria was administratively part of France – and therefore the settlers had more invested in denying Algerians any important role in government, economy, even going so far as denying the culture and history of

the Algerians.

Egypt is unique in the sense of having a diverse colonial society, but I also argue that even within the British colony there were diverse points of view. The culture of the official class, the British agents, fits much of Edward Said's characterization of imperial culture. Official doctrines claimed that the Egyptians were not fitted for self-government. But many British residents did not belong to official circles. It is remarkable to see British residents of Egypt during the Second World War absolutely condemning the attitudes of British officials and soldiers, for instance, members of the British press in Egypt were very critical of Winston Churchill's treatment of Egypt's politicians. Recent studies have shown the racist and supremacist attitudes of Churchill, but it is important to see that even in that era there were different voices, some seeking reconciliation with Egyptians on equitable terms. I think we need more studies of diverse colonial settings, as you suggest, with comparisons of South Africa and Canada revealing remarkable similarities in terms of treatment of the indigenous population. The Iranian experience of imperialism is probably closer to the Egyptian – recall for instance that in the early 20th century some Americans showed a willingness to assist Iranians during the constitutional revolution and were not motivated by Western strategic interests. Likewise, in Egypt many British residents thought that the military occupation of Egypt was a mistake and ultimately strategically counter-productive.

■ ■ One might argue that by setting aside the conventional categorical labels of “colonizer” and “colonized”, we could run the risk of white washing the Imperialist. How would you answer such a claim?

That is a danger, therefore I did not hesitate to recount the deeply racist attitudes in British colonial circles, for instance in the British-run educational services, which Edward Said experienced first-hand in Egypt. But these institutions were not unchanging. Victoria College where Said went to school still exists and it is no longer an arm of the imperial project, no longer seeking to create a group of elite Egyptians willing to collaborate with British officials, businesspeople and so on. It is one of those institutions that provides English language instruction, which so many Egyptians seek for employment purposes. Schools might be one of the more positive legacies of the imperial era. Other institutions that came in the later part of the British military occupation, like the British Council, fulfill similar roles, and have created links with universities in the UK, providing educational opportunities

and forms of cultural exchange.

The categories of colonizer and colonized are not an accurate reflection of colonial relationships, capturing only the most obvious, and most abusive component, of those relationships. It is important to see how ideologies of racial difference did sustain these worse forms of colonialism, particularly the drive to Westernize, assimilate and in the process erase indigenous cultures.



(Whipple Library in the University of Cambridge)

A sketch in 'The Illustrated London News' during the Anglo-Egyptian War which lasted from May to August 1882. The image follows the final conflict at Tell el Kebir which killed 2,000 Egyptians and resulted in the surrender of Colonel Ahmed 'Urabi's army.

Yet, many recent studies suggest that there is a middle ground between these extremes. It is an important line of enquiry as peoples living in formerly colonized regions, I think of South Africa, Canada, Australia, for instance where the process of discontinuing colonial forms of power over the indigenous requires writing narratives of reconciliation, including studies that illustrate diversity in the colony. Former imperial powers should take responsibility for the painful history of colonialism, and so a lot of my narrative involved recounting struggles among the British to recognize mistaken policies – like military occupation and support for the pashas against the majority. By telling the story of how some British residents of Egypt attempted to build a new relationship it might be possible to imagine a world where people of different cultures, the powerful and the less powerful, can coexist on equal terms. A black-white, or colonizer-colonized, scenario does not create the kind of space necessary for imagining that kind of reconciliation. So, for me, the concluding scenes in my book where we see British officers and journalists criticizing the policies of the British government lays bare alternative pathways, even if not taken in 1946 or 1956. Likewise, the stories of a former British businessperson (Michael Barker) wishing to be buried in Egypt, even if he suffered exile after 1956, serves as kind of reproach, not of the Egyptians, to whom he returns, but to his home country, which he departs. This kind of recognition of historical wrongs is an important part of reconciliation.

■ ■ How influential were the dominant narratives about the empire in metropolitan Britain in justifying a military occupation of Egypt? And just for the sake of argument, how, if at all possible, could they be undermined?

Some historians of imperialism have argued that empire meant very little in metropolitan Brit-

