

The New Age of Empire: How Racism and Colonialism Still Rule the World¹

Written by Kehinde Andrews

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In *The New Age of Empire*, Kehinde Andrews sets out to shatter the dominant myths underpinning the progressive narrative of the West. Namely, that it was founded on scientific, industrial, and political revolutions (xiii). The first half of the book sets out to historically counter this narrative by tracing how the West was actually built on three pillars: genocide, slavery, and colonialism, producing a global system centred on White supremacy. The second half of the book sets out to show how the racist legacies of these three pillars have continued to sustain the global system that emerged after the Second World War, albeit under a modified “new age of empire” (24).

The story of the West’s rise to global dominance begins with Columbus’s voyage to the Americas in 1492, paving the way to the largest genocide in history (26). Far from being contradictory to Western values or an aberration in Western history, Andrews maintains that this genocidal approach was a consistent pattern in Western conquests, replicated in other settler colonies, like Australia (31, 35). Genocide was used to eliminate the indigenous populations and thereby empty the land to accommodate the influx of European settlers (34). With land available to cultivate, the European demand for labour grew, setting the stage for what Andrews argues was the second foundational period in Western development: the transatlantic slave trade (69).

Andrews lucidly details the decisive role of the transatlantic system in creating Europe’s wealth. He contends that the Atlantic trade—which brutally dehumanised and enslaved millions of Africans as commodities—was decisive in Europe’s rise to global dominance

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(57). Against the popular narrative that sees the Industrial Revolution in Britain as the outcome of its scientific inventions, Andrews draws out the causal connections between Atlantic slavery and industrial development (59-62). The Atlantic system supplied key commodities (sugar, tobacco, and cotton) that powered the Industrial Revolution, whilst also being heavily connected to the financial sector (banking, accounting, and insurance), which provided the necessary credit and capital that drove industrialisation.

Contrary to the popular imagination that sees Atlantic slavery as a relic of the past, Andrews contends that the transatlantic slave system is not only responsible for generating the wealth that built the West, but also for the concomitant poverty that persists to this day (57). The Atlantic slave trade represents the core logic of Western imperialism, namely the exploitation of non-Europeans by those of European descent (70). For Andrews, the Atlantic system's huge responsibility for the creation of contemporary global inequalities demands that reparations be paid. Although, he also notes that if the West were to fully pay its due, the resulting financial and political repercussions would bring about the end of Western dominance (84).

Andrews holds that it was the huge wealth generated from slavery that opened the door to European colonisation of Asia and Africa, thereby further expropriating their wealth to Europe (90). It was during this period of colonial expansion that the Enlightenment project developed, which, according to Andrews, was far from a historical coincidence (2). Instead, the racism of Enlightenment thinkers was an intellectual reflection—and justification—of the genocide, slavery, and colonialism through which Europe was violently restructuring the world (24). The resulting imperial destruction in the non-European world provided Enlightenment thinkers with the “empirical evidence” to validate their White supremacist ideas (11). For Andrews, racism cannot be disentangled from Enlightenment ideas because, notwithstanding their claims to universality, they are premised on the particular: that to be a rational, thinking, human, is to be European (11, 180). This racism is

plainly evident in the rise of racial science, pioneered by Enlightenment thinkers (7-8). Andrews maintains that equality in society reflects the knowledge it is rooted in, and therefore he advocates for the complete abandonment of the Enlightenment project (2).

In the first half of the book, Andrews cogently makes the case for the central role of genocide, transatlantic slavery, and colonialism, in understanding Western development. However, this core argument is linked to some secondary claims, not all of which are substantiated. For example, in a paragraph briefly discussing the connection between the Arab slave trade and the transatlantic trade, Andrews states that it “was Muslim scholars who first codified anti-Black racism, something later picked up by Europeans” (152). Andrews provides no reference or source for this claim, nor does he cite any examples of Islamic laws which “codified anti-Black racism.” Moreover, he provides no details about who these “Muslim scholars” were, nor clarifies what he means by the term. The only clues as to what Andrews is referring to are his separate discussions of “Arab racial thinking” (79) in which he cites “the Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun” (17, 18). This, however, raises questions about Andrews’ conflation between “Arab” and “Muslim” thinking. It also does not explain how he justifies his assertion that Europe’s anti-Black racism has its origins— “picked up by Europeans”—in this thinking.

The second half of the book outlines how the core racist logic of the Enlightenment framework continues to underpin the post-war version of Western imperialism, albeit now under the guise of benevolence, human rights, and liberal democracy (24, 112). This new version of empire has entailed a shift away from Western European states, towards the United States, corporations, and global institutions (the UN, IMF, and the World Bank) (115). However, Andrews is quick to point out that the new age of empire did not completely do away with colonial forms of violence, as evidenced by Western support for the violent creation of the settler colony of Israel, and its continued support of colonial violence against the native Palestinian population (133-135).

The only solution to the new age of empire is a revolutionary politics that would create an entirely new global system (206). Andrews contends that attempts to reform the current system are akin to fixing the unbroken. This is because the ills of the existing order—from police brutality to global health and wealth inequalities—are all symptoms of an inherently racist system (206). Although Andrews does not delve into the details of what a revolutionary politics entails, he is clear that it will arise amongst those who are oppressed by Western imperialism, rather than those who benefit from it (206). In this regard, he is highly critical of “the new left” that emerged in the West out of the neoliberal onslaught of the 1980s (192). Andrews takes particular issue with the new left’s national framing, which he claims includes only citizens in the West, whilst excluding its victims outside (182). Andrews maintains that these victims have equal stakes in the economic policies governing Western citizens, since the wealth that the left seeks to nationally redistribute is largely a by-product of the West’s racial exploitation of these populations outside of the West (186-187).

Andrews’ argument for the continued legacies of the three pillars—of genocide, slavery, and colonialism—is important for highlighting how the logic of Western imperialism continues to shape the contemporary world. However, his discussion of the role of states in “the non-White West” focuses only on what he describes as their “non-White collusion” in extending the “updated version” of Western imperialism, in which he includes China and the BRICS countries (152). There is no discussion of how, or even acknowledgement of the possibility that, states located outside of the West can play a role not in collusion with, but rather in resisting, challenging, and offering an alternative to the existing global order.

Although Andrews did not set out to write a prescriptive book about *how* the new age of empire can be torn down, the reader is likely to be left with precisely this question after reading his book. Perhaps a starting point, for seeking an answer, lies in tearing down the underlying foundational myths that continue to sustain Western imperialism. In this

regard, *The New Age of Empire* delivers by offering a counter-narrative to the dominant mythology surrounding the historical founding and rise of the West.