



## ON PRAGMATISM AND PC

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What do you associate with the initials PC?

Personal Computer? Too trivial.

Political Correctness? More likely.

Post-Colonialism? Most probably not...

Colonialism has determined the life experience of the vast majority of the people living in the world today. Yet, in Scandinavia, as in most countries that were not formally part of the European colonial system, the common attitude is that it is none of our business, since we didn't have any colonies.

Interestingly enough, in the Scandinavian case that is not even true. The present Virgin Islands were the Danish West Indies from 1754 to 1917, and constituted a key link in the transatlantic slave trade. *Wonderful Copenhagen* was to a large extent literally built with earnings from the lucrative business of the 'black gold' <sup>[1]</sup>. And the Scandinavian state authorities' treatment of the indigenous populations of the Arctic rim are exemplary colonial power relationships. Nevertheless, the modern myth of Scandinavian innocence and excellence keeps on thriving and makes it difficult for postcolonial theories and perspectives to enter into the Nordic public debate.

Several parallel recent events do however indicate that a change may be underway. The art project *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism. A postcolonial exhibition project in five acts*, initiated by the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art (NIFCA), was carried out in 2006 with exhibitions, seminars and other public events in Iceland, Greenland, The Faroe Island and Finnish Sápmi (the fifth act was virtual and consists of the project's DVD documentation and website [www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org/](http://www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org/)). A simultaneous tour of museums and locations was made by the exhibition *Traces of Congo*, a more conventional attempt at shedding light on the Scandinavian participation in the plundering of the Congo and of Congo's presence in the Scandinavian imaginary. 2006 also saw the birth of a new Nordic researcher network on the theme *The Nordic Colonial Mind*, initiated and coordinated by the Nordic Africa Institute based in Uppsala, Sweden.

The above-mentioned projects do of course reach a limited and perhaps already enlightened audience. But the TV-series *Slavarnes slægt* (The

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Family of the Slaves), made by Danish film producer Alex Frank Larsen and broadcast in several Nordic channels since its premiere screening in DR2 <sup>[2]</sup> in 2005, has affected and engaged a much wider audience. For this project, initiated ten years ago, Larsen has meticulously searched thorough the Danish historical archives. He has traced between 800 and 900 descendants of black slaves, not only in Denmark but in Sweden and Iceland as well, and he believes there may be thousands.

Larsen's investigative TV journalism, which ought to shake the fundamentals of Scandinavians' self-image, is a prime example of the usefulness of the postcolonial perspective: rewriting history from a different angle and thus giving voice to those whose stories have been silenced or forgotten.

By coincidence, this sudden interest in a Nordic colonial past was articulated in a year that the Swedish government had proclaimed as the 'multicultural year'. Yes, I actually believe it is a mere coincidence, although it may seem likely that a discussion of a hidden colonial legacy ought to have something to do with today's heated debate, especially in Denmark, on immigration and integration. But such connotations are very rarely made, even in academic discourse. Nor is it common anywhere to apply a postcolonial perspective in communication for development – in spite of ComDev strategies that explicitly aim at 'empowerment' and 'giving voice to the disadvantaged', etc.

The main reason for this miscommunication may be postcolonial theorists' self-inflicted reputation for being highly academic, difficult and inaccessible.

Another reason is that postcolonialism turned into ideology can be dogmatic, even fundamentalist, and/or saturated with political correctness. And there is a prevailing gap between theory and cultural practice. Postcolonial literature was never exclusive or high-brow.

But part of the problem is probably also due to reluctance and suspicion among ComDev practitioners. There is a general lack of critical self-reflection in development cooperation, where a postcolonial analysis certainly could contribute a much-needed corrective to the mainstream agenda – even though, or rather especially since, it would potentially challenge its very foundations. The colonial legacy of the development aid industry is difficult to deny. It has been analyzed by Maria Eriksson Baaz in *The Paternalism of Partnership: a postcolonial reading of identity in development aid* (London: Zed Books, 2005) [An article based on her book is published in this issue of *Glocal Times*, which focuses on the aftermath of the WCCD held in Rome last October.]

A more humble gathering took place in Malmö and Copenhagen in December 2006, as part of the ComDev master course at Malmö University: a seminar on 'postcolonialism at home' located at both sides of the Öresund strait<sup>[3]</sup>, in the two stigmatized immigrant-dominated areas of Nørrebro (Copenhagen) and Rosengård (Malmö), with some ten participants on location and about twice as many attending online. The

seminar intended to bring together the above-mentioned three discourses: immigration and multiculturalism, postcolonialism and communication for development.

Among the speakers in the Nørrebro session was Ellen Nyman, a Swedish-Eritrean actress and activist living and working in Copenhagen. Her artistic and political activism includes posters, flyers, stickers, T-shirts, spam-mail, lectures, (fictitious) newspaper articles and, most of all, live performances in public places, where with her dark complexion she impersonates 'the other'. One of the front figures of her *Spacecampaign* is Alem, a veiled woman from Eritrea who challenges the prejudices of the spectators by acting against their expectations. In the mass demonstrations at the European Union summit in Göteborg in 2001, she walked alone in front of a puzzled delegation of Danish Communists with the inscription 'Whites Only' in the ring of stars of the blue and yellow EU flag. Later that same year, she achieved massive media attention at the culmination of the famous Danish election campaign that brought the current conservative government with its anti-immigration and apartheid policy to power: She was "the Somali woman" who sang the Danish national anthem outside the parliament building.

Students attending the workshop were asked to produce anything that somehow referred to the content and context of the seminar, and at least one of the groups was apparently inspired by Ellen Nyman's approach. They staged a near-future scenario where the Swedish government made the pioneer decision to give development aid to one of its Nordic neighbours: formerly well-off Denmark, with its dismantled welfare system. Experts from two experienced developing countries, Nicaragua and Ghana, were consulted to decide whether the influx money should be invested in health or education. (Any resemblance with the recently adopted Danish policy to let celebrities advice on the allocation of Danish development support is of course merely coincidental.)

Another group of students tried a more serious application in the concretely outlined project *News Impulse*, aiming at no less than a renewal of news reporting in Malmö and the Öresund region. Their formula consisted in letting inhabitants of the immigrant-dominated and socially deprived (sub-) urban areas become news editors and reporters for one week. During this week, they would work side by side with professionals, who would in turn report on the reactions among people in the communities concerned. The whole project would preferably be analyzed and followed-up by students in ComDev, Culture and Media, Urban Studies, Ethnic Relations and other inter-related subjects at Malmö and other universities in the region.

The short duration of the workshop did not allow any local research, neither in Nørrebro nor in Rosengård, and the fact that most of the students participating were attending online, from Colombia to China, turned the venture into a true challenge. But the three online groups, organized according to time zones – Asia, Africa/Europe and America – managed to exchange messages, images and links, and jointly put together

different kinds of web documents that were presented at the concluding plenary session. This experimental pilot workshop actually broke new ground in the Malmö ComDev master programme's ongoing exploration of the unimagined potential of web-based collaborative pedagogy.

Another lesson learned might be that postcolonial theories and perspectives do not necessarily have to be high-brow textual analyses. They can be readily applied on all kinds of phenomena in the global everyday. Turning the tables, reversing angles, inverting hierarchies etc. are effective methods and communication tools. In fact, I would consider the mind-opening potential to be their major asset. The Nordic countries – and Sweden in particular – have gained a reputation of being practical and pragmatic, not least in politics. If postcolonial thought has finally rooted itself in these barren territories, the Scandinavian contribution might be precisely that: A more pragmatic approach to global cultural matters.

[1] Sweden's less successful recent colonial affairs are not due to altruistic reasons but mainly historic circumstances. The last war with Russia craved resources that otherwise might have been put into colonialist enterprises.

[2] A Danish public service TV 'culture' channel.

[3] Öresund is the strait that separates the Danish island Sjælland from the south-Swedish province of Skåne.

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