

Decolonisation

Challenging a unilinear theory

BY MURRAY SHORT

To some, decolonisation of New Zealand was the process, over many years, of gaining independence from Britain, which culminated in the Constitution Act 1986. This was the point at which New Zealand gained full legal independence. This view overlooks the fact that colonisation is much more than an economic, political and “legal” process. The ideology which was the driving force behind colonisation persists long after the political and legal process is complete and it continues to exert its damaging influence until recognised, exposed, challenged and replaced.

Underpinning the colonisation of Aotearoa was a pervasive belief in Anglo-Saxon cultural and biological superiority, which was based on the theory of unilinear cultural evolution. This is the idea that human cultural and social change can be described as a Darwinian evolutionary process similar to biological evolution that sees only the fittest succeed. Through this process, cultures are seen to progress through fixed stages of development and the cultures of Western Europe were regarded as the top of the evolutionary line and therefore superior. A prominent linear theorist writing in 1877 described the stages of human culture as evolving from “savagery” to “barbarism”, and finally to “civilisation”.

This theory, when applied to international relations, promoted the idea that “civilised” countries had a right and duty to impose their superior “progress” on others through the process of colonisation.

Those of you who consider this assessment of the foundation of the colonisation of Aotearoa to be rather harsh may be surprised that one of the clearest expositions of the ideology was in a judgment of no less than the High Court of New Zealand. In 1877, Chief Justice Prendergast made the following remarks when ruling on the relevance of The Treaty of Waitangi in the case of *Wi Parata vs. Bishop of Wellington*:

The whole Treaty was worthless, a simple nullity. It pretended to be an agreement between two nations, but in reality it was between a civilised nation and a group of savages. Britain became the ruler of New Zealand not by signing a treaty but simply by being the first civilised occupier of a territory thinly peopled by barbarians without any form of law or civil government.

The fact that these comments were made by the High Court rather than simply some extremist settler lobby emphasises that it articulated mainstream attitudes and philosophy and reflected official policies of the time.

From a religious mission perspective, colonisation is similarly justified as a process of liberating peoples from heathen, uncivilised practices and bringing them the blessings of a superior belief system and way of life.

Colonisation, then, was not just a matter of political domination and economic exploitation but involved comprehensive religious, cultural and social oppression that will continue for as long as the ideology persists. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith says in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*

...many indigenous communities continue to live within political and social conditions that perpetuate extreme levels of poverty, chronic ill health and poor educational opportunities. Their children may be forcibly removed from their care, ‘adopted’ or institutionalised. The adults may be as addicted to alcohol as their children are to glue, they may live in destructive relationships which are formed and shaped by their impoverished material conditions and structured by politically oppressive regimes. While they live like this they are constantly fed messages about their worthlessness, laziness, dependence and lack of ‘higher’ order human qualities.

Decolonisation requires recognising and challenging the underpinning ideology and addressing its consequences. This is particularly challenging because as Smith says, “The problem is that constant efforts by governments, states, societies and institutions to deny the historical formations of such conditions have simultaneously denied our claims to humanity, to having a history, and to all sense of hope.” The fact that only in the 21st century is the history of Aotearoa New Zealand being added to the school curriculum speaks volumes in this regard.

The theory of unilinear cultural evolution has been widely criticised in the discipline of anthropology and yet it is one of those simple and powerful stories that prove difficult to dislodge. Some may consider that progress has been made; however, a recent letter to the *New Zealand Listener* from a group of Auckland University academics (*NZ Listener* 31 July 2021) could be seen as a case study in the lack of progress.

The letter was in response to a report from a government group working on proposed changes to the Māori school curriculum. The report is quoted as saying that the changes were “to ensure parity for mātauranga Māori with the other bodies of knowledge credentialed by NCEA (particularly Western/Pākehā epistemologies)”. The report is also quoted, in describing a new course, that “It promotes discussion and analysis of the ways in which science has been used to support

the dominance of Eurocentric views (among which, its use as a rationale for colonisation of Māori and the suppression of Māori knowledge)...”

In their response the academics argue that “Science is universal, not especially Western European”, and that “Indigenous knowledge is critical for the preservation and perpetuation of culture and local practices and plays key roles in management and policy. However, in the discovery of empirical, universal truths, it falls far short of what we can define as science itself.”

Sound familiar? Just as the Chief Justice stated that Britain was a “civilised nation” and Māori were “savages” and “without any form of law or civil government”, these academics are proclaiming that Western science is universal (read superior), and indigenous knowledge “falls far short of” it. The letter gained considerable support from numerous other academics and letter writers, indicating that the views expressed are widely held.

Some of the critical responses highlighted amongst other things how the exploration and settlement of the Pacific by Polynesians was enabled by deep knowledge of the stars, the oceans, tides, winds, and bird life to name but a few. This knowledge was accumulated by scientific methods of observation, analysis, and experimentation. To suggest this “falls far short” of science is plainly wrong and reveals that the position of the academics is ideological rather than evidence based.

Furthermore, it could be argued that Western science has not helped bring about a more peaceable and sustainable human community on this planet. Perhaps valuing and learning from indigenous science and knowledge would be a more sensible approach than dismissing them as inferior.

The controversy raises complex issues that are beyond the scope of this article; however, we should not lose sight of

the fundamental point that it indicates the original mindset underpinning colonisation seems to be alive and well. Decolonisation requires that this mindset or ideological framework needs to be recognised, and alternative frameworks developed. In anthropology, many alternative frameworks to the unilinear theory have been posited. The multilinear framework, for example, rejects the idea that cultural evolution follows a straight line from “primitive” to “modern”; instead each culture is different and follows a different path, which makes value judgments and comparison invalid.

The academics’ letter is only one case study. There are countless other examples of a profound belief in the superiority of Western values, knowledge, institutions, and practices. The Western approach, whether it be in the fields of health, education, childcare or criminal justice was, despite the promise of rangatiratanga in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, imposed through the process of colonisation, and persists to this day. It has been distressing to see this play out yet again in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Both Māori and Pasifika communities have struggled to convince the Government and its health bureaucracy that their knowledge and their methods of reaching their people would be more effective than the “mainstream” approach. When concessions have been made, the results have spoken for themselves, and it is clear that left to the bureaucracy, vaccination rates, for example, would be much lower.

Far from being complete, therefore, decolonisation is still in its infancy. The challenge, especially for Quakers in view of our strong commitment to equality, is to identify all vestiges of the underpinning story in our thinking as a step toward “rethinking, reframing and reconstructing” as Smith describes it. We also need to challenge this type of thinking when we detect it around us because while it persists, progress to a truly diverse, inclusive and just society will be slow and painful, as we have experienced most recently in relation to public health policy and practice.