

Reflections on Decoloniality, Time, History and Remembering

Written by Ali Kassem

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ALI KASSEM, JAN 17 2023

Amidst a wider decolonisation debate, racialised communities across metropolises have contested, and protested, questions of the 'past', of history and of memory. This article engages this question of 'time' to argue for the need to centre specific, unequal, and power-laden relationalities to history and memory across the north-south divide as foundational to the global reproduction of Eurocentric modernity/coloniality as well as to the (im)possibility of moving beyond it. In doing this, it reflects on the similar yet distinct modalities through which a narrative of history and the past is constructed and a specific relationship to it is naturalised across Beirut in Lebanon, Singapore, and Edinburgh in the UK.

Beirut

Lebanon as a country 'never existed before in history. It is a product of the Franco-British partition of the Middle East' (Traboulsi 2007: 75). Beirut itself was relatively marginal city until it was transformed into a major port and capital by the French. Gaining its independence from French colonisation in the wake of World War 2, Lebanon is said to have achieved a period of relative prosperity. A few decades later, the country entered a protracted civil war that did not end until 1991. Mainly with Gulf Petro-money, Beirut was then effaced and re-built anew: a modern cosmopolitan tourist hub on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. From high-rise buildings to new-found waterfronts and land reclamation projects, Beirut was made unrecognisable as the remnants and testaments of war were tore down. Since then, the city has gone through multiple crises, the most recent of which were the 2020 port explosion and an ongoing economic collapse. Today, while much has changed and the glitter of post-war has worn off, a particular mode of relating to the past persists.

In Beirut, memory is taboo – one that many parents refuse to discuss with their children. The Lebanese have few resources to learn their history – particularly as school and educational curricula as well as the various media outlets in the country anxiously avoid any such discussion. Despite this, this past seems to be well known within the collective imaginary of the Lebanese: one of conflict, of war, of suffering that is both hated and left unspoken for fear of its return. The same largely applies to the country's *longue durée* history – an Ottoman protectorate housing minorities, with many rounds of famine said to have enjoyed little peace or prosperity as the site of Ottoman-European conflict and competition. In line with this, growing up in Beirut or any of the country's urban centres one is standardly socialized into a rejection of 'traditional' norms, habits, and customs – the 'backward' practices of 'ignorant' forebears. The only exception to this is the celebration of the immediate post-independence moment – the moment of Eurocentred Christian Maronite domination and exploitation engineered, enabled by, and serving French and U.S. Imperialism – and a lamenting of its loss and impossible return.

Surely, there is more to the land and its people's histories than this, and more to the story of Lebanon. Such a framing cannot be taken to be an 'authentic' representation or a 'natural' story of the land and those who inhabit or have inhabited it. From long traditions of pluralistic dwelling to elaborate indigenous models of education, health, and agriculture, much is here missing. Systematically, this is all erased, as a specific construction of a 'dark' past and a consequent relationship to it are rendered hegemonic – sponsored by state discourses and policies with collective imaginaries of inferiority and backwardness.

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Without identifying relations to history as a key nexus of erasure, and undoing such relations, reclaiming colonised dignity and 'selfhood' remains impossible, as Shariati (2011) explains. This hatred of the so-called past, in other words, is a key component of erasing the colonised self. The anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle accordingly calls 'to remember' and reclaim a history and forms of knowing and being in the world that start 'elsewhere', with forms of being that do not (re)produce the crises of this very celebrated modernity (Al-Hardan 2016; Cooppan 2019; Umbreen 2022). In Lebanon, this struggle to remember is not in the face of a struggle to an ahistorical presence. More often than not, it is a struggle of what to remember, who to remember, and how to remember in the face of a disfigured, inferiorising, and assaulting construction of the past. But what kind of remembrance could unfold when one is already socialised, taught, conditioned to abject and loathe their past? How would a call to remember speak to those whose very bodies have deeply inscribed a movement away from their own histories as inferior, conflict-ridden, ignorant, and primitive?

Instead of liberatory remembering, an inferiorising one is instilled and a powerful rejection of the past is accompanied by a powerful desire to be future-oriented, forward-looking. Here, one must embrace progress, and (Eurocentric) modernity – consumerist, empiricist, technological, liberal, secularist. Yet, in Beirut, this desired future has failed to arrive. With its multiple rounds of instability, conflict, war and disruption under a neoliberal westernised present/absent state (see Baumann 2017), Lebanon has not moved into the dreamed 'developed' horizon. Rather, the country remains trapped in cycles of instability, of collapse and growth, of conflict and truce, and of violence and calm. The so-called past in Lebanon must not be remembered, and it refuses to become past – it episodically persists and tyrannises the present.

Edinburgh

Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland, is a city built on the wealth of empire and the extraction of colonisation. Today, historical colonialism itself is not past in Edinburgh – not to mention contemporary colonisation, imperialism, and coloniality. Having greatly invested in 'preserving' its history, its colonial is material, visible, inescapable. This can be seen as a consistent physical presence throughout the city's architecture and symbols – not least of which are the monuments of (as well as streets, buildings, and squares) named after Lawrence Dundas, George Rodney, John Locke, and David Hume among many others. Within this, one finds a celebration of British, Scottish, and European history – a history upon which the lauded modern present and future are to be secured. Edinburgh's present is understood to have been made possible through this past, one of 'Enlightenment', hard labour, freedom and democracy, rights and forward-looking struggle. This future was the present, and it was/is also the future of this present. To enter the present, Edinburgh does not seem to need to abject its past, nor to rid itself of its memory. Rather, this 'heritage' is proudly treasured.

Edinburgh is typically understood to be in, or at least moving steadily and 'naturally' toward, the future. It is not trapped in this present. Rather, it is perceived as an innovation hub and a leading city to be followed, mimicked. The University of Edinburgh itself is often portrayed as a key example of this, self-presenting as 'shaping the future' from within the walls of its listed Victorian buildings and the classrooms and halls built on colonial wealth and decorated with imperial lootings. For most, there is no contradiction there. The past, the present, and the future are continuous. They are deeply connected. They make sense of one another.

Within this selective (even ironic) narrative of the city's past, long and ongoing histories of violence, war, famine, poverty, and scathing inequalities, both within the city, within Scotland, and across a deeply interconnected and co-dependent globe, are disavowed. The colonisation, enslavement, theft, rape, and violent and systematic extraction of wealth over hundreds of years that made the proclaimed and celebrated 'heritage' and 'development' possible are all erased. In this sense, the particular construction and imagination of Edinburgh's past loaded with selective erasures and amnesia – the past that must be remembered – erases the 'darker side' of this history, disfigures this history, and also absences its connections to the rest of the globe to anchor a 'self' and a history that seem to be located within the narrowly defined space of Edinburgh and 'its people'. Yet, Edinburgh's 'past', and the present this past has enabled, surely cannot be understood as localised or contained within the accounts or events that have taken place in the city's narrow geography. Rather, a connected historical sociologies analysis (see Bhabra 2014) where Empire is transnationally centred is needed.

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Over the past few years, as the decolonisation movement has gathered pace in the UK, a number of reviews, campaigns, and efforts have been made to challenge some of these narratives and celebrations. While the University of Edinburgh renamed its 'Hume Tower' to '40 George Square' in 2020, the city council has decided to erect (small) plates in relevant locations 'explaining' the histories in question. The plaques, hardly noticeable and at times hardly legible, stand as reminders of a past that, also here, refuses to be past.

The material presence of the colonial and the imperial, coupled with a significant 'whiteness' systematically lends to feelings of unbelonging for western modernity's negatively racialised subjects with accompanying narratives of indebtedness, gratitude, and exclusion. This is made all the more potent in light of the UK's hostile environment, rising populist fascist politics, as well as reactive right-wing assertion. All of this is only possible with this specific narrative of time and relationality to the past. Had Edinburgh's past been understood along the lines sketched above – where this 'wealth' is understood as being of a global imperial constitution rather than of a national citizenry – questions of rights, claims, and belonging would take on different valences.

As Bhabra (2022: 318) argues, re-orienting our understanding of the histories that have shaped the present reorients how we understand the question of who has 'the right to have rights within a state and to be regarded as a legitimate object of public policy or recipient of welfare provision', for example. In this sense, reorienting our relations to the past and history is the condition to inhabiting the present in a specific place/space in specific ways, both for those thought to belong to said space and those considered not to. It is, further, the *a priori* condition of shifting our relationship to 'futures' and making other possibilities possible. Without understanding how this celebrated presence came to be, as well as what it does, how it functions, and how it is sustained, it cannot lose its hold over our imaginaries.

Singapore

Singapore is an Asian post-colonial city-state. An 'invention' of the British in many ways, it is a 'highly developed' country with some of the world's best living standards. In Singapore, an obsessive compulsion to be 'future-oriented' seems to dominate the city-state and its multiple (urbanised) spaces. Within this, modernisation is the hegemonic frame where a specific kind of future appears as the only possible. Here enters the stereotype that Singapore is in an endless cycle of destruction and reconstruction where buildings are constantly razed to the ground for newer, higher, more 'advanced', ones. The flip side to this is a particular and specific construction of the past – one where there is none.

In Singapore, one feels they are in a space that has come into being in the second half of the twentieth century. There seems to be little history. Even places of worship, often some of the oldest buildings one finds in much of Europe and Asia, are 'recent'. If one asks 'locals', they are likely to be told that there was 'nothing' on the Island pre-colonial times, except perhaps a small fishing village. There was no city, no civilisation, no inhabitants. It is said that it was, in many ways, a true *terra nullius* chosen by the British and (trans)formed into a regional port and trading hub in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This transformation came about with very little (if any) violence, and very little (if any) theft, it is said. British colonialism is therefore turned into a success story of wonderful modernisation and development enabling the 'coming' of various people from across Asia to collectively form a city-state through hard work and perseverance.

The history of Singapore, its past, therefore begins with British colonisation, and successfully continues apace along the script British colonisation set out for it, it is said. What does it mean for one to envision their histories and selves as beginning elsewhere – with colonialism, with Europe – and continuing along its set plan? While some attempts to challenge and rethink these narratives of British colonisation have been made in recent years, such work has found few possibilities and much resistance.

It is this state-sponsored narrative that governs contemporary life in Singapore, people's imaginaries and their 'common sense'. These 'stories' are, ultimately, not only fundamental to the imagination of the nation-state as much critical scholarship has aptly argued but also to the larger governing of everyday life where a specific sort of modernist present as well as future becomes the only possible – naturalised as desired, inevitable, necessary.

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Singapore's collective amnesia here appears power-laden where a modernist narrative of linear time stands at the core of aggressive pursuits of 'progress', 'growth', and 'development' (Rutazibwa 2019; Grosfoguel 2011).

With its looming materiality of steel and concrete, glitzy skyline, automated digital commerce and high-tech industries, one often hears that Singapore is not in the present – but rather in the future. It has to be, otherwise it would fall back. Examining this, Singapore's relationship to the past appears more complex. Indeed, even if the geography itself has little past, Singapore seems to be threatened – haunted – by an undetermined distant past that must continuously be kept at bay by moving forward along the modernist script. One might ask why this is so, and what past the city is seeking – so vigorously – to escape and ensure remains 'past'. Perhaps this past is not geographical, but racial, epistemological. Perhaps it is a past the bodies of its Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other communities carry with them. Ultimately, here too, it appears that there is a past that is inferior, threatening, anxiety inducing, hated. It is the one that does not begin and map itself with Europe and its colonial modernity. With massive mental and psychic effects, the possibilities for alternative remembrance here appear slim.

As anti, post, and decolonial scholars as well as other critical thinkers and activists have explained, western modernity functions as a self-reproducing narrative that selectively erases, oppresses, and silences through its very 'modernisation' (Vázquez 2009; Mignolo 2011). It is against this very silencing that decolonial labour functions to remember differently and produce alternative futures. Within a space like Singapore, the decolonial struggle needs to also involve a remembrance beyond that of the colonial: remembering the non-colonial, the de-colonial. This would, for example, include the histories of Singapore's indigenous communities – some of the country's poorest populations who survive despite shattered lifeworlds – and their rich relations to both sea and land (see Schneider-Mayerson 2021). A critical liberatory and anti-oppressive remembrance away from any fetishizing romanticization, foreclosures, or finalities could here be the starting point of thinking and generating alternatives to a failed present. For this, the colonised and inferiorised's relationship to the past must be shifted, freed, to pursue alternative futures alongside these denied memories, without being confined to them.

Concluding Reflections

How people inhabiting a particular space make sense of that space's past, its history, its memory, and consequently of their own histories and intergenerational memories produces deeply different modes of inhabiting – or not being able to inhabit – the present. It is here not only how the past is constructed within the collective imaginary of a particular space, but how people relate to this past and how that significantly shapes people's present relations to themselves as well to the dreamed and desired futures they pursue or see themselves as capable of pursuing. These extant stories of being and sense-makings of one's self, one's identity, one's position in the world and how this world came to be, ultimately emerge as specific products of a modern/colonial world order loaded with avowals and disavowals – dangerous ones that are key in the reproduction of coloniality and, consequently, in the destruction of its Others' possibilities of being Otherwise.

With Eurocentred selective constructions of the past and narratives of linear time dominating these three cities, vastly different relationalities to history and memory unfold: hate and forced forgetfulness in Beirut, pride and treasuring in Edinburgh, denial and fear in Singapore. Though Beirut appears to its citizens stuck in a morbid past/present, Edinburgh appears to seamlessly fuse past and future, while Singapore labours to continuously move and affirm itself within a threatened desired coming. These constructions across these three cities are not separate, but rather deeply connected and co-constituted, dwelling under the hegemony of Eurocentric modernity/coloniality. It is by places like Edinburgh having constructed a narrative of the past to be 'proud of' that places like Beirut self-erase while sites like Singapore frantically pursue 'progress' in a racialized world governed through a global north-south divide – in a modern teleological world where Europe is made the only 'real' through 'a form of temporal discrimination in which the 'other' is relegated as being either in the past (as barbarian, underdeveloped...) or simply negated as absent as outside of history' (Vazquez 2012: 7).

How the past is understood and related to – irrespective of what happened in this 'past' – shapes how people inhabit the present and, consequently, the possibilities and impossibilities of the future. In this sense, the argument here is to more seriously incorporate an analysis and account for this question of time, and people's relation to the past and the

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memory that have been constructed (often state-sponsored) and that imbue the collective consciousness in specific places, in understanding the socio-political processes of the contemporary world, and the reproduction of modernity/coloniality's hegemony. What accordingly emerges is a needed struggle to undo the differential constructions that Empire has epistemologically sewed across the globe over the past 500 years and establish different kinds of relationalities to time, ones that transcend both the materiality and the temporality of hegemonic Eurocentric modernity, in the pursuit of alternative liberatory futures.

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About the author:

Dr. Ali Kassem (he/him) is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the National University of

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Singapore, Singapore. He obtained his PhD from the University of Sussex, UK and was a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Edinburgh, UK. In 2020-2021, he was an early career fellow with the Arab Council for Social Sciences funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.